





The Manchester Anthology 2014

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Vona Groarke

Foreword

So, the famous novelist says, 'Creative writing courses are a waste of time.' You can't teach it: either an aspiring writer has *it* (in which case she or he'll write anyway), or she or he doesn't (in which case, you're wasting your time, his/her money and a hundredweight of words). 'You'd be better off,' the other novelist claims, 'reading as much good literature as you can get your hands on, for years and years, rather than wasting half your university life writing stuff you're not ready to write.' She may have a point. Nobody should write what they're not ready to write, but surely that's not the point of any creative writing course. That's just lazy, cynical teaching that's unlikely to encourage strong work.

The students on the Creative Writing MA at the University of Manchester, whose work is showcased in this Anthology, made a decision to clear a space for writing; to have it, for what time there was, as the focus of their lives. Every week of the academic year, they chose to adhere to a concentration on words – to observe, discuss and practise the art and craft of good writing. They wanted, when they started out, to have their work read with attention and scrutiny. They wanted the company of like-minded people. They wanted to be guided towards new work, their own and other people's that they might learn from too. They wanted to become, in short, readers and writers of greater vigilance and discipline than they'd been heretofore.

Often they wanted to learn how to take their own work seriously. Some of them wanted to change the world; some of them wanted to change themselves; all of them wanted to be taught new, sharper, braver ways of imagining, writing, crafting and editing, the better to push at what they knew how to do, the better to stand over their work.

I honour these hopes and ambitions. Since joining the University of Manchester seven years ago, I have worked with an annual cohort of students who have brought talent, curiosity and a facility for graft and perseverance to the classroom every week. In the past, I've been asked if I learn from my students' failures. I do not. But I do learn from their successes. If you're in the business of writing, success (by which I mean successful writing) has to be a joy. I am pleased to be associated with this Anthology. I am proud of our students and what they have achieved. I admire their effort, their commitment and flair. I like them for their generous attention to each other's work, and for their sense of community.

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But none of this is quite enough in itself to keep one going year after year. For that, you want the moment of surprise at encountering excellence in a student's work. You want that awe and even that envy; you want, let's face it, joy. It's here. I hope you too can find it, reader, as it surely deserves to be found.

Ian McGuire

from *Sharia Sherif*

Arcadia Bolt's first fatty of the day was at an end. She sighed, pinched the glowing orange tip with her thumbnail and stowed the roach in a baggie. Her roommate, Penny DiMarco, wafted downstairs in a red sports bra and purple sarong. Her carefully straightened hair was still wet from the shower; her gym-built torso gleamed with coconut moisturising balm. At the foot of the stairs she paused and surveyed, with a look of casual distaste, the dereliction of their communal living space. The parquet floor was an anarchistic mosaic of magazines, term papers and pirate CDs; the bamboo coffee table was a cityscape of empty and half-empty beverage containers, and all around, like craters on the surface of a really untidy moon, were ashtrays or ashtrays manqué – dinner plates, saucepan lids, yoghurt pots – Caddy tended to use whatever came to hand.

'So where's Rasha?' asked Penny. 'It is Sunday, right?'

'It surely is.' That first velveteen rush of good hashish, Caddy thought, is hard to beat. She was rifling through the CD rack in search of *Swordfishtrombones*. 'Maybe she's at church.'

'Church?' Penny, who was halfway to the kitchen, hammed a look of retardation. 'She's a freaking Muslim.'

Without turning round, Caddy shook her head.

'Nuh-uh, she's a Copt.'

'A Copt?' Penny looked pleasantly amazed by this news, as though a Coptic cleaning woman was something she had always vaguely wished for but never expected to have. 'Cool,' she declared, 'but still,' she rechecked her Tag Hauer, 'she's way fucking late.'

'She certainly fucking is.'

Penny, who had just graduated from UT Austin, was taking a semester of hothouse Arabic at the American University in Cairo before going back to her job as trainee Mid East analyst for the Krauthammer Institute in DC. For the first month of their co-habitation in this grandiose, high-ceilinged apartment above the parping gridlock of Sharia Sharif, Penny and Caddy had been tight. It could hardly have been otherwise. OK, they had been warned during induction that Cairo was not a gentle city, but neither of them had been remotely prepared for the scale or severity of its assault. The Cairean street was, for a fair-haired American woman of child-bearing age, an ever looping gauntlet of lewdness and sexual affront. Every day on the way to class, they walked through a heavy

and extraordinary flak of whistles, slurps, sucks, whinnies and groans. Their crotches were puddled and goosed and their breasts were stared at unceasingly. They were advised to dress defensively, avoid eye contact and always carry a copy of the Koran.

‘I won’t do it!’ insisted Penny one night after they had been there a week. ‘I refuse to live a lie. I was raised as a Baptist, and I’ll be groped as a Baptist.’

They were sitting on the floor of the apartment drinking terrible Aswani wine and smoking as best they could the crumbly nub of cannabis resin that Caddy had managed to score at third hand via a guy named Abdul Rahman in Egyptology 201. Rising up from the street below them came the endless orchestral warm-up of brays, yells and car horns. Penny lit a queen-size Cleopatra cigarette and started stretching her quadriceps.

‘What is it with these pindick assholes anyway?’ she asked. ‘Why can’t they just get laid and leave us alone?’

‘The Egyptian babes won’t put out I guess.’

Penny shrugged.

‘Well, who can blame them. I mean – *hey ladyladyladylady cloorpppssglug.*’ She made the slurping emetic porno noise familiar to them both from innumerable street-corner encounters. ‘Yeah right, Mohammed, *that’s* a real turn-on. Would you like to have me right here, or should we go back to your place?’

After the first appalling week, Caddy wore floppy sunhats, Yasser Arafat scarves and military-style ponchos. She sported mirrored aviator shades and even thought for a while about strapping her breasts. For Penny, on the other hand, the right to wear slutty clothes was, like the right to bear arms, basic, human, and almost certainly constitutional. Instead of backing down, she went on the offensive, gathering a small collection of Arabic obscenities (mainly to do with penis size and the incest taboo) and, when provoked, employing them freely and to astonishing effect. Some of the ensuing scenes were quite terrible – crowds gathered, spittle flew, the police, and, even on occasion, the army, were drawn in. Caddy recognised, after only a short period of living in Cairo, that the high-volume street argument was a standard feature of Cairean life – she would witness three or four a day, hysterical bug-eyed tantrums full of arm-waving and malediction. From the outside, such arguments were mainly entertaining (if a little weird); from the inside, where, as Penny’s friend and companion, she increasingly dwelt, they were, however,

horribly frightening. It was like being caught in an existential spin-cycle – it was 90 degrees, she was wearing several unnecessary layers of clothing and around her on all sides strange men were bellowing and prodding at her. After one particularly bruising incident in which Penny had responded to having her ass felt by knocking her assailant sideways with a camcorder then speculating loudly on the size of his mother’s vagina, Caddy cautiously suggested, once they were safely back in the apartment, that Penny might consider moderating her stance.

