

# LOFT

Issue IV



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Edited by Claire Cronin

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## Introduction

Welcome to Issue IV of Loft's anthology. If you are reading this, you will already have become acquainted with Patrick Bingham-Hall's cover: a spiral staircase winding into a black chasm. Opening a collection such as this is always something of a leap into the unknown, teeming with possibility. We might go in with the intention of being entertained, moved or educated, swept up in romance or adventure. Whatever it is you're looking for, we hope that you might find all of it (and more) in this new issue.

It is apt to start our descent (ascent?) into the Loft world with our short story winner, Mary De Sousa's 'Up the Downstairs' — a tale about a mother and daughter, and the ravages of dementia. The protagonist (for tonight, at least) is 'Eileen' — possibly a distant family member, or the resonance of an old song. Eileen shows her mother around the family home, their relationship one of both 'despair' and 'humour'. 'Sometimes she feels the music of what is happening between us rather than understanding the words.' This beautiful story has all the pathos of an operatic piece, and is a worthy winner.

Our Highly Commended entry in this category is 'A Woman in Her Bed' by JP Garland. This entrancing story captures 'the artist's intimate gaze' as the creation of titular painting takes place before our eyes. Set in nineteenth century London, we learn of the relationship between three women: Clara, Felicity and the suitably named Diana — a muse in whom our artist, Clara, is able to find liberation.

Moving onto Flash Fiction: David Butler's 'First Love' is our winning entry in this category. Here, we are transported back to school, rich with the language and texture of Ireland. A new student — Sadbh — is introduced to the class. She is shy. The other children (and the readers) are unsure of her, sensing that a surprise is in store. What stands out, for me, is the way Butler describes his characters and his use of metaphor: Sadbh's 'kingfisher eyes', for example, or Brother Colman's which 'bulged out like a bullfrog'. A fine piece.

The versatility of this issue is cemented in Jonathan Avant's Highly Commended flash — 'Rebel Scum'. Heading across the pond to the States, we are introduced to an eight-year-old protagonist who has saved up his pocket money to buy some Star Wars trading cards. Here, the predominant tone is one of youthful exuberance, but there is more to the piece than the simple joys of childhood. 'There's no balance in the force', the child says to the storekeeper at one point. And in this line, we find a yearning for kindness and understanding that goes beyond the power dynamics and transactional nature of consumerist culture.

Saba Pakdel's poem 'Crossing' is an entrancing meditation on the borders that define us. This is done through a racial lens, with the speaker lamenting the sacrifices necessitated by venturing beyond one's native land, people who are 'shedding illegality off [their] skin' in an attempt to belong. The poem opens with the suggestion that 'home is a motion / a wave' — an idea which, itself, *moves* through the 'imagined space' of the poem, rising once more in the third stanza: 'home is a moment, I could've said.' The shift is subtle. Time and space collide and the truth of impermanence shines through. Our Highly Commended poem, and thoroughly deserved.

The first line of Daniel Rabuzzi's stunning poem, 'Cenacle', harkens back to an essay by Walter Benjamin: 'I too unpack my library.' The poem — the winning entry in this category — had a particular relevance for me. Having recently moved house, I am familiar with this idea of unpacking one's library. Books thrown into bags and boxes, some barely remembered, others I would linger on as I picked them up, thumb brushing the cover, the author's name, the title... When we unpack our libraries, we reveal a little of ourselves.

Rabuzzi's poem emphasises, I think, the connections formed by literature. When we read, there is always a point of connection with 'another' — we become attentive to the ways the author and the characters see the world, and how this differs from the way we see the world. Even the act of choosing what to read has meaning. Or, in the case of a collection such as this, what to publish. In collating the

poems and prose you are about to read, we — the editors — reveal something of ourselves.

The credit of course goes to our wonderful, talented authors — sadly too many to mention in this introduction — who have entrusted their work to us. And in this act of trust lies the secret beauty of words, of communication. A yearning to be heard, a clamouring of voices coming together to make something wonderful. ‘Not a fortress’ — no. Something open and free, something incredible and inviting... an ocean, perhaps? Alas, I myself am not a writer.

So without further ado, let us unpack our library.

Sam Cardy

Managing Editor, 2023

## Biographies

Testimony Ageh holds a Bachelor's degree in Mass Communication, Rivers State University, Nigeria. He was born in Port Harcourt, but Originally from Delta State, Nigeria. His works have appeared in Provenance Journal and OneBlackBoyLikeThat Review. Testimony hopes his writing assists people explore their life they want and answer the most difficult questions they have faced. He tweets @Tex\_Timony.

Katy Archer works as a desk editor in London. She is currently working on her first novel.

Jonathan Avants is a literary and fantasy writer from California living with his wife and two young children in northern Japan. He is currently working on an adult fantasy fiction novel which he hopes to have completed sometime in 2023. You can say hi to him on Twitter at @jmvants or Mastodon at @jmvants@mstdn.social.

Ellen Barr is a journalism graduate and Content Writer for a London-based agency. Having recently relocated to her native city of Newcastle Upon Tyne, she works remotely, creating written content and ghost-writing for a range of B2B clients — and working on her own pieces in her spare time. You can find her on Twitter at @EllenBarr\_

Graham Bibby is a writer and musician having served as the Bass player for Big Als Hellfire Ukulele Club before venturing into the written word where his stories and poems have found homes in print and on the airwaves with Radio Sheffield's Upload show. He is currently working on a radio play and an anthology of his short stories to be published in the new year. He can be found on Twitter at @gtmaddison and on Ko-fi at Ko-fi.com/grahambibby

Dr Dianne Bown-Wilson is a short story writer who grew up in New Zealand and now lives in Dartmoor National Park. Her work has won prizes or been placed in numerous international competitions and anthologies. She has published two collections of her successful



stories: *Instructions for Living and Other Stories*, and *Degrees of Exposure*. She is currently submitting her first novel.

David Butler's second short story collection, *Fugitive* (Arlen House), and third poetry collection, *Liffey Sequence* (Doire Press), were both published in 2021. Recent awards for the short story include the Colm Toibin (2022) and Benedict Kiely (2021).

Vikki C. is a British-born writer and poet from London whose work features vivid imagery inspired by existentialism, science, nature and surrealism. Her poetry and prose appear in both print anthologies and online journals including Black Bough Poetry's "Afterfeather" and 'A Duet With Ghosts', FromOneLine Volumes 1,2 &3 (Kobayaashi Studios) and Acropolis Journal - Issue Five. Her voice and written works have been featured in various spoken word collaborations. Whilst London is home, Vikki has also lived and worked in cities across Asia, attributing her artistic perspectives to such cross-cultural influences. She is an avid pianist and musician whose compositions include "cinematic" soundscapes to accompany her spoken word poetry and prose. Twitter @VWC\_Writes

Based in East Yorkshire, Ian Carass has worked mainly in education but has had occasional poetry, short fiction and reviews published over several years. Now devoting more time to writing, Ian is currently most interested in the fable as a form and the themes of strangeness, loss and change.

Ami Clement is a third year Literature and Creative Writing student at Lancaster University, where she is the Editor in Chief for the University newspaper, SCAN . Since starting her studies at Lancaster, she has developed a strong passion for poetry, and is currently working on her debut collection titled 'Pantry' which explores the deep societal, historical, and personal meaning of the mundane and domestic sphere. Instagram @amiclement Twitter @amiclement01

Kate Coghlan has an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths, University of London. She is a freelance writer and Editor of Publications at Jesus College, University of Cambridge. She volunteers as a Non-Executive Director for Goalball UK. Her fiction

appears in Personal Bests Journal, issue 4, and on the Dulwich Festival website. Twitter: @Kate\_Cogs

R. N. Cogley is an Irish writer. His work has featured in The Wexford Bohemian, With Confetti Magazine, Provenance Journal, and many more. He is the author of The Elemental Witches series. You can find out more at [www.rncogley.wordpress.com](http://www.rncogley.wordpress.com).

Joao Coimbra is a Portuguese Canadian writer who currently lives in Leeds, UK with his daughter and fiancée. He has recently begun his writing journey, publishing poetry and short stories online. After a miscarriage, Joao found writing poetry helped him to process this trauma. He writes about themes of loss and meaning, while he also finds inspiration from the beauty of the surrounding Yorkshire countryside. By day he is a primary school teacher, with aspirations of becoming a published children's author. You can find more of his writing at: <https://medium.com/@coimbra.joao>

Susan Condon is currently an MA in Creative Writing student at Dublin City University and has previously studied writing in NUI Maynooth and the Irish Writers Centre. Susan's short stories and poems have won many awards, including first prize in the Jonathan Swift Award and South Dublin County Council Short Story and Poetry competitions. Stories have also been Long Listed, on four occasions, in the RTÉ Guide/Penguin Ireland Competitions and aired on The Jealous Wall and StoryMap. Writing has been internationally published, including: Boyne Berries, Flash Fiction Magazine (USA), Flash Flood Journal, Live Encounters (Indonesia), My Weekly (UK) and Spelk and anthologised in a number of outlets, such as, Ireland's Own, Circle & Square and The Lea-Green Down. Susan blogs at: [www.susancondon.wordpress.com](http://www.susancondon.wordpress.com) and Tweets @SusanCondon

Andrew Crowther is an unprofessional writer living in Bradford. He's had several plays performed in the region, including *Welcome to Paradise* (2003), *Working Lives* (2011) and *Night Secrets* (2022). His short novel *Down to Earth* will be published by Stairwell Books in February 2023.

Mary Crawshaw is a writer from Manchester. She has a Philosophy degree from the University of Sheffield, and is extremely enthusiastic about books, television and existentialism.

Twitter + Instagram: @maryjcrawshaw

Jake W Cullen is a novelist and short fiction writer from Stoke-on-Trent, England. Until recently, he had lived and worked in Shanghai for seven years at an international school, during that time he completed an MA in Creative Writing and learned Mandarin. His writing is influenced by his experiences of growing up in the post-industrial ruin of middle-England and his time spent living in China, often with something otherworldly flowing in the narrative. He is the writer of two novels, *Frisco & the Dandelion Boy* and *Where the Old Men Fish*; novels for which he is currently seeking agent representation. He has several works of short fiction published in previous volumes of *Loft Books* and the *Reflex Press* anthology.

Joseph Darlington is a writer from the Peak District, UK. He is the author of *The Girl Beneath the Ice* (Northodox Press, 2021) and a number of non-fiction books including *The Experimentalists: The Life and Times of the British Experimental Writers of the 1960s* (Bloomsbury, 2021). He can be found on Twitter at @Joe\_Darlo.

Martins Deep (he/him) is an Urhobo poet based in Zaria. He is a photographer, digital artist, & currently an undergraduate student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Paul Dicken has worked in academia and politics, and now lives in rural Somerset where he continues to invent fiction for a living. His short stories have appeared in publications such as *KZine*, *FlashFictionOnline*, *Every Day Fiction*, and the *Tales to Terrify* podcast; his most recent book, *Getting Science Wrong*, is an irreverent introduction to the history and philosophy of science published by Bloomsbury.

Jeremy Dixon lives near the Yorkshire coast, where he works as a builder. Having always been a passionate amateur, he's now trying to take his writing more seriously, recently graduating with a B.A in 'English Literature and Creative Writing' from The Open University.

He teaches creative writing night classes and has been published in the 'Glittery Literary Anthology Four' and 'Sky Island Journal'.

Malina Douglas is inspired by the encounters that shape us. She was awarded Editor's Choice in the Hammond House International Literary Prize and was a finalist in the Blackwater Press Story Contest and published in their anthology. In 2022 she was longlisted for the Reflex Press Prize and the Bath Short Story Award. Publications include The National Flash Day Anthology, Consequence Forum, Wyldblood, Opia, Typehouse, Back Story Journal, Ellipsis Zine, Consequence Forum, Flash Fiction Magazine, and Because That's Where Your Heart Is from Sans Press. She is an alumna of Smokelong Summer and can be found on twitter @iridescentwords.

Alanna Duffield is a writer, journalist and poet. Her creative work, which frequently revolves around love, sex, grief and human connection, has been published by the likes of the BBC, Aurelia Magazine and Dear Damsels. She has also been a headline performer at VERSES poetry night and has also performed poetry at the Luxembourg Museum in Mayfair. Alanna's first-person essays have been published by Cosmopolitan and METRO.

Clare Durham lives in Hampshire and works in the Fine Art industry. She is a former broadcast journalist and has published a number of non-fiction articles, primarily relating to antiques. She began writing fiction in earnest during 2021 and was a recent joint-winner of the 2022 Ovacome Short Story Competition.

New to writing fiction, Kate Durrant is more likely to be found on radio as a regular contributor to A Word in Edgeways, the long running reflection broadcast daily on Irish national radio station, RTE Radio One; and Pause for Thought on BBC Radio 2. The editor of two regional newspapers in Ireland, she loves writing and is thrilled that her work has been published in local and national newspapers and shortlisted in the 2021 Hammond House International literary prize.

Regine Ebner is a teacher and writer in Tucson, Arizona. She is the author of the chapbook, Oxidized Pennies (Alien Buddha Press,

2022), and widely published in poetry anthologies. She writes imagistic poetry about nature, light and landscape.

Ifunanya Georgia Ezeano is an author, writer, and poet. She hails from Anambra state, Nigeria. She works (volunteering) with Poets in Nigeria (PIN) and Writers space Africa-Nigeria(WSA-N). She has been published in the Society of Young Nigerian writers' RAPE anthology and Kalahari Review, Afro Rep Mag, and other literary magazines. She is a psychology student from the University of Nigeria Nsukka. She is the author of Naked; a poetry collection, Thorns and petals, and other unpublished works.

Lea Falls is a queer, neurodivergent, and disabled writer who lives with her wife, two wonderful cats, and a concerningly growing collection of squishmallows in NYC. Her dystopian short story Emily's Heirs has been published in Hansen House Books' Elixir anthology, and she has self-published the fantasy epic Goddess of Limbo. In the summer of 2019, she attended the Yale Writers Workshop.

Daragh Fleming is an author from Cork, Ireland. He currently has two collections of short stories published by Riversong Books as well as work appearing in several literary magazines including The Ogham Stone, Beir Bua, Trasna, The Madrigal, Époque Magazine and more. Fleming won the Cork Arts 'From The Well' Short Story Competition in 2021. His debut in nonfiction, Lonely Boy is due for release in November with BookHub Publishing. Daragh is also the Faberlull writer-in-residence for October 2022 in Olot, Spain.

June Gemmell has been writing short stories for many years and recently completed her first novel about a school janitor who wins the lottery but tells no one. She has also written a children's novel (historical fiction). A piece of short fiction has recently been chosen for publication by Soor Ploom, and her work was shortlisted by Ghostlore, and longlisted by Northern Gravy.

Gary Grace's work has appeared in literary journals in Ireland, the UK and the US. He has forthcoming work in two anthologies: The Dark Waves of Winter by Kelp Books & #SexTapeDigest by Broken

Sleep Books. His collection *The Nitelink* was longlisted for Best of the Bottom Drawer Global Writing Prize.

Maxwell Griego is a 21 year old poet from Washington state. His work has previously been featured in several literary magazines, and he begins his MFA in poetry in fall of 2022. His work centers around nature, the small & quiet moments in life, and his queerness.

Terry Holland grew up in England, studied theatre and languages in London and Berlin before settling in the Netherlands, where he works as a translator and editor. His writing has been shortlisted for the Propelling Pencil Flash Fiction Competition, longlisted for the Retreat West Flash Fiction Prize and the Cranked Anvil Flash Fiction Competition and published by Almond Press (Scotland), the Bath Flash Fiction Anthology (UK), *Stukah!* magazine (Netherlands), Full House Literary (online), Free Flash Fiction (online), Voidspace (online), Daily Drunk (online), Ellipsis Zine (online), Pure Slush (Australia) and *Seaside Gothic* (UK).

Sarah M Jasat grew up believing her family was very weird but later discovered she was Indian. She lives in Leicester, UK, and writes short fiction about the strangeness of family. She dreams about writing a novel for older children if only she could get her own child to go to sleep. Twitter: @sarahmjasat

David J. Kennedy is a poet and non-fiction writer from Sydney, Australia. Themes of ageing, wonder, and nature feature prominently in his writing, with poems recently published in *Roi Fainéant Press*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *The Jupiter Review* and elsewhere. Twitter: @DavidJKennedy\_

Rose Knapp (she/they) is an experimental poet and sound artist. She has publications in *Lotus-Eater*, *BlazeVOX*, *Maudlin House*, *Fence*, *Berfrois*, and others. She has poetry collections published with *Beir Bua Press*, *Hesterglock Press*, and *Dostoyevsky Wannabe*. She lives in Minneapolis. Find her at [roseknapp.net](http://roseknapp.net) and on Twitter @Rose\_Siyaniye

Andrew Korizno is a writer based in Austin, Texas. He is a staunch proponent of pineapple on pizza. His work is an attempt at finding unconventional receipts of grief and love, and is featured in Swim Press, healthline zine, Moss Puppy Magazine, Abditory Journal, Sage Cigarettes and is forthcoming in The Origami Review.

Alice Langley is a writer and theatremaker living and making work in Glasgow. Alice's writing is in Not Deer Mag, Pot Luck Zine, and she has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize for Flash Fiction 20221 and 2022. She is writing and thinking about women who turn into stone and currently has a cat on her lap. Twitter @AliceLangley90

Nicole Louie is a Brazilian citizen who has lived in six countries before settling in Ireland. In addition to globetrotting, she has spent a significant portion of her life writing and translating. She is the author of a book in the making about women without children. More details on: <https://linktr.ee/nicolelouie>

Tim Love's publications are a poetry pamphlet Moving Parts (HappenStance) and a story collection By all means (Nine Arches Press). He lives in Cambridge, UK. His poetry and prose have appeared in Stand, Rialto, Magma, Unthology, etc. He blogs at <http://litrefs.blogspot.com/>

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Ivan de Monbrison is a French poet and artist, living in Paris, born in 1969, affected by various types of mental disorders. He has published some poems in the past, he's mostly an autodidact.

Paul Marandina is British and lives in Northants, England.

Paul teaches English, Maths and Economics at an independent school and through 1to1 tuition.

Paul lives with his wife, dog, four cats and a tortoise.

Paul loves to write whilst drinking copious cups of coffee.

On Twitter at PaulP@BeeRummie

Sadie Maskery lives in Scotland by the sea. Her chapbook, *Push*, is published by Erbacce Press ([erbacce-press.co.uk/sadie-maskery](http://erbacce-press.co.uk/sadie-maskery)) and she can be found on Twitter as @saccharinequeen.

Emma Mather loves the smell of toast, a tasty mature cheddar, swimming in cold water and a well made Barista coffee. She is relatively new to the writing scene, but has recently had one of her stories short listed at the Hasting Literary Festival Short Story Competition. She's a first class English and Theatre Studies degree student and was once a solicitor. She writes flash, short fiction and is currently working on her first novel.

Born in Ottawa, Canada's glorious capital city, Rob McLennan currently lives in Ottawa, where he is home full-time with the two wee girls he shares with Christine McNair. The author of more than thirty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, his most recent titles include the poetry collection *the book of smaller* (University of Calgary Press, 2022), and a suite of pandemic essays, *essays in the face of uncertainties* (Mansfield Press, 2022). He spent the 2007-8 academic year in Edmonton as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, and regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at [robmcclennan.blogspot.com](http://robmcclennan.blogspot.com)

Aoibheann McCann's fiction has been featured in *The Stinging Fly*, *Crannog* and other journals in Ireland and elsewhere. Her poetry and short stories have been anthologised by New Binary Press, Arlen House, Doire and Prospero (Italy). Aoibheann is working on her first short story collection and is co-creator of the audio comedy series *Retreat!*

Brid McGinley writes short fiction and creative non-fiction. Her story, *Diving for Pearls*, won the 2022 Benedict Kiely Short Story Competition. Her work has appeared in *The Bangor Literary Journal*, *Sonder Magazine*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The Bramley*, *FlashFlood*, and *Splonk* among others. She lives by the sea in Co Donegal. @BridMcG.

Jennifer McMahon's words appear in the *Oxford Prize Anthology* (upcoming) and *Solstice*. She was a Top Ten Finalist in the Oxford



Prize, and has won the Bray Literary Festival flash competition and the Books Ireland flash competition. Her work has been shortlisted for the Anthology Short Story Award, the Alpine Fellowship Writing Prize, the Wild Atlantic Writing Awards, and the Women On Writing Flash Prize. Her novel 'House Devil' was long-listed for Fiction Factory's Novel competition.

Mona Mehas (she/her) writes about growing up poor, accumulating grief, and climate change. A retired, disabled teacher in Indiana, USA, she spends most days at her laptop with two old cats as chaperones. Previously, Mona used the pseudonym Patience Young. She's published in Sad Goose Coop, miniMAG, Exist Otherwise, and other journals, anthologies and two museums. In 2020, Mona watched every Star Trek show and movie in chronological order. Follow on Twitter @Patienc77732097 and <http://linktr.ee/monaiv>.

Ivan de Monbrison is a French poet and artist, living in Paris, born in 1969, affected by various types of mental disorders. He has published some poems in the past, he's mostly an autodidact.

Holly Nielsen is a historian, writer, and narrative designer based in London. She is currently completing her PhD at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her thesis is titled 'British Board Games and the Ludic Imagination, c.1860-1960'. Alongside her academic work Holly does writing and narrative design for video games. Before pivoting to academia and games, Holly was a journalist and arts critic, with bylines including The Guardian, The New Statesman, and Vice, among others. In her spare time she likes to draw birds.

Sarah O'Grady writes from Yorkshire with London and Glasgow connections. She has been published most recently online or in print by Spelt, Green Ink and in several Dreich poetry collections. She has recently returned to short fiction and there is a short novel in a pipeline somewhere...

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Elizabeth Olguin (she/her) is originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She graduated in 2016 from the University of Wisconsin, Madison

with a degree in Political Science. She served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Republic of Moldova from 2018 to 2020 and in 2021 was awarded a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant grant to teach in Kostanay, Kazakhstan. She is currently a Master's in Public Policy student at the University of Erfurt's Willy Brandt School of Public Policy.

Omorodion Martina is a theatre artist, creative writer and researcher. She is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Federal University, Oye Ekiti. In 2022, her short play “The Taste of Justice” made the shortlist of the African Women Playwrights Network and she received recognition as an emerging playwright in Africa. Her area of research interest lies in Dramatic Theories, Conflict Studies, Women Studies, Mental Health, Creative Writing and Performance Studies. Martina writes short stories, children's stories, poetry and plays. Her academic and creative writings have been published in journals and books.

Conor O'Rourke is an emerging author, based in Dublin. He is currently working on his debut novel, *Reawakening* - a queer romance, exploring mental health within the LGBTQIA+ community. He studied English and Drama in UCD and in 2021, was accepted onto the Mentor/Member Programme with the Irish Writers Centre.

Saba Pakdel is a poet, modernist scholar, and PhD student in the English department at University of Victoria. She specializes in migration studies and contemporary literature with a focus on exile, refugee, and immigration problems, particularly in works of migrant authors from the Global South. In May 2022, Saba published her chapbook *In-Between* by above / ground press.  
Website: [www.sabapakdel.com](http://www.sabapakdel.com)

Daniel A. Rabuzzi has had two novels, five short stories, 20 poems and nearly 50 essays, articles and chapters published. He lived eight years in Norway, Germany and France. He earned degrees in the study of folklore and mythology, and in international relations; he earned his doctorate in European history. He lives in New York City with his artistic partner & spouse, the woodcarver [Deborah A. Mills](#), and the requisite cat. Tweets @TheChoirBoats

Ankit Raj Ojha is a poet, writer, assistant professor, former software engineer and former rock band frontman from Chapra, Bihar, India. He has poetry, short fiction and research articles published/forthcoming in Native Skin, Dreich, The Bayou Review, The Dillydoun Review, Roi Fainéant Press, Paddler Press, The Broadkill Review, Routledge, Johns Hopkins University Press and elsewhere.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/939143116X>

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JP Relph is a cat loving Cumbrian who grew up just across the Scottish border. A forensic science degree, a passion for microbes, bugs and botany, and a dogged determination to make people laugh all weave themselves into her words. JP has flash published in The Fantastic Other and HISSAC 2021. Twitter - @RelphJP

Emma Robertson is a dance tutor and writer from London, UK. Her work can be found in Lunate, Ellipsis and Funny Pearls among other literary magazines and online short fiction collections. In 2022 she was longlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award and won her borough's entry for the City of Stories competition organised by Spread the Word, with both pieces published in the subsequent anthologies.

Peter Roe is a prize winning poet, artistic, autistic, computer geek and technology nerd. A former Bard of Dorchester and host of Bridport's Apothecary Spoken Word events. Founding editor and publisher of the Jawbone Collective. Widely anthologised, two published collections. Highly commended in 2021 for his forthcoming collection 'About Time'.

Tejaswinee Roychowdhury is a Bengali-Indian lawyer, writer, poet, and occasional artist. Her recent fiction has been/will be published in Muse India, Roi Fainéant Press, The Unconventional Courier, and Misery Tourism, among others. She's the founder/editor of The Hooghly Review, and currently, a fiction/screen/stage editor for The

Storyteller's Refrain. Twitter: TejaswineeRC Instagram: @tejaswineeroychowdhury Website: linktr.ee/tejaswinee

Sanjeev Sethi has authored seven books of poetry. His latest is *Wrappings in Bespoke* (The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK, August 2022). He has been published in over thirty countries. His poems have found a home in more than 400 journals, anthologies, and online literary venues. He is in the top 10 of the *erbacce* prize 2021. He is the recipient of the Ethos Literary Award 2022. He is the joint-winner of the Full Fat Collection Competition-Deux, organized by The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK. He lives in Mumbai, India.

Uday Shankar Ojha is a professor at the Department of English, Jai Prakash University, Chapra, Bihar, India. His poems are published/forthcoming in *Dreich*, *Lit.* 202, *The Bayou Review*, *Paddler Press*, *Roi Fainéant Press* and *Amity: peace poems* (Hawakal Publishers). He can be reached at [udayshankarojha001@gmail.com](mailto:udayshankarojha001@gmail.com).

Sage Short is a graduate teaching assistant at Clemson University, where she is studying for a Master's in English. She is a poet and writer from South Carolina by way of West Virginia. She was published outside of the university setting for the first time in 2022, a creative non-fiction piece in the online journal, *Identity Theory*. In her free time, she tweets about Florence Welch @sageaspyshort.

Mary de Sousa is a half-Indian, half-Irish journalist who grew up on a Coventry estate and has lived and worked in Cyprus, Spain, Pakistan and Cuba before settling in Paris. *Up the Downstairs* forms part of a collection of short stories she is working on titled *Mother*. She is also looking for a home for two completed manuscripts, *The Halfie-Halfie Girl*, a magical detective story about a mixed-race girl who travels back in time to India and Ireland to find the source of her family's unhappiness, and *Half an Hour from Pakistan*, the story of two young British aid workers whose mission to make the world better ends in a horrifying way. A third novel, a very black comedy set on an island not unlike Cuba, is in the pipeline.

Nwuguru Chidiebere Sullivan (he/him/his) is a speculative writer of Izzi, Abakaliki ancestry; a Medical Laboratory Science student whose works have been nominated for the Forward Prize, the Pushcart Prize, and the Best of The Net Award. He was the winner of the 2021 Write About Now's Cookout Literary Prize, a first runner-up in 2022 EOPP. He has works published or forthcoming at Strange Horizon, Ink Sweat & Tears, Augur Mag, Sand Journal, Mudroom Mag, Bracken Mag, Kernel Magazine, Fieldnotes Journal, The Shore Poetry, Lammergeier Mag, The Renard Press, The Deadlands, Absynthe Mag, No Contact Mag, The Fourth River, and elsewhere. He is fond of his poorly-lit room from where he tweets @wordpottersull1. When he is not penning poetry he is busy debugging Python codes as a Data Science student.

Dominic J. Sweeney is from Donegal, Ireland. His work has previously been published in the third issue of An Capall Dorcha (Herbal Habitual), the third issue of Púca Magazine (The Heart Remains A Child), the inaugural issue of Scrán (Scone Stone Walls) and by Dublin-based poetry collective NOT4U. His poem Who Will I Worship? is forthcoming in the fourth edition of The Madrigal. He is currently being mentored by Grace Wilentz through her workshop with Gallery Press.

Maria Thomas is a middle-aged, apple-shaped mum of two. She has work in various publications and was shortlisted in the 2022 Oxford Flash Fiction competition and was a flash finalist in the London Independent Story Prize (LISP 2022). Maria won Retreat West's April 2022 Micro competition, and took second place in Propelling Pencil 2022. She can be found on Twitter as @AppleWriter.

Tom Tumilty is a 71 year-old, retired civil servant, former travel agent and coach tour operator. Tom is an avid reader of crime fiction and has had one other piece of flash fiction published. He is currently working on a detective novel set in Glasgow and the surrounding area. His other writings include 2 articles in his school magazine, a sketch performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and co-authorship of a paper on Rebalancing the Innovation Policy Debate. In his 60s, he wrote and performed stand -up comedy.

Nicolas Turner is a British author living in Utrecht in the Netherlands with his wife and daughter. He is currently at work on a novel, and this is his first piece of published fiction.

Padmanabh Trivedi is a Lecturer in SBP Govt. Girls' Polytechnic, Saharanpur, UP, India. He's also a research scholar in The dept of HSS, IIT Roorkee. He writes both in Hindi and English. Along with writing he is also interested in theatre.

Born in South London but now Edinburgh based, Garen Abel Unokan is interested in narratives around coming of age, autonomy, loss, and transformation, with a focus on queerness and Blackness. With work published in the *New Yorker* and *Black Ballad*, she finds inspiration in the occult, mythology, and the ocean.

Jae Vail is a writer based in East London. They completed their Ph.D. in music at the University of Manchester. Jae's writing appears in [Fairlight Shorts](#), [Stone of Madness Press](#), [Lit.202](#) and is forthcoming in *The Interpreter's House* and *Belle Ombre*.

Bryan Vale is a writer based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He writes fiction, poetry, and educational articles about technology. His work has appeared in *Trash to Treasure Lit*, *Moving Force Journal*, *Unstamatic Magazine*, and *Short Fiction Break*. Learn more at [bryanvalewriter.com](http://bryanvalewriter.com), or follow Bryan on Twitter and Instagram: @bryanvalewriter

Michelle Walshe is a writer from Dublin, Ireland. Her work has been awarded the Iceland Writers Retreat Alumni Award, writing residencies in Ireland at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Tin Jug Studio, and Greywood Arts. Her work is published in literary journals, anthologies, newspapers, and magazines. She is the recipient of an Emerging Artist award from Dun Laoghaire County Council and has received funding from Creative Ireland and the Arts Council of Ireland. Her first novel was highly commended in the Irish Writers Centre Novel Fair 2021 and was in the top ten percent of 1,000 entries in the Cheshire Novel Prize, UK, 2022. Michelle is an active member of the Irish literary community and has participated in readings, courses and workshops at the Irish Writers Centre. She volunteers for

the International Literature Festival, Dalkey Book Festival and Roddy Doyle's Fighting Words. Find out more on [www.thesparklyshell.com](http://www.thesparklyshell.com).

Ashley J.J. White is an arts advocate, English student and poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction writer from Canada. She has had several poems, short stories and essays published in various magazines; she loves to read and write about philosophy, the natural world, human nature, and relationships. Twitter, Instagram and Mastodon @ashleyjjwhite

Mark Wynne has been published in *Ambit*, *The Moth*, *Magma*, *South Bank Poetry* and *Lighthouse Journal*. His debut pamphlet, *Frank & Stella*, was published in 2020 by tall lighthouse. A new collection is due later this year.

## Poetry Prize Winner

### Cenacle

Daniel Rabuzzi

Inspired by Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library" (1931)

I too unpack my library. Yes, I have. Many times.  
Not a fortress, no holdfast or bastide barred to others,  
A cloister,  
Linked to its sisters on a pilgrim's way,  
    The I and the We  
Leaving small devotions along the path.  
Chapel in the attic, pages flowing down the gables,  
Ink a welcome stain,  
    The I and the We  
Sharing small constructions beside the hearth.  
Sharing meals,  
Of the mind, pages as wafers of  
Sunlight and shadow,  
    The I and the We  
Saving small productions beyond the Earth.



# Highly Commended

## Crossing

Saba Pakdel

home is a motion  
    a wave, smoothing along  
    a movement, expanding in time  
borders, the irony  
    an imagined space  
    between your documented body and I  
    passing through  
    one side stands, I  
the other.

home is beyond your body's past  
to an aching present  
unwilling to heal  
    crossing invisible walls,  
I fall  
    presenting a legalized skin,  
I fall  
    shielding your birth name,  
I fall into the right category:  
a port a paper a pass.

the frame voice asked impatiently, "where's home?"  
hesitated I,  
    wondering in the empty space of time  
    a breath  
    a sigh  
a millionth of the second, pinning down

a temporary stay  
life.

the ocean is crossing  
so is the wind  
    from side to (the other) side  
home is a moment, I could've said  
the frame voice echoed over the wind  
    coming across, "ma'am, where's home?"  
poetry, I could've read  
which homes moments  
    forever dis-placed  
    memory re-locates  
renew your body's paper  
every ten years, shedding illegality off your skin.

the frame voice had no patience  
for me  
for mapping out  
    a placeless past  
for translating my history  
a port a paper a pass.

## Observed in a Dream

Mark Wynne

At sixteen I took my younger sister  
– consumptive wench –  
on a train journey to Trieste,  
the hotel where Mother and Father wed  
and threw her down on the sheets  
Nude, Reclining in Stockings,  
Observed in a Dream,  
she showed me her black legs  
and red garters.  
My rough line of desire compressed. “Pale sister,” I asked,  
“Is this a marriage?”  
Dragged by the wrists  
to the railway station  
for the long journey home.  
No one spoke.

# Little Trumpet

Garen Abel Unokan

You have always been arrogant enough to say that you'll never be your mother.

But one night you find yourself painting your walls yellow at a truly ridiculous hour, just like she did.

You remember it clear as day: the strong, thick smell of paint and her up a ladder in dungarees you'd never seen before.

Suddenly your mother was a stranger, and all the years that came before you flickered out from underneath smudges of yellow and white.

She was laughing and singing the way she would with friends, and you saw like never before how the two of you

were just tiny stitches right next to each other in the sprawling tapestry of all the people you're from.

You'd never outrun time, never outrun being her.

And then one day you stop wanting to.

# Chasing Silverfish

Liv Ross

Perfect grace is only glimpsed as through  
shaded glass. A miasma of dusk

keeps me from finding its true shape,  
only allows an impression. Frustration

at knowing there are details I cannot trace.  
Until, just once, the hazy shadow lifts.

I am overawed (overwhelmed) by the suddenness of clarity.  
An abundance to take in - more than an eye can hold.

The veil shifts, drifts, and falls. I scabble and clutch, but  
I can't remember everything (anything?) that I saw.

How can I speak what I can't recall?  
When pinpricks, like silverfish, are all that remain.

## Wrong Side of the Tracks

Liv Ross

They said that my home  
Is on the wrong side of the tracks.  
From here, you only see the railroad,  
And the backs of buildings  
Hidden from the storefronts  
Designed to entice commerce.  
Sure, they have murals  
And cute little shops over there,  
Under the Corinthian Bells  
With their sonorous tolls.  
But back here?

Here is my neighbour,  
Who once mowed my lawn,  
Now riding past on a bicycle  
While calling out “Good evening!”  
Here is the Afghan family,  
I pass most nights  
Heading to walk in the park.  
Here is the rainbow house  
And their little library  
Always full of excellent stock.

I know that I am a hypocrite  
Judging you for judging us  
For I, too, used to think  
Can anything good come from Northside?  
Not realizing how similar to another inquiry  
Posed some millennia ago.  
And the answer to both is  
Yes.

## Notch-leaf

Maxwell Griego

*in reference to Ella Higginson's "Four-Leaf Clover"*

I was greeted by the pinkish puffy  
hello of a blooming notch-leaf clover  
as I rounded the corner towards home.

Glee struck me as I had only seen the  
plant in its juvenile stages before.  
Its bold and colorful top stared at me.

I nuzzled my nose in its sweet blossom,  
and shook hands with its leaves of hope, and faith,  
and love, and Luck.

*I love you so much more now*, I thought. To think I thought  
so little of it before because I always simply left before its  
scent

could develop and caress my nose.

Now I know where luck is stored in a clover. Now I know what  
Higginson meant when she talked about working, about waiting, to  
find the place

Where the four-leaf clovers grow.

## Now That I Don't Run Around Barefoot

Kevin Risner

Wrap my arms around red maples  
wanting to know their age and how long they stood  
before I was, I fear two words –  
severe weather – because those trees I love  
will snap and lose much of themselves  
with a simple gust, less than 10 seconds, and that's that.

One haunting noise to wreck a fence or the arborvitae  
I planted, or the roof, something I have. That's just it  
right? I own something and I'm afraid  
of it being destroyed. I never worried in 2010. The downpours,  
the thunder, the heartbeats at a tornado watch. It wouldn't amount  
to anything in the end, most times.

We meandered around the lawn  
the other day, heat beginning to grow, sky blue,  
birds telling me I don't have to worry  
about a damn thing.



Kevin Risner

One walk into the woods  
harrowing fog creeping down  
from unknown canopies  
the overstory hasn't unrolled itself  
yet to show the plot I've been waiting to see  
turns curves never to end  
only a beginning.

What I always experience is plenitude  
a pen hitting paper – day one – attempt  
one. I have a story to tell in there  
to someone who likely will never hear it  
listen for longer than a minute before yawning  
turning back to a bookshelf as if I've emitted  
a light to pull us into a stupor.

When the thesis is revealed, slam the text, rip  
the paper nailed to the church door  
I've defended long enough.  
The barbs on my tongue take aim  
find another spot on the horizon  
a target that I had to lug  
out before gym class, not fast enough  
and the arrow skims past my back  
and no one budges.

# Welcome Home

Andrew Korizno

There is a ballpoint pen on the nightstand  
that has never touched paper  
and its ink has not known the sun.  
It whispers a message on my wrist  
scrawled nightly in the dark  
from muscle memory  
in the same indigo  
of the waters it sails.  
If only the same limbs—  
the ones folded under pillows  
and draped over others’  
were the ones brought with us.  
But for those moments  
in our own midnight wilderness  
we are without compass or lamp.  
So we wake up frenzied  
in tears and sweat  
and sink into our palms  
under the weight of every bedtime casualty  
and re-lived sorrow.  
But within that cradle is the message  
half-smudged between my cheek  
and pillowcase:  
“Welcome home”

# Flight

Uday Shankar Ojha

The frozen castle of love  
melts if doubts  
disarm and disdain,  
truth and trust  
sought together.

I wept for losing myself.  
Brown eyes eclipsed mine.  
The clutching palms, curly vine,  
all but took away precious time.

Waves piled up  
crumbling in pieces,  
the shoreline speechless,  
washed up.

A candle be burnt now.  
Eyes with fresh tears twinkle,  
dreaming of secret joy.

Birds colourful sway,  
roaming through my heart.

# Weaving Winds Inside

Uday Shankar Ojha

Sometimes  
the silence sinks in  
so deep,

you know not  
why the lips  
so eager

keep pressed  
tightly,  
as if

some restless soul  
is sending signals  
to those unnoticed

and unseen somewhere  
inside the blessed memoirs.

# Another World

Susan Condon

Rays of sunlight wink  
through the chink in the curtains,  
caressing my cheek like a lover.

And in the realms,  
between sleep and wakefulness,  
I sense it.

What it is, I cannot say,  
but it brings such a pure sense  
of calm and peace.

The first experienced since  
our world fractured, from  
a land of freedom, to one  
so uncertain, that fear and  
anxiety are daily companions.

Senses heightened,  
I listen,  
take a long breath,  
release it slowly.

Calm and peace envelop me.

## A Crane in Flight

David J. Kennedy

The North Sea wind scatters contrails over the River Elbe.  
A grey heron stands tranquil in the shallows — a habitat generalist,  
content to call many places home. Nearby, the arched branches

of an ancient oak tree scaffold the sky, bridging heaven and earth.  
A hemisphere away the sun is tentative, peering through the  
blinds of a guest room where a child checks the vital signs of  
her Opa.

She finds a century of warmth and a heart that is full and  
wonders where love begins and ends. Once, it coursed through the  
veins of a master craftsman — a legacy of  
monuments now stand stoic

in every city he did. Later, the unspoken miracle of  
wartime romance in the punishing shadow of the Russian Front. A  
guardian angel shone divine light on a nurse's village, where flesh  
was wounded but spirits held.

Now, you return to the echo of the ocean, where each spring  
tide washes away the receding scars of sorrow. Once able hands, no  
longer reach for a pitcher of water or sweet girl's embrace. In the  
waning hours

of March, tired eyes recall what it was to dance, to dote. *Do you  
see?* Faces of the past and present surround  
you, nursing your endless spirit. They frolic and sing songs of hope  
— the sound of a crane in flight.

### III

#### Lea Falls

there are cracks on my glass  
spidery ones  
run along my surface  
water keeps pouring  
water keeps spilling  
it'd be easier to shatter  
than to demand of the water  
to stop  
it'd be easier to shatter  
and I want to  
oh I want to  
but I know  
once the water stops  
I'll treasure this glass body of mine  
again  
I'll fill the cracks  
with gold  
I just need  
the water  
to stop  
please stop pouring

## Reflection

Lea Falls

you ask me  
why I don't see myself  
in the world, the people, the humans  
Oh but I do  
I catch my reflection  
in the veins of truth running through stories  
when people have put away  
what they've decided honesty to be  
and let shimmer in their love,  
their passions, their thousand little fires  
what actual truth flows through them  
sometimes, I rather live in their secrets  
than decipher their obvious



# **The Space We Give**

Lea Falls

I invite you into my ocean  
You hand me your cup of water  
After all  
Friendship is about  
helping each other swim

# A Question of Return

Jennifer Terry

You have always been a butterfly to me. In death,  
I have always believed that you can still visit me,  
that you have become nature after all these years.

My professor posed the idea that humans may be separate  
from nature. I've always believed the opposite: that humans  
and nature are the same. If my professor's idea is right,

and we truly are separate, when you were buried  
in the ground in the beginning of October, did you begin  
to separate from me then, dad? Or were you already

moved away by the action of dying? If my idea is right,  
that you never left, that humans are nature, I do wonder:  
when you returned to the earth, when it consumed your flesh

and left your bones in the coffin, did you return to me  
in a different way then? Did you become the butterfly  
instantly or did it take time for you to transform?

Your body has been gone for some time. I understand  
that your human presence is gone. There's no question about it.  
With all these ideas of humanity and nature, I no longer know

if our connection is strong or weak, or even if it exists entirely.  
But I have to believe that part of you is still visiting. Even if that  
means  
that you are not nature. Even if it means nature has not become a  
vessel for you.

## **Adoration of the Ages**

Jennifer Terry

I have loved you for an eternity,  
across the skies and through the seas, shining  
like a glimmer beneath the water. Sing  
to me a siren's song of necessity.  
How do I convey this insanity?  
The words will never be enough. Falling  
for you has felt like a lost ship sinking.  
I cannot escape the simplicity  
of your touch, of the stardust resting on  
your eyelashes, the way the salty sea  
sticks to your skin like a moth to a flame.  
I will love you until the light of dawn  
no longer breaks, when the captain's journey  
has finished. I will need you all the same.

# Dreamorphia

Nicole Louie

Meet me on the train to Cockfosters,  
where unauthorized dreams amount  
to carefully measured miles  
of misshapen memories.

In this decaf land,  
budgies abound and bicker  
on Flickr.

You can find them in December  
flying over to Virginia's house.  
Green was her favorite color,  
but the garden, too, is dead now.

Just like the chicken I named after you,  
the donkey I called bunny,  
and the baby I never wanted.

Talking about animals... Just the other day  
Miss Marple rolled with dogs in the mud  
while apes played giant Jenga  
with discarded vinyl covers.

Did you know Hyde Park is a hospice?  
And that they, too, get high? I wonder why  
they listen to "Temptation" all night.

# Nightingale

Nicole Louie

Vultures invade  
San Francisco's night sky,  
but your light  
— your light —  
suffice.

# The Empty Barrel

Isabelle Evans

Although there is wine, the barrel is empty.  
It is boundaries, sides, pieces of barrel.  
It has one nature and one purpose.  
Although there is wine, the barrel is empty.

Although there is love, the barrel is empty.  
It has warmth, because it was made to be warm.  
It is safe because years were spent making it safe.  
Although there is love, the barrel is empty.

Although there is time, the barrel is empty.  
It is as unexamined as it has always been.  
It is not forever, not unchanging with time.  
Although there is time, the barrel is empty.

Although there is pressure, the barrel is empty.  
It is not filled by wishes, hopes or assumptions.  
It is not filled by fears, obligations or threats.  
Although there is pressure, the barrel is empty.

The barrel is empty, but I am not the barrel.  
Although my entire body comes into every room with me.  
Although every cell serves a sole purpose.  
I am not the barrel, and I am not empty.

# Chocolate Night

Isabelle Evans

The un-stilled yellow light of a puddle  
beneath a Narnian street lamp  
draws me back to a chocolate time  
I used to think was late at night.

The annual surprise of shifted clocks,  
of suddenly generous helpings of night,  
the smile on the moon, sightlessly visiting  
places with daylight in their stomachs, now empty.

The after-school dark, usually trapped,  
invisible and sullen outside curtained windows,  
now knits tight across my eyes, seamless, depthless  
boundless, but for the lamp post, a warm yellow hint  
at the making of things.

## Gifts from the Woods

Regine Ebner

far from the whispering creak of ships  
listing in pine cobble  
a secret wish to go home again

to the piquant warble of trees and winter  
the burnt horizons of falling dusks  
the low call of rivers gravely winding

without seeds  
without morning  
without the rhyme of smoking hills

I hear the rain giving away gardens  
and I can see Mother  
standing near

a doorway and a shiver  
a leaf in the rippling sea-grass



## **Straight Stuff**

Sanjeev Sethi

No peddling of patriotism  
at the box office  
mousetrapping our boys as martyrs  
in the theatre of conflict  
as policymakers blunder.

Catasterism is not writ  
on everyone's citation.  
Roads that don't reach anywhere  
are like soapsuds on a spree.

Those who rag on the government  
and its attending channels  
must band together with legacy  
and new age media to glean,  
systems will be systems.

## Notification

Ankit Raj Ojha

Before you give in to  
guesstimating  
a netizen's narcissism  
(one who measures life  
in emoticons),

stop to surmise that  
they may have had to  
bear dearly held eternal  
dwindle into transience:

shunned by flesh,  
fishing truth in fiction.

# Twitterature Review: A Philosophical Discourse in Verse

Ankit Raj Ojha

I am tired of revising a research paper  
on gender, language and posthumanism,  
so I turn to Twitter  
for light reading.

My feed's first invasion:  
a befitting reply by a Twitter friend  
to one who has been  
hailing their mother tongue  
over another's  
for the former being gender neutral  
and the latter apparently not.

I, a native speaker of  
the "lesser" tongue,  
am reminded of something  
that has puzzled me forever  
about gender and language.

I've always wondered why  
in English we use "it"  
for non-human animals  
while in older native tongues  
the "others" are addressed  
using appropriate gender pronouns.  
Is it the West's Great Chain of Being  
hangover that animals  
are lessened even in language?

It is intrinsic and just  
to respect one's choice  
(or no choice) of gender.

But reason precedes preference.  
Animals lack human cognition;  
hence no preferred pronouns.  
So is it just to attach  
the gender neutral but dehumanising “it”  
or should we just assign  
a “he” or “she” per their biology,  
or better, a “they”  
to allow for neutrality  
without dehumanising the subject?

But doesn't this fuss over  
the ills of dehumanising a living being  
itself reek of human exceptionalism?  
Why the human burden  
to humanise non-humans  
who lack the cognition to even  
care for such constructs?

I have turned to Twitter  
to breathe easy,  
away from gender, language  
and posthumanism.  
Reason, however,  
is having a field day.

# Heritage

Padmanabh Trivedi

Every time I went home  
and touched grandpa's feet,  
he'd add a sentence inevitably  
after the blessings:  
"Parch my books in the sun  
and put covers on them,  
or they'll be spoilt."

He never missed the ritual  
till our last meeting  
when he was a hundred and six;  
and I sometimes accorded.

When he was no more,  
my mother with tearful eyes said:  
"When you were not here,  
Baba would say  
*Don't mess with my books;  
the boy will read them,  
and I shouldn't have donated my books  
to the library;  
I didn't know he would like  
Sanskrit texts.*"

His books were all underlined,  
a century old.  
When I opened them,  
the pages broke.  
He had already passed on his blood.  
He wanted his knowledge to pass on too.

# Umbrella

Ami Clement

22/11/1963 12:30pm

Incongruent, like the July sun shining over the November streets  
blessing the crowds painted in diverse, new-wave ribbons of blue,  
awaiting the midnight Continental to roll around the corner. It  
carries promises of families reunited, hope of oceans crossed,  
overlooked by steel giants, concrete trees casting a looming shadow.

Cheers erupt, momentarily blinding Dallas to the humiliation of  
Hanoi, suffering and crushed motivation occupying the South-  
East, mothers begging to hold their sons, pushed aside,  
to catch sight of the young prince and the Chanel bombshell beside  
him

a royal providence rolls through the plaza square, touring like  
Lincoln, catching the votes, hearts, minds. Above, a vulture watches  
from the sixth floor waiting to rain on his parade

the tears and desperate struggle of the pink princess, televised.  
A world in turmoil, tossed into uncertainty and mourning

all the while the Umbrella watches on the grassy knoll.

# I Haven't Seen the Sun in Two Days

Joao Coimbra

I wake again to eerie streets  
outside my windowpane  
opaque mists touch down to choke my view  
droplets hang in the air  
I haven't seen the sun in two days  
aching for its warmth upon my face  
they say this is 'God's own country'  
grey that bleeds from day to night  
though we all carry on through wet soaked coats  
with steadfast conviction it will return  
will the sky crack today?  
unwavering in our regimen  
taking no notice  
of the wet that lashes down  
and feeds the pride of our dales

## **Weak Spots**

Dominic J Sweeney

City lights glimmer, 'pon the night river -  
drawing delicate, dancing shivers.

I am arched, elbows resting long the bridge -  
stone walls; painting - inconsequential ink smudge.

And so blows the wind -  
unfolds expose; lonely skin

past lovers' row, pencilled dots -  
casting show - of my weak spots.



# Magic He Made of Me

Sullivan de Poet

To be God is to be more man

than my wish. To live

is to be and to be more.

The goodness is that

I've gone to school,

to become the scribbler

of the handwriting

my dad barely understands

each time a prescription

is made for him. I'm in the

kitchen, dazzling this

hot water with Lipton

for his diabetes,

and I must forget to

add sugar to it because

too much sweetness as

I've learned is a

perfect grace of death. I'll tell  
my dad about this  
and I'm sure he'll become  
a whirlwind of joy for the  
magic he made of me.

# Lacrimosa

Martins Deep

A wild goose swims in a  
river  
to eat  
its reflection  
or  
a pebble glowing  
with a schoolboy's  
fingerprints  
before mermaids  
contend for it  
and all the waters  
are troubled  
in  
your eyes.

# Untitled

Ivan de Monbrison

It's a little warmer in the city today.

Summer is here, the sun rises at six and sets at nine thirty.

I often wake up with the sun.

After dark, I come home from the art studio.

There are many young people in the street, drinking, laughing,  
smoking.

Things I did a long time ago.

This morning I did a lot of painting on canvas.

The paintings lacked movement.

In modern painting it is the movement that is important, for good  
and bad artists

the problem is the same.

In any case, as always, I will throw away these works one day

So why make them? Perhaps, to give movement to what has none.

# **Time**

Rose Knapp

Is time progressive and linear or  
Circumambulating Recurring and circular?

Why can't time be both? History repeating  
Itself but making progress too?

## Live Simple

Mona Mehas

I'm gonna quit my purple hair and my doughnuts and jellybeans  
I'll go back to raw beets caked in mud with the greens attached  
I wanna give up pay channels and zoom meetings online and  
concentrate on dusty volumes of poetry that make little sense,  
pay homage to authors who penned stories about heroes,  
writers who lived by their beliefs in the streets, people  
deserving of respect and honor and merit, they're among us  
today in flesh and blood and spirit, I'll feed them carrot cake  
by the forkful, I made it from scratch, baked in my solar oven -  
writers need transport to readings and dinners - I'll volunteer  
piled into my hybrid Toyota Highlander free books, my payment.

## Flash Fiction Prize Winner

### First Love

David Butler

We were learning to make Brigid's crosses out of reeds when Br Colman brought in the new girl. We all stood up when he came into the classroom. Then Miss Ivors said 'Suí gí síos' and we all sat down again.

The girl was small but she had enough tangled black hair for two heads. She wore patched dungarees and a bright blue cardigan and wellington boots that were mucky. 'What a beautiful colour. Can anyone tell me what shade of blue it is?' Miss Ivors said pointing to the cardigan but looking at Br Colman. 'An bhfuil a fhios ag éinne?'

Not even Lucy Riordan answered but that was because Br Colman was there. He had piggy eyes and was always in a temper on Monday mornings. Blinky Roche said his Da said it was because he was fond of the bottle.

'No?' Miss Ivors sang out. She walked over to where feathers and leaves were cellotaped to a wallchart and waited for someone to put up their hand. Then when even Lucy Riordan stayed quiet she tapped one of the feathers. 'It's the same teal blue as the kingfisher.'

It was the same colour the new girl's eyes were. They shone out because her skin was smoky as if she'd sat too long by a turf fire. Titch Brennan nudged me, 'Bet you anything she's an owl gypsy.' Only for Br Colman being there I'd of punched his stupid face.

'This young lady,' said Br Colman, 'is Sadbh Devlin. She'll be joining your class from today. Miss Ivors, you may add her name to the roll.' Brigid's Day was a funny time of year to be joining school.

‘Sadbh. Isn’t that a lovely name?’ said Miss Ivors. ‘Children, say Dia duit a Shadbh.’ All together as if we were at assembly we called out, ‘Dia duit a Shadbh!’

‘And what do you say back, Sadbh?’ Miss Ivors asked. Br Colman was trying to smile but it looked like a Jack O’Lantern. ‘Sadbh, say hello to your new school friends,’ he said.

She looked at us. Then she looked out the window.

‘Is she shy?’ Miss Ivors asked. She hunkered down beside her. ‘Sadbh? Are you shy?’

‘What’s the matter?’ clucked Br Colman, raising her chin with a fat finger. ‘Cat got your tongue?’ Her kingfisher eyes looked up out of her smoky face. She smiled like my little sister does, all innocent. When she took his finger her hands were tiny beside it. Then she bit down hard on it.

Miss Ivors gasped and covered her mouth. Br Colman’s eyes bulged out like a bullfrog and his face went beetroot as he tried to twist the finger out of her mouth. When he finally did he waved it up and down in the air the way the older kids waved their hands after they’d got the strap. You could see white teeth-marks in the purple skin.

