

The Manchester Anthology 2016

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Foreword

It is mid-August as I write this, and sunshine is finally blazing down around Manchester. Coming into the office, the roads were a bit dustier and the university today is like a scene from *28 Days Later*, each of the busy buildings we frequented during semester echoey and empty.

This is the time when our MA students are writing up their dissertations, the drafts of poetry pamphlets, novels and short fiction, which are excerpted in this anthology.

They are on their own by now, working over the material that they may have presented in workshops months earlier, but also beginning to reflect on the year that they have spent here. They might be thinking about something Jeanette Winterson told them about imagination and courage, or about Geoff Ryman's advice on dramatizing their material, or Vona Groarke on letting images do the work, or Maria Hyland on opening sentences. More likely, as they write their way into their material, they'll have something in mind that a fellow student did that they will be thinking about emulating.

We know that each of the MA students here came to Manchester with a talent for writing and we hope that you, their readers, will see that talent in these stories and poems. A MA like this increases the resources at their disposal, presents new opportunities for development and competitively stimulates excellent new work. It also builds a community, which these writers, from many different corners of the planet, can draw on in future.

Reading through some of the virtuosic work here, it is clear that we will be hearing more from these writers in future, but the anthology is more than a work-in-anticipation. At a time when the UK feels more balkanized and narrower than ever before it is a pleasure to read achieved work that partakes so easily and confidently in the international, transnational world writers and readers recognize as part of our imaginative inheritance.

These poems and fictions remember that inheritance as they "give to airy nothing / a local habitation and a name". Their imagined speakers and worlds do not all, of course, idealize some happy future; the reader's pleasure is often to be found in witnessing how they grapple with dark material. The city and university may

sometimes feel ordinarily sunny and dusty and *quiet* but, as the writers in this anthology show, they remain vital to the serious imaginative work of seeing plainly the world in which we live.

John McAuliffe

Fiction



Maria Barrios



Maria Alejandra Barrios is a writer born in Barranquilla, Colombia and has lived in Bogota and New York, where she took summer courses in Creative Writing at NYU. She is a History major with a minor in Journalism and Literature from Los Andes University where she was on the editorial committee and was a style corrector of the Art and literature magazine REC. She writes short stories and is currently working on a Young Adult novel that focuses on the themes of race, class, beauty standards and growing up. She is interested in writing literature about immigration, in-betweenness and coming-of-age.

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Adalina

I don't remember what time it was the first time I saw Adalina. Not many people were leaving their apartments that day and the store windows were tarnished, making it impossible for me to guess the hour based on the number of people outside. The weather channel had reported heavy winds and when that happened, everyone in New York locked their doors and prepared themselves for a marathon of hearing their neighbours speak through the thin walls.

I never took days off. Back in those days where I was still working in corner shops, I always found comforting the idea of turning the lights on in a dark, large space, watching how the lights reached every corner gradually, leaving no space uncovered. When I was alone in my tiny apartment, I usually couldn't find a reason to not sit in the dark.

Adalina entered the store looking confused. She just stood, between the chocolate bars and the cereal aisle, looking like she didn't know how to read the labels. When I first laid my eyes on her, her eye make-up was running down her cheeks, almost touching her red coloured lips. Her nose ring twinkled under the big white lights on top of her. 'Do you need help, Miss?' I asked. She just stared at me, white as the snow that was falling outside. How was I supposed to help her if she didn't speak? I thought. But she just looked at me, right into my eyes and quickly grabbed a pack of gum and ran through the door without paying. She wasn't even running fast. Her dark, greasy hair was brushing her back as she crossed the street. She probably figured that an old man wasn't going to chase her. She was right. I grabbed sixty cents out of my pocket, opened the cash register and put them there. I figured that it was the least I could do for her.

The few people I still knew back then asked me every time they saw me, which was not often, if I didn't want to retire soon. I shook my head every time. The only rent I could afford was an apartment in Harlem between 117 and 118 Street, I use to live upstairs to a Venezuelan *arepas* place, and the smell of marinated chicken was everywhere. Sometimes in my job, in the corner store, I could smell it in

my shirts. However, no one ever noticed, they were too busy mumbling ‘thank you’ and trying to pick a toothpaste while answering a text.

I worked in the customer service business my whole life. The first thing I learned to do properly was to sit behind the counter and listen to people’s problems. As I was getting older and the distances became longer, I went from working in supermarkets to corner shops. I spent my whole life under white bright lights, watching how the customers needed me less and less. Nobody needed to talk and I no longer had to listen. Instead of feeling liberated I felt lonely.

The girl came back. She was very pale again and wasn’t wearing a proper coat. It was January and the snow was almost turning black while resting on top of trashcans and tall buildings.

‘Are you going to steal gum again?’ I asked in a soft voice, the one you would use to talk to calm a crying child or a scared dog.

She didn’t reply. I was afraid I was talking to a ghost, or worse, imagining one.

‘No, no, no. Beer this time’ she had an accent, I couldn’t decipher from where. I admired her honesty.

‘I’m afraid you don’t look over 18.’ I got out from behind the counter slowly; I didn’t want to upset her.

‘I am, I am 21.’ She repeated as she was trying to convince herself and me and reached for a can of Budweiser with her left arm, slowly.

‘ID please’ I said, standing in front of her. ‘It’s freezing today.’ I managed to say casually, in spite of the fact that my eyebrows started to twitch with every step I took closer to her.

‘Damn.’ She mumbled over her breath without acknowledging my weather comment. Then she handed me the exact two dollars plus sixty cents from the gum she stole the last time. The ID was from Peru. Her name was Adalina and she was twenty-one years old.

I handed the ID back to her, I noticed she had teary eyes now and her mascara was running again.

‘I’m sorry.’ She said while cleaning her black tears with her right hand. ‘Is the only money I have left. Like, could this day get any worse?’ When she said ‘like’ she sounded as if she wanted me to know that she could also sound American.

‘Don’t worry.’ I said handing her back the money. She had a rich smell, like mud, and her clothes were dirty with soap stains. ‘I want to help you.’

She looked back at me without saying thank you. Her eyes were small and red, as if she had spent the whole night crying. I knew what being lonely was like and although I had vague memories of my teenage years, I remembered it wasn’t easy being told what to do. Almost as much as it was hard being left alone.

She left and I took two bucks out of my pocket and put them in the cash register. The store was silent again. Outside, based on the number of people in the street, it was the last hour of daylight.

The next day she came back again. I was expecting her. I had bought her a can of Budweiser and strawberry bubblegum. I wasn’t sure she liked that but Gilberto, my next-door neighbour, told me girls her age liked fruity flavours. She was wearing the same dark clothes but her long black hair was in a braid. It looked clean this time.

‘I want soup.’ She said, looking more confident than the days before.

Admiring her economy for words, I left the counter and searched for instant ramen.

‘Do you have a microwave?’ I asked.

‘Yes’ She replied. ‘I live with a Mexican family. They have a lot of stuff.’ I nodded and wondered why she lived with a Mexican family and not a Peruvian one, or with her own family for that matter.

I handed her the soup. She nodded assertively and then reached for the can of beer and the gum that rested on the counter. As she was going through the door, she turned back at me and said: ‘Thank you.’ I nodded silently. I returned to the counter and put two dollars in the cash register for the two instant ramen I gave her. I imagined how her house would be. I’ve heard Latino houses in New York are crowded; people have to share beds and sometimes sleep on top of each other. I wonder if she had to do that, if she had to fight her way to the microwave.

Adalina stopped coming for a while; I missed the little details of her life I’d learn with each visit. I used to imagine her coming back to the store sometimes, no customers around or people outside. Just me with the can of Budweiser I kept around. She would stand up in front of me, ready to pay with her own money and say, ‘It smells like chicken in here.’

But she did come back to the store one day. Clean hair and big, white smile.

‘My boyfriend from Peru is in the US now.’ She said, looking like she was ready to pay for a six-pack of Coronas.

‘I thought you liked Budweiser better.’ I said, noticing how she didn’t wear that much eyeliner anymore. She was even wearing a white shirt.

‘Not really, Budweiser is cheaper so I thought that it would be better for you if I stole that one.’ She paused, ‘I’m no longer living with the Mexican family. I live with him now.’ I noticed her accent was subtler now. I wondered how much time had passed.

‘So, things are looking up, then?’, I asked, hoping my voice revealed a hint of hope.

‘Yes,’ she said and left quickly without paying.

Lily Beck



Lily Beck grew up in South West London. After initially studying acting at the Oxford School of Drama she decided it was literature where her true passion lay so she went to the University of Warwick to study Film and Literature. It was there that she developed a keen interest in creative writing, particularly in the short story form, after studying writers such as Raymond Carver. Lily enjoys writing stories, which take a darkly comic look at life. She is currently working on a novel, which explores our increasingly fractured identities in the twenty-first century.

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Bound in Shallows

Chapter One

Monday

In the middle of the door, near the peephole with the rounded brass edge, was a kiss. It looked like red lipstick. Hannah moved closer and put her face to the door, her nose almost touching the kiss. It was dark red, the top part was thin and had lacerations. The kind that happen when lips are bunched waiting to be kissed. The bottom lip looked fuller. There was a gap between the lips where a tongue might enter. Without knowing it Hannah's own lips were mirroring those on the door, puckered in a silent whistle. The kiss was smudged slightly, as though the kisser had wiped their face along the door.

Hannah stood and looked at the kiss. Her keys hung loose in her hand. This was not what she was expecting to see on her door as she left for work first thing on a Monday morning. She didn't have time to get rid of the mark. She was cutting it fine as it was. She slid her key into the lock and heard the click, her eyes staying on the kiss. She wanted to touch it with the tips of her fingers. Instead she turned and walked down the three flights of stairs and out of her building.

The sun was bright and hung low in the sky. It made the yellow sandstone buildings lining Sauchiehall Street hum. Hannah walked uphill to her office. She pulled the lapels of her coat towards her chest. The warmth of her breath disrupted the air in front of her. The street was quieter than usual. She enjoyed the sound of her boots hitting the pavement. When she did pass someone she looked at the shape of their lips.

'Spare any change, Hen?'

She looked down. A man was crouched in the doorway of a newsagent. The windows were boarded with cardboard crisp boxes.

'Oh, um, let me just check,' Hannah said, digging her hand into her pocket, hoping to find something. Her fingers touched the satin lining of her jacket, the only thing she could feel was a crumpled receipt.

Most of his body was inside a sleeping bag covered in stains and rips. His face was dirty. His dark beard grew in patches across his sunken cheeks. His eyes were pale blue, and there was a sweetness curled around their corners. He was young, too young. A dog shivered beside him, a red rope tied around its neck.

‘I’m really sorry I haven’t got any change on me,’ Hannah looked at a pile of copper and silver coins in front of the sleeping bag. Both man and dog looked at the pile. They looked at Hannah. Neither made a sound.

‘I really am sorry,’ Hannah continued walking and didn't look back. Her stomach felt empty and uneasy.

There were more homeless people than she had imagined. She struggled to understand their heavy Glaswegian inflections. She would say ‘what?’ ‘Sorry?’ ‘Pardon?’ louder than she intended and then apologise when she didn't have anything on her, walking away flushed with guilt. She really was sorry. She really would help if she could. She couldn't.

The face of the homeless man stayed behind her eyelids as she listened to the whir of her computer coming to life. She was the first one to arrive on her floor of the office. She saw her reflection in the black of her computer screen. She rubbed her eyes and sighed. She noticed she had only painted the nails on one of her hands. Sensational Red, it had said on the bottle.

This was only Hannah’s second month at the Glasgow branch of Oxfam. She was starting to get used to the Scottish rhythm of the chatter, the angle of the light that came through the window by her desk, the cold cans of Irn-Bru stocked in the side shelves of all the fridges. She knew the names of most of the people on her floor and had started to join them in the pub after work on Fridays. She always made sure to leave before the gin and tonics fizzed in her head. She wanted them to think she was sensible and professional. She wanted them to think she had chosen to come here. She didn't want them to know why.

‘Good morning Hannah!’ It was Karen. Wide smile and pink jumper.

‘Morning Karen,’ said Hannah. Karen plopped down on the seat next to her.

‘God, Monday blues eh?’ Karen said with a chuckle. Hannah noticed crumbs on Karen’s sleeves and shadows under her eyes. Hannah smiled at Karen.

‘Good weekend?’ Karen said, directing her words into the oversized handbag she was rifling through.

‘Not too bad thanks, pretty quiet. You?’ She didn't want to tell Karen about her weekend spent under the duvet covers, with beans on toast and cold cups of tea.

‘It was pretty wild, Hannah. It was my cousin Marie’s hen do. We went to Reflex bar down George Street, have you been, Hannah?’

‘Nope, can’t say that I have,’ she looked at Karen’s lips. They were pale and cracked.

‘Oh Hannah, you have to go, its 80s themed. All leg warmers and puffy hair. I had a few too many voddy Red Bulls. I won’t lie! I think I was sick in the taxi home,’ Karen said, her coarse laugh bouncing her cleavage. Hannah tried to laugh as well. It sounded forced so she stopped. She focussed on the emails pinging into her inbox. She thought of the photos Karen had showed her. Karen’s three small children, arms tight around each other, gaps in their mouths from lost milk teeth. Karen was still laughing.

‘Tea, Karen?’ said Hannah, wanting to get away from the laugh.

‘Oh yes please, I’m gasping,’ Hannah knew Karen wouldn’t say no.

Hannah listened to the sound of the kettle as it bubbled. Her arms were folded, and she picked at the nails of her one painted hand. She felt a sudden weight on her shoulders. Her muscles tensed. She turned and there was Colin, her line manager, standing behind her wearing a crooked smile with his hand on her shoulder.

‘Didn’t mean to make you jump, Han! Just saying good morning.’ He always called her Han. She didn’t want to be called Han, but after two months she thought she would look pathetic saying something now.

‘Sorry Colin, haven’t had my caffeine fix yet,’ nervous laugh, ‘can I make you anything, tea, coffee?’

‘No thanks Han, I’m on a juice cleanse right now. Green sludge for breakfast, lunch and dinner,’ Colin rolled his elbows back as he spoke and stretched his neck from side to side. He looked like a tropical bird mid mating dance.

‘I’ll tell you I’ve never felt better Han, mind you I haven’t had a shite for about three days,’ Colin laughed, exposing his tea stained teeth. His hand was still on her shoulder. She felt its heat move down her arm.

‘Right, I’ll catch you later Han. Meeting is at 12,’ he walked out of the kitchenette, which had enough room for an uncomfortable pair, if a third joined someone would have to press against the discoloured walls and slide out of the room. Hannah felt as though someone was behind her. She could feel the weight and warmth

of Colin's hand. She had an urge to press her back against the wall. To feel solid concrete on her back. The kettle clicked off and steam filled the air, warming Hannah's face. Hannah filled two mugs and carried them back to her desk.

'Ooo lovely,' Karen cooed, taking a gurgled sip, followed by her usual sigh of 'ahh'. This habit of Karen's sometimes made Hannah want to smash her mug against the wall and scream. This morning it just gave her a headache behind the eyes.

There was an email from Colin in the inbox.

Just a reminder about the Midday Monday Meeting today at 12. Meeting room 2. Just like last week!

See you all then,

Sincerely,

Colin Farmer

Head of Communications

Each week he sent the same email. Each week the three M's were capitalised as though this was an event of national significance. Each email he signed 'Sincerely' and specified his full job title as if everyone would suddenly forget. Each week Hannah sat and tried keep the smile from falling off her face and sliding down under her feet. She had to report about the hit rate for the website over the last quarter. She had to convince the other members of the department that her strategy for increasing the traffic on the website had worked. The headache behind Hannah's eyes was growing.

Shaun Carter

Shaun M. Carter was born in Manchester, England. He completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Creative Writing at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, before returning north to earn a Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. His fiction traverses a stylistic and structural range between contemporary fiction set in the north, magic realism, science fiction, and fantasy. He writes short stories as well as an untitled, work-in-progress novel influenced chiefly by the experimental style of William H. Gass. Thematically, his writing focuses more on how characters might spiral out of control and subsequently into emotional dust, rather than always growing stronger through their ordeals; the emotional landscapes of his characters are pocked with equal parts compassion and gallows humour. Shaun has hitherto accumulated two years of editing experience, working as a Sub-Editor for the University of Manchester's newspaper, *The Mancunion*, as well as working as an Associate Editor for online magazine *Life As A Human*. He also assisted in reading through the slush pile and selecting the included stories of January 2016's edition of *Omenana* magazine.

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Grey Sheets

The café is called Infusion. Carl – seated on a wooden chair painted white, but stained black with the ink of stray pens and streaked grey where trouser buttons have gouged the surface – considers himself a regular. A patron. Infusion’s lone barista, the one with syrup-brown hair, pencil-drawn eyebrows, and two piercings in her nose, bookmarks her page when she notices him. She brings over Carl’s Fanta shortly after he is seated. Usual table, in the far right corner, furthest from the exit; his legs are tight under the oak table.

A window exposed by drawn curtains reflects sunlight from behind him onto his laptop screen, like a frozen computer program he cannot terminate. In the screen, he sees two things: the first is a large tenement building, half-office-rented, half-under-renovation, the red brick exterior pale as the flesh inside a strawberry. The second is the shadow of a thousand leaves. The wind wafts them to one side then the other as if dispelling a rank scent.