‘Are sweatpants really such a big ask?’

Penny was still panting slightly. Her pupils were broad and adrenalated.

‘I come from a proud line of Texan women, and I hide my ass for no man.’

‘Is your ass really that important?’

‘Look sweetie, it’s 90 degrees outside and you’re wearing a poncho. What does that say?’

‘That I’m culturally sensitive.’

‘That you hate yourself.’

‘There’s more to me than tits and ass.’

‘You’ve let yourself go. Don’t ask me why exactly, but you’re full of shame. That’s probably why you’re here.’

‘In Cairo?’

‘That’s right – it’s masochism. Come on, this place blows. The air is like sewage, the people are so dumb, it’s not even funny. Just living here qualifies as self-harming behaviour.’

‘Why are you a Mid East analyst if you hate the Mid East so frigging much?’

‘My first choice was China. And my second choice was Brazil.’

Arcadia realised at that moment that she and Penny were no longer and would never again be tight. Penny, for all her quirky post-feminist Texanness, was basically a fascist freak.

‘It’s not a question of shame,’ she said. ‘I like my poncho.’

‘Yeah right, and I’m sure all the Darth Vader chicks out there really love their outfits too.’

Penny started dating a US marine corporal named Clancy who was stationed over at the embassy. Clancy was huge and coated with ostentatious and unnecessary muscles. He had pecs like Frisbees and arms like gilded cantaloupes. He wore vivid polo shirts, bright white

Reeboks, and chinos that ended three inches below his brown and scarified knees. He seemed to Caddy to be about as interesting and sexy as an SUV.

‘Would you describe those pants you’re wearing there, Clancy,’ Caddy asked one afternoon after several large bong hits, ‘as culottes or pedal pushers?’

Clancy shook his triangular head and raised his army-issue Ray-Bans.

‘Not sure, Caddy,’ he fired back. ‘Would you describe someone who sits on her fat ass all day getting stoned as an *intellectuelle* or a fucking loser? And let me give you a clue, the answer begins with an L.’

‘In that case, what do you say we just call them Capri pants and be done with it?’

Clancy and Penny went scuba-diving at Sharm el-Sheikh, rode horses in the desert and played golf near the pyramids. They used the Sharia Sharif apartment only occasionally for sex – Clancy, who had to take a piss test every month, was wary of contact highs, and, for both of them, the lack of a/c and satellite TV was a barrier to any more prolonged hanging out.

‘Stay, why don’t you!’ Caddy would yell ironically as they left, fresh and oily from a post-coital shower. ‘I’ll crack a window. We can make our own entertainment.’

Without Penny the evenings were longer, emptier and even more besmirched by pot and traffic noise. Occasionally Abdul Rahman, her drug-buddy, came round. They got high, drank 7Up and ate Borio cookies. Abdul Rahman thought he might be gay and was keen to have Caddy’s opinion.

‘Maybe we could make out a little,’ he suggested sneakily, ‘as an experiment.’

Abdul Rahman was 5’6” and weaselly. His father was Jordanian and his mother was from Halifax, Nova Scotia. He had been educated at International Schools in Beirut, Rome, Bangkok and Helsinki, and was semi-literate in several languages. After 15 minutes’ smooching, they paused and peered expectantly down at his groin. Nothing. Abdul Rahman looked surprised.

‘Wow,’ he said, ‘that’s a first.’

Jack Brodie

Hot Air Balloon

Dale Burton lived alone. When he retired – early, he was 59 – his family would tease him about what on earth he was going to do with the time, and he would usually reply, ‘There’s not enough hours in the day.’ For the first few weeks, it seemed true: he drove to the local auctions, walked the fields and lanes near his cottage, and went for Sunday tea at his sister’s house in Oakamoor. Soon, though, these things changed from things he did because he wanted to, to things he did to fill the time. He would wake in the night wondering where the years had gone, and sit up in bed thinking it must be some kind of sin to live like this. After three months of it, if his family had asked him how he filled up his days, he might have said, ‘Well, you have a routine.’ But they had stopped asking it.

It was around this time that his moods became closely dependent on customer service workers. To be mistreated by one would send him into a rage. He would try and organise a family-wide boycott of that garden centre, or that pub, and it would set him off thinking dark thoughts of how the country had gone rotten and everything was fucked.

All folk wanted was a friendly smile, a word about the weather; that was why he liked Ben. Ben was the lad who worked the frozen aisle at the local supermarket. He was blond and tall, and had a bouncing, elbows-up walk, which was why Dale called him Tigger. Just talking to Tigger was enough to make Dale’s day.

On a snowy afternoon towards the end of winter, Dale was browsing the frozen vegetables when a voice said, ‘Let’s see what Dale makes of it’, and it was Tigger, standing with a colleague. He asked Dale for his opinion on whether dogs could be gay, and as Dale answered as best he could, Tigger smiled and nodded slowly. His mouth stayed slightly open, Dale noticed, and his lower lip was wet.

A few minutes later they ran into each other again, this time at the biscuits, where Tigger was pulling cardboard from the display. He looked up at Dale and said, ‘People will talk.’ Dale listened as Tigger complained about how they’d sent him to the biscuits even though the freezers were half empty, and how they’d probably call him to the checkouts any minute.

‘This is a staff announcement,’ came the tannoy. ‘Could Ben Freeman please make his way to the checkouts.’ They laughed and walked over together, and Tigger scanned Dale’s shopping through. Over the beeps they talked about the weather, and how bad the local football team was,

and, as Dale was leaving, Tigger winked and said, 'Take care, mate. See you soon.'

It was March – March already. Dale was always alarmed when he saw the date – alarmed by how far into the year they were, and alarmed by the year itself, which always sounded futuristic. Both of his parents were dead. In fact, most of the people of his early life were now dead, and this, Dale knew, was how *you* died. Slowly, everyone who knew you, and everyone you knew – in life and on telly – floated up until you were an old man with nothing left to keep you there. One by one, all the strings that tied you to the world were cut, until finally, in the end, no one knew you and you knew no one. It was a different world, then – yours had been replaced, and there was nothing left to do but float up quietly in its wake.

He became restless. That week, as the snow melted, Dale found he couldn't read his books any more: he would sit with them for two minutes and stand again to pace the room. In the early hours he lay awake thinking foolish, long-put-to-bed thoughts and sweating into the covers. He bought new clothes: corduroys and V-necks in a range of colours; a red cravat. He had never cared about football, but now he kept the radio tuned to a sports station all day, and knew the fixtures, and did care. He drove around aimlessly. He bought some mouthwash. He went frequently to the supermarket.

