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WILD EAST

ASHLEY HICKSON-LOVENCE

Illustrated by Camilla Ru

PENGUIN

CONTENT WARNING

Before you begin reading, please be aware that small parts of this book may be triggering for some readers. While it is a work of fiction, this book is grounded in many aspects of modern life and covers some serious topics that readers should be aware of, including knife crime, county lines and physical violence.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Growing up with my mum and little brother in our council flat in Hackney, East London, I never thought I would be an author or a doctor of Creative Writing with a PhD one day. Mainly because, when I was at school, I rarely read books written by people like me, about people like me.

Slowly things seem to be changing.

If you've ever felt unseen, unsure or unsafe, a little shy or even outright terrified, in or out of the classroom, then *Wild East* has been written for you. This is a story for those who – like the main character, Ronny – might not consider themselves readers usually but are still, in some way, in some form, a lover of words.

Ashley Hickson-Lovence

WILD EAST PLAYLIST

'All For Maz' – Castro

'Please Don't Move to London It's a Trap' – Murkage Dave

'Expensive Pain' – Rimzee (feat. Born Trappy)

'Plants Don't Grow' – Frankie Stew and Harvey Gunn (feat. Kamran Kaur)

'County Lines 1' – Frosty

'2009' – Mac Miller

'Light & Dark' – Dré Six

'Dreamgirl' – Calum O'Rourke (feat. Tyler Lovence)

'Pumped Up Kicks' – Foster the People

'Turn' – RV and Headie One (feat. Unknown T)

'Gratitude' – Mr Jukes and Barney Artist

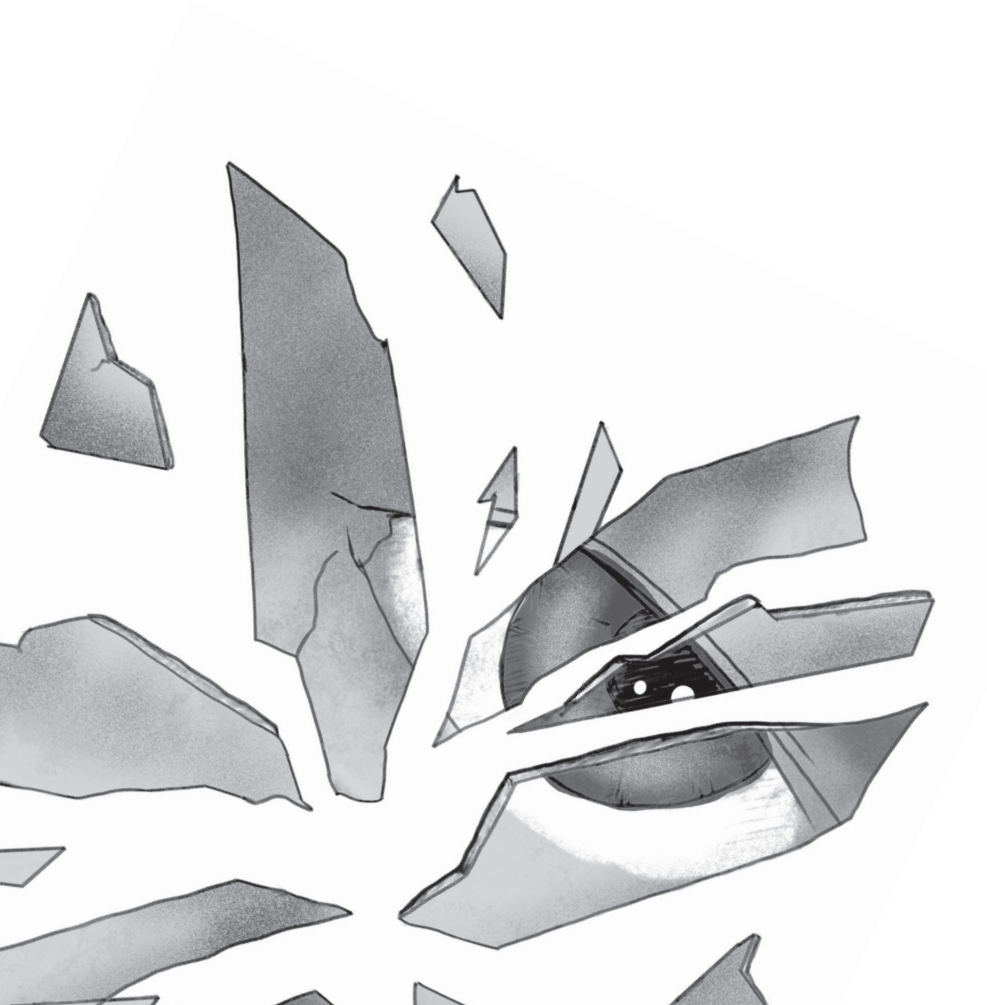
'Building Castles' – Bawo

'Crazy Year' – Dimzy, LD and 67

**Plants don’t grow
when it’s dark and cold.
Something that seemed so simple
is the part unknown.**

– Frankie Stew and Harvey Gunn

PROLOGUE



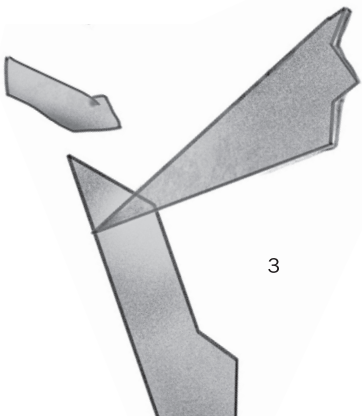
A glance as sharp
as a shard of broken glass.