‘You little bitch!’ he said.



# Highly Commended

## Rebel Scum

Jonathan Avants

It was \$5.50... \$5.50, and a promise from my stepfather. That's what I remember saving to buy Lord Vader.

My eight-year-old self had done their chores consistently throughout the week, earning more pocket money than I'd had since my last birthday. These included every activity I hated most: Taking out the kitchen garbage, 50¢; Sweeping the entryway, 25¢; Mowing the lawns, \$2.50; Mopping the dining room, \$1; Homework done every day, 50¢; Dishes put away, 75¢; No mouthing off to mom or stepdad—no deductions to my total.

I didn't actually know how much a second edition Star Wars CCG Lord Vader card was worth (\$64) but I believed, after a week's worth of dedicated chore doing, I had surely earned enough. I walked into the card shop, immediately entranced by the smell of musty cardboard and dust. Busty anime figurines lined the shelves nearest the entrance, either the shop's hottest sellers or the shop owner's proudest novelties in his collection. I pulled on my stepfather's sleeve—who'd driven me, his promise cashed—and guided him past the display. Just ahead, the shop owner stood behind the glass counter, reading a comic. No use—my stepfather's lip was already curling at the sights and scents of the place.

"You gunna be quick?" my stepfather asked.

"I can be," I replied.

My stepfather nodded. "Please." Patting me on the shoulder, he walked back to the doorway and leaned on the frame, crossing his

arms and watching like he'd just been hired as the shop's security detail.

Stepping up to the glass counter, I smiled at the shop owner. Behind the panes, the Star Wars CCG singles sparkled prettily.

The shop owner lowered his comic. "You wanna buy some singles?"

I nodded.

He looked at me head to toe. "Watcha got on you?"

I dug my hand into my pocket, producing a crumpled wad of dollar bills and change. Smoothing each bill on the edge of the counter, I stacked them one atop the other, like a teller at the bank. "\$5.50. Can I get a Lord Vader single, please?"

The shop owner snorted. "How old are you now?"

"Eight. I just started playing," I replied. "My friend plays the Rebellion and keeps winning. He has a Luke Skywalker card that always trumps me." I looked the shop owner squarely in the eye. "There's no balance in the force. You get me?"

"Well, we can't permit that," the shop owner mused. He unlocked the glass countertop and slid it back. "You're a kid. Tell you what. I'll sell you any card you want for a buck each."

Not realizing my luck, I thanked the man and made my selections, walking back out of the shop \$4.05 poorer, with Lord Vader, his Death Star with matching Super Laser, Luke's Red 5 X-Wing as a gift for my friend, and a five-cent planet Alderaan card in my hands.

"Get what you needed?" my stepfather asked me.

"Mmm," I said. "That rebel scum is doomed."

## Silent Shapes

Brid McGinley

Aidan felt Maeve's elbow pierce his dreams.

'Quick, switch it off.' Maeve's voice was a hoarse whisper, fighting against a dull, strident alarm. Aidan moaned, pushed himself to sitting, fought to get his bearings. Where was his bedside locker? And that noise? He squinted through the low light wafted through flowery curtains. Ah, yes. The Holiday Inn. The reunion.

'Turn it off,' Maeve's voice was urgent, her head turned towards the other bed, the unconscious forms of the twins. The alarm unit mocked them from the ceiling. Maeve threw Aidan a towel. 'Try and cover it til we find the switch.'

The wailing had dulled to half-hearted whining beeps and Aidan balanced on the pitching mattress, fingers tracing the outline of the alarm's plastic cover, batting it with the towel.

'This is hopeless,' he said, swaying on the soft mattress, 'maybe call reception.'

Aidan looked at his sleeping daughters. They hadn't moved, and he wondered again how his children's fierce resistance to sleep could give way to this comatose state. He remembered how peacefully they slept on his chest as babies, their breathing synchronised. Had their doubled presence made the other loss more acute? Was it because his son's life was lived in a single day that his potential remained boundless? A distilled lifetime of love? His little boy could have been anyone, was everyone. A perfect life. Aidan felt the gossamer veil that protected him from the chasm of grief flutter, threaten to rip.

'No reply.' Maeve said, puzzled, squinting at the ceiling.

'Strange.' Aidan swung his feet to the floor, walked to the window where an intermittent blue light pulsed against the curtains. Below,

on the fog-bound street behind fire engines and police cars, ghostly forms huddled, pyjama-clad wraiths draped in blankets and duvets. What was it? A film shoot? In the middle of the night? No. Hell no!

‘Maeve, grab the girls.’

Emergency lights guided them through deserted corridors, heeding vaguely remembered warnings to avoid lifts, their clattered footsteps slapping the abandoned staircase, each parent clasping a child. As he spewed through the rotating hotel door into cool night air, blood thrumming in his temples, Aidan saw Maeve waiting, her face wearing that remembered mask of fear and incomprehension. He pulled her to him, creating a warm cave for her, for their children. The night chill pierced and the child in his arms stirred. Aidan felt the cut-glass air catch at his throat, felt his eyes water.

As suddenly as it started, the alarm stopped, leaving its phantom echo pinging in the gothic gloom before fading with the receding emergency lights.

‘False alarm,’ someone muttered.

Hordes of cloaked guests began to drift past, a battalion of silent shapes swallowed by the pulsing door. Aidan looked at Maeve, her guarded eyes, the haunted look. And then, a nervous cackle, relief and memory merging, as their laughter rose unbidden, unsteady, tremulous on the spectral night air. And all the while, their children slept, oblivious.

# The Portrait of a Lifetime

JP Relp

‘Shall I flatter you?’

He grins around the chewed end of a brush, his palette a cacophony of colour reflected in fawn-brown eyes. I smile, sweep my silver hair back,

‘No, my darling, paint the truth.’

My truth. Loss and pain in the deep pockets of my cheeks and jaw. Joy and contentment in sharp lines, radiate like the spines of a fan from my eyes. Turmoil and uncertainty plough wide furrows across my forehead. Fear and worry, like bedsheet creases following a sleepless night, gather at my mouth. It’s all there. A lifetime of me, and of me with you.

Your brushes dart like bright birds, diving and pecking at canvas, shaking colour like rainfall from their wings. My face resolves in flesh-tone slabs and swipes. My life displayed like an old soldier’s ribbons; testimony of valour, battles won and lost. It’s all in the marks you make.

A palomino pony seeming to fly over barrels and logs; a kitchen steaming in baking scents and a white-haired woman, teaching; a toffee-apple kiss on the Big Wheel; a borrowed pendant and vintage lace tying tulips; a cold weekend in a budget hotel, exploring every plane and damp hollow; babies in knitted matinee jackets, blue then pink; a girl with mascara-lined cheeks, lovelorn; a ruddy, rugged boy in a green beret; a tan puppy that plumps out an empty nest; a rainy May wedding, tying browning lace around roses; an anniversary, pearl cufflinks and teardrop earrings; reading fairy-tales to a girl with dimpled cheeks and knees; a syringe filling with mutated blood cells,

a half-full bra; a Military wedding, a tired toddler pulling at an itchy wig; a garden grave marked by forget-me-nots; video-calls from too-bright desertscapes, a man with changed eyes; a funeral, and another, and another – the inevitability of time; a painted teenager dusting flour and sugar, learning; a grey-haired couple in foldaway macs, snapped beneath Lady Liberty; the creak and grind of knees in dappled woods, a puppy grinning around mossy sticks; a house packed in so many boxes, memories straining brown tape; a golden celebration, bubbles and cake, a wedding song danced stiffly; midnight hot chocolate, entwined hands spotted and crinkled, a love determined to be gifted diamonds, sapphires, platinum...

He puts the portrait on the wall. A half-century of observations in its caressing oil texture. My fingers hover over each hill and hollow. Paint still tacky, glistens like tears. Of sorrow. Of joy. He takes my hand, an old master of my truth. We go outside, the garden full of colour and life, sings with promise. We fold into each other, soaking in the sun like contented cats, talking of things to come. The portrait can always be added to, but it can never be taken away.

# The Great Escape

Jeremy Dixon

It's nine o'clock on a balmy morning between Christmas and New Year. Joe's filling the coffee machine and heating the oil for the donuts in his kiosk by the slipway, when he sees a tall, willowy man wearing a blue knitted jumper with a snowman on the front, stride out onto the beach. He has a hook nose, no chin and a forehead that slopes back into his short grey hair, so from the side he looks like a puffin. He's carrying a brightly coloured bundle in one hand, and a pair of wooden handled oars in the other. A stirrup pump is trapped under his arm.

At half past nine, Ami is staring at the sky. To the west, it's white, like a new canvas waiting for the artist's brush. To the east, over the sea, it's a pale, watery blue. Oblong clouds plod through it like zeppelins, and gulls whirl noisily above, their startled shrieks polluting the silence. She watches her boyfriend throw the ball and the spaniel tear after it, ripping up the sand with his eager paws. Then she watches a man, wearing a blue knitted jumper with a snowman on the front, drag a Union Jack patterned dinghy into the water, climb in and begin to row. The sea is smooth, like a sheet of polished silver.

'Come on Monty, time to go.'

She turns. Her boyfriend is shaking the lead at the reluctant spaniel.

'Look at that,' Ami says, gesturing towards the dinghy.

'Bonkers.' Her boyfriend shrugs. 'Come on Monty.'

'Do you think he's alright?'

'Course - why not?' He clips Monty onto his lead and sets off up the beach. 'Let's go get breakfast, before they're too busy.'

Ami takes one last glance, then follows, thinking about fried mushrooms, scrambled eggs, and toast with melted butter . . . and a caramel latte.

‘You said I couldn’t bring my dinghy,’ Amelia whines at nine forty-five, ‘cos it was winter.’

‘Don’t be silly, of-course you couldn’t bring your dinghy,’ her mother replies, without looking around. Her husband is some way behind with Amelia’s baby brother on his shoulders, having stopped to look at the replica pirate ship in the harbour.

‘So how come he got to bring his?’ Amelia points towards a man rowing a Union Jack patterned dinghy, some distance out and heading further.

Her mother stops and looks. ‘He’s a grown-up,’ she says with a sigh. ‘When you’re a grown-up, you can use your dinghy whenever you want.’ Then she turns and carries on along the beach with her hands in the pockets of her long, black coat.

It’s almost eleven when Maggie walks down the beach, to where the tiny waves are silently caressing the sand. She’s blowing curls of steam off a cappuccino she bought from the kiosk by the slipway. It’s just after eleven when her husband joins her. He has a cornet in one hand and a chocolate flake in the other, which he is saving till last. His silver moustache is fringed with lemon sorbet.

They parked their blue Focus estate on the road beside the beach. The one with the single yellow line where only blue badge holders can park. His hip was smashed when he fell through a rotten scaffold board two days before he was due to retire. He walks slowly and drags his right foot, so that the inside edge of his black loafer is always scuffed.



‘What’s that?’ Maggie asks, scowling at a tiny grey dot, far out, where the sea meets the sky.

‘I don’t know . . . a boat?’ he replies, taking another bite from his lemon top.

‘Too small.’

‘A buoy then, marking a crab pot maybe.’

‘Maybe.’ She turns . . . and tuts. ‘Look at the state of you,’ she says. Then she licks her thumb, smooths out his moustache and kisses him on the forehead before her gaze is drawn back to the barely visible speck.

‘What’s wrong?’ Joe asks, crunching his cornet.

‘Do you ever feel like . . .’ She pauses, chewing her lip and frowning. ‘Like you’re just too late for something?’ She turns to him.

‘Like what?’

She turns back to the sea, but the speck is lost in the distance. Her stomach tingle tails and a wave of dread shakes her. ‘I don’t know,’ she says, ‘something.’

# The Curse of the Patterson Women

Jeremy Dixon

There's that look again. The one he's had all morning. The one he's never had before. She feels queasy and the back of her neck stings. She shrugs it off, shaking her shoulders, bouncing the copper curls that tumble down her back. But that look - can he know? Does he know? No, of-course he doesn't, how could he? - don't be silly. She looks the other way.

'Emma, Emma.'

She spins, smile fixed.

'Lovely party, Emma.' Beth, the bore from next door. Invited only because if she wasn't, she'd spend the next three months complaining about the noise.

'Oh, don't be silly, Beth. It wouldn't be a party without you. Sorry, must mingle.' Then like a ballerina, Emma twirls away and is absorbed into the crowd.

The door opens and she looks, with wide, effulgent eyes. They came. He came. He had to of course, or it would have looked too suspicious. She scans the mass of bodies, hoping Toby might beat her to the door, but he isn't there. Gone to the garage perhaps, for another crate of Stella, or to practise that look.

She smooths down her dress, the mint green halter neck that she used to wear for Toby when impressing him mattered, and approaches.

'Thanks for coming, lovely to see you,' she says to her, not to him. She can't look at him because if she does, she will blush, and she never blushes. She must, of-course. She must speak to him as usual. She must flirt shamelessly as she works her way through the Pinot Grigio, becoming cruder when she switches to gin. She must, and she will, but all she can think about now is the other night. The night that

Sally was at her mother's, and Toby was out with the lads, again. Shouldn't he have grown up by now? The night that she crossed the street to borrow some lemonade for her Southern Comfort, then complained that she hated to drink alone.

She downs her wine in one noisy gulp. 'I must just,' she begins, vaguely towards him, waving her empty glass, 'get a, erm, do help yourself.' She slinks away, into the bodies, cursing her clumsiness. It's that look, that damned look, it's unsettled her, that's all. Christ, what is she doing? What is wrong with her? Knowing Toby it's probably wind, a dodgy scotch egg or too much cheese. She laughs.

'Em, over here. Em, sweetheart.' Her mother is waving, standing in the bay window with Emma's aunt.

'Emma, darling.' Her aunt smells of lavender and for a moment, she is a child again.

'Have you seen your uncle, he's in a terrible sulk with me.'

Emma's mother laughs. Her noisy, gin fuelled laugh.

'Why? What have you done?' Emma asks, wishing she'd refilled her glass before she came over.

'Oh, I bumped his precious Mercedes. He thought someone caught it, when it was parked outside the house, but it was me. I bumped it on a bollard in the supermarket car park.'

'So how did he find out?' Emma asks, frowning suspiciously at her big-mouthed mother.

'Oh, I told him.' Her aunt shrugs.

Emma screws up her face and rubs her temples. 'Why on Earth would you do that?' she asks, shaking her head.

Her aunt and mother look at each other and laugh.

'I didn't bloody do it on purpose, obviously.'

‘You should know better by now, you silly old trout,’ Emma’s mother says, ‘I’ve no sympathy. You should have told him the truth from the start. He’s only cross because you lied.’ She pauses to empty her glass. ‘You can’t beat the curse.’

‘The what?’ Emma chuckles.

‘The curse,’ her aunt says, dismissively, ‘the curse of the Patterson women.’

‘Surely he’s told you.’ her mother adds, scowling.

Emma feels sick as her stomach rolls over. ‘Told me what?’

But her mother isn’t listening. She’s on her tiptoes scanning the room. She waves and shouts, ‘you-hoo,’ when she sees Toby. He heads towards them, with that look, and her mother’s face crumbles.

‘Told me what?’ Emma begs her aunt.

‘We talk in our sleep, all the Patterson women. Can’t keep a bloody secret to save our lives.’

Emma turns to her mother, trembling.

Her mother is glaring back. ‘What have you done?’ she growls.

Then Toby is there, next to her, on top of her. Her chest hurts and the room spins and she thinks she might vomit. She can feel the heat from his body, and his damp warm breath on her face. When she breathes again, she chokes on the smell of stale lager. She looks up, into his face, at that look, but now she knows exactly what it is. It is the look of utter contempt.

# The Warm Spot

Kate Coghlan

‘Don’t touch me,’ my daughter snaps, so I withdraw my hand from her shin. Sometimes I sit on her bed inhaling the synthetic sweetness of mango body mist, and she talks to me softly as if I’m one of her cats. By stroking her leg today, I’ve broken the spell, revealed myself as non-feline, furless, maternal, meddling. Clover saunters in twitching her tail, then hesitates. She waits for me to rise before she jumps into my warm spot, circles, and settles. My daughter leans back against her pillow, rubs the tabby’s head and shuts her eyes.

When I was my daughter’s age, my mother rushed out first thing then hurried back to cook dinner. Questions were quick-fired as we ate, ‘Music practise? Homework? All OK at school?’ Sensing her impatience to tidy up and return to her computer, I would nod and agree, ‘Yep, all OK’. It wasn’t. Casual acts of betrayal and violence dominated my days. Shouts of ‘Scrap! Scrap!’ and an outdoor stairwell we called the Gos-Pit, where people were shoved down and spat on. I had to change my route home to avoid a narrow passageway, where a pack of girls huddled to tease and taunt.

I’m upstairs in my office the next afternoon, when I hear the front door slam, the thud of heavy shoes kicked off and a stomp-stomp up the stairs. I wait for five minutes before sidling in.

‘Good day, love?’ I ask, perching on the bed, moving a brush out of the way. It reminds me of a decade of hairstyles –ponytails, ballet buns and French plaits. Now she borrows my straighteners without asking.

‘It was OK,’ she replies, without raising her eyes from her phone.

‘Are your friends still getting on?’ At that age, mine wrote anonymous poems detailing each other’s faults, left for discovery in

pencil cases and lunchboxes. One said that I had ankles like tree trunks and talked like a nun.

‘They’re OK,’ she says.

‘Everyone’s behaving at breaktime?’

‘They’ve got no choice,’ she says. ‘There’s a zero-tolerance bullying policy.’

‘That’s great,’ I say, trying to imagine how such a thing could be enforced. Her phone pings with a message and my mind jumps to cyber-bullying, mean-girl chatter streamed24-7. They say kids film each other’s humiliation now, then pass it around, a second twist of the knife. I imagine my worst teenage moments filmed; gossiping about an absent friend; watching a classmate in trouble and staying silent; being pushed into a hedge, a cigarette held close enough to feel its warmth on my cheek.

She snorts and shows me the screen. It’s a video of a black kitten falling off a bookshelf and into a buttercream-topped cake. Heart emojis float upwards as everyone likes it. I laugh as I glance at Clover, dignified and devoted on the carpet, waiting for her turn.

Before leaving I say, ‘You’d tell me, wouldn’t you, if anything bad happened at school?’

‘It won’t,’ she replies. ‘Nothing interesting ever happens to me.’

# Maureen

Alice Langley

‘You know some people just buy their wheelchairs?’ Maureen says. She faces the window, where the spots of rain are shimmering on the glass. She hasn’t been outside since they moved her here.

I don’t have my contacts in, so everything is without hard edges. I left in a rush this morning because I needed to go to the bank. Then I felt bad, as if coming to see Maureen is a chore to be fitted in around other stuff. There was a queue at the bank, so I left it.

There is another man in the room with us. He appeared after the uneaten yoghurt cup and the milky tea had been rolled away, over the thin institutional carpet.

I shake my head, ‘I didn’t know that.’

I think about bacteria that will eat your flesh, burrowing into the muscle and sinew, hollowing it out like the core of an apple. You should see a doctor if your skin gets warm, swollen, red, or very painful after surgery or an injury. Sometimes they can catch it in time.

The man standing behind Maureen has said nothing, and he doesn’t touch her. She looks back at him occasionally. She doesn’t smile, not exactly, but something threads through the air between them. The nurse who brought the medication, rattling in an orange-brown bottle, did not acknowledge him.

‘There are people out there who don’t really need them, but they had money,’ Maureen says.

A guy at the gym used to say that pain is just weakness leaving the body. He was the fat guy who worked on the reception and couldn’t lift five kilos. Probably. He used to eat the energy bars they had in cardboard boxes on the counter. When he opened his mouth, you could see bits of raisin in his teeth. Sometimes Maureen can’t stand

up, so they just leave her looking out of the window, or point her non-wheelchair towards the TV.

The TV flickers in the corner, but the sound is off. It's some morning chat show. The colours are up too high. Pinks, blues, and purples flash across the screen. The man behind Maureen checks his watch but doesn't seem impatient. If I catch him out of the corner of my eye, it's like he flickers too.

I go to open the window a bit – there's condensation sliding down the inside of the glass.

Maureen watches me.

'How do you know that? About the wheelchairs?' I ask.

The crack of the window lets in the sound of car wheels on tarmac, and petrichor.

'I saw it on the Google.'

For Maureen, the internet is called Google.

The man is still, like stone, and doesn't make eye contact. He looks as if he's standing in a mist. Everything is softer though, without contacts.

Doctors don't really understand our nervous systems, or why some pain turns chronic. Even the fact that we call it the nervous system is a problem. Women who faint and need smelling salts to revive them. Hysteria. Periods. They wait as long as they can before giving painkillers to women in labour. They don't trust us. Maybe if you go private, I think.

'Would you want one?' I ask.

Maureen was looking at the man, who offers her his hand. I feel a bit sick. Maybe it's hunger. Low blood sugar. Maureen hasn't eaten anything properly for days now.



She drags her gaze to me. ‘What?’

Her face skin clings to her skull in a way I’ve never seen before. She told me once that your mattress doubles in weight every few years through collected dead skin cells. I looked it up and it’s a myth, but I haven’t told Maureen yet. I think she’d like Creepy Pasta, but I haven’t told her about that yet either.

‘A wheelchair.’

She looks at the window again. There’s a gap in the clouds now and it might stop raining. I think about how much better it will be to cycle home, not in the rain.

# Columns

Holly Nielsen

Maybe it's the angle but I'm pretty certain the columns aren't touching the ceiling.

“-but really he has to be read at least twice to be truly appreciated.”

He loves answering a question no one has asked. His portion of the lamb must be unpleasantly cool by now. I get the sense this entire evening is rehearsed. A scenic walk to the Lebanese restaurant, red wine, a sharing plate, more wine, hotel bar, a well-timed kiss by the river, hand resting on the thigh in the taxi, home for whisky, “has anyone ever told you that you have the most amazing eyes?”, ten minutes of dispassionate intimacy.

They're clearly not structurally integral and they take up a lot of space. What overambitious restaurateur chooses columns?

“-it really changed my view on the craft of writing, because that's what it is, a craft.”

I'm glad he chose Lebanese food, but this pomegranate seed has made itself at home in my molar. The conversation started with him asking “on your deathbed what do you think you'll regret?” Not many of my dates have a death bed question before appetisers, I will give him that.

But if there's a gap, doesn't that mean the space between column and ceiling gets dusty? It can't be possible to clean. You'd need some kind of extra-long duster with a hinge and even then, I doubt it would work.

“-you need to read it sometime. I would lend you my copy, but I've just scrawled so many annotations it's barely legible.”

I wait a moment to ensure he's done. “Rupert, can I ask you a question?”

He leans forward an almost imperceptible amount and looks above his glasses. “Of course. You can ask me anything you want, I’m all yours.”

“Are those columns touching the ceiling?”

# The Twilight of the Gods

Katy Archer

The ladies wore their finest furs to alleviate the chill. Silver skulls adorned the hats of their husbands. Some people had arrived in cars, precariously weaving through the darkened, ruined streets. Some had walked, stumbling over the rubble that had accumulated all across the city. All of Berlin's high society were there to celebrate the Reich – or what was left of it.

Slivers of light escaped from the edges of the blackout curtains at the large windows of the concert hall. Swastikas stood to attention at either side of the double doors, blowing in the breeze. Battered Berliners littered the streets. They were looking for food, or shelter, or a way to escape. They completely ignored the upper classes in their finery.

For those who had received an invitation, it was a miracle. Some believed that it was a divine act that had saved the concert hall from the constant shelling. Others were certain the normality of it all meant that the war wasn't *really* lost.

Just before 5 p.m., the doors were tightly sealed. The programme was about to begin. '*Hurry, hurry! You don't want to miss the start!*' Young boys with baby faces showed the few final stragglers to their seats, standing to attention at the end of every row, like children playing soldiers. Each had a small, tin box with a hinged lid in his hand. They looked like they had been made to store rations: cured fish; rye bread; coffee.

The concert hall was full. The lights were finally dimmed: people marvelled that there were still working electrics. The conductor walked onto the stage and tapped his baton. The music began. First there was Beethoven. Next came Brahms. Somewhere near the end, the Russians joined in, distant cannon fire adding to the crescendo of

Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*. The raptured crowd didn't seem to notice.

As the final note lingered on Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, thunderous applause broke out. People were pounding their feet. There were tears in their eyes. Some in the front rows had stood, causing a wave of people further back to also get to their feet. But one woman was doubled over as if in pain. Mascara dripped down her face.

*'It can't be over. Surely it can't be over?'*

The lights were brought back up and the mostly-smiling audience began to head towards the exits. As they filed out of their rows, each was given a parting gift from the ushers, who had opened their little tins. It was like a digestif. *'Would anyone care for a cigar? A brandy? A spot of cyanide?'* They were taken wordlessly: the smiles faded as quickly as the final note of the symphony they had just heard.

Outside, the gunfire sounded closer than ever before.

*'Are you sure it's safe to go out there?'* said the woman with the mascara-stained cheeks, hesitating. *'What if we get hit by a bomb?'*

Her husband didn't answer. The capsule sat heavily in his hand.

# Sicko

Alanna Duffield

The only thing I unwrap is the egg basket. The rest of me stays neatly stacked, folded and smoothed down in cardboard boxes at the front doors.

It's a big place. Overindulgent. But that's on-brand, I suppose. I peel the bubble wrap off the china basket—a gift from my mother. It sits like a butter-yellow oasis on the barren kitchen island. She gave it to me when Len and I were still together.

It seemed a strange gift to receive at the time, but I've since realised it was just one piece of a much larger puzzle she assumed I was placing together. One that, with enough connecting edges, would begin to resemble a family. A mother figure. The type of woman who might keep powder blue Whole Foods eggs in a ceramic basket—as much on show as any flower arrangement or bowl of potpourri.

In case you haven't guessed yet, she doesn't know me very well.

I smirk at the basket and all that it represents. Even its curved edges hint at the maternal. I wonder what she would've thought, my well-meaning mother, as she carefully selected this gift from a small-but-painfully-expensive shop on Stoke Newington Church Street. What might she have selected instead if she had known that, only a year later, her daughter would have abandoned her lover, her job, her friends? Abandoned everything in order to buy a home that was deliberately isolated. Abandoned everything except the sugary decadence of solitude.

Like I said, overindulgence is on-brand. I walk around the building I have acquired. It's big enough to house a family of six.

“Sicko.” I murmur fondly to myself.

No one likes the woman that chooses herself—not even other women who desire to do the same. You see, not loving someone enough does not constitute a reason to actually leave them. That doesn't sit right with others. They want proof of your madness.

Len was very handsome. Maybe you guessed that too? I think it matters.

Whoever converted the old barn in the Outer Hebrides had made the rather lavish decision to do away with the entire back wall, replacing it with a single pane of glass from floorboard to rafter. It would have been invasive, had the view held anything other than the sprawling verdant countryside. Not a single human being sullied the view.

I begin to laugh. It's a shrill, silly thing at first but it grows inside me like yeast. I cackle in the way that women are encouraged never to do. I step into the mad image of myself: the witch, the bitch, the spinster.

With a last rip of laughter, I swipe at the egg basket, raising it high above my head, and let it drop. It blasts apart, a shard of it catching between the cleft of my toes—a last, frantic attempt to hurt me. A small amount of berry-red spools out onto the wooden floor. I nod approvingly. An appropriate blood sacrifice.

## **Do the Right Thing?**

Peter Roe

To see someone you loved, lose every part of their self, was like a very slow torture. Watching her father rewind through his life until he didn't know her anymore, was like a terrible television joke. Near the end he talked in Polish, sometimes German. He had never talked about his family, just that he was a refugee from Europe. He only ever spoke English, with a faint hint of an accent.

She found the deeds when clearing his papers. Supposedly purchased in 1962. A farm in Dorset, his name on them 'Jonah Williamson'. A lot of farmland, which was rented out to various farming corporations. The farmhouse itself a 'sometimes' holiday let through a local agent. They said, "He was a lovely man who came and stayed two or three times a year".

This was a surprise to Jenny because her father never mentioned it. She was an only child but they were never close. He always made the right noises. Put her through the very best boarding schools, funded her further education. Now, it was her Doctorate that gave her the knowledge to do the right thing.

She turned the ring of keys in her hand, stopping at the five lever Chubb. She opened the car door, stepped onto the drive and walked back toward the innocent looking barn. As she walked she did a mental recap of everything she had found; Cranach the Elder, Cranach the Younger, Kowalski, Simmler, Danloux, Molenaar, Durer, Rubens, Rembrandt and Raphael.



# New Year Exchange

Emma Mather

What they wanted, was not to have to be a family or be called brother and sister. They wanted to still hold hands under the desk together.

What they wanted, was not to have his father in *her* kitchen in the early hours of New Year's day, rubbing sleepy dust from his eyes and scratching his crotch.

What they wanted, was for his mother to have stayed, not to have shouted at his father, "You bastard," and left in a taxi just after midnight.

What they wanted, was not to have seen his father and *her* mother whispering in the corridor. His father touching the small of *her* mothers back.

What they wanted was not to be embarrassed when their parents danced and *her* mother slipped her arms around his father, while the radio played Phyllis Nelson's *Move Closer*

What they wanted was for everyone to have been in the same room, clinking glasses and wishing each other Happy New Year.

What they wanted was to be allowed to pull the party poppers and sing karaoke.

What they wanted was to sit at the grown ups table and drink watered down wine.

What they wanted was to be allowed to stay up late and celebrate New Year's eve, together.

What they wanted was a proper New Year's eve.

# Dance Macabre

Sarah O'Grady

The stale whiff of sealed double glazing and chintz hung like tired spirits over the lounge. Pointless was on TV again but nobody bothered to shout out the answers. Lunch had been and gone; soft food with plenty of salt. Miss Dawn had completed the cryptic crossword in record time and was now rummaging in a carpet bag her niece Lark had smuggled in the previous evening. She had spent her insomniac hours memorising instructions and now creaked to her slippers and pattered about the Parker-Knolls handing out equipment and whispering orders. She found everyone so compliant these days and it was this that had her unsettled.

In time Lulu sighed and shook her honey hair free from its kirby grips and started to tap her feet on the polished lino in the corridor of the dying. There was a stir on the sofa, the Major tilted his head to make sense of the disruption; outside the sun warmed the empty beds and underground the tulip bulbs woke up. Nobody inside heard the blackbird singing.

On a ladder outside the dining hall opposite, Tom Jones chamoised across the glass. He was singing what sounded like Sex Bomb to Miss Dawn, but maybe she had died and gone to heaven, in any event there was an unaccustomed energy growing in the recirculated air. The view looked clear. The residents around Miss Dawn began to nod in unison, their headsets turning them into bug-eyed insects, withered limbs akimbo, pointing their toes across the bars of zimmer frames, following Lulu's lead and locomotion.

By the time the credits were rolling, and nobody had guessed a pointless answer, the only person left watching for the news, followed by supper, was a suspiciously bewildered Miss Dawn herself. She seemed unable to explain the smashed window or how the front door

had been opened, compromising the atmosphere and security of her peers. Her mobile phone, which had tracked the coda through the broken window and live streamed it to the Grannarchy UK website she had set up months ago, was tucked up inside her knicker leg.

“ Old habits” she mused, taking the lift to her single bedroom with space for an ornament or two. “Besides” she reported to Lark later that night, “ it was just luck they were all of an age to remember the Conga.”

# Venus Flytrap

Sarah O'Grady

There was something visceral in her response when I noted the dusty pot by the open French windows. The sun was low and October golden, her sweet face, all soft lines and crinkles where her smiles had been, was lit like an aged Rossetti. Her once titian hair was falling faded on her pale neck, the blue veins showed on the inside of her wrists and as she caught strands up in her still slender fingers, a plain wedding band glinted.

Her kitchen had always held the faint aroma of fruitcake and upstairs the empty bedrooms had fresh flowers replenished in the moment of abscission; she tugged at the petals to check for frailty.

This welcoming room at the back of their house was lined with books and the sofas facing each other were deep enough to curl into before an open fire or in a shaft of sunlight with the birdsong coming through. Beeswax scent silaged off the parquet and velvet curtains hung heavy as tabs, ready for the evening performance, plum brandy and coffee served in wafer thin cans. The background chatter was incessant.

The sharp flesh looked incongruous wedged between the piano and the shallow step out onto the Cotswold stone; a black plastic pot slipped inside a chipped green bowl with a carnivorous succulent wizening into the powdery grey soil. I moved to lift it outside but she gripped my arm too tightly and then whispered, so only I could catch her undertone.

“Leave him be petal, he pinpoints where my nurturing runs out.”

# A House is not a Home

Tom Tumilty

“I’m sorry, I can only give you a very quick tour. The office have double booked and there’s another couple due very shortly but I’m sure you’ll be able to see everything you want to. To be honest, I’m not really a salesman but this house just sells itself.” I hoped I sounded sincere, although the young couple didn’t seem totally convinced.

“This is the living room. As you can see, it’s a lovely, large, bright space with plenty of light from the picture window and that fantastic view of the hills.” They moved over to the window. “The garden is a good size, plenty of room for kids to play, and it’s low maintenance”. They nodded.

“I can let you have a really quick look upstairs. I can’t tell you more than you can see for yourselves, actually. I’m not really supposed to be doing the tour but the lady who’s usually here had to pop back to the office, so I said I’d man the fort for her.” They were beginning to look a bit annoyed but I knew I had a trump card still to play.

“This is the kitchen.” This was the clincher; if she liked it, the sale was as good as done. Her eyes opened wide and she positively beamed. “It’s an open plan kitchen and dining room with plenty of space and all the modern appliances. It was only just refurbished last year. There’s a walk-in pantry and a utility room at the end just on the left.” The way she turned to her husband said it all. She really wanted it.

“Sorry to hurry you but, please, take a card from the table at the door and phone us if you want to know any more. Thanks.”

All the way up the drive they were talking animatedly, heads together. Now, the estate agent lady had said she need half an hour to pop back to the office and pick up more schedules. So, ten minutes left to take what I could manage in the back of the van. The TV, computer and

microwave would fetch a fair bit and that jewellery box in the master bedroom looked quite tasty.

# TTC

Martina Omorodion

It is a different world for a woman in my culture that is trying to conceive. Some have chosen to call the phrase TTC - a quaint acronym that does not capture any of the struggle, pains and humiliation that comes from a monthly period that refuses to take a break.

TTC- sounds like Tender, Thorough, Care. The type you get from your in-laws when you have just delivered a bouncing baby boy. It gets better when it is twin boys. You are sure to become royalty in your husband's house. Even his mother will want to spoon-feed you. She'll ensure you do no strenuous chores or cooking. Your only duty, for now, is to eat, sleep and breastfeed the gluttonous twins.

Mejide snapped from her reverie. Her thoughts were broken by the cries of her neighbour's twin babies. Mama twins was fondly called Iya Ibeji or Mama boys, a testament to the feat she had achieved. "But why did babies cry so loudly?" Mejide thought to herself. The sleep had vanished from her eyes. She looked up at the clock. It was a few minutes to midnight. Thankfully, she had not overslept. She would have missed the midnight prayers she had to say to open her womb. She gave a deep sigh. The words were heavy on her heart.

For eight years of marriage, she had been trying to conceive. But the more she struggled through magic potions, prayer houses, fertility herbs and more. Her monthly period remained constant. Never late, never missing a day. She looked at her husband snoring away on the bed. He had little or no worries. Another wife that could bear him sons was just a asking away. It was Mejide that had plenty to lose. She could lose her home, she could lose her marriage, she could lose her life. But, no matter how much she pleaded, Busayo, her husband refused to seek help. Not hospitals, not pastors, not marabouts.

Everything was fine, he insisted. He had also refused to take a second wife, for this Mejide remained grateful.

But she was beginning to lose her patience. Just what if? Just what if Busayo was the one with the problem? But she would never know. In her culture, you do not question a man how much more his virility or his fertility.

The clock struck midnight and, wearily, Mejide went down on her knees. The faint sound of crying babies seeped through the thin walls. Just maybe, the prayers might open her womb. Just maybe...



## The Sun Sketched in Pencil

Jake Cullen

In the dull of winter, she requested that I sketch for her the Sun. Had I been anything close to a semi-competent artist, the request might have been simple. However, the last time I drew a picture, the lads in year 8 called me gay, so I stopped.

“Why the Sun?”

“I feel like we haven’t seen it for months.”

“Wasn’t it sunny yesterday, just for like half an hour?”

“Oh, I’m not sure. I must have missed it,” she looked down and picked at the dry skin around her fingers.

I wrapped up warm, opened my bedroom window wide and pulled up a chair. My first attempt was a circle drawn free hand. I tore out the page, folded it into a paper airplane and threw it out of the window. My next five attempts were different sized circles, free hand n’all, I tore out those pages, made paper planes and sent them flying. My next fifteen attempts or so were the same, mostly because I was having fun watching the planes swirl twenty stories down to the ground like kamikaze pilots in a state of regret. The next attempt was a circle drawn around a 1RMB coin with straight dashes of light emanating from its circumference. I felt the drawing was unclear somehow. Rip. Plane. Kamikaze. The next effort was drawn around a coaster. Wrong size. Kamikaze. Then around a pot of pills. Same result. I gazed at the sea of grey above, I thought that if only I could see the Sun for a moment, I’d remember what made it so special.

When she came into the room and flicked on a small bedside lamp as she searched for hand cream, something clicked. Her hair dangled beneath the light and cast dancing shadows of black lace atop the bedside cabinet. I took out the coin, placed it in the top left of my page

and skated the tip of my pencil around its rigid edge. In the bottom left corner, I drew two vague human figures hand in hand. A hard pressing of fuzzy pencil flung behind them; inescapable shadows of summer.

Her arms embraced me, her strawberry smelling hands met at my chest and she kissed the top of my head. We looked at the murky sky together as chatting and laughter flitted up from below. People were straightening out my planes and observing their contents. As they looked up, we could see their smiles, even from here. I couldn't make up my mind whether they were searching for the origamist who slung the planes or if they were searching the skies for a momentary halt of winter. She looked at me and then up to the sky, smiling, expectantly.

## Literary Love Child

Vikki C.

I read about the awards in the Times and frankly I feel unextraordinary, even on a languorous Sunday in Portobello which expects nothing in return. The flower market sellers have lilting foreign accents and you wonder if they understand us, but really I am the one having trouble communicating. The irony is these great linguistic events leave me mute, condemned to the penumbra. I knew as soon as the orchard light grew dim, the plums were due to plummet, the typewriter cursing in italics at my overthinking. There's a hesitation in this unmade room. The signing away of fifteen years, like it never happened.

Writing is an act of unbecoming.

Ambition is to be the mote in your eyes, drifting on a sea of tears. Or the perfumed myrtle left behind after the allotment roses have decayed. I refuse to separate my failing body from the mahogany desk. My spirit is already en route to the next life. It's a bloodletting - birthing a love child who simultaneously personifies and damns you.

She arrived at the hour of my death, perfectly formed and beautiful with the last rays of summer in her hair.

I accept this now. How the yellow dress looks better on her lithe frame. Something about the fabric and her carriage - a few eras less therapy on her shoulders. I saw how he reads her - every time like the first. Their relationship is a Tarkovsky film of vignettes drowsing behind a lens that blurs every flaw. He, a successful agent of their literary world. For me, it isn't envy. Not the green of pine trees in autumn when all else is gold - no. I would never inhabit such remorse for something I conceived and carried through a crisis while he was elsewhere seeking glory at the bottom of a whisky bottle.

They sent a cheque for a generous sum and I should be out on the terrace with wine and a glowing bonfire to match my ego. But I'm bound to this bed, sleepless, while her name is carried by glittering pushcarts across continents.

No one knows these blues that lounge within four walls, inebriated.

He speaks of her like testament, while toasting champagne under balmy cypresses in Tuscany – I am left to trace the deep scar of Polzeath's wintry cliffs. Between greyscale monologues, Plath's 'Bell Jar' has become my pillow of choice throughout this absentia.

It's a mixed euphoria – winning but losing something greater. A contradiction.

I stare at the framed cheque and think of her elan. Briefly, I am not sad about being partially tethered to the afterbirth. In this orchard of dying light and overripe plums, she gifted me a little redemption. Fifteen years on, she finished my opening sentence with bright eyes and a necklace of accolades. And I am now small enough to fit inside her name. Perhaps, this is success. How the author's prerogative will always be to romanticise the ailing mother the world never sees.

# Emergent

Jennifer McMahon

Alone in her room after school, Paula touches her trophies with uncertain reverence. First, the costume-jewellery necklace. Until recently, it adorned a slim neck, and draped tauntingly over pert breasts. Now, it inscribes a bright oval on the nightstand. A wristband from a concert that hugged warm skin, and left its impression in a red ring, lies beside it. She lifts the sock. Once, it encased a delicate foot, of tender toes with burgundy toenails, freshly painted. She presses it to her nose and inhales deeply, but its scent is long gone. Each item is a part of Rose; to touch them is to touch her. Each one is stolen, though if Rose has ever missed them, she's so far given no sign, or called foul.

Paula allows herself a few more precious moments, then conceals her trophies within the folds of a silk scarf. She returns them to the drawer in her nightstand, where they'll be close to her when she sleeps. Shame creeps into the hollow they leave, sickly and cold, blunting her reverie. Her feelings are wrong, and she can't even name them. All she knows is that, whenever Rose is near, she's breathless, dizzy, altered. An illness, a fever, that's what it must be, because it can't be the unspeakable truth, a sin that's probably worse than murder. Her mother, if she knew, would express her horror in endless lectures and prayers. Her father would shun her, maybe even kick her out.

She lies back on her bed, and throws out her arm. It's all too easy to imagine soft blonde hair tickling where it touches. The problem is to stop imagining, once she opens herself to it. The countless love letters she's written in her mind have yet to know paper, the baited text messages she's composed have yet to be sent. It's torture, this loss without ever having possessed, but it's all she has. Without it, she'd be unbearably alone.

The sound of clattering cutlery and rattling plates rises from downstairs. Her mother is setting the table for dinner. Paula will have to get up, go down there, and pretend to be a normal girl with normal, healthy feelings. Her mother will smile at her, and tease a little.

Any new boys in school?

Any crushes?

She has only one.

She takes her phone from the nightstand and types a text message. It needs no thought; she's always known what must be said. Her finger hovers over Send, as it has countless times before. Either way, she'll regret it, but maybe it's better to regret telling someone you love them than never saying anything at all. She presses it and lies back, eyes closed. Stupidest thing she's ever done. There'll be no good reply, only recrimination, maybe even abuse.

An agonising minute passes. Her phone beeps.

She lifts it before her, opens damp eyes.

Reads, then reads again.

And smiles.

# Graduation

Sage Short

It's graduation week, and my mom has ordered all things pink that Amazon creates. We ventured out to Dollar Tree to find the cheap things: pink placemats, napkins, plastic silverware, golden buckets to hold the pink silverware, and other miscellaneous party-must-haves. Target had the light pink plates that she said I can take with me to graduate school after we have no use for them. We got caught up in making our home a Barbie Dream House when we forgot about my boyfriend, who, was also graduating, and who, by the way, was completely fine with splitting our joint party with all pink decor. But, my mom is a giver. So she returned half the pink placemats to get gold ones in their place. Boy things are easy. My mom had a lousy, abusive drunk for a dad, and her mom died before she entered kindergarten. Her step-mom is my grandma, and she did her best with what was left of my mom's adolescence. My mom was worried about survival. Now, we're worried about a color scheme.

When we didn't have money, we couldn't decorate for holidays. And now, my mom looks forward to every season. We change the wreaths every few months. We plant new flowers out front in the spring. In December, we change the hydrangea screen-painting in the dining room to a Christmas tree truck painting.

I think my mom is healing through pink.

Recently, my mom came home with plastic bags strapped to her arms and dropped them carefully onto our wooden living room floors. Her face lit up as she showed me her haul. She was redecorating the dining room with bits of nautical decor, bringing the beach to us even though we're coastal. I think I inspired her when one of the dinning table chairs finally broke from my weight. Our senior cat had been using them as scratching posts for the better part of ten years. But I, the only daughter, had been the straw that broke the camel's back. We're praying the cats don't chew the fake hydrangea that is the dinning table's new centerpiece.

Piles of cardboard boxes showed up at our house today. They're stuffed with pink and black decorations. It looked like we were decorating for an Emo Barbie. It was funny and cute and sometimes felt like it was too much.

I knew we'd save the boxes for when I move. All the pink will come with me. But I hope I accidentally leave a box behind. I hope my mom makes a nest of me.



## The Village Priest

Elizabeth Olguin

The priest in white vestments stood in front of faded Orthodox splendour, gold shining in the candlelight. He held a brush in his hand, dipped in holy oil. As the choir sang the name of God, the rolling vowels echoing over and over against the gilded walls, the crowd made their way to the ikoni. Michael and Gabriel's illuminated halos collected wrinkled, crushed bills; their faces the lip prints of the supplicants, willing the archangels to carry their fervent prayers above.

The visitor approached the ikon, his hands brushing against the ancient wood before he kissed the silver cross above the angels' faces. Metal, cold and sharp against his lips, the glass smeared with the saliva of those ahead of him.

He stepped in front of the priest, unable to meet sanctified eyes without a warm, red flush crawling across his cheeks. The priest spoke, but the visitor heard nothing, his eyes fixated on the holy man's lips.

The priest flourished the brush and the visitor leaned in, eyes closed. He heard a sharp intake of breath as he drew closer to the priest and took his own, drinking in the heady, intoxicating smell of the incense clinging to the consecrated damask in front of him.

The priest brought his arm up, proffering his wrist for the ritual kiss. The visitor bent down and pressed his lips on the soft, pale skin near the veins. Through long, full lashes, he looked up at the holy man in front of him. The priest stood, mouth agape, crimson flush down to the high collar of his garments. He smiled.

The visitor pulled away after half a second too long, nodding to the priest before making his way to the next gilt-framed ikon.

The next person stepped up, searching for absolution.

# Forget Me Not

Tejaswinee Roychowdhury

Branches of wilted forget-me-not blossoms from their backyard, one from each day of the week, rest on his palm as he sits on the watchtower overlooking the pine woods and the village beyond. The twins used to plant the flowers in the muzzle of his rifle.

There is not much a foot soldier can say in a war, but he tried his best.

Divided by language, he had taken a box of broken white chalk from one of the twins and with his good hand, drawn on the ragged stone wall: a horizon and a sun. He then pointed at his rifle sitting in the rags at the corner of the hut. *Pew-pew*—he said.

The twins stared at him with their wide uncomprehending eyes, their mouths partly open and frozen halfway into a grin; but the colour drained from the sunken cheeks of their mother. She pulled the twins close to her bosom, away from the once unconscious man she had dragged home from the woods outside the village in an empty potato cart. After all, he was a man who wore colours and stripes she had learned not to trust, and she was the enemy—not his nurse sent by his country.

*No, no*—he shook his head. Dry-mouthed and in haste, he scribbled another horizon and a setting sun. *Waaaaaaanh*—he let out a high-pitched wail, imitating the sirens both he and them were used to.

The twins giggled, but their mother scrunched her brows, her face as grave as his. Their eyes locked, speaking, intertwining like unkempt grapevines meeting on forgotten bamboo frames. She nodded gently. He sketched a new horizon, a crescent moon, and a few stars.

*Run*—he said and jogged across the room to the stone fireplace, dead to the summer.

*Run*—he said again, slower, wanting to engrave the word in the air that smelled of warm sheep milk and stale bread.  
Her lips quivered like disturbed lake waters on a windy evening.

He let out another wail before his final artwork: a horizon with a rising sun. The little chalk circles he made under the chalk aircraft looked like gas balloons floating to the heavens until he rained them upon the chalk ground, and said—*boom*.

The twins ran around the humble room decorated with clinking wind chimes and owl-feathered dream catchers, laughing and screaming—*boom, pew-pew, waaaaaaanh*—before running out into the backyard and playing hide-and-seek amongst withering structures.

She wept.

He sat with his back to the wall and knees to his chest.

Last night, he knelt in front of her before hobbling back to his platoon lest his young bride paid the price.

*Run*—he had pleaded, cupping her hands in his, gazing into the eyes of the woman who nursed him to life, cleaned and stitched his flesh wounds, and put his broken arm in a sling.

As his eyes search for their little hut, he hopes they're gone. He hopes, for the sun had risen over the horizon.

## Hook, Line and Wisdom

Testimony Ageh

There's a friend I have in Jake; one that is adverse to pessimism. There's this lake at Pearl Harbour, rumoured to have a dearth of fishes, but that's Jake's favourite fishing spot. It is not his inability to be blind to the reality that, maybe or not, fishes rarely congregate there, but his resistance to the general notion that nothing lives there, but a hook and line full of hope, and an empty basket full of salt water and sea flies.

He'll always tell me, whenever we meet there during my morning jog by the lake, "see, don't you think I'm the smartest person alive?" And, I usually find sense in his self-acclaimed wisdom. The hotspot usually get too crowded and fishes travel back to him. At least one. He doesn't have to fight for a salmon. Or a Tuna. Or a Tilapia. Or a catfish. What he fights for is basically what to do with the one he'd caught that morning – should he make a cassoulet, and drink the soup out of it? Or make fish stew that could take him through two days. Now, that's wisdom.

He told me he could stop fishing soon. He said he's caught enough fish oil – Omega 3 fatty acids which are essential in preventing and managing heart diseases, and lower blood pressure – and he no longer needs to see his doctor. He wants to live and find the right balance.

# **Anywhere That Isn't Back to What We Left Behind**

Sarah Jassat

I wake up to a hot puff of Minnie's morning breath.

"Mummy," she says, sitting up in the back seat and looking out of the windows of the car "I slept in my clothes!"

"Mmm. I did too." I rub my face and let my thoughts clatter into place while she presses her nose and fingers against the window of my Fiat Punto. Each point of contact creates its own cloud of condensation. The rug I had thrown over us the night before has slid into the mess of bags crammed into the foot space. My body is freezing and stiff from contorting between the hard plastic shell of Minnie's car seat and the car door. Number one on today's to-do list: find somewhere to sleep that isn't a car.

"Mummy..." Minnie looks as though she's the one responsible for rebuilding our lives. "I need a wee."

We fall out of the car. Two of the plastic bags start to slide out, clothes and snacks spilling. I shove them back into the car and kick the door closed as Minnie tows me to the park bathrooms. They're a mess but they're open and Minnie doesn't notice the cigarette butts streaking watery coal down the sink, she's too relieved to see a toilet.

Afterwards we stand at the sink and scrape the crusts from our eye lashes with cold water. I look at myself in the cracked mirror. There are dark smudges under my eyes and lines threaten to crack my skin and reveal everything underneath. I inspect the damage that didn't used to be part of me, consider the other damage that isn't visible. No more, I tell my reflection in the mirror.

"You look nice when you smile," Minnie says. "Really pretty. Like a princess."

I show Minnie how to brush her teeth with her finger and while she makes the enamel squeak, I fingerbrush her curls away from where they're stuck to her neck. Now we look like a mother and daughter that just happened to visit the park a half hour after dawn. To do list number two: buy a toothbrush and a hairbrush. At least one between the two of us.

The day has stretched wide open while we were becoming presentable. Outside, I can see the shapes of the shadows. This park, just somewhere to stop the car and rest my head the night before, is beautiful. It's a place I want to linger in for a while and there is a lightness, a novelty at the thought. How long has it been since I did something just because I wanted to? Minnie swings her hand in mine, her thoughts train-tracking my own.

"Can we go to the playground before we leave?" she asks.

"We can," I tell her. I scoop her up, spin her round and round, her squeal ribboning out into the air behind us. "We can go anywhere. Anywhere we like."

# Les Fleurs

Maria Thomas

The day after your funeral, it started raining flowers. The dawn sky was an opaque, eerie amber, as if all the sand from all the world's deserts were hovering amongst the clouds; and the sun had a painted quality, where we could see all the speckles and stripes and brush strokes it was composed of. The painted sun rose high in the sky, and then the flowers started to fall like rain.

At first, we all trooped out into the streets and avenues and roads, faces upturned towards heaven, as petals rained onto our clothes, into our hair and onto paths and grass and pavements – parrot-faced tulips, slick-tongued orchids, cherry-blossom ticker-tape and saffron coated tiger-lilies. For the first time in days, we laughed, as the petals tickled and brushed softly against our skin, we smiled as our friends and neighbours became drenched in colour, as if the painted sun had sprinkled droplets of pigment onto them. Other people's children – not ours, not you - gathered armfuls of flowers and threw them into the air like confetti, and some of us lay on the floor and made angels with our arms, sweeping the delicate petals into wings of many hues, the scents heady and rising as the flowers continued to pour. You would have loved it.

After a while, as the flowerfall continued, we drifted away, back to our shops and offices, our schools and homes, our jobs, and our grief. But the flowers continued to drizzle onto the ground, sometimes in flurries that tumbled and span like candyfloss, and sometimes in huge monsoon droplets that bounced leaving spectral imprints on the ground – like the ghost of you in our photographs and memories. It rained all day, and when we went to bed that night, flowers continued to fall, poppies that drifted like fireflies, and baby's breath that swirled like snow as the wind picked up around them.

We woke to stained-glass roses illuminating our windows and walls, to kaleidoscopes of colour that provided a hint to what waited outside. It was difficult to open the front door, but when we did it was to a world transformed. Great mountains of flowers covered everything – hearses were festooned, cathedrals coated, trees garlanded, lampposts and fire hydrants, shops and trucks, buses and busstops, everything was covered with flowers.

In the churchyard we find your tomb carpeted with daffodils, carpeted with yellow and orange, white and green, carpeted with trumpets, and we kneel at your grave and bury our faces in the flowers and weep.



## Line Cook

Bryan Vale

The smell of onions is in his *mask* — somehow. Filtered from the white slivers at his fingertips, up along the skin, inside his body, and out again into the mask that has become a part of his face.

The meals he helps prepare disappear into paper bags with the names of rideshare services on them. The bags disappear through a window, collected by strangers. Then into the city. Keeping the shut-ins fed.

He wishes he could be a shut-in. Instead he's stuck here, with all these *cebollas*.

Chop, chop, chop. Another white onion vanquished. The plastic gloves do a pretty good job of protecting his eyes. But his nose — that's where the vegetable lives. He's never quite free...

The kitchen is getting hotter, which always happens during dinner rush. Once they ran out of paper bags — the horror! App users receiving super burritos in discarded cardboard! Their ratings went down *that* night.

But either the kitchen is getting hotter or he's just working up a sweat on his own. Liquid dribbles down the back of his neck, down his forehead into his eyes.

The sweat makes him cold. He's shivering and the dinner rush seems to have slowed, or stopped. There is a clock above a greasy skillet that says 4:33. He hasn't chopped anything in a while.

He can't smell the onions anymore.

He looks around. Brushed stainless steel encrusted with years of grease and oil, moist brown tile floor with a black drain in the middle. Could he slip down that drain? Could he slide?

The virus — it's come for him.

He looks at the cook on his left, who is stirring beans, concentrating. The cook's arm goes in a tired circle. A lopsided circle. He knows the feeling of that arm, that ellipse. When your forearm is numb from continuous motion.