It must have been that Tigger only worked weekends, because the next time Dale saw him it was Saturday again. He was outside the entrance to the warehouse, talking with a colleague.

Walking down the aisle, Dale's whole body seemed to be beating. As he looked at Tigger, everything mixed together – the hum of the freezers, the beep-beep of the checkouts, the chatter of shoppers, the rattle of roll-cages, the pumped-in smell of sweetly baking bread – and he felt a lunging sadness in his belly.

'Hey up, Tigger. Shame about Stoke earlier.'

'I know, mate. They all want shooting, don't they?'

'Never mind, hey. At least the sun's out.'

'He's found himself a woman,' said Dale's brother-in-law. 'That'll be it.' Dale was at his sister's house for Sunday tea – an arrangement that dated back to the 80s. They were at the kitchen table, drinking gin and tonics, and Dale was listening as his sister and her husband talked about the recent changes in him: the new clothes, the lost weight, the long

silences as he ate his food.

‘That *won't* be it,’ said his sister, ‘but there’s something the matter with him.’ She turned to Dale. ‘Now, come on, Dale. We’ve all noticed it. Everyone’s talking about it. You can tell your sister.’

Dale stood up. ‘You daft sods, there’s nothing to tell,’ he said, and started filling the kettle with water. ‘I don’t know what you’re on about.’

But he did know – it was impossible to hide it. He found that he was thinking more and more about Tigger from the supermarket. Things Tigger had said would seem to grow in significance as the days went by, until Dale, who’d thought little of them at the time, repeated them, clung to them at night, lived on them. It happened like this: he’d see Tigger in the frozen aisle, they would talk as usual, and Dale would go home. Then, over the next few days, Tigger would grow in Dale’s mind until he was always there, laughing with him, walking with him, listening as Dale said all the things he could never have said to the real Tigger.

‘The thing about you, son,’ he heard himself think one day on his walk, ‘and this’ll sound corny. The thing about you is you carry sunshine wherever you go. And in a world like today’s. In a world where there’s no decency and no one cares about anyone any more – that’s valuable. You’ve got the gift of life, son, and you share it with everyone you meet. No, really, you’re a star.’

At its worst, the pain was so much that Dale could hardly stand up from the table to prepare a meal. He would sit with his eyes closed, head down, and think of the coming years when Tigger would grow up as he, Dale, grew old. Then, after a week had passed, he’d meet Tigger in the aisle, they might talk about the weather or how busy the store was, and the process would start over again.

Once or twice he avoided the store and didn’t see Tigger for a fortnight or so, and those times he wouldn’t think of him as much. But he always weakened; he always went back.

In the daytime he knew – almost knew – that what was in his head was impossible. But at night he convinced himself that Tigger could be his, and worked himself into panic for doing nothing to claim him.

March led into spring. The garden bloomed and Dale spent most of his time in it, while his feelings for Tigger, having nowhere to go, sloshed around inside him, weighing him down. He changed his diet, ate crackers for lunch, and this, combined with the gardening and walking meant the weight dropped off him: his cheeks hollowed and his belly

shrank, he felt the fabric of his trousers as it blew about his calves. An idea was forming in his mind. In May he would be 60, and he would have a party – all the family would come. He would hire a hot air balloon and they would all take rides on it. And when he pictured it, Tigger would be there, spreading the gift of his sunshine.

‘Hey up, Tigger,’ said Dale on his next visit to the supermarket. ‘I say, where do you stand on hot air balloons?’

‘Can’t say anywhere, mate. Why?’

‘Never mind why.’ And he tapped his nose.

The party was what Dale lived for now, and he busied himself with its arrangement. He booked the balloon and marquee, and had a grandnephew print the invitations. He kept Tigger’s on the kitchen table, and one day he added a note to it: ‘To a ray of sunshine, from Dale.’ The same afternoon, he added another – ‘But really, you’ve been a star’ – and soon he was running back and forward from the garden, adding more lines as they occurred to him, until the back of it was covered in biro and he’d written all the things he’d wanted to say.

Before bed, he threw the invitation in the bin.

When he woke the next morning, after a bad night’s sleep, Dale had made up his mind. He would give Tigger the note. He could run away, he could never go back – nothing was worse than this silence.

As he drove to the supermarket a sickly excitement rose inside him. His legs trembled and his forehead was damp.

The frozen aisle was busy. Tigger was at the far end of it, stocking up the icecubes. Dale walked towards him, invitation in hand, and at that moment Tigger turned and glanced at him. His eyes seemed to stick for a moment on what Dale was wearing, and then he turned the other way and spoke to someone out of view.

One of the managers appeared.

‘Hey up, mate,’ said Tigger, jumping to his feet and walking past him. ‘I’ll just go and get some more from the warehouse.’

‘Never mind icecubes,’ said Dale, and took hold of his arm. He handed him the invitation.

‘What’s this?’ Tigger opened it, and had started reading from the front when the manager stepped forward, hands behind her back. She was middle-aged, with a bronzed face and dyed copper hair.

‘Ben, you’re needed on checkouts,’ she said, and, seeing the invitation, added, ‘What’s this?’ She took it from Tigger and started reading.

Dale watched, paralysed, as her eyes flicked over his lines.

‘Sorry, Ben. Do you know this gentleman?’

‘Not really.’

She nodded, turned to Dale, and spoke slowly. ‘Right. I’m going to give you this back now, sir. All right? And Ben, if you can go and jump on checkout 16 for me. Great.’

Tigger left, and Dale was alone with the manager. She looked around distractedly, before her gaze settled back on Dale. ‘Was there anything I could help you with at all, sir?’

Behind her, the supermarket carried on as normal. Dale could see the faces of other staff members who had turned to look at him: an old woman on the checkouts, a boy collecting baskets. He saw that they all knew about him, and had known about him for weeks.

‘No, thank you,’ he said, and went home.

On Dale’s birthday, all the family went up in the hot air balloon. Over 30 guests were there, from his eldest sister to his newborn great-grandniece, and it was said by some of them, when Dale was among the balloon-riders, that a year of retirement had aged him, and he was looking a little frail. As he rose higher and higher above his cottage, Dale’s eyes drifted down to the patchwork of fields that stretched to the horizon, and settled on the glinting line of car-roofs on his drive. His family would be gone tomorrow, but that didn’t matter. He would always have them, and always had.



Joss Burns

The Station

Richard had been in the train station in Manchester for about 45 minutes, standing in the agreed spot by the entrance. It was a warm day but warmer still inside because it was the first hot day of the year and someone hadn't thought to turn off the heating. Standing still, he felt he wasn't quite a part of the crowd but slightly removed and, as such, he felt he'd developed a sense of the station's rhythm: the ebb and flow of people as trains arrived and left again.

'There you are, Richard!'

