

Winning entry

Pixels Don't Do You Justice by Jessica Fraser, De Lisle College

Pixels don't do you justice,
Just categorise your parchment skin
Into swatch boxes
Defined by pigment.
Limited. By diagonal hatching.

Spun silver becomes brushed steel
Tarnished, bled into the valleys and peaks
Of you

Translucent tracing paper
Inked blue vital signs
Become a complex of digits
Defined by naught and oh.

Milky cataracts invisible,
Awkward hairs, dimples limp
Innocently airbrushed
You are Tinny Hollow
Absent
A flat
2D you...

Pixels don't do you justice.

Winning entry

'What a Functional Life' by Elizabeth Fennessey, Tonbridge Grammar School

INT. URBAN HOME

A young woman in her twenties emerges from a bed in response to a soft buzz from a skin tight band around her left wrist. She stretches for a moment before making her way to the kitchen. The surfaces are all barren with a seemingly artificial sheen glinting in the sunshine seeping through the curtains. The woman makes her way over to raise the curtains, revealing a glass pane, bare of any handles or opening mechanisms. After taking in the warm rays on her pale, blue tinted skin she turns to look at the band on her wrist, tapping it twice to bring up a screen of light in the air above the small device. She flicks past pages on to her messages where she has received an audio clip from a contact titled 'James' with a cutesy love heart icon situated next to the name.

JAMES

Good morning sweetie! I've synced our schedules for our two-thirty video exchange, I hope you don't mind but I upgraded our relationship to allow our sessions to increase to 30 minutes! I look forward to our discussion - today's couple topic is films! Have a wonderful day!

The woman smiles, laughing slightly. She presses a microphone button on the light screen.

LILA

Record audio response

An artificial voice responds.

VOICE 1

Hello 'Lila', you have 5 remaining audio messages available to send today, are you sure you wish to use your allocated points?

LILA

Yes.

VOICE 1

What would you like to say to contact 'James'?

She thinks for a moment, pondering her words.

LILA

Say: "Thanks, I look forward to seeing you. I hope I don't get too boring after 30 minutes! Enjoy your day! I absolutely adored the...

VOICE 1

Alert! Romantic relationship status is only at level 3, caution should be taken in extreme emotive language use.

LILA

Oh...thank you, how about "I '**appreciated**' the virtual flower experience you sent, it was almost like smelling the real thing!"

VOICE 1

Message sent.

Lila swipes her fingers down, closing the screen. She makes her way to the other end of the room, placing her wrist over a scanner on the counter. A voice, different to that on the wrist band announces...

VOICE 2

Blood protein levels low, please collect egg portion from the pantry.

Lila rolls her eyes and begrudgingly collects a yellow foil pouch from a long tray of similar sized pouches in varying colours. She opens the pouch into a metal dish and places it into a machine somewhat reminiscent of a microwave and presses a button on the far left of the device. After a series of odd noises the contraption completes its function and Lila opens to see a small sludgy, yellow soup with a pungent smell inciting a slight gag in Lila. She retrieves the dish as the kitchen voice remarks.

VOICE 2

Have a functional day.

Lila sighs, staring at the odd substance in front of her.

END.

Winning entry

'Then' by Seiwaah Nana Boatey, Barking Abbey School

EXT. BOGOTA, COLOMBIA - TWILIGHT

A quiet city landscape. House windows echo blue digital light that douses the palette of the setting in a sombre blue.

In a flat, the light from a room window, one of the higher storeys, flickers faintly, yet noticeably. BENJAMIN and his GRANDPA can be heard talking from BENJAMIN'S computer over the quiet, reverbing melody of Imagine by John Lennon.

JCUT TO:

INT. BENJAMIN'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

ZOOM IN on Benjamin's face in front of multiple computer monitors.

BENJAMIN (V.O)
My day? The same as usual.

MATCHCUT
TO:

INT. BENJAMIN'S ROOM - MORNING BEGIN

FLASHBACK:

Benjamin looks past the camera at the monitor, identical to the preceding frame, his face bored.

JUMPCUT TO:

LONG SHOT profile view of Benjamin slouched in front of his computer, clicking unenthusiastically.