The smells are back. No. He's not sick. It's fatigue.

"I'm tired," he announces, and as he says it his throat seems to lock up.

Barely acknowledged by anyone in the kitchen.

He leaves through the back door. He's not coming back.

# Marketplace

Emma Robertson

**BootyBride24:** FOR SALE Full length Diana De'Briana wedding gown with veil and tiara. Never worn, selling due to my now EX fiancé being a total snake. £1500 or make me an offer.

**Kazza:** O no! U ok hun?

**BootyBride24:** I will be hun, just me n the kids from now on xx

**NotAnAlien:** Please, I like to ask a question. Why did you want to marry a snake?

**Kazza:** She dint no he woz a snake!

**NotAnAlien:** Surely you can see when someone is a snake? Is very easy to spot!

**BootyBride24:** He hid it well @NotAnAlien. He had me fooled.

**NotAnAlien:** So, is possible for snake to stand up like human male?

**BootyBride24:** ???

**Pickles:** Is this still available?

**BootyBride24:** Yes hun

**NotAnAlien:** I'm sorry, I trying to learn how a snake can be mistaken for human man. I want to learn more about this species.

**Kazza:** Wot species?

**NotAnAlien:** Humans. *Message deleted.*

**NotAnAlien:** Snakes.

**DanDan:** I think you'll find that @NotAnAlien is implying that @BootyBride24's ex-fiancé is a LITERAL snake, rather than a figurative one.

**Kazza:** Wot?

**Pickles:** I'm interested, will you take £800 if I pick it up myself?

**BootyBride24:** PM me hun

**NotAnAlien:** So can he stand up?

**BootyBride24:** NO a snake cannot stand up you timewaster

**DanDan:** Well, actually, snakes can "stand" up to half of their total length, so if it were 12 foot long, it could technically "stand" up to six feet.

**NotAnAlien:** And why you need a special dress to marry a snake? Is for safety?

**BootyBride24:** OMG I didn't know he was a snake when I agreed to marry him.

**NotAnAlien:** So why this dress?

**Kazza:** Wots wrong wiv da dress?? If u don't like it just jog on!

**Pickles:** I like the dress! How about £600 without the veil?

**DanDan:** Where are you from @NotAnAlien? Here it's customary for brides to wear a special dress when they get married.

**NotAnAlien:** Sorry I recently arrive here. I want learn more about your ways.

**Kazza:** So dats y u don't no proper English!

**DanDan:** Welcome to our country.

**MaryMoo:** Hello @DanDan! Did you find your dog?

**DanDan:** Yes I did, thank you @MaryMoo but I'm afraid he's gone now.

**Kazza:** O no! Hes wiv da angles now hunni

**MaryMoo:** Run free over rainbow bridge little man!

**DanDan:** No, I meant I gave him away because my new girlfriend is allergic.

**NotAnAlien:** Now...I have SO MANY more questions to ask you all.

**BootyBride24:** OK I'm not selling the dress now so I'm turning off comments

**Kazza:** O no! Y?

**BootyBride24:** My fiancé has been on the phone and apparently that was his cousin and he was just cuddling her because she was sad about her nan dying

**DanDan:** Wouldn't his cousin's nan also be HIS nan?

**BootyBride24:** Other side of the family

**NotAnAlien:** Is the snake? You going to marry him again?

**MaryMoo:** What snake?

**DanDan:** Surely not?

**Kazza:** Good 4 u hunni!

**NotAnAlien:** Please?

**NotAnAlien:** Hello?

**Pickles:** Is this still available?

# The Box Room

Ellen Barr

A 6 by 7 foot sanctuary for a whole three years, I fell in love with this room, and later, who I was in it.

This tiny, sweaty, dusty room with no storage space and ivy draped over the window. This room with dog-eared books and drawers that would tip over if you filled them too much.

I started writing here on the bed, beneath art that threatened to peel off the wall more and more every day. I applied for jobs, evening light pouring through the leaves and onto the laptop. I crawled through this door at 6am after messy nights out, ones I'd complain we were too old for when I woke up with clothing and jewellery and a pizza box scattered across the floor, and the suspicion I was a terrible person.

I typed emails, texts, and WhatsApps. I called my Mum to check in. I ordered hungover Pret. I opened the window so wide I couldn't close it properly again and swore when I hurt myself trying.

Sometimes I stared out of the window at hazy London sunsets and questioned my career, my morals, my mortality. Sometimes I stared out of the window and judged the neighbour's ugly gazebo.

I let boys into this room. Most of them I didn't fall in love with, one of them I did. And suddenly it wasn't just my sanctuary anymore, it was ours. We were at our best inside this room. We whispered secrets and fell into each other every night, two glasses of red wine and a shared bottle of water laid on the chipped window sill.

On our good days it was deep conversations and tears of laughter. On our bad days it was me alone at 3am in the bed that didn't feel like just mine anymore, crying and writing unsent pleas on my notes page, hoping he'd ring me, which he always did.

Then one day he didn't.

It was over — the room once more my own, and I learned to love it again.

I've laughed in it, and cried — over friends, boys, work, my own body, and spilled milk. I've read and I've sang. More than once I've thrown clothes on the floor and covered the full length mirror with a towel because I couldn't bear to look at myself. On better days, I've stared at myself in my underwear and thought actually, I'm probably alright. I've taken photos for boys I never sent. I've taken photos for boys I did send. I've assembled flat-pack drawers and proudly claimed it was DIY. I slept knowing some of my favourite people were just on the other side of these walls. I fixed a wobbly cupboard. I read the email offering me the job.

I sorted, I packed, I surveyed, and I realised I fell in love with this room so much I forgot how small it looked when it was empty.

## **Doom**

Ifunanya Ezeano

Did you cover my juice when I left? Mom asked and started drinking thereafter.

A fly was lying lifeless at the bottom of the glass when she dropped it with me still stuttering at her back.

## Short Story Prize Winner

### Up the Downstairs

Mary de Sousa

She pushes the bedroom door open, a Struwpeter silhouette against the white landing light.

'Come on, Eileen,' she whispers urgently, crooking an arthritic finger at me.

Trousers on inside out, the pockets two shiny elephant ears. Shoes on the wrong feet pointed out like the genie in a fairy-tale.

'Mum, it's the middle of the night,' I say, keeping it cheerful.

I am ready though, dressed under the covers. She approaches, plucking at the bed and straining to see me. She touches my face. It would be terrifying were it not my mother. It is terrifying because it is her.

When we were small, for sore throats and nasty coughs, she would make butter balls, rolling small chips of good butter in soft brown sugar between her hands. There would be six on a little saucer brought to the bed for the invalid and maybe one for any other child awake who convinced her, they too, had a slightly sore throat. And a cool hand on the forehead as the melting sweetness slipped down.

'Eileen, get up,' she hisses as if the house was on fire.

My name is not Eileen, but our house is on fire and, at the moment, nothing, but nothing, will put out the flames. It will take a long and weary time to die out and we will all be left scorched and sitting in the ashes wondering what the hell happened. And I will start making myself all sorts of promises. This WILL NOT happen to me. I WILL find a way to die beforehand. Two years on from this night, when she



is long gone from this house, I will amend this promise. I WILL NOT be left sitting on a padded chair dribbling onto a cardigan with someone else's initials felt-tipped on the label.

'Get up, it's too late,' she says which, despite my sagging heart at the thought of what lies ahead, I find funny.

My sense of humour won't last. It never does. If only I can avoid the lamenting. Turning back into a child. Mourning my mother. Calling for her to emerge from this person. It will do neither of us a blind bit of good.

But first things first. On this chilly dark night, alone and taking my weekend turn with her, when all good people whose brains are not short-circuiting, are asleep, I must equip the little woman for our night watch of hell, and I resent it. Glasses on, walking stick forced gently into the tightly clenched hot hand, hearing aids and teeth in.

This last piece of kit, the denture plate, can be dangerous. My kind, sweet, funny mother who all her life found it so difficult to open her mouth and raise her voice (allowing others to raise theirs) and who loved us all until we couldn't breathe, is not above biting when necessary.

I work slowly, loathe to connect her. It raises the stakes for injury for me and brings her own predicament into sharper focus for her. Is it not kinder to leave her in the fog?

'Get up, get up, get up,' she says.

The repetition is a warning. Shouting and hitting may follow.

On my last weekend, she spent a whole evening in her nightie throwing her head back like a wolf and howling the name of her parish priest over and over and over. I was only able to stop her by handing her a crucifix.

When she was young and sharp ('my waist was 22 inches, you know'), she used to sing occasionally in a London night club. In her darkest

times, when I was still small, she taught me the words to Somewhere over the Rainbow. Why then, oh why, can't she? I must not think of that now. She still sings regularly - it's one of the things we do best together - sending Fields of Athenry up and out into the ether of the estate - but only in the daylight garden. When the sun goes down, she has one aim.

'What would you like to do?' I ask, my tone neutral and friendly.

I might be asking which route she would prefer to follow in a stately home. She always loved the gardens of such places.

'Go home,' she says.

She has lived in this house for more than 40 years. It was our first real refuge from the brutal wreckage of her marriage and, after a short first stop on a crummy estate to gather ourselves, we landed a house on the outskirts. We thought we'd made it. We had TWO gardens, back and front, and a garage. We acquired a lawnmower. We were like regular people.

'Shall I just help you with those shoes?' I ask getting to my feet, taking both her hands and steering her bottom down on to my still warm bed.

'Why, what's wrong with them?' she says angrily.

'They're on the wrong way round,' I say.

This could go either way, a quick slap or a shared giggle. Her sense of humour is still in there. I know she is in there. But I still feel the fear of a child who can't get to their mother.

'She's putting a lot of this on, you know. It's all for show,' she confided in me once about her own antics, as I dragged her back to the house, she had escaped from to embark on a slow-motion chase around the estate trying to snap off car aerials and shout obscenities at neighbours she had once delivered Christmas cards to.

I take off the shoes and swap them, noticing the socks don't match. I try not to think about her dressing herself or I will cry.

'Listen to this,' she says, prodding me. 'I think it's me that's the wrong way round.'

We hug and laugh together. She has felt my despair and handed me humour. The double act is intact. It's a good start. I feel the laughter build in me.

'Stop now, Eileen,' she says, old-style Irish. The laughter must always stop. It could end in tears.

The fact she has chosen 'Eileen' for me tonight bodes well. She has two family members with that name. I don't know which one I am yet, but she loves them both. There are other family names she could call me now that could mean serious trouble. Or it may be just a record she remembers us playing as kids. Either way, I'm very happy to be Eileen. Other people talk of their hurt when their parent first forgets their name. Me, I am grateful for the small distance it gives me. I have let my name be called too often. And, maybe, if I can just keep on being them, the Eileen's will turn out to be more tolerant and understanding than me.

I kneel at her feet and she lifts off my glasses and places them on top of her own.

She once stayed up into the small hours, after a long day at work looking after other people, sewing sequins on by hand to finish the satin and tulle tutu and matching wand she had made me to perform as a fairy in my first school play. I can see her wetting the thread and picking up the shiny discs one by one. Putting on the costume was one of the most thrilling moments of my life. 'Fairies are beside you,' I sang, to her delight. I wish, I wish they were now.

We set off, her in front thudding carefully down on to each step, counting, one, two, three, four into the darkened hall, turning carefully to leer at me twice to make sure I am still there.

At the bottom I hold my breath. Did I double lock the door? If not, it's an amateur's mistake. She waits a moment, nose almost to the wood, to see if I will open it. I hold my eyes down. She starts fumbling with the knob, throwing me a look to see what I will do. The chain is on but she opens it just enough to peer into the blackness and closes it again.

She helped me through my first heartbreak when I tumbled through this same door having been well and truly chucked by my very first boyfriend. 'Don't forget, it's not you that's wrong,' she told me.

'Come on missis,' she says and I don't like the fact she has dropped my name.

'Let's go this way,' I say, flicking the button up on the double lock out of her sight.

And so we turn to start the first of endless circuits of the downstairs rooms. From now on until tablet time, the night will become a specialised form of game, a type of indoor Parkour mixed with I Spy to remove anything breakable before her little eye settles on it.

Before I knew better, I would spend precious energy explaining that this was her home and using clues and pointers in each room to prove it. There is precious little left now, the photos torn down long ago, the ornaments smashed or hidden.

She can no longer walk far alone and it is too late for her to learn how to use the metal stroller. Earlier attempts ended with her sitting on the sofa tangled up inside it, staring in the direction of the telly from inside her strange metal cage. So off we set holding hands, with me facing her, and walking backwards, Ginger to Fred. She needs me but she doesn't want to. As soon as she passes a chair or the dining table she lets go of my hands and makes her own way like a baby learning to walk. I am waiting to catch her when she runs out of table. I know she won't attack me while I am enabling her to move. That's the painful unspoken deal.

In the middle of each circuit, we reach the sofa and sit and sigh as if taking our ease at a bus stop. Hardly has her bottom met the velvet than she looks at me and says, 'Come on,' companionably but firmly, and we rise and shuffle off again. We turn 15, 20 times but she never reaches the place she is looking for.

'Mum, I'm very tired,' I say finally, pantomiming a yawn. 'What if we have a cuppa and go back to those warm beds.'

'I'm very tired,' she says but I imagine I see a shadow of the old mother's concern for me cross her face.

"We could always go back to bed?" I insist.

'I haven't got a bed," she says. "I have to sleep on the floor. If my poor mother only knew I have to sleep on the floor..."

'I could make you up a bed if you like,' I say.

'If you like,' she says.

She has learned to answer like this. All-purpose phrases that are never wrong. 'You said it, not me,' is another, jauntier, favourite.

"I've got that thing," she says. 'You know.'

'Yes,' I say naming it.

'That's it!' she shouts like a game show panellist, looking at me suspiciously. 'I haven't got a house. Look at this place. It's so gloomy.'

'What about a cup of tea?' I say.

She stopped actually drinking the tea a while ago but she likes the ritual of being asked. Tea has been a good and constant friend to her all her life. It has almost never let her down except sometimes in other people's houses where they were heathen enough to use sterilised milk.

We set off again but the mood has changed. She is grinding her teeth, her eyes narrowed.

'Oh you would, wouldn't you,' she says, dropping my hands at the table, scene of tipsy Christmas dinners with paper hats, impromptu parties, crossword puzzling together, working my way through her bills.

I am at one end, she at the other, like warring politicians. She starts to turn, edging towards me purposefully. I move the other way. I've seen this in a Charlie Chaplin movie.

'You sidle bitch,' she says, her face contorted like an evil elf. Her accent has dipped from soft to street Dublin.

'What's a sidle bitch?' I ask.

Sometimes to make the night go quicker, I try to have a bleak sort of fun or at least keep an inch of intellectual distance from the pain.

'You are,' she says triumphantly.

Finally, she knows the exact answer to a question without even a clue.

'And if I get hold of you....'

She growls quietly and I squint at the clock, placed high up on the wall. Why is it that the hands don't move? She sets off the other way and so do I. I wonder, not for the first time, how far she would go. I can only hope some motherly instinct, the smell of her second born child maybe, might stop her. My mother is tiny but her last strength seems to have concentrated itself in her hands. I can no longer cut her nails, so to be held in her grasp is to suffer.

She stops and begins to tap and stroke the table, as if sorting things.

'How is your mother keeping?' she asks.

I have learned to hitch myself to her flighty mind quite efficiently. No course correcting. I have read the literature. If she mentions elephants, I segue to elephants. What they don't tell you is it doesn't always work. Sometimes when I am congratulating myself on my mental

agility, the old mother peeks out and wrong foots me, accusing me of outlandishness.

"You're my mother," I say, too tired now to think of a cleverer answer.

"I know that," she says. "I mean how is the other girl?"

People often come in two versions for her now.

"She's fine," I say. "A bit tired."

'And what about the small one?' (my younger sister).

'She's fine too,' I say.

'That makes a change,' she says looking at me deadpan.

'I know,' I say too quickly, relishing the flash of the old familiarity, our complicity in relation to my sister.

'I know, I know,' she says, singsong and hateful. 'I'm tired and I'm so, so cold.'

'Would you like a hug and we can go and sit by the fire,' I say.

She loves affection but has never been comfortable with being touched, the result of all the unkind touching she has suffered.

'Well, I suppose so,' she says.

Sometimes she feels the music of what is happening between us rather than understanding the words. One night, as we made yet another gloomy circuit of the hallway, she took my head in both her hands and looked into my eyes saying: 'That poor girl, she's in mourning.'

And I am. Watching this awful unwinnable last fight to be herself cuts me to the heart.

We are at the kitchen and she peers in with little interest. I can see the light of someone's telly flickering opposite. She taught me how to make macaroni cheese in there. She loved to stand at the sink

watching the customers arrive all aflap for the bird table. A plane's engine would send her rushing outside, tea-towel in hand.

I dip in and lay out a small piece of toast with honey and a chocolate. In my pocket I have a pill I am hoping to slip past her, something to quell the anxiety long enough for us to get a few hours' sleep. It's not that easy to do. I have found spitty remains down the side of the sofa and under the table.

Sometimes, when she will take one, she opens her mouth obediently afterwards to prove to me that it has gone, and I cannot bear it. I would rather she hit me. It doesn't matter that she used to wipe my arse once. I don't want to wipe hers any more than she wants me to. We are going too far.

'There's chocolate,' I say. 'Toast with honey. Cake. Whisky.'

'Oh yes!' she says reaching for my hands to start another circuit.

It's a short list to her heart and I won't need to produce all those actual things. She has famine genes, the type that necessitate a biscuit or tube of mints in her handbag at all times. What I will do is place one dosed chocolate on a plate half-way round her circuit, somewhere where she might think she has found a secret stash.

'This is not my home,' she says, anxiety mounting. 'I can't stay here.'

'Let's go after we've eaten,' I say.

To myself I call her King O'Leary. Why did I never see that Lear had dementia? I start to soften a little towards Regan and Goneril. The difference is we have no need to diminish her retinue. There is only us left, her children, and we can't seem to agree on what is best to do. We have no castles to ride furiously between. Just this - the family house - stripped bare.

I see her take the chocolate and we finish the final lap. Daylight is coming. She sits on the sofa, her head nodding forward. She tries to rise but cannot. I put my arm around her and find the TV remote to



watch something mindless and soundless. I don't mind the couple who can't decide which beautiful sunny house in Spain to spend their money on, but the soft-edged purple-haired old people whirring up and down their stairs or chuckling over pensions in their cardigans with tea and biscuits, make me want to bite my knuckles.

I hold her hand while she sleeps, kissing her hot forehead now and then. She wakes abruptly.

"I want to die," she shouts.

'Shall we have a cup of tea first?' I say.

She drifts off again but continues to murmur.

'What if we all gathered round?' she asks.

It's the old Irish notion of the circle. The family circle. Impregnable. Only it isn't. Nothing can keep this out. It is inside and energised and it will eat us all up.

'Good idea,' I whisper.

'I want to go,' she says, using my real name for the first time, her voice level.

## Highly Commended

### **A Woman in Her Bed**

JP Garland

The canvas was large, and the painting was done horizontally. It was not a portrait of the kind for which Clara Bowman was known. Instead, it was from across a bedroom. The bed was large and though it was clear that two people had been in it, only one remained. A woman. She slept, and a sheet covered the lower portion of her naked body. She was on her right side with her head to the left. Her right hand was beneath her head, her brown, even black, hair dangling over the frame. Her left arm crossed her stomach, beneath her breasts.

The breasts themselves—a mother's teats—were exposed and sagged slightly down, the aureoles slightly darker than the pale skin surrounding them. A lady's skin. To the left was a table on which there were two wine glasses, one half full, the other half empty, and an empty bottle lay on its side against one leg of the table.

The sheets themselves were scattered except insofar as she pulled one partially over herself, and a blanket lay in a pile, part of it visible over the frame at the bed's foot. Atop that was a collapsed day dress in a steamy maroon and bits of a woman's undergarments.

The eyes of the lover—it was clear she lay in post-coital bliss—were closed but her mouth was slightly open and could even be said to be smiling. The viewer embarrassingly was forced to consider what she was dreaming and whether it was of the one who was no longer with her.

The room was dark as if it were a cloudy late afternoon, but light enough came through the slot in the curtains to place parts of the boudoir in a haze. A vague image of a formal portrait of a man and a

woman was barely visible in the upper left portion of the canvas against a light blue wall.

The woman's identity was unclear and it was possible, even likely, that were she recognized she would be banished from society. But it was clear that the model was not Felicity Wilson. Still, when it was done, Felicity Wilson and Clara Bowman agreed that wonderful as the work was, it was best not displayed in London for there were surely some who would recognize Diana Adams.

Her husband, Sir John Adams, was convinced that Diana was having an affair in retaliation for the publicity he managed to obtain from the incident with Clara (and Felicity). In fact, each afternoon she was away from her house "visiting" was spent in Felicity's bedroom modelling for Clara. It was at Diana's insistence. Clara intended to paint Felicity, and the two were planning the details when Diana banged on Mrs. Wilson's door a few days after *The Times* piece.

In all of what happened, Felicity felt the worst for Diana. She, Diana, had gone to the exhibit the morning she later appeared at her sister-in-law's, though Clara did not recognize her. Diana wanted to see what all the bother was about. She saw the artist sitting off to one side with a pad in her lap, smiling and answering questions and nodding at compliments she received. She seemed a rather plain, thin woman who paled in comparison to the beauty of her portraits, especially of Elizabeth and Róisín.

Why was her husband so horrible to this American? She remembered that she was the one he mocked in New York. She wished to speak to Felicity about it, and so after a light lunch to help her get calm, Diana knocked on the Wilsons' door, having no idea that Clara would be in the sitting room preparing to paint Felicity, and Clara and Diana were taken aback when they set eyes on each other not three hours later.

It was Felicity's idea to have Diana model instead. "Sweet revenge," she called it. They arranged the bedroom. Diana was at first hesitant and insisted on wearing a nightgown while Clara painted her in the bed, sleeping like a cherub. Clara felt guilty about it, but she knew such a painting would be a failure. Her goal was to paint a woman in

the flush of being satisfied by a lover and several days after beginning, she decided to break her rule and allowed Diana to see the progress of the work.

Clara began with the bed and the bedclothes. She allowed Diana to look at the work at the end of each session. Diana enjoyed art, but never before saw the process, and it fascinated her. She was in the bed with the sheets over her. Clara showed how even concealed one could appreciate the curves of a woman's lower body, the sensuousness of the hips flaring down to the feet.

While they stood side by side looking, Clara remained silent, almost feeling Diana's emotions. Finally, the Englishwoman asked whether Clara thought she could perhaps be...more exposed. A scarf, perhaps, draped across her breasts.

"Otherwise, it might as well be a woman sleeping after a tiring morning at Harrod's."

"I think... Yes, I think that might prove better. Thank you, Diana. We will see tomorrow."

The next afternoon, Clara asked that Felicity absent herself, fearing Diana might lose her nerve with her friend in the room, so Felicity herself went to Harrod's. Clara placed a screen in the corner so Diana could disrobe and when she came from behind it, wearing undergarments from her waist down, her arms covered her breasts. Clara simply asked her to resume her pose in the bed. When there, she pulled the sheet down to just below Diana's navel.

Diana, having come so far, lay looking at Clara. Feeling the artist's intimate gaze, she moved her arms to expose herself, displaying a smile her husband would never have recognized on her lips and in her eyes and inviting Mrs. Nathan to reveal her.

Before this session, Clara avoided painting the sheet that would cover Diana's torso because she hoped she would be allowed to paint it without the sheet and when she was given permission to do that, she quickly framed the woman.

At the end of the session, Diana, now in a robe, stood beside Clara. She caught her breath after a moment, and Clara clasped her hand but said nothing.

A *Woman in Her Bed* was completed several days before Clara was to leave London to return to her life in New York. Much as she enjoyed her stay, Clara was relieved to be heading home. There was a final dinner with the artists whose works appeared in the exhibition put on by the Royal Academy. It was held in the great hall in the back of the gallery the night before they and most of their works were packed off for America.

In the morning, Felicity, Diana, the baroness, and the baroness's three granddaughters saw Clara off at the Waterloo Bridge Station on the south bank of the Thames. The three adults saw *A Woman in Her Bed*, and Diana was proud of it and her courage in sitting—or lying—for it. Neither Felicity nor the baroness was the least bit scandalized by the nude form of the mother-of-three, and they were proud of Diana, too. Clara agreed that she would not display it in New York without Diana's permission, but Diana had come far and understood how alive she was made by Clara so the artist knew permission would be forthcoming. For the time, though, she agreed to limit its viewing to those who in Clara's opinion would appreciate it.

As they exchanged final goodbyes on the train platform, Felicity was the last to hug her dearest American friend. She pulled away, but her hand ran across Clara's belly before she was completely away, and Clara was glad her secret was out.

*October 14, 1878*

*Dear Baroness Never to Be,*

*I must first tell you that the Woman is the toast of New York. No one I think knows she is you, but I assure you that many, many—men and women—wish to know her.*

*It was the star of my recent exhibition, far more attractive than the icicle-laden (and appropriately titled) Blizzard of some dreary landscape over the Hudson River.*

*I will quote from one critic: "One wonders when, or if, the lover will return, but to the 'Woman' it does not matter as she is clearly in the glow of what it is like to be satiated. Her nipples it is clear have been suckled on many times, but this has not diminished her capacity for the physical connection to another. She will soon rise and perhaps finish her glass of claret before doing her toilet and dressing for the evening, knowing that she will carry the afternoon's passion with her as she dines and dances and makes small talk with the Dukes and Duchesses who have long since forgotten what it is to be alive."*

*Yes, she is you, and I promise you that she is the you I saw those many days in dear Mrs. Wilson's bedroom. I am told that you and your dear children are free of the daily burden of someone we have both known. I hope that you find it in you to find the fulfilment that I saw in you.*

*With all my love,*

*Your Dear American Friend,*

*(Mrs.) ~~Joseph Nathan~~ Clara*

And *A Woman in Her Bed* proved spectacularly popular, enough to lead to some picketing outside the gallery and murmurings about a violation of the Comstock Act in many a conservative home.

To Clara, the painting was unique. She did not fancy becoming a boudoir artist, popular as some European masters were in doing such work. She connected with Diana. It was only the intimacy that the two felt for one another before her first brushstroke and, more, in that moment when Diana smiled and opened herself and her body to the woman who was painting her that allowed Clara to portray her as she did, and with the model's involvement in the work each day she sat—or more accurately lay down—for Clara.

## Gangplank to a European Season

Daniel Rabuzzi

“Gravity saved my life,” he said as he smoothed the bed sheets with hands that had felt much mowing. He had told me he liked the home even though the cooking was not as good as what his Mary used to fix. Also, that fellow down the hall was a Liverpool fan, which was an irritation, but one a man could live with. Above all, he liked the bed sheets.

“We would never have believed it,” he had said once, shaking his head like a horse hanging over a stable door. “As children, my brothers and me would share a blanket, and be grateful for it. When it became terrible cold, we threw old flour sacks on top, and we burrowed underneath like foxes.”

He had laughed then, grinding and yarking the way a pheasant does. The nurses could hear him in the next room. We had not been talking about gravity or any other law of physics, though we might have been since, as a man who had spent a lifetime swinging a scythe and wielding a sickle, he knew a great deal about those subjects. So, I asked him what he meant.

“I fell and broke my leg and hurt my shoulder,” he replied. He looked at me the way he often did, a look mixed of wonder, pity, and amusement. He never understood how it was that I—and all my generation—could not distinguish the voice of one cricket from another or remove a stone from a horse’s hoof or (most incomprehensible of all) remember what phase the moon was in. I had, at least, learned from him the patience of a good inquirer.

“In the Great War, that’s when I fell,” he said, looking at his hands as they carried the bedclothes. “That’s what saved my life.”

Outside was wind and rain, a typical East Anglian Saturday afternoon. Woven into the drumming of rain on the windows was the sound of the televised match from a room down the hall: Liverpool versus

Everton, their local derby on the far-away Mersey. But he was much further away than that.

“I wish Andy and George had fallen like me,” he said. “Not the way they did.”

A nurse arrived with tea for us both. He brummed as she poured the tea for him. She smiled and spoke a kindness as she stirred in two lumps of sugar. “Just like Mary,” he said when the nurse left. He hands only shook a little as he held the cup to his lips. For a while we enjoyed our tea, listening to the wind outside, pretending to ignore the sound of the announcer for the Liverpool match.

“September 1915,” he said, as he finished his tea. “That’s when Jerry bombed us. Right here in Norfolk, I mean.” He leaned towards the window and I was sure he could hear the chuffing of the zeppelins above the wind chafing the panes.

“Was the eighth of September, in fact,” he said. “Funny I should remember that, who can’t remember what he ate for dinner last night!” He told me about the zeppelin raid that evening on Dereham.

“Bombed both important places in town: the church and the pub.” He laughed hard at that, crumpling the sheets in his mottled hands.

Liverpool must have scored because screeches erupted from the room down the hall. For a few moments all we could hear were cries to the gods of football.

“Well, I must tell you, that bombing made us all want to sign up to fight the Hun, only I was still too young, even for Lord Kitchener to want me in his New Army. But Andy and George were older. They qualified, indeed they did.”

The man in the next bed, who had only arrived last week, woke up and looked at us with startled, rabbit eyes. I wondered if I would see him on my next visit.



“Andy was different,” said my grandfather. “Would look at the sky and wonder if he might get to fly in an aeroplane one day. We used to have him on about that. Once I remember he walked all the way into Norwich, here in the city, on his one day free just to hear a lecturer from London talk about something or other. Something scientific, I think it might have been. But he was always very kind to me, read me stories, sometimes made stories up just for me, in the winter dark when I was little. We didn’t have the telly in those days, you know, not even the radio.”

Grandfather’s hands walked over the furrows of his bedcover like draftsmen leading horses. His fingernails were sand-colored.

“George was more of a roisterer, a bit of a daredevil,” my grandfather continued. “Could outrun any man or boy in the county, won a prize at the fair. Played pranks all the time. Hid one of the farmer’s cows once, sneaked it out of the barn in the evening and put it among the neighbor’s herd, just for a lark. Somehow he never got in trouble for his foolishness, everybody just laughed when he got caught. Used to make a face like this...”

Grandfather rolled his eyes and mugged in a vaguely Chaplinesque way. He laughed his pheasant laugh again, then said nothing for a while, just rustled the sheets, which made his empty teacup clink. When he spoke again it was about his brothers training in the winter of 1915-1916.

“Drilled and square-bashed in Colchester before shipping out to France in the spring of 1916. Part of the build-up for the Big Push, you see.”

I did see: stained images of impossibly cheerful men drinking Bovril from tin cups over fires somewhere just behind the trenches near “Wipers” or “Passion Dale” in Flanders. “Plucky” was the word always used to describe them in the official dispatches of the time and in the regimental histories that followed. We had grown up with those images, ghosts we honored but did not want to believe in. On Remembrance Day we tried to placate the ghosts by wearing red paper poppies on our lapels and reading out the names of the fallen

from the memorials. But the dead never told us if they were appeased, they just kept grinning at us from those scratchy old photographs, perpetually marching through ruined French towns on their way to the front.

“Norfolks and my brothers were in the thick of it then,” grandfather said. “The biggest one of all: the Somme in 1916. You’ve heard of that? If you haven’t, I should like to have a word with your teachers.”

I nodded. The man in the next bed had fallen back to sleep. His mouth made slurpy sounds.

“Good. The Norfolks were the Eighth Battalion. I know. I remember. My brothers George and Andy were in it. July, 1916. Wheeeeet, the whistle blew and over the top they went.” His whistle-sound was so loud that the nurse poked her head around from her station to see what the matter might be. I waved at her and she waved back before she disappeared again. The man in the next bed woke up for a moment, then fell asleep again. I looked at Grandfather, who looked at me but was with his brothers on the Somme.

“Andy could write a decent hand, so we got one letter. They had survived the first week. Then the Norfolks attacked Trones Wood... have you heard of that, then?”

I had not and shook my head. Grandfather let out a rasping sigh. The teacup clinked on the tray beside him. I steadied it.

“For a week that July Trones Wood was a slaughter but in the end the British took it. A great victory.” Liverpool must have scored again or maybe it was Everton, but neither of us paid any heed. My grandfather gripped the sheets so hard that they came untucked from the bottom. I made a note to myself to tuck them back in or to ask the nurse to help us.

“Only George and Andy did not come out of that wood. Machine gun or grenade or artillery shell, no one could say, only that they were KIA. We got a telegram, that’s all. Bodies never found. Their names

are on the memorial in that place I can never pronounce, over there in Belgium.”

Wind outside, wind in our heads. Grandfather paused for a long time. “I remember that Andy disagreed with our mother about going to church. She was very cross with him, about his saying that he could learn as much from books as from the parson.”

Grandfather looked at the sleeping fellow in the next bed but he spoke to me. “George caught a hedgehog once, gave it to me for a pet, which it would not be since it only came out at night and peed on the floor and once on my father’s shoes, so we had to let it go. But that wasn’t the point, was it? No, George had brought a pet for me, that was the point.”

I thought of the great-uncles I had never known and the cousins my father had never had. My father is a quiet man, very cautious in all his doings. Grandfather had married late, what with the depression that had harried Norfolk especially hard, so my father was too young to serve in the second war. The Luftwaffe had dropped a few bombs on East Anglia but that was mostly by accident on their way to destroying London’s East End. Still, many East Anglian’s had not come back from the second war either. My father is a cautious man.

“After that, our mother, being your great-grandmother as you must understand, would not allow me to volunteer the way George and Andy had done. I was her only remaining child. Father said the same. But after the Somme we had no choice anymore in the matter: they brought in the conscription. They knew my age and I was taken, along with every other eighteen-year-old in the kingdom I suppose. Winter of 1917-1918, when we thought the war might last forever. Jerry made his final push that spring, almost reached Paris. Everyone was frantic, so they rushed us through training and shipped us off.”

I tried to imagine my grandfather as a boy. His laugh must have been audible in the next county, and his hands must have been able to...well, to do almost anything. Until just a few years ago, he could still beat men half his age arm-wrestling at the pub.

Grandfather looked straight at me and said, “Only I wasn’t shipped off, was I? Because gravity saved me. Walking up the gangplank to the troopship at Dover, with our packs weighing as much as we did, and that narrow strip of wood swaying in the wind, and somebody behind me stumbles just before we reach the door. He pushed me and I lost my balance and fell thirty feet or more, right onto a rock.”

The man in the next bed made a whiny sound in his sleep. Down the hall came the rushing words of the announcer as Liverpool’s striker stormed the goal. I heard gulls and the cries of a lieutenant, saw a man unmoving on a beach.

“Only a broken leg, after all, but made me unfit until mended. That was in late June of 1918. Oh, they would send me back only the war ended before I was ready. I was due to go the first week of November, orders and everything, and then the armistice came.”

I thanked someone’s loss of balance and the vagaries of a skinny plank of wood. I praised the laws of physics that caused such things. I even thanked the gulls wheeling over Dover that day, perhaps they had called down some special providence on my grandfather and thus on me.

“Funny thing,” he started. He relaxed his grip on the sheets. “Funny thing is, the Eighth Battalion, all my mates that were shipping with me, fought again at Trones Wood. They took it back from the Germans in August 1918. I might have died there too. Or not. But I would have been right where George and Andy were, when they fell.”

Surely Liverpool had scored again. The goal must have been a magnificence. The television viewers sounded like geese. I assumed I would see the replay on the highlights of the week later that evening. We can see everything in replay, except what really matters.

Grandfather said in the softest voice I had ever heard him use, “So I came home to Norfolk, back to work for the farmers round Dereham. That you know. Married your grandmother. I don’t think I ever told your father this, but you should know that your grandmother fancied my brother Andy before me. I think she liked the way Andy stood up to my mother, about going to church and other things. I always

thought Mary, your grandmother you understand, she might have married me for...well, who is to say, and what does it matter now?" I had loved her, as all children love their grandmothers, but had never really known her. I could remember her apron and her puddings at Christmas and the cookbook she helped assemble for the Women's Institute, but not much else. She had died five years earlier.

The rain continued to fall on the windows. The football match droned on. The nurse's shoes squeaked as she came to collect the teacups. Grandfather was lost in 1918, and I had a long drive back to London in front of me.

Grandfather died six weeks later, before my next visit. Pneumonia. My father and I stopped at the home after the funeral to pick up grandfather's packet of belongings. The nurse told me how sorry she was as she handed us a little cardboard box containing his effects.

On the way out we passed the Liverpool fan, who was distraught because his team was failing all expectations by doing badly in the league standings. Liverpool was not among the top three teams that spring of 1981, despite being the champions four of the five previous years. They would, however, salvage their season by winning the European Championship that May.

When we opened my grandfather's box, my father and I found at the bottom a brittle photograph of two young men in uniform. One had a moustache, both looked earnestly at the camera with their arms folded across their chests. The photograph is all that remains of their European season.

# The Rescue Dog

David Butler

13a Drummond Close had an abandoned air, as though some daemon of neglect had breathed over it and moved on. Even in the early April sun the house remained colder than its neighbours. Sicklier. The brickwork had a lichen-green pallor that extended over the windowpanes. So, too, over the Nissan that had been decaying on its driveway for two years now. ‘Hello?’ she called. She had to jimmy the key in the lock, turn it through a number of revolutions before the mechanism gripped and the door juddered open.

‘Anybody home?’ The air was hangover stale, sharpened with an acidity that made Muireann think of solitarily maleness. A tang that recalled visits to the zoo. Not for the first time, there was a hint of a more disturbing odour, a corrupt stench you’d maybe catch off old cardboard laid up under bridges. She hesitated to pull the hall-door shut behind her. ‘Anybody in?’ In answer, the cascade of a toilet erupted to the far end of the corridor. ‘Hoi, d’you never think to crack open a window in here?’ she called, veering into the kitchen and jerking aside the net curtain, though the liver-spotted window refused to budge. He appeared in the doorway behind her, an unshaven, broad-shouldered man with the beginnings of a belly. He had on a vest and tracksuit pants, and his hair was wet, as though he’d just dunked it in a basin.

‘That’s some collection of bottles you have in your recycle bin, Frank.’

He took a while before answering, as though he wasn’t sure what tone to select. ‘Rough night last night.’

‘Ha! I almost believe you.’ She’d tugged open the back door, a draft of cooler air entering with the daylight. ‘Seriously, how many are you putting away these days? And don’t give me Grandad’s oul guff about wine being a great man for the cholesterol.’

‘The trick is to avoid opening the second bottle.’

‘Yeah?’

He’d hoisted up his features, a mask to suggest levity. ‘I account it a small victory not to have the first tippie before the six o’clock news.’

‘Seriously. How many a week?’

‘What is this, an inquisition? Did my loving sister send you over to spy on me?’

‘As if!’ She looked hard at him. ‘You’ll do yourself serious damage. Multiple organ failure, yeah? It’s no joke, Frank.’ Because that was the odour she’d caught, unmistakable now he’d exited the bathroom. ‘Look how Grandad wound up.’

‘I daresay the old man had his demons to fight.’

‘I’ve always hated that expression. It glamourizes the whole thing. Like being a dipso is meant to be heroic or something.’

‘A dipso? Jesus, I haven’t heard that expression in donkey’s.’

Now she was rooting in the fridge. Checking its alcohol content, he had no doubt. She lifted out a packet of mince more brown than red, made a show of inspecting the Reduced to Clear label. ‘Really?’ she inquired. ‘Is it any wonder Aunty Joyce left you?’

‘That’s unkind. Also inaccurate. I’d never dare buy Reduced to Clear back in Joyce’s day.’

‘You did so! She told me. She said you’d ease off the labels. She always knew because the bar-code would be faded and torn.’

‘That is a lie!’ he declaimed theatrically.

She shut the fridge. ‘You do remember what’s happening today?’

‘Today?’ He stretched one arm up against the lintel, rubbed lazily at an armpit. ‘Sure maybe you’ll remind me.’

‘Go on with you now, you know well what today is.’

He watched her avoid seeing the calamity of pots and plates in the sink. Detaching himself from the doorframe, he made a pantomime of searching around the room, behind the armchair, under a cushion, beneath the table upon whose faded oilcloth lay a screwdriver, a radio and the entrails of a plug. ‘Where is it, so?’

‘Beena’s bringing him along later. I said I’d throw an eye over the place, make sure there’s nothing he might choke on. He’s called Blue, by the way.’

‘What make of dog is he, anyhow?’ He’d lifted the screwdriver and plug, put on unlikely glasses. ‘Can I’ve three guesses?’

She shrugged, prepared to be amused.

‘How big did you say?’

‘Small. Size of, I dunno, ...a pillow?’

‘A pillow.’

She’d begun to potter across the linoleum floor with dustpan and brush. ‘Or... a grab-bag.’

‘My God, your comparisons! And you an English teacher.’ He laid down the items, frowned, tucked one hand under either armpit. ‘He’s one of those Presbyterian tykes with the Old Testament eyebrows, what’s this they’re called?’

‘A schnauzer?’ She hoisted her brows dismissively, a real teacher’s trick that. ‘I’ll help you out. Blue’s not any type of terrier.’

‘Not a terrier. Oh Jesus. A poodle.’

‘You’re such a fecking...’ She clattered the dustpan into a corner. ‘No.’

‘Not a poodle.’ He raised his arms in token surrender. ‘You got me, kid. Go on, what?’



‘We don’t know for sure. Bulldog cross?’

‘Cross meaning vicious, is it?’

‘Yeah right! He’s four months old, like.’

‘Neutered?’

‘Intact.’

‘House-trained?’

‘-ish,’ she hovered a hand equivocally. ‘You might keep an odd newspaper handy.’

‘A bed-wetter, and muscle-bound as a bouncer. And with a puss on him like one of them bunched up soft-leather grab-bags your Hindi pal is so fond of.’

Muireann stood rigid, allowed the humour evaporate. ‘She has a name you know.’

He found again the screwdriver, busied himself with the plug. ‘I daresay she does.’

‘Beena.’

‘Well, it’s Beena pleasure...’

‘Ha, ha!’ Avoiding the clutter, she filled the kettle from a stuttering tap. ‘What do you have against her? I’ve never known.’

‘Against her?’ He peered above his bifocals, waited. She noticed the tremble in his fingers was back. ‘I have nothing against her,’ he said. ‘She scares me, is all.’

‘She scares you.’

‘It’s the hair. Those dreads, man. The way she wears them half bunched up, as if some giant tarantula had nested on her head. You know how I am with spiders.’

She busied herself with detergent and bucket while the kettle rattled voluminously to the boil. ‘I suppose only West Indians are allowed to have dreads, yeah?’

‘Hey, you’re the generation is meant to be “woke”, Muireann ní Bhriain. I’m a relic from the Dark Ages, remember?’

‘I never said that.’ She’d begun to shove the mop in energetic swipes over the surface.

‘Sure you did. Christmas?’

‘You weren’t there at Christmas.’

‘Your birthday, then.’

‘You haven’t been anywhere next or near Mam’s in well over a year. Not since Joyce...’

‘Yeah. Least said. My, doesn’t time fly?’ The mutinously shaking fingers abandoned the task of wiring. ‘What’s the deal, remind me. A week’s babysitting, was it?’

‘Ten days. Two weekends, remember? We arrive back on the twentieth.’

‘Hitler’s birthday.’

‘And someone else’s. The half century, isn’t it, Frank?’

‘Don’t remind me, Jesus. Eyesight getting longer, temper getting shorter.’

‘Mam can’t take him on account of the cats.’

‘Peculiar time to adopt a dog, just when you guys knew you were going away, or no?’

She leaned on the mop. ‘You’re not going to back out on me, Frank?’

‘No, no. Morituri te salutant.’

A first exchange of smirks was interrupted by a peremptory thump at the front door.

‘That’ll be Beena, now.’

A cascade followed, as if a hundred tiny ball-bearings had spilled and scattered. The bulldog pup that scampered into the kitchen was everything he’d imagined. Tubular. Muscular. An asthmatic, scrunched up muzzle flanked by Churchillian jowls. Its coat was so soft it might’ve been made of suede, and be-damned if it didn’t have a blue hue to it.

What disconcerted were the human eyes. An old man’s eyes.

While Beena – dungarees, nose-stud – hefted two shopping bags and a dog-harness onto the counter, unsettling the sink’s clutter, Frank scooped the pup up onto the table. ‘Give the floor a chance to dry off,’ he said vaguely. The pup took a single side-swipe from a bowl of water Muireann set beside it, then stood rigid as a statue, its old man’s eyes never for a second leaving Frank’s.

He, equally aware of Beena’s ironic scrutiny, hunkered down. ‘You are one ugly motherfucker, you know that?’ he cooed, scratching behind the undersized ears. A moment later, a response rose from the table’s oilcloth. It took the form of a snare-drum rattle that sent flippant blobs of amber wobbling like mercury across the plastic, dribbling over the precipice and piddling to the floor.

‘That’s telling you, Frank,’ said Beena.

Once they’d left, any frivolity caved in. He’d watched from the gate Muireann’s hatchback diminish until it was swallowed by the T-junction. At once the afternoon yawned open. The aching, interrogative silence of it. And the one after, and the one after that, and the whole stretch of featureless time till his niece returned, the ten last dismal days of his forties. When he held it flat above the gate, his hand was trembling like an aspen leaf. Old anxiety began to fill his

gut with static. The fear. The giddiness. Had he been able, he'd have run after the car, called out after her, 'I can't, Muireann! I can't fucking manage.'

Returning into the interior, damp now with detergent, it was almost a surprise to find the dog hadn't moved. It stood erect on the kitchen table, the plug-less radio mute beside it. 'You really are one ugly mother,' Frank repeated, to make a breach in the silence. He extracted from one of the shopping bags a twin-pack of kitchen-roll, bandaged a few sheets about his hand. He then wiped down the oilcloth, making no allowance for the pup whose knowing eyes followed the movements even as the paws were made to prance.

He pulled off the makeshift glove, dropped it to the floor and moved it with his foot over the yellow splashes. He then pincer-ed it up, marched to the bathroom, flicked it into the toilet and, after working the handle like a defective pump, finally discharged it.

Back in the kitchen, he considered what to do next. The wash-up he'd save for later. The mincemeat and rice would keep, too. 'Ok,' he sighed. 'Ok.' In one movement he opened a press, lifted a wine bottle, weighed it with a toss, needlessly checked the label – they'd been identical since the Lidl sale last January – set it upright on the counter and twisted the cap. He'd lied to his niece. It wasn't the six o'clock news he accounted a small victory, it was the one o'clock. Today, he'd beaten it by forty-five minutes.

He'd also lied when he'd said the trick was to avoid opening a second bottle. It was the third bottle was the problem. But that was a problem for later.

He poured a mug, the white enamel blackening the wine. But he didn't down it at once. Instead, from the other shopping bag he drew out an open bag of kibbles. 'A quarter cup in the morning, a half in the evening. Wasn't that it, buddy?' The eyes watched him. 'Sure a handful never hurt anyone, huh?' He rattled a few in a breakfast bowl, set it down in front of the bulldog. Toad-like, it passed a tongue twice over its nose. But it didn't so much as sniff the offering. Frank raised

the mug, toasted the visitor, tossed off half the contents. 'Suit yourself,' he wheezed as the burn travelled down the raw gullet and into his gut. Steadily worse each day, as though his innards were being corroded. He really should make a determined effort to get some soakage in in advance. But the last time he'd checked the breadbin, the sliced pan was freckled with Verdigris.

Of one thing Muireann was right, he was slowly killing himself. Of that there could no longer be a doubt. Some mornings, he'd caught the same fetid waft from his urine that he knew from his old man's decline. But here was the thing. He'd been on such a continuous binge now, months on end it had lasted, that any short hiatus risked anxiety, the afternoon jitters, the unfathomable anguish that came from nowhere, heavy as swamp water. The anti-depressants were no bloody use against that. It gave him the jitters just to think about it.

At least he avoided spirits, most nights.

He was slowly killing his bank account, too. At this rate, he'd be out of the house by the next birthday following. After Joyce had left, he'd considered taking a lodger into the back room, to stem the haemorrhage. What stopped him wasn't so much the thought of sharing the bathroom and kitchen. Not even TV rights. The company itself mightn't have been such a bad thing. What he'd balked at was the idea of having a stranger's scrutiny turned on him, seeing how every day was the same as the next, every night, Friday and Saturday, spent on the sofa. Fuck that.

He'd fallen out of the habit of talking. Aside from niece and sister, there was no-one. How had he let that happen? How had he allowed the slow disintegration of a marriage swallow up all his energy? Dole office once a month, post office every Wednesday, twice a week to the supermarket. These were the only features on the map of his solitude. It was a small mercy Muireann had always liked him; looked in on him once in a way. Less often, now she'd hooked up with your one with the dreads and dungarees. At the sound of her car on the drive, he'd hoist his old, jaunty humour like a tattered flag. Let on he

was doing ok. And for the couple of hours she'd sit in with him, maybe he was.

Reaching for the bottle, his hand brushed off something unexpected. The harness clattered to the floor. It took him a moment to recognise it. 'Come on,' he called, gruffly. 'We'll go out for a breath of air.'

April twentieth was a day of relentless drizzle. At least it meant they were home when Muireann finally called. For some reason, he'd expected her in the morning.

Beena was with her. She brooded at the threshold of the kitchen as though fearing contagion. Which was ironic, Frank had made a real effort to tidy the house. Blue, meanwhile, was bouncing on hind-legs and hugging Muireann's calf tight as any marsupial, the tail-stump rapid as a wiper up full. 'How's my fella, huh? How's my little maneen?' she fussed, in that baby-talk that all the women seemed to adopt in the pup's presence.

'Three DVDs he demolished. One slipper. I'll send the bill. I'll tell you another thing,' Frank went on, 'he's a bit of a scrapper, so he is. So that first day I took him on up to Corkagh Park, this one with a red setter and a big hairdo comes over. Orthodontic grin. American, of course. "Look at you! Aren't you cute?" Cute! "What is he," she goes, "Staffy?"

'I said he could be a bloody Pitbull for all I knew, all I could say with any certainty was he's a rescue dog, and aren't the most of them fellas mongrels? Our pal there is standing stock still, not at all sure what to make of the attentions the setter is giving him. Sniffing here. Pawing there. But Muireann, you want to have seen the look of comical concern when the setter finally decides to stand astride him. "Aren't you just a-door-able?" Adorable or not, the next thing he's launched himself at the setter's throat like a Tasmanian devil, you'd swear it was a rabbit he was going for and not a mutt five times his size. Our American friend is outraged, says how I shouldn't be let in the park

if I can't control my dog. I had to laugh though. That anxious look he gave, as much as to say, what the hell are you up to?'

'They're a great way to meet people,' Muireann glanced up from her struggle with Blue's uncontrollable excitement. 'It's like there's this whole community of dog owners out there. Only it's the dog that owns the owner, not the other way round.'

'All I can tell you, he's not afraid to take on anything. The size of the fight in the dog, isn't that what they say? You'll have your hands full with him.'

'And c'mere, where did he sleep?'

'Sleep?'

'Yeah.'

He glanced toward Beena, who was watching complacently from the doorway. Was it a trick-question? 'You never left over any bedding.'

'I know that. What I'm asking, where did he sleep?'

Be-damned if there wasn't some sort of a look fired between the two girls. Some sort of codology afoot. 'Sure how would I know where he slept?' He looked about. 'On the sofa, I suppose.'

'He did, aye.'

'I don't know what you're trying to imply.'

She pushed the dog away, its paws sliding stubbornly across the linoleum. 'You'd miss him all the same, Frank.'

'Wait a minute. What do you mean I would miss him?'

'Happy birthday, Uncle!'

'Ah, no. Oh no you don't...'

'What?'

‘You’re not foisting your mongrel on me, girl.’

Beena detached herself from the doorway. ‘You’d want to be careful, Frank. Owners come to look like their pets, isn’t that what they say?’

‘No way. No way, José.’ He glared at his niece. ‘I knew well you were up to something.’

‘Tell you what,’ she said, wiping the cobweb of slobber from her trouser-leg. ‘Hold onto him for another month. Yeah? See how you get on. If you don’t want him at the end of that, I’ll get in touch with the shelter. Deal?’

He looked at the mutt, whose imperturbable gaze was now directly on him.

‘A month?’ he said.



## Butterfly Colours

Alain Radcliffe

Today I got back from holiday to find a trainee hovering by my desk. The boss had sent her over so she could shadow me for the morning. Eleanor. Call me El. She was all fired up for her first week, so I took her to the empty canteen and stood her a bit of cake. A shining girl: new to the city. Her blouse hung loose on her. I was her once. She cut up her Victoria sponge into squares and the first mouthful of sugar set her rattling on. Question after question. What did I get up to at the weekends? What did I do in my spare time? Was I single? She asked for my recommendations – best bars, best nightclubs, best restaurants.

I noticed her discreet undercut and her amazing fingernails and her unease. She hadn't found out yet that the world had been split open for her delectation. I told her I was fifty and what she needed was to pick up a copy of *The Skinny*.

Ah, okay! And she took out her phone to make a note.

But when I got back to my desk I sat for a while, staring at my screen, and thinking about when I was eighteen, nineteen, and we used to go into Glasgow, me, and you, and have our capers. We called it a scene but really it was just a couple of pubs: doors in walls down quiet closes in the Merchant City, long before it took off, with funny knocks needed for entry. It all felt dangerous. Movie-thrilling.

There were no clubs back then – at least not in the way we think of nightclubs now – just cavernous rooms with a bar at one end, where people could sit and listen to music and have a bit of time to themselves, and by the end of the night, everyone was up on their feet. There were hardly any women in those days. Folk generally left me to it, but you got a lot of attention. The queens called you hen and doll and – yes – you were looking your very best in those days: tall with

skin that reflected light and a battery of one-liners ready to go. Surrounded on all sides. You were twenty years of age. It was your time.

It was you who found this scene, of course it was. You were the first to dip your toe and I went in after. Mum and Dad used to joke that I wouldn't try anything until you'd taken the plunge. It was like that from when we were knee high.

Here's the thing: you were always in a hurry. I remember almost as soon as you turned twenty-one you said Scotland was a dead loss. The sun moved around the sky and just like that you were gone, and my world was in monochrome. Worst six months of my life: nobody could say a thing to me. I scraped together enough cash for a bus ticket and came after you, meaning to stay just for the summer. I crashed on the floor of your Fitzrovia bedsit and signed on.

It took some adjustment, sharing a room, even if we were brother and sister. We divided up the little space with the Wall of Jericho running down the middle. Your colour-coded arrangements on one side and my heaps on the other. You showed your love in the way you chopped half your morning banana into my cereal and never let me take a night-time walk on my own.

And you brought me out. All the way out. We marched for Act-Up and against Section 28. We manned stalls and sold whistles and badges for civil partnerships and equal marriage. We were activists! We moved through the crowds, and you told me I would meet someone, as though it were the be-all-and-end-all. She's out there, you said, spreading your arms, showing me my limitless future.