His dark eyes slicing souls open
with crystal-clear precision
on the top deck of this 43 bus,
we've become targets locked in his vision.

'What you looking at?' he says,
words all jagged and pointy,
loaded like a strap and hanging heavy,
weighty enough for every
passenger to hear.

We didn't know we were
looking at him, not really,
Maz and I, no more than a
little peep if we were – certainly
didn't mean to cause offence.
We've just been chilling, in all honesty,
chatting and joking around
doing stupid impressions
of our teachers and stuff –
but this guy sat at the very back
is getting all riled up.

'Oi, did you not hear me?'
he says louder than before,
his voice all strained and spiky.
'What ***you*** looking at?'
He seems to be addressing **me**
now only.



He's sat with this other guy,
quieter but looks just as menacing,
both like sixteen, seventeen,
eighteen at a stretch maybe.
Either way, just a few years older than us
and unlike Maz and me,
not in school uniform.

I think they've got it twisted
because I know I've never seen
either of them before.
Where I come from, you remember
every spot, scratch or scar
of someone's face, so this must be a case
of mistaken identity, it has to be.

The two of them sit sprawled across
the five seats at the back and we're sat
half turned to them,
Maz on one side of the aisle,
me on the other,
just a few rows in front,
on the top deck of this double-decker bus,
the current scene of this unprovoked
but not totally unexpected verbal attack.
When you live in London you can't ever
let your guard down just like that.

Me and Maz, best friends since Year Seven,
same form class, school football team,
always get this bus home together,

take it basically every day,
from our school in Archway,
past Holloway,
and Highbury, along City Road,
through Islington and into Hackney.

Maz is mad good at art,
wants to do it for GCSE.
He's a guaranteed Grade 9, easily
one of the best in the year,
maybe even the whole school;
good at doing realistic portraits of people
and landscapes of the city.

But this picture here
is not looking pretty.

In seconds the mood has shifted.
This guy's serious and now the blood's
proper thumping under my skin,
as painful as punches to the ribs.
He's angrily pointing his fingers at me
and his fury is hard to ignore,
we're definitely looking at him now
even if we weren't looking before.

'Nothing to say, yeah,' he says,
again, just speaking to me specifically.
'Not a big man any more, yeah,' he adds,
rising from his seat now, aggressively.

We can't take this, can we?

Maz has had enough and
starts to speak up,
taking matters into his
own hands on my behalf.
Calls him names in reply,
names he deserves undoubtedly
but still feels strange to hear at like four
in the afternoon on a Wednesday.

But I suppose he's
got the right idea –
we can't look weak,
made to look a joke
by this joker talking silly
in front of all these people,
just like ten minutes or so from our ends
where we grew up,
where we were born and raised.

The other passengers seem to ignore
what's going on completely,
or what might be
just about to happen.
They only half look,
they only half care,
this disagreement a minor inconvenience
they can forget about in five or ten minutes.

Some of them saw Stormzy
the other summer, headlining Glastonbury
so instead of getting involved,
defend or protect,
they read a *Guardian* book review
or scroll through ASOS
for something to wear
for their work summer barbecue.

This is the youth of today,
and this is what they do:
through anger is how they communicate.

Blame the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan.
Blame drill music.
Blame bad parenting.

(They don't care. Not really.)

'I'm not doing this. Come, Ronny,'
suggests Maz sensibly
as he gets up and
heads towards the stairs quickly,
ready to get off before all hell breaks loose,
before this all gets out of hand.

The passengers breathe a sigh of relief,
can get on with the rest of their day and maybe
that's the end of it. This drama to them
like a scene from *Top Boy* on Netflix,
watch a bit and then press the OFF switch.

But as we stomp down the stairs,
Maz spouting parting shots,
me staying quiet,
scampering behind trying to keep up
without looking back,
I hear footsteps **follow us off**.

Now we're walking towards Islington Green,
and even Maz seems keen to get away,
but this guy is not giving me the space,
his trigger finger
jabbing my temple and I'm
too shook to react,
too scared to respond.
My heart in my throat,
the heat in my face.

These guys are moving mad,
the main one in particular,
limbs flailing and fizzy,
legs and arms all frenetic.

In our rush to escape and get away,
we barge past a posh couple
who at first act outraged
but then see what's going on
and say nothing.

She's brunette and wearing Birkenstocks,
he's wearing khaki shorts
and camo-coloured Crocs.

I spot the tightness of his knuckles as he
grips her hand and
leads her from the commotion.
I clock his watch – could be
a Rolly, or an Audemars –
and he's brave for wearing
one of those around these parts,
but at this moment,
he's not the one in danger . . .

We are.

Because this bus guy's
bobbing about like a boxer,
but it's not his fists he's threatening us with.
No, there's too much fury involved now,
he's in too deep to back out
and seems ready to match words
with actual action.

There's something shapely in this boy's tracksuit,
recognizable from playground stories
or films, music videos on YouTube.

The sunlight is gleaming off
his shiny forehead,
droplets of his sweat spread
and start to drip as this scuffle spills
from the pavement on to the streets
and Maz is shouting back now,
not letting it go –

it's not what he knows –
but when the guy's hand dips,
I duck.

Me and Maz, best friends since Year Seven;
same form class, school football team,
but he's in real trouble here because
now it's two against one.

I've gone.

I'm fleeing the scene at speed
and, as I break into a
full sprint and glance back,
I see a glimmer of a knife-edge,
the stainless-steel shine
of a black-handled seven-inch.

Maz – weaponless, of course,
his only defence his desperate pleas –
is floored.

The liquid pours:
his blood, my tears.