BENJAMIN (V.O)
Clicking, clicking, clicking.
Working, trashing-
(he sighs)
Quite a lot of trashing actually.
Lunch?

JUMPCUT TO:

Above shot of table as Benjamin places his plate down and

sits.

BENJAMIN (V.O)

A tomato-and-chicken-style wrap, a glass of milk-and-chocolate-style shake, an apple-style apple. Oh and my morning fish oil capsule, for a bit more brain power.

JUMPCUT TO:

CLOSE UP shot of Benjamin's profile. Focus on the monitor behind. He gets up and walks to it.

JUMPCUT TO:

Close up of Benjamin sitting in front of the monitor looking past the camera into the monitor. His face becomes puzzled

MATCHCUT TO:

INT. BENJAMIN'S ROOM - FLASHBACK ENDS

BENJAMIN

My day's been fine Grandpa, as always. Working on my --ahem-- 'literature essay.'

JUMPCUT TO:

Behind Benjamin focus on REFLECTION on monitor beside Grandpa's image which begins to speak

REFLECTION

After lunch, my day had taken a surprising turn. I need to know more about that thing, about you and Grandma that I shouldn't have said again, that you didn't want to talk about again. But I need your advice again-

GRANDPA

(urgently)

I've got to go now Benjamin, my boy. I really must go.

(waves and blows a kiss)

Call ends and the webcam application closes. A shadow falls

over Benjamin's eyes and on his room. He opens text file labelled THE KISS which glows blood-red.

The melody of 'Komm Süßer Tod' FADES IN and we hear lyrics about forgetting love.

JUMPCUT TO:

CLOSE UP of Benjamin's eyes, reflecting the title. A MACHINE alarms 'FLUCTUATING FEELINGS' and a RED LIGHT PULSES, illuminating Benjamin's face.

JUMPCUT TO:

CLOSE UP of monitor and ZOOM IN to his reflection on monitor.

PAN to Benjamin's profile and ZOOM OUT as he impulsively pulls a monitor out of the wall and onto the floor. The pulsing lights are blinding and Benjamin pants, astonished at what has happened.

The song becomes louder and we hear lyrics about tumbling down.

The camera lowers to his feet where we see the song is playing from an old phone, flashing a battery symbol.

CUT TO:

EXT. BOGOTA, COLOMBIA - NIGHT

LONG SHOT of Benjamin's room window, which reflects the full moon.

FADE OUT

END.

Highly-commended entry

'Delicate Binary' by Fahima Begum, St Anne's Catholic School and Sixth Form College

Wandering to the edge of the screen,
my cursor meets your suggested profile
in an exchange of delicate binary.

My fingers press against the plastic keys,
a flood of data instantly passing
in a dizzying dance of compatibility.

The lights dim and forbidden words escape.
Unfortunately, the electrons refuse to carry
the full weight of an embrace.

Wandering to the edge of my mind,
a desire takes position.
Dangerous, untamed, but divine,
an appealing proposition.

The meeting of two lips
in an unapologetic kiss
sends the system into amiss
as we begin to go off script.

It was foolish of them to decide
that a love so great and wide
could be rendered in a resolution
and not cause a revolution.

Highly-commended entry

'The New Normal' by Millie Capehorn, Wycliffe

Isolated from family, talking through “zoom”
Playing my piano to get rid of the gloom
Dad off to work now, so many patients to see,
But now when he returns, just how well will he be?

Mum now has a new office, she’s working at home;
We walk round the block, but we’re not allowed to roam.
Funerals now being held in the empty church;
So many internet friends I intend to search

New hobbies we all try, let’s do baking today,
Little children still yearning to go out and play.
Day after day, they all merge into one.
Can I use the time wisely to get some things done?

Clap for NHS heroes on a Thursday night;
A cough in the family, giving all a fright.
Exam courses now halted, abridged and some ended
Those holiday plans must now all be amended .

See familiar faces and hear their voices;
No hugs we will get, no family rejoices
For us “Short term lockdown” was how it all started,
When school days ended, and the year groups all parted

But now they are saying, “social distance” is key;
If we can ever go back to some liberty.
The Prime Minister says in a voice so formal
We must all accept what is now the “new normal”.