Infusion’s eight tables are all in use, but not all of the chairs. A woman, her back to Carl, is winding her baby. Carl notices the baby’s bib. The knitted elephant is piebald with regurgitated milk. The face above the bib is round. Eyes blue with wonder. Padded cheeks flushed red.

The smell of Carl’s lunch greets him before the sight does. The barista lays the plate in between his books and laptop. A small dish of maple syrup stands like a redoubt above a field of sliced assorted berries in the ceramic centre. To each side, a streak of smoked bacon bridges two American pancakes.

The baby’s eyes glance Carl’s way. Then, with a gurgled head-bob, the newborn vomits. The mother praises it and rubs at its mouth.

Carl frees knife and fork from his napkin. Stabs a blueberry.

A woman is interviewing a young-looking man in the top left of the café. They’re both wearing suits. Hers fits. Carl hears her voice each time she asks a question; the young man’s answers get lost in Infusion’s acoustics.

Carl navigates his thumbpad with a sticky finger and clicks a handful of times. Types in a password that threatens to leave him every morning. The WordPress

underbelly of his online fiction magazine, *Other Dimensions*, claws its way steadily onto the screen. Menu titles and other text float out of position while the site loads. Slow Wi-Fi. *Other Dimensions* has four new submissions in its Slush Pile. These are for Carl to read through, make decisions on. The stories themselves are restricted to 2,000 words. On average, he reads ten submissions a week. After seven weeks, business is groaning forward like a wounded beast.

The first submission in the pile is a secondary-world fantasy called ‘Cutpurse’. The submission lacks a single spelling mistake, grammatical error, or typo. But the story’s protagonist, a woman with a fantastical name Carl cannot remember, lacks agency. *No choice is made*, he thinks to himself, *1,800 words and everything seems to happen by chance. What’s the author’s name?* He scrolls to the bottom of the page. *Lara Beckworth. Tell you what, Lara—*

He is cut off from his thoughts by a voice. ‘Carl Hempton?’

He looks up, a stabbed piece of bacon on his fork hovering before his open mouth.

‘Charlie! Christ.’

She smiles. ‘May I join you, Carl?’

Her appearance is unchanged since their last, disastrous evening together eighteen months ago. Her hair is still long, black, sleek. He feels the intense regard of her eyes above her high cheekbones.

‘New phone?’ she asks with a nod.

Carl glances at his iPhone. He had a previous model, back when. He smiles in affirmation, and then hides it away in his pocket. He still has the photos she sent him.

He packs away his laptop and pulls his plate and Fanta close. Charlie adopts the seat opposite and places her saucer and tea mug down. The vanilla of her tea infusion is heady on his nostrils.

‘I thought you worked from home,’ Charlie says, the final word hanging like a question.

‘Ah. I’m not working today.’ He says. Then, worrying about what that might suggest, amends: ‘Well, I am. But it’s kind of a side project. An online magazine sort of project.’

‘An online magazine?’ Her interest seems genuine. She holds his gaze. ‘Is it live?’

Carl smiles. Outside, rain plummets in grey sheets. The flagstones outside drink deep through the thin cracks between them. Inside, an old man sits down at the table nearest the open door. His umbrella, oily with rain, reclines at his feet like a small dog.

‘It’s live,’ he says, concession in his voice.

‘What’s the link?’ Charlie smiles again. She sips her vanilla tea.

He hedges. ‘How about I wait until it’s a little more populated with content. I’d rather show you something good than a work in progress.’

Her lips purse. Smile fades. ‘Whatever works, Carl.’

A pregnant pause falls between them. Carl stabs the last blueberry on his plate. Chews violently. Then folds the cutlery together and pushes it all to the side. ‘What about you, anyway? Still working for...’

He watches as she steeples her fingers and waits. ‘For...?’

‘Oh, c’mon, Charlie,’ he says, sipping his Fanta. ‘It’s been eighteen months!’

‘Fourteen months, Carl.’

‘Really?’

‘I’m still working for the same firm. Yes.’

‘Well, great. Great. A promotion on the horizon?’ His gaze shifts to the black denim pocket of his jeans. His phone. His secrets. He wants to scroll through the photos. See her – all of her – again.

‘Funnily enough, I’m due a pay-rise in two months. But it’s not really a promotion. More to justify a bigger workload.’

Carl nods. This is not what he wants to talk about with this woman. He recalls the ease with which their first few dates had ended up in his bed. The cocktails beforehand. A Long Island Iced Tea for her and anything with dark and white rum mixed together for him. The meals that followed. His rib-eye steaks, and her butterfly chicken glazed with orange honey and bedded in rice. Lying spent and stark every Friday for five weeks. Maybe six. Until she mentioned her six-year-old boy.

‘How’s Max?’ he asks.

She starts. ‘I’m actually amazed that you remembered. He’s doing okay. On a class trip to Blackpool today. We thought he might miss it. He had a cold on Monday.’

A man in dark, soaked clothes enters the café. His beard is dirty grey and hangs like a scrag of moss from his chin. His pate is bare. His eye sockets are dark and sunken.

He is headed their way. They always start with Carl's table in order to get through everybody.

He moves in heavy boot thumps to the right of them. Charlie, unknowing, jumps when he speaks. The man addresses Carl. 'Scuse me, ser. I'm tryna get some change fer a hostel by reading my stories what 'ave wrote out. Would yer mind?' The beggar is clutching a bundle of paper against his black coat. The back pages look soggy. His work is titled *Sleeping in the Street*.

Carl glances from the beggar, to Charlie. She is regarding the beggar with a look. Pity? Disdain? Fear? He cannot tell. He reaches into his own coat's inside pocket, and pulls out his wallet. Three-pound coins. 'Here.' He drops them into the beggar's scarred hand.

'Would yer mind if I read yer my stories, ser?'

'I haven't got any more change. Come on, man. We're busy here.'

The beggar, his cheeks wet and red, his nose a minefield of pores, tilts his head slightly. He bites his lip and gives Carl a look. 'God bless yer, ser.'

'Carl –'

He addresses her hurriedly. 'Are you free tonight?'

'– Get lost. I don't wanna read your stories. Get out of here –' The outburst is from the young man in the ill-fitting suit a few tables away. The interviewer must have left at some point. It hadn't gone well, seemingly.

Charlie blinks. 'What?'

'I was thinking... If you're not busy. We could... get dinner?' Adrenaline pours out of him with that final word.

Her mouth becomes a colourless line. 'Carl. What? No! What kind of world do you live in? This isn't how this works. Is that why you gave him your money? To impress me?'

'No!' he pleads. His eyes flick to his pocket.

'I have to go. I'm sorry.'

'Charlie –'

'– Good luck with your magazine.'

Gone.

The barista shuffles over. ‘Another Fanta?’

When Carl leaves Infusion, over two hours later, he sees the beggar, sleeping on a bench. His story, if that’s what it really is, is scattered on the floor. The rain has moistened parts of the paper to a sallow grey. Much of the ink has run. Words have bled. Carl notices three pound coins anchoring the title page to the flagstones.

He looks left, then right, and picks the coins up. Then carries on walking.

Behind him, pages flee in the wind.

Ruth Cornish



Ruth Cornish is a twenty-two year old writer from Sheffield, who has been living in Manchester for the past four years. After graduating with a 1st Class Honours Degree in English and Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University she went on to take the Creative Writing MA at the University of Manchester. Ruth's writing is inspired by the darker side of real events and highlights the unnerving aspects of uncomfortable situations. She writes character-driven realist fiction that aims to challenge and disturb. She is currently working on a short story collection.

One of her short stories won a competition in 2013 and was published in an anthology by *Mardibooks*. In 2014 Ruth carried out a summer placement as a journalist for the national publication *Mai Life*, based in Suva, Fiji. Ruth has also written regularly for the Manchester Metropolitan University student newspaper, *Humanity Hallows*.

The following extract is taken from her short story *Peas*, a work of realist fiction set in London and the Cotswolds.

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Peas

There were only a few minutes left of 2010 when Ella realised she was too drunk. She knew this because she thought it was 2011 already.

‘Are you fuckin’ kiddin’, we’ve not had the countdown yet!’ her sister’s friend Georgia screamed back at her.

Ella made her way through the crowd of dancing bodies and found an empty sofa. She slumped down and ran her tongue along her teeth and felt a sugary layer of lemonade. It was her sister Grace’s friends’ house party and she didn’t know many of the people there as they were all Grace’s friends from University. Ella was in her last year of her A-levels, and she felt like everyone could tell as she sunk deeper and deeper into the sofa cushion.

‘Oi, get up! You’re gonna miss the countdown!’

Ella looked up. It was Grace’s boyfriend, Damien. The room seemed to be spinning around his head, but she could just about make out his dark bearded face and toothy grin.

‘Where’s Grace?’

‘She’s been looking for you and I said I’d help find you! Come on let’s - ’

‘I need a minute, just give me a minute.’

He came and sat down next to her. His t-shirt was stuck to him and Ella could see droplets of sweat dripping down into his curly chest hair. The sight made Ella’s throat close up.

‘Do you wanna go... do you want somewhere a bit quieter?’ he asked her, his eyes bloodshot and wide.

Ella’s hands clung on to the edge of the sofa.

‘Come on, let’s go through here, I think you need a bit of air.’

She couldn’t remember later if it’d been her or him to suggest going into a bedroom. But she knew for sure that she hadn’t suggested the door locking behind them. She knew she hadn’t been the one to suggest his hand on her thigh or his jeans around his ankles. One minute he was tucking her into the bed and quietly telling her to get some rest, and the next minute her knickers were digging into the sides of her calves as he tried to pull her legs further apart. He was on top of her with his hot

breath in her ear, and then he wasn't. She wasn't sure if she'd been asleep. She sat up and saw there was sick on the polyester carpet and didn't know if it was hers.

There were cheers from outside the room. It was 2011 now. She remembered lying there thinking how absurd it was that people celebrated the New Year. It was just time passing, nobody had done anything worth celebrating. They'd all just managed to exist for long enough to write a different number down when they wrote the date. She looked around the unknown bedroom and was pretty sure he'd left. She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes.

*

Ella's heeled boots clunked against the concrete as she walked quickly down Blackstock Road towards Finsbury Park tube station. It was her third week working at Higham Law Associates in Euston, she couldn't be late. She could feel her phone vibrating from her bag. She pulled it out and saw that Grace was calling her. She didn't want to pick up but knew she couldn't ignore this one too; it was the third call she'd ignored all week.

'I'm sorry, I've just been so busy, with the new job and everything...' Ella said.

'Have they still got you doing admin?' Grace's voice seemed rushed; she wanted to get to something.

'It's an admin job, Grace. Yes they've still got me doing admin, that's the job -'

'Are you sure you don't wanna go uni? You can do access courses you know...'

'I'm sure. I like earning money, I like my job...'

'Okay, okay. I just don't want you missing out on anything that's all! Anyway, I wanted to ask if you wanted a lift this weekend? Damien's driving over after work on Friday and he offered to pick you up on the way if you wanted - '

'No, it's okay, I can get the train,' Ella said.

It was their Dad's birthday and they were all going home for the weekend to celebrate. It'd been a year since it'd happened and Ella had just about managed to avoid seeing Damien since. Grace and Damien had moved in together in Reading the same month Ella had moved to London. Grace had come to visit Ella a few times, but

had found her withdrawn and aggravated whenever she was around. This, along with Ella's lack of effort to stay in touch, made the visits quickly turn into sporadic phone calls.

'Ella, can you just not be difficult for once?' There was an edge to Grace's voice now.

'I'm not being difficult. Surely it's easier for you two to just make your own way there - '

'I don't care what's easier, El. I wanna go with you. I hardly see you anymore and I hate it! Listen, be ready at half six on Friday, and we'll get you. Oh, and don't forget a card for Dad.'

'Tell me all about it!' Damien said as soon as Ella had got in the back of the car. He was sitting in the driver's seat wearing a tailored ashen grey suit and a lime green shirt. A pair of aviator sunglasses were pushed back over his slicked back mane of dark hair.

'Yeah, Damien has been asking me all about your new job,' Grace said with a smile on her face, as she settled into the front seat next to him. She looked back at Ella in the rear-view mirror. 'He's very interested.'

'And very impressed too! Getting a job in the big smoke is hard enough as it is, let alone when you're nineteen with no degree,' Damien said.

Ella let the backhanded compliment hang in the air for a second. She did up her seatbelt and tried to ignore the tightness in her chest that'd been growing all day.

'It's only admin...' she said.

This was the first time they'd spoken since it happened but he was speaking to her so confidently it was like nothing had ever happened in the first place. Had it? Did he just not remember? He must remember.

*

After that New Year's Eve Ella didn't give herself time to think about any of it. She was eighteen and still living at home with her Mum and Dad in the Cotswolds, whilst Grace was studying at UCL and living in London. Damien was on Grace's Economics course and he'd invited her to a party after class in one of the first weeks. He was older, he was from the city, and could open a beer bottle with his teeth. Grace was

used to being the one in control, the one everybody listened to and wanted to be friends with. She liked how he made her feel like she wasn't quite good enough.

On the morning of New Year's Day, Ella woke up in the unknown room at the party. Still half drunk, she went straight to the station and got on a train home. Grace had texted and called her a number of times: she couldn't find her and was going back to Damien's. She'd asked Ella to call her as soon as she could. Ella texted her saying she'd passed out and was getting on a train home. She sat on the train watching the man opposite her devouring a greasy Burger King and tried to ignore the pain between her legs. She wondered if Damien had fucked Grace too when she'd gone back to his. She spent the rest of the train journey throwing up in the piss-covered toilet at the end of the carriage.

She told herself she'd think about it when she wasn't hung-over anymore, or maybe when she got to see Grace in person, or maybe once Grace had broken up with him. There'd been sick, there'd been spinning, there'd been cheers. Was she sure she hadn't been the one to lock the door behind them? It would be easier to talk about it once they'd broken up.

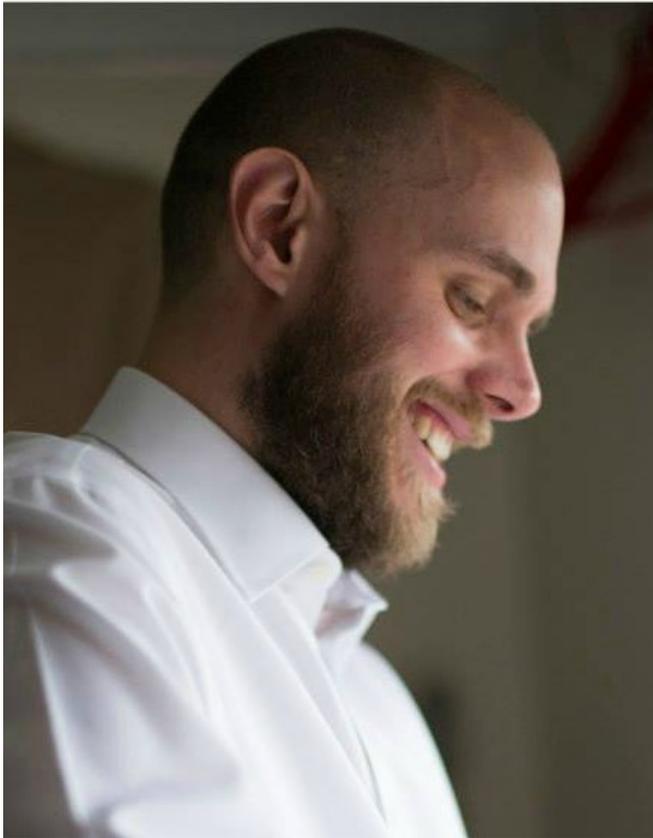
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It was dark by the time Damien's Audi pulled into the drive of Grace and Ella's parents' house.

Ella breathed in the musky smell of home as she walked down the hallway and saw her Mum sitting at the dining table with a steaming mug of coffee.

When they hugged Ella noted that her Mum held on just a little too long and squeezed the side of her arm as they pulled away. She didn't know what this was supposed to signify. Maybe she was just happy to have her home, or perhaps she was letting her know she understood how hard this was. But how would she know? Nobody knew.

Tom Dean



Tom is a politics graduate from Yorkshire, currently living and working in London as a freelance copywriter/proofreader. He is interested in realist fiction and influenced by the writing of Tobias Wolff and Dave Eggers.

He is currently working on the novel, *Legend*. This is a coming-of-age story about the friendship of two schoolboys in West Yorkshire at the turn of the 21st century.

Donnie, son to Iranian parents, has lived his whole life in inner city Leeds, while Ryan has been raised in the affluent market town of Wetherby where both boys now go to school. Through the young eyes of Donnie, the themes of loyalty, belonging and small town prejudice are explored as the boys' friendship comes apart.

What follows is the opening of the novel.

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Legend

1.

September 1996

The first time I spoke to Ryan was on the first day of high school. I made a fist in the pocket of my England trackie top as I watched him playing footy next to the Geography block. It was lunchtime and the sun was blasting but I felt like shit. The stink of cut grass and Dairylea Triangles was doing my head in but my big problem was I hadn't found anyone to chat shit with yet. I'd kept my head down in the morning but me, Donnie, I was a loudmouth – I hated being alone and I was dying to talk to someone.

It was the first time I'd even been to Wetherby. It was this stupid town that you could get to piss-easy on the bus from Leeds, but my stupid primary school hadn't sorted out a visit before I started and Dad reckoned he was too busy working at the pizza shop to take me. Dad said Wetherby High School was the best place for me and at the same time he told me the school got more money for bringing in loads of kids from Leeds. Even though my parents were Iranian I was born in Leeds and had always lived there, and that's where I wanted to stay. But instead I was in this stupid little place that my older mate Riyad told me was for white people.