London was, for those few years, absolute bliss. By the time I arrived you'd already found all the places we could go and dress like the aliens we were and let down our hair. For me, the place was mind-boggling. It hadn't occurred to me that there could

be so many out lesbians in the world. I was fearful at first, clingy, my skin blotched from too much sun and alcohol, not sure how to be. You took me to a club called Generator and stood at my shoulder while you pointed out all the women you thought I should be talking to. There were boys in nun costumes and women in bow ties and braces and I stared, shocked by their beauty.

Not everyone survived. You never made it home. When we started losing people it felt like we were under siege. But those early years meant something: an ease of being. An incredible lightness. We lived for a while on a sweet spot that was yours and mine and nothing to do with Scotland and our parents and the menagerie.

There were five of us kids. Our family went boy girl boy girl boy, like a seating plan at a wedding. Because we were third and fourth in line and less than two years apart and both preferred glam and punk to smooth or prog it always felt like it was you and me in one corner and the rest of the brood in the other.

You were always out there. I don't think you had ever heard of the closet. It was obvious from early on to anyone with eyes that you were different. I loved you for your circus clothes and the hair that went from David Bowie to Johnny Rotten to Flock of Seagulls in the space of a decade. You covered up your blue Scottish skin in butterfly colours.

It was both a gift and a curse, this outness of yours. When you walked down our street in Mount Florida in eyeliner and with your fingernails painted green like Sally Bowles, next door shook their heads and called their kids over.

At school you were thought dangerous. They feared you and so they tried to hurt you. I remember you running a lot. Running between classes to avoid being tripped or pushed into doorways. No wonder you were skinny. You put down your tiny waist to the fact that you'd

spent most of your teenage years running away from the other kids. You laughed it all off, but your smile quirked at the edges.

The other day I saw a headline on one of those placards outside the paper shop. *Scotland Best in Europe for LGBT Equality*. Something like that. I stood there for a long time, staring at it, more bewildered than anything else. I found myself laughing out loud, turning to my right, and sharing the moment with the empty outline where you should have been. Anyone walking past would have thought I'd taken a drink.

Mum and Dad's united front was tested to its limits when it came to what to do about you. They seemed blind to what was happening until they could avoid it no longer. The kids punched and kicked mainly below the waist but one night you went home with your lip split so deep it ran red. Mum brought out towel after towel and when it finally stopped bleeding your bottom lip stuck out like an opened drawer.

I wish you would try to fit in at that school, she sighed as she stitched a patch onto the sleeve of your coat.

I'm fine, Mum, It's all fine.

But when you turned back to the television after a waiting pause, the way you mashed your lips together made me put out a hand for you. You were only sitting on the other side of the room but the sense of the distance I had to cover made my knees wobbly. Your eyes found mine, and you shook your head, as if to say it was fine, it was nothing. It wasn't forever. We'd get away eventually.

Our brother Chris overheard the parents talking about what had happened. Mum wanted to go up and see the heidie, but Dad didn't want to make a fuss over what he said was a bit of roughhouse among a group of lads. That night, when your lip had swollen up to twice his normal size, I saw Dad looking at you across the dinner table with

contortions in his face. He hated that you wouldn't give him peace. He hated that he couldn't sort you out.

As I watched you, I learned to stay quiet and keep my nose clean. At school I had friends and a need to fit in. I liked the validation that came with good marks and report cards dense with compliments. A pleasure to teach!

When I arrived at the end of my teens with an almost clean behavioural sheet my parents breathed a sigh of relief. In their eyes I had done well. The word lesbian wasn't in their heads, even though I'd never dressed girlie, never shown any interest in boys. For some reason no one ever talked about girls doing it with girls in the way that they mocked and feared boys doing it with boys. It was the Queen Victoria thing: out of sight out of mind. Poofs and buffties they understood. They didn't have the vocab to talk about what I was.

Years later, whenever mum came over to visit, she always referred to Sarah as my pal, as though we were just two single gals sharing a bedroom for reasons of economy. To her we were the Liver Birds. Laverne and Shirley. I thought of you and how you held nothing of yourself back. I corrected my mother, more than once, my heart pounding in my chest. I used the L-word. She pretended she hadn't heard, though I felt her wince. She tightened her fists and turned away from me.

Mum and Dad might have denied to themselves what you were, but the shaming words all came tumbling out eventually. News of your relationship with that fine art student you met in your first year in London wound its way up the country, eventually reaching our mother's ears. Someone who knew the boy let it slip to someone else who happened to know a girl I was at school with who told her mum

who mentioned it to her colleague who happened to be Mum's best friend (Auntie Liz) who gently but spitefully broke the news.

We were home for a rare weekend and Mum was making coffee. She had her back turned to us as she rattled the jar and mugs with more vigour than usual. She'd been asking the usual questions – How was your apprenticeship going, what were our digs like, did we have enough money, was I making friends? Had I thought of looking for a job myself or applying to college?

The tone of her voice had become just a bit too casual.

*What's this I hear about you going out with the boys?*

She turned and tried to meet your eyes but hers wouldn't quite rise to the level of your face. I didn't know where to put myself. And I'll never forget. You looked across to me, your eyebrows coming together, and I looked away.

Coward. I should have come out with it. To this day I wish I'd piped up. *I'm the same as him*. Two queers in the family might have pushed our mother to the edge, but it would have taken the weight off you. But there you go. I balked. Not one stupid word.

Mum tried to speak again but her voice disintegrated, and her shoulders started heaving as she dug in her trouser pocket for a hanky. After blowing her nose, she turned so we could see how red and smudged her face was.

I'll need to say something to your father, she said, hurrying from the kitchen.

No more was said, of course, though Chris and William relished telling us that Mum had spent more than one evening weeping on the couch with Dad's arms around her. Our sister Jackie wanted to know what I'd said to upset her. I told her Mum was sad because she'd found out her son was a shirt-lifter. Jackie, bless her, couldn't see what all the fuss was about. *Now if you'd told her he was a shoplifter*

...

Just like all those arrows that came at you in the playground, you put up with what I did without complaint. I let you down, but you would never have cast up what happened that day. I saw in that look you gave me all the weariness that came with being so completely out. But you couldn't be anything else.

Now I look at the pictures of us together and think about how young you were, how excited and shy, and how much I have changed since then. I'm no longer young, though I don't feel old. A couple of years after you died, I came back up to Scotland. I swapped the funny clothes and big hair and bedsits for suits and office jobs and home comforts. I made new friends. Every year we marched through the capital for our pride. Down the Royal Mile, round onto the bridges and up again onto Calton Hill, banners flapping. It got to the point where we could have walked the route blindfold.

It took a while to get used to you not being here. Most of the time I'm good, I'm great, too busy to even notice, but every so often I'll turn to share something, and seeing the long-lean gap beside me, I'll remember, and my heart drops through me like a stone. It's not fair. When the brood gets together, we dine out on all the old stories. We smile and sigh, our throats tight, at hundreds of pictures. We start talking about people we barely even remember, concrete blocks and colony houses that have been torn down and built up again, of glass and steel this time.

I still think about that look you gave me in Mum's kitchen that day, that expectant look – *help me out here, would you?* – with a certain amount of regret. You never mentioned it. If you'd ever said something I might have been able to put it out of my mind forever.

You wouldn't want me dwelling. You would remind me that I'm alive and in the middle of my life. You'd spread your arms and

show me my possibilities. Now keep going, you'd say. Grab up the world. Keep going.



# Aerial Burial

Daragh Fleming

The magpie is dead in the kitchen by the back sliding door when I return home.

At first I expect it to stir, as if it has simply fallen asleep in the sun. Lexi, my seven-year old German Shepherd, no longer has any interest in it, sniffing at the bird briefly as she waits for me to open the door. I am nervous of it, lying there lifeless. I imagine it bursting into life, flying around the kitchen in a panic. But that does not happen. It continues to lie there dead, with its blue-black coat shining in the dying sunlight.

I go to get the shovel.

There used to be two shovels but the red and black one broke somewhere between the years. The one that remains at the back of the ancient shed is a brown wooden shaft with a spade covered in dried-cement. I am too wary of the bird reanimating to touch it with my hands, and my grandmother always told me that magpies were filthy animals and deserved to be shot. Yet I can't help but feel sorry for this one, and I don't know why they are assumed to be dirty when I see them bathing in the birdbath every other morning.

I've always liked magpies. When I was studying for the Leaving Cert my desk faced out into the front garden through the window. A single magpie used to sit in the grass when the sun was shining. I named it Jerry and he became my study partner when it suited him.

The magpie now lying dead in my kitchen may be Jerry. It looks like a Christmas decoration, with his lifeless legs looking all rigid and bendable like metal wire. It feels odd to be thinking of Christmas in July. A magpie for the Christmas tree drying in the sun.

I think first that Lexi must have killed it. I wonder if it has come in through the window to steal eggs again. Earlier in the day I caught

one sneaking out of the kitchen after attempting to steal a scone from the corner. There is no blood. It just lies there with no signs of violence. Perhaps its neck is broken, snapped like a Christmas cracker. I imagine Lexi not knowing how to kill. She certainly has no interest in eating the bird. There may be a dormant instinct to kill but with no knowledge of its purpose. Lexi looks at me like she always does; her mouth curled into a smile, her eyes begging me to play.

I don't normally wave at magpies. That's something people do; pay their respects to the black and white dinosaur. They've never sounded like other birds to me. Their song is more a glottal click than anything else. It isn't quite the squawk of a crow, either. They're the never-ending outlier of the flying community. I feel I should at least salute the bird now in death. Before I scoop it onto the old shovel I salute the dead bird in silence, picturing it handing rigid next to some candy canes in December.

We live next to a field. It usually grows corn but this year it is something else. I'm not sure what but the plants' leaves are green, and even greener in the dazzling light.

The list of animals we've thrown over our hedges would surprise you. Several hamsters, small and short-lived little grenades that my father catapulted over the 15 foot-trees. Many small birds found dead in the wet grass of the early morning. The occasional, unfortunate rabbit. Never any of the dogs – their deaths demanded more noble burials. And a snake – one of the more unusual pets – introduced to the field via the same mechanism. I remember my father presenting that snake to me on the end of the red and black shovel to prove it had died. Minutes later I witnessed the snake flying through the air to its final resting place.

An aerial burial, is what my father calls this method of body disposal. A grim but effective solution.

I consider burying the bird in the ground. I don't wave at them, but I have always felt some sort of connection to these birds. Some unknowable thing. Once, when I was having coffee outside with a

friend in Barcelona, a magpie landed right next to us. An older gentleman marvelled at it and began to take pictures. I didn't understand – the birds were treated like vermin at home. My friend was slightly surprised, too, telling me that magpies aren't usually seen in Spain. And this made me think the bird had followed me from home.

It lies there on the shovel, its legs all wires, its feathers crisping in the sun. Lexi has no interest at all. She just sits in the grass waiting for me to throw her ball for her. She couldn't have killed him. I hope it isn't Jerry. I think it being Jerry will make me quite sad. I think hard about whether I should bury it properly, like how we'd buried Holly when she'd died. Holly was our first dog. We got her when I was two years old and my first memory is of her, popping her head up over the ears of a cardboard box in the kitchen at the old house.

She is buried somewhere in the garden now.

I decide not to bury the magpie. But I don't catapult it into the air, either. I imagine all the other magpies seeing this dead one being launched over the hedge and subsequently putting a curse on me for having done so. Plenty of them live in our garden and scare the smaller birds away from the feeders to gorge themselves. I simply cannot have the weight of a magpie curse on my shoulders with everything else.

There is a gate by the side of the house that leads to the edge of the field, the border of our lands, behind one of the sheds. It's a sort of laneway that separates the shed we've nicknamed 'The Canopy' from the field next door, which is framed by an electric fence that has never been switched on in the 21 years I have lived here. We keep a beehive there behind The Canopy, out of reach from the dog, and away from the garden so that the house doesn't become swarmed by working bees. Here by the hive I can extend the shovel over an overgrowth of long, threatening nettles that have taken over the ditch on the side of the field, and place the magpie gently down among the growing unidentifiable crops rather than firing it aimlessly, and disrespectfully over the trees. Despite not waving at these birds, I don't wish to play

with fire, as I suspect that disrespect in death demands a heavier toll than ignoring them in life.

So I lay it gently down into the field of green unknowable crops, as the bees buzz nearby, as Lexi gives out from the garden, as the sun beats down from above like the god that it is, and I wonder what one dead magpie means, because I know that one living magpie signifies sorrow.

When I wake it is not naturally or because of some pre-set alarm. It is the dog, Lexi, her ferocious bark which sounds entirely different to her playful bark if you know her well. There is a fox in the field, perhaps, or some other dogs she dislikes passing our house. Her bark, when it is like this, ascends into a gentle howl every three or four barks, making it sound like she is crying, or sad, or worried. It's quite lovely to hear it, as it's a bark she only uses in particular situations, making it rare and therefore, naturally, magical.

It isn't bright outside yet, nor is it dark. The morning's in-between. I would never voluntarily be up this early, but Lexi's also seldom this abrasive in the early hours, so between grunts of dissatisfaction I rouse myself to investigate.

The air tastes of sleep. My eyes burn of wanting darkness. Lexi is in the back garden trotting circles and barking her disapproval, howling her dissatisfaction. There is also another sound. It is hard to make out. I slide the backdoor open and it is now that I hear them clearly, hundreds of them, clicking and croaking like they do, swirling and twirling in the air like a black and white tornado slowing down.

An onslaught of magpies. If that isn't the collective noun for them then it should be. My eyes almost burst to take in the sheer amount of them, jolting me far from sleep, adrenaline coursing through my veins almost immediately upon sight of them.

They float above, circling the garden. Their noise, so unnatural, so out of sorts, all join together in to a cacophony, a symphony of communication – a single collective cry.

Lexi darts inside as soon the door opens, brushing past and almost knocking me over, unsure of herself or what to make of the hovering magpies. I can hear her cries still from her safe harbour on the couch in the living room. Surely the whole street is awake now with the noise of them. I wonder if I'm dreaming, briefly, before somehow just knowing that I'm not.

I stand there, unsure of what to do. Wondering what exactly is going on. It is almost fully dark now, the sheer volume of birds sucking out any of the threatening dawn. I stand there for several minutes before deciding that there isn't anything I can do and turn to head back inside and away from the disturbed community of birds.

But then.

Two magpies swoop.

Side by side. Down with intent. Beyond the edge of the garden, beyond The Canopy and into the field. They are gone from sight. Until they are back. Seconds later. Carrying something between them like a coffin. No jostling or bickering. No fighting over a potential source of food.

The chorus of clicking magpies grows louder, peaking, shrieking. All-consuming. A war-cry? Or a plea of agony?

It's the dead magpie from the day before. They take it between them and slowly flap away, down the hill toward Glanmire. Down the hill to somewhere sacred, with the tornado of magpies following, dispersing, trailing the two coffin bearers. A concession behind a hearse.

I stand until they are all but gone, their shrieking clicks still audible in the distance, the sun rising on the far side of the house. The day beginning. New life erupting on a bleary-eyed planet.

And then I am alone again in the garden as if the cloud of birds had never been there at all. And it is now that I understand; one live magpie means sorrow for us, one dead magpie means sorrow for them.

## Visions of Harold

Nicolas Turner

In Wiltshire I had been waiting for Harold Cusk without even knowing it. Well, everyone had – our entire generation was ready for a new direction, a breakthrough, a revolution, of sorts.

I was sixteen when *The Visions of Irwin Brodsky* came out. It was reviewed in *The Guardian*, the *TLS*, and the *LRB*; I rushed out to buy it. His face on the dust jacket was quite round, almost childishly pudgy, his greenish eyes pale behind steel-rimmed glasses. He didn't look much like a writer to me – I had been reading Hemingway, Kerouac, Joyce. I thought writers were our modern heroes, crafting our myths for us and living them at the same time. Harold showed me something different, that writers in our late-capitalist, post-modernist, God-free age were marginal, precarious, breakable. I read *Visions* over a single week in September, the weather still warm enough that I could sit by the river that ran behind my parent's house. The water in the late summer sun was opaque, dark, brackish. I had grown up along that river - the Avon, but not Shakespeare's. I could still remember wading in up to my knees as a small boy, the sharp stones pressing on the soft soles of my feet, the cool spreading up my body despite the day's warmth. I experienced Harold's words similarly; they crept up me, so that putting the book down I felt physically shifted from one element to another, barely able to breath.

As soon as I finished the book, I wrote Harold a letter. I can't remember now what I said, but I am certain I was rambling, incoherent, fanatical - a true revolutionary. Harold did not reply. I read in an interview that winter that he ignored all fan letters, did not want to be burdened with the encrusted desires of others. I was disappointed, but at least I had not been marked out for special opprobrium. I read in the same interview that he was writing a second book, longer than *Visions*, more formless. I would have been happy to read his shopping list.

That second book never arrived. When I finally met him in person, ten years later, he was already considered part of the past – the revolution he had unleashed had curdled into doctrine, atrophied, and was now ripe to be overthrown in turn. I considered myself one of the tribunes of the coming wave. Yet I knew, even then, that all revolutions have something Hegelian about them, that the new model will contain within its very heart something of the old. Harold knew this too - he welcomed me not as patricide but as a sort of brother, albeit of a Cainian variety.

His boyish roundness had turned to fatness by then, his cheeks so red they seemed rouged, the vast flanks of his body clad in russet-brown tweeds. His mind, however, remained the same one that had submerged me so entirely as a teenager. His talk was like his prose, had become, in fact, his real creative work, flowing out of him in great gushes of imagery and ideas. He would begin with Modernism, cover the *Cantos*, the Odyssean Nekyia with which Pound opens, descending himself into a sort of underworld: through Facism, Italian and German, Goethe, Faust, Dante, a brief excursion back to Eliot, that evening laid out like a patient, leading to medicine in the early twentieth century, the works of Thomas Browne and Robert Burton, Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*, the Jewish diaspora (of which we were both a part), the Holocaust, and back to the *Cantos*, the defilement at its heart, and yet the beauty in which it was wrapped, and suddenly we were talking of Adorno, the Enlightenment, Thomas Mann, Faust (again). On it went, a vast tide, carried along by his humour, his insight, and his unique turns of phrase.

He held court in pubs across south London. I had moved to the area after university, was trying to make it as a writer, and I saw him drinking surrounded by acolytes in a particularly dim corner of a pub one warm September evening. It was the kind of late summer evening when the light makes everything shimmer with possibility and I could not resist going over, pulled in by the memory of those previous September days I had shared with him. We ended up back at his apartment at three, just three or four of us, all younger than Harold, who was in his forties by then. He pulled out the obligatory coke, although he hardly seemed to need it, and, with the acrid note



in the back of the throat announcing that we would not be asleep before sunrise, we settled in to listen.

After that we met regularly, usually in one pub or another, especially as the autumn cold took hold, although the following spring we did walk one day along the South Bank, the sky above a great blue vault, the high Thames bringing a smell of the sea with it, seagulls clustering like egrets by the Nile. The breeze kept tugging thin strands of hair from his scalp into stalks, as if he were floating underwater, and his open jacket continually flapped wide, revealing the stains on the shirt beneath, once white but now going grey and yellow around the collar and armpits. Yet I was thrilled to be there as he spoke of Conrad, of Vietnam, of how we were still living in the fallout of the sixties, still trying to make sense of the fractures that particular revolution had left, a transformation as important as anything that happened in 1789 or 1917. Harold spoke of such epochal moments as if he had lived through them; more, as if he had written them himself.

So, of course, I put him into my writing wholesale. Lifted his monologues, his fuzz-stained teeth, his grimy Brixton flat, and put them straight into my work. Later, when my first novel was published, he claimed I had slandered him, threatened legal action, would send his remaining disciples to my signings and talks to abuse me. I forgave it all because he was right, I had stolen something from him, although there was no slander in what I wrote, it was hagiography if anything. I loved Harold. He had always understood that I would betray him, but he enjoyed being talked about again, being interviewed and mentioned in the literary press. Some people even returned to *Visions*.

The last time I saw him was on Peckham Common. He was walking around reading Blake out loud, stumbling and spilling larger onto the pages, the words as he declaimed them barely decipherable from each other. He had lost wight, but not in a way that looked healthy; his skin was folded in ringlets at his jaw, his stomach unnaturally distended, so that he seemed almost to have to hold it up with his hands to stop it pulling him forward onto his front. It was spring, again, and the daffodils thronged the edges of the paths with their trumpet-noses as if lining a parade route. Against their brightness Harold looked grey,

ashen, the tinge of yellow in his skin that of fat left to congeal. He saw me but we did not speak, just looked briefly at each other, nodded.

A week later I read that he was dead. He was forty-eight and had published one novel. I did not cry, but I read *The Visions of Irwin Brodsky* again and again and again.

# The One Thing Money Can't Buy

Terry Holland

I spill out through the open door of the Ten Bells, shoulder a path through the heaving, chattering throng of after-work, casual Friday, early evening prosecco drinkers. The late September sun is painting the looming white tower of Christ Church Spitalfields the deepest scarlet. I retract my head—buzzing from several pints of Red Right Hand imperial IPA—into my flipped-up collar, focus on a spot five yards ahead of me and march resolutely down Commercial Street, doing my best to block out the insistent hum of the traffic, the intermittent scawl of sirens and the scurrying, phone-fixated pedestrians who (usually) duck out of my way at the very last second. I need some solid nourishment to soak up the ale, and I need it fast.

At the impressive, newly restored wood-and-tile structure of The Culpeper—like the Ten Bells heaving with young, hip disposable-income burners—I swing a left onto Wentworth Street, past the surviving archway to Rothschild Buildings (erected in 1886 to house the deserving Jewish poor), past the former Providence Row night refuge (for the utterly destitute of all creeds) and the top end of Gunthorpe Street (site of George Yard Buildings, model homes for the industrious gentile poor), then cross the junction, right onto Brick Lane.

As usual, the curry house touts sixth-sense my rumbling stomach and bark out their special offers, waving flyers and business cards under my nose, but I press on with laser focus. My Friday night biryani will be every bit as good as theirs but a third of the price, from a little Bengali take-away tucked unobtrusively among the wholesale grocers and convenience stores on less fashionable Osborn Street.

The take-away isn't busy and I'm soon out again, clutching a warm carton of Friday night delight. I'm almost sauntering now as I pass The Buxton (also painstakingly restored to its late-Victorian shabby chic, and part of the same chain as The Culpeper), when suddenly I

hear a woman scream, followed by a dull thud. My heart leaps into my mouth—I look up to see a woman sprawled on the pavement, a somewhat dishevelled man in a long, grimy coat squatting beside her. I hurry towards them in what I (perhaps rather ridiculously) hope is a decisive, concerned-citizen type manner.

The man holds out a grubby hand towards the woman, who ignores it, scrabbling to her feet. “What am I, fucking invisible?” the man asks, his voice a defensive mix of accusation, embarrassment and hurt. After a beat, he adds, “Are you alright?” The young woman takes a step back, then warily looks at him.

“Yeah. Sorry. I was sending a text. It was important.” She looks down at her phone, checking for damage.

“Well watch where you’re fucking going next time, yeah.”

She gives him a wan smile, straightens her smart coat and strides away, towards the bright lights of Brick Lane. I now see that the guy is squatting on a flattened cardboard box. A small backpack, a couple of carrier bags and a sleeping bag are propped against the wall behind him. He bends down and starts picking up a few scattered coins and dropping them into a paper cup from Costa Coffee.

“Hey,” I say, unsure what to do other than just stand there. “Are *you* alright?”

He looks up. His eyes are bloodshot, there are big, dark circles beneath them, he’s unshaven and missing a front tooth. “Me?” he says. “Pffff. Yeah. Champion. Never better.” He places the cup on the corner of the flattened box.

“Ehm, listen,” I say, hesitantly. “When did you last eat—I mean, do you fancy a biryani?”

“Biryani?” he says, rolling the word in his mouth like a boiled sweet. “Yeah I’d fucking love one mate.”

I hand him the carton with a smile I hope isn't too condescending or stupid or fake. He smiles back, a big saliva bubble popping in the gap where his front tooth used to be.

"Thanks," he says.

"Ehm, listen," I say again, running through various improbable scenarios in my mind. "Are you going to be alright? Out here?"

"Me?" he says again. "Pfffff. Yeah. Don't worry about me. I've got the one thing money can't buy."

I look again at his pile of possessions, thinking maybe there might be a dog hiding among them. There isn't. Imagine an estranged wife, mother or girlfriend.

"Poverty!" he says, his mouth opening wide in a raucous, side-splitting laugh that culminates in a wheezing, racking coughing fit. He sits down on his flattened box, opens the carton of food with trembling hands and spits a big gob of dark, viscous mucus onto the pavement.

## The Buddha of the Roses

Joseph Darlington

It had just passed moonrise when the gates of heaven swung open. A new worshipped object had come to join the gods.

Demeter and Venus hitched up their robes and the Sphinx flicked her tail. Ah Puch, the Destroyer, folded his arms and pouted.

“And who might you be?”

The little plastic Buddha only smiled.

“They shouldn’t let in such cheap tat,” said Marble Mary. “It brings the whole place down.”

Mary had been there at the reformation. She, like many of the old ones, believed the new plastic gods should be barred from heaven.

“Let’s hear him out,” said a round bauble of Jesus Christ’s face. “Perhaps he may offer us wisdom.”

“Yes, tell us!” bellowed Ah Puch. “Why are you here?”

The plastic Buddha chuckled.

“I am as surprised as any of you. I am not made for great things, and my path had been a humble one. Every step has been a new humiliation! And yet, entirely by accident, I find myself here...

I was born in a factory in China. I was formed in a mould; the seven thousandth to spring from that container. I would like to say I broke it, but another five thousand came after me. I am one of many millions all produced the same way.”

At this point Mary rolled her eyes. The Sphinx slunk away, disgusted.

“I had barely cooled when I was packed in a dark wooden crate and shipped to India. Me and a hundred others. The waves rose high and the crate tipped over. I was crushed by a pile of my brethren. My head, at the back here, is still dented to this day.

When we got to India I spent two years in a warehouse. Sales must have been slow. Eventually, I was sold off, wholesale, to a discount mart near Goa. A wandering minstrel picked us up, five of us, and took us back to his tiki hut on the beach.”

A carving of Lono raised an eyebrow at the mention of a tiki hut in Goa.

“It was a wonderous time. Men and women came and went. The minstrel made them cocktails and regaled them with music from his musical box. The sun was warm; the sand was soft. The sea was emerald blue, like the sky.

It was there that I met my owners...”

“A God does not have owners!” bellowed Ah Puch. “A God has worshippers! The humans must bow down before us!”

A marble of the Emperor Diocletian raised two fingers.

“If I might interject? I was born a slave. I earned my freedom in the legions and rose to the position of Caesar. After I died, men worshipped me. Perhaps this little potbellied imp has a similar story?”

“Nothing of the kind, your imperial majesty. As I say, I am as surprised as you all are to find myself here. Why, my owners did not even care for me. They’d had a bit too much rum punch and bought me as a joke. I was their little trophy for the afternoon. I sat on their table as they drank. The man, young then, and heavily intoxicated, wore me as a hat once or twice. The girl stuffed me in her suitcase and forgot about me until she got home.

It is only for that reason that I was kept. My destiny, perhaps, was to be thrown in the bin that very evening. Yet the Fates decreed otherwise...”

An ancient Ephesian pot showing the three Fates rattled its handles in recognition.

“I learned the girl had met the boy in Goa. They had meant it as a fling, but as I fell out of her backpack in her bedroom in Timperley, she thought of him and she was melancholy. The internet was in its infancy. She found him on MySpace and agreed to meet up. She took me on the train down to Doncaster and he laughed when he saw me. Once again I was to be worn as a hat.

I watched them from the bedside table as they coupled that night and swore to be always together.”

A line of crucified Christs with string trailing from the tops of their crosses nodded familiarly. They had all been hung in bedrooms.

“And it was no facile promise; they really did stay together! I watched them from his bedroom, where she left me. Then I was taken to their apartment, where I sat up on a high shelf.

A spider made a nest inside my hollow body. My patience was tested, and my love for all creatures. Eventually, it was eaten by its children.

The days passed and the years went by. My owners grew older and more tired. Then, one day, she bore news of a child. I was packed in a box and placed in a trunk, then in a cellar. There weren’t even spiders in the cellar. Not that I could see. I was entirely abandoned.

And so I learned patience, and I humbled myself. I remembered that I am only plastic, formed in a mould, and bought as a joke. I came from nothing, I am nothing now and, in a million years or so, I will degrade into nothingness again. Perhaps earlier, if I am sent to the furnaces and melted, or ground into dust and flung into the sea.



It was my time of tribulation. A journey to the underworld. But a humble Buddha should expect little else...”

A passing Buddha, twelve feet tall and glazed with sparkling jade, heard his little facsimile and snorted. He shared Marble Mary’s opinion of the plastics. It made him think far less of men that they could bring themselves to worship such trinkets.

“But it did not end there, surely?” a wood-carved Odin said, blinking.

“Oh no, it did not,” the Buddha smiled. “Although it felt like an eternity, I was eventually found again. This time by a young boy who I learned was their son. He laughed at me, for I am cheap and gaudy. But when he showed his mother, she remembered me. She said I had brought them good luck, and she took me to their café.

For in the years of my descent, they had risen. He had worked as a cook, then a restaurant manager. She studied accounting. They opened a vegan café, with pictures from Goa on the walls.

She took me there, set me down, and used me to prop open the kitchen door.”

“Shame!” cried Ah Puch.

“Shame!” echoed the rest.

Two Chinese door guardians, the *menshen* Wei Zheng and Zhong Kui, opened inwards to glance at each other. It didn’t seem such a bad fate to them.

“So I propped the door open for five fateful years. I watched the orders come in and the food come out. Soup sometimes fell on my head, and sugar from pastries. The staff would hit me in the face with the brush every evening when they cleaned up, and in the morning I was pushed back into place roughly with the heel of a boot.

But, oh, the smells were divine! And to see the laughing faces of the customers; it was a fate of great majesty for me. Each day I was grateful, and each night I spent in solemn meditation.”

“This is a pleasant fate,” Marble Mary admitted. “But it is hardly the life of a God.”

“You must be worshipped!” squeaked a hundred household gods in unison. “We were worshipped! Why are you here?”

The Buddha sighed.

“As I promised you, it was an accident. Of this I shall now tell. You see, the café was not doing well. There were customers, yes, and the staff worked hard. But the man insisted on the highest quality ingredients, and the woman that they all be organic, fair-trade, rainforest-protected and guilt free. Neither was willing to sacrifice their own ideal of goodness, and so costs kept going up, and no matter how busy they were, they always lost money.

It caused great arguments, in the evenings when all the customers had left. I sat there, forgotten in the doorway, watching them fight. Finally, he slammed the door. He left. Two weeks passed, and each night I saw her crying.

Then, when all seemed lost; a blessing! The man returned!

It was closing time. He entered just as the last customer left. He apologised. He told her he loved her. He presented her with roses.

They kissed, intimately, and then with passion. She held on to him. Their eyes met, and they rushed upstairs.

The stairs were through the kitchen and, as they passed my door, they dropped the flowers.

They dropped them at my feet.

He bent to pick them up, but she said it didn't matter. She said to leave them for him, meaning me, and they laughed. They laughed all the way up the stairs.

And so that's how I came to receive homage. From mortals that knew not what they did. I was surprised, to feel my soul lifted up. I did not expect to come here. Until moments ago, I could not have dreamed such a place existed. And yet here I am. I am here."

The other worshipped objects all grumbled and shook their heads. Even a toenail, who had once been touched by a nun who had mistaken it for the toenail of a saint, balked at the plastic Buddha's story.

"I am sorry," said Marble Mary. "But there seems to have been some mistake."

"This is an outrage!" cried Ah Puch.

A chorus of African masks blew raspberries.

"Wait!" came a booming voice.

The crowd parted. Through them strode a vasty beast; the Golden Calf. The founder of their heaven. The minor gods all looked up at him as he stood, great and golden, with a vast gold shield perched on his head.

His ruby eye looked down at the Buddha. The Buddha smiled.

"It is the Code of All Idols," boomed the Calf. "That none of us are here on our own merits. In worshipping us, the mortals are merely reaching out to the spirits that flow through us. We are likenesses. We are not Gods. And yet, in the homage we receive, we are nevertheless blessed. The mortals do not aim to bless us; they are worshipping the Gods we resemble: we, all of us, receive our blessings by accident.

That this little Buddha was more fortunate than many, receiving homage where no homage was due, should mark him out not as

defective, but as supremely blessed. Blessed beyond those of us whose sole purpose was to receive adulation.

Now hear this! I do decree that this little Buddha is one of us, and rightly so! And he shall be known forever after as the Buddha of the Roses.”

As he spoke, the Buddha felt roses blooming inside him. His hollow core filled with petals, and the air around him burst with fresh fragrance. His rosy lips, forever smiling, sprayed from an airbrush in China, turned gold. And all the objects around him bowed their heads.

# Le Patrimoine

Michelle Walshe

My mother was a scientist. The pungent scent of chemicals trailed her every move. I knew her exact location by the intensity of the smell of *laboratory*. Newspapers and magazines littered various surfaces around the house with the words *genius* and *trailblazer* regularly following her name in articles.

She worked ferociously as if she knew her time was limited. She was never home. Weekends meant nothing to her, they were simply more peaceful days at the laboratory when she got more work done. When she wasn't at work, she was attending events to talk about it or lecturing rapt students on her research methods and findings. Or she was running, always running, miles and miles every morning. I often wondered from what.

She was the only daughter of an only daughter, and I was her only child. Her mother was a scientist too. This was the pattern of matrilineal descent in my family that stretched back generations. I rarely saw my mother. I knew no different so didn't question her absence from my life or the high-octane level she lived at. She told me her mother had been absent from her life too. It was just the way things were in my family. Sometimes, a thought would flit across my mind, so fast I could barely catch it – why had she given birth to a child she had no time for?

And that was why, when I turned thirteen, I didn't understand what was happening to me – the sudden dull aches that meandered around my pelvic area to the tops of my hips before pooling and settling in my abdomen. They spiked into my lower back any time I moved, determined darts of pain. Blemishes appeared overnight on my previously clear skin, hormones surged through me making me feel simultaneously invincible and incapable.

I didn't have the language for the changes that raced through my scrawny girl body, the curving and rounding of it, no sister to talk to,

no aunt to ask. It is to prepare you, was all she said, opening a red velvet box and handing me a yellowed, fragile piece of paper. Prepare me for what? I asked as I unfolded it and turned it over and back in my hands, frowning and squinting at the illegible smears of ink interspersed with drawings and symbols. She simply smiled and left the room.

That exchange and the information written on the scrap of paper preceded my first attack. The inability to breathe. The sweeping red rash that ran rampant across my chest rising from nowhere, spreading like fire to my neck, my face, raised and bumpy and angry. My racing pulse throbbed at each wrist. My heart palpated, fluttering against my ribs like a trapped bird in a cage. A cold, slick film of sweat formed on my skin following the first hot flush of panic and left me shaking and shivering, exhausted and empty. I spent long, unstructured days in bed, curtains drawn, protected from reality by the darkness. Mother left pills of indeterminate colour and number beside my bed. I swallowed them all, trusting her scientific knowledge. When I had the strength to move again, I crumpled the piece of paper with its shocking information and threw it into the bin and removed it from my space. The next day it was back, smoothed, and folded, placed under a glass of water beside my bed.

I turned to science then to search for answers. I read everything I could lay my hands on – books, my mother’s academic papers, ancient texts, scrambling to find any historical analogy to my family’s composition. I stayed late in the school laboratory peering through powerful microscopes. I pricked the tip of my index finger with a pin and placed samples of my blood onto slides, mixed chemicals in test tubes and petri dishes, watched them bounce off each other, multiplying and dividing, clustering, and gathering. I decoded the symbols and deciphered the drawings on the yellowed fragment of paper but without the precious stone it specified my efforts turned to smoke.

On a bright, sunny, summer’s day, shortly after my fifteenth birthday, Grandmother, came to live with us. I’d never set eyes on her before the moment she appeared in our doorway, small,

upright, bright green eyes flashing resentment. She looks so old and angry, I whispered to my mother. She glared at me and hissed, don't be ridiculous, she's only fifty-five.

Mother told me to be quiet around her, not to upset her. She was easily upset, apparently. I saw her only erratically even though she hardly ever left the house. Her moods changed like the weather. She had a favourite chair in the kitchen by the window where she spent many hours every day in the summer when she was out of bed. She sat, staring into space with a vacant gaze. Once I asked her if she wanted to go outside to get some air, but she recoiled from me, shrinking back into the chair, imprinting her slight body on the material as if to say no, I'm staying put. I never asked again. When I grew older and began to work in a laboratory too, I tried to share the news with her, but the very word made her shriek.

After her arrival, the changes at home were slow at first, so slow I barely noticed. My mother, sharp and smart and glamorous as well as being scientific, started to look unkempt before gradually descending into total dishevelment. Her clothes, normally pristine and ironed, were tea-stained, and creased. Her usually coiffed, bouncy hair hung lank and oily about her shoulders. Her manicured nails chipped, and she left her skin make-up free. She stopped running and her skin took on a greyish hue from too much time spent indoors.

She became prone to bouts of uncharacteristic behaviour. I caught her staring intently at the television when it wasn't on, or holding a book upside down, pretending to read. She stopped going out, stopped shopping for clothes, stopped seeing her friends and I frequently overheard her on the telephone cancelling her speaking engagements excusing herself as she had to take care of her mother. Sometimes, late at night I'd find her sitting alone in a dressing-gown in total darkness in the kitchen.

Eventually, she gave up her job, not at once, but slowly, reducing her time at the laboratory from five days to three, from full days to half days to finally no days at all. Early retirement she called it, with a grimace. She was forty-five years old. Instead of wearing a white

coat, she donned an apron and cooked every meal and cleaned up Grandmother's every spill of food and liquid and leak of bodily fluid.

She ran every errand, completed every task, accompanied Grandmother to every appointment. She laid out her medications three times a day on a tray with a lace-rimmed cloth and water in a crystal glass and watched as Grandmother swallowed them. She fixed a smile to her face, and I saw it slip only occasionally.

Ten more years passed, and Mother's hair turned grey, lines furrowed her face, her body thickened, her energy diminished.

Meanwhile, Grandmother looked the same at seventy-five as she did at fifty-five, the only change was her once dark hair was now silver and cut close to her head. The wrinkles on her face had been there for as long as I could remember. Brown liver spots freckled her hands. She was immaculately groomed when she was out of bed, nails painted, lipstick applied, hair brushed. She continued to spend winters in bed and summers on the chair in the kitchen, her face tilted towards the sun.

Around the time my mother stopped working at the laboratory, the intensity and severity of my attacks increased. I was watching my future play out before my eyes and didn't like what I saw but felt utterly powerless to change it. My breath caught in my throat as I saw my mother tend to my grandmother's every need, the toing and froing, the washing and drying, the running up and down the stairs, the forwards and backwards between the kitchen and the living room, ferrying food and drinks and pills while Grandmother sat, entitled and oblivious, like a cuckoo in a nest.

I was trying to prepare myself for what lay ahead, but it was like studying the routine of a prison warden. Exact mealtimes, exercise times, medication times. There was no deviation. And no escape.

Grandmother died sitting in her chair on the longest day of the year. A shuddering sigh and a soft slump that made us both look up from our dinner plates. Mother's mask broke, her howls of anguish were



heard the length of the street. I was surprised at the strength of her grief, or maybe it was pent-up anger finally finding release. I thought she might rejoice in being set free from the bonds of care, but I was mistaken. I thought she might use her newfound freedom to go back to work, cherish the opportunity to return to her beloved laboratory or to work on her academic research but I was wrong about that too.

When we returned from Grandmother's funeral, I watched in despair as she walked up the stairs ahead of me, trailing one black-gloved arm listlessly along the banister. She went into her bedroom, shut the door, and refused to come out. In that moment I understood the changeover had begun.

Grandmother left it to Mother in her will. Mother handed it to me wearily as I brought food on a tray to her bedroom, pressing its cool weight into my palm and closing my fingers around it before her hand flopped down on the thin bedsheet draped over her as if the effort of the transfer exhausted her.

I left her darkened room, took it outside and held it up to the light between my thumb and index finger. At last, I was holding the family kryptonite. I was surprised by how heavy it was - a single stone, no ring or pendant or chain attachment, a flat, square cut emerald. It winkled, flawless, in my hand.

I thought for a moment about throwing it away, about breaking the chain, going it alone, but I had seen too much. Without the stone, I would leave no trace, no legacy of my existence, it would be the end of the line.

I stood alone in the laboratory. A vague smell of singed chemicals lingered in the air. I placed my left arm flat on the counter. A thin clear canula extended from my hand. Fluid dripped slowly from it into a stainless-steel kidney dish, every drop was an explosion in the silence.

I leaned over a tall, thin test tube, a solitary glass finger upright in a wooden rack. With my right hand I sprinkled in a pinch of anxiety. It left a trace on my fingers, a dusty, scratchy feeling on my skin. Then,

I squeezed the soft, squishy pink top of a pipette and added a drop of worry. It made a sound like a tiny thud when it hit the bottom. The symptoms of my illness merged and fizzed in the transparent tube. I observed the process with satisfaction.

I stood back, watched as a thin trail of white smoke curled into the air as it rose. It darkened when I added depression, blackened when I slid in mania, hissed when anger trickled down the side. It left a track on the glass like the slow arduous path of a snail. The test tube glowed red as my negative emotions joined each other.

The air around me coloured. An acrid smell filled the space. I coughed, wrinkled my nose. Keep concentrating, I told myself. I peered at the handwritten instructions scrawled on the yellowed scrap of paper, first pressed into my sweaty, anxious palms that day, long ago, on my first day of menarche. By now, I should have known the instructions by heart having read them so often, but it had been a long time since my last experiment and it was my first time using the stone, and I wanted to be sure.

I ran my index finger slowly under each word, read, then re-read, focussed my gaze. Sometimes G looked like S, and I did not want to err. The precisely appointed time had to elapse to allow the materials to coagulate. I set a timer and watched the seconds tick down.

The emerald twinkled on the counter in front of me. It caught a single early morning sunbeam slanting through the solitary tiny window. Loyalty was always added last. The green stone must meld into the gases, solidifying them, binding them together. One mistake and all would be lost. The child could develop powers of her own, forge an independent path, chase her freedom, abandon her host. This cannot be allowed to happen because of what the child is for, to mind me as I age. When she enters puberty, I too will press this piece of paper into her warm and sweaty palm, and will avoid meeting her gaze, withdrawing without answering her pleading questions.

Mother told me if I added the right amount of valerian and chamomile to the mix, the child would never know the nature of the darkness she is moving in, what system she is being brought into, or for what she

has been born. There had been a shortage of both when she was creating me, she said, her face turned away, shrouded in the darkness of her bedroom.

I turned up the flame on the Bunsen burner. The smell intensified. The air glowed, warm, and fiery, cooking my recipe. Tiny bubbles broke the surface inside the tube. I dropped in the emerald. It plunged through the meniscus, breaking it, falling heavily and swiftly to the bottom. It pulsed green against the red, swirling feelings.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath. The next step was crucial. I heard a bang and opened them. I watched as a long, solid mass shot from the tube into the air, arced like a comet, glowing green and red at its tail.

It bounced off the walls, ricocheted from the counter back to the ceiling screeching and shrieking and wailing, as if it knew what lay ahead and did not want to be born. It banged into the door, fell silent and vibrated as it plunged to the ground.

I held my breath as it lay there jerking, shuddering, and shaking. It contracted and expanded as if it were already breathing. Before my eyes an outline of limbs began to form, and three lines triangulated at the centre. A female human shape fizzed and moulded itself from the morass.

The kidney dish was full of fluid now. It slopped over the sides. My eyelids felt heavy, my limbs hollow. The inside of the test tube was blackened and charred. I shoved it to the back of the worktop and pulled up a stool, perched on its hard edge, leaned my elbows on the counter and watched and waited. Not long now.

# Settlement

James Vail

Can't stay put. I've tried but this sublet is the thirteenth in nine years. In that time, the various duties of moving flat have been consolidated into a method so practised I now feel more of a witness to the process than an active participant. The method is enveloping. There is only moving and unmoving.

I am halfway through packing up my belongings when the first wasp flies in through the window. Buzzing with determination, it circles the room before settling on the desk, proffering its stinger in my direction. In an instant, I am forced out of my bedroom. The door slams shut as I frantically check the creases of my shirt for stowaways.

"William," I yell, stepping the five paces from my door to his, "can I stay here for a bit?"

"Make yourself at home."

"I've had to surrender the place to a little beast," I say, surprised as always by how bright it is inside.

"I'm sure you know the type."

He nods. "How's the packing going?"

"This morning, it was still a bedroom, and now it's—"

"Not?" He looks me up and down, as if he is trying to draw the words out of me with his lips, pushed forward into an incredulous pout.

I sigh. This place feels different to the previous dozen. Despite my best efforts, I stopped distinguishing between my things and the room within which they reside. Perhaps it is the pull of the decommissioned

fireplace that corners the bed, drawing all my smallest belongings into the orbit of its fireless void. Whatever it is, comfort crept in like rising damp.

As I thumb through a dog-eared map of Snowdonia partly open on the desk next to William's computer, he pours out a cup of coffee and pats the bed twice. "For the removal man," gesturing to me to take the cup. I sit down beside him and rest my head on his shoulder in resignation. He smells like me, because I have spent the last three months stealing his shampoo. I know he smells it too.

Three hours pass. I press my ear to the door and listen to the wasp buzzing as it clicks away at my laptop, responding to my emails. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice William watching, offering me a bowl of soup. We sit on the floor of his bedroom with our legs stretched out across the rug and eat. I scan the room. Though I spend a lot of time here when he is away, it becomes an alien landscape when he is back.

William tells me about his next trip to Snowdonia, shows me the changing line of the snow with the side of his hand on my arm like I am the mountainside. The pressure is comforting and I miss the touch when he removes his hand. "Have you been?" he asks.

I picture him, an explorer on the slopes of Everest. "Take me?" I say, embarrassed immediately by the naivety of my request.

"You can just go." William's tone is merciful in its neutrality. He folds up the map and switches on the lamp. "Why don't you stay here tonight? Finish in the morning."

Unlike the communal spaces in the flat, William's bed feels strangely unmarred by that usual ache of permission. His breath ripples across my neck and I can't stop myself from pushing my hips into his side. I hold my body against his as if it were naturally comfortable until my leg muscles twinge, and I am forced to roll over. When dreams eventually come, they are filled with the sounds of buzzing.

Through the crack at the bottom of my door the next morning, I hear the new tenant taking a call with one of my colleagues. I make out something about an ‘outcomes triangle’ amongst the gnashing of mandibles and gesticulating of wings. But hearing the jargon of my profession in the mouth of another makes me feel sick and I cannot bear another word.

Making breakfast, I notice the ease with which I borrow William’s crockery, pans, utensils. The kitchen only feels like a shared space when I am alone, and when William is here, it belongs to him. I am a guest in his presence. William’s bedroom on the other hand, I think to myself as I brush toast crumbs from the bedsheets, always feels partly mine.

He returns the next morning, shoulders grazed from a slip he took descending the snowy peak. He stands, unabashed in his nakedness, grinning as he tells me of his exploits. “Won’t they be expecting you at the next place?” he says.

“The room doesn’t free up for a fortnight. I don’t know where I’ll stay.”

“Here, of course.” He struts across to his room and I hear the springs compress as he sits down on the bed. I follow, climb in beside him without asking. In the fumble of our shifting bodies, our faces nearly collide. We pause, waiting for one another to move. A kiss comes between us but does not happen.

Under the sheets, William talks for a long time about Mount Fuji, the fact that the distance from the highest car park to the summit is shorter than the full climb of Ben Nevis, and how that means that every Scottish person has climbed Fuji (altitude forgiving). We look at photos of the mountain on his phone while my hand goes numb on his chest. As I stare at the snowy cone, I feel I am falling headfirst through the empty space where his body should be, becoming microscopic in the silence.

While he is making dinner, I tidy William’s bedside table. I take an ashtray that he keeps for a candle holder to the bathroom and carefully

rinse it in the sink. His grandmother died two months ago and after the funeral, the entire flat was populated with as many trinkets and treasures as William could fit into a single suitcase. Overnight, we had lived here for half a century. Some of the objects even made their way into my old room, undertaking redundant little functions. Looms without heirs.

The swirling glass of the ashtray dips and dives in the water under the tap like it is alive. Meanwhile, in the next room my business goes into administration. The wasp sells all my clients to a competing consultant, and turns to other matters.

I wake up in a sea of maps. There is a pink line across my abdomen and for a second, I wonder if one of the A roads has spilled over the edge of the Ordnance Survey, carving me into the topography of William's next trip, until I realise it is an impression left from sleeping on top of my phone charger that disappears under my thumb. I'm annoyed to see William packing again. Clad only in one of his T-shirts, I sit at the breakfast counter but do not begin eating until he has left.

The door to my bedroom is mummified in swirls of grey-white-grey nest exterior. Plumes of smoke expanding, petrified in sheets of brittle paper. Chewing sounds emanate from my room for many hours. I hear the new tenant, using its mandibles to repurpose my things, my furniture, churning it all into envelope in the service of proliferating hexagons.

William gets into bed at some point late in the night. I flinch against his cold body. He tries to place an arm on my side, but I shrug him off in a gesture resembling the turning of sleep. Hours later, he gets up to open the skylight, cutting out a gorgeous dark space against the fuzzy yellow hue of the street. In pretended slumber, I watch the outline of muscle glide across rib as he pulls the window into its frame.

Dawn, my skin comes alive in the heat of the shower and I have to wait several minutes for my erection to subside. Back in his room, the covers have escaped the bed and William's naked body is exposed, his legs, his hard stomach. I realise his eyes are open and fixed on me, unfurl the towel wrapped around my waist and reach down to pick up a pair of his boxers sprawled across the floor. But he snatches them before I can, leaving me alone and exposed as he walks through to the kitchen to put the kettle on. I follow him through, still naked, and stride past him to switch the kettle off at the plug.

William looks me up and down and takes my penis in his hand. I gasp, grabbing the counter to steady my balance. He is rough, almost clinical, holding me at arm's length. It is over quickly and afterwards, I am emptied and throbbing, left to clean myself off the kitchen tiles.

"I'm going to stay at my parent's for a few days," he says later that day. "I'm not getting much work done. Feel free to use anything in the wardrobe."

I nod silently. William tosses a shirt and some toiletries into a rucksack, stepping over my legs stretched out across the floor. "You know, I could go," I say.

"Go where?"

"A hotel?"

"Don't be silly," through a curt smile.

A minute later, he is gone and I am alone once again, except for the buzzing coming from across the hall. I remain, splayed across the floor of his bedroom, using my phone to look up pictures of my next flat on the estate agent's website. I try to conjure up an image of this grainy, overcast avenue as my home but I can only scan along the streets that surround the building, counting the crossings to the nearest train station, and despair at the increase to my commute.

The wasp is heard flying in and out of my bedroom window. It is heard bringing in smaller insects to the room. The smaller insects, still



alive, make clicking and screeching sounds as they are pulled apart, devoured by the new tenant's gnawing, insatiable young.

William messages me to tell me he is back in town for the day and asks to meet for a coffee. Giddy, I pull on his now-dirty clothes and board the train. I see him as I leave Piccadilly on the station approach. He looks so much smaller out in the real world, surrounded by buildings and buses and bridges. He tells me of a new job in Edinburgh, as if it is good news. Three days ago, he was offered the position, and I should come to see him when I can. I imagine all the people he has told before me as I sit on the coffee shop toilet and google the duration of the journey from Reddish North to Haymarket. It is far enough that the chances of a visit seem slim.

"I'll come round yours to pick up my stuff sometime next week," says William. We exchange looks.

"I mean ours," he hastily adds and I tell him "sure, just let me know," like he doesn't still have a key.

Back in the flat, I close my eyes and grab the kitchen counter, restaging our encounter, waiting for William's hand to reach out to me again. His touch is softer in my imagination. His hands scoop and swathe me into an embrace as my skin vibrates with the beating together of our blood.

The new tenant annexes the bathroom. It makes quick work, breaking down the original entrance to the nest and erecting a much wider wall, such that half of the hallway is consumed in white-grey cone, illuminated only by a thin shard of light cast across from William's bedroom door. I hear the rustling of fresh larvae, burrowed into new cells in the bathtub, the sink, the toilet.

Though having the flat to myself would be my first choice, I make a home enough of this in between. Nonetheless, my hygiene routine slips into irregularity as I strain to wash in the kitchen. I am forced to urinate in the sink and I use a local cafe for more serious matters. The

leaves of William's plants grow fluffy with dust in the time that he is gone. Tiny fragments of our bodies, suspended in the air, settle and form a new kind of skin that I do not bother to remove. By contrast, I am in various states of undress, shedding the unwashed clothes he left for me on the floor of the kitchen and bedroom. I turn the heating up just enough that the air does not bother me but, as a result, his plants droop, and though I try to water them, they become encrusted brown; the pots that once gave them life give forth only to a burgeoning foamy-white mould and I watch it spread over several days before intervening.

Invasive, images of William's new life intrude on my daily motions. Having only seen Edinburgh in photographs, I picture the whole city like a castle atop a mountain with William as King, conqueror. I spend my evenings scouring the internet for flats near Haymarket, my eyes getting lost in blurry pictures of unfurnished living rooms with high ceilings, seeing no shelter here, only the cavernous empty spaces between the numbers of the property listings.

Dusk, I am met with the sight of the new tenant finishing work on the kitchen. Eyes as large as dinner plates, its head protrudes through a small gap at the bottom of the door. The remainder of the doorway is concealed in the papery substance of wasp's nest. It regurgitates wet matter, the remainder of a cereal box from earlier in the week, packing it down into place.

My blood boils. This, I cannot abide.

I leap to my feet and kick at the head. After tearing away at the nest, I land a blow and the wasp produces screeching sounds. There is a moment of scurrying before the wasp's sting protrudes out of the hole and sinks an inch into my thigh.

I fall back, blood gushing from the wound. On my hands and feet, I crabwalk into William's room, watching the new tenant return to fill in the hole, clicking and buzzing with obstinacy. I wrap my leg tight in a towel hanging over the back of the desk chair. The venom travels upwards to my heart and brain. I feel the poison slowing my thoughts

to a quiet, confused din. Beneath, my stomach froths and at some point, vomit appears. The wound scabs quickly but it continues to ooze fluids, black, purple and milky yellow — my mind drifting in and out of a half-sleep that brings infinitesimal dreams of elsewhere.

I am thin and thirsty when William texts me to tell me he is coming round to pick up his things. He discovers me on the floor in a disgraced puddle of my own mess. Speechless, he quickly removes a can of energy drink from his rucksack and pushes the metal to my lips. It tastes like deodorant but I gulp it down and wipe my dribbling mouth. He reaches down to grab my hand and pull me up, but I yank my arm away, wincing.

“I’m comfortable,” I say, like I am spelling out a new word.

“Look at the state of this place. You need to get out of here.”

“Is this my eviction notice?” I growl. “I’ve finally overstayed my welcome.”

“You think I care about this dump? I only came back today to see you.”

“Go then. Get out of my flat.”