Hence, we ask, what is “normal”? Future, present, past?
Nothing forever stays the same, nothing will last.
Forgotten times of handholding, love and kissing,
Gone from our lives now, contact forever missing

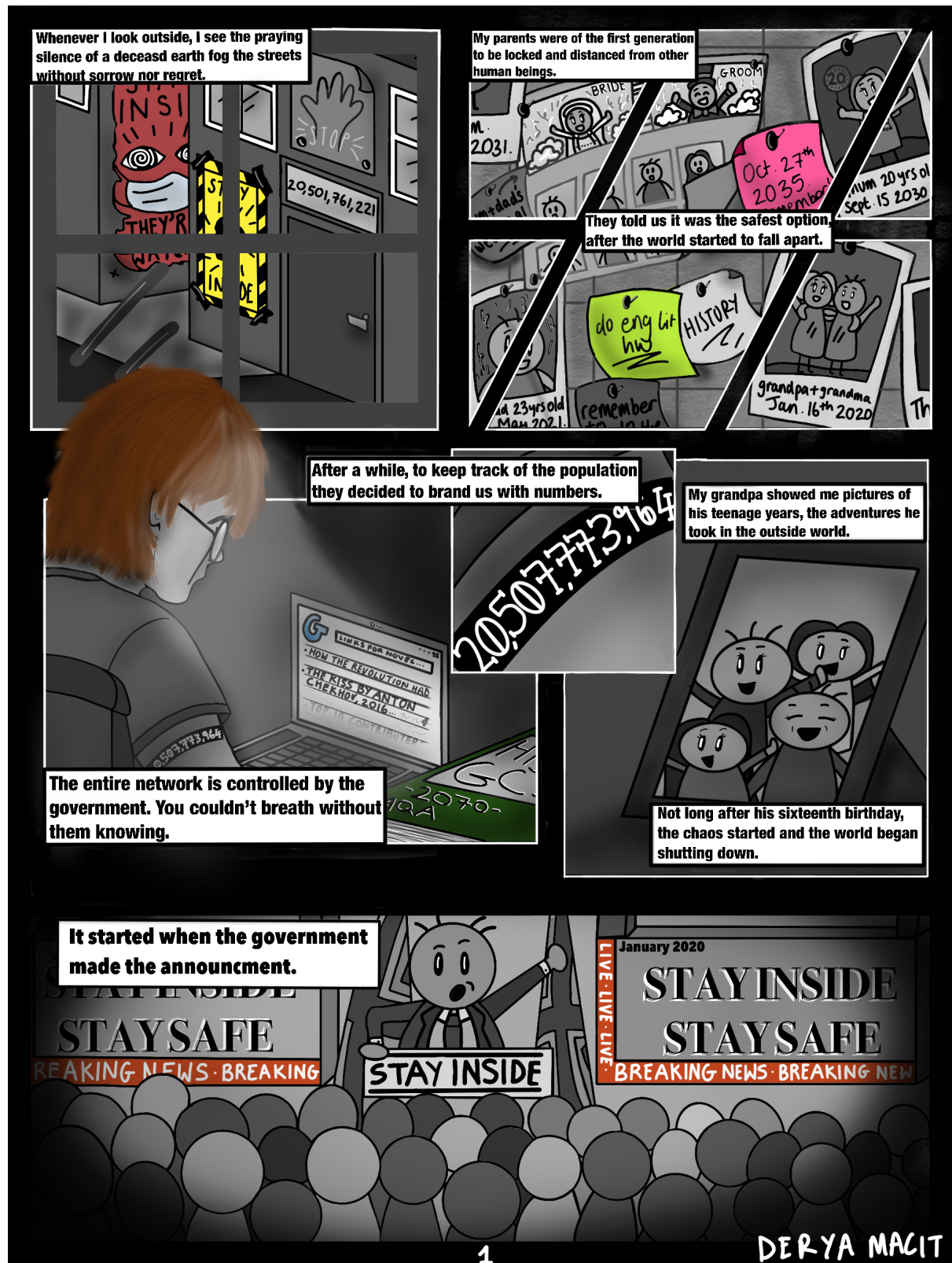
Isolation, internet, interact through screens
Is this now what the “new normal” means?

