

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

*Sarah MacAllister*  
**Hollow Bones**

I STARED AT MY BOYFRIEND NIBBLING CORNFLAKES with a teaspoon. His evening ritual.

"You're doing it again," I said.

"Doing what?" Chris glanced up from his bowl.

"Sniffing."

"Sorry, Emma."

"Blow your nose!"

Chris stood and walked to the kitchen sink. Holding his hands cupped to his face he gave an almighty blow and, after twisting the faucet, he rinsed the slime from his hands.

"Why can't you use a tissue like everyone else?"

Chris zombie-walked towards me, arms outstretched, ready to contaminate me with bogey fingers. I laughed and dodged them, squealing. "Get away, get away from me, you sicko!" But really, I was revolted by him a lot of the time. When his mouth hung open watching tv, when he sneezed, or snickered instead of laughing, how pale his lashes were; all these minor irritations provoked me, created an invisible rash. It was my own fault. I fixated on these insignificant details. He loved me. That should have been enough.

Later that night, we wrapped ourselves together in bed under our duvet, sky blue, but instead of drifting to sleep, my eyes kept blinking open. I listened to the soft purr of Chris breathing and did not feel soothed. In the dim glow of the streetlight filtering through the curtain, I watched the grey walls of our bedroom and the predictable shadows of furniture and baskets.

I slipped from Chris's arms and walked naked to the bathroom. Inside the mirror, my shadowy face stared back, my eyes like holes.

His razor lay on the sink.

I flipped the blade out and held it between my finger and thumb, a slice of metal, and swiped the crook of my elbow. Blood trickled but the cut was more of a scratch, as if from the claws of an irritated pet. I replaced the razor blade, unpeeled a small plaster from the cabinet drawer and smoothed it over the broken skin.

Upon returning to bed, I curled into Chris's warm arms and calm waves pulled me to sleep.

The following night was the same, all grey walls and contented breathing. I returned to the bathroom, stripped off the plaster and brought the silvery blade to nestle in my arm, where a baby's head might have rested. Slitting the skin again felt a little sore. I reapplied a plaster. The lump that was Chris rolled from the draft when I lifted the duvet. Warmth spread from my head to toes, like sinking into shimmering sands.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

"What happened to your arm?" said Chris, stroking the smooth surface of my plaster in the morning.

"Just snagged it in the garden."

"I'll kiss it better," he said, pulling my mouth inside his rubbery wet lips.

On the third night, I crept into the bathroom and detached the razor blade. I plucked the sticky, flesh-coloured strip from my skin. The cut was moist, weeping slightly. I niggled the blade and fresh blood welled over, dribbling to my wrist.

Why not, I thought.

I dragged the tiny blade from the thumb and nicked through inches of skin, then retraced the line, going deeper this time, until blood ran into the sink. My face a moon in the mirror, with crater eyes that led nowhere.

We'd run out of plasters, so I bandaged my wrist with toilet roll. I sneaked back to bed and smelled the familiar pheromones from Chris, wafting like king bolete spores. Relieved to feel sleepy once more, I flowed within an underwater forest glade.

"Emma, what have you done? What the hell have you done?"

Chris shook me awake into the cold daylight that forced a line between the curtains. I blearily raised my arm to fend off the incoming light. Toilet paper clung in red strings and the wound gaped back like an idiot's grin.



Tyres rolled along the driveway, crunching gravel like small animal bones. Chris opened the passenger door and steered me into the grip of nurses at Wintersun House. Double doors sealed the corridor winding to cells of a barren honeycomb. Bleach wafted from the linoleum. Chris waved through the glass, then left.

"Lift your top so we can take a waist measurement," said the nurse, stretching cool tape around my warm waist. She tutted and inscribed a figure on her chart. "Eat something. You're starving." We walked to a dining area, where the air stank of grease, and my nurse doled out a plateful of plump sausage rolls and glistening beans. Pills shone like bleached smarties in the plastic cup she handed over. I tried to hand it back.

"How about a two-inch needle for your bottom instead?" she said, with a broad, eyeless smile.