William spends a long time packing up the remainder of his belongings and taking them down to the car. He pauses between each load, tossing me uncomfortable grimaces. I decline his further offers of assistance, not so much confrontational as dispirited. With a clunk, the bedroom door shuts. All that remains are the dead plants and those other belongings of William’s too trivial to be gathered in the haste of his exit. To my right, his grandmother’s ashtray holds an untouched candle, still wrapped in plastic and covered in dust.

Furious sounds of ripping and splitting come from all corners of the flat, of chewing and blood-curdling screams. I raise myself to my uninjured leg and hop to the door of the bedroom. The wasp, with

broken wings and one mandible hanging askew from its face, crawls through an opening in the nest.

“What’s happening?”

“Another wasp came in,” a garbled growl of human words.

I roll my eyes and exhale a deep breath. “Make yourself at home.”

We sit down on the floor facing each other. Bright sunshine beams in through the skylight, producing two short, ghastly shadows besides us. I push the half-empty can of energy drink towards the wasp, and it picks it up with its only remaining appendage on the middle segment of its body. The yellow liquid dribbles down the wasp’s disfigured face, turned away from the light.

I get up, don a collection of garments scattered around the room. Either mine or William’s, their origin is indeterminate, unrecognisable in the mess of it all. Wincing as the elastic slaps against my hips, I throw my only set of keys to the floor next to the beast. “It’s all yours,” I say. The wasp clicks its mandibles together.

As I begin to descend the concrete staircase to the street, leaning against the handrail to support my injured leg, the new residents can be heard boarding up the wood behind the front door with the remains of my furniture and the bodies of dismantled pupae.

# The Empty Corridor

Mary Crawshaw

It is very difficult to pinpoint the exact effect a death has on a room. It radiates a sour and grim truth, felt only in the presence of such an event. The experienced are used to this truth, they can look past it, tasting the peace and relief, or squalid injustice of what has taken place. Once this is in perspective, they might begin a long journey of release. For those who have never seen such a reality, or who witness and are stripped of the unthinkable, the moment is a prison. It traps them in the room, hopelessly searching for what is no longer there.

What a shame. Mrs Blight thinks as she watches the couple cling together, their sobs echo down the corridor and join the other emotions in ricocheting off the walls. This is a relatively straight forward case, they have lost his elderly father, sudden but natural apparently. Mrs Blight sees lucky people like them a fair amount, but she feels a deep sympathy, all the same. It helps no one to monopolise, she tries her very best not to. Such a lot goes on this corridor. It is packed with terrified traffic, footsteps and squeaking wheels, all of them hoping to reach the same destination. As if there is one.

Mrs Blight purses her lips and absent-mindedly begins to fondle her handkerchief, hoping she is not disturbing them. But with so much around them, this corridor is not a very private place. Its grey and brown sandy walls make a person want to scream. Always the same dull and lifeless grey staring directly back into the eyes of the desperate. It's the malaise of it all which often makes people angry. In this place the walls should either be alight with dark and inconceivable terror, or shining a bright and delightful mirror of the hopeful. They should not be like this. Yet hospital corridors remain an additional discomfort, and many who stare at them feel their emotions numb into a reluctant acceptance of life's sheer delicacy. A constant reminder that something is not quite right.

Mrs Blight has been here for so long now, she has had time to consider even the walls. Something most people only think about briefly, even in retrospect. She has concluded that she would spruce the place up a little bit, she's seen how most people like a fresh looking layer of paint. But she supposes that there must also be a middle ground, a place for penetrating sorrow or grit to flourish. It separates here from comfortable, low-stakes normality. All extremes can be found here, it seems unnatural to push it all together into the compact sides of one building. Mrs Blight concludes that the grainy beige panelled walls reflect that well. You wouldn't find them anywhere else. Here, people have the simultaneous realisation: how much they care about the colour of walls, and just how little it matters. Amongst all else that is going on around her, Mrs Blight just sits, wearing her favourite pink lipstick, holding her purple weathered handbag. She is ready to go at a moments notice. She is sure it won't be much longer now.

A lovely looking man, a doctor, steps out of the room with a desperate father, who has new worry lines being etched forever onto his face. He has a lovely daughter on this corridor's ward. The doctor gives a polite and delicate smile as he prepares his arsenal. With a steady, calm expression he wades through the news that his daughter is still alive. The father nods slowly, his hand running through his greying hair, steadying himself for the next charge. He is forcing himself not to burst with questions. Mrs Blight feels the same. She can also tell that the doctor's large, gentle form is heavy, from shouldering far too much power in the conversation.

A few years ago, Mrs Blight saw him laden in layer after layer of crinkling plastic on this very same spot. As he had walked down the corridor he had stopped, perhaps believing himself to be alone for a quiet moment in the dead of night. He put his hands to his face and wept.

Occasionally Mrs Blight allows herself to drift further along the corridor. Soaking in the goings-on. There are people on this corridor who are all alone. She often tries to do things for them. Mrs Blight will sit by them, wishing they would look up and see her. Maybe she does it for herself more than them, praying that in the raw and delicate point where life begins to slip away, they will acknowledge her. But

even the lonely make no connection with her. They lie on their backs, staring at the ceiling in their tender silence, until their quiet end.

In the corridor there are sets of cushioned plastic chairs. Mrs Blight sits in the middle of a trio, watching as the father from earlier comes up the hallway. This time, he has his other daughter with him. The girl has red hair and freckles, her eyes are wide with false confidence. Mrs Blight can pinpoint the red-haired girl's state of utter shock, she is walking through her own unique torture, certain that not a single soul could possibly understand. She wants everybody and nobody to feel it too. It always feels like that for the young. Mrs Blight knows the feeling bubbles up here more times than anyone would ever be able to count. The girl will get used to it, Mrs Blight wishes she could tell her that.

The father and sister take a visitor's seat, and they begin to make nervous conversation. Behind them, a delightful young toddler on a tricycle tumbles down the corridor, he is undeterred by the tubes taped into his body and his exhausted, petrified mother pacing closely behind him. He giggles with glee at every single thing he sees. The red haired girl watches him, the corners of her mouth pricking with slight conflict, until her features lift into a forlorn smile. Mrs Blight thinks the little boy is lovely. She smiles at him as he passes, but neither him nor his mother notice her. She sits back as they leave.

The next day, the red-haired girl and her father are visiting again. The father keeps his eyes fixed on his daughter, in her melancholy hospital gown as she nurses a glass of water. He has a tender arm drooped around his other daughter, who is holding a small chess set. She looks slightly more at ease today. The red-haired girl takes her seat beside her sister, who shifts wearily at the arrival of visitors, and then notices the game. They play it for what seems like hours. Genuine, lively smiles pour out of them, and Mrs Blight feels much warmer on that day.

Mrs Blight is unsure of how long she has been sitting in the corridor when the little blonde girl first walks past her. Her footsteps are a shy shuffle, as if she wants to leave no trace of her journey behind her. The little girl cannot be any older than six or seven, and she is looking

only at the ground, holding the large hand of her grandfather as he guides her through her first experience of the sparkling sombre hospital. She is clutching onto a bright green bag, the contents holding all security she knows. Mrs Blight wonders who she is here to see. She puts on her usual soft hearted smile as the child approaches. As they come down the corridor, Mrs Blight's ears prick, searching for remnants of conversation which might pass between the little girl and her guardian. But the only sounds are her soft muffled footsteps, in heavy contrast to the echoing thuds of the man next to her. She is still not looking around, focusing solely on her own feet, wrapped in dainty purple sandals.

Then something extraordinary happens.

As they approach, the little girl's eyes drift from her own shoes, to the feet of Mrs Blight. She stops walking, her confused grandfather tugging gently on her small arm. Slowly, the girl looks directly up at her, her shiny, young, inquisitive eyes take in the woman sitting alone on the corridor. She does something which hasn't happened to Mrs Blight for a long, long time. The little girl smiles back at her.

Her grandfather is confused. Without even a glance at Mrs Blight, he smiles down at the child and gently lifts her from the ground, continuing down the corridor. The little girl looks over his shoulder, still smiling at Mrs Blight before they turn off and enter their ward. Mrs Blight takes a long time to recover from the shock. Her heart pounds with the gleeful fulfilment of being acknowledged. She clasps her hands together, feeling utterly delighted. For a fleeting second she wonders quietly –

How long since that last happened?

She can't wait to tell him when he is ready to leave.

More time passes on the corridor. Mrs Blight is no longer sure of the difference between an hour and a day. She is excited as she waits for the little blond girl to return. But it is a long time before she sees her again.



Until then she sees so many things. Some which make her feel so sad she thinks that surely, that father, standing in his own anguish after losing his only child might share his moment with her. In a way, of course, he does.

She hopes that the doctor, who finds her mother on her own ward one afternoon, might want to sit with her. Still, no one else shares anything with Mrs Blight. They pass by her, and she feels excitement and fulfilment fade back into someone else's emotions. She is left hazy.

The day finally comes amid a racket of protest from a husband refusing to leave his new wife and baby for the night. Soft padding footsteps roll through the corridor, and there is the girl, her yellow hair dripping down her shoulders and her eyes glued to the ground.

Mrs Blight comes to life again, at the sight of her dear friend. She prepares herself, perhaps she will say a few words today. But as the figures approach, the little girl's grandfather begins to speak, and she turns to look up at him. They walk straight past Mrs Blight, who deflates into a familiar sinking feeling. She settles back into another quiet, unacknowledged hum of emotion.

Mrs Blight is disappearing.

She sits. For once ignoring the complex flow of delights and agonies which haunt her surroundings and the others clinging to the air. She wonders again how much longer she will have to wait. And then, there is the door. The pad of footsteps are back. A little bolder this time. Mrs Blight raises her head, and there she is again, staring right at her. For a moment, Mrs Blight is unsure of what to do. She sorts through fragile thoughts until her senses return to her, and she smiles fondly at the little girl, she must have seen her after all. They stare at one another, caught in a tentative confusion, and Mrs Blight is struck by how lost the little girl looks. She pats the seat beside her. The child watches the gesture, but does not move. Instead, she tilts her head slightly, as if wondering too many things, all at once.

"Hello." Finally, the little girl speaks. Mrs Blight is far more taken aback than she would like. Being noticed is one thing, a smile another,

but she has entirely forgotten the feeling of being spoken to. The girl takes up her offer, and shuffles over to the seat beside Mrs Blight.

“Hello.” She replies, and she waits for a moment, unfamiliar with the rhythm of conversation. “What are you doing here?” She wonders aloud to the child, who scrunches her lips together and looks down at her feet as they swing back and forth a few inches above the ground. She inhales slowly and wearily.

“I’ve come to see the new baby again.” Her voice is no more than a whisper. Mrs Blight can feel her throat beginning to constrict.

“I see.” She says. “And what’s he like?”

“Too small.” The girl says quickly. “Everybody thinks that he’s too small.

“Oh.”

“But he looks alright to me, he’s the same size as Biscuit.”

“A biscuit?” Mrs Blight says in surprise. The girl lets out a small chuckle.

“No, no,” she rummages around in her small bag, pulling out a teddy bear, no bigger than her own head. “*This* is Biscuit.” She giggles. Mrs Blight feels her mouth pricking up into a smile.

“Oh he’s lovely.” She reaches out to touch him, his well loved fur is made up of knotted brown patches. The child is cautious at allowing the interaction, a protective hand over her bear’s chest.

“I’ve had him since I was one day and six hours old.” She says matter of factly. Mrs Blight emits an impressed hum. “But we don’t put wires in Biscuit, even though he’s the same size as the new baby.”

And now there is a silence festering. Mrs Blight prays it will not be final, that the delicate exchange is not going to end. But she cannot quite summon more words, her focus is drifting to a dark corner.

“They did that to my baby.” She says suddenly. Her words feel as if they belong to someone else. The girl’s eyes move with anxious speed up to her face.

“Did it make him big?”

“It’s going to make him better.” Mrs Blight feels a whimsical smile on her face. She thumbs the strap of her handbag.

“How long does it take?” The girl asks. Mrs Blight is looking around.

*It will be over soon.*

“Well I... I can’t quite remember. But it won’t be long now.” She shakes off a despondent thought.

*There is a firm hand on her shoulder, easing her away from him.*

“Would you like a soft mint?” Mrs Blight asks the child, who is studying her closely.

“No thank you.” She says politely, her eyes are deep with curiosity.

*Come away now.*

The child is shuffling. There is a question on her lips which she is unsure how to form. Instead she looks away from Mrs Blight and back in the direction of her family.

“I wish the new baby would get better.”

“Me too.” Mrs Blight agrees. A restless prickling thought swirls in her head.

*I’m so sorry.*

“You can come and meet him, if you like.” The girl begins to offer. Her words are dripping in curiosity. Mrs Blight has longed for this invitation, to share herself, and moments with others. Perhaps this is why.

She does not want it anymore. It was better before, when she had faded into a desperate observer. It was better to be waiting. She shakes her head at the child.

“That’s very kind of you. But I won’t, if you don’t mind. I…” Her mind overtaken by ill- defined recollections.

*We did everything we could.*

Meanwhile, the question is fully formed.

“Where is your baby?” The child asks.

Mrs Blight is very still. He is back, all of him. Mrs Blight is real again, just for a moment, and she knows. She has been in this moment for so much longer than she hasn’t. She doesn’t answer the child. Instead, she begins to whisper.

“Actually, I think you might be the only one here.”

A melancholy mist is descending, taking charge of Mrs Blight once more. She will let it take her. Even now, she cannot leave. Instead she begins to fade again. The little girl says nothing.

“Thank you for talking to me. You go now, and see the new baby.” Mrs Blight tells the child. She watches her slide off the chair, her blonde hair bouncing slightly as she goes, and she walks slowly with her small bag back to the door, not once looking back at Mrs Blight.

The little girl walks into the room, and is wrapped in the arms of her grandfather. They talk gently to the new baby, settling into their wait.

The corridor is empty again.

Except for Mrs Blight.

And all the other ghosts, lost inside their faded moments.

# Jigsaw

Sadie Maskery

"I'm not a child", she said, petulantly, thus weakening her argument. Her daughter rolled her eyes.

"No one thinks that. You're going to get bored. I can call you and see you if you press the video button at the top right of your screen-"

"God forbid."

"But I can't visit until this is over -"

"Will I notice? You hardly visit any-"

"- and there was a donation of jigsaws to the home so there you are" she finished smoothly. "We thought you'd like it. You never watch the TV."

"Too quiet, and the remote always leaves the screen looking tiny."

"You're going deaf and it can be heard in the corridor, and you have to press the button TWICE, we showed you. You can have subtitles."

"If I wanted to read I'd pick up a book."

"We sent you books, you threw them at someone. "

"That SOMEONE tried to sneak up on me with an enema."

"She didn't sneak and you should eat your vegetables. Sarah says she's picked out one that should suit you. You don't have to do it."

"Other daughters arrange for their mothers to be smuggled gin. Other daughters slip cigarettes through the window."

"Other daughters are trying to kill their mothers. I am trying to keep you alive."

"What for. This is living death anyway."

"Just try the bloody jigsaw. I'll call tomorrow."

"I hate you."

"I love you too."

"There," said Sarah. "That was nice, wasn't it. Chuck us your phone, I'll wipe it for you."

"Bugger off," Mary replied, but absently. She pushed at the jigsaw puzzle box. "Why did you choose that one?"

"I don't know, it was that or kittens."

"Box is tatty, how can I see where things go when the picture is so scratched?"

"You'll manage. You like a challenge." Sarah perhaps smiled, invisible behind the mask but her eyes were already looking towards the door, the next inmate, the next duty call, and Mary didn't bother trying to detain her. Yes she was lonely, and the hours drifted over her in imperceptible, insidious layers, sediments of inane happenings, tea breaks, mumblings behind plasterboard walls, the drone and tiny tapping of a lost bluebottle beating against the double glazing that kept her hermetically sealed from the world outside. The silt of relentless unmarked time was what was killing her, suffocating her will to live. But so gently, so kindly. She was well looked after, she couldn't deny. The windows were set too high or her bed was too low. It was her bed from home, she had demanded that, but even propped up on pillows all she could see through the panes was a sliver of sky, and the pillows always slumped and left her awkwardly leaning against the wall. She could not watch people in the street below or see the building opposite. Sometimes a pigeon flew past and the

movement would make her heart skip a beat. But she would not call back Sarah. She knew she had received her allotted time. It was nice of her daughter to call. What was her name again? A good girl. Always had been. Not her fault she was so far away. And the lack of gin. Ah well. How can I do a jigsaw, Mary suddenly, furiously, thought, on this stupid little table. How many bits are there. It won't fit, it won't fit. How many?

She gently tipped the box and let the pieces slide onto the trolley table that slotted over her bed. "More than 856", she read on the lid. "That's helpful. What kind of number is that? I'll do edges at least, see if they're all there."

She started indifferently sorting into colours, corners and edges, and fitted a few together. After a few minutes the indifference shifted a little, just a little. Her eyes sharpened and she gave a tiny grunt of satisfaction when a line of five seemed to manifest under her questing fingers.

By teatime she had already completed the outline but was having to disarrange the sides to fit them onto the table. Sarah bent over her and oohed.

"You've done a lot already," she said, pleased. Most of the guests had just gone back to sleep and not even bothered to look. "You'll need a bigger table won't you."

She disappeared again and Mary assumed she was gone for the evening. Never mind, Mary thought with a little pang. But then she was back, huffing a little under the mask, with a proper wooden table, the old-fashioned kind. She dragged it through the door and then pulled up the leaves. "We can get it over your bed, it's a peg that slides out from under, not gateleg, that's why we keep it. One of the biddies -" she corrected herself "- guests liked playing bridge with her visitors. But she's passed. It's all right, I gave it a good going over with the spray just now."

Between them they carefully transferred the jigsaw over, and exchanged grins, or at least Mary assumed so. Sarah's eyes looked pleased anyway. "Are you all right then, all set up? Oh my God look at the time, Mrs Brady will be shouting on me. Is that you?"

"Yes, yes, bugger off," shoed Mary. "What is that bit now? It doesn't seem to match."

"They don't match the picture," she said to her daughter the next time she called. It was a few days. Things at the home were somehow ... Odd. Sarah's face gave nothing away behind the mask, but the sounds from other rooms seemed more urgent, less apathetic. The jigsaw was definitely coming together, and Mary's fingers twitched slightly as she glanced over the phone towards the table. That bit looked promising.

"What do you mean?"

"The picture is all faded and scratched so it's not clear anyway, but there's a part that doesn't match at all, the colours are all darker. I can't tell what it is. It's like night time."

"Oh my God I've heard about this. Some people do jigsaws and the pieces are all cut from the same template in the factory so for a joke they take parts of one jigsaw and swap it with the other jigsaw so you get like a train with a horse's head or a house with a bunch of flowers in the roof or something. It's so annoying. Someone's having a joke with the home. They've mucked up the jigsaw to prank you. What a shame. That's so cruel to do to old people. Throw it away, I'll get one on Amazon, they'll get it to you tomorrow. Some people are just so mean. I'm so sorry my love."

"No, it's all right." Mary hesitated. "I quite like it. I'll keep going now, see what it is. You can get me gin delivered if you like."

"Haha. So funny. Love you."



"Love you too." Whatever your name is. She passed the phone to Sarah who gave it a careful wipe with gloved fingers and looked cursorily at the jigsaw.

"What is it? Looks like a country lane and then the hedges all go black."

"Good, isn't it."

"Bit modern art for me."

Mary smiled and looked out of her sliver of window. It's the best view I've had for months she thought to herself. I like the plants in the hedgerow. It's been so long. What is that one? She slotted another piece without looking at the shape in her hand. Hawthorn. It knows where it fits. And there's some sort of creature. Where it gets shadowy, I can't see the shapes. What plants are those. I don't remember. And the birds. That's no pigeon. I wonder who gave it to the home. Joker.

She was so engrossed that she barely noticed Sarah leave. Sarah was distracted today anyway. From through the door Mary hazily noted that the muffled voices included more male conversations than were usual in the home. There was a coming and going. More shuffling as if more tables were being moved. Cars in the driveway perhaps. As she placed her pieces her hand seemed to blur a little. I'm getting shaky she thought. It's always warm in here but the air seems like treacle today. She blinked slowly. It's lunchtime soon. I can't smell cabbage. She laughed to herself. You never notice the smell of cabbage until you can't smell it. She remembered old people's homes she had visited before she herself was trapped in one. Always that smell of cabbage and stale urine. Her friends slowly drifting away from her. Sometimes with vague, pleading terror in their eyes as she said goodbye and left them: sometimes, more hauntingly, with nothing in their eyes all, nothing at all. Not me though, she smiled, triumphantly slotting in an odd shape with a funny patch of yellow. I do not go gently into that, whatever it was, night, oh it's a window. A lit window. It's a drive. The country lane leads to a driveway to a house. The dark patch seemed less fuzzy now she could make out the

intention of the artist. Where the individual pieces seemed only to have one shade, as they combined the picture shifted and settled to an integrated whole. A country lane leading from sunshine to somewhere twilight under massive trees with something ... Something shifting in the shadows through the leaves. It was not a bucolic scene. There were thorns, and the wildlife would probably... bite. And the house at the end of the drive was dark except for a few windows. No cosy cottage like on the jigsaw lid. But. I bet I could get gin there, Mary thought with a brief spark of happiness. Or absinthe. I wouldn't be given tea and sympathy.

There were more noises in the night and she shifted restlessly in her sleep. The duvet crushed her with its weight and her breathing seemed sharp and out of rhythm, staccato and random as water skittering over the gravel bed of a shallow stream. Not Sarah, but another shape, bent over her, and she awoke from a dream in a start. A man in a white cloak she thought wildly, but it was more like a spaceman. "What is it, what is it?" she shouted crossly. She was still half submerged in her dream, there was a doorway with a vast stony lintel, and roses, she could feel the flutter of petals on her face as she rang the bell but it was just the alarm in the next room and the shape above her straightened.

"She's a bit warm but I don't think so, I'll check again in the morning, let's get number 25 sprayed. What's happening with Mrs Brady?"

Another shadow from the corridor.

"Not good, I doubt she'll -" and the door closed and she fell back into her dream. Thorns in the hedgerow and roseblossom, so fragrant. She could smell in her dream. It was the house from the jigsaw puzzle perhaps. Perhaps. Maybe. Could she tell? And then Mary was awake, wide awake and her breath snagged in her throat, lances thrusting through her sleep into her very innards. I'm poorly, she thought. She reached for the alarm cord and then stopped. They'll take me away. Another small cold voice dropped into the silence, I'm dying. She

reached for the cord again. Do you not want to see how the jigsaw looks?

The table was only pushed towards the end of the bed; the pieces were just by her feet but it seemed as if she was climbing the face of a massive waterfall that thundered in her ears as she dragged herself upright and sat, clinging to the wood as if her fingers had become part of the grain. The moon shone through the curtains, there's luck she thought, and then no, it's for me. A massive spring moon, a supermoon to see me out. There were only a few pieces left to complete and they shone white in her hands as she placed them. The doorway was stone, she hadn't dreamt it, and there were roses against the wall at one side. She nursed the last piece and it glowed gently as she leaned forward. I'm going to have to pass through that lane and under those trees, she nodded, understanding. It's not safe. And it gets darker. But I can see light through those windows. It's a good solid house. And there will be gin.

Sarah's mask misted over with tears as she helped them remove the furniture ready for the sprayer.

"I honestly thought she was ok yesterday. It's such a bastard of a thing. We're all to shit here, you've no idea how tired we are, it's exhausting. I can't stop thinking about it, I get home and all I can hear in my head are the old ladies gasping for breath and trying to call out for help and there's nobody with them. It's killing us without killing us, do you know what I mean? We didn't even have time to warn her daughter she was ill, she just went."

"I know love," said the soldier.

"Oh my God and she didn't even finish her jigsaw. Oh no wait, she did. Oh what a shame. Oh my God what a shame. That's just such a shame. There's one piece missing. She worked so hard and after all that there was one piece missing." And she sobbed as the soldier gently led out of the room.

## Keep A Secret

R.N. Cogley

Ben's phone buzzes in his pocket as he makes his way up a long, gravel-filled driveway. The gravel crunches beneath his black, school-appropriate footwear and his uniform is sticky with sweat. The uniform shirt – baby blue in colour – is almost glued to his skin. It's too tight, but there is no point in buying a new one; Ben will be finished with secondary school in the coming months. The pants fit him fine, but the petrol blue uniform jumper has always been too big. Ben keeps the sleeves pulled up so the uniform does not look as baggy, but his exposed arms shiver in the cold air while he digs into his pocket for his phone.

“Are you nearly here?” the text reads.

“I'm outside,” Ben texts back.

Ben stares down the driveway and examines the big house in front of him. It's not the first time he's seen it, nor will it be the last. The house is white and its keystones are black. Usually, a big jeep and a luxury saloon are parked outside, each having the most up to date number plate as possible. But today, there are no vehicles parked outside the house.

“Cool. Come around the back. I'll let you in the back door.”

Ben sends a thumbs up emoticon back. He walks around the back of the house, stepping past a caged, barking dog. The dog isn't small, but he isn't big either. The dog continues barking as Ben knocks on the back door.

Will answers the door as soon as Ben knocks. He was standing there, waiting. Butterflies fill his stomach; they anxiously flap, sending an uneasy, nauseous feeling up Will's gullet.

“Oh, hi,” Will says. He opens the door wide and lets Ben inside. He doesn't look Ben in the eye; he's too nervous.

“Hi,” Ben says back.

Ben follows Will inside. They meander down a long entryway and into a large kitchen. Ben studies the surroundings. Everything is neatly arranged: all of the utensils are hung up, the plates are stacked and put away, and there’s no dirty dishes on the sink. All of the kitchen appliances match as well, both in brand name and colour.

“Do you want something to drink?” Will asks.

“No thanks. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

The two stand in silence; neither can bear to look the other in the eye. Will is looking at his feet. His white socks are stained with dust. Ben is still looking around the kitchen.

“Do you want to go into the sitting room?” Will invites.

“Sure,” Ben says.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything to drink?”

“Positive,” Ben says.

In the sitting room, the television is on. It’s paused but Ben can see the title of what Will was watching. It’s a documentary about the history of Ireland. The documentary is paused on an old map where Ireland is called Hibernia. If he were to press play and let the map evolve, Ireland would become covered by a British flag, Ben thinks. He shivers while thinking of this. Will sits down on the leather sofa, likely reclaiming the position he occupied before Ben arrived; Ben does not join him. Instead, he stays standing. Will is nervously tapping his heel against the floor. He’s not in his school uniform like Ben is, and he wishes he would’ve left his on to conform with his surroundings. He thinks this even though he is in his own house.

Ben has similar thoughts, wishing he would've changed into more comfortable clothes like Will had.

“Going for a H1 in history then, yeah?” Ben teases Will.

“I hope so,” Will says. “We’ll see how I do in the mocks first.”

“Sure, they’re only a practice test,” Ben says. “No point in even studying for them.”

Will shuts his eyes tightly. He wishes the mocks were merely a practice test but for him, they might as well be the actual leaving certificate exam. Will’s parents are smart – his dad is a barrister and his mam works in insurance. Ever since primary school, they’ve been hard on him. If he didn’t get a spelling right, he was forced to write the spelling out until he filled an A4 page. When he finished, his mother would flip the page and make him fill it all over again. And if he got below a B in an exam, there would be hell to pay when he got home, even if that exam was merely an end of chapter, in-class assessment. Ben does not have this pressure. His parents likely do not even know what seven subjects he’s taking for the leaving cert.

“Yeah,” Will lies. “It’s only the mocks I guess.”

In school, Will and Ben do not associate. In primary school, they were friends. They only lived a five-minute bike ride away from one another and even shared a bus stop. But when they made the jump to secondary school at the age of twelve, Ben became cool. Will did not. By now, everyone has forgotten that they were once friends. Even though they still share a bus stop, they affect not to talk to one another.

“Did you drive over?” Will asks. “I heard you passed the theory test last year and finished your lessons. Everyone in school is talking about it.”

“Oh, no. Mam would have a stroke if she found out I was driving unaccompanied.” Ben pauses for a moment, scrutinising the rest of Will’s statement. “And I doubt everyone is talking about my driving abilities,” he scoffs.

Will notices that Ben's cheeks are rosy red. He's embarrassed that people are talking about him. This isn't what Will expects. Ben rules the halls in school; first years clear the way for him. Surely, he wouldn't be embarrassed by something like this. In fifth year, a rumour spread around the school that he got to second base with Jessica Ryan in the back of bus on the way home from the Carlow IT open day. The rumour got so prevalent that both Ben and Jessica were called to the principal's office over the intercom. Everyone in the school knew what the matter was about, even the canteen staff. Will was on the bus that day too, but he didn't see anything. He was sitting at the front behind the teachers. Will and everyone else on the bus were called into the principal's office as well but nothing was said about the incident after that.

"Everyone's always talking about you," Will says.

"I wouldn't say that now," Ben says. He's still standing, his hands shoved into his pockets.

"People are saying you're taking Katie Doran to the grad."

"Are they?"

"Are you? ... Do you like her or something?" Will's arms are folded over his chest and he's squeezing himself.

"I don't know," Ben says.

"I see you sitting with her at break times."

"That doesn't mean I like her," Ben says defensively.

"Why would you sit with her if you didn't like her?"

Ben and Katie had been knocking around together since secondary school started. They were the first people to shift in the 'shifting box' in first year so their fate as the year's 'it' couple was sealed since then. They spent a lot of time together and sat beside each other in almost every class too.



Ben rubs his exposed arm. "I don't know. Why do people think I like her? Everyone is always saying that I fancy the hole off her."

"Because of the way you two act around each other, maybe?" Will says. "You spend most of your break times with her. She practically throws herself at you in the social area."

"She does not," Ben says, his cheeks reddening.

Will adds, "I avoid going to my locker because I can't bear to look at the two of you sometimes."

Ben rolls his eyes. He knows there's something deeper in what Will has said but he's too confused to attend to it.

"Sorry," Will says.

At first, Ben was uneasy about coming to Will's house. He hadn't been in years and hadn't spoken to Will for just as long. Ben still feels guilty for abandoning his childhood friend in favour of newer, more popular peers but Will and Ben had nothing more to offer each other after primary school; the friendship had run its course in Ben's twelve-year-old eyes. Ben was ready to speak to girls and play more violent video games whereas Will still wanted to play with rubber animals and play hide and seek. Their mutual silence toward one another endured for six long school years; that is, until this morning's PE class with Ms Brennan.

Ben wasn't participating in class; he was out with a pulled hamstring. He forged a note from his mother and Ms Brennan believed it. Will wasn't participating in PE either, but he rarely did so anyway. He always had an excuse: migraines, stomach aches, trapped nerves. Because they couldn't take part in class, they were put on clean up duty. Ms Brennan taught the class how to play badminton that morning so Ben and Will had to tidy up the nets, rackets and shuttlecocks when she finished her lesson.

"You're folding the nets wrong," Will told Ben.

Ben looked at him, confused. He hadn't heard Will speak since his voice had broken.

"You're supposed to do it like this," Will instructed, showing Ben how to fold and roll the badminton nets.

Ben followed Will's instructions. They rolled up the nets and hung up the rackets in the gym's storeroom. The storeroom was dark, neither Ben nor Will turned on the light.

"Hand me the rest of the shuttlecocks, will you?" Ben shouted to Will. Ben was standing on a mountain of gymnastic mats trying to put a box of shuttlecocks on a shelf.

When handing Ben the shuttles, Will's hand brushed against Ben's crotch. Neither of them said anything when it happened. Will was too frightened, and Ben was too surprised. Their gazes met but they quickly stepped away from one another, destined to never speak for another six years. Then something happened that surprised Ben: an erection filled his pants. It was hours after this – at big break when he should've been sitting with Katie – when Ben text Will's old number and asked if he could come over. Ben was amazed that Will still used this number as the company the digits belonged to no longer existed, but he was astonished when Will text back saying, "Yes."

"So, you don't like Katie then? It's just that everyone says you do." Will's questioning continues and Ben cannot fathom why Will is so interested in Katie and him.

"I said I don't know. I don't know who I like or if I like anyone," Ben huffs. His fists are clenched in his pockets and the veins in his arms are bulging from the skin. "Or even if I like girls," Ben blurts out.

Will's mouth falls open, but he quickly composes himself before Ben looks at him. "Are you gay? It's okay if you are," Will enquires.

Ben presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth and exhales loudly. His palms are sweaty and he can feel his pulse in his neck. He doesn't know the answer to Will's question, he really doesn't. Is he gay or bi

or any of the other letters in LGBTQ+ that he learned about in SPHE? Ben doesn't even know how many letters are included in the "+" of the term. Does he like men or women? Does he like both? Does he desire neither? Of course, Ben has had sexual relations with girls in his year and girls from schools in town in the past. But he doesn't know if he truly enjoyed the experiences. If anything, he saw them as more of a to-do list, a task that needed to be completed for him to move onto his next developmental stage. After he finished, he would just lie there and stare at the ceiling, full of regret. Ben would feel physically ill. He actually thought that was how it was supposed to feel afterwards, like how he always felt guilty after masturbating to porn in his family bathroom. Maybe all of the movies were lying, Ben considered. Maybe sex wasn't a great, liberating, once in a lifetime thrill. But Ben has never had a shared sexual experience with a boy. He has masturbated to gay porn before and enjoyed watching it, but he never labelled himself afterwards. Sometimes, he wonders if he'd feel the same way with a boy as he does with a girl. He doesn't know if he is the problem or if the concept of sex is the problem. How would he know?

Will stands up and moves closer to Ben. Now, the two boys are facing each other. Will feels something he never has before, like there's a balloon expanding in his chest. Will cranes his neck in Ben's direction but Ben pulls away slightly.

"What are you doing?" Ben asks.

Will is getting closer to Ben with every passing second.

"Tell me to stop," Will says.

Ben remains quiet.

"Tell me," Will says.

Ben stops pulling away. He leans toward Will with closed eyes and lets his body do the rest. In an instant, Ben's lips meet Will's. Ben feels his arms moving, searching for something, someone. But then he stops and steps away. Just as quickly as their lips meet, the two

boys are apart once again. For a few moments, neither of the boys says anything. The air in the room becomes heavy and the entire world stops spinning. Their eyes are locked onto one another's, like there is an invisible magnet between them. Then the gravel outside loudly crunches beneath the weight of a car. The sound of a roaring diesel engine accompanies the crunch. The magnet between them falls and Will flies to the window.

“Shit. My dad is back. He’s not supposed to be home until seven.”  
“Do you think he saw us?” Ben asks, wiping his lips.

“No,” Will says. “You can’t see anything when you’re pulling in.” Ben doesn’t say anything for a few seconds. He just stands there, dazed.

“You’ll have to go,” Will tells Ben.

“How will I get out?”

“Actually, just stay here,” Will huffs, running his fingers through his hair. “We can say we were studying history for the mocks or something.” Will is pacing around the room, panting.

“I don’t do history,” Ben says.

“Well, my dad doesn’t know that.”

Will and Ben quietly take a seat on opposite ends of the sofa. Will presses play on the documentary and Ben opens Will’s yellow book of past exam papers. Ben pretends to read the words on the page and Will pretends to watch the television. They act more awkward than they did before.

“Oh, Ben,” Will’s dad, Martin says when he steps into the sitting room. “I haven’t seen you in years. How are you keeping? How are the parents? Make sure to tell them I was asking for them, won’t you?”

“We were just studying for the mocks,” Will butts in. “Ben needed help with history.”

Martin completely ignores Will in favour of Ben. “So, tell me how’ve you been keeping?”

Ben, clearly uncomfortable replies, “Yeah, we’re all tipping away.” Ben rubs his knees and announces that he has to leave. “It was lovely seeing you again, Martin. I’ll tell mam and dad that you were asking for them.”

“And you too, Ben. Don’t be such a stranger in future. Come down whenever you want,” Martin says.

Ben leaves the sitting room and steps out the front door to be reunited with the crunchy gravel. He doesn’t say goodbye to Will and doesn’t look over his shoulder on his way out. Instead, his eyes are glued to the floor. Martin follows him to wave him out, asking about farming, if he still plays hurling and if he’ll keep up the GAA after the leaving cert. Martin still hasn’t greeted his son, Will. Will peaks out the sitting room window and feels the invisible magnet pull his gaze to Ben. Ben can feel the magnet too.

# The Oak Sprite

Andrew Crowther

A couple of days back, I think it was Monday, we were in the living room which looks out onto the back garden, and Julie said, “Do you think that tree blocks the sunlight?”

I said, “What tree?” and she said, “The tree in the back garden.”

I looked out of the window. “I suppose so,” I said, “yes.”

So then she said maybe we should get it cut down. We’d get more sunlight, she said, and I could see the logic.

Then, later that night, Julie had gone to bed and I was about to follow, when I got a shock; I jumped.

Because you see there was this knocking at the door. The back door, I mean. And that’s odd, because the back door doesn’t lead through to the front, it just goes into the back garden, and the back garden has a locked gate. So who it could be was more than I could think.

Anyway, I went to the door and I opened it and of course there wasn’t anyone there. And I was just going to shut the door again when it was as if there was a voice.

It said: Excuse me.

And I opened the door again and looked out. Then there was the voice again.

Don't touch the oak.

I looked out into the darkness and I said "Hello?" A bit cautiously, you know.

The voice said: Not you, which I didn’t understand at all.

I said, "Who's there?" but the voice didn't answer that, it just said: Every living thing is possessed by a sprite.

I thought about that, and I said something, I think it was, "Oh." Then the voice repeated: Don't touch the oak.

By now I was getting quite confused by this whole business, because it was just a voice without anyone there, and it wasn't making any sense. So I just said, "I'm sorry," and it said: I'm not talking to you.

So I asked, "What do you mean?" but it just said: Every living thing is possessed by a spirit again, which didn't take things any further. Then it said: Come outside. We must talk.

And I almost stepped outside without thinking, but I stopped myself and I didn't. I looked out again into the dark night. And for a moment, something hung in the air. Then it vanished.

I shut the door and, feeling a bit daft, I went to bed.

Julie was asleep. The window was ajar, as she prefers. I lay in the dark waiting for sleep to come, and then I drifted off and strange visions came to me as the wind blew through the night.

Next morning at breakfast, Julie said she'd had a really weird dream, but she couldn't remember what it was, so that conversation didn't really go anywhere.

Then I went to work.

It was a quiet morning in the shop. A young couple, nice-looking, shy, came in mid-morning and asked about one of the phones.

I said, "It comes with the latest version of Android and automatic security updates. It has free unlimited high quality photo storage and a picture-in-picture mode" (I showed them that) "and it lets you open an app with another one running. It's robust and it's surprisingly shock resistant." I keep a metal ruler on my desk so I picked that up and hit the phone with it two or three times till the screen shattered. It was

still lit up and I showed it to them. "You see," I said. Then I dropped it on the tiled floor. The case smashed and the innards sprang out. I said, "Unfortunately this is a defective item but," I said, picking up the next phone from the display, "you'll be absolutely delighted by the structural damage this thing can experience," and I hurled it against the wall, where it landed on the floor.

I could see the manager coming towards me, so I picked up the next two phones at the same time, using one against the other in a repeated movement. He tried to pull the phones out of my hands, but I wasn't having any of that and he wasn't in good enough training to stop me. The other assistants were stood there watching, but the manager shouted at them to help and then one of the bigger guys came over and persuaded me to stop.

Five minutes later I was standing outside on the pavement. I walked about town till my feet got tired, then I found a bench. It was a warm day, and it was nice to watch the world go by.

About one o'clock, I went home. I wanted time to myself so I could work out what to say to Julie when she got back from the office.

But actually, when I let myself in, she was there already.

"Hello," I said. "You're home early."

She said, "I've got the sack," and I said, "Now there's a coincidence," and then she explained.

"Something came over me," she said. "I called my boss a git. I said she was a waste of space and a liability to Western civilisation. I said I'd picked more intelligent forms of life out of my nose. I said some other things too which I've forgotten. Then she said Right, get out. So I did."

Julie sat down opposite and she looked a bit shocked, as if she was puzzled about what she'd done. So while I had the chance I told her what I'd done.



“Darling, what a nightmare,” she said, then we opened a bottle of wine and got very drunk. It doesn’t take much.

Later on, we were talking it over, and I don’t remember how we got onto it but I said, “It’s all the sprite’s fault.”

Well, Julie looked at me as if I was mad or something. “What?” she said, so I said it again, “It’s all the sprite’s fault.” But I could see she was still a bit confused, so I explained all about how the oak sprite had knocked at the back door and said Don’t touch the oak and everything’s possessed by a spirit.

An expression came across Julie’s face like a smile, but a bit worried looking too. “Right,” she said, “possessed by a spirit,” and I said yes. Then she came to a conclusion. “You’re drunk,” she said. “As drunk,” she specified, “as a drunk thing.”

“Well, yes,” I said.

“Besides,” she said, “it’s not an oak, it’s a beech.”

“What?”

“It’s not an oak tree, you dumbbell, it’s a beech.”

Then in that moment it all became clear to me. I said to her, “It’s all clear to me,” and I explained, I said, “This is what’s been happening, I can see it all. The spirit of the oak, or the beech, or whatever. It’s under threat. It knows we want to cut the tree down. And I mean, let’s be fair, it’s not going to be happy about that, is it, that’s where it lives. So it came to stop us from cutting the tree down. It got into us. Like you said, something came over us. It was the oak sprite, Julie. The oak sprite made us do it all.”

But then Julie shook her head. “No.” she said. “No. Look. You’re saying this sprite... oh, I can’t believe I’m saying this but, okay, this sprite came to you and said every living thing is possessed by a spirit. Yes?”

I said yes.

"And then it said it wasn't talking to you."

I said yes again.

"It was telling you, only you were too thick to notice, it was saying that you have a sprite in you.

Because according to it, everyone does. It didn't want to speak to you, because it wanted to talk to the sprite that's in you."

I thought about this. "I see."

She stood up. "Come on," she said. "We're both very drunk, you've got me saying stuff that makes literally no sense, and now we've got to go into the back garden and talk to a tree."

It was dark in the garden but not cold. There was a dry, gentle breath of wind.

"Right," said Julie loudly. She paused, uncertain. The tree remained a tree.

"Sprite," she said, and we both felt very foolish. There was a pause, then I turned to go back in and at the same time the voice spoke: Yes.

It was like a bolt of lightning. I span round and looked at Julie. Had she heard it? Her eyes were full of shock. She nodded at me.

She's bolder than me. She said loudly, "Who are you?" and the voice came: You know who I am. I am the spirit of the oak.

"It's a beech."

What?

"Look at the bloody leaves. It's not an oak, it's a beech." Then Julie drew breath and went on:

"Anyway, you sprite. I hope you're proud of yourself."

Sorry?

"Yeah, so you should be. You came to us, didn't you, and you had a good old chat with the spirits that are in us and they, they ruined it for both of us. Lost us our jobs. So, mission accomplished. Well done. I mean, and I'm going to spell it out for you because I don't know how familiar you are with sarcasm, what you have done is... well, I can't think of anything bad enough. No jobs, no income. Do you hear me? While you're swanning about being all fey and folk cultural, we will be up the creek without a paddle."

Julie can be very eloquent at times.

At length, the sprite's voice came, and it just said: Oh.

And then: Well, I'm sorry about that. But you've got it wrong. Every living thing has a sprite. Of course it does. The spirit is what gives consciousness, it is the spark of magic. The spirit is you.

And I said, "What?"

And it said: I didn't want to talk to you, I didn't want to talk to the sprite. Why should I? We sprites, we cling to the branches, we're not at the root. I had to speak with the ape, the essence, the part buried deep. I thought if I could bring that to the surface, just a little bit, then maybe you, it, you, wouldn't want to cut the tree down after all, and I would be saved. I'm sorry. It seemed the best way.

We stood there for a while, not speaking.

I thought: Who am I? Is it true that I'm not the same thing all through? Am I, I mean the real me, just the bit on the surface, the half-trained driver of an unruly engine? Then I thought about all the strange things I've done in my life without knowing why. The night seemed darker; the world seemed far away; even Julie.

Then the voice said: I can help you. It can make it all right again. It's really very easy. All you have to do is say yes.

Suddenly, and the voice didn't even have to explain it, I saw exactly how it would be. Somehow, it didn't matter how, everything would have gone back to how it was. It would be as if what had happened, hadn't. We'd have our jobs back, and our precious money. I would never have thrown those phones, Julie would never have called her boss a git. Our futures would be safe.

It was a moment of decision. I looked at Julie, and I knew my answer.

“No,” I said. “Thanks, but no.”

And Julie smiled and took my hand, and we walked back into the house, our futures gloriously unknown.

**Bees;  
or,  
The Simultaneity of Things**

Ricky Brown

“...and the wise man warns me that  
life is but a dew-drop on the lotus leaf”  
The Gardener: 46, Rabindranath Tagore

Meet The Beatles.

“How are things progressing on Sol 3 (B-229), Drone PCS 7088?”

“Well, Mother of All, it’s a little... complicated. Maybe we could save a little time if you just called me... P... PC... Peace?”

Mother Of All fixed her ocelli on Drone PCS 7088 while her compound eyes monitored the workers constantly providing her food and disposing of her waste. She pointedly expressed her next question by tooting a series of vibratory signals.

“You haven’t gone... native, have you, Drone PCS 7088?”

“Not at all, Mother of All. I am merely respectful of your time.”

“Very well, Peace. Enlighten me.”

Peace swallowed hard and launched into a speech he had practiced dozens of times in his head. He knew that he was asking for a lot. The denizens of Sol 3 (B-229) had recently discovered the means to destroy their whole planet. The Hive had already ploughed a huge amount of resources into that little blue marble, and it wasn’t clear that the test colonies the Hive had established there some one hundred million Sol 3 (B-229) years ago to ensure their species’ survival in the event of a catastrophic collapse at home would see out the next Sol 3 (B-229) century.

When he was finished, Peace waited patiently for Mother of All to weigh her decision. He had supported her since her first piping in G-sharp had announced Mother of All as the worthiest of the Virgin Queens. Sure enough, Mother of All had dispatched each of her rivals in record time. This, Peace was confident, was the dawning of a glorious Golden Age for the Hive.

At last, Mother of All shifted her long abdomen as a prelude to another vibratory burst.

“Four? You want that we should anoint four at the same time?”

“With all due reverence, Mother of All, we anointed El Greco, Galileo Galilei and Shakespeare practically simultaneously, and that has kept the denizens of Sol 3 (B-229) in good stead for four of their centuries. Think of it as an investment.”

“Hmmmmm... Peace and love, you say, Peace? It’s a bit on the proboscis, don’t you think? And all four of them in the same—what do they call them? Nests? Wouldn’t that call attention to our project?”

“Cities, Mother of All. And, no, I don’t think so. It’s a non-descript nest, if you will, on a wet, grey rock made mainly of coal. The people there—and everywhere else on Sol 3 (B-229), for that matter—will think it’s a lovely story. Four Lads Who Shook The World!”

“You certainly have a way with words, Peace. What would you call this operation?”

Drone PCS 7088 had given this a great deal of thought each night as he contemplated Sol 3 (B-229), twenty-eight septillion light years away.

“With your permission, Mother of All, Operation Across The Universe.”

Twenty-eight septillion light years away, a young boy ran onto a bus, looking panicked. The curiosity of an older boy in the same school uniform was piqued.

“What’s wrong with you?” the Bassist asked the fine-featured youngster who had dropped into the seat next to him.

“Did you see the size of that bee?” the Lead Guitarist responded. “It was bigger than your fist!”

Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.

Mother Of All was at the height of her powers, laying more than her own body weight in eggs every day.

Peace didn’t know where to look. He settled for a spot somewhere a Sol 3 (B-229) foot or so above Mother of All’s ocelli.

“Spit it out, drone. Can’t you see I’m busy? What’s the latest news of your project?”

“I’m reluctant to say, Mother of All. The progress of the anointed ones has stalled. The young seem to like them, but there is a feeling on Sol 3 (B-229) that they may be a flash-in-the-pan. The songwriters happily admit that their lyrics are secondary to their catchy tunes. I thought that the humans we had selected had the capacity for greater vision.”

There was nothing for it but to put himself at his Queen’s mercy. Peace told Mother Of All how he had expended further resources on another human—a skinny, enigmatic poet—in the hope that his challenge would spur the band on to greater heights, to a higher consciousness. The Poet had introduced the band to soft drugs, but while The Poet had begun performing with a backing band and his audience had embraced a new, youth-driven culture, the band were increasingly hemmed in by commercial pressures.

“Peace,” Mother of All vibrated with a sudden and unexpected sympathy, “I believe that I may have the answer to your problem. We need to be brave—the Hive’s very future may hang on us following the right path. You are aware, of course, that your Mother of All could have been a worker as easily as she became a queen.”

“Mother Of All, I hardly—”

“There is no need. It is an easily stated fact. It was a diet of our Royal Jelly that determined I should be transformed into a queen. I understand that similarly transformative substances exist on Sol 3 (B-229)?”

Of course, Peace had contemplated the possibility of having the Sol 3 (B-229) equivalent of the Royal Jelly administered to the band, but the risks were so high. The introduction of this new variable threw all of his simulations into states of uncontrolled standard deviations. What if the band dissolved into four constituent, self-centred and addictive puddles? Who could anticipate what might result from mass adoption of the substance and the band’s embrace of creative randomness? To make the call was above his station.

“There is no choice, Drone PCS 7088, when the alternative may be end of our very civilization. It falls to me, as Mother-Of-All, to make the fateful decision.”

Freed from responsibility for the outcome, Peace giddily engineered a pleasingly random and haphazard event to trigger the next stage of Operation Across The Universe. As the Lead Guitarist and the Rhythm Guitarist relaxed on cushions on the floor after an enjoyable dinner with their wives, the Lead Guitarist’s dentist spiked their coffee with LSD. The Lead Guitarist thought nothing of the slight hint of metal in his drink before a door inside his head opened up under a neon sign that flashed—Magic Theatre—For Madmen Only—Price of Admission—Your Mind. Virtuoso sitar music poured through the doorway and pooled at his feet and as the rich taste of the coffee overpowered the metal and expanded to fill his whole body the Lead Guitarist advanced towards the door and through it he could see the Himalayas and in the Himalayas he could see a line of yogis and yoginis stretching along a mountain ridge on the final leg of their journey to nirvana and they passed their brothers and sisters who had died on the journey and had completed the journey and were released from endless cycle of death and rebirth and they had always been there and would always be there in his head and on the mountain and



in his head and the Lead Guitarist knew that he had to join them on their journey and he followed his feet as they passed through the doorway under the neon sign and immediately and eventually he was careering through the late-night nest that was and would become and always had been Lowonidonjon and Londonjon and Llundein and Londinium and LDN and London and he had always known —

Helter Skelter.

Peace ran across the length of the Hive, climbing over his comrades in his haste to deliver the news to Mother-Of-All. He had hardly left his cell since priming the Dentist to spike the Guitarist's coffee. The band had quickly shown signs of fulfilling their destiny, and as the Drummer's delicate cymbal work and fat tom sounds had stretched time into a fine, filmy thread then compressed it into something viscous, sticky and thick, their thematic reach had expanded as they embraced deeper aspects of romance and philosophy. As their lyrics grew more artful, fans began to study them for deeper meaning. The Bassist and the Rhythm Guitarist and the Lead Guitarist had become more like the Hiveans—the mixed allusiveness of their work was a clear indication to a resident of the Hive that they now created across multiple dimensions, even if the inhabitants of Sol 3 (B-229) could not yet consciously think across dimensions. Since they had not developed that capacity, it was an unremitting task for Peace to hold the centre together. His cell was strewn with stacks of generating machines and simulators and tapes chopped to pieces and stuck together upside down and the wrong way around, and yet...  
And yet.

When the tapes indicated that the denizens of Sol 3 (B-229) were beginning to understand that any single induced feeling must often exist within the context of seemingly contradictory alternatives, Peace had felt with the conviction of a natural-born Sol-ite that the emergence of Sol 3 (B-229) as a fitting Ark for the inhabitants of the Hive was finally within reach, even if the exact path remained indistinct. Here surely, was a people with the potential, in all their untutored savagery, to avoid the mistakes that the Hiveans had already made and were making now and seemed doomed to continue

to make. Peace worked all the hours that Mother-Of-All gave, not noticing that his helpers were increasingly dominated by mostly young adults. He didn't notice that his appetite had deserted him, or even the number of comrades whom he climbed over to deliver the terrible news who were dead already. By the time he reached Mother-Of-All's cell, Peace might have said that he felt an hour of time on Sol 3 (B-229) had passed since he had heard that terrible news, if time had any meaning in the Hive. For Hiveans, all events throughout history had occurred simultaneously, were occurring simultaneously, and always would occur simultaneously, and the simulators could sense and record these events.

Until now. Now, the Hive had a future. That is to say, it was no longer possible to say with certainty what would happen to the Hive and the Hiveans who carried something of the Hive within them. And none of the Hiveans and none of their simulators had been able to see this event coming. There had simply been a blind spot and none of them had seen the blind spot.

Dusty piles of protein supplement lay in arcane patterns around Mother-Of-All's cell. Unable to make sense of the patterns, Peace looked directly at Mother-Of-All. He had never seen surprise and consternation spread across the face of a fellow Hivean before, as it did when the news he relayed from the machines swam into focus.

“Mother-Of-All, there have been awful developments on Sol 3 (B-229)!”

“Of course there have, Drone PCS 7088. These are merely symptoms of the problem that Operation Across The Universe is addressing. You are helping the humans move beyond this. You are like a god in that sense, I suppose. Except you don't play dice.”

The playfulness in Mother-Of-All's ocelli froze in the cold horror of Peace's gaze.

“No, but... You remember, Mother-Of-All, that the anointed ones were not thinking about their lyrics at all?”

“Secondary to their catchy tunes, you said. I can hear it in my mind as if you were saying it right now.”

“Right. We needed to give the humans at large something to hold on to. Messages that they could use to reach a higher consciousness. But they could only do that if they were doing the work—the hard Sol 3 (B-229) yards—themselves. So rather than pollinate manifestos in the anointed ones, we introduced an element of creative randomness.”

“And you’re convinced that this creative randomness directly led to these events? They couldn’t have been... a random event?”

“I’m afraid not, Mother-Of-All. It seems that the events were inspired by the anointed ones’ songs. The humans in question even made reference to two of them.”

Mother-Of-All’s antennae jerked blindly as the chronoreceptors housed therein tried to find some ultimate meaning to these events, some final outcome, but although she could see every atom in the universe and its position and direction of travel, the formulas indicated any number of possible conclusions.

“There is nothing to be done then, Drone PCS 7088. The operation must cease. We shall husband our resources instead.”

Peace had one last throw of the dice.

“Except, Mother-Of-All, the reason that the ringleader instigated these events is that he correctly intuited a message of civil rights in another lyric. I think that we might be on the cusp of achieving something quite incredible if we can just extend this emergent empathy a little further.”

Somewhere in the unknowable future, the bearded man stared at his interlocutor and ranted and raved and gesticulated wildly.