I was inspired to write the poem "The New Normal" after reading the short story "Then". In the short story, Benjamin lives in a world where social contact is limited and life is conducted largely through media channels, cyber-space, and remotely. Benjamin is horrified

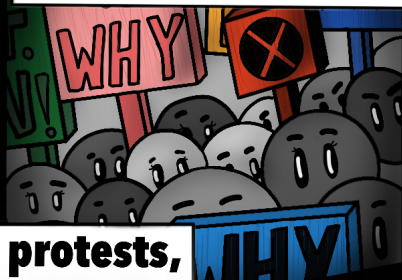
that the thought of elderly relatives, living in another era, found it "normal" to hold hands and kiss. He finds references to literature of the past, heavily censored, that make him question briefly his own "normal life". Clearly, there are great parallels to the modern world in which we are currently questioning much of which we consider to be normal. I started to contemplate my own "normal" life now and how it compared with my own normal life of a year ago. I went on to consider whether there is a "normal" after all. Different countries have different normal in terms of greeting and social contact; what is normal in Europe might not be in Asia. Within a continent normal varies, and normal varies over time - what was normal for Victorian Britain would be abnormal now and a Victorian child would look at modern Britain with awe and probably would not recognise life at all. So, what is "normal" - is there such a thing, or does it simply reflect the brief moment in time in which we live and what we are "used to"? I hope my poem reflects my personal normal, which I suspect I share in common with many, but which was not "normal" for me in the past and may be unrecognisable as normal in the future, perhaps.

Highly-commended entry

'Stay Inside - Stay Safe' by Derya Macit, Clapton Girls' Academy



After the announcement, anger spread like an unstoppable wildfire around the globe. Humanity tried to resist in every way,



revolutions,



even wars.

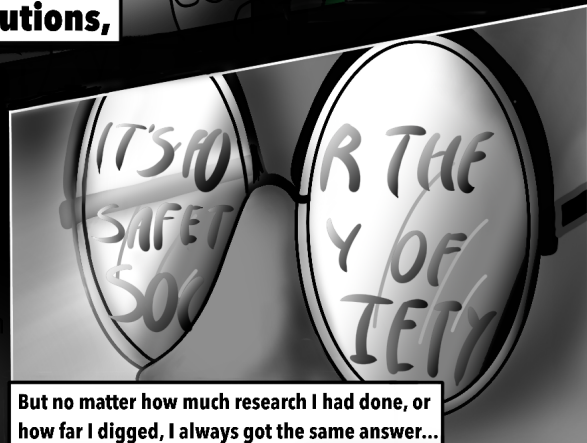


protests,



I spent countless hours

going through the darkest websites,



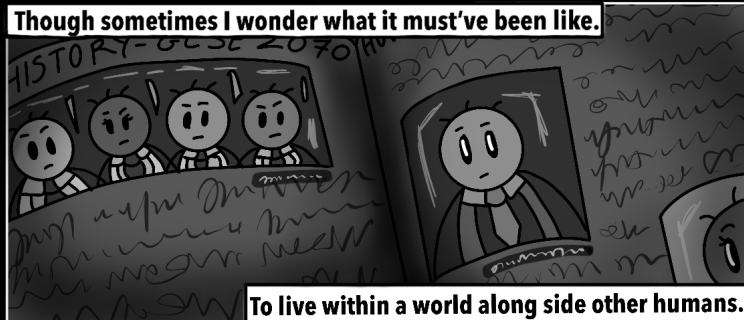
But no matter how much research I had done, or how far I dug, I always got the same answer...

Perhaps it was best to not know, after all curiosity did kill the cat.



Satisfaction brought it back although, I don't think anyone will ever truly know what happened.

Though sometimes I wonder what it must've been like.



To live within a world along side other humans.

Even in one of the biggest cities in the world,



The one thing that our generation had in common was that,

Everyone in our world

is born and dies



alone.