It was obvious Ryan was king round here. Everyone was shit-scared to tackle him; he was scoring goals for fun. A couple of times he even sat down in the middle of the pitch shouting at the other lads and messing with his curtained hair. I was getting pretty bored with his fucking about and thinking I should do something when an older girl sat down right near me.

Shit, she was well amazing. I couldn't stop staring to save my life. She had blonde hair and her shirt was tied above her pierced belly button and there was sun all over her legs. She hadn't noticed me yet but she was gonna love me when she saw what I was about to do.

Even though the game was going on I just walked straight across the pitch up to Ryan.

'Mate, I'm playing,' I said. 'What team am I on?'

Up close, he didn't look hard. He was a lanky streak of piss and his eyelids were low like he was stoned. He looked at me for a second then across at the blonde girl. 'Go on my team,' he said. 'You just goal-hang. And if you get the ball just give it to me.'

I moved my tongue over my front teeth and narrowed my eyes; same as I'd seen Mama do whenever she had to walk past all the dirty old men whistling at her from the pub near our house.

'I'm striker,' I said. 'I broke all my school records last year. If you'd had me on earlier we'd be winning by ten.'

He stared down at me and stroked his chin. 'Sure.' Then he saw the Three Lions on my chest. 'Where'd you get your top from?'

'Dad got me it when Euro 96 was on.'

'It's quite cool.'

'Thanks.'

It felt good when he said that. It made me ready to play.

Ryan was the best I'd ever played with but I reckoned I could stop him. The best idea was to keep well close to him and play dirty just like I'd seen Italy do on TV loads of times. Them dirty bastards pulled shirts and nipped people and trampled on people's feet, whatever they had to do to win.

So I was about to tell him I was changing teams, take him down, but then something weird happened.

He got through on goal and rounded the keeper and he should've just knocked the ball between the jumpers, but instead he stopped and waved me over. I didn't know what was going on but I did what he said. He waited for the keeper to get back on his line.

'It's ok mate,' he said to the keeper, 'you can have the ball now.'

But when the keeper went for it, Ryan put it through his legs and the poor bastard fell in a heap on the grass. It was amazing. He was pissing himself, loving it. But I could do even better than that.

'Watch this mate,' I said. Then I got down on my hands and knees and headed the ball over the line. Proper taking the piss!

We did a high five. Ryan laughed that much it showed a big tooth up in his gum that was waiting for his baby one to fall out. It looked like a vampire fang.

Anyway, after that I started having a good time. Ryan was still pretty greedy but he passed to me a few times. He scored most of our goals but I got two. Then later in the game he got into trouble.

The ball bounced away from him and when he stretched for it he went bang into this boulder of a kid with zits all over his forehead. This kid went down like a sack of shit and for a second I thought he'd fucked up his knee or something. But then he jumped up and got in Ryan's face.

You could tell Ryan wasn't used to kids standing up to him. He was blinking a lot and his body was floppy and he didn't have his fists up. He didn't have a fucking clue.

The blonde girl was watching now. It was brilliant. This was my chance to be the biggest legend in the history of the school. Everyone was going to know my name.

I got between Ryan and Boulder. I didn't care. I wasn't scared.

There was a crowd. Boulder had spit on his chin like I'd only ever seen on total mental on TV. We were about the same height but he was a fat bastard and stank of tuna.

'Fuck off nobhead,' he said.

'Wanker,' I said.

'Come on then.'

'Come on then.'

In Leeds me and Riyad sometimes went past these minging tower blocks full of proper hard bastards called the Ocean Estate. At that moment the name came into my head. I didn't even live on any estate but I just came out with it, 'You heard of the Ocean Estate crew in Leeds?'

'What?'

'Ocean Estate crew in Leeds. That's my crew.' Then I said what I'd heard Riyad say loads of times. 'You fuck with me, you fuck with all of us. You get me?'

Boulder was quiet. He was looking around, shitting himself. I swear his eyes were getting wet and he hated how much of a legend I was. Before I came to this school Riyad had told me Wetherby was full of fannies and I'd definitely be in the top five hardest in my year. I couldn't wait to tell him he was right.

'Ocean Estate Crew. You go home and ask your dad.'

'Nob,' he said. He looked behind for back up but he had nobody. So he turned and sloped off through the crowd, towards the Geography block.

I'd won!

I was a total hero already. The crowd started moving away but a few of them definitely looked shit-scared of me. No one said anything but that didn't matter cos Ryan was gonna tell me what a champion I was and beg to hang around with me.

But when everyone finally got out the way I saw he was walking off with the blonde girl.

Stupid idiot walking away like that. I couldn't let him get away without saying cheers so I jogged after him. 'Alright mate?' I said.

They both turned around. He smoothed his hair back with both hands and she was stroking her tummy. Like all the fittest girls, she had brown eyes.

'Yeah, thanks. I would've sorted that,' he said.

'What's your name anyway?' I said.

Me and him said our names and I stuck out my hand. He had a decent shake. Not as solid as mine but still. The girl was called Ness.

'You're an alright player mate,' I said.

'Better than alright,' he said.

I went to Ness, 'Sorry you had to see that just now.' I'd got that line off Riyadh. I wished I had shades on, Riyadh reckoned people always looked slicker in shades. 'I'm Donnie, pleased to meet you.'

She smiled. 'That kid's a right psycho,' she said.

We all chatted for a bit on the steps next to the CDT block and Ness told me she was in the year above. But then they said they had to go and I was left on my own again.

They'd only gone a few metres when they stopped and she put her hands on his face. Then she stuck her tongue down his throat.

I thought maybe Ryan would keep his eyes open while he was getting off with her, same as all shit, first-time kissers. But he didn't. His eyes were shut the whole time.

Gemma Doswell



Gemma Doswell is a YA fiction writer. She is currently writing (and re-writing what she believes to be the 100,000th version of) her first novel in a series of four, *Pure White*. The series is set in an inverted world where art governs over science. She has been studying the MA part time while working in publishing, GCSE tuition and a bank call centre. Despite toes in varying employment pots, no vocation for financial services has been awakened. She instead remains loyal to re-writing *Pure White* and its art-based utopia... and to her GCSE students. Submitted is version 100,001.

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Pure White

Chapter One
The Woman with a Paint Brush

Ciaran watched his step as he passed the sign.

WELCOME TO MAYFORD GROVE
(WARNING: YOU ARE ABOUT TO ENTER ZONE 2: THE
MONET RESIDENTIAL ZONE)
PLEASE MIND THE BLUR

He kept his eye on the outline of his trainers – it was hard to tell where grass ended and bushes began in the impressionist landscape so it was easier to focus on something with hard edges, just while his eyes got used to the blur. The blades of grass got harder under his feet, tangling together like carpet; the green split into yellows, teal and brown. He sighed: nearly home now.

Anya tiptoed ahead. Her plaits disappeared into the night as she moved deeper into Zone 2; she'd started to merge with the landscape.

'Anya, wait.'

Ciaran sped up. She didn't need to be in a hurry – her Dad wasn't home tonight. He concentrated on her outline. If Ciaran's mum found out he'd snuck out after dinner, she wouldn't let him out again. She was a worrier, Ciaran's mum. That's what his Dad said. At the start of the summer she took Ciaran to the park (even though he could have just gone on his own as he was nine now and the park was behind their house) and she made him hold her hand all the way until they got to the playground. She was scared of losing him in the blur. His mum said that the 'Curators' put too much money into making the Monet zone look nice but not enough time had been spent on making it safe. Ciaran never knew why she said things like that – Zone 2 was the safest place in London.

Ciaran trampled through the grass. It crunched under his feet – Mayford Grove was man-made so even though it looked soft and blurry from far away, up close, it was hard and crunchy. Anya turned round.

‘Shush, Ciaran! Why are you stomping? If someone hears us, I’m dead.’

She was so dramatic; there was no one around.

‘You’re the one who wanted to sneak out,’ he mumbled.

‘Yeah, because dad said he was going into work. You know we have to spy on him, Ciaran – he has secrets.’

Anya’s dad only worked at night, according to Anya, when the university were doing top-secret art experiments. Every school holiday they spied on him.

‘But we’ve never found anything, Anya.’

‘Just tiptoe, Ciaran.’ Anya glanced around. ‘If the men in paint-fume masks find us out here, they’ll probably have to take us away and blot out our memories.’

Ciaran tiptoed towards Anya; careful not to trip over the trousers his mum told him he’d grow into. ‘They can’t blot our memories for nothing can they?’

Ciaran also wasn’t convinced that the men in paint-fume masks existed. Anya told him that they worked with her dad and that if they found anyone spying on their secret work, they opened up people’s heads and put special blotting paper on their brains to soak up their memories. Ciaran asked his dad about it because he worked at the university too (only as a graffiti technician) and he’d laughed and told him not to be so ridiculous. Ciaran thought about it but decided that as Anya’s dad’s job was more important than his dad’s, he probably knew better.

Anya shook her head. ‘We didn’t know what we were looking for, Ciaran. There might have been an experiment but we just didn’t see it.’

Ciaran sighed and nodded. Anya didn’t admit to getting things wrong and he couldn’t be bothered to argue. They carried on walking. Last time he’d suggested playing the geranium game they used to play instead of spying, Anya went in a strop and said that they were too young to play games like that. Ciaran still enjoyed them.

As they came to the clearing of Mayford Park, Ciaran glanced over at the lake. The water was dark and blur-less. The lake was one of the only natural bits of nature left in Zone 2. Almost all of London’s nature was man-made. Above the lake, there was a cloud. It looked like cotton wool against the cobalt sky but with broken pieces of glass twinkling inside it. Ciaran looked up – it was too late for white clouds now wasn’t it? It didn’t look like Anya had noticed. It was probably nothing but Anya

would pretend it was something if she saw it and then they'd waste more time when Ciaran really needed to get home. He tiptoed on and decided not to mention it but Anya squealed and grabbed his arm.

‘Ciaran, look at that!’ She pulled him back and pointed. ‘That’s it – that must be the experiment.’

Ciaran stumbled and tried to get out of her grip. ‘I don’t know, it might just be a cloud, Anya.’

But Anya was a year older and she was taller than Ciaran. ‘You don’t get big white clouds at night.’ She pulled him to the ground. ‘And we won’t know unless we stay and watch, will we.’

She crossed her legs and Ciaran rubbed his side where he’d landed.

‘What about your Dad? What if he or the men in paint-fume masks find us or –’

‘Shhh. They won’t.’

‘But I need to get home!’

‘Stop being a big baby, Ciaran. Do you need your mum to hold your hand here as well?’

Ciaran flushed. She always made fun of him about that. He looked at the ground.

‘Fine,’ he said and pulled his legs into his chest. He started to pick a scab on his knee. ‘But if my mum finds out and doesn’t let me out of the house for the rest of the summer, it’s your fault, Anya, if I can’t play with you and –’

Ciaran stopped, noticing the cloud. It did look weirdly white, and was it getting bigger? It was nearly the width of the lake and it looked like the twinkling shards might bring the whole thing down.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Anya said. ‘Look at how bright it’s making –’

The cloud exploded. Ciaran’s scabbed knees smacked his jaw and he was flung over the grass towards the water. He hit the ground and skidded, burning his cheek and arms against the blurry grass, until he hit the sign:

DANGER: NATURAL WATER

Ciaran's ears buzzed. He lay, eyes closed, scrunched around the wood until he felt splashes of water. But it didn't feel like water. He opened his eyes and saw the whole sky and everything beneath, was white. The cloud had disappeared and white shards were hailing into the lake from above, throwing splashes onto the grass. The water prickled on his skin.

'Ciaran?' Anya's voice was muffled against the storm. 'Get away from the lake!'

Ciaran levered himself onto his elbows to find her. He had to squint so that water didn't hit his eyes. Then he saw her, crumpled on the grass between the lake and the clearing, her dark skin clear against the white grass but her hair wet and dyed white in thick streaks. Ciaran dragged himself over the ground towards her, his arms measled with white dots from the water.

'Anya?' He reached for her. 'Anya, what are they experimenting?'

'I don't know!'

Ciaran clamped his lips as a swarm of midges fled past his head towards the clearing, some of them escaping, others falling to the ground like dust under the shards. The hail got heavier; gushes of water launched from the lake. And then Ciaran saw them: from the corner of his eye, near the entrance to the university, men were climbing out from the bushes. And they had masks like two black snouts.

'Anya!' he screamed but she was plastered to the grass, drenched and not moving.

The sky throbbed, hailing out shards; it looked like it might fall down and tear the ground apart.

'Anya, they're in the bushes, the men in paint-fume masks!'

And then it happened; the sky fell down, and everything went white.

Alice Gradwell



Alice Gradwell is currently studying for a Masters degree in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. She graduated with a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing in 2013 from the University of Lancaster. She won the Programme Prize for the best portfolio in her year. In the summer of 2014 she completed a short story writing course with Comma Press in Manchester, which prompted her decision to go back to university. She is a short story writer, specialising in autofiction that often deals with the themes of grief and loss. Her submission 'Fridgey' is an extract from a short story based on her own high school experiences. Her ultimate aim is to produce a collection of short stories. She has been a bookseller at Waterstones for six years and lives and works in Manchester.

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Fridgey

This is one of those moments, I say to myself as I pull up my jeans, *when you reevaluate your life choices*. It was expected at eighteen, it was fine at twenty-one, pushing it at twenty-three, and now it's just fucking sad. I scrutinise the cotton swab in my hand. It's only faintly changed colour, a pale yellow, but I'm sure it's enough. Most of the piss went on my hand anyway. *Twenty-six years old and you've just pissed all over your own hand. Great. Well that's something we can tick off the list*. I put the cotton swab back in the test tube and put it on the sink. I'm zipping up my fly when I realise, *oh even better, I've pissed in my knickers as well*. Either that or its discharge. At this point I don't know which is worse. They're not even nice knickers. The elastic's all but gone and there's a brown stain on the gusset.

It was definitely the guy from the bar, it had to be. I mean, there was just one too many holes in his ears. The moustache also, a greasy little handlebar number, really should have raised some alarm bells. I mean, he looked kind of unclean but the beer told me it was in a sexy, sort of rockstar way. Now I think he was just dirty in a homeless sort of way. Actually on second thought, it could have been the Tinder guy. That's the problem with Tinder, they're all willing to tell you how bloody tall they are and where they went on their gap year, but not that they've got crabs or warts until it's too late and you've swiped right. *God I've got to start wearing condoms*.

I buckle my belt with shaky hands. *As long as it's not one of the big three I'll be fine. Anything but the big three. Hopefully it's just chlamydia again*. Anything that can be cured with either antibiotics or a jab to the ass, just please God, *please let it not be one of the big three. It could be worse, I could be bloody pregnant*. I stare at my reflection in the mirror. *So here we are again*. The spotlights overhead illuminate my haggard face. *God I look about thirty*. There's dirt all under my fingernails; I glow with a slight sheen of sweat and there's alcohol fermenting into something else entirely in my pores. 'You look like shit' I say out loud, shaking my head back and forth. I pull at the grey and swollen skin under my eyes. I pull it all the way down to reveal the red crescent moons under my lids. I run the tap to make it sound like I'm washing my hands, but I don't. I collect my sample and go back out into the nurse's office.

It was in year eight when I realised I needed to up my game on the boy front. I was 13 and Emily Dixon leaned over in the lunch queue and asked me if I was a fridge or a freezer. The dinner lady with the acne scars had just plonked my bowl of chips, cheese and gravy on my plastic tray and then told me to move down the bus. These were the days before Jamie Oliver of course. Emily Dixon grabbed one of those bright coloured juice drinks where you pierce the straw in the bottom and waited for me to answer.

Emily Dixon was always referred to as Emily Dixon for two reasons: number one, there was more than one Emily in our year and number two, she was kind of a celebrity. The Dixons were loaded and her surname gave her power, kind of like Cher in reverse. Emily Dixon's Dad had just bought the year eleven common room a wall-mounted plasma screen TV because Emily's older brother was in year eleven. Naturally the whole school had gone nuts. Emily Dixon had straight blonde hair and she'd started her period in year seven. Everyone knew this because she wore these magnets on the hip of her low-slung Tammy trousers (I wasn't allowed Tammy trousers) to help with her cramps. She used to roll her jumper up if the magnets were ever covered and she'd flash a good inch or two of bright red French lacies in the process. (I wasn't allowed those either). Clearly none of us paid any attention in biology because she definitely wore the magnets more than one week a month. In short, Emily Dixon was kind of a big deal; Emily Dixon leaning over in the lunch queue to ask if you're a fridge or a freezer, also kind of a big deal, ven if you don't know what it means.

I like to think that what happened next is a perfect example of the fight or flight response. My thirteen-year-old self had a choice. Flight, and risk Emily Dixon never talking to you again, or fight. My thirteen year old self chose wrong.

'I'm a freezer.' I said, reaching for a pack of salt and vinegar space raiders. My gauntlet had been thrown down. Emily Dixon's eyes widened which took some effort as her eyelashes were soldered together with about half a tube of bad gal mascara.