“Will of God...” His hands spun as if quite detached from his wrists. “Whatever you wanna call it... you call it Jesus, call it Mohammed,

call it goobybob, call it nuclear mind, call it blow the world up, call it your heart.”

The interviewer was surprised to be quite unaffected as the bearded man grabbed his arm. The swastika on the man’s forehead was almost cartoonish. But the interviewer swore afterwards that the man smelled of evil.

The End

Peace listened to his favourite song by the anointed humans one last time. It sounded to him like the perfection of a thousand Mothers-Of-All piping at once, except the final chord was in E-major, not G-sharp. It rung out for over forty seconds as he made his way across the Hive. Peace was so tired. Resources in the Hive continued to be hoarded for domestic use. There was no need for the simulators to be operational, or for Mother-Of-All’s chronoreceptors to be receiving. Peace knew what was coming, and Sol 3 (B-229) would not serve as an ark for the Hiveans. In the time it would take to travel to that planet, that ark, it would have burned.

Still. One of the inhabitants of Sol 3 (B-229) had described the chord as a forty-second meditation on finality that leaves each member of the audience listening with a new kind of attention and awareness to the sound of nothing at all.

Peace vibrated ruefully. No one in the Hive or on Sol 3 (B-229) would ever know, but he had come so close. At least he had this. The song could be described—had been described—as the crowning achievement of the most important cultural phenomenon on Sol 3 (B-229) during Peace’s lifetime. At least the people of Sol 3 (B-229) had that.

The chord finally died as Peace entered Mother-Of-All’s cell, replaced by babble and a tone above the limit of human hearing.

“Turn that bloody rubbish off!” Mother-Of-All yelled.

“Turn that bloody rubbish off? You haven’t gone... native, have you, Mother-Of-All?”

This close to The End, Peace felt that he could afford the casual tone. Mother-Of-All even smiled indulgently.

“I suppose this is it,” she said. “I’m sorry I had to pull your resources, but I managed to run one last projection with what we had. They were never going to make it.”

“I know.” Peace kicked over one of the piles of protein supplement in resigned disgust. “But I’ve run projections, too. If we remove the signals, our input, this is the end result —”

Peace turned the bloody rubbish off and cued up The End Result. An orchestra tuned up before the tap of a conductor’s baton and a frog’s Ribbit signalled the beginning of the piece.

“Surely you can’t allow this to happen, Mother-Of-All?” Peace asked as the frog chorus began its song. “What about our cousins on Sol 3 (B-229)? Hope may have passed for us, but isn’t there something we can do for the bees? Maybe we could create some kind of oasis for them?”

“Oasis, you say? Peace—you’re definitely sacked.”

As the laughter of beings who had been happy and were happy again vibrated through Mother-Of-All’s cell, three young men begin a two-hour rehearsal with their new drummer before they perform at a dance sponsored by the local horticultural society in Birkenhead. It goes well. As the four laugh and kid around, a band of four men—not so much older—conclude a tight set played on a rooftop that briefly relieves the pressure of a miserable month while another young man gratefully accepts the fantasy gift of a signed double album from the Rhythm Guitarist and resolves to meet him again later under the archway entrance to his apartment building and the Lead Guitarist reflects on life and thinks that you’d better believe that it’s fragile like a raindrop on a lotus leaf as the oceans and the mountains of Sol 3

(B-229) burst open while all of the inhabitants of that little blue marble from the smallest to the biggest live and laugh and love and Mother-Of-All and Peace and a few nurses stay on the Hive while the rest of the Hiveans disappear because that's how it works and while all of these things are happening millions of humans are playing the songs of the four young lads anointed at Peace's behest millions of times and —

“There never was a time when you or I did not exist.  
Nor will there be any future when we shall cease to be.”

Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2—Verse 12

# **I Love You, Charlie Ford I Love You**

Graham Bibby

In the six months that Maisie Parsons had known Charlie Ford, she'd noticed three very distinct things about him.

Firstly, he was a true gentleman, more so than any other man she'd ever been with, yes a couple of them would hold a door open for her from time to time but Charlie, well he would pull back the chair for her at the restaurant, hold her coat for her and once, when she was in pain with the cramps, he even put her shoes on her feet.

Maisie liked that, she liked it a lot.

Secondly, he did not swear. Not once had she heard him use foul language or take the lord's name in vain, even when he'd trapped his fingers in the door of that old Pontiac he drove around in, he just took a deep breath, stretched his fingers out and said.

'Well, I guess that's my penance for the day.'

The third thing she'd noticed about her man Charlie Ford was that at no time during the day or night, not even when they were intimate, did he ever remove his shirt.

Not once had she seen the curve of his shoulders or the shape of his back.

He would unbutton it down to the waist but always leave one or two fastened so she could place her hands on his chest but could not wrap her arms around back of him.

Not even during the heatwave had he ever looked like taking it off.

In bed, at night she would ask.

'Charlie, take off your shirt, I want to be close to you'

In reply, he would kiss her lightly on the lips and say.

‘No honey, I just don’t feel comfortable like that, you know how shy I am.’

He would kiss her more firmly and she’d forget about it until the next time.

Now Maisie knew she was falling in love, the feeling became stronger each time they met and the ache she felt when he left her had risen beyond any kind of infatuation, she was hooked, he had become her reason to rise with the morning sun and he filled her thoughts and actions throughout the day until sleep took her to dreams of him that shone like beacons in her mind's eye. At times the dreams were so real she would fight to stay with them as the early light touched her face and the living world demanded her attention.

However, despite the emotions she now felt for her man, there was the one issue that nagged at her, the business with the shirt.

It shouldn’t have and part of her felt ashamed that in a way she didn’t trust him, thought that he might be hiding something, a tattoo, a deformity or some such.

What, she thought, could be so bad or shameful that he would hide it away like this.

And although she tried hard to bury the feeling, she could not, and early December morning the truth, as it has a habit of doing, came out.

They had been to the Pavilion Club, Charlie knew some folks there and the Jazz was good. The place had a reputation for attracting unusual individuals, people that didn’t necessarily fit in elsewhere, either in the local nightclub scene or in life.

This particular night they had danced and enjoyed the many cocktails the Pavilion was famous for and ordinarily they would have left around midnight but such was the heady atmosphere in the club that



neither of them wanted to leave so when they finally arrived back at Charlie's apartment it was almost dawn.

They undressed and collapsed into the big, oversized bed Maisie loved so much. It was soft and comfortable, cosseting the sleeper it brought a sense of security and well-being she had never known before, this married to the fact Charlie was laid right there beside her made this bed her favourite place on earth.

Charlie fell to sleep right away, he slept as he always did, on his back with his shirt unbuttoned to the waist.

Maisie though, stayed awake. Her mind full of images and sounds from the night and she watched Charlie for quite some time as his chest rose and fell with every breath, illuminated by the blue neon lights from the drug store across the road.

Eventually, she could hold back no longer and stretched out her hand allowing it to hover just a fraction of an inch above his skin, the warmth of his body rising to her palm, then she moved her hand down towards the two remaining buttons on his shirt and slowly, whilst hardly daring to breathe, began to unfasten them.

He did not move but as she drew back the front of his shirt she feared that the sound of her heart might wake him. It did not and so, in the blue neon wash of the drug store lights, she gingerly slipped her upturned hand underneath Charlies' back.

Exactly what she was expecting to find she didn't really know but it wasn't long before her fingertips touched a gentle ridge that seemed to run down the length of his back, it was warm to the touch and made her hand tingle with gentle electricity.

It also woke Charlie from his slumbers.

Startled, he rose quickly and turned to sit on the edge of the bed with his back towards her, as he did Maisie took hold of the shirt at the collar and pulled it down, she held on tight, pulling it towards her which kept Charlie where he was.

‘Don’t do this Maisie, I’m begging you.’

He looked over his shoulder at her ‘Please!’

But she was transfixed on two parallel scars that ran down his back, around 7 inches apart and a quarter-inch wide.

They glowed with colours that moved and ran into each other, they seemed to be alive in a way she could not fathom and as she ran her fingers down them they reacted to her touch, glowing with an ebb and flow, almost as though they had an emotion and feeling of their own.

‘Why Charlie, they’re the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen, what in God’s name are they?’ Charlie pulled at the shirt and freed himself, now standing he slipped it over his shoulders and turned to face her.

‘If I tell you you’ll say I’m a crazy man, you’ll leave me and I don’t know if I could stand that’ He leant against the wall, hands clasped behind his head, eyes closed.

‘I couldn’t stand that’

His voice was so quiet she could barely hear him.

‘Just tell me Charlie, don’t think about it, just tell me and I promise I’ll still be here because right now I can’t imagine being anywhere else but here, with you.’

She rose from the bed and walked over to him, rested her head on his shoulder. ‘Tell me Charlie, it’ll be OK’

And he was defeated.

‘Well’ He began. ‘A long time ago, I saved a boys life. He was drowning and while others stood and watched I removed my good shoes and went in after him, he wasn’t too far out but when I got to him, he was as good as dead. Anyhow, I dragged him back to shore and by that time a doctor had arrived and set about thumping on the boys chest, you know, to try and bring him back. Then a cop car

turned up with its sirens wailing and lights flashing, it seemed like the whole town had arrived.

Now everyone was focused on the show so to speak and they forgot about me, me who'd gone back into the water to get my wallet that was floating away with my last twenty dollars in it. Nobody saw me get pulled down by the undertow, they didn't hear me cry out for help or come to my aid.

So on that day I drowned instead of the boy and for that sacrifice I was taken up by God to sit by his side'

He paused for a moment expecting a reaction or comment of some kind, but there was none. She just stood there, arms around him and her head, resting on his shoulder.

'So' he continued. 'Before I go any further you should also know that since I had been a young man I was not unfamiliar to gambling dens, casinos and the like. It was an addiction for me and a strong one at that, I failed to quit it in life and boy did I try, but even after I'd passed to the Lord's kingdom I couldn't shake it out of my head and eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, I went looking to get myself into a game of cards with Lucifer himself as I figured he was the only one who could help me and sure enough he offered me the chance for one last game, but the stakes were high and I only had one thing to bet with'

Maisie raised her head and looked up at him.

'Your wings?'

'That's right, the deal was that if I won he would take the gambling addiction from me so I could reside peacefully in Heaven without needing to lay down money all the time. if he won, he would get my wings.'

Charlie wished she would say something more, be shocked or call him a fool or anything, but she didn't, she just stood there, running her fingers along the empty scars where his wings had once been. He

looked over at the drugstore, the old guy who owned it was opening up for the day and Charlie wished he could swap with him, be him in any way possible.

‘What happened?’ Asked Maisie ‘What happened next?’

‘Well the arena he chose was packed with every vile creature that had ever been sent down to him, I couldn’t think straight for the noise and stench, the heat was incredible and I could hardly see the cards through the thick, black smoke.

Everything was in his favour and, as I was supposed to, I lost, as soon as the cards went down and I saw those Aces all lined up and that terrible smile on his face I knew what was coming and his beasts fell upon me with anger and purpose, they ripped the wings from my back and kicked me out into the world, a world not meant for the likes of me.

So now I have nowhere to go, I can’t go back up there and I don’t belong down here, all I’m left with are the scars on my back. Scars that no one’s ever seen or touched, not until you that is’ The sun had risen to replace the blue neon and as they stood together knowing that all things had changed for all time, Maisie asked her man Charlie Ford a question

‘Will you watch over me Charlie?’

‘Of course I will," he replied. ‘always,’

She stepped back from him and lifted her hands to reveal the shifting colours that had once danced across the scars on an angel's back had now spread to her own arms and shoulders before making their way down her back and chest.

‘Have I saved you Charlie, Have I?’

The words hit him hard as he reached around to touch where the scars should have been, but they were not to be found.

He stepped forward to take her hand but could not, what was happening here was not to be undone. She smiled at him as the colours touched her face, almost all of her now consumed with brilliant, shining colours and textures. She was no longer of Charlie's world.

And she breathed words so quietly he could barely hear her.

'I love you Charlie Ford, I love you'

## Silver Strings

Nikita Parik

As Nina stood outside her grandmother's house in her native Indian village, the crumbling state of the outer walls of the residence surprised her. A wave of hot, bubbling, almost sickening, nostalgia hit her core with a strange strength. She took a few hurried steps inside the doorway, curious about the extent of decadence the rest of the experience was to bring for her. A loud murder of crows greeted her in the courtyard, followed by a sea of people dressed in colors her subconscious had ached for in the States: mango green, fuchsia pink, sunflower yellow, soft-focus blue. Today, however, she only had eyes for a fountain of silver in this jungle of colors. Her eyes darted back and forth until they found it- the back of her grandmother's head as she lay sunning herself in the afternoon sun in the farthest corner of the decaying house.

Past gushed out from the scalp of her grandmother as perfectly sparkling silver hair. Nina stepped closer, wanting to rush over and spool those long tresses around her fingers, like she used to when she was little. "Unicorn hair", she murmured. '*Buddhi ke baal*', or the fancier term, 'cotton candy' that she had learnt in her first week in New Jersey. She chuckled. Silver clouds over pre-monsoon skies, she thought fondly. Sparkly, silver unicorn blood in bright Indian sunlight. Liquid dreams- floating between the conscious and the subconscious, between the states of being and unbeing. The silver haze from a waterfall on a hot, bright day.

Another few steps in, and she marveled at the perfection with which her grandmother's silver tresses contrasted with the yellow-gold sand of the land below the *charpyoy*. '*Dharti Dhora ri*' - The Land of Sand Dunes- the one and only, Rajasthan. Her Rajasthan. Memories of playing *pitthu* from when she was a six year old surfaced in her mind like the sun slowly surfacing in the desert horizon after a night of bitter cold. She'd often lose at the game, and her grandmother would pacify her with her favourite foods - a plate of colorful wonders: soft grey-brown *bajre di rotli* with snow-white dollops of home

made *makkhan*, fiery red *kaachri ri chutney*, soft-green *saangri ro saag*.

Tongue is the centre for all core memories, she surmised. It facilitates food as core memory through taste, and also language as core memory through the utterance of the mother tongue. This food that was a part of her identity, food she had dreamt of in her initial years in New Jersey as a teenager before acclimatizing to the local culture: dreams that began to fade as she entered High school, almost disappearing by the time she entered NYU as a freshman for a degree in English. The lilts in her language had also replaced themselves with newer lilts. She did not sandwich friendly vowels between dry, angry consonants anymore- glass remained glass, and did not morph to *gilaas*. A lot of word-initials were now aspirated, many end-consonants left unpronounced- Pin was now *Phin*, rubber, *rubbaa*.

A new identity had overtaken her while the old one from her childhood got buried within the treasure boxes of her mind. Today, they opened one after another in rapid succession, like rapid fireworks one after the other on the 4th of July. Most of these surreal memories for her were tied with her grandmother: losing her shoes while playing in the sand dunes, only to be rescued by *daadi* later, petting a wounded camel, feeding it food that *daadi* had prepared specifically for it, practicing numbers with her by counting the stars in the clear night sky, memorizing "paharas" or mathematical tables in her native tongue, Rajasthani... A wave of memories drowned her, taking her by surprise at how much lay buried in her subconscious.

She passed people by in a daze, barely registering faces. As she walked on, she wondered how in-between spaces become home without one actively realizing it. A lot of time had passed between then and now. She had always been an outsider in USA with her long braided hair, her wheatish complexion, her specific tastes in food and fashion. She had felt like one in India too since the first time she had arrived here from USA a couple of years ago, with her different English, and a stranger temperament. Maybe people who were destined to occupy the hyphens eventually master the art of making a home of it, she thought. Existence, for them, splits in two, traverses each side of the hyphen, beautifies the aesthetic of belonging in

the *unbelonging*. These chasms are then filled with uncertain flowers, the soil planted with a unique language, sky colored with a potpourri of an eclectic cultural mix, rivers taught to hold on and to let go at the same time. The hyphen often becomes the anchor, silently holding two worlds together, without one being necessarily aware of it. However, some instances, such as this one, overturn the balance in favor of one over the other side.

Mind wrapped in these woolly thoughts, she stumbled against someone and almost lost her balance. "Oh *baisa*, you've grown up quite a bit! Sarita! Look who is here! It is *baisa*!" It took her a moment to register that it was Ram Dayal *kaka*, their neighbor. The wounded camel from her childhood used to belong to his family. She had spent many summer afternoons playing make-believe in his garden and drinking *bel ro sarbat* and fresh *chhaas* prepared by his wife, Sarita *kaki*. She looked ahead and saw that grandma was just a couple of steps away now. Ram Dayal *kaka* followed her eyes and his tone grew somber, "She only talked of you in her last few days, *baisa*. Our condolences. Wish you could have arrived sooner". Somebody was now shrouding grandma's fragile little body and head of silver hair in a white cotton cloth. She felt the floor melt underneath her legs and all the nausea that she had held inside made its way out from her mouth in one quick movement. The night stars that had once helped her count surfaced in broad daylight, filling her vision. She was now falling, falling, falling into strange, blurry depths.



## The Anti-Death Note

Joao Coimbra

I can't remember exactly how it came into my possession, except that before I threw myself into bed I emptied my pockets and plunked face down onto my duvet.

Still groggy from last night's work do I opened one eye and peered at the red blinking 3:45 back at me. In the corner of my vision – I saw my keys, some change and crumpled up receipt on my bedside table.

Being the new intern, last night's conversation inevitably came to the topic of my upbringing, my parents, where I was from.

'What was your Grandfather called?' She asked politely.

'Geronimo' you remember responding.

'How do you spell that?'

You recall searching for a pen in your suit jacket to write his name on the back on the receipt.

A hard knock at the door brought my attention to the present.

Startled, I hid under the covers pretending I was asleep. A moment passed and the second knock was harder this time. I crept towards the door, trying to peer into the peep hole while still trying to pretend I wasn't in. As I looked through I saw a tall dark figure.

'Well are you going to let me in, Joe?'

My pulse quickened, this voice rung a distant and familiar note in my mind, I had hear it a life time ago. I squinted in focus a second time, and the figures resemblance reminded me of a photo from my childhood. One of an older couple, black and white sitting on a low brick wall, holding a baby. It dawned on me, and I slowly opened the door, gaping at the figure in front of me.

He stepped forward into my living room.

‘Grandad?... but how?’ I whispered

‘The note.’ He said very matter of factly.

I was only two years old when Grandad passed from lung cancer, and only remember him from stories and pictures, like the one I kept on my fridge. He thumbed at the photo fondly and turned it over.

‘*Geronimo and Layla with Joe 2001*’ was written in smudged loopy swirls.

‘So what’s it like?.. after all of this?’ the question had made a lump in my throat since he had been sitting here. I tried to start a conversation but ‘*How are you?*’ seemed a bit redundant.

‘Its what you would expect’, he said fleetingly, ‘but not everyone you think is there.’

Of the stories I had heard about Grandad, not many family members spoke highly of him, or at all. Brash and abrasive at the best of times, alcohol the biggest culprit. But I didn’t see this in him, I saw a sombre man with salt and paper hair, one who had been a long journey - clothes wrestled and drooping on his spindly frame- just satisfied to be sitting.

Maybe out of pity, or wanting approval, I padded to my room and reached for the note on my bedside table. Still crumpled in my hand I opened my palm towards him, sitting there like a misshapen lotus flower, one that has been folded over and over, crisp replaced with crumpled I offered the note to him.

He looked at my hand, then me.

‘Don’t ask me how’, I mumbled

‘But when you write a name on the back of this paper, that person comes back to life’ I offered him a pen.

Grandad sat contemplating for a moment, the pen hovering over the crumpled canvas.

Then in an instant he began with the letter ‘L’

# Blackberries

Kate Durrant

It's easy to pass 26 years.

It flies by in a blur of school and work and the mundane busyness that is the bread and butter of day to day life.

The first step, the first time a tiny hand clasps yours, the first time you hear that most beautiful word 'mummy'. Tiny teeth left under sleepy pillows, parties and chicken pox, and children with bit parts as angels in Christmas concerts. Shepherds pie every Tuesday, homemade cards too precious to ever discard, and slammed doors and broken teenage hearts.

And its all those firsts, all those little miracles, all those long days and short years, that bring us all to soon to our goodbyes.

But 'Feed them,' as that famous quote doesn't say but should, 'and they will come back.'

And they do.

Parenting books don't have a chapter on waiting.

They should.

You wait to get pregnant, you wait to give birth, and spend a lot of time waiting for them to go to sleep, only to wait for them to wake up again. You wait outside school gates, on side-lines, by swimming pools and sometimes beside scary looking hospital beds holding impossibly small bodies.

As the years pass, you wait for that key in the door when they've 'missed the last bus and we won't even go into the unquantifiable amount of time that you wait for them to answer their phones.

But it's *always* worth it.

I sense him before I hear his key turn in the front door as he arrives home for one of his irregular and much loved visits home.

My son, all blonde hair and legs, six foot five inches of perfection. Well, to me anyway.

He catches sight of me waiting at the open kitchen door and makes a move in my direction, realising as he does that he has forgotten his belt and I laugh as he pulls the top of his jeans firmly up, thinking of those innocent days when a small boy running out of the school gate to his waiting mum would notice that he had forgotten his belt and would stop to pull up his pants too.

His smile lights up his face as he bounces over, bridging the weeks since I have last seen him in three long strides.

'Hi Mum,' he grins as he drops a kiss on the top of my head and I close my eyes as I grin back, inhaling the moment.

I put the kettle on to boil for coffee wondering, as I do, when he became old enough to drink coffee, as he opens the fridge, searching for a custard slice or a sausage roll, knowing that there will be something special there for him, as he grabs the milk so we can make pancakes for lunch.

He passes me the two litre plastic container as I take the flour and sugar out of the cupboard and mix the batter, the kitchen air hazy with floury dust and familiarity.

Taking his jacket off and throwing it haphazardly onto the couch, he sits down heavily into the kitchen chair that has been his since his little feet could only hang forlornly into thin air, legs not long enough to touch the ground.

He kicks his size 12 shoes off under the table as I pass the first of many thin pancakes to him which he liberally tops with golden syrup

and lemon and sugar before inelegantly tucking in as I lean against the cooker waiting for the next one to brown before flipping it onto his plate, watching him lightly as I do so.

'Remember The Pancake House at Centre Parcs Mum,' he asks as the golden syrup drips down his chin and I ignore my phone calling me, not wanting anything to dilute this precious time as my son and I chat with that wonderful shorthand that only exists between two people who once were one.

Patting his flat stomach in appreciation he shakes his head 'no' to my unspoken question of 'more' and pushes his plate to one side, bouncing up from the table leaving a trail of congealing syrup and screwed up napkins behind him, the debris of the small boy he once was.

'Will we go blackberry picking, Mum,' he asks, mischief in his voice.

Not waiting for an answer he pulls open the deep kitchen drawer, the one full of 'useful items', as he plunges his long arms into the mess of Tupperware, food scarred pots and lidless butter dishes.

'Aha,' he cries as he bangs two old enamel trays onto the counter before kicking the drawer shut with his foot.

'Will we go now?' he says, clapping the tins together in anticipation before handing one to me, knowing what my answer will be.

I close the laptop, saving the work email I was composing to the draft folder, work that he is blissfully unaware of, knowing, as he has always known, that there is nothing more important in my life than him, his sister - and blackberries.

I tell the dogs we're going out and throw the keys into my pocket, leaving my mobile phone on the table. Blackberry picking with your son is no time for interruptions.

The berries that have caused all the excitement are only steps away hidden in the bushes that edge the green where he played football and

built dens, and no doubt got up to greater devilment as his legs and ambitions grew longer.

He's way ahead of me, mouth and hands already stained with the juice of childhood memories, his tin remarkably bereft despite his speed in picking the succulent offerings that it seems have been waiting just for us.

Heaney-like, my pickings sit 'Like a plate of eyes' in my tin and I smile as I watch him take a photograph of his purple laughing face in front of a bush heavy with fruit.

An image, no doubt, already winging its way to 'the lads' and across the world to his sister, and early fruit picking partner, in Australia.

We chat as we pick the precious fruit that binds us.

I tell him about the dogs and how my begonias have been eaten alive by the slugs this year, and he tells me about a game of seven a side with the lads and Crypto Currency, although really I am only looking at him and hearing his voice not his words.

'You can show phenomenal growth if you invest wisely,' he says, scrolling through his phone with his free hand excitedly showing me charts and graphs.

I smile and look instead at the phenomenal growth of my 26 year old investment, thinking of the love I have speculated over the years and how it has repaid me so handsomely, and I reach out to touch his hand and say, 'I know, son, I know.'

A message slides into his phone, interrupting his train of thought, and he smiles as he sends a fast reply.

'I'll be off now, Mum,' he says, stealing a berry from my nearly full tin, as he hands me his nearly empty one, his enthusiasm for this childhood pastime spent as he strides away, dropping a laving kiss on my head whilst laughing at the responses to the photograph he sent earlier now ping-ponging into his phone.

I pick another few berries as I slowly make my way home to the waiting work, the sleeping dogs and the empty house.

He drives past, pipping the horn, and I wave at the back of his car knowing, as Seamus Heaney so beautifully said of children and blackberries alike, that 'Each year I hoped they'd keep, yet each year I knew they would not.'



## Think Local, Act Global

Tim Love

She The town of Braintree where I grew up sounds like something in Dr Who, with cerebellums dangling from branches. Plain old Brantry, the town of bran, would be more fitting. The river I crossed there on the way to school was just *the river* and my mother was *mummy*. Only at school did I learn that rivers had names. Letters I took home from school were addressed to Mrs Davis - a kindness, because she never married. In the playground she was called worse things. She could have made up a story - her husband dying in a plane crash while she was pregnant for example - but though she'd do anything for me, she wouldn't lie. It would also have helped had she specialised in landscapes instead of male nudes.

She always signed her paintings *Beth Davis*. Googling, you'll find that she's described as one of leading painters of the Essex School, a group distinguished by their palette - faded golds against pink, mauves against olive - with skin-tones that absorb the surrounding colours. You'll find two of her oil paintings in Braintree Museum and one in Aberdeen Gallery. The rest are in private collections, and my loft.

I live in Baldock where the Knights Templar settled after the Crusades. I told mum they'd come from Baghdad, which was corrupted into the name Baldock, though she claims the name really means *dead oak*. I visit her each weekend, by train because I can't drive. The stroke weakened her down her left side, though she's still able to keep the house nice. Beside me along the ramp leading to her door are painted pots of herbs. The knocker is a brass horseshoe, recently polished. She takes a while to answer.

“You need a hair cut,” she says. She looks shorter each time I visit.

“You're looking well,” I reply, entering as she slowly retreats. She's moving easier than before, wearing a flowery hairband with matching

dress. When she starts wearing her dangling craft-fair earrings again, I'll know she's fully recovered. I notice an LP spinning on her old music centre, the stylus raised. There's an album cover beside it - *Blue*. "You needn't have stopped it just for me. Joni Mitchell eh? After her stroke I read that she couldn't talk let alone sing."

"She had her child adopted. Kept it all secret. Just got on with life. Did I ever tell you that I met her once?"

"No."

"Good, because I didn't."

The first few minutes of visits are the hardest for both of us. She saves up a week's worth of spite for me. We sit down. "I've forgotten you were into her," I say, after a pause.

"I'm a child of my time, John. Simon and Garfunkel. *Hello Darkness* my old friend. Even The Carpenters sometimes, *Goodbye to Love* and all that. I suppose you youngsters are into Billy Bragg." She starts singing "*I don't want to save the world, I'm not looking for a new England, I'm just looking for another girl*" in a surprisingly firm voice.

"Everything's on YouTube now mum, for free."

"But I care about those scratches, that background hiss. They add character, like wrinkles. I can see that you're developing some character at last. Do you ever feel you've wasted your life John?"

"You're a bitter old woman. And I'm in my prime."

She grins. "Of course, you're a numbers man. Details, names, dates. Your world's digital, scratch less. You'll grow out of it. How many millions are you worth now?"

"Only a couple. You know I don't care about money. And I know that deep down you're proud of me aren't you."

Awaiting her reply, I notice that her electric buggy's plugged into the wall under the bay window. I bought it unsure whether she'd use it. She gets up, heads towards the turntable. I wander into the kitchen, opening cupboards, then glance into her bedroom.

“Looking for anything special?” she says, sliding the disc into its sleeve.

“Just seeing if you're coping.”

“Checking to see if any boyfriends are hiding away more like. Don't worry. They call this place sheltered, and they're spot on.”

“Mum, I've long given up believing that you'd ever bother hiding anything from me, though one day I'm hoping to find under your pillow a love letter with my father's name and address on it.”

“As you well know I must have been to at least twenty parties that month, and when I say parties I mean parties.”

“Suppose on the eve of my marriage I discover that my fiancée is my half-sister?”

“So you've met someone?” she asks, suddenly interested.

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe not. If everybody was like you, John, life wouldn't be worth living.”

“I could easily give up Investment Consulting. I could stumble out of it as easily as I stumbled in.”

“Some of us stumble every day, letting the years look after themselves.”

“With a point five base rate that's easier said than done. The moment's not right.”

“You're intellectualising your emotions again, John. You should have gone to Oxbridge.”

“I know I'm a disappointment to you, mum, but in my own way I've rebelled like you did against your parents.”

“You make me regret that I was ever an artist.”

I sometimes stay for the evening meal but I'm beginning to think that I might wash up after lunch and leave. Her tongue's always been as sharp as her mind. The other mothers avoided her. I can understand why now. She had her group of friends and stuck to them. They'd stay the night sometimes, a few at a time or just one. I grew up quickly, became used to talking to adults, trying to impress them. I learned to make my own breakfast and go to school if her bedroom door was closed, never doubting that she was behind it.

“Come on John, take the weight off your feet. Relax.”

“I can't. I had a difficult childhood you know.”

“Think yourself lucky that I didn't use you as a model. In those days we believed that a portrait had to be more than a face. I still believe that.”

“Well don't start getting any funny ideas,” I say as we sit in the armchairs. She got rid of the matching settee when she moved. And my old toys.

“How's Baldock?” she asks, raising her eyebrows.

“Same as always.”

“The way you like it then.”

“Nothing wrong with that is there?”

“Of course not,” she says, bringing her hands together on her lap. “Dead oak. Right, I've got some quiche in the fridge. Thought we might throw together some odds and ends and call it a buffet.”

“I've got to make a conference call so I'm afraid I'll have to leave early.”

“Oh dear. Don't you like my tone of voice today?”

“It's not that. There's an option with a Canadian company that's suddenly come up. Afternoons are good, timezone-wise. How's your work going?”

“Those days have long gone as you well know.”

“I thought I could catalogue your pieces. Someone should. You're famous enough.”

“Me? Famous? Well maybe. Did I tell you I'm in the Oxford Compendium of Quotations?”

“No.”

She strikes a theatrical pose - “Beauty is the scar tissue left by art.”

“I'm impressed. Really.”

“You can put it on my gravestone.” When she doesn't look me in the face I know her words mean more than she's admitting. “Come on,” she says, “let's tuck in. I've got you a can of Guinness. Your favourite.”

Meals calm her down. We natter on as we always do. By the time I leave she's almost pleasant. On the journey back I wonder how I'll spend the rest of my day, and what she'll do with hers. She seemed more sprightly. An act? But what did she mean when she told me as I left that she'd been joking about the Oxford Compendium? Was she wanting me to infer that everything else she'd said was true? I think back through the conversation. She likes it when her hints dawn on me hours later and I phone her. Come to think of it, before she answered the door she could have been putting the LP on rather than lifting the stylus off. Maybe *Blue* was a hint. I'll have to look up the lyrics.

There must be a few scholars scattered around the world interested in her work. Her work can be categorised now, strands of development identified, influences discovered. Her life - the part that matters most

to her - is over. But what about mine? I watch the flat landscape slide by.

I'm sitting at the window, gazing out as the sun falls. The concrete of the sill beyond the glass is exposed where the red paint has worn away. Three empty milk bottles stand in a perfect line. Hearing a rustle I turn towards the room. An empty frame hangs on knotted string from the picture rail, surrounding a crack in the wall that was there when we moved in. Below, on a black iron bedstead, Ruth is wrapped in a sheet. She has pulled her knees up almost under her chin.

"You're doing it again," she says.

"What?"

"Ignoring me."

"I'm just thinking."

"You always do that."

"What?"

"Ignore me when I don't want sex."

"How am I to know what you want?"

"There are ways."

I gaze at the remains of her face after the shadows have done their worst. There's something more than prettiness that makes men stare at her. Studying each feature in isolation I realise that her eyes are too far apart, and her mouth too narrow but people don't notice that when her lips widen into a smile. She could be a film star then. And she's a talented painter.

"I don't like you staring," she says, pulling the grey sheet over her face.

I could buy anything but I prefer to live here, amongst artists. Nobody knows about my past. I've enrolled as a mature student though I'm rarely at the art college. My black chair matches the bedstead, its wicker seat creaking as I turn to look outside. Street lamps are coming on, hung from the buildings like lanterns. A few people pass, heads down, collars up. Maybe it's colder than it seems. Floorboards creak as I cross the room to put my overcoat on.

"Where are you off to now?"

"I can't relax. Maybe a walk will help."

"There's Aero bars in the cupboard," she says.

"I don't want Aero's."

"Mint Aero's."

"I don't want Aero's."

"Yes you do. They're your favourite. Go on, treat yourself. Yum yum."

As I open the front door there's a familiar smell. I'm never far from a river whatever city I'm in, and I've tried many since my mother died. I glance back towards the bed then head out. I photograph her through the window, the milk bottles in the foreground catching the last of the light, the room sparse and monochrome. I take the first narrow alley with its flight of steps, past big houses that have become run-down student bed-sits. Above a bay window is a makeshift balcony made from floorboards. Black bin-liners are piled upon bigger, burst ones, like black snowmen. Gutters drip onto the bags. I cut through the park, past the play area with its colourful, unbreakable equipment. The bandstand's freshly painted white. I've only seen sepia photos of how grand it used to be, like one of those fairground roundabouts but without the horses. I wonder if it's still used.

I've only known her for two months. People who've known her far longer have tried to discourage me without saying why. I don't know

what makes her so tired. She sleeps and rises with the sun. Perhaps things will be different by summer. Perhaps I'll have moved on.

I've always enjoyed night by a wide river, how the surface became more viscous. My photography project's about windows and mirrors. I try to photograph the stars' reflection in the water. I might have to fake the sparkles. I'd have loved to have invented the constellations. Without numbers it's easy to join the dots, easier still if you don't have to use all of them. My memories are disappearing one by one. Soon I'll believe anything.

It was here that Ruth had told me all about herself. I believed it all, like I believed my mother. Before I could express shock or sympathy she asked "And what about you?" I replied that I'd been brought up by a single mother as well. She outshone me in intellect and charisma - a local character. She used to be a tireless campaigner for Greenpeace. On market days she'd trudge around with a placard, or collect signatures for petitions. She battled to keep the river clean, sending letters off to the council if rubbish washed up. When a grey foam appeared overnight, her speedy intervention led to a local company being fined and made bankrupt. And yes, maybe a lack of father figure has something to do with my having had no long term relationships, though I'm still looking.

I'm getting cold. I don't why I came out. Once back I pause outside our window. She hasn't drawn the curtains. I look in at the scene - unchanged, only darker. I see the bundle that is her on the bed, the sheet pulsing in and out where her nose is. As soon as I get in she sits up.

"Tired yet?" she asks.

"I've done some thinking," I say, "I'm never going to make it as an artist. I'm going to write a book instead, about Beth Davis."

"Who the fuck's that?"

"Just my mum," I say.



## Dance Here Forever

Clare Durham

I had just turned 19 when I dropped out of college to go on the road with Fargo. Fargo wasn't his real name, obviously. Rather more prosaically he had been christened Simon, but that is apparently not a fitting name for a self-styled King of the Road.

I'd met him in a pub in Brighton. I was home for Christmas and he was visiting friends. My first term at uni had been filled with spotty boys barely north of puberty, who had just been loosed from their mother's apron strings and spent most of their evenings in a haze of snakebite and Dungeons and Dragons. Conversationally they were at a loss where women were concerned, so tended to open proceedings with a drunken grope and close them by attempting to stick their tongue in my mouth. So when Fargo strode up to me in a Brighton bar – 23, tousle-haired and 6ft 2 in a black velvet top hat and leather waistcoat – and asked me if I'd read Brighton Rock, I was instantly smitten. After three rum and blacks it felt like we had dissected most Classical literature and I had unguardedly told him all about my English degree at Exeter.

“But why, Debbie?” he asked me.

“Why what?” I replied, smiling tipsily into his serious brown eyes.

“Why are you chaining yourself to an institution? Why are you letting those over-educated, middle-aged pricks tell you what books you should be reading and how you should interpret them? You should be reading for love. Read the books that speak to you. Read the books that your friends are moved by. Free yourself from the tyranny of forced education.”

My alcohol-addled brain was sluggish, confused, and somewhat overcome by my late-teenaged hormones. “But I enjoy my course,” I faltered. “I like learning about books. All books.”

“That’s not real learning,” scoffed Fargo. “Parrotting what you’re told about Shakespeare or Milton or Hardy? That’s not life, my little parakeet.”

“But my parents say I’ll get a better job if I have a degree.” The minute the words were out of my mouth I regretted them. One glance up into his now scornful brown eyes and my confidence shrivelled.

“Thatcher’s cat,” he laughed, deridingly. “Curling around the legs of Tory policy, stroked by the law-makers and picking up the capitalist titbits. Is that what life is to you? Is that what you want? You’re just a statistic, Baby Bluestocking. Get ‘em into uni and keep them off the unemployment list. But what happens when you all come out with the same worthless piece of paper?”

He relented when he saw how wounded I was. “You need to see life, Debs. Look at how the true creatives are living now. I’m not being held back by the man. My life is all mine. Mine and my band of brothers.”

“Band of brothers?” It was my turn to scoff now. “Do you think you’re Robin Hood or something?”

Fargo was unfazed. He stood up, took my hand and told me that, like Robin Hood, he had a habit of taking what he wanted.

When I woke in bed beside him the next morning I knew immediately that my life, and me with it, had changed forever. As we sat in the back of his camper van, gazing out at the seagulls circling over the grey waves, sharing a spliff and eating bacon sandwiches, he told me about his life on the road. The freedom of waking up in one town and going to sleep in another. Of his band of fellow travellers, their campfire story-tellings and singalongs; the closeness of nature, the sharing of deep knowledge, the enjoyment of a simple life away from authority, from parents, from all of life’s weighty baggage. It seemed to my impressionable ears like an absolute dream.

So it was then that by the end of February I had quit my degree, rowed horrifically with my parents and moved into Fargo’s camper with a bag of clothes, a toothbrush, a box of books and £20 to my name. For

fifteen glorious weeks I lived in blissful nomadic contentment with my tall, eccentric saviour as he taught me trivial skills which, at the time, seemed life-changing. The days passed in a haze of driving, planning our next stopover, cooking meals on a fire or the little gas stove in bad weather. The evenings were spent getting to know Fargo's friends, hearing about their past adventures; then, when night time fell, the pair of us would snuggle up in the van. I felt safe and loved and somehow like I was making my way in the world.

Then it was late May and a buzz grew around our little happy camp. The Solstice was four weeks away and this, so I learnt, meant Stonehenge. Suddenly the mood among Fargo and his friends became serious. The seven blokes would sit of an evening, smoking around the fire, talking earnestly and scribbling notes, while I and the three other women were banished. Bored after four nights of this, and against the advice of my fellow females, I snuggled up to Fargo as their evening discussions were hotting up. He pushed me away, not unkindly. "Not now, Little Parakeet. We've work to do."

Playfully I resisted and nibbled his ear – just one of the reasons that he called me Little Parakeet.

"Get rid of her, Fargo! Bloody hell! This is no time for kids to be getting in the way!"

Adrian, who had seemed to resent my presence since I'd first teamed up with Fargo, was glaring at the pair of us. I expected Fargo to defend me, as he had in the past, but instead he hauled me to my feet and pushed me back towards the three other women. "Sort her out, Jen," he said and turned back towards the fire.

As my cheeks burned and tears stung my eyes, Jen tried gently to explain to me what I couldn't possibly understand – that the Stonehenge Free Festival was a long-standing tradition for herself and some of the other older travellers, that last year many had failed to reach the Wiltshire monument, and many of those who did had found themselves beaten or arrested or both. Adrian had apparently considered himself lucky to have got off with a black eye. Fargo had

spent two nights in a police cell and then had to find his own way back to his campervan, some 50 miles away.

I listened in disbelief as Jen related story after story of people she knew being arrested and dragged off to police stations across the south of England. Of parents being separated from their children, of possessions being confiscated and lost. My uncle was a policeman and I couldn't associate the picture she painted of these apparently violent and thoughtless officiants with the man who for ten Christmases in a row had magically produced a 50p piece from behind my ear and who had brought me a bag of toffee bonbons on every single visit. But trying to defend him, and his occupation by association was a mistake and more than once led to me curled up under the covers on my own in the campervan, crying myself to sleep.

Things got worse at the start of June when our daily journey saw us joining up with at least 20 other traveller vans on a disused airfield in the New Forest. Suddenly our quiet, happy camp had joined a melee of noise, children, dogs and chaos. Sympathetic Jen, who could see my discomfort where Fargo could not, took me under her kindly wing and advised me who to steer clear of and who would always have a kettle on the boil. Within two days it was apparent that trouble was brewing. Journalists kept appearing and trying to engage us in conversation. Photographers were everywhere we turned, and seemed especially drawn to Fargo, still in his top hat and leather waistcoat. There were clear organisers who would knock on the wall of the van of an evening and pass on instructions or the latest so-called 'intelligence' about if and when the police were expected to make a move.

This was not the life I had signed up to and I grew increasingly detached from the whole thing, taking myself off for walks among the trees and across the gorse-covered downs. Fargo, who had once seemed so exotic, so confident and so free, now looked arrogant, foolish and, frankly, scared, as talk of the inevitable police raid increased.

Five days into our stay at Stoney Cross I was standing in a thicket, watching a cow and her calf grazing on a gorse bush. I heard a twig

snap behind me and turned to see Jen making her way through the trees. “We were getting worried about you,” she said.

“I can’t do this anymore, Jen” I said, suddenly voicing to her what I had been afraid to admit to myself all along. “It was fun while it was just us and were we free and enjoying life, but not when it’s like this. Now everybody is either scared or ready to fight. I don’t want a running battle with the police. Supposing I come up against my uncle?”

“What drew you onto the road, Debbie?” asked Jen, unexpectedly. “Why did you leave your degree and take up with Fargo? Was it just for him?”

I shook my head. It was a question I had been asking myself a lot these past few weeks and I wasn’t entirely sure of the answer.

“I was a bit intoxicated by him,” I admitted. “He was so different to anyone I’d ever met. His life sounded exciting. And free. Mine felt trapped in an endless circuit of exams, results and parental expectation. I wanted to feel free. I wanted to live without care or burden. To dance barefoot round the campfire and make love in the rain.”

“I think you’d find the rain would put the fire out,” said Jen, deadpan. I looked at her and laughed; foolish in my immature ramblings. “There is no such thing as a life without care or burden,” she continued. “You just have to choose which cares and burdens you prefer. Some prefer the burden of a monthly mortgage payment. Others, the burden of finding somewhere to park their home for a week without a copper knocking on their door in the early hours.”

I sighed heavily.

“Call your Dad, love,” said Jen suddenly. “You’ve always had that option.”

“But I’ve failed,” I said, tears springing from nowhere and coursing down my cheeks. “I failed them by dropping out of my degree and

now I've failed myself by having to admit that it was the wrong decision."

"Or....," Jen paused. "You could say you've succeeded in trying a new way of life, which has helped you grow up and learn new things about yourself."

I looked at her doubtfully.

"Very few decisions are permanent," she continued. "Think of this as an extended holiday. The great thing about holidays is that you can always revisit them."

She took my hand and led me to a tree a few feet from where we were standing. On it was carved 'Dance here forever'.

"That's for you," she said. "In years to come when the cares and burdens of ordinary life are getting you down, you come here and find that. You think of me and Fargo and of young Debbie as she is now – innocent and full of hope. No matter how old you get, how sensible, how bogged down in mortgages and jobs and paperwork, your young and optimistic self will always be here. She will always dance here forever. Barefoot around the campfire, if you like."

Her arm stole around my shoulders as she kissed the top of my head in a motherly fashion. "There's a phone box about a mile away," she said. "Let's go and call your Dad."

# Codex for Mending

Isabelle Evans

Begin with the earth. First, find a place which feels like your ground. Instinctively you know already where this is - the first place you imagine, a place where your toes remember the cool flicker of grass or your heels the sidelong lurch of loose paving stones. You have sat or laid down here and forgotten your body, relaxing your grip on it and freeing those senses which would usually cling so tightly to your skin, innervate your fingertips, your cheeks, the backs of your knees. You have felt like a part of the earth.

Go there now. Take with you:

- Things from before. You can't return to a time, but going back to the place you can bring the time with you. Bring things which don't hold any of the bitterness of now. Bring things you haven't looked at or thought about since before. These are the sorts of things which hide in black-pen-labelled cardboard boxes with cut-out holes for handles, worn and bent and put in storage. They're things which were folded and put away so long ago that even the pillow-cases your mother favours least are piled on top of them now, but they are perfectly pressed, none the less, should you need them.
- Things from after. Not from during – this is an important distinction. These things must not be hintingly scented with her hair or the private skin at the nape of his neck. They mustn't be things you stole together from hotels or restaurants to hoard like children and buzz gleefully over for years to come. They mustn't be coloured like a hospital or an airport. They are you now, and just you. Something from a charity shop which made itself irresistible by fitting perfectly. A book for the summer to come, recommended by someone who reads faster than you,

or far less.

- A shovel.
- Warm things. The earth isn't warm unless you get very, very deep inside.

Take yourself to the spot where you feel like the world shifts around you. You've been here in the past as a younger person and it's easier to feel like you're still the same here, with things from before, and your feet planted firmly in footprints which were always yours. You can remember a lot. Sometimes it's hard to tell what's a real memory and what is a moment you've built in your mind, based on a photo you've seen of you, grinning with gappy milk-teeth and reveling in the pleasure of this place.

Now you have a decision to make. Something is going to be buried.

When you think about it, burial isn't quite a clean break. It puts earth between you and the thing you've put away, but you can visit at a distance if the spot is marked somehow. You could even visit with a shovel if you feel a morbid need to take up what you've put in the ground. Today you will agree with yourself not to bring it up back into the air though, you will be resolved. So the decision. Are you burying things from before here, things from after, or climbing into the earth yourself?

Second is the air. Air is changeable and careless. It only carries things which weight nothing at all, owing nothing to anybody, it gives us what we need only by chance, never by design. Don't ask anything from the air. You're going to have to give and take.

This time it doesn't matter where you are, excepting a few conditions:

- Somewhere you haven't been for long. Perhaps somewhere you've walked past or happened across transiently without doing much more than slowing to glance.
- Somewhere you don't plan to be for long again. Unlike a burial site, you do not revisit the air – it won't have the



patience to have waited for you.

- Somewhere empty and quiet.

*A note on quiet: absolute silence is difficult to come by. Just being alive tends to mean that it's impossible, with the pulsing and rushing or the creaking and folding always at play beneath the skin. Anechoic chambers have been built to distil silence. They're places of negative sound – the absence of sound. Without people inside, there's nothing at all and the air is as lazy and still as anywhere imaginable. People create their own madness though, distracted and taunted by the sounds of their own anatomy as it fumbles through the time. Perhaps it's a reminder that humans aren't clocks. Our rhythm isn't for keeping time, or anything else so predictable. It's all far more of a performance than that. And so nobody has managed to spend more than 45 minutes inside the chamber. But you won't need that long.*

In this place, take breath. It's an expression that's worth considering, taking breath – does that mean that something else is robbed of it? Where is it taken away from? It isn't given to you, you're not receiving it. Take it, selfishly and wholly for yourself. At this point, that feels right.

You may have come here with nothing, but in taking breath you will give back too. Howl now. Let it take whatever shape you like. Let it fill the air, and feel the fullness as it resonates around you. Let it echo like a choir of wolves under the moon. Cold air is best for this, denser. Darkness is good too.

*A note on darkness: vision has different priorities in the dark. We're predators, but in the dark who knows what threat there might be? In the dark, we're all prey. Looking at distant stars – the little ones you can barely see - it's easier out of the corner of your eye. Catch a hinting glint of them off to one side, but when you gaze directly they wink out of being. In the dark, the peripheral vision is more careful and more awake. We can't have the singular focus be on where we're going anymore. What matters is all around us. And something small and dead-ahead might as well be behind you for all that you can tell it's there.*

So you howl – the only way to know what's in the darkness is to fill it yourself, empty your chest, give up everything that you've taken

from the air, down to the last whimpering gust. Do this until you've filled the night with noise, and until the air has taken it away again, every note.

Now fire. This may take some patience. You need to find a dead tree.

Do you think it's sadder to see a dead tree because it was so stoic in its life? Or less sad because the life was long, and still, and the death will have more movement? An oak tree can live for a millennium – one century is considered at the younger end for death; three centuries, the sort of age when those left behind will wrinkle their brows and noddingly agree that he lived a full life – when the sadness is all ours for missing him, not his for going.

Find a dead tree which is falling back into the earth, and keep an eye on it. Wait for the branches to fall. You want pieces of dead wood which you can carry, big enough to feed a fire. You need the fire hungry.

When the branches start to fall, gather them up – start with the little ones which snap off under their own tiny weight – little tinder. Next will be the kindling, long enough to need snapping, but easily snapped in your hands. And some larger pieces too – carry what you can, it's not yet grave-robbing. Prepare the wood for a bonfire.

Make feathersticks. You will need:

- A knife – large, sharp, flat – something unforgiving, without serrations
- Five sticks from the tree – as thick as a broom handle, and certainly dead

People are excellent at surviving – not as excellent as the oak, but we can manipulate the tree, make it our tool even as it's dying. With your knife, remove the bark from the sticks then skin them until you reach the heartwood, softer and paler than the rest. This is the wood which will burn for you, long after it's dead, long after you have let the cold penetrate your bones, and for the both of you it will make furious life.

When you force a sharp blade along the heartwood of the branches you can shave curling ringlets from them. Layer them and they will sit on the branch in a row, ready to draw the flames down and in. Sometimes when the wood is wet it's the best way to make a fire, using feathersticks. The curling barbs are so fine and so new to the air that they catch on fire easily. Light them and show them to the kindling. Before long, everything will be alight. There's that sharp definition you feel when the fire warms your face and chest, your shins and thighs, while your back is chilled by the evening and the winter. It's a kind of balance, but no kind of rest. At no other time are light and heat so closely related.

This fire is another kind of burial. You have with you things which you didn't put in the ground, too heavy to release to the air. This fire, when it dies, will leave an ashy dent in the earth – this will be the final resting place of the things you have left. The fire will make them as close to not existing as they can be – as close to dead. The blackened dust they become will mix with the ash of the dead branches and there will be no life left in it.

Tacitly say goodbye to the things from before – those things were unencumbered, stained with long naivety. To try and be the person they belonged to once again would be like eating meat without acknowledging that it was once alive. It's too late.

Say goodbye also to the things from after. They belonged to you before the mending. But this too is a version of yourself which you're going to be separated from now.

As these things burn, the warmth on your face is the last sensation of them you will feel, and they will be gone when the fire goes out. You can stay if you'd like, to see that everything is turned to soot. After that, there will be no need to return here. If you do, it's likely that the tree will have sunk deeper into the ground and the little pit of this fire will be trampled by rabbits and carpeted with grass, because things move forward, and so shall you.

Last is the water. It must be moving - it doesn't matter if it's a tide which surges and retreats or a river which carves the land with its

purpose. Choose a place open to the sky, somewhere you love. Bring with you:

- Your warmest clothes – you will need them afterwards, more than you might expect before.
- Something to eat and to drink – there are different kinds of tiredness, just like there are different kinds of sadness. There is a tiredness coming that will empty you, and while that's needed, you mustn't stay empty for too long. Don't give the cold time or space to fill you up.

Although your every instinct will try to stop you, you're going to walk into the water. Your feet and ankles will take the first shock of it, but they'll be quite forgotten as the water tucks in at your waist, taking you inch by inch. The skin will be shocked and every nerve will jangle in warning but it's important not to listen this time. Soon your feet are not only forgotten, but invisible. Your chest is important – once the water reaches there you will lose your breath. Let yourself gasp. You will need a few moments of this, letting your body know that you're visiting an element that isn't your own, feeling that this isn't where you're meant to live. In that moment, feel for the fright and calm. The water is moving and every time it touches a new part of your neck it's almost painful, until finally the body feels that it has given you enough warning. Now you can just be brilliantly alive and close to weightless.

See the water's flickering surface and how difficult it is to know what's beneath it. Even the limbs of yours which are hidden in it now feel distant – not lost, but borrowed and not yet returned. You could be any size now, tiny in the grand scale of an ocean vista or crowding the waterway. You can move if you need to – the water does. Wait, and you will feel the tremendous calm of being washed away -like the air from your howling lungs and the ash that the fire made of things from the past, all washed, carried, gone away. You're not clean or weightless, nor should you hope to be, but here and now you can be unaffected by the gravity or the memory of what has happened before.

There is nothing in this codex for what comes next.

## A Case of Anna C.

Helen Kitson

In 1955 Ealing Studios released *The Ladykillers* but Anna Carter wasn't able to see it. While Alec Guinness flashed his frightening, big white teeth, Anna Carter was shown which bed was to be hers and introduced to the men in white coats.

My Darling,

Why did you betray me? As though I meant you harm! All I asked was to be allowed to love you...

'Who are you writing to?'

'To whom am I writing, I assume you mean?'

'Oh yes. I forgot, you're an educated lady.'

'Is that why I'm in here? Because I've behaved like a man in my pursuit of a career?'

'We don't think like that any more.'

'Nonsense. You men will always think like that.'

She handed the piece of paper to the doctor. She'd known she would never be allowed to send the letter, but it was important for her to see the words written down. A reminder. Proof.

'You have to forget him, Miss Carter.'

'I cannot. I don't want to.'

'He doesn't want you.'

'I don't care.'

Love at first sight.

As Juliet loved Romeo. As Heloise loved Abelard. As Cleopatra loved Antony. So she, Anna Carter, loved Robert Roberts.

Perhaps it was inevitable that with Anna for her first name she would lose her mind. They were all called Anna, the famous patients of the famous psychiatrists. A feminine name, Anna, a bit limp, like a drooping, dewdropped rose.

‘Anna,’ he had said, and she had looked up and was immediately bound to Robert Roberts.

‘Anna?’

‘So pleased to make your acquaintance. I trust we shall have a productive and useful relationship to further the reputation of the school.’

‘Yes; quite.’

After that, she could not eat her egg and cress sandwich.

Starving for love.

Such a practical woman, too. Proud to be called a bluestocking. Proud of her degree, her career, her enunciation.

She had a crisis in a shoe shop and told the assistant helping her on with a sensible pair of slippers that she did not want to love Robert Roberts.

The girls in the shop tittered.

‘I let myself love him and that was quite, quite wrong. I am middle aged.’ She burst into tears, but she bought the slippers.