He heard the voice before he saw the speaker. Then a recognisable face emerged from the crowd, as hot and tired-looking as the rest of them – but smiling. He had a large nose and thick lips that threatened to meet as he spoke. They seemed to naturally draw your eye until you had to make a decision to ignore them as you would a large burn or a birthmark. He was wheeling a small travel case behind him and wearing a slightly creased business suit with the jacket draped over his arm.

Richard held out his hand.

'Hi James,' he said. James took it and added a pat on the shoulder. Richard wondered if he had been too formal.

'You been waiting long?' James said.

'No, not too long.' He looked behind him, through the glass doors. 'I know a small pub not far from here, do you want to go there?'

James looked at his watch but Richard wasn't sure if he registered the time.

'I don't know, I've only got like an hour until my next train. Should probably just wait in the station.'

Richard smiled.

'Yeah, OK, that's fine,' he said.

'You don't mind, do you?'

'No, no, it's fine.'

They found a seat outside the Wetherspoons upstairs, beside a glass barrier, overlooking the lower floor of the station.

'So, it's been a while,' James said, sitting down with two pints of cheap lager. 'For us,' he added as an afterthought.

'Yeah a few months, anyway.'

'About that,' he said.

'You look different,' Richard said, nodding at James. He wasn't used

to seeing him in a suit.

‘So do you.’

Richard smiled. He had been putting on weight for a while but it had become noticeable only in the last few months. He found himself feeling fatter daily and had not only accepted it, but had begun to ease himself into it. He took a gulp of his pint and started wagging his finger to show he was about to speak.

‘Hey, remember that time back in uni we drank all that whisky and started singing with the homeless guy?’

He laughed and James sat up a little.

‘Yeah,’ James said, ‘God, I almost forgot about that. I hate whisky too. Haven’t drunk it since. He was pretty nice, that guy.’

‘Until he got bored of us and told us to fuck off.’

James started to laugh – but he didn’t quite manage to develop it beyond a start. ‘I guess he probably got pestered by a lot of annoying students,’ he said tilting his head to the side.

‘Yeah.’

‘That was a good day, though.’

‘We had lots of good days,’ Richard said.

‘We did.’

‘Remember when we spent a whole day knocking down beer cans with playing cards?’

James laughed again, nodding to show he remembered. It lasted longer than the previous laugh but like before, after a few seconds, it faded to a smile and he looked over the railing to the floor below. Richard looked over as well. A train had just arrived with a large number of passengers and it seemed as if everyone in the station was heading in the same direction, with common purpose, towards the door. He looked away, towards James.

‘I was surprised you texted me,’ he said.

James continued to look at the people below. ‘Really?’ he said.

‘I didn’t think you would.’

‘Oh.’

Richard ran his fingers over the outside of his nose and began bobbing his right foot on its ball, causing the table to vibrate a little. He took a few gulps of his pint and looked back over the barrier. There was no order any more. The stream of people had left the station and now they had gone back to wandering in various, independent directions. Richard waited for James to speak.

'Why did you text me?' Richard said.

'Hm? Why did I text you?'

'Yes, why did you text me?'

James seemed to think for a few seconds, hiding behind his drink. 'Well, we hadn't seen each other for a while,' he said at last.

Richard nodded absently and downed the last quarter of his pint. He stood up. 'Another?' he said.

James made some indecisive noises. 'Ah, I don't know... I probably shouldn't.'

'I'll get two more,' Richard said. 'You got the first two. I wouldn't feel right.'

Inside, the pub was cool and dark. Richard had to wait for his eyes to adjust. There were people scattered around the tables in ones and twos. He took a while deciding what to get, leaning on the sticky wood of the bar.

When he returned he found James staring again at the people below, without looking at anyone in particular.

'I didn't want another drink,' James said as Richard placed the pints in front of him.

'It's good beer. From Germany or somewhere. Best one they had on tap. I asked.'

'I didn't want another.' James still had half of his first pint left. He took a small sip.

'I'm sorry,' Richard said. 'I was just trying to be nice.'

'No you weren't.'

Richard folded his arms and breathed a laugh. He shook his head. 'I see, apart from the suit, you haven't changed then.'

'Apart from the fat, neither have you,' James replied, briskly.

Richard sighed. 'Then what has?'

Richard could tell James had expected him to get angry. James didn't reply for a moment, running his fingers along his chin. He looked Richard in the eye.

'I've thought about this, you know,' he said.

'You have?'

'Yeah, since that night.'

'And what changed?'

'I think it was because we didn't change. We were so close and we thought we could be friends like we were when we lived together, even

after moving out. We didn't change – everything else did.'

Richard nodded and James wiped his brow, revealing a dark sweat patch in his armpit.

'Maybe,' Richard said.

'You don't agree?'

'I neither agree nor disagree. I just think it's sad.'

'Hm.'

'I mean,' Richard said, feeling himself relax as he spoke, 'it's sad how we just... drifted until suddenly it was awkward. I think that's why I got so angry and said all those things that night at Melissa's party. Do you not remember how we had barely spoken the whole night before that, even though we hadn't seen each other in a while?'

'Yeah, I remember.'

'I hated that.'

'I did too.'

'If we were lovers, there would be an end, something definitive to look back on – to know when it was over. It's never the same with friendship.'

'I know what you mean,' James said.

'You do?'

'Yeah. I suppose that's why I texted you today – I don't know.'

They sat together for a while longer, each looking over the barrier at the people below. Occasionally one would spot someone who looked strange and make a comment about them and the other would laugh and reply. After about 10 minutes, James finished his first pint and stood up.

'Well, I'd better get my train.'

'OK,' Richard said, and nodded. He wanted to say 'it was good to see you', but he stopped himself. Not so much because it wouldn't have been true but because it didn't seem necessary any more.

'Bye,' James said.

'Bye.'

Richard followed him with his eyes as he walked over towards the steps. He watched him pick up his suitcase and carry it down to the lower floor where he went to the screens that told him which platform to go to. Richard leaned over and took James's untouched pint to his side of the table. When he looked back again he caught James fighting his way upstream through the course of recently disembarked passengers until he made his way to his gate and went beyond.

Joss Burns

Richard stayed for another hour, drinking silently, enjoying the come and go, the surge and retreat, the shrink and swell – the rhythm of the station.



Sarah-Clare Conlon

from *A Note on the Type*

THURSDAY

Flat 13: Carruthers, *Caretaker*

As the gardeners seem to have made a good start on the lawns and edges, I've decided to let them get on with it under their own steam and go over to the school before lunch, so I can have the gazebos loaded there and unloaded back here while it's still dry. Our head gardener said that last night's weather forecast was wrong and actually it is due to pour down, so they're all action stations, cracking on with the mowing, strimming and leaf-blowing, so hopefully they'll be pretty much tidied away by the time I'm at Belvue Court again.