I carried my plate to a table near the window that the unblinking sun stared through. Small birds hopped on the grass outside: sparrows, finches, and tits. Someone shuffled behind me. A fat woman with staring eyes eating a pie. I could be you, she seemed to say. She hummed a hymn as she chewed and swallowed. I felt her hot breath on my shoulder and breathed sweat as the woman inched closer. She wanted to be near another body, anybody would do. She sat down as I stood up.

I stuck my pills under my tongue, feeling the chalky things melting in my mouth as I hurried to the toilet and spat them out, along with lunch. When I opened the toilet door, my nurse was waiting for me.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

She escorted me to Dr Burrow's office, the consultant psychiatrist. While he spoke, his wiry eyebrows lurched upwards, as if he were surprising himself.

"Some people find medication allows them to regain an even keel." His foot tapped and jiggled. "It's silly not to eat because you're afraid of getting fat. Don't you think?"

I stood up and left.

Dr. Burrow followed me to my cell. "I'm not interested in dredging up the past. It confuses patients and side-tracks them from finding solutions, which is what I like to encourage. How do you feel about that?"

"Fine," I said, lying down. Dr Burrow sat on the bed too.

"Good, I'm glad we agree. Tell me what you'd like to get out of our sessions together. What are your goals? How will we get you better?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Let me tell you about a man who asked for my help not so long ago. He was where you are now, dissatisfied with life. Somehow, he expected more. It frustrated him no end that he couldn't be happy. He thought something was wrong with him and wanted me to fix it. So, I asked him to think of a commonplace activity that he knew how to do, like taking a shower, and describe the steps for someone who had never done it before."

"He picked shopping. Walk to a shop, he said, grab something, give money to the assistant, and leave with the item. So, I asked, how would they know where to find the shop, or choose the item they needed, or know how much money to bring? He got my point straight away. His list would never help anyone. The same applies to happiness. How can you be happy if you don't know the steps to follow?"

Dr Burrow patted my arm. "Think about it," he said.

My hands were cold and mottled. My breath tasted sour. The nurses were fat and probably offended by my childish refusal to eat. Just eat, eat it, damn you. I lay on top of the covers, trying not to think about anything, feeling lumps from the mattress springs. Hours ached by. Cries echoed through the corridors. I stroked the bird doodled on the wall. The bird stared back through the orange ring around its pupil.

Nurses marched into my room and switched the yellow light on. I blinked while one pulled the cover off.

"You have not been taking your medication. We need to inject you. Turn over."

I ignored them, so they rolled me over.

The needle's contents shot into my backside like an upside-down sneeze that swarmed through my body. Blood drummed in my ears. White larvae fell from holes in my shins. My lungs filled with glue. I broke into a cold sweat. A shadow crept from the corners of my eyes. Nurses took turns addressing me, trying to reach me; but I refused like a broken button.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

Then a miserable flip-flop began in my chest.

"Just a panic attack," someone said.

Somebody must have told Chris because he phoned me the next day.

"How are you?" he said.

"Fine."

He sighed. "Emma, I know you're not fine."

"How perceptive of you."

The day yawned ahead, and the hymn-singer sat beside me on the sofa, thighs touching mine.

"You have wide eyes," she said. "Wide eyes for seeing."

I continued watching the television screen. My chest clenched and beats skipped and pounded, bucking like a tormented horse.

"Pie?" She held the plate under my nose.

"No, thank you."

Chris visited. Once through the double doors, he rushed to embrace me. I stood still while he squeezed my bones.

"I miss you," he said.

What could I say? I didn't miss him at all.

"Emma, I love you."

I felt a stab of jealousy because he was capable of love.

"Me too," I lied.

He sighed into my hair, a warm puff.

"Just, try to eat something."

Chris carried his love for me away down the shiny corridor, feet squeaking, then waited to be buzzed out. He pushed against the first door and stepped through. It snapped shut. Trapped between two doors, he was caught like an insect in a windowpane, neither inside nor outside. He pushed the outer door a fraction of a second too soon and it wouldn't open. I saw him waving to someone through the glass. A buzzer sounded. He walked free.