Subsequently she accepted her love and decided to put up with it until it had run its course.

But he would smile at her in that special way...

‘He does love me, you know,’ she told the doctor. ‘But because of our social positions and so forth...I’m a little older than he, and he’s a shy man. He hides from the truth.’

‘He’s given you no reason to assume your feelings for him are reciprocated.’

‘Who could love him more than I do! I am an intelligent woman, I have so much to offer him.’

‘He has a fiancée. She is a girl of nineteen. A blonde, I gather. No nonsense about wanting a career.’

‘I know you’re only saying that to break my heart. I know it’s a lie. I know I’m the woman he needs.’

‘You hounded him. You spied on him and bombarded him with letters and telephone calls. That is not normal.’

‘Normal! It’s not normal for fourteen year olds to fall in love and kill themselves, but who could fail to shed tears for poor Romeo and Juliet?’

She lay back on the pillow, exhausted, her arms crossed against her bony chest. In repose she looked older than her years. The white hairs around her temples appeared more prominent, as did the creases around her eyes and mouth. A desiccated woman.

‘If I am mad, how do you propose to treat me? I can’t afford to take too much time off from my job.’

‘My dear woman, I shouldn’t worry yourself about that!’

‘But I do! It’s my livelihood.’

‘Yes.’

The doctor looked up from his papers and took off his glasses. Anna found his hairiness distracting. He had clumps of wiry grey hair protruding from his nose and ears, with untidy sideburns that spread down his face, almost reaching the flabby, crepey jawline. Not a handsome man but a man. Anna didn’t know about men. They smelt different from women. Their skin was coarser. The older they became, the less human and more animalistic they looked.

She had seen so many doctors. They all had different ideas about treatments. About women. Some had sympathy. Most were impatient.

The ward doctor was young – she liked him. This one had an air of seniority. Not likeable. Respectable.

‘Miss Carter: you put a great deal of effort into your career, didn’t you?’

‘Of course I did. I have a very good brain, I’ll have you know. This...thing from which I’m suffering is merely a little nervous trouble. It has nothing to do with my intelligence.’

‘The point I’m making, Miss Carter, is that a woman’s duty – that is to say, the thing for which she is most fitted – is to look after a family. A woman who runs a home and looks after her husband and children is generally the happiest kind of woman. It is a simple fact, Miss Carter, that women find it difficult to enter the male sphere of work and still retain their essential femininity.’

Anna didn’t feel mad, but she did feel ashamed of her meaty hands, her white hairs, her broad shoulders. Had her career turned her into a terrible kind of pseudo-man, a doomed creature no better than a castrated man?

‘Do you want to be a fully functioning woman, Miss Carter?’

‘I am. Aren’t I?’

It was having to lie in bed with nothing to do that was the worst thing. That, and listening to the grunts, ravings and the sobs of the other women. They weren’t like her, you couldn’t have a decent conversation with them. They were clearly beyond help, she shouldn’t be with such people, it was cruel.

‘I don’t want to look like that!’ she said to the nurse. ‘This treatment – I don’t want it to turn me into a lunatic, I couldn’t bear it!’

‘Calm down, dear. You must relax.’

The women slobbered and wet their beds; Anna could smell the sharp smell of urine. But they were being helped, weren’t they? Manhandled out of their rejection of their proper womanhood and into wellness.



‘Please God let it work. Please God let it come quickly,’ she whispered into the pillow.

When Anna woke, she realised she’d soaked the bed.

‘What do you remember?’

‘There was a man, wasn’t there? A man who loved me. I can’t remember his name, though...Are we married?’

She had gained weight, because of the insulin. Her good clothes had been packed away. The replacements were shapeless, poorly made skirts and blouses she wouldn’t have given house room to in the old days.

‘I can’t get the stain out of this skirt...’

‘You have no husband. You never have had.’

‘You’re a cruel man. I hate you – you’ve made me fat.’

Her memories of Robert Roberts were blurred, but with effort she could bring them into focus. She had to get out of the hospital as soon as she could, and let him know that she was all right – still alive – still waiting.

‘Who was the lover of Romeo, Miss Carter?’

‘Romeo who?’

She could not answer the question, in spite of numerous prompts. The doctor quoted lines to her. Shakespeare quotations she used to have by heart. She didn’t recognise any of them.

‘What does it mean? These strings of words, they bother me.’

The doctor raised an eyebrow. It was the doctor with the sprouting hair.

You will never teach again.

‘Doctor? Please explain.’

‘I don’t want you to be worried by anything.’

‘But...’

He patted her hand. Anna was horribly aware of her rosy veins, the golden liver spots, the spatulate fingers. She never used to be so old, did she?

He’d not kept his promise to make her into a woman. He’d made matters worse by increasing her weight, although her bosom was larger, her hips broader. Was that what he meant? Was body fat specifically female?

‘I would like some make up,’ she told the nurse once the doctor had finished with her.

‘Good! It’s healthy to take some trouble over your looks.’

The nurse returned with a hairy stub of carmine lipstick, a block of brown mascara and a case of pressed powder; the powder was lumpy and had a hard, shiny, greasy surface. Anna had expected the cosmetics to be brand new.

She licked the small mascara brush and dragged it through the brown gunk. She applied it to the white hairs at her temples.

‘Takes years off you,’ the nurse said; but the doctor was less enthusiastic.

‘You’ve been dyeing your hair?’ He touched Anna’s temple and she flinched, as though the place was tender to the touch.

Vanity, she learnt, was as reprehensible as letting yourself go. It showed a too-excessive concern with the self. A woman should be well groomed but she should not be narcissistic – that was the preserve of whores and movie queens. In an ordinary woman it showed an unstable personality.

‘You’ve been writing to Mr Roberts again.’

‘How do you know?’

‘You have no secrets from me, Miss Carter.’

‘One day I shall go back to him and we will be together, as we were meant to be.’

‘Your letters will not be sent. He won’t receive any of them until you can write to him in far less provocative terms. Until you can write to him without these extreme emotions to which you’re prey.’

Her writing paper was good quality, cream-coloured with a watermark. She had no one but Robert Roberts to whom she wanted to write. Her best friend Sheila had no time for complaints of a mental nature, though she would have agreed with Anna’s doctor that a woman was best suited to family life. Sheila had visited Anna in hospital once, but wouldn’t go back; the overwhelming stench of urine had disturbed her. A very skinny woman, she couldn’t afford to be put off her food.

Dear Sheila...

‘Go on.’

‘I’ve nothing to say to her.’

Electroconvulsive therapy. She heard the words but they meant nothing.

‘I want to know how it will feel. I want to know what it will do to me.’

‘You’re a very demanding lady.’

‘Because I’m not docile? Because I have a mind of my own?’ He smiled; her mind wasn’t her own any longer.

The worst thing, perhaps, was being gagged. Presumably it was to prevent her biting her tongue, but she felt the doctor would have been happy to keep her gagged all day long. And bound, too.

Once a week, eighty volts of electric current passed through Anna’s brain. Each time she failed afterwards to display sufficient tractability, but each time another piece of her memory cracked and snapped off.

‘I haven’t forgotten him. I refuse to forget him.’

The doctor sighed and broke his pencil.

‘You are an infuriating case. You must realise that you cannot possibly be allowed back into the community until you are judged no longer to pose a threat to Mr Roberts.’

‘What on earth do you think I could do to him? He’s a man and I am, as you’ve told me so many times, a member of the weaker sex.’

‘I think you’re capable of a great deal, Miss Carter.’

Was she full of devils, then? Was she receiving diabolical strength? Or was she simply mad, was it as simple as that, in the end?

‘Where are all the male patients, doctor?’

There were none. Men didn’t go mad. Anna knew that – there was no reason for a man to go mad. The doctor began to explain how a woman’s brain was more susceptible to mental incapacity. Anna stuck her fingers in her ears and sang, la la la la la.

She never again bothered to apply mascara to her white hairs. Mirrors were things she avoided, but if she chanced to see her face reflected it was a shocking, haggard sight. An unhappy face. A dazzle of white hair surrounding putty-coloured skin. My face?

‘Don’t break it, dear – you don’t want seven years of bad luck, do you?’

‘Seven years. Seven more years.’

She stood in line with the other broken-headed, broken-hearted women. They shivered in their ill-fitting, fraying nightgowns.

‘Next!’

Anna lay down on the operating table.

‘You look very well, Anna.’

‘Thank you. It was good of you to come.’ Anna forced her mouth into a smile. ‘My hair – I’m afraid it’s all turned white. I look old – don’t I?’

Robert Roberts smiled.

‘The flowers, though – so beautiful! The smell...These are my favourite sort.’

‘I’m glad.’

‘Dr Johnson mentioned you have a fiancée. She’s keeping well, I hope?’

‘Very well.’

‘I’m so glad. Really very, very glad.’

Anna was happy. Her mind was as calm as a blue, mirrory sea. She felt nothing.

‘Nothing, Anna?’

She blinked. She hadn’t meant to say the word aloud. Really, she felt quite barny sometimes. No one would guess that she was an intelligent woman. Or she used to be. Didn’t she?

‘It’s so hard to explain. Such peace. I’m so eager to get home, though. I shall have a nice rest and I expect I shall bake a great many cakes.’

‘What about your teaching, Anna?’

‘I’m afraid those days are behind me. I overtaxed myself, I see that now. Oh, the peace! You simply can’t imagine.’

Her hands were folded in her lap. Her once hated hands that she’d tried to hide. Why bother? She stared at them, puzzled.

White, dead things.

‘How do you feel in yourself, Anna? Of course all we wanted was for you to get better...as I said to...And to Sheila, of course, who’s been most concerned.’

She shook her head. The sound of his voice clattered in her head. Anna wished he’d go away, or at least shut up. She closed her eyes and sighed, hoping he’d get the message. Why had he come to visit her, anyway? He was only someone she’d once worked with, or so the doctor had told her.

‘I’m afraid I’m tiring you out. But it was important to me that I come, to tell you – well, that I don’t bear a grudge or anything. It’s just a pity...but after all, these things happen in the best regulated families, don’t they?’

He gave her hand a squeeze. Her eyes snapped open and Robert looked afraid; but the moment passed, the glazed look returned to Anna’s eyes.

‘That’s a good girl,’ he said. He put on his hat. ‘I’ll be off, then. I don’t suppose we’ll ever...but then, you never...but probably not.’

Would he never stop talking, this ridiculous little man?

‘I’m no doctor, but I would say you’re quite cured,’ he said, giving his hat a self-congratulatory tap. ‘The wonders of modern medicine, eh?’

‘Quite so,’ Anna said. ‘A miracle.’

She watched him shamble down the pathway that led to the real world, aware that she could leap up, run after him, follow him. She could leave whenever she wanted to.

‘A friend of yours?’ a woman asked when Anna shuffled back inside.

‘A man who used to love me,’ Anna replied. ‘He gave me flowers. No one ever bought me flowers before.’

‘They’re already drooping. They just die.’

‘They do indeed. Doesn’t everything?’

By the time she reached her room, she’d already forgotten his name.

## A Deep and Meaningful Conversation

Conor O'Rourke

“Are you peri?”

The woman leant against the railing that separated the seating area and dance floor. Five empty wine glasses rested on the counter by her, implying that she and her two female companions were rather tipsy.

“Sorry?”

“Are you peri?” She repeated with a nod to the bingo booklet I was using as a fan.

“It’s just really warm.”

She rolled her eyes and turned back towards the stage where the room awaited the arrival of a Drag Queen Hostess. A quick search on my phone and I understood she had been asking if I was perimenopausal. When I looked back up, she was watching me with a smirk.

“I’m right there with you,” she called and began to fan herself too. She reached over her companions and extended her arm.

“I’m Karen. Which, according to the internet, makes me an absolute weapon.”

I shook her hand. “Matthew.”

“What are you drinking?”

“Red Bull.”

“That will fuck up your body. But who am I to judge?”

She sipped her wine. For a moment, we bopped along silently to *Kylie*.

“Who are you with?”

“Myself.”

“Fair fucks.”

She nodded, somewhat knowingly, her eyes giving me a once-over.

“See anybody that you like?”

I laughed awkwardly, glancing courteously around the room.

“I’m not really looking for that tonight.”

“Just here for a good time?”

“That’s it. How about you?”

“We went out for lunch. And now we’re here.”

Of the three, she was by far the most collected despite the amount of wine they had apparently consumed. Whilst one of her friends – the smallest, petite and blonde - draped an arm around the frustrated couple next to us and yelled in their ears that she didn’t feel anyone needed to be labelled, that we all could just *be ourselves* – her other companion made her way to the raised dance floor, doubling as a stage, and began to unceremoniously crawl across it. A bouncer swiftly moved her along and The Blonde abandoned her lecture to intervene. They giggled as they were warned that another misstep would get them removed. Karen remained stoic throughout – as if this was a regular occurrence for their Sunday nights.

“What are we, children?!” The Crawler declared. “I just want to dance!”

“How do we feel about this whole transgender thing then?”

The Blonde was back pestering the couple. Mercifully, bingo began before she could force her foot any further into her mouth.

It had been years since my last and I was comforted by the fact that I recognised many of the Drag Queens and their routines. The



unexpected familiarity let me momentarily forget my displacement. As familial ties dissipated, Ireland was swiftly losing any sense of home – and yet, London did not feel welcoming either. But as a glitter ball spun, confetti cannons fired, and a Drag Queen made numerical innuendos – those thoughts briefly flitted away.

By the time we had all failed to win, The Crawler was asleep standing up. The Blonde, after knocking back another glass, began to slur her words. Karen watched over them, slightly removed from the madness – but when the bouncer clocked them, she escorted them out before he could.

As the show finished and a DJ stepped in, I moved to the smoking area. Propped against a wooden fence, I watched other revellers spill from the doorway, lighting up as they hit the colder air. I sipped on my second Red Bull, this time through a paper straw, that disintegrated in my mouth.

“You alright?”

I had made eye contact with a guy on the periphery of the group nearest to me. He was wearing pink flares, a white-sleeveless top with a brown-cow-print and a Stetson. As an outfit, it exuded confidence – unlike my positively beige shirt-and-slacks combo. I nodded.

“Did you have a good Pride?”

Suddenly, the somewhat bedraggled state of the clientele I had noticed earlier made sense. Half of the bar was on a comedown.

“I did, thanks, did you?”

Lying was the easiest option. This Cowboy did not need to be burdened with my woes. He launched into a description of various parties he had attended that weekend, happy to have an audience. When his friends began to make their way back towards the dance floor, he lingered for a moment.

“Can I get you a drink?”

“I’m grand, thanks.” I nodded at my half-empty glass and then felt the need to continue. “I’ve work in the morning.” Another lie. “I’ll be going soon.”

The Cowboy smiled awkwardly.

“What do you do?” I asked, sensing I needed to contribute something.

“Oh, I study.” He began to shift on the spot. Now we were closer, he was undoubtedly a lot younger than me. I let it hang in the air – proffering a pause long enough for him to escape.

“Well, if you change your mind - I’ll be in there.”

As he went, I moved into the empty space his group had left. I slid onto a high bench by the wall, my legs dangling. Bingo had been a good distraction but now, what had felt like solitude was swiftly descending into loneliness. The babble around me grew louder, and smoking more appealing, as I looked for something to numb my bubbling feelings. I glanced to see from whom I could pawn, flirting with temptation, when Karen appeared at the doorway.

Noticing me, she shuffled my direction. By the time she had manoeuvred through the crowd, she had lit a cigarette and was offering the packet to me. Sense took back over.

“No, thanks. I thought you were gone.”

“I got them chips and a taxi. I’ll be fucked if I’m cleaning up any more of that mess.”

She plopped onto the bench next to me and exhaled deeply.

“I’ve two teenagers at home and a two-year old. Lockdown was eventful!” She took another drag. “I’m kidding, of course, I love them all *dearly*. But the teenagers practically fought over who got to babysit and I’ve doled out a flat rate of €10 per hour. So if I’m out, I might as well make the most of it - it’s fucking cost me enough. Did you ever babysit?”

“I’m the youngest.”

“Got away with murder then. This revolution business has a lot to ask for. *‘Oh Mam, I’m going to the shops for milk, send me a tenner.’* They’re robbing me blind.”

“You don’t have work tomorrow then?”

“I stay at home. That’s the work.”

I nodded a few times, hoping it would suggest some air of identification. She looked the opposite direction and surveyed the smoking area. In the silence between us, I noticed a faint buzzing in my ears from where we had stood next to a speaker earlier. She turned back as she took the final drag from her cigarette and stubbed it out on the bench. A waft of smoke curled up.

“So what are you running from?”

I raised my eyebrows in protest.

“Come on. You’re single?”

I nodded.

“Single and sober, in a gay bar, of a Sunday. It doesn’t take a genius. Is it a man?”

“My sister.”

“Doesn’t approve?”

I shook my head.

“Of what?”

“Take your pick.”

Karen’s eyes moved away from me and towards the door, where a steady stream skipped up and down the steps. Occasionally, the drunker of the patrons would stop to steady themselves in the doorway, clinging to the frame before descending carefully. Inside, a

trance track with a steady beat was blaring that did nothing to entice me to dance. Karen was quiet again – either the effects of her consistent drinking now taking its toll or leaving a pause pregnant enough for me to take the bait.

“I think she feels like I stole a life from her. I’ve been in London for a few years – I moved to study, and I work there now. She’s never been to visit, so naturally she thinks I live this blend of a lifestyle that’s as glamorous as it is seedy. When actually, it’s...I don’t even know what it is. But because I left – and she stayed – she has such resentment towards me.”

“Why didn’t she leave?”

“Our mother – she cared for her.”

Surprisingly, the past tense stung.

“For long?”

“The guts of a decade. It wasn’t always as intense as it became. But there was a rough period – a few years after she had graduated from college herself – so she moved home then and that was it. She just stayed.”

Karen lifted her bag from by her feet and placed it between us. She pulled out her cigarettes and lit another on the first click of her lighter.

“Say what you really want to say.”

She spoke mid-exhale. I didn’t respond.

“If you’re not going to be honest with the stranger you met a few hours ago, you’ve got some chance saying it to her. I can tell you’re holding back – call it motherly intuition.”

I allowed myself to smirk. She shrugged as she transferred the cigarette to her other hand, so the smoke drifted away from me.

“She’s angry that I left. But how else could it have played out? I was never as close to Mam as she was and when it came to the physical

things, of course Mam wanted her to help and not me. It wasn't discussed – we all just fell into our roles. And..."

"Go on."

"They didn't want me there. I knew that first summer that I came back from London that we didn't understand each other anymore. Maybe it wasn't that they were resenting me for having my own life, but it certainly felt like that. And I was just beginning to figure out everything myself – or attempting to. I knew it was selfish, but I couldn't stay there. I don't think I would have survived."

"And now?"

"As fucked as it sounds, now that Mam's gone and I'm not playing the role of the self-exiled son-slash-brother, I don't know where we stand anymore. I can't go back and do it differently. I did what I thought was right at the time and maybe I was wrong – but what's the point in harbouring all of that? I wish we could just move on."

"I don't think you get to make that decision."

A yell and a cackle interrupted us as a heel gave way on the steps and three friends tripped over each other, screaming with laughter. Karen didn't elaborate. We watched the friends regain their composure and move back inside.

"Want to dance?"

I hesitated. "I don't think so."

"Right answer. Shall we go?"

I glanced at my watch. It was now Monday. I nodded.

In the lane outside, where the madness of the club was reduced to background din, we stood awkwardly next to each other, doing up our coats. It was a dynamic I had experienced often, as silently we tried to establish the next steps, just never before with a woman.

"I'm getting a taxi," Karen announced, pointing right.

“My car is that way – do you want a lift?”

She shook her head. “I’ll be fine.”

Her coat fastened, she quickly pulled me into a hug, her hair smelling like a mixture of perfume, smoke and Pinot Grigio. She gave my arm a squeeze as she let go but her face remained impervious.

“If you really believe you did the right thing, then you have to accept that. You’re not responsible for anyone else’s decisions. And banking on them won’t help you figure yourself out either.”

“Could you tell that to my sister?”

“Yes but I charge double after-midnight. Be well.”

We walked in opposite directions down the lane. As I neared the end, I glanced back to see the door of her taxi closing and her faint outline through the window. I held up a hand but they were already speeding away.

The silence was not uncommon between us. It lasted an indeterminable length of time– any sense ruined by the clock that always sounded like it was ticking with irregular gaps. My sister remained focused on the window, her cup drying on the rack next to the sink. Her left hand rested on her hip, while the right firmly held the stove behind her, presumably cold. Mammy’s apron was tied around her waist, the top folded over, splattered with flour. Our silence was punctuated by the rattling of the single-glazed window in its frame, as the weather took a turn outside.

“I read your first book.”

This was a genuine surprise. She glanced over her shoulder when I didn’t respond.

“Some of the characters were...familiar.”

“It’s not based on anyone. I told you that before it came out...”

“I know. But still.”

I paused, unsure if I should press the point. This was new territory.

“There was a day in the hospital towards the end. I couldn’t look at my phone anymore and no one was around, so I went to the shop. And it was there. It felt like a sign – not that I believe in any of that shite.”

I stared at the half-drunk cup in front of me. The anticipation of her review felt like waiting for exam results.

“It was good.”

She was back to the window.

“Thanks.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, tiredness washing over me. Despite showering, I still smelled faintly of smoke.

“Look, about the will.”

I paused, expecting an interruption, but none came.

“I think you’re right; I think it was a mistake too. Mam wrote it when I was in a bad way and would have changed it if she could. You deserve the house.”

She didn’t move from the stove. She took a deep breath and exhaled through her nose.

“I know it’ll take time but as far as I’m concerned, it’s yours.”

“I’ll buy you out. I can’t afford to right now, but...”

“Honestly, it’s fine - I’m not coming back from London.”

It hung in the air for a moment – my first time articulating a decision I had been skirting around for months. She turned to face me; arms crossed.

“Is that what you want?”

“I think it makes sense.”

An argument felt eminent. There was plenty for us to choose from.

“Alright then.”

She met my eye for a moment. Then glanced at her watch.

“What time is your flight?”

“Seven in the morning, so I should probably make a move, if I’m to get packed.”

I pushed the chair back, wincing as the wood scraped loudly on the floor. She moved towards me and held a hand out for my cup. It was rinsed by the time I was at the door. “I’ll stay in touch.”

“Do.”

I gave the door the first of two pushes necessary to open it. When it gave way and the evening air flowed in, she called out:

“See you at Christmas.”

I glanced back. She wasn’t looking at me.



## **An Irish Wedding in Marbella and Subsequent Email I Sent My Ex-Wife**

Gary Grace

The Facebook Memories tab is where I source my pain. Sometimes I forget how much you smiled with me. You never stopped. In the beginning. Neither of us were ever much good at staying alone. I imagine you are smiling now with someone else who is nothing like me. Your heart is broken too. And there's nothing either of us can do about it. I'm sure it was while we were together, as mine was. But the distraction of each other's new smell and new taste was enough at least, to stave off the daily ideation we shared. We'd met each other and that meant we could survive, for a while anyway.

I'm at the wedding in Marbella and I've had too much to drink. I didn't take anyone else. Perhaps I should have? The night is still young so I go for a wander around the lush hillside venue to sleep it off and return a new man. A better man. The sun has gone down and the party is in full flight. I know I'll find some cool ground down the back behind the tall trees. No one will go there. The light dew caused by the night-cycle sprinklers deters me. I consider returning to the party and although it has grown faint, I can hear the guests singing along to "The Boxer" by Simon and Garfunkel. It surprises me that such a wonderful song is playing and seems serendipitous and poignant to me in the moment given my scuffle and sprint from some original rude boys last night on the strip. Birmingham geezers who needed excitement. Simon and Garfunkel tell me what I need to do...

*Running scared,  
Laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters  
Where the ragged people go  
Looking for the places  
Only they would know  
Lie la lie, lie la la la lie lie  
Lie la lie, lie la la la la lie la lie*

So I lie-la-lie'd' my drunk as down and dreamt.

I crawl inside your womb to keep warm. I say I'm sorry over and over again. I have a slight fever. I'm feeling under the weather and think you'll heal me. My mouth makes the hissing sound of a struggling bicycle pump. Your belly inflates with the torrent of my sorrow, wailing in concert with yours. Your body falls limp in the calm of our shared horror. Ecstasy overtakes, allowing your back to arch you into a crescent moon shape. Your arms fall by your sides, limbered by our shared memories that I have bled directly into your aorta which swirl throughout your body reaching their eventual destination; your slowly healing wrists. The scars bubble that beautiful pink-red-blue and your feet can lift lifelessly from the gravelled alley-ground where I first found you.

Like a creaking haunted ocean-liner, the hot air balloon you've become carries us up into the night sky. The moon is fucking enormous. We don't have eighty days but I'm happy to take whatever time I can get with you. I can tell you don't want to talk. What, if anything, is there left to say. It's over and we both know it.

You just say, 'Play that song you used to play when we first met. The one that hurts me so'.

You close your eyes. I do too. I cannot see but I can feel. So I feel. I feel around behind your ribcage and remove the bone from the finger I don't use anymore. Not without you. What use has it now, other than for this? I never want to finger anyone else again. I play the back of your curved bones like a xylophone. It sounds better from the front but you never want to see my face again.

I wonder if I should stop but say nothing. You breathe lightly out and wordlessly urge me to continue with a hum, knowing my every thought. The sound doesn't pop or tinkle. I play with an industrial metal pace and your whole body shakes with the dark vibrations. The sound is deafening and I scream the lyrics to your song. I'm spitting and my throat hurts. Your ghost is in it. The louder I growl the words out, the softer your laughter gets until I feel you drifting off, fading

out. Your breathing lulls. I stop playing and search for water to soothe my dried up mouth, but there is none. The fountain tap at your coccyx spurts cheap, warm Tesco rosé and I spit it out, wondering who has been refilling you since I've been gone.

There's no furniture left so I just lie down again. There's silence for a moment but soon I hear it, echoing around your pipes. My favourite sound in the world. The sound of your pumping heart. Your belly button is a cracked stained purple looking glass. I stand there enjoying the salty breeze as we eclipse the moon casting a grey bulb of a shadow over Dublin bay. I wish we were there. I wish all this was real. I let my skeletal finger fall towards the sea but it doesn't make it to the water. A one-eyed gull swoops in and snatches it up in her beak. I hope it will help fortify her nest so that her chicks don't meet an untimely end, blowing away in a world they are not yet prepared for.

I think I hear you say "Don't go, please" and I tell you I'll never leave you again but you shout at me, yelling "You're not listening, I said go now, go!"

You hold your nose and blow hard, causing your ears to pop open and we're losing pressure rapidly. We're plummeting. I'm praying we hit the water but you're leading hard directing us towards the west pier of Dún Laoghaire. I guess when I stopped playing music, that was the end. The green lamp of the lighthouse is flashing as we crash into it, being torn apart and we sink into oblivion on either side of the rocks.

\*

I can feel my body stirring. I'm crying a little. I can feel that I'm waking. I don't want it to end even though I'm conscious of the fact that it's just all been nothing but a delicate nightmare. Someone is calling my name. I roll off my back and onto my flat stomach. I grip the wide halm of southern Spanish grass with both hands and get to one knee.

"I'm fucking grand" I tell her.

I know she thinks it'll be easy to take advantage of me, maybe just because of the past we'd shared, before I'd met you. And she probably can. You'd like her. Siofra. A fucking mad bitch altogether, in a good

way, mainly. But not in that waking moment she can't. I'm not in the fucking mood obviously. Siofra says she knows I need a shoulder to cry on. I tell her I need a wet-warm throat to violate, and she smiles, saying if I play my cards right, later on that might be a possibility.

I tell her to get her hands off of me. That I'm grand. But she knows I'm not and kisses my cheek softly only once, and brings me back to the reception, out of the hidden patch I'd been dying in, out onto the white carpeted pathway that Adam and Lauren had waltzed-up earlier for their nuptials and heartfelt vows they'd written themselves. There's a sensitive soul beneath that hard exterior of that lad apparently. I was proud of him. We all were.

"I don't want to be here", I tell this pale-goth-ghost from my past.

I wonder why she's even there. Like, who the fuck does she know here? But she's not a ghost at all. She's warm in fact and she just tells me that I need another gin and tonic. And she's right again. They're always right in times like these.

"I want to be back in Ireland with her" I whimper and I squeeze Siofra's hand as I swallow the fist of a lump in my throat approaching the music, "How did I fuck up my own marriage Siofra?" The wedding had been at three. Myself and Johnno didn't make the groomsmen cut. I cried in the shower before leaving, remembering our own wedding day. The Nirvana cover-band you let me have. Your punk-rock look like Courtney incarnate. The skulls, pumpkins and spooky snow globes placed on beds of dried Halloween leaves on all the tables. Your mother's scowl removed. The magic in the air.

I considered which sunglasses would be less obviously trying to hide the little laceration my left eyebrow had sustained, getting a square dig off the most Napoleonic of the Birmingham football hooligan types the night before. Uncouth leering flaccid cunts. But maybe I just take things too seriously. A half-pissed Hibernian psycho allowing our country's bloody history to get the better of me. Melodramatically. Pathetically. The girls getting harassed weren't even Irish for fuck sake. Sometimes I'm a stupid cunt. As you know.

It's not advisable to run as fast as you can wearing dress shoes. The oxblood brogues got scuffed. That made me sad. They're the only shoes I've ever loved. You would love them too. The eyebrow will heal, but that leather never will.

The mourning beer did help. The afternoon whisky did more. The champagne sadness popped at midnight and I did my best to hide the rage. I smiled and freaked out all the lads. Especially Johnno. He was asking for you.

"Here, Dark Lord" he'd said, "Are you off your feekin meds or what?"

I told him not to be ridiculous. As if I'd be that irresponsible. As if I'd do anything to jeopardise Adam and Lauren's special day.

I've been called a beautiful liar before, many times, but Johnno just patted my shoulder, sighed a sigh of relief and went back to looking at all the pretty women, dancing in their new gorgeous figure-hugging gúnas. Everyone has an arse like, I thought to myself. I'm not bitter. I just need another Hendricks. It's late but there's still filo prawns floating about and that spicy tuna. And the bleedin' calamari. You can't bate' it.

In theory I'd agreed with Johnno who'd joked, "Sure going to weddings single is the best craic" saying "You know yourself man, you're a hooer for cross legged divorcées, alone at the bar, gagging to engage with the likes of you, a young lad sure, knowing exactly what it would be. No kids in tow. No fuckin strings man, C'mon n'cheer up Bro".

But I don't want to bang a divorcée. We'd have too much in common and end up weeping in each other's arms. I suppose that wouldn't be so bad. At least that exchange would be honest. I'd be babbling about you and she'd be banging on about her gambling-cheating ex who was still a really good dad to their three kids. But I had my doubts as to the market value of a washed up old divorcé like myself. Those ladies probably sought what my younger self might have offered.

Energy and not a feeling to speak of. And the younger ones sure, all seem to have fellas. Mr. Hendricks, I guess is company enough.

An unholy trinity of the lads' mothers I know since I was a scamp start to hover, bearing bowls of patatas bravas. I'm speaking to one of the waiters in Spanish because I can. They're all very impressed. I'm talking absolute pony but sure, they don't know that. They ask me how my mother is and I lie through my teeth. I can feel her smokers' cough swelling inside me.

I can tell Catherine is trying not to look at my eyebrow, my newly formed crows feet, the pain in my eyes and my ever-growing jowl. She's trying to smile through her pity and disapproval. She asks how my mother is and I lie through my teeth, saying she's doing well. I feel my mother's smokers' cough as I clear my throat.

Maureen asks no one in particular what the difference is between garlic mayo and garlic aioli? No one has a clue including me and I feel like a knob having just been audibly whacking out my broken bouncing northern learned Spanish. Gallego. Practically a different language.

I respond to her smirking, saying "the spelling".

She snorts a little then gives me a clip in the ear, I presume for having the audacity to be hilarious while she had a mouth full of too-hot fried potatoes.

Cathleen just stares at me. Arms folded, without saying a word. This woman has notions. She has it in her head that I'm the one who was a bad influence on Johnno's younger brother Sean, who we'd always let tag along, growing up. We were as bad as each other.

The waiter was Moroccan, he confessed, and told me all those northern Galicians sounded like Italian sailors. I told him I'd been called worse. They feckin kind of do though, he was right. It seemed like everyone was right but me. I yawn at my own amateur dramatics even as I say that. You just never believed that anyone else could hurt as badly as you do.

For a moment I forget about you, having left the three white witches to reach the terrace and overlook the marina. It's paradise. We're in the hills. The palm trees sway. The coast is golden. It is almost July and it's sweltering. But I can feel the sea breeze. I'm still in my three piece suit. I look back at the party and the happy couple are embracing each other on the dance floor. Smarter men than me look cool in the white linen flowing open-shirts.

I chain smoke like a little sad boy, sulking, waiting for the night's earlier saviour, Siofra, to come back, heaving out of her dress, to beg me to take her away from this place. But there's another man here. He's six inches taller, at least, is fit, has nice white teeth, a fancy watch and a stable source of income I reckon. And he cares. He wants her. I don't really, and I can see the fist in *his* throat as he offers Siofra his hand and leads her out onto the occasionally erected dance floor.

She looks smug, her head on his shoulder and her eyes get smokey as they meet mine. I wave. I really do hope they work out. He seems like he deserves her. Or someone to cherish him at least. I know she'll hurt him, slowly. Like you all seem to do. As they turn, he's clearly delirious about her. I'd say he was concentrating hard on, well, on not getting hard, pressing into her.

I want to get back in my dream world, where I could use telepathy to assure him that Siofra wants it. He sees me. I nervously wave and turn my shaking lithium hand into a thumbs-up so that he can be safe in the knowledge that I mean no harm.

Things are wrapping up. Taxis arrive and the shawls are coming on as shoulders are getting cold. I've slipped into the shadows so that she cannot see me when she'll invariably look back, waiting for *her* rescue. They get one together.

We're in the same hotel. I'm positive this isn't an accident. I've been such a mess since the divorce was finalised that days and nights all seem to bleed into one another. I'm not sure if it's been Siofra stalking me or the other way around. Neither would surprise me.

I follow her and Handsome Dan or whatever the fuck his name is. I wait a little while. I take my shoes off, not wanting my heels to alert them of my presence. I know how quickly she moves. I slide down to sit outside her door and sip scotch from a beautiful rocks glass that I'd stolen from the venue, and wait for it to begin.

For a moment I wonder if I'm too late. Perhaps he'd blown it, but no. He's whispering softly to her and soon I hear her entrance moan. It's still the same. He's being gentle. She's being polite. Siofra doesn't like it that way. Or maybe all those times she'd just been placating my needs. I hope that was the case because Handsome Dan really does seem like a good guy.

I drink the scotch and place my ear to the glass against the door. The sound is amplified. I hear him say he loves her. She reciprocates. It's beautiful.

What else is there worth living or dying for, in this stinking dung heap of a world, but true love?

I miss you Heather.

Oisín



## General Knowledge

Stephen Brophy

By Limerick Junction there was still no word from Carl and the family distracted themselves with last minute preparations for the quiz.

‘Capital of Uruguay?’ Lara asked, as the train slouched through a patchwork of green fields.

‘Montevideo killed the radio star.’

‘Dad, if you start that carry-on on T.V. I’ll disown you in front of the nation.’

He unscrewed the thermos cap and filled the lid with steaming tea. ‘I’m gonna answer every question like that,’ he said. ‘Cause *pundemonium*.’ He winked at Lara who was cocooned in her hood, watching the misty distance eke by. Bad jokes had always been his way of disguising stress.

‘Sweet Jesus,’ she said.

She returned to the quiz app on her phone.

‘The Calcutta cup is awarded in which sport?’

Blank faces all around. ‘Horsereading?’ her mother tried. She was better on science and nature; her father wasn’t often caught out on geography, but history was his real strength; Lara knew her music, but Carl, the eldest, had always been the one for sports. Ever since he could put one foot in front of the other there’d been a ball at his feet. He was to meet them off the train in Dublin.

‘Can we phone a friend?’ her dad asked.

Her mother touched his knee. ‘I think I might, actually,’ she said sliding out of the seat, ‘just to check in.’ And she swayed off down the carriage with her phone pinned to her ear.

They took a break from the questions on the off chance they might catch a sliver of information, but she was too far away to be heard. Lara wrote her initials in the condensation her father’s tea had caused on the window. Her dad tapped out a piano riff one-handed on the tabletop. The country beyond the window flickered by like old movie reels. A copse of damp ash trees, shuddering in the breeze was replaced by a young farmer walking his land, pucking a sliotar ahead of his bounding sheepdog. The farmer, in turn, was replaced by a lone magpie resting on a rusted gate.

‘Well?’ Lara asked when her mother settled back in beside her father.

‘No update.’

From the gear bag by his feet, her father doled out chicken and stuffing sandwiches swaddled into the same kind of tinfoil bundles he had always packed for trips to Carl’s away matches. Lara ignored her sandwich, picking instead at the packet of crisps that was splayed open in the centre of the table.

Her father reached into the gear bag again, ‘I want us all to wear these tonight,’ he said, laying three blue ribbon pendants out before them.

Lara sat twisting her ribbon on the tabletop while her parents pinned theirs to their windbreakers.

‘Keep the questions coming, Lara,’ her father said. ‘Keep our minds on tonight.’

By Portlaoise they had most of the capital cities of Europe and South America covered, along with each president of Ireland. They knew the first black woman to win an Academy Award, the first man to climb Everest, the name of the man who stayed on the shuttle while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin played golf on the moon, but they were none the wiser on Carl’s biopsy results.

The last time Lara had gotten the train up to Dublin, Carl had sat across from her, fit as a fiddle then, flirting with the young one who pushed the snack cart. They'd spent the day shopping on Grafton Street and eaten an early dinner in the Hard Rock. He'd even let her have a bottle of Coors Light with her burger before they caught the last train back to Cork. The following day he'd collapsed coming out of the shower and she was the one who'd found him, naked and pale, face down on the landing, the towel bundled around his feet. He was twenty-two years of age with a county final on the horizon and a tumour the size of a grapefruit growing on his spleen.

Lara had a chart downloaded to her phone that quantified the growth inside her in fruit sizes now. That seemed to be the common metric these things were measured in. Week one was represented by a poppy seed; a tiny speck of life, less than the size of a fingernail. By now – week twelve – the chart compared her baby to a plum, noting that it had sprouted miniscule fingernails of its own. Only she and her G.P. knew. Not even Jay Nelligan, who, after a shared bottle of vodka had worn her down and convinced her he'd mastered the art of pulling out, knew about the result of that night.

Carl had tried hiding his growth at first too. He'd watched his team win the county final from the side-line, feigning a hamstring injury, and slipped away before the celebrations started. The last thing he wanted, he'd said, was the attention of it. Early on, he'd told Lara that was the worst of it. She could never wrap her head around that until she'd held the test in her hand and seen the dizzying sight of those two thin red lines.

The quiz show was called Family Time, and it was the one thing every week the Cotters, as a whole, made a ritual of. Thursday nights at

seven, all outside distractions were put aside and they gathered in the living room, and nine weeks out of ten they beat the family onscreen.

‘I’m telling ye,’ Lara used to say, ‘we could do it.’

‘Different in front of those cameras,’ her dad would caution, but he never went as far as to actually disagree.

Even when Carl was bad, he’d sat with them. Lara had a hard time pulling her eyes away from the television’s light gleaming against his clammy bald scalp, the skin drawn taut over his gaunt features, the way his opiated eyes searched vaguely in the direction of the screen. And still he would pull sports answers out of the fog, but it seemed to sap the last of the energy from him and often he would retire to bed before the second commercial break. One evening, they watched the mother of a family from Tullamore dab her eyes with a tissue she produced from her sleeve while she told the host they would be donating their winnings to the National Cancer Trust. Lara filled out the application form the next morning.

‘More than fifty percent of twins are identical. True or false?’ her father was playing the part of quizmaster now, as the train made loud progress through the flat green basin of the Curragh.

Lara almost blurted out the answer, recalling it from an article a baby blogger had linked to. She almost said it was closer to thirty three percent.

‘That doesn’t sound right,’ said her mother.

‘No?’ her father asked.

Lara’s mother gave it one final consideration, ‘No.’

‘Correct. It’s false. Remember with Carl, you were convinced it was twins?’

She smiled. ‘First pregnancy. I was convinced of a lot of things. I was convinced an all-natural birth was the way to go. Listen to your mother, Lara. If you ever have a baby, when it comes to labour, drugs are your very best friend.’

‘Steady on, Lisa,’ said Lara’s father. ‘Give the girl a chance to grow up herself first.’ He smiled warmly at his only daughter. ‘Right,’ he said, ‘Jupiter is larger than all the other planets in our solar system combined. True or false?’

Carl had arrived home from his first oncology appointment since the surgery with a bottle of champagne in his hand. The rest of the family were seated around the kitchen table, constructing their fajitas from the brightly coloured ingredients scattered in bowls across the tablecloth.

‘What’s this?’ his father had asked, motioning towards the bottle.

‘What do you think?’

‘Fuck off. You’re not serious?’

Carl’s smile folded in on itself. He couldn’t speak, only nod his confirmation.

His mother shrieked and leapt across the room into his arms, knocking the bottle to the tiles where it shattered. Lara stepped through the green shards and the frothy booze trailing along the grout lines of the floor and gripped her big brother tighter than she had dared to for a long time.

Their father sat at the table and wept.

Sitting around the train table with them, she wondered how they would react if she spilled her news there and then. She hadn’t taken it well herself, at first. Then, last week she had felt the frigid gel

smear across her abdomen, the pressure of the ultrasound's probing. On the screen she had expected to see shapeless shades of grey. She couldn't believe the clarity of what was nestled inside of her. It reminded her of the way her father slept sometimes in the armchair with his chin resting on his chest. Its delicate little nose was so defined, and it appeared to be pouting, and there was a galloping heartbeat that alarmed her for its speed, but the sonographer assured her was, 'exactly what we want to hear.'

She was amazed she could contain all this beauty inside herself, and felt an unexpected and powerful need to share it with the world. But there was rarely champagne for sixteen-year-old pregnancies.

Carl had been eight months cancer free when the new growth appeared, dark-brown and malevolent at the base of his neck. The biopsy was rushed through by a family friend at a private clinic in Dublin. He was living there by then, studying to be a physiotherapist. "Rushed through" still meant a week of frayed nerves, of nights spent climbing the walls.

Lara glanced him on the platform as they pulled into Heuston Station now. He held no bottle. His back was to them, his phone to his ear, and she could read nothing from his posture; he had always stood slightly stooped, his chin tucked like a boxer. Then, he was lost to the squirming knot of bodies spread out across the platform. The train slowed to a crawl and Lara pinned the blue ribbon to the breast of her hoodie, twisting it around and around, staring out the window at nothing in particular.

Her father took hold of her free hand. 'We've been here before,' he said, 'and it all worked out.' His words might have carried more comfort if Lara couldn't feel the clammy sweat of his palm across her knuckles.

Her mother sat across from them, clutching her phone, searching the crowd outside for her son's face. Her eyes were every bit as heavy

and bloodshot as the day Carl had arrived home armed with the champagne. After his news that day she had slept for sixteen hours straight.

They were standing with their bags slung over their shoulders before the train ever came to a halt. As they waited for the doors to open Lara selfishly thought that if the news was good, maybe she could ride its wave, that its buoyancy might be strong enough to carry hers too. Because hers was good news, and years down the line it wouldn't matter how young or foolish she had been. The child would be another one of them that they couldn't imagine life without, a new and essential member of the family, another child to love. When the door slid open, she stopped short on the step. The briny smell of the river wafted up through the station. The platform hummed with the droning accents of the place. Behind her, passengers clogged up the carriage. A short man in a heavy coat muttered something in a foreign language.

'You alright, love?' her mother asked.

'I just need a second.'

After all the anxious spying on her mother's calls, all the hours waiting to hear, she wanted to delay the news now, to pause in a time when a favourable outcome was still possible. In her mind's eye she glimpsed a hopeful future where Carl was running with her child, the pair passing a ball between them, and she felt herself begin to unravel. This was the future she chose to believe, the future she chose to live in for just a moment longer, before stepping forward to find her brother's face among the crowd.

# North

Ashley J.J. White

The ad said “must love dogs” but I expected common house pets, not actual wolves. As I pushed through the gate and fumbled with my luggage, two of them held back, eyeballing me. A third was right at the gate with his huge white ears alert and his raggedy tail wagging. He looked me square in the eye and gave me what seemed like a mischievous grin. Smiling, I dropped my stuff to give him a pet.

My human host sauntered down the front steps then in a flurry of frizzy blonde hair, pushing her chunky, black-framed glasses up on her nose. She was wearing a ratty tank top that said in faded letters, Witchy Woman. She shooed the dogs away.

“Don’t mind them, they’re friendly. Well, he is.” She said, giving the nice one a pat on the head. He tailed us as we lugged the entirety of my earthly possessions around to the back of the house.

“This is North,” she said, digging around in her pockets for my key.

“He’s beautiful.”

“He’s around eighty percent arctic wolf. That’s his mom and brother out front. I rescued them from a shelter up in the Yukon a few years ago. I was only planning to take the puppies, but there was a crazy bond between the three. I couldn’t separate them.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” I said, and as my fingers caressed North behind the ears, my eyes wandered around my new place. I hadn’t seen it in person.

“Make yourself at home. And feel free to kick this mutt out if he’s bothering you.”

North stayed with me for the rest of the evening as I unpacked. It felt strangely natural to have him there by my side, like I’d known him longer than ten short minutes.



The house was small, but the backyard was a special kind of paradise. There, I spent many long days blissfully swaying in a hammock tied to two palm trees, the ocean breeze kissing my face while I lazily flipped through pages and pages of summer reading. That yard was a miniature jungle; it felt nothing like the Canada I knew. Surrounded by dense greenery—bamboo, palm trees, cherry blossoms, ferns—it felt exotic, and the roaming wolves only magnified its wildness.

North was filthy most of the time; his thick white coat always matted with evidence of his days spent romping around the nearby forests. On nice days I'd leave my door open, and he'd rove in and out as he pleased. On cooler days, I'd hear a distinct knock as if from a human knuckle. I'd open the door to see North's face, soaking wet, eyes twinkling, ears begging for play.

I never spent long in that basement suite without a knock from North. The other two would only come down when I was cooking; they'd come in, sniff the air, weasel some food scraps out of me and leave, but North always stayed long after the aromas of mealtime had faded.

Maggie said he wasn't like that with any of her previous tenants. Probably because most people don't want a hairy grimy beast in their house. But not only didn't I mind; I loved it. He became a fixture in my life as if he were my own family dog, although, North was no ordinary dog. While he had the superior intelligence of a wolf and a face full of mischief, he also had the loyalty and neediness of a common Labrador. An amalgamation of primal and tame, I'd soon learn North contained multitudes.

One warm summer evening, he came bounding through the open door as usual. Maggie had shaved him down to make him more comfortable in the July heat and the sight of him was so funny I couldn't help but erupt into laughter. She left only the hair around his face and at the end of his tail; he looked ridiculous, like an awkward white lion with a head too big for his body. As I laughed, genuinely delighted at the sight of him, the big poof on the end of his tail dropped between his hind legs. His ears flopped, his eyebrows

descended into a sad arch, and his gaze went down to the ground in front of his paws. He turned around and pouted out the door.

“Oh my god! No! North, I love you!” I called after him. His ears perked up and he turned only his head back, as if to say he’d return, but only if I quit laughing at him.

That’s one example of his sensitive side. There were other times I was reminded of his more carnal nature.

One night, a neighbourhood cat wandered into the suite and spent a couple of hours cuddled up beside me on the couch. Later, when I let the cat back into the yard, it happened to be the very second Maggie got home with the dogs. North ran around the side of the house and was confronted by the intruder.

There was a screech followed by a small but visceral struggle. I opened the door to a sight I’ve never been able to forget: North looking wilder than ever, blood painting his paws and jawline the richest, most brutal crimson. I couldn’t tell you what sound I made, but it was enough for Maggie to come running around the back of the house, worlds calmer and more collected than I. She’d seen this before. She told me to go inside, said I wasn’t helping anyone with my hysterics.

I collapsed into the couch with my head in my hands, trying to erase the savage sight from my mind. Sometime later, my phone pinged with a text from Maggie letting me know North hadn’t moved from my door.

Sighing, I opened it and there he was, looking apologetic. He didn’t barrel in as usual; he was waiting for my forgiveness. I had to smile, and I tilted my head in invitation. Perked up, he went straight to his usual spot at my feet and didn’t move for the rest of the day, not even when the smell of lunch came drifting down.

About a year later, Maggie and I went for a hike with the dogs. It was mid-summer and the only refuge from the thirty-degree sun was in the arms of the impenetrable forest. It hadn't rained in months; the ground was dry and brittle. North was running ahead with his brother and mom, carefree in his element. A light breeze carried the ocean into my hair, playfully mussing the wayward strands with its salty breath. It was the perfect temperature in the shade, and I kept saying to Maggie what a beautiful day it was, what a beautiful part of the world where we were so lucky to live. The Fraser Valley River rushed far below, adding production value to the birdsong.

Suddenly, the peace was fractured. North's yelp cut through the humdrum and along with it came the unmistakable sound of ground falling. He had run too close to the edge and the dry rockface gave way under his feet. Yelping ourselves, we ran to the cliff. His eyes locked with mine as he fell with the cruel illusion of slow motion toward the rocky riverbed below. The river that was moments before a source of quenching peace transformed before my eyes into an evil crevasse.

Maggie crumbled to the forest floor, much the same as the ground that had crumbled under North's feet. I didn't cry right away; shock is a muzzle. In a daze, I sunk to the ground beside Maggie and dumbly rubbed her back while she wept. When my own tears came, they did so like I'd never shed a single tear in my life, like they were only now bursting through the dam on behalf of a lifetime of sorrows.

In a rare show of affection, the other two nuzzled between us, a human sadness in their downcast eyes. The four of us stayed there frozen in our anguish long enough for dusk to fall.

The house was vibrating with heartache upon our return, as if it was somehow made aware of the news. We often think of houses as inanimate, but how can they remain so with all they bear witness to?

All afternoon and evening I tried my best to keep it together for Maggie's sake; it was more her loss than mine. But as soon as I hugged her goodnight and met the safety of my own space, any semblance of strength disintegrated. North's fur was all over my little world and I wished in vain that I could reconstruct him with the tufts.

When we returned to the forest for a ceremonial goodbye, I was struck once again by the poetic tragedy of it all: how the very nurturer of his wild spirit was also the harbinger of his end. I wanted to scream at the cliffside for its violent incompetence.

Many years later, I returned to Vancouver after a long stretch overseas. I went to visit North's spot one gloomy afternoon in January. I was intentionally alone, and as it does, time ran away. Whatever light was able to penetrate the gloom began to disappear behind the mountains. It would be dark soon and any familiarity I once had for the forest was long shrouded. Every time I felt like I was on track I was back where I started. Blackness fell around me as I circled the woods in vain. The heavy clouds smothered any light from the moon. My eyes adjusted to the dark, but it was only a small consolation. My paranoia sharpened as the blanket of nightfall settled in, comforting only to the nocturnal critters lurking in the shadows.

Eventually, after endless circling to no avail, frustration and exhaustion paralyzed me. I slumped down to the mossy ground and leaned up against an oak tree thrice as wide as I. Just then, a shadow flickered in the corner of my eye accompanied by a deliberate rustling. My heart pounded as I traced the sound to find a lone white wolf, his twinkling golden eyes illuminating the darkness. As those wild eyes met mine, my breath ceased to exist. I froze in place as the animal stepped closer. Without breaking eye contact, he sat in front of me, his giant head mere inches from my face.

I should have been scared. It was the middle of winter and hunting was scarce; most of this carnivore's prey was safely tucked away. It's a phenomenon fear wasn't the emotion tugging at my insides, but a

feeling of profound peace. I smiled, and the creature tilted his head. I reached out my hand, palm facing upwards, and the wolf leaned forward to give it a curious sniff. Then, with a movement that would have startled the wits out of any sane person, he licked my hand.

I laughed. The sound was strange as it cut through the deafening silence of the night. I scratched him in the spot behind the ears North always loved. He nuzzled into my hand and curled up beside me, his hot-blooded body as safe, warm, and comfortable as my own bed.

After some time, he stood up with an exaggerated stretch and tilted his head suggesting, “come on.” The forest flora had coloured his white paws a deep brown, creating the ethereal illusion of his white body floating. I followed and every time there was a fork in the path he’d amble left or right with the surefooted confidence of a host giving you a tour of their mansion’s west wing.

As the night passed through adolescence into maturity, the coastal air with all its humidity and damp began to seep through my clothes. Shivering, I looked ahead with desperation to find my ghostly guide sitting in the middle of the pathway waiting for me. As soon as I reached him, the distant lights sparkled their reflection in his glossy eyes. He looked toward the city and then back at me as if to say, “you’re safe now.”

Cold as I was, I stood there in awe watching as my saviour skulked back into his natural habitat. As soon as I reached the forest’s edge, the distinctive sound of a wolf’s howl pierced the frigid night. I howled back.

## Lost and Unfound

Diane Brown-Wilson

*There are two types of people when it comes to losing things: those who move on and those who are forever looking.*

'It was a daaarrrk and storrrmy night...!' Leo's muttering to himself, narrating limericks, reciting the phonetic alphabet –anything to ease the misery of trudging through the driving rain. A couple of hours ago, his supposedly waterproof gear started to leak; inside his boots, his socks are sodden. But there's nowhere on the coastal path to shelter. The wind's so strong he can barely lift his head to check his bearings; all he can do is plod on, eyes down, fearful of losing his footing.

Leo's also trying to banish thoughts of Kate. She'd seemed enthusiastic when he arranged this trip a few weeks ago – a semi-challenging walking holiday for two. So he still can't quite believe that last weekend, after two years together, she sat him down and said, 'I think things have run their course; it's time to say goodbye.'

It's a pain that smarts like a blister, although he wonders how much is wounded pride. After all, like every girl that went before her, he'd never been able to say I love you. So he knows he should move on, respect her views, but her words continue to haunt him: 'You're harder than a porcupine to get close to, Leo. You need to let people in.'

With the November night descending, the coastal path is a hostile place, especially now he's fallen behind schedule. He'd be ten miles on thawing out in his pre-booked accommodation if he hadn't lost two hours helping that woman search for her dog (it eventually bounded back unharmed). An hour ago, he called the B&B to say he wouldn't be able to get there before dark and asked if there might be a bus or taxi. 'Ha!' the man laughed. 'Nothing like that around 'ere. Perhaps we'll see you tomorrow.'

Thanks for that, Leo thought, shoving his phone back in his pocket.

So, it's this place or nothing. In the distance – across a field – he can see lights and silhouettes of buildings, some kind of civilisation. He takes the fork in the path leading inland, but as he approaches, he's not met with a reassuring welcome sign; there appears to be no main street—the settlement's nothing more than a dozen houses and an ancient pub: The Halfway House. Halfway to bloody nowhere, he thinks.