'Oh my God!' she gasped. 'No way. Who with?' Emily Dixon side eyed me as she put a chocolate muffin on her tray. I paused for a second too long. She pounced. 'Do you even know what it means?' she asked. It was as clear as the loo roll in her bra that I didn't. She began to pick the icing off her muffin with her French manicured fingers. Emily Dixon's Mum let her wear false nails to school even though it was

against the rules. Once she'd come in with this gem charm dangling off her middle finger which got ripped off during netball practice. Emily Dixon always played centre. 'Ok, so if you've kissed a boy you're a freezer, and if you haven't you're a fridge.'

There's nothing more embarrassing than accidentally telling Emily Dixon you've kissed a boy when you haven't. Except maybe then having to admit to Emily Dixon you haven't actually kissed a boy.

'Oh no. I'm a fridge then.' I said, staring into my bowl of chips. Emily Dixon tilted her head to the side and then said the worst thing anyone has ever said to me:

'Yeah I thought so.'

So not only had I not kissed a boy, it was pretty damn obvious that I hadn't.

For the next four years of High School I was 'Fridgey'. I got Christmas cards addressed to Fridgey. Fridgey followed me down the school corridors. Fridgey got screamed at to pass the ball or to take the shot. On our last day of year 11 everybody wrote 'miss you Fridgey, keep in touch ☺ x' Fridgey followed me to college and then onto university. People forgot why I was even called it, I just was. And of course, it didn't remain true for long. I kissed a boy, and the rest of it eventually, but I was still Fridgey.

I didn't speak to Emily Dixon again after that. She turned fourteen the next month and had a party at pizza hut. I wasn't invited. Last I heard she was engaged with a baby on the way. I remember finding out when the picture of her engaged finger popped up on my newsfeed. Same French manicure. It got 153 likes. I hid her from my timeline.

Giorgio Grande



Giorgio Grande is a fiction writer from Manchester, England. He began his writing career as a freelance content and copywriter, working for various publications in the fashion, art, and travel industries. When he was living in London, Giorgio took his passion for art and culture and applied it to a degree in the History of Art at the Courtauld Institute.

Following his experience of writing commercially, Giorgio decided to advance his fiction writing with an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. During this time, Giorgio complemented his studies by undertaking many projects and placements, eager to submerge himself in the literary world. As his ability to write prose grew, so did his personal network and his insight into the industry that produces the vivid fiction for which he strives.

Giorgio is interested in both reading and writing fiction that deals with themes of selfhood, marginality, sexuality, loss, and subjective realities. After building a portfolio of short stories, Giorgio is currently writing his debut novel, *The Boy Venus*. The following extract is the novel's opening chapter.

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The Boy Venus

I

I stood at the end of York Shambles, watching all sorts of people pass by, but none were the boy I was waiting for. I had an umbrella in my hand, which I gave to an old lady when a taxi dropped her off a good 50 metres from the high street. I stood beneath the canopy of a record shop, and caught a glimpse of myself in the window. My reflection was lanky, I had only managed to gain a little weight since school, nearly 20 years ago. Back then I was so gangly that my teachers made me run cross-country, but I bunked it off to smoke roll-ups with Miranda, one of nice girls from the year above. An hour on, the rain stopped and I gave up waiting to go find the boy I loved.

He was in Rowntree Park. ‘Olly! There you are,’ I called out. He was sitting on a bench, smoking too fast, and reading a paperback like he was a beatnik in Paris. He looked up at me with his wolf-pup eyes, and took a drag of his cigarette, which he held between his index and middle finger, not his thumb like other boys. ‘Shit! Luke, sorry, I just lost track of time,’ he explained.

‘It’s okay! You alright? You look pretty stressed.’

‘My flatmates are being dicks again.’

I sat next to him and put my hand on his thigh, but not all the way up it, not yet. ‘Olly, people are just jealous. Look how stunning you are! You should understand that whatever they say has nothing to do with you. It’s just their own bullshit, you know.’

He gave me a smile, and it took my breath away, so I took him home.

*

He wolfed down the tomato soup I made for him, from scratch. I could see him start to shiver so I picked out a jumper for him to wear. When he pushed his arms through

the sleeves, his t-shirt rode up, showing me that trail of hair leading up from his trousers to his bellybutton.

‘Thanks,’ he said.

‘Keep it.’

‘Luke, I can’t. It feels expensive.’

‘It was nothing, honestly.’ I pulled my diary from the bookcase. It was bound in black leather and inscribed with a gold ‘1994’ along with my full name, ‘Luke Lucas.’ When I sat down on the couch next to him, I realized that my heart was beating in a violent way but I went ahead and said what I needed to say. ‘Olly, my sister is coming to visit in a couple of weeks but why don’t you stay here before then. It’ll get you out of that house, and I have a spare room!’

He looked at me with his mouth open. I laughed and grabbed his head and played with his hair. I did it for several seconds and he didn’t pull away like he’d done before. This time was different - he laid his head where I put it, to my chest and on my lap. I stopped playing with his hair when he fell asleep there, and I just watched him. He was like a kitten.

I nudged him awake to show him the sunset, it took my breath away, and I didn’t want him to miss it. When he came to stand next to me at the window, I blurted something out. ‘We should do it tonight,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Let’s pick up your things and move you in tonight.’

The look on his face was all it took. I booked a taxi right away.

*

I had never been to Olly’s halls before and after he showed me in, he handed me some cardboard boxes for packing. I missed whatever he said when I spotted a chart on the kitchen door. It listed everyone in the flat and everyone had a gold star for every person they fucked that term. Olly caught me grinning like a fucking moron. He had no stars.

‘Are you making fun of me?’ he asked.

‘No, it’s good. I’m happy,’ I said, elbowing him in the arm. I walked to the window and looked out at the grim little garden, covered in weeds. ‘Now, let’s get you out of here.’

Our system worked pretty well, Olly passed over his clothes, books, cassettes, that sort of thing, and I packed them in the boxes for him. 'You can tell I'm a Tetris ace,' I said. Olly didn't laugh. I turned away, hiding my face.

I noticed Olly was avoiding his reflection - he walked straight past the mirror in his room. It was his nervous habit of his so I asked him what was wrong.

'If my flat mates see me do a runner, they'll kick off and Addy will be back soon.' Addy had the most gold stars. 'Fuck Addy. Everyone else has,' I said. He laughed at that one. When we finished packing his room, I drew up a checklist and I made sure we didn't leave until he had marked an X next to everything.

I handled Addy for Olly. On our way out, she ambushed us. I had seen her sort before - one of those pretty, mean girls who think everyone loves them as much as they love themselves. Not me. When she walked up to Olly, kicking off, saying he couldn't leave because he owed rent, I stepped in to protect him.

'Oi,' I shouted. 'Rent? I'm the bailiff. I'll be repossessing your things next!'

That shut her up. Her face screwed up like she was sucking lemons, and in the taxi, Olly and I couldn't stop pissing ourselves about it.

I didn't tell Olly that I posted an envelope with the rent he owed the next day.

*

Before making up the spare room, I took Olly to my bed, telling him I was tired and I'd build up to it.

He didn't say anything until he pulled a flask from his jacket. 'We need a drink. Have some whiskey.'

'I can't. I've got work in the morning'

He held the flask in front of my lips until I gave in.

'I'll go and make up your room.'

'Don't do that now! I'll just sleep here.'

'What, with me?'

'There's room, isn't there?'

Olly kicked off his shoes, pulled off his jumper and slid off his trousers. I folded the clothes into a neat pile and put them away in my chest of drawers.

'Can't you just leave them?' asked Olly.

‘Back when I was a kid, if I left any clothes lying around, my mum and dad would make me do the whole family’s laundry for a week. Habits are hard to break.’

‘Luke, I noticed something today. Your eyes change colour at night. They’re a grey-green now.’

More than ever before, I was aware of Olly’s body, of the weight of his body on my mattress. I risked a look, he had his eyes closed but I put my hand in his hand anyway. He held it back. I took his body in my arms and then he took control. He slid my fingers into his boxers. I breathed hard and he breathed hard and then we learned more about each other in one hour than we had in the last two years. But what I didn’t learn was that he would be the boy to ruin everything. The boy who’d lead me down a path of love. And of misery.

Kelsey Howard



Kelsey Howard is an American writer and poet. Born in Urbana, Illinois and raised in Midland, Michigan, she has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English literature from Michigan State University, and a Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing from the University of Manchester. She has also taken Master's level courses in Communication at Villanova University, and spent a summer abroad during her undergrad studying Shakespeare and British literature in London at Birkbeck, University of London, in conjunction with Michigan State University. Her writing focuses on loss, mental health, family, feelings of rootlessness, and the realities and struggles of every day people, and the unique issues they cope within their individual lives. She is a short story writer and is currently working on a novel titled *Fifteen*, that deals with loss and grief, the search for peace, and love, and two people's desire to not be defined by a shared event, that overshadows, and looms heavily, over their lives. The following work is taken from said novel.

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Fifteen

Part I

Blue Ruin Bar

September 2016

Manhattan, New York

She is sitting at the counter of the Blue Ruin, sipping a gin and tonic on the rocks (made with Bombay Sapphire, like always), as the music drifts from Muddy Waters to John Lee Hooker. This place is hard to find, at the northern end of the Garment District, just south of Hell's Kitchen. Free from the noise of Midtown. The lighting is dim, with floral printed silk handkerchiefs over the exposed bulbs. The usual drunks are sitting in their usual booth, back by the old jukebox that hasn't worked in ten years. The owner can't let go of it. He fell in love with his wife as they danced to 'I Just Want To Make Love To You' many years ago, when New York was still dirty. Before Giuliani cleaned it up and sanitised everything, from the porn shops in Times Square to the clubs in Greenwich Village. At least that's what her Dad used to say.

The bar smells like Chanel No. 5 and spilled beer that nobody has bothered to clean up; it feels like there should be a solitary man playing a saxophone on the empty stage. She takes the lime out of her glass, and holds it precariously in her left hand. She tips the drink to pour an ice cube into her mouth, crunching it between her teeth; she loves the cold sensation against her gums. She takes the lime and begins to suck the remnants of gin out of its pulp, as it sits between her full lips. The cool fall air comes blowing into the bar from the open door, raising goosebumps on her skin. Reaching behind her back, she pulls her grey, faux fur coat off the chair, and places it on her shoulders; her long, black hair spilling down the soft material.

'Jameson, rocks, with a lime please.'

She hears this from her left, down the end of the bar. His words are laced with a heavy Brooklyn accent. It sounds like her own voice, the one she grew up with, before she toned it down.

'Hey!' Jameson's voice shouts from down the bar. She turns to look at him.

'Hey,' he says again, softer this time.

‘Yeah? You mean me or...?’

‘Yeah you, sorry, you look...?’ his voice goes up at the end, like it’s a question, more than a statement. He walks into the light and she sees his green eyes.

‘Holy fuck, it’s you,’ he starts pulling on his dark mop of soft curls.

‘Holy fuck, it’s me! Hey Liam.’

‘Hey yourself, Ali.’

The bartender places Liam’s whiskey on the counter, the glass banging against the wood. The drink sloshes over the rim. She runs her tongue over her teeth, feeling for left over lime. Alessandra should have known. Of course he saw that she was here; she accidentally left the geotag turned on, on her Instagram. Ali can never resist posting pictures of the cocktails she’s drinking, whenever she’s at a bar. Liam starts walking closer to her, and leans against the dark wood of the counter. As usual, he’s holding his Yankees hat in his left hand.

‘You gonna pay for that son or ya just gonna look at her all day?’

Liam’s face began to flush a dark pink as he reached for his wallet. The bartender’s smirk began to creep up slowly, sticking to his weathered face. His Queen’s accent is still heavy, stained and worn after too many years of drinking too much bourbon. He always looks like he stepped out of a Scorsese movie from the 70’s.

‘Tony come on, he’s just a little shy, cut him some slack,’ Ali smiles as she says this, half into her glass as she goes for another sip.

‘How much is it?’

‘It’s \$3.00 lover boy,’ Ali chuckles into her G&T at Tony’s response. Liam hands the money over, and pulls up a stool so he’s sitting a comfortable distance from Ali. He learned not to invade her space a long time ago.

‘It’s so crazy running into you here,’ Liam says, as he stares into his whiskey.

‘Is it, Liam?’ he looks up at her in response.

‘Yeah...what do you mean? Why did you say it like that?’ The blush has returned to Liam’s cheeks again. Poor guy can never hide it. Ali looks him up and down, and stares into his eyes. His cheeks flush even darker as she does. She thinks it’s endearing that he still acts like this around her, even at their age. Ali reaches up, and pushes a dark curl out of his left eye, so they can see each other better. Liam remembers that move. He feels it rush back to him. He reaches out and grabs her hand as it pulls away from his face. She just continues to look at him, unmoving. Ali forgot

how soft his hands are. Liam lets go of her right hand, and it drops gently onto the bar. She leans her elbow onto the counter, and holds her head in her hand as they look at each other.

‘You came here to see me, Liam,’ Ali says abruptly. Liam doesn’t answer right away, as Howlin’ Woolf comes wafting through the room.

‘Yeah I did Ali,’ he says matter of factly. She’s happy he answered honestly. He’s nervous that she thinks he’s a crazy stalker.

‘Good. I’m glad you did,’ Ali says with a soft smile, easing his anxiety about showing up tonight.

‘Why did you come here tonight, instead of tomorrow night?’ Liam is talking to his whiskey again instead of her.

‘I don’t know I guess. I wanted to stop myself from watching TV and stuff...’ Ali began to trail off as her right index finger traced a ring of water on the counter. She’s vigilant about using coasters at home. But she always forgets to use them when she’s out.

‘Why are you out tonight?’ She probably sounds harsher than she feels; her tone has a tendency to sound colder than she intends. Liam places his hat on the counter and takes a long sip of his Jameson. Maybe he doesn’t know either.

‘I don’t know, Ali,’ Liam finally says, sighing heavily as the words leave his mouth. She smirks in response. He wants to know how she can always read him so easily. It makes him feel embarrassed, but he would never admit that to her.

‘I haven’t seen you in...how long? Five years, Liam?’

‘I guess so, yeah...I stopped going after the last time we saw each other.’

‘Me too. But why haven’t *we* seen each other in so long?’ Ali motions between them as she says this. She tries to remember if they had a falling out back then, but she can’t remember anything bad happening. She remembers the lights of the ferris wheel and the sound of the waves. Liam closes his eyes and sees them running through the haunted house, Ali clinging to his blue polo as she screamed. The fireworks exploding overhead. He remembers her skin lit up by the late afternoon sun, as they walked to Brighton Beach.

‘I don’t know, Ali. We still talk online sometimes, I just...I guess...we just got busy. With work and stuff...’

‘Yeah, maybe,’ Ali still doesn’t get it, but she doesn’t know how to say it any clearer than she already has.

‘Why Jameson?’ She asks.

‘Why not?’ Liam says, and laughs. Ali laughs too, and they order another round. They sit there for a while in a comfortable silence, listening to the blues drifting through the bar, as they sip on their drinks.

‘I still have it,’ he says this so quickly and softly that Ali isn’t sure she hears him. She looks up at him, and he’s playing with his hair once again. Some habits don’t seem to fade away with time.

‘Have what?’ She has no idea what he’s talking about.

‘What you gave me that night. The last time we saw each other, remember? When we were about to leave the beach?’ Ali looks at him, her head tilting to the side, eyes searching the ceiling as she thinks about it. Liam begins to feel nervous that she doesn’t remember, and it makes him feel stupid that he thought she would. He feels foolish for holding on to it for five years.

But then she remembers. She remembers handing it to him just as the sun set. And suddenly she starts to feel overwhelmed that he still has it. Ali can feel the breath catch in her throat as she tries to swallow, and as she moves her eyes up to look at him, she can see Liam holding it in his left hand, and her eyes fill with tears. She hates herself for feeling all of these emotions at once. It’s like a levee just broke. And Ali finally cries.

Shari Jaffri



Shari Elis Jaffri is a writer based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. After graduating from The University of Iowa with a degree in business, Shari worked 3 years in the communications field where she spent busy days and long nights writing press releases and working on creative PR campaigns for brands. In spite of never running out of things to do, Shari always returned to writing.

Shari is interested in writing compassionate stories and is currently working on her first short story collection. The collection includes an eclectic mix of stories featuring Asian ghosts, disillusioned hipsters and foreign maids looking for love, to name a few. Her piece in this year's anthology, 'Losing Light', is all about exploring the horrifically thin line between folklore and mental health.

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Losing Light

My mother has always been a superstitious woman.

Though it's been twenty years, I can still see her by her usual spot; a gaunt woman in an orange kaftan, face illuminated by yellow light and hair in a bun as she worked away on her knitting. As if by clockwork, every night ended with the same reminder from her.

'Aziz, Imran, don't forget to wash your feet,' she'd say. 'You won't want to get nightmares.'

'Yes, *mak*.'

My brother and I obeyed these instructions with trust, our feet cool and clean as we'd wait for sleep to take over, the whirring of the fan punctuating the balmy night air. Although I had my share of doubts, *mak* had an explanation for everything. I remember waking up from a bad dream one day, feeling betrayed her precautions hadn't worked. With bated breath, I'd confronted her the next morning.

'Ah, Aziz,' she replied, barely taking her eyes off the pot she was stirring. 'Did you say your prayers right? Did you *mean* them?'

'But, *mak* -' I winced in reply.

The suggestion I hadn't meant my prayers made my cheeks burn and I wasn't sure how to defend myself. She always said the right things to cut me short.