I turn left onto the main road then left up the next proper road then left again into the school driveway, with its owls fashioned out of metal guarding the gateposts on the perimeter fence. It's really not far, sort of just behind the block, really, but they've kindly offered to lend me six gazebos, which is going to be quite a weight, I reckon. I park up in one of the visitors' spaces next to the main entrance and step out of the car. It's always funny coming back to my old school; kind of makes the hairs on the tops of my forearms stand proud, a sort of goosebumps, I suppose. I've been back a few times over the years, for classical music recitals and Old Mancunian reunions and, of course, the annual summer fêtes, which I sometimes come to with Julia and Miles, and where I clocked the gazebos last year. Just as well! I go through the heavy double doors and into the hallway, which is dark and cool, with wooden panelling to the walls inlaid with the names of old boys, stained glass in the windows showing the school's emblem, the owl, for learning and wisdom, and coloured mosaic tiles on the floor depicting the coat of arms that also appears on the uniform's tie and blazer. It's a pleasant contrast to how humid it's got outside – I reckon this is going to be one humdinger of a storm we're in for.

There's a reception desk on the right-hand side, just before and next to the headteacher's office, but nobody's sat behind the glass partition, so I ding the big brass bell, like something you'd get in an old-fashioned hotel, and scrutinise the pictures of the prefects while I wait for it to be answered. The minutes count down noisily on the ancient grandfather clock that's stood for all eternity (or at least for as long as I can remember) at the bottom of the sweeping polished mahogany stairs going up to the humanities department on the first floor. The steady and confident

tick has the effect of a tap dripping into a full sink in the middle of the night, and I can't keep still. I sit down on a leather chair in the hall, then stand up and pace around, then sit again. I suddenly realise it's as if I am actually waiting to be seen by the headmaster, back in the day, back in the 60s when I was a pupil.

It's just then that I hear a hand grasp hold of a slightly loose doorknob and turn, releasing the latch with a squeak and pulling back the door with a squeal. My immediate thought is of Camille and her bike lock. Should have brought my WD-40 here, too, I think. I stand up as the school secretary clip-clops out into the echoey corridor on surprisingly impractical-looking shoes for these well-worn, slightly slippery floorboards. I assumed the school secretary would still be as stern and unsexy as when I was here, but obviously not. God knows how these young lads get on, with her around.

'Hello,' she says, smiling with glossy red lips and extending a perfectly manicured hand for me to shake. 'Mr Carruthers, I presume? Now, let's just get the key we need and then I'll explain how to find the storage shed where we keep the outside gear. Are you OK to go on your own? It's just that I have some important emails I need to sort out.'

'Yes, yes, that's fine,' I reply, watching as she reaches up to a hook and getting distracted as her tight pencil skirt rides up slightly. 'Er, yes, I can make my own way, not a problem – I used to be a lad here myself, once.'

'Really? How lovely! Well, it's over by the cricket field. Now, before I forget, could I just ask you to fill in this form, please, and let us know how you'd prefer to pay the deposit.'

'Deposit? I had no idea...'

'Don't worry, Mr Carruthers, it's just a formality. Just in case we need to replace any of the equipment if it gets damaged or stolen. It's highly unlikely, of course, but we have to cover our backs. We are a school, after all, and a registered charity.'

'Oh, right, OK. Well, will a cheque do? Or a credit card?'

'I'd prefer the card, if that's all right with you. I'll swipe it now, then when you return the gazebos, we'll refund the full amount, if everything is satisfactory. Now, how many gazebos was it we said – six? I think I can stretch to eight, if that would be better.'

'Oh, I should think six is fine. That's what I decided with the bride and groom when we were chatting about the logistics. There's a big tree in the garden, you see, which will provide some shelter, should it

become necessary.’

‘Oh, well fingers crossed it won’t – it sounds idyllic! Right, now here’s the form for you to fill in and sign and date, here and here. If you could just give me your card...’

NAME OF HIRER:
ADDRESS OF HIRER:
..... POSTCODE:
ON BEHALF OF (IF APPLICABLE):
CONTACT TELEPHONE NUMBER:
CONTACT EMAIL ADDRESS:
SIGNATURE: DATE:
Has a deposit been paid to cover damage, loss or theft of goods or equipment? (OFFICE USE ONLY): <input type="checkbox"/> Y / <input type="checkbox"/> N
AMOUNT:
STAFF NAME: ID NUMBER:
SIGNATURE: DATE:

I find where the equipment is stored, and luckily there’s a flatbed trolley, like you get at B&Q or garden centres, for me to load on the six gazebos and drag back from behind the cricket pavilion and along the path round the side of the school to where the car is parked. It’s an estate, so I just need to put the back seats down and slide the oblong bags in from the boot, piling the last couple on top. Once I’ve returned the trolley to where I found it and checked to make sure I’ve locked the equipment shed, I head back to reception. I heard the bell go while I was over by the playing fields so I think I’ve timed it just right to avoid all the kids. I’m crossing the quad when I spot June and call over to her. She waves and waits while I catch up with her then walks with me back into the school buildings to the entrance hallway so I can hand in the keys.

‘So, June,’ I say, ‘I don’t want to pry, but is everything still set for Saturday? I heard that there was a bit of a, shall we say, a to-do, round yours the other night...’

‘Oh right, who’s been flapping their big mouths?’

‘Now, don’t get angry, they’re just worried about things, is all. But I was with Emily yesterday, over at the Dalys, and she seemed fine, so I just wanted to check.’

‘Yes, everything is on track, John, no need to worry. We all know how much work you’re putting in to make the garden party really nice. Now, is there anything that we should be worrying about? You mentioned a problem with the gazebos – did you manage to get that sorted?’

‘Yes, that’s why I’m here – I’ve borrowed some from the school. I knew you had some after I came to the fête last year so I rang up on the offchance, *et voilà*, I’ve just loaded the car up.’

‘And is everything else in hand? I know the tables and chairs came the other day, didn’t they?’

‘Yes, tables and chairs are in the store cupboard round the back of my block, then tomorrow I’m taking delivery of the sale-or-return drinks and glasses. I’ve reminded Archie and Adrian to help me set up the furniture and shelters on Saturday morning, while you’re all busy getting ready, then when you’re in town at the ceremony, the caterers are coming over and they’re bringing the cutlery, plates, tablecloths and serviettes, the lady’s bringing the cake, and the table decorations and lanterns are being dropped off. It’s going to be all go, but I’m sure we can manage!’

‘Thanks, John. Now if you could just sort out the bloody central heating, that’d be great.’

‘Well, the engineer’s been called, so we just have to wait,’ I say.

As I slam the door and put the car into reverse, the shift crunches against the manual gearbox and I have to put the clutch further to the floor before the stick takes hold. I’m a bit annoyed by that last comment, if truth be told.

