

Emily Hepditch
Senior Short Fiction
The Fare (an excerpt)

Tommy and Cath are nearing the sea, the last little stretch of the trip, a route as familiar as rolling home at night, built in like a grain. Slow down over the pothole, change lanes to avoid the speed sign poorly planned protruding pointed corners into the oncoming lane.

Any plans this evening? Cath asks and it brings hot colour to Tommy's face.

No, he mutters, and doesn't say it's another night condemned to the company of his old laptop that will die unexpectedly, thrust a black screen in his face, reflect his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, press another bruise into his soul.

And the noise will start,

a whispering at first that will tease and tempt and crescendo into a fire of shouting that bounces off the empty walls back at him because there's nobody near to absorb the sound.

No friends, who have all wandered on (too narcissistic to be nihilistic).

No girlfriend, who wandered on with one of the narcissists.

No parents, who mentioned through glinting easy-life teeth it would be good for Tommy's independence to consider branching out into a place of his own. Like trees can be chopped off just above the roots and still be expected to reach for the sky.

Now it's just Tommy in the black screen, and he doesn't have an answer to give the bleak man staring back.

Tommy asks why do you go to the sea every day?

Cath says it's my favourite place to go

and life, which is meant to be crammed full of tippy living, should be spent in your favourite places.

She doesn't tell him that it has always been the sea, her background dream like a soft, knowing pillow for hard falls

like all those times Leonard drank himself out of jobs, credit cards, and families. Like when Byron in sour spirits lit his father's tequila-stained mattress on vengeful fire, swallowing up the plywood floors. Or when the man with wide shoulders but sad eyes came and told her that the

house she worked three jobs to uphold had been clawed back by the bank, nickel by nickel
they'd fallen behind, leaving them on the front lawn,
no longer theirs.

Those days yes, she had dreamed of the sea.