Our father, *abah*, worked most of the time so it was *mak* who kept us company. *Abah* was a man of the world who toiled hard to make ends meet. He often came home with bags beneath his eyes. We lived in Kuantan at the time and had little to do in a small town that barely had a cinema. This was before *abah* landed the contract that'd later change our lives, before our family would be too occupied with our own things. *Abah* was a good-spirited man who liked to joke whenever *mak* broke out into her nervous fits.

'For the last time, Aziz! Leave your money out again and a *toyol* will steal them,' she warned, pressing the loose notes I'd left around the house onto my palm. The thought of a *toyol*, a green imp that steals from house-to-house by climbing windows, made my skin crawl.

‘Tipah, no *toyol* is going to steal his money. If anyone, I will,’ *abah* said as he winked at me. I giggled, but quickly covered my mouth when I saw *mak*’s face.

Mak gave *abah* a stern look and a slap on the back. ‘*Sayang*, this isn’t funny! There’s no harm in being safe than sorry. And if I don’t teach them these things, who will?’

‘Whatever you say, dear,’ *abah* said as he shook his head and loosened his tie. The smile remained on his face as *mak* scooped rice onto his plate.

During afternoons, *mak* would read *Peter & Jane* books or teach us English and Malay nursery rhymes over cream crackers and tea. Some days, she’d share with us stories about her own childhood growing up in the 60s, back when Malaysia was new to independence and still under British influence. Her father, a diplomat, would bring her all sorts of novelty gifts—a rocking horse, an *Etch-a-Sketch*, a xylophone, little wonders that made her days magical. But more interesting than these was when she’d weave folklores into our daily lives.

‘Quick! Boys! Shoo them away!’ *Mak* yelled at the sight of black crows flocking our house compound. ‘We don’t need any bad luck around here.’

‘*Hyeahh!* Take that!’

We stomped the ground and chased after the birds, pretending our arms emanated laser beams as they flew away in a nervous scatter of energy.

‘Okay, kids. Help take the clothes in next, and quickly. It’s nearing *Maghrib* and you know how the Devil wanders around after dusk. We don’t want spirits picking up on our scents.’

We unpinned the clothes from the washing line and balanced the fresh laundry on our arms. As the sun gradually slipped away, we lowered our voices.

‘Do you think the ghosts are on their way?’ Imran asked nervously as he added more clothes to his pile. A few shirts toppled to the ground.

‘I don’t know,’ I hissed as I attempted the same. ‘But we better hurry before we get an answer.’

Looking back, I realise the environment we grew up in had a mystical quality to it. Coupled with my active imagination, every turn presented the possibility of magic. A black cat was a demon in disguise. The slightest flash of white suggested a *pontianak*, a vengeful spirit with long black hair wandering around in the guise of a beautiful woman, seeking revenge upon men who had wronged her. The howling wind meant ghosts were conspiring mischief.

‘How do we protect ourselves, *mak?*’ both Imran and I asked one night.

‘You have to remember to pray to keep your faith strong, my sons. They only touch the weak.’

She’d then make us repeat the same prayers before bed. We’d recite them again and again, the Arabic verses dancing away on our tongues into the silence of the night.

*

As I grew into a young adult, my beliefs began veering away. Maybe it was because the more I knew, the more I became a man of logic. In spite of my mother’s best efforts, I’ve never been very traditional. Imran always played the role of an obedient son better than me. He turned into a goody two-shoes who often judged me for my decisions, and so it didn’t take long for us to grow apart. Now, don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I’m not a believer. I just think that the more paranoid you are, the more likely it is for you to attract these things. Nothing breeds evil more than fear.

My early 20s wasn’t what you’d call smooth-sailing. It was then that my relationship with my mother worsened and my episodes began. I’d feel elated one second, overwrought with depression the next. These mood fluctuations distracted me. School was difficult and maintaining relationships became unbearable, because everybody irritated me, especially my family. I couldn’t turn to any of them since I was too different. I was too ungodly, too weird, too moody. Needless to say, I wasn’t them.

Truth is, none of my peers understood either. Mental health awareness was painfully slow in gaining momentum in Malaysia, so people thought I was making excuses or being overly sensitive. The university didn’t have counselors I could see and it wasn’t like I could get medicine over the counter.

My mother didn’t make things easy.

‘You’re not suffering from any mental illness, Aziz. You’re just hearing these things because your spirit is weak,’ she told me. ‘You don’t need medication, you just have to pray.’

I usually kept quiet when she said these things, knowing better than to start a war I wouldn’t win, although it bothered me. It was ridiculous; would she put my own

well being down the line because of her silly beliefs? It didn't take too long for my patience to wear out.

'I signed you up for religious classes,' *mak* announced one day just as I'd gotten home from classes. 'Starts tomorrow and it'll be every Thursday night at the mosque.'

'You just don't get it, *mak*. I'm *sick*. Which part of that don't you understand?' I replied impatiently, realising a bit too late that I hadn't hidden my annoyance. My voice came out louder than I'd intended and I was shaking slightly.

The awkward silence that followed lay thick in the air as *mak* stared at me in disbelief.

'Suit yourself, Aziz.' she said, her voice on the verge of tears. 'Don't expect me to help next time.'

My spot at the family table became empty most nights after, and I started having my meals outside.

*

Following that incident, things took on an even stranger turn. Though my imagination had always been vivid, it escalated to another level—I began hearing things. Loud sounds, soft sounds. The first time I heard them, I thought they were sounds filtered through the walls, until I realised no one was even home. Sometimes it'd be the sound of mumbling voices, other times it'd be shuffling feet, as if others shared the same space with me.

The thought crossed my mind that maybe the house was haunted or, even worse, maybe I was. But my more sensible side interjected that I was sick and that I was clearly suffering from a disorder of some sort. After many missed classes, failed papers and calls from the university, *abah* eventually took me to a psychiatrist. Unsurprisingly, I was diagnosed as bipolar, and was prescribed medication.

'Don't tell *mak* I brought you. You know she doesn't approve of these things,' he said on the drive home. 'She doesn't mean any harm, it's just that she came from a different time and place. Okay?'

'Yes, *abah*,' I mumbled, trying to resist the urge to add, 'But so did you.' Instead, I thanked him and took my medicine, as prescribed.

Innes Laird

Innes Laird grew up near Manchester, but moved to London to do a Postgraduate Degree in Journalism at City University. Having lived in London for a decade as a journalist for national newspapers and magazines, Innes returned to Manchester to raise a family. She is currently writing a collection of short stories set in London and the North. These stories are interrelated and are written from the point of view of unreliable narrators, whom all share wider connections. Notably, Innes' stories can easily transmute from the written form to radio/TV broadcast as stand alone plays or monologues. Innes is a fan of Nabokov and Faulkner, and places Alan Bennett on an equally high pedestal.

Set a Sprat to Catch a Mackerel

My forty-fifth birthday party last night was a tremendous success. All the parents said so. I'll even go as far as saying it was better than our wedding reception. Of course back in the day, it was mostly Adam's family and work colleagues who made up the numbers – and let me tell you, they *were* the Addams Family - all of them weirdos. Then again, ours was never going to be the wedding of the century. Even splashing out on a Thames riverboat, and booking Wet Wet Wet to perform the dance number didn't compensate for the dull conversations about engineering and sprockets. Oh, but my party was such fun. Everything went to plan. Nobu Restaurant, Berkeley Street, pulled out all the stops -- they even provided a surprise three-tiered cake as a token of their appreciation of how much I'd spent. Or should I say, how much *Adam* had spent. But after nearly twenty years of marriage, what's his is mine. Yes, the guests were my favourite kind of people. Parents of William's rugby and school friends -- kindred spirits I suppose you'd call them. They deserved the best and that's what they got -- dining amongst the rich and famous. Steven Gerrard and wifey were only six tables away, so my choice of venue really paid off.

Adam did his usual thing and left me to do all the organising. But I'd rather have it that way. He knew it'd only start a row if he even dared to suggest I invite his brother Simon and family. Even worse, his batty old mother. We only see them the odd Christmas and, believe me, it's a *very* odd Christmas having to tolerate Simon's dreary three-bedroom semi in Boxland. Granny Sackville clearly favours Uncle Simon and the two cousins over my boys. She's always banging on about how they didn't have the same privilege of going to a private school that mine have had. And she's never disguised how much money she's spent on his kids -- apparently to make up for their “disadvantages”. I mean: she even bought Simon's eldest a car for his eighteenth. My Jonty received a twenty-pound Next voucher.

I've only known the guests for two or three years, but I have a feeling they're going to stick around. Not like the parents of Jonty's friends who seem to have disappeared into the ether now our kids are at uni. But they were never much fun anyway -- all of them older than this crowd, and set in their ways.

After early evening cocktails, I guided my guests to the seating plan, pointing out the 'Rugby table' and the 'School table'. The *Hors D'oeuvres* were beautifully presented, as per our pre-order, and distributed precisely on time. I made sure I was sat next to Pippa and her husband. She's the Deputy Head at William's school (Mrs Waterhouse) and her husband is very intelligent, he's a corporate lawyer. Their son, Alex, plays in the same rugby team as William, but I wanted her on my table – the School table. That was a wise choice as the rugby bunch are always prone to rowdiness -- you know, drinking too much. And that wouldn't do for Pippa. Of all my new friends, she's going to be the most useful over the next few years while William's at school.

Sat on Pippa's right were American Angelica and German Gunter, parents of Stefan. They met at Spearmint Rhino, a place I'm not familiar with. He's a merchant banker and she's an ex-nanny from Atlanta -- now a "home-maker", as those Americans call it. She's one of our Ladies who Lunch and spends a lot on her appearance, although she's only admitted to some of it. She's definitely had a boob job and reminds me of a younger Dolly Parton. Although I can't imagine her saying, "It costs a lot of money to make me look this cheap". More like: "I've gotten good genes from Mama's side."

We 'Ladies' meet up once a week at the Country Pub and Diner just outside Brentwood and if we're lucky, we get to glimpse at the celebs. Angelica once saw Posh and Becks there in the Nineties, which is why she's so insistent on going. But the only one I've ever seen is Kerry Katona.

I purposely sat entrepreneur Charlie (and wife Steph) next to my husband because I wanted Adam to pick Charlie's brains about setting up his own business. I've told him repeatedly there's no money in working for other people. My plan came to nothing though as Charlie got wasted and started ranting on about Steph injecting all his money into her face, boobs and arse. I can't believe she allows him to speak like that, especially in front of these professionals. I'm pretty sure both tables of guests heard it because I noticed some people on the rugby table sniggering behind their wine glasses.

Courses two and three were interspersed with a champagne sorbet *entremet* to cleanse the palette. This was my idea; I'd seen it on Nigella's *Nigelissima*. Mother would've been secretly proud of me as she always said I had lofty ideas. I say "secretly" because she had a very different life to mine. Growing up, my half sister

Jenny and I were outcasts in our street. We had different fathers, each of us born out of wedlock, as they called it in those days. Basildon was a very unforgiving place in the Seventies. Mother worked two shifts; bless her, at the Carreras cigarette factory. But hard work wasn't enough of a penance for her sins of the flesh in the eyes of those judgemental old bags in headscarves. I can hear her now, shouting at them, "Go rot in hell!" as they detoured across the road to avoid us. When our new stepfather (the first one) moved in, Jenny and I mostly lived at Nan's and Granddad's on the next street. Sometimes I would go out leafleting with Granddad. He'd pass me the 'Vote Labour' pamphlets and I'd post them through the letterboxes -- niftily, so the dogs wouldn't bite my fingers. My kids have never twigged their mother comes from staunch Labour stock. We're a Tory family now -- although I am beginning to see the attraction of UKIP.

When the main course arrived, both red and white wines were flowing, and conversations were getting louder. Several people on the rugby table were overdoing it a bit. Charlie must've got bored with Adam and had swapped places with his wife to show Penelope his chest tattoo. Penelope works for BUPA as an E.N.T consultant, and her husband, Nigel, is a consultant at the Moorfields Eye Hospital. Ever since Year Seven when all the boys first met, their son Ned has been top of the class. He passed his grade eight cello at eleven, and sat GCSE maths at twelve, so I'm glad he's been William's main friend over the last year. Ned's been bullied a lot, though, by some of the rugby boys. Mostly by Steph's son, Jack. So, in an attempt to put an end to the bullying, I'd placed both mums next to each other. I'm always the Henry Kissinger, me. Alas, I'd have to wait longer for my Nobel Peace Prize as I watched Penelope's top lip curl. She was trying to process the image of Charlie's tattoo – a blue lion with, *Millwall*. 'No One Likes Us We Don't Care' written around it. She comes from Tunbridge Wells so I doubt she knows what it means, or even realised this was his chat up routine (he's done it to all of us). But she did look a bit scared, bless her. Steph clocked it all out the corner of her eye, and slapped Charlie's shaven head, telling him to stop showing off. She's a bit insecure about her husband, and I don't blame her. Steph's another one of our Ladies who Lunch.

When the dessert arrived . . . Oh correction, I mean *pudding*. (Apparently it is very "non-U" to say dessert. You mustn't say serviette or toilet either. It must be *napkin* and *loo*). When the *pudding* arrived, Charlie was back to Steph's Botox again, so Adam (tactfully, for him) moved the conversation on to how the couple first met.

Charlie said they met at Sandown Park in the Royal Enclosure to which Nigel piped up, “There isn't a Royal Enclosure at Sandown – only at Royal Ascot.” Well, Charlie was adamant and shouted him down. As no one else seemed to be any the wiser, Nigel diplomatically let it go. But minutes later he whispered to his wife who smirked behind her servi. . . *napkin*. Later, when I circulated around the guests – rather like a butterfly landing on different flowers - I overheard Penelope say to her husband, “H-K-L-P” while nodding over at Charlie buttering his cheese cracker. This morning, I typed this acronym into Google and, to my surprise, I found out it means, 'Holds Knife Like Pen'. Apparently, it's used to describe the table manners of a lower class or uncouth person – how ingenious. I must remember that.

Warming to his subject on how the couples met, my husband was on his feet explaining how *we* met. Oh God, my heart sank. I always hate it when he tells this story about how he'd gone on a golfing stag fortnight in Portugal and I was at the same hotel - on my own. It makes me sound really sad and lonely. But it wasn't that way at all. There'd been a mix-up as my sister Jenny, who worked in a travel agents at the time, had booked me on a discount package holiday to Corfu. But she'd got the wrong week - before we'd broken up (I was a junior school teacher), and the only holiday left was this golfing one. So I'd taken it, why wouldn't I? I didn't need to swing a seven iron to get a tan and relaxation around the pool. Adam always tells it like I was deliberately on a manhunt for a rich husband. Well, even if I was, it didn't work, did it? I ended up with Adam! Needless to say, he fell for me instantly and we got married six months later. We had Jonty four months after that.

Around eleven, my iPhone 6 Plus flashed on the table, it was my Sweet William. I still call him that even though he's fourteen. I took the call in the restaurant lounge, and glanced across at Mr and Mrs Gerrard who were at this point being stalked by paparazzi.

“I'm just ringing to see if you're having a good time, mum.”

“Yes, darling. Hey, you'll never guess who's within spitting distance from me, right now.”

“Jonny Wilkinson?”

“No, silly. Steve and Alex Gerrard. They're being papped right now!”

“Oh, right. Anyway, Mum, are you having fun?”

“Yes, I'll tell all when I see you. Now, make sure your big brother isn't up to no good.”

David Malone



David Malone is a fiction writer from Liverpool, England. His short stories have appeared in Carve Magazine, Momaya Annual Review, Crannog, Grey Sparrow Journal, Tales from the Underground and others. David was a Bridport Prize 2014 winner for his short story *Hearing Aid* and is currently working on his first short story collection. A former BBC World Service researcher and British Council teacher, David has lived and worked around the world and is interested in fiction that deals with themes of travel and escape. Presented is an extract from *Boobie Gets Everything*, a short story David workshopped and submitted as part of his portfolio for the MA course.

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Boobie Gets Everything

He had fired the first shot of war. That was what she told herself as she dragged her luggage through the departure lounge at Liverpool Airport. They'd had Twitter, Facebook, Instagram; a million-and-one ways to consciously uncouple and move on with their lives, but that was all over now. He had gone and made shit real again, tossing a paper grenade into her handbag from the far side of the world. Lucy stopped at a Travelex booth and pulled out the envelope he'd sent. The photo of him inside smiled defiantly up at her, wedged between a pre-paid airline ticket and a scrawled note that read:

Lucy,

Come to Bangkok.

I think we should talk!

- Rory x

They'd split eleven months before, shortly after his Great Aunt Boobie lost her second breast to cancer. Lucy had never trusted the woman; too eccentric, too cloying, doting on her little golden lion in a way that made Lucy feel deeply uncomfortable and surplus to requirement. They skirted around each other at family parties, sizing one another up across the heads of other people's children. A showdown seemed inevitable, so when the diagnosis came Lucy felt a flood of joy invade her body, a quiet relief that things were finally taking their natural course. She sent flowers to the oncology ward but left the card blank, afraid a single word might expose her deepest wish: that the old woman would simply slip away into the night. But Boobie recovered, faster than anyone — including the doctors — thought possible, and on her favourite nephew's twenty-fifth birthday she summoned him to the Hilton Liverpool, where, dressed in her late husband's dinner suit and a fake moustache, she handed him a briefcase stuffed with five-pound notes. It came with the express condition he spend it all on squeezing titties 'before his own world turned flat'. Lucy imploded. She kicked him out. He called her crazy. She changed the locks and set fire to his clothes, only strengthening Boobie's argument that it was high-time her nephew 'had an adventure of his own'. It was a victory so spectacular, so swift in

its finality that Lucy swore if she ever saw Boobie again she would run her over with her car.