Everyone Has a Favourite Spot

Sylvia likes to sit on the front row at the cinema. I discover this on our second date when she marches straight down the unsettling slope. It's not somewhere I'd pick, but I'm not consulted.

I'd never even sat on the front row until I met Sylvia. I like to position myself halfway along a row halfway from the back. Safe middle ground. Near enough the exit in the event of a fire or a sudden urge to pee; far enough from the projector to not hear it click and whirr.

Sylvia likes the front row, she says, because it makes her feel part of the action. All I feel are my ears bleeding and the progressive nagging of my neck, and I can't concentrate on the film once I've noticed the little holes in the screen where the light is sucked through.

Sylvia has made me sit to her left because she's decided I'm right-handed. She decided this on our first date, in a summer evening beer garden, when she watched how I pick up my drink and light my cigarettes. She decided correctly.

Sylvia tells me a right-handed man should always sit on the left-hand side of a woman in the cinema, so he can grope her effectively when the lights go down. I assume this means she's given me the nod to put my hand between her legs.

I assume wrong. Sylvia hisses you can only do that on the back row, and she doesn't sit on the back row, ever. So much for feeling part of the action.

We wait for the credits to roll, then leave in silence.

There is no third date.

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Clean Me

Stinky Jim is talking broken biscuits again. Lou stares at his lips; concentrates on making out what he's saying. The other customers are getting jittery and she needs him to calm down.

Lou nods at Jim, reaches under the counter and fishes out two speckled sky-blue and white tablets. She hands them over and he returns a head movement, the nearest he ever gets to thanking her. She watches his hunched back dwindle as, still chunnering and cussing, he drags himself across to the edge of the room.

Stinky Jim is Lou's favourite. She loves the way his filthy clothes and filthier words grate against the shiny surfaces and surgical striplighting.

She glances across at the bank of silver machines. He dribbles dirty rags into one, crowns them with the two blocks, slams the lid shut and sends coins down the slot with a final swear to launch the cycle.

Lou smiles that small smile and thinks about telling Jim to wash his mouth out. After all, she is here to help people make everything fresh and clean and new.

First published in The Salt Anthology of New Writing 2013

S.E. Crowder

from *Beyond Land*

Part One

The ground vibrates beneath us as we lumber out of the Forward Operating Base and head for Lashkar Gah. It's August, just before dawn. Lieutenant James Walders, Davy Thomson and I are in the Scimitar, the lead tank in a convoy of four. In our headlights, the barb and razor wire sparkles like fairy lights. The road is dark, but the heavens above are full of twinkling stars. A waxing moon droops close to the horizon, and in the north-east quadrant, the last specks of this year's Perseids shower explode in the sky.

The tank holds a warm dusty heat. Walders, our new commander, sits beside me where the turret joins the hull. He's eager to engage the enemy, and he looks the part, in his sand-coloured fatigues and Osprey body armour. At 6'1", he's a few inches shorter than me, but impressive in his uniform. His hands are soft as a baby's, clean white fingernails; they're a dead give-away he's new to the job. After six months in Afghanistan, my knuckles are knocked and gnarled, fingers split open more times than I can remember. I bear the marks of a tank soldier. When it comes to man or tank, she'll win every time. This lady's a hard, unbending bitch.

'Is everything safe out there, Lance Corporal?' Walders says. His voice is reedy in my 'phones.

I lift the passive night-sights to look him in the eye. 'Yes, sir.'

'It's going to be a beautiful day.' Walders nods ahead at the silhouetted mountains.

I follow his gaze. 'Yes, sir,' I say.

We've been out for half an hour, the sky has changed, there's a honey glow in the east, and as we twist along the Helmand Delta I watch a string of tank shadows eel along behind us. Scimitars are small, light tanks, not much bigger than a Sprinter van, but packed with firepower.

'I love this work,' Walders says. 'We'll beat the bastards.'

'Yes, sir.'

He's full-time, professional army, and proud to be in charge of a Scimitar.

I'm part-time, TA, joined a year ago. My ex liked soldiers. At first I didn't take the training seriously, but within a few weeks, I got into it. I enjoyed the weekends away. She dumped me and married a career soldier, a Sandhurst graduate; the real thing, not a part-timer.

Davy Thomson is driving and only God knows how he jams his bulk into the hulk. Davy and I are in excellent spirits. We have two days left of our six-month tour; my first in Helmand, my first anywhere.

He's singing: 'Talkin' till the night was gone. In the back of my truck with the radio on.' It's a Country and Western song that's always on the *Ops Breakfast Show*. Thomson has a sweet voice, high-pitched in tone, the kind chubby guys have. It's not what I call music. I prefer The Killers or something edgy and raw.

My ex, the one with the soldier fixation, liked smoochy country ballads. I'm thinking about her and the tight dresses she wore, when Lieutenant Walders barks, 'Shut the fuck up Thomson. That's one crap song.'

I shout, 'It's a pity we can't bottle your whining, Thomson. We'd make a fucking fortune selling it to the Yanks. It's better than nerve gas.'

We laugh together; we're a team; we're three men in a can.

Thomson turns, gives me the finger, and mouths, 'Up yours, Boyers.' His helmet conceals a shiny scalp the sun has baked and hardened to a tortoiseshell glaze. His face is flat and round, he's stocky and tough, but he's no ARAB, Arrogant Regular Army Bastard. When he calls me a STAB, Stupid TA Bastard, it's for laughs. We respect each other. All he's ever wanted to do, even before he left school, was drive tanks. He's done two tours in Iraq, and this is his second in Afghanistan.

I've worked for the same insurance underwriting company for almost six years, was offered a position straight from uni. It's another reason I joined the TA; I wanted to do something different, wanted a challenge. At first, Thomson had trouble understanding my civvy profession. He asked what I did, and I told him I evaluated clients' investments for risk and exposure. He took a while to think about it, before saying, 'We're in the same game, Boyers. Insurance, war, they're both about risk and chance, they're about making battle-winning decisions.' And now, after six months, I'm no longer a city underwriter, I'm a combat soldier.

Inside his lifebelt of lard, Thomson's a real romantic. He ribs me about not having a full-time girlfriend. He says, 'A bloke like you, Boyers, nearly 30, needs a woman like my Kaylie.' I've seen photos of her – worn down, ratty hair and all the style of Britney Spears on a bad day. They have two kids: a boy of five and a baby girl.

This morning, before we came out on patrol, he jammed his phone in my face to show me a video of the girl's birthday party. She had a pixelated smile and puffed red cheeks. She waved to Daddy and blew out

two candles on a Peppa Pig cake. Thomson keeps one of her comforters, a fleece rabbit, Snuggle Bunny, in his breast pocket. It's his lucky charm. I've promised to go up to Catterick with him to meet Kaylie and the kids when we get back.