He pushes open a door and arrives in a room that could be a film set for an olde worlde hovel. He blinks in the light, disconcerted by the silence and warmth, and shakes off water like a dog.

'Evenin',' a man's voice calls.

'Oh, hello.' Leo's embarrassed by how wet he is, but as he approaches the bar, the man behind it, as scruffy as his surroundings, doesn't seem perturbed. 'I was wondering if there's anywhere around here to stay the night. As you can see, I've been walking.'

'Right enough. We run a hostel in a converted barn up the lane. That said, there's not much call for rooms at this time of year, so you won't have to mind bein' alone.' He chuckles, 'Least it's better than being out in this.'

'That'd be fine.'

The man hands him a key. 'You can settle up in the mornin'. Breakfast here from eight, if you want it.'

Leo nods. 'Can I get a pint and something to eat now?'

The publican reaches for a glass and pulls a pump, evidently unacquainted with the concept of choice. 'Pie and chips do yer?'

'Fine.'

'Settle yourself by the fire, then; I'll bring it across when it's ready.'

Two hours and four pints later, Leo struggles to his feet. He's nearly asleep in the warmth of the flames, the food and beer having eased his discomfort. Only four other customers have passed through while he's been here; now, he's the last one remaining.

'I'll be off then,' he says to the publican, who gives him brief instructions about the hostel. 'There's only one room with the bed made up, so you'll see which is yours.'

They say goodnight, and when he steps outside, Leo's once again lashed by the weather. He sighs and grits his teeth, reluctant to return to his previous miserable state. Luckily, he spots his destination after only a few minutes' walk by torchlight, shrouded in darkness, as expected. He unlocks the front door and flicks on the light in what's revealed to be a long narrow building. When he closes the door behind him, all is suddenly silent. The thick walls muffle the maelstrom outside, yet as warned, the place is cold and unwelcoming.

'Dry, at least,' he murmurs, dropping his rucksack in the first room he encounters. It's compact, and the furniture basic – a smallish double bed made up with sheets and blankets, a wooden chair and a bedside table. He decides he'll find the bathroom and then turn in; by now, he's beyond exhausted.

Wandering down the narrow hall, he opens doors to five more rooms virtually identical to his own, then a bathroom with an electric shower. He turns it on and is pleased to find the water runs warm – not piping hot – but tolerable enough to get clean. A final door at the end of the corridor is possibly some communal space or kitchen? He turns the handle and pushes it open, expecting to have to locate the light switch. But there's no need: the light's on; the room is warm – a fire dancing in the grate; and a young woman is at the table, sewing.

'Oh!' both are equally startled.

'God, I'm so sorry.' Leo says. 'I didn't mean to alarm you. I had no idea you were here.'



'Well, I wasn't expecting you either. But that's alright; there's plenty of room for us both.' The woman smiles and stands up. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' She has long blonde hair, is dressed in jeans and a fair isle jumper and looks about his own age, early thirties.

'Um, I don't know. I'm a bit damp and cold, so I was intending to have a shower and go straight to bed.'

'Been walking?'

'Yes.'

She nods and smiles. 'So, do you have any dry clothes?'

'Trackie bottoms and a sweatshirt, which I hope have escaped being soaked.'

'Well, I suggest you shower and put them on, then bring your wet stuff back here. I'll put it in front of the fire to dry out for tomorrow. You can decide then if you want tea.'

'Oh... thanks.' He's still confused, the four pints of beer not aiding his clarity, but it sounds like a good suggestion.

While he showers in the icy bathroom, his mind's in overdrive about the woman. How odd she's here when the publican said he'd be alone. Who on earth can she be? Presumably, she could be a fellow hiker, but the fire and the sewing? – she seems as settled as if this is her home.

Dressed again, he picks up his discarded clothes and heads back, but the very moment he opens the door to the room she's in, the lights flicker and extinguish. Although he hadn't noticed it earlier, there's a lighted candle on the table, which continues to provide some illumination.

'Power cut,' the woman says, not at all disconcerted. 'Hardly surprising in this weather. But it's quite cosy with the fire and the candlelight – although not much good for working.'

'Working?'

'I was trying to finish some embroidery tonight, but I guess I'll have to abandon it.' She holds up a piece of fabric within a frame, but he can't judge its artistry in such poor light. 'Nice,' he says lamely, not wanting to invade her space in order to examine it in detail. However, what does strike him clearly is her soft Irish lilt, clear green eyes, and the hint of mischief around her mouth. Everything about her is somehow off-kilter, and he wonders if she might end up inviting him to follow her down a rabbit hole like Lewis Carroll's Alice.

He must be frowning because she laughs. 'Embroidery's probably not your cup of tea – though that reminds me, do you want one?'

'But the power's off.'

'Ah, but that kettle over the fire provides constant hot water.'

'Then yes; that'd be great.'

'So sit down while I sort it out.'

He does as he's bid, sinking into an armchair in the corner of the room, letting it envelop his weary bones. He's too tired to question the how's and whys of how things work, especially as the woman appears so efficient. While she skilfully stokes the fire and moves around the kitchen in a way that brings back memories of his mother, he lets himself relax. Oddly, he has a sense of coming home, of entering a world he's predestined to inhabit, although he can't rationalise, even to himself, exactly why that might be.

Wondering whether and how he might share this thought, he stretches out his legs and lets his eyelids droop, soothed by the flames' whispering and sighing.

'You need to go to bed.'

He hears a quiet voice and feels a gentle hand on his shoulder. He snaps awake but struggles to recall where he is and to identify who has spoken. Fortunately, she's standing right in front of him, silhouetted in the light of the candle.

'God, I must have dropped off for a moment.'

She laughs softly. 'Some moment. You've been asleep for over an hour. But the fire's dying down now, and it's getting cold; I think you need to move.'

Up close, he's able to admire her perfect skin and small, exquisite teeth and catches a hint of a delicious fragrance. He'd like to sit there longer, drinking in everything about her, but knows it isn't possible. And sleep is dragging him back. 'Okay,' he mumbles. 'Is the power still off? What—?'

'Yes, but don't worry; I'll make sure everything's safe. Let me guide you to your room; we've only got this one candle.'

Still befuddled, he obeys, and once there, she waits in the doorway while he finds his torch.

'Goodnight,' she smiles. 'Sleep well.'

'Yes, you too. See you in the morning.'

She closes his door, and he gets straight into bed, keen to avoid the cold. He almost feels drugged, his thoughts whirling in a peculiar dance of questions about the woman, who she is, why she's here and the reason she's impressed him so powerfully. There's so much he wants to ask her, will ask her in the morning. As he becomes drowsy, his mother's face drifts into his mind as it often does immediately before sleep. 'Always remember I love you,' she says. 'I know we'll meet again one day.'

Those were the words she'd uttered at the end while he sat by her bed with his small hand clutching hers. When she died, something perished within him too. At least, until now he assumed it had... Love at first sight, he muses. Is that a real thing?

It's his last thought before oblivion.

Later, he's woken again by the same light touch and beguiling voice. 'I'm freezing and I hate being alone in the dark; can I come in with you?'

This time there's no candle lighting the room, and all he can see in the moon glow seeping around the curtains' edge is the vague shape of the woman. He has no idea what the time is or what the storm is doing, and he lacks the energy to question. 'Get in,' he whispers, holding up the blanket as he shifts to one side of the bed. 'You can lie in the warm bit where I've been.'

Silently, she slips under the covers and lies with her back against the length of him, and he puts his arms around her as if it's the most natural thing in the world. When she squeezes his hands as if in thanks, he buries his face in her lemon-scented hair. Neither of them moves; he doesn't want to – it wouldn't be right – and within minutes, he senses her breathing slow and deepen.

He lies alongside her as if spellbound, overwhelmed by a feeling of peace. If I died now, I would die happy, he thinks, wanting to keep hold of every second.

Eventually, lulled by the rise and fall of her breathing and the heat of their bodies, sleep reclaims him, too.

When he wakes in the morning, the space beside him is empty. It's dark, and he lies still for a couple of minutes, relishing his memory of holding her before fumbling for his phone on the bedside table. It's only just after seven – she must be an early riser. He assumes she must be in one of the other bedrooms, though he can't remember any of them being made up. He can't call her name - he doesn't know it - and

why would he disturb her anyway? Instead, he decides he'll get up and try and make some tea to repay her previous kindness.

He finds his clothes dry and folded on the bedroom chair and quickly pulls them on before making his way to the kitchen. As he passes, he sees that the door to every room – including the bathroom – is open, and all are uninhabited. The kitchen, too, is empty, transformed from last night's cosy nest to a pristine, untouched showroom. There's no trace of ashes in the fire; it's freshly made up and no longer warm. The mugs are back in the cupboards, the chairs straight, and there's a new candle in the holder. It's as if no one has ever been here, certainly not last night.

The only clue he finds is a strand of green embroidery thread languishing on the floor. He picks it up and looks for more but, finding nothing, twists it into a tiny bow and puts it in his pocket. Before leaving, he forensically searches every room for further clues, but there's no evidence of her presence. She's disappeared. Completely vanished. And he doesn't know who she was.

It's just after eight when he knocks on the pub door, and after a couple of minutes, it opens.

'Ah, it's you,' the publican says, ushering him in. 'Peaceful night?'

'Well, peaceful enough apart from the power going off, not that it made much difference.'

'Strange, no problem here that I know of. Back on again this morning, is it?'

Leo nods. 'Yes, it's fine now. Luckily, the woman there had lit the fire and found a candle, so it was absolutely fine..'

'Woman?'

'The woman staying there. About my age, blonde and petite, with an Irish accent. She looked quite settled when I arrived. '

The man frowns. 'Weren't no one up there but you last night; I think that beer must have got to you.'

'Hardly - she was as real as you and me. I don't know her name, but she looked like a walker. Perhaps she sneaked in illicitly.'

The man frowned. 'Tell you what, I'll get you some breakfast, and while you eat it, I'll look at our security camera. We may be in the backwoods here, but we still have some up-to-date magic.'

Half an hour later, as Leo finishes the last of his toast, the man comes over. 'So, I don't know what you were on, but there was no sign of anyone there but you – unless she came down the chimney!' He chuckles.

'No car? What about this morning – did anyone leave?'

'Nothing. I've looked at it all.' The man's expression is beyond sceptical.

Suddenly Leo's had enough. Lacking evidence, he even doubts himself. Just what state had he been in...?

As quickly as he can, he pays the bill, says goodbye and sets off down the path he came in on. He'll have plenty of time to mull things over as he walks, especially as the weather's clearing.

Exactly a year later, Leo's trudging the same stretch of coastal path, muttering to himself again, reciting limericks and singing. The day, although cold, is calm and dry; this time, he's trying to distract himself from his mounting excitement. He's heading for the same hostel, hoping she might return tonight, though he knows no reason why she would.

Maybe, at last, I'll see her again, he thinks, and finally, put an end to searching. That strand of thread is still in his pocket, a talisman he hopes might lead him to her. Since that night, he's tried everything to find her: exhausted all possible avenues in person and online and

persistently scrutinised social media. Within weeks, he returned here to question every resident, but no one knew who she might have been; not one person had seen her. He's contacted Irish women's organisations, needlework societies and colleges, art galleries, South West communities, and more – but all to no avail. He even spoke to a private investigator, but he advised he'd have no chance without a name, at least.

Yet he isn't despairing. He's not driven by needing to prove who she was or what happened that night but by the force of a powerful revelation. Within the few short hours he spent with her, he finally discovered what love is - and now he knows, he'll never forget.

Even if he searches for a lifetime and never finds her again, his life, at last, has meaning.

## The Lobster's Tale

Paul Dicken

As the SS Parime finally slipped into port, after many uneventful weeks at sea, it blew its whistle in a sigh of relief, the aperture yawning wide about the scolding hot steam and crinkling on either side into a contented smile of stress-whitened metal that almost reached to its ears. It was glad to be home again in London, even if the weather remained cool and frigid and frightfully reserved, and offered only the faintest rain-droplets of saltwater tears in acknowledged of her return.

But as the poet tells us, every beginning is — of course — just as much a coming to an end; and every returning home must always be balanced by an equal and opposite journeying into the unknown, lest everything comes to a rest and the world stops spinning and there are no more stories to tell. For the men crowding the deck were all southerners of the pampas who thought very little of wind-streaked warehouses and the faded grey waterfront; and as the Parime stretched languidly into her berth with a little shudder of appreciation that made the water lap the dock, so her crew took one look at the English weather and all at once scattered to the skies in a great cacophonous flock of many-coloured birds that squawked and sang and wheeled in a graceful arc to the west and the warm waters of Buenos Aires, and to the dark-eyed girls and the warm summer nights and the little path up the hill to the hacienda with the view across the valley.

Ambrose was not impressed. This was precisely why he had left South America in the first place; and he indicated as much to the grey-whiskered harbourmaster as he struggled down the gangway under the inconvenience of his own luggage.

The harbourmaster shrugged. "Foreigners, Sir," he suggested helpfully. "It's all that sunshine and wine and women, it gets into the blood."

"Well, it's not the sort of thing a chap expects here in England."



“No, Sir.” Although it was in fact the third time this had happened in as many months — and by now the rustling undergrowth of paperwork that had bloomed across the harbourmaster’s desk had all but reclaimed the poor man’s office, primordial administration sprouting ever upwards towards the illumination of a feeble skylight and twisting hopefully towards the warmth and security of a near-by filing cabinet, and spilling creeping tendrils in triplicate onto the dusty wooden floor, and cross-pollinating legal definitions and mutual indemnities into a thriving bureaucratic eco-system of its own purpose and design that could conjure worlds into being as vividly as any mournful ballad heard on the distant breezes of the barrio, if only one knows how to look; but’s that another story.

And so the harbourmaster merely pointed Ambrose towards a hansom cab, and re-adjusted his cap, and went about his business whistling a happy tune; and waited patiently to resume that same wondrous dream that he had lived every waking night since he was a boy, more vivid by far than the drab realities of the day that he bore with magnanimous indifference, for he knew that the best stories are those that have already been written, if only we can find the time to remember them. And so the Earth continued to spin.

Ambrose arrived just in time for lunch at his Club. The Secretary waved him over to his table, and they drank scotch-and-soda and complained about the weather, and muttered darkly about the cricket.

“They’re fielding two express bowlers, running them back to back.”

“It’s not the sort of the thing a chap expects here in England.”

The dining room was packed and murmuring and lightly punctuated with the chink of cutlery; the occasional bon-mots ascended above the fray but too well-bred to overstay its welcome, while a dense semiotics of silverware pointed beyond itself to those stories that can only be taught to those who already know them well, the ones that allow the telling of other stories, and the stories about the stories, and the stories about them too, so many stories that we never even notice

that we have recounted ourselves into a shared civilisation so distracted were we by our tales. And all the while, fleet-footed wine stewards add their own marginalia, exchanging mediocre Bordeaux — which is exactly the sort of thing a chap expects here in England — for second-hand debts and promissory notes, little fictions all of their own if only you know how to read them, with their cliff-hangers and misdirections, and flashbacks to earlier times, and characters in cameo from intersecting narratives, and every now and then the intervention of a mysterious benefactor whenever the bill becomes too unseemly.

“How’s the work coming on that labyrinth?” asked Ambrose, perusing the menu. “Or what was it again? A physical manifestation of infinite symbolism?”

“The Council wouldn’t give us planning permission,” replied the Club Secretary. “They said we had space for at most three allegories. Maybe a parable or two beside the croquet lawn.”  
“Typical bureaucrats.”

“Well don’t blame me, I voted for the fellow with the moustache.”

A six-foot tall lobster in a well-tailored dinner jacket and a top hat took their orders; it had a white linen cloth draped across the larger claw, and used the smaller, less-deadly one to offer them a choice of bread-rolls.

“Ah. Thank you, Wilton.”

The Head Waiter chattered deferentially, its inscrutable little black eyes waving back and forth on the end of their little twitching stalks. It then returned to the kitchens where it selected two smaller lobsters from an ice-bucket by the door and put them in a pot of boiling water. No-one was sure how the Head Waiter felt about this. But then, not every story needs to be told. Some need to be kept silent deep down inside, where they can burrow and insinuate and twist about our fibres, knotting them together with creeping tendrils of semantics, a little denouement in the blood, a touch of pathos worming through the marrow, bottle it all up until it can interpret you back onto your feet,

narrate you through the day, keep you safe beneath the layers of sub-text and endlessly deferred meaning, impenetrable beneath a hard, calcified shell — or then again, maybe it's the shell that keeps all the stories bottled up inside. No-one ever asked. Neither did they ask how it managed to balance itself on the tip of its chitinous tail, nor for that matter where it got its suits made; and it was generally considered impolite to ask.

“So no labyrinth then?”

“The Bursar suggested that the true labyrinth is one without any walls,” replied the Club Secretary, and tapped his temple with his forefinger to illustrate the point. “That it's all in the mind.”

“All in the Bursar's mind, more like. Just another cost-cutting exercise. But what about the minutes from the meeting? Is he allowed to do that?”

“Well that's the problem, we haven't got the minutes.”

“But Harrington is usually so good at this. Excellent memory, great attention to detail.”

“Exactly. He's recording everything that happened. Everything,” the Club Secretary reiterated. “He's been at it for months. Two volumes just on how the play of light dancing across the ink-well reminded him of his childhood. They're rather good, actually.”

The Head Waiter returned with a bottle of mediocre Bordeaux. The Club Secretary started filling his pipe. “So tell me, Ambrose. How was your trip to South America?”

A great groan arose from the Reading Room, where the faithful had gathered around the wireless in their MCC ties and blazers. Two express bowlers, fielded back-to-back! The batting collapse had been brutal. One old man began to weep softly, the sort of tears that a man saves for a faithful hound or a fallen mare, or maybe a particularly

well-regarded spouse. A few other gents wiped an irritation from the corner of their eye.

And then the flood began, a great deluge that soaked into the carpets and rose above the ankles, little eddies swirling about smartly polished brogues, and then almost as high as the argyle socks, and washing away a carelessly discarded copy of the Times, diaphanous newsprint dissolving into the water, and a thousand untold stories adrift in a raging sea of waterlogged grammar and a flood of unmoored syntax; and then right up to the knees damn it until you had to stand on the chairs, and still the grief kept pouring down, until it flowed out under the doors and all across the lobby and out onto the Mall.

The Head Waiter regarded the spectacle with its inscrutable little black eyes on their little twitching stalks. He clicked his mandibles together thoughtfully, and then left the Clubmen to their grief, and returned to the Dining Room. It really wasn't the sort of thing a chap expects here in England. But as the poet tells us, every ending is — of course — just as much a beginning; and sometimes you'll find the magic of exotic lands was always waiting for you at home. And so one by one, Wilton lifted the writhing lobsters from the ice-bucket with its smaller, less-deadly claw; and placed them gently in the rising torrent of salty water, and watched them scuttle out of the doorway and out into the world. No-one was sure how the Head Waiter felt about this either; but then again, sometimes the best stories just need to be lived.

He had a friend who worked in the City; within the week he had a new job in banking. But that's another story. And so the Earth continued to spin.

# The Package

June Gemmell

Miss Arabella Storm checked her morning mail which consisted of an advert for a stairlift and a life assurance offer. She didn't need a stairlift, she was an active sixty five year old, and she didn't need life assurance, for who should she leave her money to? Her elderly parents had passed away some years ago, and now there was only Merlin the cat. She tipped the leaflets in the bin and walked to her bay window.

Because her house was positioned at the very end of a cul-de-sac, Miss Storm could view the whole street. Safely tucked behind Flemish lace she liked to watch the movements of her neighbours, and be on alert for any suspicious activity. Her mink velour armchair was positioned so she had a clear view from the window.

And that's where she was standing when a delivery van drew up at Mr Crawford-Smith's house.

'Mr Crawford-Smith isn't in,' she said to Merlin. 'It's a Wednesday, he'll be at his bridge club.'

After a few minutes the doorbell rang.

A young man with a crew cut stood on her path. 'Could you take in a package for number twelve? There's no answer at the door.'

She nodded and held her hands out. 'I'd be happy to. My neighbour is out at his...' But the young man had already laid it on her doorstep and was on his way back to the van.

She placed the small cardboard box on the polished parquet of her hall floor. Edmund Crawford-Smith had been her neighbour for around ten years. His hair had turned from black into a distinguished grey over this time. Even after his retirement from the bank he took care of his appearance, wearing smart jackets and well pressed

trousers. He kept a neat front garden and Miss Storm approved of this. She had carefully cultivated their initial friendship until it had turned into what she now considered to be an ‘understanding’.

Every Thursday they went to the local art club together in his silver Volvo, and on a Sunday night they watched Poirot in her front lounge. With homemade Victoria sponge, sometimes lemon drizzle cake.

At the art club she sat next to him, fetched him the brushes and the paint colours he needed and brought him coffee during the break. She liked to signal to the other ladies that he was her property and they could stop ‘sniffing around’. She had to be quite sharp with Mrs Menzies and her incessant chatter when he was working on his Lake District landscape.

She looked down at the parcel again. Nice handwriting she noted. It looked like a fountain pen had been used.

‘I wonder who it’s from, Merlin?’

The cat licked his paws and cleaned his whiskers.

She bent down and twisted it round to see if there was any information on the other side of the box, bringing her eyes level with the cat’s inquisitive face.

‘Usually, the sender puts their name and address on the back. Just in case it should get mislaid. But there’s no sender’s address here. Most perplexing.’ She stroked the cat’s head.

She went about her morning cleaning routines, and as she caught sight of the box she would look at it again, or give it a little shake, her ear against the brown cardboard.

The hall clock with its sunburst shards of gold, ticked above her head.

‘Oh, puss, look it’s a quarter to eleven. Time for our cup of tea.’

She padded through to the kitchen, the cat following her sheepskin slippers feet. The radio trilled away in the background, but as she

drank her earl grey tea, her focus wandered from the programme. She pushed the cat off her lap and returned to the hall.

Miss Storm had an idea. If she carefully peeled back the packing tape, she could look inside, just a quick peep, and carefully reseal it without anyone knowing. Any damage to the packaging she could blame on the delivery service. However, there was an obstacle. It was thickly sealed with layer upon layer of sticky packing tape.

‘Look at this,’ she said to the cat. ‘There must be a whole roll of tape here. There’s no need for that. Wasteful!’

Peeling the tape off would be tricky and she would never get the parcel back together the way it had been. But then she held up a finger.

‘Wait a minute. Do you know Merlin, I have a new pair of sharp scissors perfect for this job. But I’ll need to be quick. Mr Crawford-Smith will be back at noon.’

When he got home there would be a card through his door from the delivery man, and then he would arrive at Miss Storm’s door looking for his parcel. She didn’t want to be caught in the act.

‘What do you think Merlin?’

The cat didn’t answer, but rubbed itself along the back of her legs.

She padded upstairs to her wardrobe where her clothes hung in a neat row, carefully pressed, on wooden coat hangers. The sewing box was on the shelf above. Back downstairs, she looked admiringly at the shiny steel blades. Merlin climbed the carpeted stairs and positioned himself halfway up, looking at her through the banisters.

She lifted the parcel on to the telephone table. The scissors slashed a fine, straight line across the top of the box. Inside was a letter and a large irregular shape wrapped in tissue paper, fastened with sellotape.

She peeled back layer after layer of tissue taking care not to rip the paper. Once or twice there was the sound of a car in the street and she

hurried to the window to check, her heart beating violently lest Mr Crawford-Smith was back early. But no, all was well, the Volvo was still nowhere to be seen.

Merlin had come to poke his little white nose into all the rustling paper and she brushed him to one side. As the final layer was unwrapped the object was revealed. A little pottery house. A charming cottage, decorated with individual roof tiles and flowers pressed into the clay around the door. The detail was extraordinary.

The letter in the box was not sealed, so it was easy to take it out and have a quick look. Just a glance. What harm could it do? But the contents of the letter chilled her to the bone.

*'Dear Edmund' it began 'I hope you like the small gift enclosed. The last time we had lunch you mentioned how much you liked the little pottery ornaments in the gift shop next door. As you know I go to a pottery class every week, and for the last month I've been making this for you. I do so enjoy our weekly lunches together, and hope when you look at this gift you'll think of me. With all my love. M. x*

Lunch! Every week! And it was signed off with a x. Well, that gave Miss Storm quite a start. He never took *her* out for lunch. They went to the art club, and occasionally for a coffee afterwards in the church hall cafe. She felt like a fool. He had been deceiving her, seeing this woman behind her back.

She rummaged under the sink for what she needed and felt the heavy hammer in her hand. The first swing smashed the little house entirely in two, but the next few blows smashed it into dozens of tiny pieces. The cat slunk away into the conservatory.

She stopped, breathless and checked the time. She would need to put the broken pieces back in the parcel. Quickly. Things often got damaged in the post. It wouldn't be unusual. Crushed. Thrown about



by delivery drivers. Regrettable but it happened all the time. However, as she picked up a roll of tape to start the process of rewrapping, something made her hesitate.

If she put it back in he would see even from the broken pieces, the lovely object it had been. Even the small fragments showed details of window frames, and tiny elegant window boxes. He would see it was a beautiful thing. She tipped the pieces in the bin with a crash. She had a better idea. In the greenhouse, under one of her fuchsia pots was an old misshapen green saucer, perhaps it had once been an ash tray. She had found it in a corner of the garden many years ago. It was chunky and heavy. Perfect. She gave it the briefest wipe with an old cloth and resealed the parcel, so that no one would be able to tell that the box had ever been opened.

When Mr Crawford-Smith arrived at her door she was wearing her best dress and a gold necklace he had admired in the past. The smell of newly baked cake was wafting through from the kitchen. Her lipsticked mouth smiled a welcome.

‘Oh Annabel. You’re looking well. I believe you have a parcel for me?’

‘Yes. Won’t you come in Edmund? I’ve just made some ginger cake if you’d like a slice?’

‘That sounds lovely, but I’ll not stop if you don’t mind. I have something to do this afternoon.’

Miss Storm’s smile lowered a centimetre. I bet you do, she thought.

‘So, I’ll just take the parcel if you don’t mind.’

She lifted it from the small table behind the door and handed it over.

‘Thank you Annabel. It’s from my sister, Margaret. She made something special for my birthday at her pottery class. I’m looking forward to opening it.’ He waved a goodbye.

Miss Storm gently closed her front door.

## The Haunted House at Bhangarh

Paul Marandina

I stare out of the tinted window for most of the trip; it's like being in another world. You have to go to India to know what I mean but the villages and farms are nothing like the ones in old Blighty. The tour is loaded with sightseers, mainly aged fifty and over apart from two teenagers who are travelling with parents and a young couple in their twenties. It is forecast to hit 40C later on. Tourist season is coming to an end with subsequent months post April suffering thermometers recording heat in excess of 50C. Just. Too. Hot.

I decided to take off on holiday after an acrimonious divorce. Her solicitors had taken me to the cleaners leaving the house sold, my pension shafted and my current abode a canal boat just outside Birmingham. What was there to lose other than myself in the sub-continent? Bitterness and anger are now my constant companions. India has surprised me so far; a more progressive country than you might imagine; contrasts are extreme though. Inhabitants of villages are either in or on the edge of poverty whilst cities like Delhi continue to boom. A decree has been passed recently that all rural towns will get public waste bins. For now, rubbish is simply set alight from time to time, making sure that no sacred cows are at risk from man-made infernos.

The couple across the gangway are laughing and pointing again. Every sight is an adventure. Hair grey-blond with age and wearing a sailor's hat, the man sitting nearest to me leans across the seats, urging me to look at another vehicle carrying an impossible load. I smile, enigmatically. I know, I know; it's *all* so different. I go back to my own view. An ancient goat herder with a long, wooden staff is meandering along in a field with a tall, skinny woman balancing a large, clay pot on her head. He is beneath a tree, his shadow cast on the ground as the sun rises in the morning sky. The coach driver is steaming along the narrow roads at pace, overtaken frequently by a never ending stream of mopeds, invariably with a girl strapped behind a young, male daredevil riding like a demon - Asian Evil Knieval.

There's an idol on our dashboard; Ganesh, I think. Hinduism has thirty three million Gods so I could be wrong – polytheism in all its glory. We have passed numerous accidents en route today. Lorries spilling their guts, motor bikes careening into oncoming traffic. Fatalism rules. Reincarnation prevails.

The driver's teenage assistant is offering cans of lager to the passengers. He sports a small, well-groomed beard as part of his transition to adulthood. Alcohol is difficult to come by with it being banned in many districts on religious grounds. Mouthy Dave from Essex at the back will buy a couple of tinnies. He has the look of a man who denies his family nothing; no expense spared. Unlimited rupees pay for cold, frothy beer to stave off the heat. No need, of course, this wheeled charabanc is air-conditioned – a pre-requisite in these parts. Sales go well. Again. The youngster wanders back to his master with a zipped sports bag topped up with more cash takings. The driver smiles.

The coach has slowed to a crawl. It's another holy festival. Another day, another deity. There's a large mass of people heading for the temple outside the gates. Music is blaring. It could be bhangra. It sounds similar. Women are dressed in reds and oranges, a riot of coloured saris. Men are dressed in conventional shirts and trousers, children cling to adult hands. One of the cohort is standing up at the front of the coach. She's in the gangway, hips swaying, snake-like. Her face is all sultry; eyes closed, pouting. She's in her 60s. Others think about following suit; you can see it in their eyes. But they don't. Conservatism wins. For now.

We're pulling into the car park having finally squeezed passed the shuffling devotees, the iron gates to the fort in sight. Crowds mill about, comings and goings inspired by one of the premiere tourist attractions in Rajasthan. The indigenous tour guide is standing and barking instructions to be heard over the din. He has a kind face and a helpful, polite manner. His English is exemplary. There's a time allowance of an hour and a half. Mind the monkeys, keep them off your backs. They can *bite*. That's where the phrase came from: "Get the monkey off your back."

I commence the lengthy walk on my own. Couples form a line behind me, hand in hand, cameras at the ready. Indian people are anglophiles; they love folks from home. Every so often, you can expect to be stopped at random with a request for a selfie to be taken with you. No explanation is ever given. On either side of the track are the stone ruins of the outer parts of the fort - Jauhri bazaars, houses of dancing girls (Nachni ki Haveli). Rhesus macaque monkeys eye unsuspecting victims, circling ready to leap onto unsuspecting passers-by. Simian mothers cradle their simian children amongst ancient Banyan trees; tangled, deep tree roots look like they lead to the underworld.

At the end of the path is an expanse of green grass surrounded by stone buildings in disrepair. Visitors are picnicking, taking in the views. Further on are the ruins of a Royal Palace. The site is ringed by forest and scrub land with a further domicile at the top of a steep cliff. It is at the disused Temple of Gopinath that I decide to take a break from investigating the walled remnants of the former military base. Seated on a granite step, it is noticeable that there are no statues inside. Superstition has it that all things die here after dark. As I sit and watch the playful apes amongst the monuments my mind wanders.

*It's a cold December night and rain is falling heavily. I am sitting in front of the television watching football. The front door of the flat bursts open; my wife Elaine storms in. She had lip gloss smudged across her face, she is as drunk as a skunk. I look across, alarmed. I haven't seen her like this before. She slurs "We need to talk". I look her up and down and retort "Someone needs coffee, lots of coffee and bed by the looks of it." The room goes silent for a few seconds before she blurts out "I want a divorce". I am taken aback by this, not sure what's happening. We argue; we argue for an hour and then two hours. It seems she has met someone else; someone better. Initially she won't say but eventually comes clean – it's some no mark working for a marketing firm. Finally she hisses "I want you to leave." My anger gets the better of me and I storm out, slamming the door shut. I go to stay at mom's place.*

Pete is stooping, looming over me asking if I'm OK. He smiles as I assure him I was miles away. We met a few days ago and clicked

straight away over dinner. Pete is an engineer who loves working with apprentices. They keep him young. Partner Jan loves animals and is against the riding of elephants. She's an activist. They have plenty of space over in Godmanchester to walk their dogs. Pete lights another cigarette, his floppy hat giving some shade to his lanky demeanour. He jokes about leaving soon; entry into Bhangarh is prohibited after sunset. It is claimed to be the most haunted fort in India. We peer up at the outlook, hands cupped to eyes, at the top of the mountain. Wind whips dust swirls into the air on the sides of the hills. I visualise tigers stalking the terrain in the dead of night.

Jan remembers the ghost story that the guide told us on the way here. A tantrik priest fell in love with the beautiful, princess Ratnavati, a magician in her own right. Casting a spell to make her love him, he enchanted a bottle of perfume that was destined for the object of his obsession. Sadly, his plot was rumbled and the magic bottle thrown back at him, transforming into a boulder and crushing him. Before dying, he cursed the princess along with the rest of her family and the nearby village. A year later, an apocalyptic battle led to the death of Ratnavati and most of the army. It is said that the curse means that no one in the village or fort can be reborn; forever condemned to desolation.

It's on that foreboding note that we decide to trek back. Pete and Jan are full of life, chatting about the legions of hawkers everywhere and India in general. As we pass more monkeys, further banyan trees and artefacts waiting to be explored, I open up about my reasons for being here. They had asked why I was on my own previously. I had side-stepped the topic then but the relaxed surroundings made me feel easier about disclosure now as we strolled along. They sympathise, brows furrowed, occasionally murmuring support. The sun beats down prodigiously. We reach for bottles of water, drink and I talk some more.

The throng of revellers that held up the coach are blocking the path between us and departure. I look down as a little native boy and girl offer to take each of my hands. They want me to dance. I flinch and grimace. Pete and Jan have disappeared into the crowd and I am on my own. They lead me into the melee. There's a communal joy as old

and young, children and tourists are all dancing, jigging about, arms flailing against the backdrop of an active temple. The music is intoxicating. Full of life. There's a cacophony of laughter; smiling is endemic. I am now dancing with a girl. She has stunning, brown eyes and a demure expression. She is wearing traditional dress, embroidered fancifully along with elaborate bracelets on her arms and ankles, an absence of a bindi on her forehead suggests she is not married. On her head is a jewel encrusted tiara. She looks regal. I think she may be late teens. I am a thirty something. She looks like a (mystic) princess. We glide around, wordlessly, hands forming shapes in the air. It feels like I am there for hours. In those moments, everything else means nothing. There's a hand on my shoulder. I turn to see the genial tour leader motioning towards the coach. Time is short. I look back and she's gone. We head away. I am exhilarated and deflated at the same time.

In my seat once again, I ready for the next show courtesy of the pane of glass on my side of our ride. The driver starts the engine, a collective murmur permeates the atmosphere. The nautical giggler is leaning over again. I must have a curious expression on my face as he asks if I am alright. I look at him and, for a few seconds, ponder whether I *am*. Stoically, I declare that I have never been better.

## Plexiglass

Aoibheann McCann

I once read about this woman called Emma, an upper class English woman who lived in Sudan as an aid worker. She met the warlord there. I can't remember his name but I remember that he already had a wife. Emma married him amid the starvation and the violence. A reporter went to see her and her new husband. They offered him food from orange plastic UNICEF plates in a tent in the desert, protein balls made from high calorie Unimix diverted from the aid drops. There was a documentary made about her called The Warlord's Wife. I can't find it anywhere online. I search for it obsessively in second-hand shops. I want to know why she loved him. I need to know.

His favourite food is a sandwich made from a whole crusty white bloomer. He eviscerates the loaf, pulling out all the soft insides, filling it with cheese singles and crushed-in-the-bag crisps. I'd eat the insides he discarded, rolled into dense white balls, my bag of crisps eaten whole, one by one.

No-one is left in my life except him. The people I know blank me on the street.

In the end, before he finally turned himself in, we slept in a single bed. He gave me a ring with a purple stone and I bought him a gold cross that Christmas though we never went to mass. He asked me did I want to get married, but he meant to an African man who needed residential status. I quietly said no.

He asked me again last week, though he wants me to marry him this time. It'd be an advantage because of where he is now. In prison.

Every night, in our bed, before he left, he'd whisper in my ear that he loved me so much that if I left, he'd have to find me.

I flushed the ring down the avocado toilet bowl when the Gardaí came. He answered the door to them and that's when I knew that the

person those women had described really was him. They looked right through me.

I learned about love from songs, not from looking at my parents. I learned the lyrics off by heart and absorbed them into my bones. Love was unavoidable, love was at first sight, people died for love.

He told he loved me the day after we first kissed. He told me he had been waiting for me all his life. He told me that he couldn't bear to spend a single night without me.

In the yellow text book for Leaving Cert there was a paragraph on a 'Honeymoon period' that lasted a year after your wedding day. The book said that after the first year things got boring, but you should expect that and do practical things like draw up your household budget together. Examples of household budgets always included the cost of fresh flowers. I can't remember my father ever giving my mother flowers or her buying them, though a girl in my class said her father had given her flowers when she got her period, but he was from down south. Apart from the yellow and white carnations on the altar on Sundays, the only flowers I ever saw indoors were the wild flowers that my older sister used to put on her May altar when she was going through her religious phase. The May altar was an upside down cardboard box, some holy water in a Mary-Mother-Of-God shaped see-through bottle with a blue twist off cap shaped like a crown. I wanted to wreck it because I always resented that sister but was too afraid of being cast into a burning, skin crackling, hell for the sin of blasphemy.

Our honeymoon period didn't last a year, it barely lasted a month after he moved in. He never gave me flowers, but things were never boring.

In religion class I learned that if you really love someone you will die for them. That is the greatest thing of all.

He says he will have nothing to do if I stop visiting.



My favourite advertisement on TV was when the man interrupted a wedding and the bride ran off with him. It was an advert for cars.

I can't remember what I liked about him before we were separated by plexiglass. He has a great smile but his teeth are bad. I love his eyes but they turn green when he is angry, and that was a lot of the time. Plexiglass has improved him considerably. He has tattoos but they aren't the sexy kind, they aren't dragon sleeves or hearts with daggers, they are Indian Ink dots on his face and ACAB on his knuckles. His one true belief above all others: All coppers are bastards. The tattoos were described on the posters.

I listen to The Greatest Love Songs on my phone on the bus on the way out to Arbour Hill. They take it off me on the way in. When I am waiting for him to appear, I stare down at my feet at the biker boots that he hates, that he can't see through the hatch.

My feet keep following him to the prison. They have always followed him everywhere, despite everything. I have asked them not to, but they never listen. They followed him when he first went on the run, when the posters went up all over the country. My feet casually tramping over my friends and my family, one foot after the other they followed him. I read aloud what he did from the papers, over and over again, trying to make them see sense.

The journalist said he waited outside their houses until they turned the key, then he pushed his way in. That he always slid the rings off their hands first. That he told them he would come back and find them if they went to the Gardaí.

My granny only ever told me one thing about love and that was that when poverty comes in the door love flies out the window.

He brought poverty in the door with him, they came as a package, not a noble kind of poverty, a fuck you poverty. An I'm- doing -this- because- I -was- brought- up- in- it poverty and the- only- other- way- out- of- this- is- the- lotto poverty. He never bought a lotto ticket in his life.

In the dream I have, the one where I'm not afraid of him, I crawl through a stone arch to get to him. I crawl, and I listen and I am only scared because I think I'll never get to him. What's strange about the dream is that he has his arm around me as we walk through the corridors though he never put his arm around me in public. I try to get back into the dream if I wake up in the middle of it. We are best in dreams.

Once, someone told me my fortune. They said if I stayed with him I would be a kind of slave. I stared at the curse written in the palm of my hand. They were right but though I still visit, he doesn't know where I really live now. My post is redirected.

I tried to leave him before but I kept ending up in all those hiding places with him. My stomach lurched when he ranted about who was really to blame for what he was: the estate, the drugs, the place he used to work, his father, his mother, his ex, his brother, his sisters, the city, me.

For months I managed to borrow money from men with matching Indian Inks who followed me home and stuck their chins out at me, standing at the gate staring as I turned the key quickly and went in. He'd twitch the curtain and watch until they went away. I've paid them all back, one by one, in whatever way I could.

I know I am not supposed to acknowledge even the existence of a why, the women in the chat rooms have told me that there is no why, that the why is put on woman, that we must discard the why, that the why is his business. Not mine, not mine. But at night I still scan for a logical explanation, as if it's just on the tip of my tongue.

The dark dark dark that he whispered in my ear as I came. The stuff that I thought was a fantasy.

I wonder does he sleep with men in prison, I suppose everyone assumes that that's what men do, either that or they are raped in the shower, or both. I don't ask.

Just before Christmas of the first year, during the honeymoon period, he chopped up our bedroom with an axe. I don't know why we had an axe. He had a photo of his mother and he put it on the pillow beside me as I sat on the bed watching. I can't remember now why he did it.

REPEAT AFTER ME: THERE IS NO WHY.

I see women like me on TV. Women who marry prisoners on death row. I can't stop loving him even now, even now I know what he did. Even though I read how every single one of them broke down when they read their witness statements in court. I realised that's what he'd been whispering all along. It was written on the palm of my hand. I suppose I should be grateful that he turned himself in, that he pled guilty. That I didn't have to give him an alibi. Maybe he did it for me.

I am The Warlord's Wife. The woman with good intentions. Blinded by love.

He acts like nothing has changed except that he is doing his Leaving Cert, like he is at a boarding school for men in their late twenties who have decided to finally finish school. He says when he gets out, he'll get a job, we'll buy a house, we'll have kids.

I am saving my money so I can leave before he does. Without warning, without trace. I have enough to leave, but not enough to change my face. When I have enough I will go.

I think about Emma, The Warlord's Wife. She died in a car crash, she missed out on this part. The part where you look back and watch yourself falling. The part where you stop denying that you had no idea what was happening.

I cannot trust myself because I love him. I have failed as a woman, a girl, a daughter, a sister. I gaffer tape my own mouth and stay in my room and sit on my hands. I do not have to love him but I'm not sure how to stop.

# Quilters

Ian Carass

Angela had joined a group. She had never joined a group before, had not even really liked the idea of a group.

After the children had left the nest and after “the business” had begun to make a comfortable profit. After the mortgage had reduced to the point where equity outweighed debt and the finish line of unencumbered ownership was a spit away. After the children were all settled, had jobs, had their own transport and their own lives. After the point where two holidays a year was a possibility, albeit one of them would likely involve a caravan. After all this, and *before* grandchildren, Angela had joined a quilting circle.

Angela’s sewing skills has become rusty over the years. No-one darned a sock any more. Make do and mend was a lost mantra. There might occasionally be a trouser leg to take up a notch (her husband was short in the leg) or a button to sew on. These did not stretch her. Once of a day, Angela had made clothes for the children, but it became more convenient to just buy things as the children grew up.

Angela had reviewed the contents of her sewing basket and replenished what she needed to. She had also dug out her sewing machine and found it relatively smooth-running, despite the years of neglect. Her first projects were on the smaller scale but her skills rapidly returned. The most satisfying aspect of her new pastime was that it represented something that was just for herself, her own thing.

Angela had heard of the quilting group from a friend and ventured there one Thursday afternoon. It was a welcoming group, ladies from all spectrums, some she knew by sight, others were unknown to her. Some ladies brought home-made cupcakes in for their break. Some brought hand-made truffles from the chocolatier on the high street. A slight division did exist in the group. The older hands seemed to keep to one side of the room; the new recruits to the other. It was not

exactly a clique and no-one was exactly unfriendly, but the line down the centre of the room did demarcate something of a cleft in the membership. Whether this simply reflected longevity of service, a higher level of skill, or subtler differentiations of social standing, Angela refrained from analysing.

At the meetings, Angela sat between her old school friend, Katy, and Balvinder, who lived near Angela. Angela kept a low profile initially, finding her feet, seeing how the circle functioned. But from her observation of the quilts spread across laps and the fineness of the stitching on display, Angela quickly realised that she was by no means the least able in the group or the least ambitious. Some ladies seemed to have the same few squares of quilt on their knees every week. These were the first to get the kettle on at break and the most easily distracted as local gossip rippled across the group. It was a broad church, nevertheless, and by definition both a social event and a practical exchange of ideas and techniques.

One day at a circle meeting, with Angela feeling by then that she had earned her place by dint of both attendance and contribution, the leader suddenly sat bolt upright in her chair at the head of the table. Everyone else froze, unsure what had occurred. The leader's eyes slowly lifted to the ceiling and the eyes of the ladies followed her gaze. Everyone saw, and the leader must have felt, the large drops of water that were seeping through the ceiling, from a damp patch that was beginning to spread in an ominous way. It was only a few moments before the drops became a distinct flow and the caretaker flapped into view, shouting, "Every body out."

In an organised flurry all the ladies packed away their quilts and their needles and, infused with the camaraderie of adversity, filed out of the room. The caretaker offered them a vacant room at the other side of the building and, graciously accepting this proposal, the ladies made their way through the darkened corridors. The room they were allocated was much larger than their usual space and was not set up for them. Chairs and tables had to be found and the ladies almost huddled in defence against the acres of space that surrounded them.

The group formed and re-formed in these small moments of chaos. Ladies who usually sat together found themselves marooned and displaced. The little circles within the circles had eddied into new configurations. Everyone was getting on surprisingly well, mucking in, customising their new surroundings to their needs. A kettle was quickly located to cement the new structures and the contents of baking tins were handed round like essential survival rations. The members immediately fell to examining the work of ladies they had only ever seen at far away tables.

Angela found herself sat next to a quilter who usually sat across the way.

“Hello,” the lady said. “I’m Penny.”

“Angela.”

“Well, isn’t this a pickle? We are all heads and tails.”

“These things do happen.”

“Of course, and it’s how you respond to them that matters. What are you working on?”

The ice broken, Angela and Penny were soon deep in conversation, discussing designs, comparing handiwork and fabrics. Penny was very impressed with the neat and imaginative quilting project Angela was working on.

“But this is lovely. Where do you get your ideas from? My style is much more traditional.”

“The designs just come to me,” said Angela. “I look around and wonder how I can translate what I see or feel into a patchwork design. Nature inspires me. Life inspires me. But I’m at something of an impasse at the moment. I seem to have exhausted the fabrics in the sewing shop in town. I need some bolder colours, more adventurous patterns to finish this.”

“I know what you mean. It is a wonderful little shop for essentials, but its range is limited and rather staid in its stock of fabric. You need to spread your wings.”

Angela and Penny looked again at the intricacies of Angela’s quilt.

“I have an idea,” said Penny. “We shall have a trip to York. There are some wonderful shops there. I’m sure you’ll find just what you are looking for. We could make a day of it. Have a spot of lunch and thoroughly explore the shops.”

“It sounds wonderful. I have never looked in the fabric shops there. When were you thinking we should go?”

“No time like the present. I wouldn’t want your work held up for want of materials. Are you free on Saturday? Call round to ours at, say, ten in the morning.”

Angela did not need to check her social calendar. Of course, she was free to go.

“All settled, then,” said Penny. “I will look forward to it.”

Penny gave Angela her address and they once again took up their needles and thread.

After twenty minutes or so the caretaker came into the room and sounded the all-clear. “Just a problem with a stopcock. All sorted. I’ve given your room a mop, so you can decant back in there when you’re ready. I need this space back for line dancing.”

Flushed a little with all the drama, the ladies made their way back to their regular room. It did look pretty much as it should. The table and chairs were still in place, a few stray threads marked their territory, a solitary abandoned thimble signalled their prior occupation. There was a moment of hesitation, a feeling that something had shifted in the group and new relationships formed. Everyone was waiting for everyone else to make the first move, so nobody moved. Then Mrs



Peel, the longest serving member of the group, entered the room. She had stopped off for a comfort break on the way back and now pushed through the ladies to assess the situation.

“What’s the hold-up?” Mrs Peel asked, sensing a certain tension and wondering why everyone was still hanging about. “No damage done,” she said and surged into the room, immediately sitting back down in her usual place. Mrs Peel’s friend of fifty years, Mrs Bailey, shrugged and sat down beside her. Mrs Moat took the next seat, as if unspoken rules of etiquette had come back into play and everyone opted to conform. Penny and her cronies were comfortably ensconced in their assumed places. The room had settled. Everyone ended up sitting in exactly the same spot where they had been before the great flood had momentarily washed everything clean of old affiliations.

Angela did not get the opportunity to speak to Penny again before the Circle dispersed but come Saturday she was steadily trawling through her wardrobe for something appropriate to wear for fabric shopping, with a spot of lunch. That particular combination of events had not featured in her social life before, but her closets were well stocked, for most eventualities. It was a pleasant day and all set with handbag, bag and a few samples of patterns she hoped to match some fabric with, she set off to walk to Penny’s house. Angela knew the house well enough, one of the larger properties in Cheyne Walk, overlooking the leafier end of the park. She tried to take her time, strolling down tree-lined streets, but she was early, perhaps too early to arrive quite yet so she made another circuit before heading back towards Penny’s house.

On her second loop Angela found herself following a lady whom she began to recognise as Tina, a friend of Penny’s from the quilting circle. Tina had not seen Angela and Angela did not feel she knew her well enough to catch up and say hello. It seemed to Angela quite plausible that Tina might live in this area too.

Angela maintained her distance, several paces behind Tina, and then stopped dead. Tina had turned off the road and was making her way up Penny’s drive. Angela hesitated at the entrance to the drive but was

still close enough to see Tina go up to the front door just as Penny opened it, as if she were expecting this visitor. The two ladies kissed cheeks, Penny greeting her guest effusively and pointing out the magnolia just coming in to flower. Finally Penny drew Tina into the house, encircling her arm with her hand.

Angela was stumped. Perhaps she had got the wrong day. Perhaps Penny had asked Tina to join them on the day trip to York. Perhaps Tina had called in unexpectedly and would be out in a few moment. As she waited and Tina did not re-emerge, Angela wondered if perhaps Tina had left Penny's house by another door.

Angela lingered. Her due time was close upon her. How rude it would be to keep Penny waiting. She had to act and without further prevarication walked up to the door and rang the bell. Penny did not immediately come to open it. Angela was about to ring the bell again when the door was flung open and Penny was standing before her, already in her coat.

Angela smiled. Penny looked at her, puzzled then slightly cross as if, Angela thought, Penny suspected that she was going to ask her to buy some pegs or cosmetics. Finally a sort of recognition dawned on Penny's face.

"Oh, it's, it's ..." Penny said. "You're from the sewing group."

"Yes. It's Angela."

"Of course, I remember. You were making that beautiful quilt in that outrageous pattern. Very ambitious. We all admired it. But is there something I can do for you?"

"We made an arrangement," Angela said, suddenly feeling a little lost. "You remember, at the quilting circle? The trip to York, to look for fabrics. And maybe a spot of lunch."

Angela was now becoming increasingly uncertain as to what exactly had been arranged.

“Lunch?” said Penny. “Could we have been so definite? I do remember we chatted at the group, but I don’t recall that anything was agreed.”

Penny was beginning to improvise, with Angela still standing resolutely before her.

“I am so sorry,” she said, turning her head as someone called for her name from inside the house. “I’m afraid my husband has just this morning informed me that he has made plans with the in-laws today and I won’t be able to join you. It was a lovely thought, so kind of you to think of me to accompany you on your little excursion. What a lovely adventure for you. I’m sure I would much rather be browsing fabrics than entertaining the in-laws.”

Penny kept smiling the while. Both she and Angela could hear Tina distinctly inside the house asking Penny if she was going to be long as they must make tracks.

“You must know how it is,” said Penny finally.

Angela looked at her stonily.

“I know exactly how it is,” she said.

Angela turned to go, but Penny called her back.

“Oh, please, Angela. I do feel awful about our crossed lines. Wait a moment.”

Penny disappeared into the house and Angela relented a little, assuming she would be telling Tina she had to cancel whatever arrangement they had made.

Penny came back, all smiles, holding her handbag. She reached inside and drew out a fifty pound note, offering it to Angela.

“I hope you will accept this,” Penny said, “for your trouble.”

Angela looked at the proffered note, then up at Penny's beaming face. So many difficulties could be removed with a little cash, that smile seemed to say.

Angela turned and left without another word, leaving Penny standing at the door.

Angela went and had a coffee. She was fuming, humiliated. There was no way she was going to look at fabrics now. She doubted she would go to the group again. She even doubted she would quilt another stitch.

When she got home her husband, Kieron, asked her how her day had gone.

"I'm not going back to that quilting group," Angela announced. "It's not for me."

She would not explain her reasons. Kieron let it lie.

Over the course of the next week, from time to time, Kieron noticed Angela going into her sewing room. He noticed parcels at the door. He noticed when he came home to an empty larder and no tea on the table. Angel joined him for a take-away at the kitchen table.

"Quilting in there?" he asked.

"Of course, what else would I be doing?"

Kieron shrugged and went to wash up. Angela carried on sewing.

By the time of the next quilting circle meeting Angela had had a change of heart. She was damn well going to go. She had made friends. It got her out of the house. It gave her an interest, that would last for a lifetime. She packed her bag and went.

Penny was holding court in the midst of her friends when Angela arrived. Angela somehow inserted herself into this group.

“How did it go with your in-laws on Saturday?” she asked Penny.

The conversation stopped and the friends looked at Angela. Penny smiled tensely.

“Not as bad as I imagined it might,” she said, turning to talk to Tina.

“I had a lovely time choosing fabrics. Did you know that those little shops in York can supply on-line? I went a little crazy ordering this and that. It was such a shame we couldn’t have visited in person. I put my new fabrics to use straight away. I reworked my design, just to feature them,” said Angela, indicating the bright colours peeking from her bag.

Tina was looking at Penny strangely, as Penny tried to ignore Angela.

“Did Mike’s parents come up for the weekend?” asked Tina. “All the way from Surrey? You never said.”

Penny was floundering. “Just a flying visit.”

“I feel dreadful,” said Tina. “You should have mentioned. I wouldn’t have kept you half so long if I had known you were expecting company. And Mike’s parents, too. You must have had so much to do.”

“No. It was fine,” said Penny. “It was a flying visit.”

“They didn’t stay overnight?”

“No, just a flying visit.”

“Where were they flying to or from?”

“I meant it was only a short stay. Just passing through.”

“How odd.”

Penny tried to change the subject, but Tina still could not grasp how Penny managed to spend most of the day with her, whilst this enormous event was pending.

“I would have been frantic,” said Tina.

“Mike said they would take us as they found us. I didn’t make an especial effort.”

“But after last time.”

“Can we just move on, please?” said Penny, finally exasperated.

“What a beautiful quilt,” said Mabel (formerly identified as Mrs Peel), tugging into view more of the quilt half emerging from Angela’s bag. Attention switched to Angela’s quilt, as she folded it out for all to see. It was a glorious sunrise scene rolling out before the group, exquisitely stitched, with the sun at its apex holding the lustre and patina of an old, gold sovereign. Fields of iridescent green spread out below the sun. Sheep, abstractly sketched, grazed in a complex but harmonious pattern. In the distance, artfully suggested in slivers of ultramarine and silver, a waterfall cascaded from on high. Tina’s attention was finally diverted.

“You must have spent hours on it,” she said to Angela, “is it from a pattern?”

“No. My own design. I was inspired.”

“You certainly were. You have been hiding your light under a bushel.”

As the group gazed in awe at the colours, the fabric like spun gold falling through their hands, it was as if a sun had risen in the room and every face was caught in its beams.

No-one noticed that Penny had slipped away from the group and was quietly leaving the room through a side door.