She examined the photo again. Rory's face, that Nordic-looking prototype of sharp, pointed angles, stared back at her, handsome as ever. She flipped him over and mouthed the Thai-sounding address on the back. It both annoyed and intrigued her, like a dare wrapped in an insult. Hadn't she been the tour-guide in their relationship? Hadn't she negotiated every map on their city-breaks in Bologna and Stockholm and Prague?

At the gate she handed her coat over and followed the flight attendant down the gangway, turning left into the curved surroundings of BusinessFirst. Ahead of her, other first-class passengers floated about the cabin like low-lit fish: slow and graceful and never touching. Lucy found her seat and stared out of the window. He was an emotional terrorist, she reminded herself. She would not negotiate with terrorists.

*

At Bangkok she cleared immigration, picked up her suitcase and climbed onto a SkyTrain. Giant billboards whipped past the windows, too fast to be read. Beyond them the city skyscrapers wobbled frantically in the midday heat. Lucy switched her phone on. The canal outside the station was exactly where her app said it would be. She followed it south three blocks, past the ornate terrace of a giant pagoda, its crumbling steps littered with the bodies of a dozen sleeping dogs, then left onto a sloping side street that ended at Sopa Apartments.

The concierge was a little brown rabbit. Even her lips were brown. She pressed her hands together in a little prayer and welcomed Lucy to the building, her face lighting up as Lucy introduced herself.

'Oh, you are Mr. Rory's friend! Welcome! Welcome!' She spun around and reached into a pigeonhole. 'Miss Lucy this is for you. Apartment 4-0-5, 17th floor.'

Lucy nodded at the plastic keycard placed in her hand. Across the hallway an empty elevator pinged open. 'Is Mr. Rory home right now?'. The thought of him

catching her like this, unmade and unprepared, bedraggled in day-old clothing made her stomach flip.

The concierge reached for the phone. 'I will check.'

'No, don't!' Lucy spotted a restroom beyond the elevator and wheeled her suitcase toward it, easing the door open with her hip. In the mirror she examined herself, turning slowly from side to side. Her dress, creased and limp now, would have to go. She sniffed her armpits and grabbed her breasts, weighing each one individually in her hands. If she were American, she thought, now would be the time for a pep talk: a litany of self-affirmations to cloud the mind and swell the chest. Instead she began to audit her body: the loose black curls that framed her face; the tight pinch of her waist; her harp-shaped bottom lip. She fed each part of herself into the giant whirring processor of her mind and waited for a result: a green light, confirmation that, for now at least, she was still beautiful.

She unzipped her suitcase and unrolled a peppermint sundress. Hair teased and dark under-eye circles removed, she nodded at herself and stepped back from the mirror.

'Thank you!' Lucy shouted into the foyer as the elevator swallowed her up. It spat her out again a few seconds later, high above the Earth's dirty surface. She found 4-0-5 and let herself in. The apartment looked modern inside, open-plan and featureless in a new-build kind of way. Rory's X-Box sat abandoned on the living room floor. Beyond it, between a black sectional sofa and a pair of sliding balcony doors, a pyramid of empty beer bottles twinkled in the sunshine, dappling the walls in flecks of brown-orange light.

'Lucy, babe. That you?'

His voice was coming from a deeper part of the apartment. She wheeled her suitcase in and closed the door behind her, wondering who else she might be. The slap of bare-feet on tiled floor grew louder until he skirted around a corner, hair wet, a thin towel knotted tightly around his waist. His dimples were deeper than she remembered, but his smile had lost none of its punch. He ran at her like a dog unleashed, whipping her up into the air with a shriek.

'You came! You came!' he shouted, her shoes slipping away from her as he spun her around the apartment.

They crashed onto the sofa, tipping it over, Lucy's foot dislodging a fat Buddha statue from the nearby dresser as they hit the floor with a roll. It wobbled off the table and exploded beside them. She had missed this she realised — an involuntary shriek of laughter escaping her lungs— Rory's childlike need to physicalise everything.

He climbed on top of her. 'I knew you'd come. I fucking knew it!'

Lucy struggled angrily beneath him. Bodywash, still oily on his skin, was soaking through her dress.

"I've been a dick," he continued, planting kisses on her face. 'Know that I know that.'

His hands skimmed the contours of her breasts. His hair, a mangled mop of gold and yellow, fell jauntily across his face. He looked like a puppy she thought, young and stupid and completely irresistible, covered in shit and wanting to come home.

'I need you to forgive me.'

'I need. I need..'" Lucy parroted back at him. 'You're such a pussy!'

He slipped his fingers under her dress, tugging at the waistband of her underwear. 'Correction, Lucy. A pussyhound.'

They crashed about the apartment like pinballs, ricocheting into the bedroom, a small yelp escaping her as they landed awkwardly on the bed.

'Shit, I'm sorry!'

'Don't talk,' Lucy warned him, hiking up her dress. He headed south on her, mouthing fresh new sentences into the dampness between her legs. 'I said don't talk!' she repeated, more forcefully this time. He climbed on top of her, slick and naked and gleaming like fruit. She bit his neck as he found the rhythm, nudging her forward like a tiny boat toward the swells of an orgasm. She grabbed his shoulders and started to moan: for Liverpool, for their apartment on Duke Street, for the three years and four months they had made and unmade a bed together. She followed her thoughts like stepping-stones, each one leading her further away from herself, out into the white-hot flashes of an unknowable world. She was rising, rising, high above herself now, up and over all the great grey buildings of this world. She moaned and gasped for

them all, until Rory's lips, soft and inexplicably sweet tasting, found her own, edging shut the opening doors of her mind, easing each one back into its frame with the very faintest of clicks.

Scott Preston



Scott Preston works as a full-time freelance writer of web content, advertising copy, and chest-swelling self-help articles; some of his non-fiction has been featured in *Verge Magazine* and *Writer's Digest*.

His fiction tries to deal in the art of tall tales where the narrator isn't ashamed he's telling you a story. It uses the adventures of cutthroats, hoodlums, and wayward working stiffs to explore problems of the everyday.

Old Man Coniston is the opening of a novel he is currently working on. Set in the present day, it tells the story of a bloody feud among warring sheep rustlers in the hills of the north of England. An epic tale of the struggle between a father and son who have been forgotten by the world and robbed of the pastoral life their ancestors promised them.

It aims to do for British farmers what the Western did for cowboys, and what *Gangs of New York* did for Leonardo DiCaprio. It turns away from the nostalgic world of thick stews and woolly jumpers and away from laughless kitchen sink realism. To a world of duty, sheep stealing, legend, and madness.

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Old Man Coniston

I look around here now, past Keld Gully, cloud-eaten hills, and the thin end of Bewrith village, and get to thinking maybe nothing much did ever happen. Where most people would come to stop happening.

To get away from it all they'd say. Hunched-backs to the wind, blinking it in — asking what there was to be doing now they'd got here.

Few times a year I still get offcomers come up to my house asking if this is the old Herne farm. Usually got that Kersner's book to hand. *A History of the County War* or some daft thing. One of the last great farms of old Westmorland and they're thinking it's here — a limestone house built for a postman and his wife in the fifties.

Caldhithe the Herne place was called, you can still see few of the outbuildings and a feed-lot the fire didn't take to if you know where to look. Was all a bit hid away even when it were standing. As far as cobbled slate houses can be said to be standing.

If they seemed keen enough, the offcomers, I used to walk them out there where main farmhouse had been. Not many animals left here now, but not so much has grown back where the ground blackened.

They'd seem disappointed when I showed it to them, maybe thought they'd feel the moment fiercer stood where twenty-one people were killed. Course most of the lads didn't die up at the farmhouse.

Locals left scraps of Caldhithe alone, rumour was that no one would buy the land — not even at auction, but I'd met the National Trust fella that looked it over. One who took it when the lawyers couldn't find any Hernes left. Not sure what they're waiting for to turn it around.

I kept putting the rent I owed the Hernes in a tin under my bed — did it for years. Ended up spending it all on that new Land Rover of mine and I still haven't heard anything from the new owners.

Most of the people I took out to Caldhithe were young, kids really, a whole school trip once. Last person I took out was an older fella about a year back now.

Sixty-odd he must have been, not too much older than me at least, but he carried his years like a stink. Wore a slop-brimmed fishing hat halfway down his ears and stood at my gate looking gormless for five minutes before he came to the door.

Takes me maybe five minutes to get there but he's quiet the whole time. I got him standing at the right spot and he tells me he used to know William Herne as a lad. Old man had worked Caldhithe four seasons in a row before he moved on to his own place down in Shropshire.

Not sure what his game was.

He offered me a slice of fruitcake from a hanky. Showed me a white scar that ran wrist to elbow, said it belonged to Caldhithe. Asked if the King's Head pub was still around. He thought it was the first place he'd fallen in love, though he wasn't sure it couldn't have been in the Pitney Arms.

He told me William had seemed a good sort and it made his head go funny when he tried to figure it out. Knew my name without asking and he started stabbing at my chest with his finger, telling me I should have done something about it all.

I just nodded like I always did.

People would ask me how it was I didn't know what was going on just over the hill. All the hiding and thieving. Course I did know. We all did — whole village talked about it. Just a question of how much you pieced together at the time. Miles of nothing can make thick walls. People would see some Blue Texels or Cotswolds or some other faraway breed of sheep in a field and know they didn't walk there on their own account.

I know more than most seeing as I wasn't one to turn down money back then and I'd been William's only hired hand for four years before the trouble began. Didn't want to talk about any of this for a long time — what my part in the whole thing had been. Felt wrong trying to make sense of it when there was none to be had.

They'd ask me what kind of a man William was. What was he like to talk to? Will Herne. The Devil of Gummer's Tarn. I'd tell them he was just a farmer, better than some, no more special than most.

He was quiet so we thought him principled. When he did speak it were to the point as if he read the newspaper too much. Kept to himself or his family as he could. He wore this long wax coat for the last ten years of his life, fell dress-length to near his ankles and he buttoned it all the way up so he looked like a man of God. Would drink near as much as one and all if he got the chance. His wife Helen wouldn't let him keep it in the house, the coat, it stunk so bad of muck and wild mustard.

Like a lot of the hill farmers the village didn't see too much of him. Just knew he was out there doing his work and you might run into him if you got lost in the fells or kept an eye to his stool at The Crown.

Took his role as a tourist attraction for southerners a touch serious. Heard more than a few offcomers in the village give tale of a farmer they could swear was staring them down a field away, or else they'd found him pointing to signs he kept about the place reading *dogs off leash will be shot*. If they laughed back he'd stark barking at them like a dog himself. Couldn't have been anyone other than William. Not around here.

He was well liked though. Respected even. Was always the man you didn't want to bother with anything, but you knew you could if you needed to. Saw it myself when he helped the farmer just over the hill. Got his sheep back for him after they'd gotten trapped in the floods one year. Carried them higher and higher up the fells over-shoulder one-by-one, long past dark when he couldn't see where he was taking them.

They'd ask me if he'd always been a violent man. He didn't shy away from blood or things that come with death if that's they were meaning. Couldn't. It was part of the job. Killing, butchering — violence so to speak, it's what a farmer needs for his land to have any life.

Hurting others, that wasn't so much the William I knew. I still don't believe what coppers said about the way it all went down in the end. Lots of ways to get blood on your hands without hurting people.

If he wasn't the sort to be hurting anybody they'd ask me, how he could kill his own son?

Never told them it was because it needed doing.

You can't understand what happened at Caldhithe three years ago without understanding Danny Herne. One thing Kersner never realised with his book and all his bloody research and questioning.

Without Danny there's nothing here that wasn't going on in ten other farms. Or the rest of the country from what I've heard. Everywhere you go you find they have their own laws — their own way of doing things and you leave them to it most of the time. Got to keep your own in check.

Only William knew how to do that with Danny when time came.

Tara Sherman



She travels for the thrill, plays chess and poker to blow off steam, and is a sucker for beer and a bad joke. Originally from Austin, Texas, Tara spent half of her upbringing in Georgia, where she attended Valdosta State University. She was awarded a scholarship prize from the American Academy of Poets in 2002, followed by the Raymond Register Fiction award in 2003. She received her B.F.A. in Mass Media and Creative Writing in 2004.

After dabbling in a few unsavory professions, Tara decided to move abroad. In 2008, she taught English writing at Hebei University in Baoding, China, then continued in Zaragoza, Spain for another four years, enabling her to learn a second language. She worked with children in Ukraine, then spent a year teaching in Russia, where she also gave lectures on culture and language acquisition in the heart of Moscow. She enjoys making music, and in the past decade has self-produced three albums under the moniker MISU.

Tara was raised on Mozart, boiled peanuts, David Lynch, and the Archies. Her tone is darkly cheerful and she enjoys writing for the stage. She is currently working on her first novel, *Underwater*.

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Pom-Pom

You lasted a week, then woke up this afternoon in a state. *A right state*. Carla warned you about this one. You didn't think it would happen to you. Now here you are, standing in front of your closet, sobbing like a little bitch. *Swish swish* go the hangers on clothes. Maybe a dress will do the trick. Them dresses are so girly-girl. Nothing appeals, nothing relieves. You feel something crusty on your cheek. You wander to the bathroom mirror.

Blood?

Those pom-pom heads. Jake awarded you third place in the costume contest. Third place. He just felt sorry for you. This whole town does, you see them shift in their seats, you hear them whispering, you see how unpleasant it is for them. *Call us if you need anything, call us if you do*. What's your number, you say? Hang on, gotta use the bathroom. Oops, think I forgot it. Let me go and find my phone. Dead cheerleader holding her pom-pom heads. 'Trick or treat, it was either this or dress up like a rape victim.' Then you laugh first, signaling for them to join in. Oh Jenny, you and your quirky bar banter.

You spot a head lying on the kitchen floor, minus the blonde wig you'd glued on the night before. How did you get home? Shouldn't you be in school? No wait, it's Sunday. Tomorrow will you go? No. The earth is spinning. Tears keep coming. No. Five more minutes of this then call it a night. Call someone. Anyone. Carla? No. Your mama? No, as much as she told you to call and meant it, no. You're tough as nails. Repeat. You're tough as nails.

A chortled sigh. No one gets it. You don't want them to get it. You wouldn't wish this on anybody. Except him. And maybe Hitler. You decide you hate Halloween from now on. It's a stupid holiday for children.

You stand on the porch. The clouds are swollen and gray. It's almost three. You spot the blonde wig in the grass, matted with leaves. A drive will do you some good, you say. Somewhere outside Pulpwood, where this feeling will escape. The cave in your chest, the leak in your brain. Where do they go in the movies after a rape? After hugging their knees on the floor of the shower, watching their blood stem down the drain? Little girl on the stand, the cowering, whimpering, weak little

fragment, wagging her finger, *'He rrrraped me!'* Camera pans to the man next to his lawyer, with folded hands and a smug grin on his face. Fade to commercials and she fades away forever.

You heard they caught him. You heard he's in jail. You heard he's denying it. Is he out on bail? You don't want to know. You want to go where the panic will subside, then crash it, bury it underneath the waves. So you decide on St. Augustine, just three hours away.

St. Augustine is not warm this time of year.

You and Isaac came here once. You were all shy, covering your mouth while chewing your first fish taco. Piano teeth. The July heat. Lathering his tattoos with zinc. He saw you had none. *'It's actually nice to hang out with someone who doesn't have one,'* he barked, how relieved you felt! You hugged your stomach, pointing your big toe in the edge of the foam. *Jenny*. It wasn't cold. *Come with me*. His arms, covered in stories, stretched like the horizon behind him.

'You're in a movie,' you grumble with your legs straight, staring at the foot of your jeans, caked in damp sand. You decide to stand up. Wet-butt. You sit back down. You hate wet-butt. *'A bad movie with no ending at all.'*

The wind is blowing. Kids are running along the shore. A boy and a girl. Stay that way, you mutter. Stay. That must be their parents. They even brought their dog. Kicking sand from its paws as it gallops across the beach at an incredible pace.

You brought your red notebook. It rests against your thighs. This would be the ideal time to write the perfect song. You squeeze your pen like a lemon against the page. A few drops come out. Then a few more. Wait, those aren't your words.

'Are you serious?'

'Yup,' chuckles the rain.

You sit there and wait, hoping it's nothing more than a passing thought.

But it becomes a speech, a delirious invocation of what the world is really like, hurling itself at you in thick, heavy slops. But wasn't Florida supposed to be the sunshine state? Get up, go get your ass in the car and wait some more.

Zero visibility, till you spot the lifeguard tower up ahead. The lot is behind, where Ivy, your little green Honda, waits helplessly. Converses dangling from your fingertips, your arm pit clamping the notebook to your ribs. Your face to the ground. Cold water trickling down your neck, inside your shirt, down your spine. Florida is a

flaccid penis hanging off the United States. It can't get any worse than this. 'You son of a bitch!' you scream. It cannot get worse than this.

Is that your car? No. Is that your car? No. You can't even tell what color they are. Where the hell did you park her? Oh, right. At the other end of the lot.

You stop. Poor Ivy is limping.

'Mother fuck, son of God! You piece of fat mother shit!'

Rain slaps against the concrete while its accomplice, the wind, whistles and sneers. You kick the tire, sunken to the gravel. It's on the driver's side. Your side.