Davy and I have one more early-morning patrol, and then we're off to Cyprus for Post-Tour Decompression. We plan on hitting the bars of Episkopi and Ayia Napa. He keeps saying, 'I suppose a City Boy like you, Boyers, knows how to party? Wait 'til we're on PTD, I'll show you.' After Normalisation training and briefings, we'll be back in Brize Norton, and I'll go home to my 'real' life.

I'm thinking about the bars of Ayia Napa as the sunlight breaks over the jagged crest of hills to the east of the Helmand Delta. These are the things I'll miss about the early-morning patrol: the pure light streaming across the valley, the way shadows form shapes and castellations in the sand; every day feels like the first day. Inside the cab, the air is diesel fumes and farts, but outside it's crisp and sharp. Afghanistan blows you away; there's a subtle, aesthetic quality to the absurd landscape and weather. Often, you get every season in one day.

On a bright morning a few months ago, I was on escort duty, an NGO visit to a village a few kilometres north of Lashkar Gah. A basic healthcare trip, and when the medics had finished we sat together on mats in the shade of a mulberry grove: Afghans, soldiers and NGOs. The kids laid out blue plastic sheets and beat the tree trunks with twigs. Berries tumbled down, blood-red juice splashed onto the blue tarp, and a boy with stained hands held out his palms full of berries to me. I took them politely.

'*Tashakur, tashakur,*' I said. He grinned and ran to his friends. The taste of the warm berries was dense, chewier than blackberries, but not as tart. The sky was clear, and the air was hot enough to bake a lizard. The locals gave us chilled *lassi*.

An NGO doctor told us that the best grapes in King Solomon's time came from Afghan vines. I imagined Solomon, after a hard day doling out wisdom, relaxing with his favourite wife, sharing a bowl of ripe mulberries and a goblet of Afghan wine.

The NGO looked at the sky. 'We're in for some weather.'

There were a few strands of cirrus blowing in from the north-west, nothing more. '*Bad-i-sad-o-bist ruz,* the wind of 120 days,' he said.

On the way back to base, the horizon filled with red dirt clouds, and a wind strong enough to strip paint blew up from nowhere. It was one hell

of a gnarly sandstorm, and we only just made it back to base before there was a total brownout. Nothing moved for three days.

Davy has stopped singing; perhaps because he's seen the sun. It's a beautiful August day, an ordinary day. We follow the usual route; we're an ordinary patrol. The rumble of the road fills the cab as I change to day-sights.

I'm feeling pretty fit, there's not much to do on the base except work out. I have a small flat in West Hampstead, on the second floor with a view of Maygrove Peace Park, and I'm planning to jog each morning around the lake.

Walders says, 'Will you be signing up for a second tour, Boyers?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I believe the most exciting thing a man can do is to go to war.'

'Yes, sir.'

I'm caught in the sticky web of Davy's tune. I'm humming, *Together we're singin'. Forever we're singin' that ol' country song. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah...*

Across the far side of the Helmand River, 500 metres away, a man pushes off in a wooden dinghy. I can't see his face, but I can tell he's old by his movements. The road follows the curve of the river, around to the right. I adjust the magnification of my day-sights to $\times 10$ and train my gun. The man lifts a sack, and the small boat keels. He moves deftly to correct the balance. The sack rips open, rusty chains and fishing hooks slip onto the deck. I focus my attention on the road ahead. There's a shape in the dirt, a dead dog. Flies swarm up and around splayed guts. Davy has seen it because the Scimitar slows.

'I see,' Walders says. We approach slowly. The dog's in front of us, in the centre of the road, 10 metres away.

There's a bright light. There's a sharp pain in my left shoulder. Our sardine-can world rips apart.

Charlotte Haines

from *All Good Things*

Lizzie retreats to the bathroom. Because of her ankle, she can't pace without feeling ridiculous, but the room is small enough that she can turn from side to side and it feels like the same thing.

She feels shaky with adrenalin; it had been hard to throw the spoon at her plate when she'd wanted to hurl it at Joe's face. His stupid, symmetrical face. To think, for a moment, she'd felt almost sorry for him – a bearded alcoholic living on a mattress in his living room. She let herself forget everything he was responsible for.

The urge to harm something is immense. She pulls the towel off the handrail and throws it at the door. Then she opens the cabinet doors and slams them shut again. Her reflection startles her. She looks awful. The scratches on her face are livid, looking much worse than they feel. She pokes at the skin between them, twisting her neck to get a better look.

She'd dressed quickly earlier, and now she lifts her top up to study the bruises dappling her skin. They run down her right side in strata. The largest is at the bottom of her ribcage, ranging in shades. She can see a darker epicentre where she must have landed on the fallen stone from the wall. This is the spot she presses against, experimentally.

'Ow,' she says, then does it again, unthinking. 'That was stupid,' she tells her reflection.

Lizzie considers the impulse to poke at wounds, to test the strength of the hurt. She hopes that isn't all she's doing here. The memory resurfaces of that night, in the taxi, of Tom saying *you have to leave this alone Lizzie; you can't keep doing this*. She lets her top fall back down, watching her reflection shift from anger to something more nuanced, something she doesn't want to witness.

Both taps produce cold water, but she splashes her face anyway. Lizzie isn't ready to face Joe, so she puts the toilet seat lid down and perches on it. She reminds herself that things could be a lot worse, had, in fact, been a lot worse. A day ago, she'd thought she wasn't going to make it here. The snow, her injury, had made it difficult, and it had been too dark to see the map. She'd almost walked past the house; there hadn't been a name or number outside.

It was only because of the hours she'd spent poring over newspaper cuttings about the accident that she recognised the gate and the American-style letterbox at the edge of the garden.

The crash had been a big story. Joe had been famous – the pet artist that newspapers trotted out to appear more cultural. He'd been young, good-looking and, more importantly, had had flings with a minor member of British royalty, a married American actress and a supermodel who had sat for him.

The death of a married lover, especially one who'd curated his art show, was too much for the papers to pass up. They got hold of photo-evidence of the wrecked car, the battered carcass of the Highland cow that had been hit. They'd interviewed Lizzie's neighbours, printing quotes about her parents' arguments. There had even been photographers waiting outside the church, at her mum's funeral, to see if Joe turned up.

They hadn't been able to see the paparazzi from the car. The journey to the funeral had been silent. Her dad was a wreck. He'd been drunk the whole previous night and Lizzie's grandmother had had to wake him up, five minutes before the car arrived.

Halfway up the path through the graveyard, her father noticed the photographers.

'What the–' he said, face darkening. 'Bugger off,' he yelled. 'Have some fucking respect.'