DERYA MALIT

Commended entry

'Then: Personal Reflection' by Francesca Lane, The King Edward VI High School, Morpeth

Upon reading Then, I was reminded of a dream I had a while ago, of a curse stopping people from being able to touch and hold each other and I was clinging onto my family knowing that if I let go, I would never be able to hold them again. Unsurprisingly, I woke up very sad yet relieved to discover it was just a dream. However, it did make me realise the value that, as humans, we place on touch.

On further reflection, I was reminded of a quote I read which was an observation on human nature, stating that: people will never remember what you did, but they will always remember how you made them feel, and it occurred to me that any form of touch, even something as simple as a handshake or a kiss on the cheek, can unleash a multitude of feelings within us, and that through touch, a door is opened to emotion. Furthermore, the lack of touch, can also greatly inhibit our emotional grounding and understanding.

After reading Then, I thought it appropriate that I familiarise myself with The Kiss by Anton Chekhov so that I could identify with what Benjamin himself read and I was struck by how excessive his emotional response seemed towards the narrative in comparison to my own. I contemplated this for a while, wondering how a relatively simple, yet poignant, story could have such a dramatic effect on someone. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that it was due to his lack of understanding of the feelings that touch can cause that he was overwhelmed by emotions he couldn't comprehend. As humans it is impossible for us to articulate a feeling we have never encountered before yet, once encountered, the feeling is never forgotten. Hence why, in relation to the quote I mentioned earlier, we remember how different individuals make us feel.

The final conclusion I came to was when I considered the title of the story: Then. Initially I interpreted it as if it were a connective, seamlessly connecting two events, keeping the story moving, looking forwards, so to speak. However, this analysis didn't seem to fit the story so I considered the word's other meaning. 'Then' is a word used to look back on previous occasions and generations and it's this interpretation that illustrates the meaning of the story. Looking back on a world where people could hold hands and kiss was a world infinitely better than Benjamin's because along with touch came feelings, openly expressed not dampened. In a world dominated by Coronavirus, it is easier than ever to see the story's significance. With families separated, unable to comfort each other with hugs, social media thronged with posts captioned 'throwbacks' in remembrance of an unconfined way of life, it is important to keep moving forwards, hopeful in the remembrance of a better time and knowing we will get back there again.

Commended entry

'Before Everything' by Aaron Gillett, Wilson's School

The place: London

The year: 21—

Act I Scene I

The stage is unlit, covered in darkness, before two spotlights reveal an aging man (George) and a teenage girl (Amelia). George has huge bags under his eyes which seem to give him a fixed expression of worry whereas Amelia's smooth skin and almost manufactured stance makes her state of mind impossible to decipher.

George: *[With gruffness in his voice and answering an incoming phone call]* Hello

Amelia: Hi Grandpa, it's only me – Amelia *[she stutters, taken aback slightly by her Grandfather's harsh tone.]*

[There is a tension on stage as the two characters, unaware of each other's presence speak outwardly.]

George: Oh, Amelia how are you. When did you last speak to your parents? I haven't heard from your mother in a while *[he mumbles under his breath - inaudible to the audience]*

Amelia: About 3 weeks I think *[shrugging off the thought of her parents in order to move the conversation onto something of greater importance]* Look, I was just calling to ask you something. Something about before.

[There is hesitation as the tension returns to the stage, silence from George prompts Amelia to speak again]

Amelia: Y'know. Before everything—

George: *[interrupting Amelia with force]* I know what you mean.
[There is uncertain silence]

George: Amelia, we've discussed this. Things that happened before *[the gruffness returns to his voice however George speaks with a certain difficulty]* are not spoken about for a reason. The Boundaries are there to protect and not to be broken. Do you not understand that for your own safety—

Amelia: Please, just one question

George: No Amelia I've told you before –

Amelia: Did you see Grandma when you were getting married?

George: Yes *[with reluctance]* we saw each other, only a couple of times mind and on the day itself of course. *[forgetting himself and losing himself in memory]* God I'll never forget how we embraced and she –

Amelia: Grandpa you touched?

George: Amelia—

Amelia: Like properly Grandpa? Did you touch?