Is this the part in the film where the girl dashes into the sea? Is this that part? 'You tell me!' you holler at the sky, water splashing in your eyes. Rage is unfamiliar to someone like you. You prepare to scream something fearful and unholy, clutching your fists and tensing up for the mother of all rants.

But with this kind of luck, you'll crap your pants.

So you dig out your keys and take a seat in the driver's side, while the rain continues to deliver its eloquent speech.

It didn't take you long to find the tavern, once the nuts were screwed off and the donut was tight and secure. The bag of tools from the trunk you thought you'd never have to use, not on a day like this.

'This is hilarious,' you say, sipping Anchor Steam, pigtails like two wet ropes dripping on the bar. Your eyes follow the mahogany panels, like the walls of a sunken ship before the water barges in.

You recognize the bartender. He looks like the old editor for the paper you used to write for at the university. *Great column, Jenny*. Even he'd looked surprised when he told you that. Which one, the one on abortion or MTV? Batting your eyes, smug and surefire, age nineteen. Back when telling your version of the truth felt harmless. And sexy. The only reason you chose to write for that paper was because of that editor. Now you ache for that kind of incentive.

Sorry, bartender says he doesn't remember you. July to August, August to September...you count with your fingers. It *has* been four months since you were here last. Isaac in the side of your eye, eating his fish taco. Knee nudging knee underneath.

Poetry



Tara Sherman - poetry

Art Restoration

for russ

i saw you outside a bar in atlanta,
fuckin' with a broken bike chain.
you were sitting on the curb,
with the stern face of a surgeon
adjusting the metal link with precision.

i imagine you looked like that
when you used to do tattoos
in the town we used to live in further south,
where one girl had your name on her thigh.
nobody round here like him anymore, she'd
sigh
before lifting her skirt even higher.

it'd been a decade at least
since we last spoke
but i'd heard about the snakes.
took a seat on the curb with the nerve to ask
you okay? since they almost took your life
some years before.

you laughed, said *sure*,
then showed me the scars
ridden up and down your leg.
with a grin on your face
you said they came like punches
before you flatlined twice
in the hospital bed you lay in for months,

however long it took to get the taste
of metal out of your mouth.

maybe that's what venom tastes like?
it's a shame that girl with your name
on her thigh wasn't lurking around
while you were curled on the ground,
entering a state of paralysis.
she had a big mouth, i'm sure she would've
bent down to suck the poison right out
and now it'd be her kidneys on the fritz
instead.

but what a waste of perfectly good venom
to grease a soul like oil on wheels—
you skipped town after you healed
yet she lives down there still,
dripping tears into her beer
and rippling her reflection
on how life isn't fair, it just *isn't*

i've seen your art on the cartoon network,
saw you on the front page of the *ajc*
with gloves on your tattooed hands, holding
jim henson's original creation
with the same grin on your face
when you were showing me your scars
outside that bar in atlanta.

Bo Crowder



Bo grew up in a working-class family in a community dominated by heavy industry. In his career, he has visited countries all over the world, causing him to learn (and forget) French, Spanish and German. He began writing poetry over ten years ago while taking his BA (Hons) in English Literature.

His poems are dominated by themes of people and place, art and humour, and he likes to use elements of the colloquial. His experiments with form and language often lead to an inclusion of the bizarre and the surreal.

The poems in this anthology will appear in his first pamphlet, due to be published later this year, and have been described as having a striking tone and voice with an adventurous vocabulary, mixing classical and dialect in an easy way with speech. Bo has a good ear and a gift for unusual phrases, which make for consistently memorable and arresting poems and produces strong work with flair and skill.

He enjoys attending and performing at poetry readings and is a founding member of the Staffordshire Poetry Stanza. Bo lives on a smallholding in the Staffordshire Moorlands, keeps rare breed sheep but still hasn't fixed the roof on the chicken shed.

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House Clearance

Clear the way,
sang the galloping major.
Her song seems to bring
a buzz to my ears
as I enter her house
on my own, one last time;
to clear it I had to negotiate
and fifty quid
is the knock down rate.

The *tranclements* clutter
the kitchen, a brass ashtray
with the final fag, false teeth
for the queen's speech, the toasting fork
crusted with crumbs, shellac 78's
all shook up in a box,
and, staring at me, six pairs
of spectacles, each one focussed
on an age.

The *back kitchen*, is cold
and cleared of all but the cooker
rings of rust top it. She was
immoveable too; besides,
most of what was precious
she gave away, except
pig headedness, which is
in the will and I'll be sure
to inherit that.

Keggy Hand

I'm trying to keep the lines straight, I do my very best.
A lawn's a curse or a blessing, depending on your point of view
and when the sun is setting and there's trouble with the kids-
they've been promised a game - better be the keeper
of that promise. Hurry, if they catch you out even once,
children have long memories is all I'm saying.
I take the clippings up to the compost and bury
my head in the bucket and dig out all that mulchy
green, summer absinthe, and I know, buried in there
somewhere, is another kid nagging for a game.

'Lord Ted does it this way,' you say and I'm watching
and trying and you say 'those born to play are
dextrous.' Awkward, kegy handed, I stick it out.
Mirrored as I am I observe the grip, the stance, the stroke
and do my very best. Me at the crease, a cracked slab,
you bowling slow balls at first, gradually I get it,
a sweep to the covers, the drainpipe,
a glance to the slips, the kitchen window, or
a drive through your legs for four, the yard gate.
These boundaries, it's fun to slam the ball
at them, they're all made up for me you say, I think I see
the real pitch, imagine myself at the middle of a great green oval,
you've been there. Sometimes I miss the swing completely,
but sometimes I smack one in the centre and there's a sweet
sound and that feeling of connection. Gradually I get it.
It's six and out, you say, and don't forget it.

The lawn is smooth; the lines are straight, well straight enough.

The buzz of the mower has become a busy whine

- the kids, I've promised them a game.

I get the bat and ball and show them the right way

to knock the stumps in, with the handle, but it's awkward

so I let them find their own way, and sod Lord Ted.

They use the face, leave dents in it, add some to mine.

We spend a long time deciding what the rules are

and the game itself seems to be over before it's begun.

Just enough time to wash our hands before tea.

Restoration

I lend a hand to fix up
the old barn, first the ugly
strapping is scutched away,
replaced with lime mortar to
make black flecks shine like dark stars
between rough gritstone quoins.

We dig out the floor and drop
the level, more than a foot,
stripped to shorts and boots, bare backed,
sweating through summer, working
these calloused palms, no one clears
our pile of tea bag slops.

Last we all lift tiles, burnt brown
as autumn sun sets, place them
to lean safe against a wall,
check the purlins, rafters, joists,
put the tiles back one by one,
scrapping the chipped and cracked.

Sorting the duds, *my job*, on
the obverse of one I find
an imprint, hard to see except
by slanted light. Look! A child's
hand impressed in clay, I keep
this tile and throw the rest away.

Starsky and Cordelia

I fear I am not in my perfect mind
as I remember when we met. You were,
unusual, I forget what you wore.
Oh! Nothing. Skin on skin. We didn't fuck
each other up too much did we? You weren't
vexed by football, nor did I ask you
to iron my shirts. This pain you have is not
unnatural: share it with me.

A fast car's what we need to put you in
the drivers seat, to buckle up the past.
I've got the motor running sweet it's
outside waiting for us both for one last ride,
just squeeze my fingers show you understand.
I liked the old times better than this new.

My glass eyes see much more than these wrinkled
hands, flecked with age. I won't let go, nunquam:
at least my muscles have a memory.
This silence doesn't help
Don't play Cordelia with me
I am a very foolish, fond, old man.

The Sagger Maker's Bottom Knocker (A Salutation)

Dusty lad, 'prentice to a 'prentice
in whose hand the mawl falls flat and even,
cocked cap hero who makes piecework
at odds with clock and clay,
watchful of breaks in the sagger's base,
up before the crack of dawn,
snacks on cold snappin' and a cool pint
to slake away cough and kiln.

How should we salute you?

Cold shadow, cast across five towns
you jiggered us to what we are, your ware
topped the world's tables, fed our mouths,
your slip made us aspire to be the best, you
branded us as a place to come from,
though you became a what's my line?
A silly name to shout, lungs out of breath,
'China made in England.'

Ursa Major

That looks nothing like a bear, you say
as we lie in the open, staring at stars
trying out our Greek eyes with this
blackety black point to point puzzle.

The truckle beds are uncomfortable,
we are not in a double, I want you
like a spoon, there's an itch to know
other,
what's that crawling up my leg?

We eat almonds slowly, bursting
soft green shells with a thumbnail,
the fire crackles, spitting
glowing flotsam into the air.

I explain what a light year is,
six million million miles of
speed bumps and give way signs,

I'm not counting.

Warm beer, cool air, we bounce
ideas off satellites
as they join the dots for us,
I need to touch you.

From our separate beds we reach
out, fingertips meet, a static spark,
a charge that we unearthed,
makes a moment into a universe.

In answer a meteorite flashes
in the corner of my eye, synapses
snap their fingers at each other,
looks more like a saucepan to me.

A thought we cook a little
and then stare some more,
inside our heads a black hole
that sucks at everything.

Estelle Goodwin



Estelle Goodwin was born in Essex and now lives in the North West. She began writing poetry after a varied working life as an employment lawyer, designer of an Arts and Crafts house and manager of a charity with projects in the Kibera slum in Nairobi. She is also a Trustee of a Multi Academy Trust and has been a school governor for many years. Estelle's poetic life is one of exploration. She enjoys experimenting tonally and often underpins her poems with musical elements extracted from another of her passions: choral singing. The poems included in this anthology evidence a desire to bring humour and fantasy to her reflections on the difficult moments in life such as death, divorce and absence. Estelle has a MA in Ancient World Studies and a passion for Greek tragedy. She has plans for a sequence of poems drawing from the Medea myth and particularly the story which predates the Euripidean drama. Estelle was long listed in the 2015 Canterbury Poet of the Year competition and Highly Commended in the 2016 Much Wenlock International Poetry Competition.

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A lie

When we set off for Clissold Park, one stainless
Sunday morning, the lie (I know this now) was just

new-born. You'd birthed him as the full-fat moon
spurted light into a borrowed bedroom,

then washed his dangling limbs in whisky fumes
and semen. Swaddled, you brought him

home at midnight. He lay between us till
the rooster cried, a red-eyed laboratory

rat intent on getting fat on rancid milk.
His mouth froth-stopped. After I'd made you

bacon and egg, you slapped the drooling
lie into the top pocket of your new-bought

Barbour jacket. Said, you'd had enough
of questions, when would I start

believing? While the lie took a nap
we walked beside the bare-limbed oaks,

fried leaves a buffer for our boots, the pond
aflutter with curiosity. We threw burnt toast

to the solitary swan, whose whooping
woke the lie. Grown too leggy, already,

for the pouch in which you'd trussed him,
he dropped at your feet. Began wailing.

To an imagined brother

I don't think about you often, big brother
I never had, but today, clinging to a plank,
scanning the horizon, I look for your unfamiliar
face, floating across all the years I have
not known you; sun peeled boy pushing

a girl on a swing in a city garden, higher
and higher. She turns her ribboned head,
hands clapping. Hovers above a galaxy
of daisies, and she is me and you are he,
and we are at the beginning of it all.

I see you next, a newly made man, reaching
deep into the baggy pockets of this world
for a path through heaving years. Amid the rabble
and babble of exuberant youth, you forget me,
even my name. I see you then at a country

church, tall amongst my wedding guests, proud
usher, determined defender, laughingly you tell
the groom: do not hurt my sister! Perhaps he hears
and history is reworked because you breathed
those words. And there on a hospital ward,

meeting my new born son, uncommon emotion
plucking a lullaby from wet eyes. This boy will roll
with you, through bolting years. On football pitches
and surfers' beaches, your hand will hold him
steady. At dusk on an autumn day, I see you

in a shed, furnished with carpenters' tools, beside
our father, with his father's saw. You softly
break wood. And the moment is birdsong
in the landscape of our past and your patience
breeds its sibling in me. And now, when the door

to childhood has swung shut and I am born
an orphan, I yearn, to cry and laugh and bicker
with you as we dispatch our parents' things.
Big brother, never known, all this you could
have been, had you lived beyond my dreams.

A conversation

I've been trying to have a conversation with
Death but she isn't taking my calls. I want to tell
her it's mighty rude to keep turning up in my life,
uninvited. Sticking her stilettos in the door
before I have a chance to direct her to some other

floor of my apartment block. Last time she rolled up,
she was dressed in red chiffon. It's only
a rumour that Death is a guy cloaked in black.
That Grim Reaper stuff? Invented by her little sister
Birth, brunt of Death's bitchy 'in the buff' humour.

I was in a steamy bath, didn't hear her tread
in the hallway; all soapy and hopeful I answered
her ring before I remembered to look through
the spy hole. Blew any chance to play dead
under my four poster bed. That time, thank God,

I wasn't the main event. She'd come by to say
my boss had snuffed it and I'd better pay in
my expenses cheque. Before I could stop her
she'd crashed on my sofa so I sneaked a look
in her bulging notebook, full of its names, dates,

unnatural causes. But her gunpowder eyes pinged
open before I could get to the Goodwins. Between
you and me I've begun to doubt she knows what
she's about. Last week she rolled up at my best
friend's fiftieth. Got tipsy on the whiskey, stuck

a death-date sticker on the last guest to arrive, who (I heard later) had a cardiac arrest in a stranger's shed. Who can see a plan in that? So now I'm hiding under the covers, trying to reach her; tell her I want one final get together (some long time in the future).

The Silence Pools

It dripped, the silence, through the bedroom ceiling.
It splashed into the cat's eyes, who hissed in my face.
It washed the indigo from the rag rug and bled
through the floorboards onto the kitchen tiles, where
it collected in a pool of porridge that grew and grew
every day I did not hear from you.

I sat, with the cat, worrying red ribbons through
my hair. Rocking and humming, humming
and rocking in the chair we bought at the Buxton fair
when you were a boy and I was a girl. But the porridge
wet my ankles so I danced, with the cat in my arms,
into the garden, where trumpet lilies puffed

perfume into the night sky and stars chattered
softly with the fire flies. I leant against
the pussy willow and wondered if the words you owed
me were lost in the voiceless dark, cart-wheeling
across the white cheeks of the moon. While the cat
chewed the lawn I flicked my toes in the soil.

Again and again I blew my hope to you, watching
it turn to pewter as it flew fast on a course starlit, true.
For a moment, liminal and still the moon stopped
turning, the cat stopped chewing, the silence stopped
dripping: I saw another silence, set hard in stone,
in another house, in another town.

Flying to Reykjavik

I've been here hours. Sharing air
with a factory of lawyers, a dead-eyed clerk,
a bored, squinting judge and you. Stacks
of files, a new party wall, divide us.
In this windowless box excess words
are trying to escape. They bounce round
the walls getting louder and louder until
I snatch one "marriage" and fly up to the ceiling,
making myself very small (like Alice) and escape
through a vent in the wall. I have a plan
to take the word back to where it all began
(the garden, do you remember the garden?
Its love-in-a-mist, its gazebo where we almost
kissed?) but as I glide across the darkening sky
I see you, the lawyers, the clerk and the judge
swooping after me shouting (more words):
Catch her, she's stealing the marriage. Which is odd
because I thought you didn't want it? So I drop
the marriage (it was getting heavy anyway)
and fly on and on and on to Reykjavik,
to drink burned wine and toss
your ring into a lava pit.

LOSS

In the corner
of my bedroom
sits a heap of boxes.
For a long time there
was nothing there.
The carpet ran smooth,
the view from the window
was free. Now the boxes
reach two metres high,
different shapes, different
sizes, different weights.
There is no avoiding them.
The best to be hoped for
is that they stay where
they are and don't spill
through the door. Today
the postman brought
another box. It has
your name on it and now
the whole tower tumbles
with my grief.

Katherine Horrex



Katherine Horrex was born in Liverpool in 1988 and grew up in Hull, where she turned to poetry after leaving school at an early age to work in a cafe. Her interest in the form lies most notably in its ability to distill and explore geopolitical landscapes, and the idea of language as living organism. She is currently writing a piece that aims to visualise the internet and has recently been involved with the Amy Johnson festival in Hull, writing and recording soundscapes with a group of young artists. Her work has been published in several journals, including the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Morning Star*, *Poetry London*, and most recently *Poetry Salzburg Review*.

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Wood Frog

There is nonchalance in the veins
of the roses you gave me.
Their heads hang stiffly
over dried out stalks.
I forgot to water them, or rather
thought I'd watered them but hadn't.

Now that I have means nothing,
though the stems puff and the heads
begin to lift, trembling as ice
trembles in the early yards of spring.
Though the buds begin to crack
open, permitting light to flood

back in, the way a wood frog sparks
itself to life after a full winter
cased in tundra, its solid black
nut of a body soft again,
eyes lifting from the thaw
of its torso in answer to the storm

in its cells. No such urgency
is found in a vase, though there may
have been a hope in giving,
in the short brightening of this room,
where a corolla frowningly
describes a person's heart.

Lapwings in Fallowfield

They sit with the road's oily
tang in their nares,
their bodies like helmets in grass.

Heads in the plumage.
Younger ones look like soil upon snow
and nest in the adults' thick feathers.

My sister and I at somebody's
wedding, when we hid
under somebody's dress.

Natural Light

filters through voile, like tannin
leaching into unwashed mugs,

exhaust fumes on their crawl
of grau, grau, grau.

From four o'clock, a dim electric
light will bathe the room.

