

Highly Commended 2018 OutStanding LGBTIQ+ Short Story Competition

Eraser Eyes by Verity Croker

'Who puts up blank road signs?' asked Felix.

They'd been walking for hours, vapour pouring from mouths, muscles tiring. Finally they reached a town. No lights. No people. No dogs.

'The land that time forgot.'

'What's that?' Felix said, spooked.

A tattered-clothed figure with shoulder-trailing hair appeared through the murky dark. The breeze was sweet soap scented.

'Weird,' whispered Adam. 'Let's get out of here.'

'Who are you?' croaked a deep voice, seemingly unaccustomed to use.

'I'm Felix – this is Adam. We need food and somewhere to sleep.'

'Erasmus.'

'Hello Erasmus,' said Felix. 'Why's the town empty?'

'I'll tell you after we eat. Follow me.'

Adam and Felix caught each other's eyes and shrugged. They were starving.

Nobody spoke on the short walk to his house. Once inside, Erasmus lit a welcoming fire, and soon a rich meat aroma made them salivate. Windows steamed.

Erasmus offered them beers. They drank thirstily and ate without speaking, only the clatter of spoons against teeth and gulping sounds breaking the silence.

Erasmus insisted they relax while he cleared away, so Adam and Felix sank into the worn, leather couch. Adam looked tenderly at Felix dozing on his shoulder, then gazed around the room. His eyes fixed on the bookshelf.

'Strange. There's nothing on the spines.'

Felix mumbled as Adam eased his head onto a cushion. Reaching the bookshelf, Adam pulled out a book.

'Nothing on the cover either.'

He nudged Felix awake, shoving the book in his face.

Felix, wide-awake with intrigue, grabbed a random book, and opened it.

'What the...' said Felix.

Blank pages. He picked out another, fanning pages. It too was blank.

Adam's eyes slid to Felix's chest.

'Man,' he said, voice shaking. 'Your t-shirt.'

The saying – You may not recognise me but I'm The Next Big Thing – had disappeared. Felix scratched at the material as if willing the words to re-appear.

'Something really freaky's going on,' said Adam. 'Let's scam.'

'Please don't leave,' Erasmus begged from the doorway. 'Everybody leaves.'

'What's happening?' asked Felix.

'It's a long story – sit down again.'

Erasmus waited while they complied, curiosity overcoming fear.

'When I first started reading as a child, words floated into my eyes. Opening a book, words quivered, peeling off the page.'

Erasmus coughed.

'I'll get water,' said Felix.

When Felix returned, Erasmus drank deeply.

'And?' asked Adam.

'I was banned from the library, shooed from shops. Kids called me "Eraser-Eyes."'

Adam and Felix knew all about bullying.

Erasmus coughed again.

'Doctors'd never seen anything like it. Later on, my eyes erased paint.'

'Paint?' asked Adam.

'Words disappeared from shopfronts, street signs, billboards. Townsfolk begged my parents to leave, but they knew the same thing'd happen wherever we went. So the townsfolk left instead.'

'After my parents died, I was alone. I felt guilty pillaging, but I needed food. I gathered gas bottles, carting them in wheelbarrows, grew vegetables, and kept a cow for milk, chickens for eggs. The years passed slowly. You're the first people here in ages.'

'Must've been lonely,' said Felix.

'Yes, I practically lived at the library, though text disappeared as I read. Books saved my sanity. I learned about a world I'd never see.'

Erasmus coughed again, putting a handkerchief to his mouth. As he returned it to his pocket, Adam cried 'Look!'

Drawing the handkerchief closer, Erasmus saw little black marks. Little letters. Hundreds of them.

'My god,' croaked Erasmus.

His coughing spasm returned. More letters tumbled to his handkerchief, some floating into the air, drifting towards Felix's t-shirt, rewriting the slogan.

Adam and Felix stared, open-mouthed.

Soon, countless letters spread like bee swarms, forming words as they got more distant from his lips. In an ever-enlarging funnel shape, words poured out of his house, around the streets and into buildings through cracks and crevices. Words plastered themselves into their original slots, on signs, shopfronts, food packaging, posters. Library books opened and pages drank in words like parched, thirsty souls.

Felix and Adam held hands, necks craning to witness the re-forming words, thousands of them, millions of them. Adam wiped spittle from the old man's mouth, words forming on his tissue.

'Tell my story. And yours.'

Erasmus dribbled again. Once more Adam wiped his mouth and read the tissue, as Erasmus pointed a shaky, crooked finger at Felix's t-shirt slogan.

'The power of words,' he said. 'Never forget.'

His chest heaved, and out came one last blast of air. He was gone.