George: Amelia you must understand things were very, very different when I was a young man. People lived their lives with no constant fear that they were going to contract or pass on. And imagine, people didn't understand the danger they were in. So, I know it was wrong and now we have Redactions to stop this kind of thing. But it happened Amelia, I'm not going to lie to you it –

Amelia: How did it feel Grandpa? *[Amelia interjects, cutting off her bumbling Grandfather]*

George: Wonderful.

[George EXITS while Amelia looks into the space beyond the stage before the lights fade.]

The Curtain Falls.

Commended entry

'Now' by Marco Lewis, KES, Stratford upon Avon

I was 25 when I met her. We held hands and we kissed, but now I am not sure that that I will ever kiss again.

I sit here typing, to the best of my ability with aged fingers. A story that would seem unimportant to the children of today. My own daughter exists in isolation, unable to ever meet her husband, and my grandson, will never be able to meet his mother. I will have to explain to him the 'old days'. He will not understand, despite my best efforts, the comfort that human interaction, even just a kiss, can give. But today I will focus on a positive, as that is what we must do in this time, where time itself is condensed and confined.

It was 50 years ago; we had just heard word of the OROAN -C virus. My father had organised a fundraiser to support research into genetic sequencing, in the form of a dance. I had just returned from a trip to India, I had always thought that it was a rather beautiful place, but after feeling homesick, had returned, to attend the dance. I never thought that it would change my life...

I entered the gaping mouth of the concert hall, and as it swallowed me. I could see hundreds of others had been engulfed as well. I never was keen on these social events, the conversations always seemed to turn from political squabbles between antiquated partisans, to the latest money-making schemes, both of which bored me senseless. It's funny, but now, I would give anything to go back to some semblance of that. And then she entered the room. She wafted up towards me, shining like quicksilver and, soft as a cloud she whispered 'Hello.' That simple word that I have spoken so many times to my daughter, but one that would echo, timeless in my life as the word that started it all. 'Til then I was disinterested but now, my entire gaze, my entire life, was focused on her. 'Hello,' I said, smiling as our life together stretched out before me.

A year later we were married. It's funny how quickly things can go by when you spend time with your loved ones, something that the world will never again know. We were going on another trip to India for our honeymoon, and as we were travelling, we reminisced about our first kiss, it had seemed so awkward at the time, but at the same time so beautiful. She began to laugh, and just as quickly, that laugh turned to a cough. I think I knew then that our time together would be cut short. The path that had been extended, was cut just as easily. A cruel twist of fate.

Now I sit here, alone, a glass screen between me and my loved ones, as it was with her. One day they will understand the importance of love, and we will all meet, for the first time, again.

Commended entry

Then by Josie Jackson, Wellington College

*The human heart has hidden treasures,
In secret kept, in silence sealed;—
The thoughts, the hopes, the dreams, the pleasures,
Whose charms were broken if revealed.*
Evening Solace by Charlotte Bronte

Then

She pulled off her skin to reveal a face. Well, by 'a', I really mean 'new', since this was the third time she had pulled off her face tonight. And by 'pulled' it was more *peeled* - like one does to a sweaty sock they have worn for too long.

Frankly, I didn't want to know where she put all her old faces; I imagine it to be fairly vile to open a garbage bin only to find a perfect mask, a template of a face. But, with closer inspection to find it with the exact tone and consistency of skin, only to further realise- *oh dear*, someone is missing their face.

Why, you ask, do I know that she has pulled off her face *three* times tonight? Well, a man of my good sensibility and reputation could not simply let an abomination out and about the streets at any time they deemed fit. Whoever went around just pulling skin off their face to reveal a new face, was in my books, not human.

For all of my discerning faculties (if I do say so myself - I have many); they were all concentrated on resolving this, this bewitching and elusive *thing* that had so easily snared my attention and provoked much turmoil, in and around me. As my Grandma (God bless her soul) always said: If it were to be, let it be done. And since the creature decided to *be*, I had to make sure that it was *done*.

By that time in the evening the visceral curiosity had usurped the rational fear of something so *other*. So, with heart over head in mind, I trailed her with enough assiduity to unlock her secrets.