Not much today it seems will grow
beyond voile that makes a milkiness

of roads and clouds; the sail
that hides the vapour trails from view.

Annie Muir



As an undergraduate, Annie Muir won the PBS National Student Poetry Competition. She has lived in London and Berlin, where her version of Rilke's 'The animal that never was' was published in Sand Magazine. She has also had poems published in Myths of the Near Future and The Moth. She is currently living in South Manchester, working on her first full-length collection.

The poems presented in this anthology explore the construction and distortion of personal identity through the act of writing, and all are in some way indebted to the works of Jacques Derrida.

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I am

a daughter, short-sighted
audience, listening,

rain, tap
tapping on shoulders

and roofs, trying
to settle

in puddles, a nuisance,
doing my job,

falling oblique
outside your window.

Table

I built it myself, from a door found
in a skip, sanded down and polished, until

I could see my face in the wood.
I sit here, at one of the short ends, and lines

crawl towards me like long, brown worms,
like the future read in a palm, the lines

parallel, each following its own path, until
the other end of the table. I've sat here

for as long as I can remember
(but that doesn't mean much) trying

to think. There is nothing on my table.
Anything I try to put on it: a bowl of fruit,

or vase of flowers, to make it look nicer –
even me, sitting here, thinking

is too much, and doesn't add anything to the fact
of this table, here, that I built, myself.

Palindrome

She ate her breakfast backwards, *crunch*,
spitting toast back on the plate and scraping butter off,
she got into bed and slept, woke up,
and went to the pub. All her friends were there –
shouldn't they be at work?
she couldn't understand what anyone said
but acted like she could. A man with black hair
sat outside. He talked with his hands so was easier to hear,
and he conjured cigarettes from ashtrays.
She went to the library and pretended to read
from back to front like Japanese,
went home and ate her breakfast, *crunch*,
got into bed, slept, woke up, picked up her phone
and it rang – *MUM* – she answered and it sounded like

the end of the world. She tried to ignore
reversing cars and dust and hair clinging
to her body. She closed her eyes and saw
a photo: of her mum, dad, brother, sister, her,
and an inflatable killer whale, in a swimming pool,
treading water. Children are time made solid,
her mother said, atomic clocks...
Atoms weren't supposed to split up, so it was a shock
when they did. The children were all teenagers by then,
and not very solid – her mother hung up,
and she tried to hold on to the image. A black hair
from the floor landed on her shoulder and she brushed it
away. She tried to remember what happened the night before,
she only drank two pints of *1864*.

Two portraits by Lowry

At midnight I started with the eyes,
the shape of two big leaves

fallen onto a face and fossilized there,
the corners red, as a sign of what's
inside.

I made them dry like a duck's back,
the irises two halves of a lopped
melon,

and the eyelashes: hands in the theatre
clapping at the end. I gave it
overgrown

redbrick-brown hair, and shaded in S's
of darkness
around the eyes. For the nose I drew a
bulb

in a dark room, and for the shadow
beneath:
a lower case 'm' in bold. I shut the
mouth tight –

a capital B on its side, fast asleep,
and made the jaw square like the zeros

on my digital clock. The background is
blue
this morning, as I wake up and look

at my self-portrait with red eyes
and wonder who's to blame for it.

I turn the paper over and try again.
This time the face is oval and the hair
black,

parted in the middle, hiding small ears
in a hidden ponytail behind my back.

The eyebrows are brackets and the
eyes, magpies
with little ladybird legs. The tiny bits
of red

in the corners are only there to match
my glassy lips and polo-neck. My nose
is hardly visible now,

and the 'm' of shadow is still black,
but has loosened up
into a wave. I name this portrait Ann.

Ruth

We stood on a bridge
and a train went under
our legs. We waved
and the driver
beeped. We endured
rivers and barbed-wire
because Ruth said
ten people a year are killed
by charging cows. We saw
Mam-Tor bus-stop.

The top was windy. We got a photo.

I chased Ruth down
pretending to be
a cow. We hitched back
with two old men listening
to classical music who said
our little legs must be
exhausted.

Hedgehog

after Rilke

The moon is watching on TV
as I sit in my room, surrounded by
jumble

trying to translate a rabbit into a
hedgehog.

With my memories: of a spring
morning, a present –

a ‘How To Care For Your Rabbit’
book
full of words and pictures.

– Or, of finding a hedgehog in the
garden,
and seeing, with my own eyes,

curiosity meet fear, and the face
become a cage
with the tongue locked inside.

Take scissors and, carefully,
cut out the long ears, they only get in
the way,

and then the black bowling ball eyes:
swap them with full-stops.

Finally, cover the body with arrows
pointing outwards. You don’t need a
garden

to know that somewhere, outside
the hedgehog is awake, the moon is
watching on TV

as I carefully tidy away the towers of
jumble
into drawers and wardrobes,

and, when everything is in its place,
the curtains close.

Keshia Starret



Keshia Starrett is from Derry, Ireland and currently lives in Leeds. She is interested in poems that layer ideas and contexts, play with language and sound, and experiment formally. Most recently, she has published work in *Unknown* magazine. After completing her MA at Manchester University, she will begin a PhD at Leeds Beckett. During her PhD she will create a series of conceptual poems that visually and verbally represent various mental illnesses. In order to do this she will collect language from individuals with mental illnesses, and rearrange it into poems that provide collaborative accounts of various mental health disorders. Included here is a short collection of poems that are interested in sound, playing with form and provoking sinister effects from seemingly ordinary scenes

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three little pigs

she felt the caterpillars hatch
in her stomach but she was too young –
a child with mousey brown pigtails and a red waistcoat
forced on her by her stylist (sister #1)
to perform at the feis;
she read out a poem called mr squirrel (she didn't win)
and father took her, sister #1 and #2, to the park
(a consolation prize for her hack-job fringe).

she yoyo'd on her dad's hand as he pulled the seat back,
eyes rolling between ground and sky,
a plane perturbing toothy laughter and she watched it
draw pure, white, dirty divisions –
the chain snapped under its strain

and she kicked off from the swing (just in time)
and the landing was less than clean (a lot of turbulence)
and one pigtail down.

dad complained when the girl in
front put her seat

back, during their return (she didn't need that much room, anymore)

and there was no discrimination
regarding the inflight meal -

no longer craving but wanting
an extra dessert,
she ate all three puddings –
well-deserved for being
good.

mirror

someone switched off
her reflection.
the family asked to keep it
anyway
but it reveals nothing.

blue bonnet
decorates the mirror and attempts

to stare
out

waiting for her return.

no one paid much heed

it back onto
the wall

and she appeared
at last.

one eye blue and
one eye black

revolving in its socket
now stared back granny-smith-green

and she smiled at me.

I panicked, noticing the switch.

a faceless lady with a

until a candle blew

the wake

to you, mummified in the Manchester Museum

did you know an elastic band
is enough to keep
your razor mouth shut?

bandaged up as if
they want to keep you safe;
as if they care, as if
you had a sore jaw and they
needed, or wanted
to let you heal.

you appeal to me,
swaddled menace
in muddied bandages –
you need your rest
before the stitches
come out.

morbid creatures we are,
demanding an open casket
to mourn you,
crying crocodile tears while you
look as if you want
to open your jaws
one last time

and bite down
hard.

Peter Viggers



Peter Viggers is a member of Manchester based ‘Poets and Players’, known for its imaginative programming of poetry and music events, principally at the Whitworth Gallery. He is also a patron of the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, held every November and featured on BBC Radio 3. Peter has worked in the Civil Service, education and for an association of local government departments, doing research and organising conferences on social care policy. He has been involved in the arts since attending art college and running a writing group in the 1980’s in Bury, Lancashire, where he helped to organise a poetry competition (judged by U A Fanthorpe and Mick North). He is widely read, taking a keen interest in contemporary poetry from across the world, his music and art interests inform the sounds and images in his poetry. The poems in this selection range from China to Manchester and offer a series of psychological landscapes around themes of presence and absence. Peter’s first published poem was in a Welsh poetry magazine, since then, a number of his poems have been published here in Manchester; his latest poems are published in the spring 2016 issue of *Orbis* poetry magazine.

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Unearthed

Not knowing the humps and hollows of Orkney,
the curve of the Atlantic shore,
coming from darkness,

being new to wheeling round the sun,
never before having felt this coldness
or the smell of a running river,

from life bounded by warmth,
my stirring. A blue disturbance
between moor and sky.

*

The moon wandering above Skara Brae,
sips from the brim of night
untouched by midwives' hands.

From sandstone throats of low hills
burns flow toward the North Sea
and I have found an unfamiliar berth.

Someone knocks at an Orcadian door.
Smelling of roots and rain, wearing
a new skin, I learn old words to say.

City Song

(after Delmore Schwartz and in memory of Lou Reed)

On sidewalks turned from thoughts of death
life is bright and always advertised,
surrounded by thousands and their breath,
my emptiness concealed and self-revised,
for the passing hours' pecuniary hire;
in the crush of hope and intercourse of streets,
learning the art of straying, I aspire,
to fly from the black wings of defeat.

No calm comes before cessation of desire,
in this place of ambition and plastic,
twisted and trashed, of passion and trends,
of lines that lead to light, or false magic.
By concrete and commerce, night is my friend,

a bed waits, but the city's song won't end.

The Inexplicable

Yours were not the unexpected
footsteps echoing across our oak floor,
their heavy tread going down the hall
to the dragons on a Chinese chest.

You were not there
when the fig tree shook
by the wicker work chair
which sagged as if sat upon.

You were not there when something
slithered across the floor
and the light switch gave me a shock.

What was it, the scratching
below the bed, like someone
trying to escape?

You were not there when I daubed
red lipstick
across my face, getting ready for a
party

at Saturday twilight, when footsteps
came up the polished wooden stairs;
I fled to our room and prayed.

You once saw a silhouette there,
framed by the window;
now I understand about that.

But what did you mean
when you said I was
protected, that if I were chosen,
I will be well “looked after”?

They say you are coming back
from Fallowfield hoping
for a transformation.

I am here waiting
with a shadow by my side,
waiting for the home we have lost.

Esther's House

After Esther Freud's "Mr Mac and Me" published by Bloomsbury

Her house has a history, once an old inn, the original cottage moved
up a hill by wheelbarrow, brick by brick.

Tea towels folded in a drawer, potato masher on its peg, a sewing box
with rusted pins, items labelled "Amethyst",

"Low beam", seventeen identical three-pin plugs, locks
for doors that no longer exist.

Something else unmentioned and unlabelled by the back door,
a shadow with a cap, she knew it was

a boy. Lantern light at a window, the skeleton
of a chair sitting in the corner, a bare bulb, a box of sunglasses
with white frames. He went on long walks across
the marsh land, toward the enemy and the water's edge.

Facing the Rose I

after Robert Graves "The Cool Web"

November, buds are opening on the rose bush again,
one in full perfume by a bare hedge lures me, I inhale then
let go, snagging my thumb on a thorn.
Returning to my evening glass of wine
and another, I dip into darkness.
Bats come back to the garden,
wings wide, jaws open.

Facing the Rose II

"T'is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of
my finger"

David Hume, Philosopher (1711-1776) , 'A Treatise of Human Nature' (Bk 2, Part 3,
Ch 3)

November, the buds are opening on the rose bush again,
one in full bloom lures me with its deepest red, I inhale
then let go, retreating from its thorns.

Returning to my evening glass and then another,
sinking like the sun. Tongue losing self-control,
I am not ill, the thorn of the rose has cut me.

I will remove all that is weak, diseased or dead;
the sky becomes dark, thrums with wings,
bats come back to the garden
fingers spread, jaws open.

Winter Solstice

You sat by the window
in winter, struggling to write
what needed to be said.

There are reports of snow,
here nothing sticks.
the fridge is full, the table laid.

Cars are left on nearby moors,
their drivers walk down buried trails,
I long for your return.

I'm listening for a cadence
the pulse of words,
come out of nothing, a form
of uncertain song.

I have pruned the elder,
auricularia fungi,
silky and soft as lobes,
glisten on its boughs.

This is the home we have created,
all that's grown and gauged;
an oak waits for exiled birds,
the gate to the grove is open.

The garden has its lines and curves,
spaces where leaves will grow;
it has thorns to snag the sun.

Karen Wheatcroft



Karen writes and lives in two languages and places: Manchester, England and Lyon, France. She has been binding her homes together for twenty-five years. She has done diverse work in both countries and is presently a freelance translator and cook.

Always interested and influenced by visual art, she makes art-brut installations for exhibitions, and is currently collaborating with a French ‘outsider’ artist, writing ekphrastic poems from his work.

This selection of Karen’s poems interconnect, advance instinctively and in flux, versioning and re-versioning themselves; foregrounding what language can do, rather than what it can say. Continually searching for an acute, cutting angle from which to observe, the poems move around their moods and unsettling subjects, panning in to render them unrecognisable, reaching the point at which a magnified, decontextualized, sensual abstract–beauty appears. Singular and sharp visual images suddenly bring the whole into focus. Karen makes poems in which every sentiment is given equal space; beauty sits beside ugliness, which shadows it. The reader is confronted by what remains and the distinction between the sublime and the abject is blurred, like the distances between languages and places that Karen searches to close.

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Elegy for an accidental photo, since erased

It is an emptied scene, with only its self
to stalk. Everything is former. Even the night's
thick shutter can't quite reach, break
the acid-yellow light. Something shook it
hard, rearranged its props, then fled.
Only two floodlit plants remain; an interloping cactus
now struggling from its tarmac bed, and a Yucca,
curtailed and lurid, already tipped
from its rootless soil. Startled and sodium-blind,
its limbs are snapped, de-ranged. Something has no place
here; the waste, the clutch and creep of weeds, the littered
exceptions. It seems some things deserved illumination,
and others, not at all; they are simply caught
like passers-by, burned out of the dark,
cropping up again and again at the edge of the frame,
walking in, walking out. They are stolen
by flash, by accident, by chance, not even worth
the argent they take. All this 3am disequilibrium,
stilled in a click; an empty forecourt, the steel ribs
of a rotting car, oil drums tipped on their side, claimed
by graffiti, and back there a once-red-and-white WELCOME sign,
fading into an absence
that must be staged.

Day

I didn't make the bed

on its crime. Stray hair

I didn't gift to it. Or pin to its opposing edge

a slip (of some kind), then whoreishly

not hang around. I didn't watch its linen

veer from Egyptian white. No one left sheets

too long unwashed, like I might have

once. There were no unusual stains or rips. Just the silence

of an egg. I wasn't rapt by the fresh blade of light

splitting the beechwood door. My hands didn't snag

on anything sharp. On anything blue or vaguely warm.

There was no need to unfix a thing;

no need to do, at all. No sign of fight to straighten

out, no heap of clothes, and no odour

of fire, either. What looked like the calcium bowls

where hip joints slot, might simply have been

depressions or dips, where heads had slept

or not. The envelope end of one pillow

untucked. The other intact and plumped. Someone,

already gone. Then the grind from a shutter

missing a hinge

some of its slats

extruded. Nobody here

to notice the rain

scratch open the eyes of day.

alteration

the horizon shimmers, then drops
behind our bed, the flat-earth wall,

beyond the taut line of sea, where we,
not always awake when it matters,

dream, our thin arms crossing,
uncrossing
beside a shuttered moon. we haul the
rope

of ourselves in and out of depth, of
timelessness,
sure that nothing will crack, change its
form,

lose elliptic, silver-weight. don't we
only end
in return? though some sleeps

hurt. sting like the white-muscle tails
of serrated fish, thrashing their life

at your feet, their hanging-on, a hook
barbed in the lip of the day

being hauled toward you. in that sleep,
the language-bone dissolves, turns
back

to the calcifying drip, to old waters
marking time
as stalagmites, at the back of the dark.

and the past slides in on its side. we
don't hear
the extinct arrive, re-ossify, re-skin.

we are not there when fossils are raised
from the swamp, given spine, volition

to crawl for the light,
in the wake of a different world.

Looking for the structure of blue

It begins with a swimming pool. We get up
in the night, find the tarp undone, a lamp still on,
an animal obsessively licking a salt-roll hung off
the gate. We avoid the desire to jerk our minds into rough

conclusions, liking none. We avoid things done
on the hoof. But the animal tramples something beyond,
then runs; you scan the dark at my back but end up looking at us,
looking. Water can do that; yield infinity. Its particular blue,

won't be had. We knew that already. We saw
how it never really splits, or finds a cool singularity. Know
exactly how it flows, like mercury spilling over a series
of magnets. And like perpetual snow, its blue is collective.

Whatever you just unzipped drops, ruches around your feet.
When finally you dive, your long body refracts, bends like a Hockney
with a suspended splash of titanium-white. And a hung
considered breath. The moon makes its path toward you,

scooping in and out of dimples, rocking to get you. Reaching your pelvis
at the skinny hip, it hits. Flashes sudden silver, a murmuration
on the turn. It is an exquisite thing. My mind flicks
back to the quick pages of old magazines, to the dull polaroids

of *Readers' Wives* in their soft-porn strips of 80's homes. Leaning
on baths, on sinks, formica tiles, uncomfortably lipsticked,
scant across unmade beds. They wanted the moon
on a stick. I never understood, but remember their skimpy, flawed

and more-beautiful-because-of-it bodies, just like yours;
glistening, expectant, worthy. Held in that other warm blue;
a blackbird's smooth and perfected egg. Who does not
want this? It is still an exquisite thing to offer an ordinary skin.