Shouting had the opposite effect to what he intended, and the photographers moved in. Her dad picked up a wreath from a grave and hurled it at them. Then a plantpot containing tiny narcissus flowers – this shattered on a monument, raining down dirt and fragments of ceramic on the photographers. They jumped back, out of the range of the debris.

'That's it – run away, you fucking vultures.'

He picked up another wreath, shoulder rolling back in preparation, and Lizzie said, 'Dad!', her voice breaking.

He looked at her, as though he had only just realised she was there. The wreath dropped to the grass, soundless.

'Fuck,' he said. 'I can't do this.'

He strode down the path, back towards the road.

'Where's he going?' Lizzie asked. 'He can't just leave – he needs to be here.'

'Let him go,' her grandmother said. 'This has all been very hard for him.'

Since her arrival at their house, she'd made it clear where her own sympathies lay and that she expected Lizzie's to be there as well.

'He needs to be here,' Lizzie said, voice rising. 'He needs–'

Tom took hold of her hand and she fell silent, letting him walk her into the church. Her father turned up just after the start of the service, squeezed down the pew and sat next to her, the smell of beer on his breath. That's what she remembers most from that day – Tom's hand, and the smell of alcohol.

*

Joe takes his mobile out to the front porch with him. It has stopped snowing, and everything seems static, stifled, after the constant motion. He looks for signs of life. There's a meandering set of tracks on the lawn, where something – a rabbit, he thinks – has loped out, then doubled back and crossed its own path.

He calls Emma, just so he has something to do with his hands. A cigarette would have been preferable but he'd smoked his last one weeks ago, too drunk to savour it. He doesn't expect to get hold of her, is pleasantly surprised by the fact that the call even connects. The blackouts don't normally last longer than a couple of days but they're a week into this one. He didn't think her mobile would still have battery.

As he listens to the bright bring-bring of the call, he tries to work out where the rabbit's tracks disappear, but there are too many shadows to tell.

He's about to hang up when Emma says, 'Hello', sounding out of breath and residually irritated from their last encounter.

'Hi,' he says. 'Hi. I thought you weren't going to pick up.'

'I had to get outside. Mark was in the room with me – I couldn't answer it in front of him.'

'This isn't about... any of that.' He makes a face at the clumsiness of the sentence. Joe has never known how to refer to their peculiar, meandering relationship.

'I know,' she says. 'But how would I explain you phoning? How would I explain how we knew each other? That's the problem with lies. They pollute everything. You can never tell the truth again.'

He snorts, 'That's the problem with suddenly growing a conscience. It makes you care about things like that.'

'I always had a conscience,' she says, brittle. 'I just didn't care for a long time.'

'I know. Sorry. I don't know why I said that.'

He thinks she's going to come out with something awful and honest,

like *because people in pain lash out*, but instead she says, 'What do you want, Joe? It's really cold out here.'

'How do I know if an ankle is broken or sprained?'

'What have you done now? This is what happens when you're hammered 24 hours a day. I told you—'

'I haven't done anything. This is... theoretical.'

Now that Joe actually has the opportunity to tell someone about Lizzie, he can't bring himself to. It feels like betraying a confidence.

'Theoretical?' she repeats, disbelieving. 'OK. Well – *theoretically* – you would travel three months back in time and go and get an X-ray at a hospital.'

'Emma.'

'Well don't bullshit me if you want me to be helpful. I don't have time for this – I don't have much battery left. Not all of us have the luxury of a generator. I just have to wait for the electricity to come back on again. If it does. Tell me what's going on or I'm hanging up.'

He shifts his weight from one foot to another, then says, 'Lizzie's here.'

It comes out as one word, so it takes Emma a moment to decipher. 'Lizzie?' Her voice alters in pitch. 'Rebecca's daughter?'

'Yes.'

'Oh my God.'

'Are you allowed to say that? I thought taking the Lord's name in vain was frowned upon.'

Emma ignores him. 'What is she doing there?'

'She just turned up in the middle of the night. No warning. I imagine she's here to ask about Rebecca but... I need her gone, OK? I can't have her here, Emma. I just... I can't stand it. I mean the last time I saw her she—' he cuts off.

'She what?' Her voice sharpens. 'What aren't you telling me?'

Joe has said too much. He tries to quell the panic in his voice. 'Nothing,' he says. 'I... look, I'm just being stupid, all right? You know me; I don't like feeling guilty. I just... need her gone. And her bloody ankle's the size of a football and I need you to tell me how to fix it. Can you just tell me how to fix it?'

Emma exhales down the phone. 'Feet aren't really my area of expertise. I deal more with paws, hooves. Can she put any weight on it?'

'Some. I think.'

'Then it's probably sprained. They tend to swell up more, I think. She

needs to stay off it – elevate it, preferably. You should bandage it.’

‘And how long will it take? To get better?’

‘I don’t know. It depends how bad it is. I can’t even say it isn’t broken. Sorry.’

Joe hits the side of the porch with the palm of his hand. The wood reverberates, and a wedge of snow dislodges, falling to the floor. He wants to do it again, and again, until something gives – the wood, or his flesh. But then the image resurfaces of Lizzie hollowing out eggs, and he drops his hand back down.

‘Maybe this is a good thing,’ Emma says, though she sounds unconvinced. ‘Maybe this is just what you need. You never really worked through everything that happened. She might help with that. She might need it as much as you. Maybe... you say you don’t want forgiveness but–’

He interrupts. ‘She’s not here to forgive me.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘She’s just so angry.’

Emma is quiet for a long time. ‘I used to be angry,’ she says at last. ‘People don’t always stay angry forever.’

‘No,’ he says. ‘But sometimes they do.’

She makes a noise of agreement, or sympathy, or derision, he can’t quite tell, but she stays on the phone, wordless, until the call disconnects.



Fredrik Hakansson

from *Conception of God*

Chapter 1.01

1

Stephen gazed out of the living room window wondering how night could have grown so thick. Headlights from passing cars illuminated the road no more than lone fireflies. A ghost had drifted by and stopped, now looking in, trying to remember what being sheltered felt like. It was the surgical tape above its eyes, Stephen's own eyes, giving the ghost away as a reflection.

A phone rang. Stephen didn't react at first. It was not his ringtone, so he assumed it must have come from the evening news on TV, but it went on and no one answered. He realised it was the landline, so unused that he'd forgotten it was there.

'Hello?' he answered.

'Is this Stephen?' a teenage girl, sounding his age, asked. He had never heard her voice before.

'Yes,' he said.

'Hi, this is Melanie, your new classmate. I'm just calling to give you our homework since you weren't at school today. How're you feeling? I heard you went to the hospital.'

Her name didn't ring any bells. Stephen paused and wondered if he should hang up, but thought that would be rude. 'Yeah. Hit my head on the way to school, nothing to worry about.' He ran his finger along the plastic tape on his forehead. 'How come I've never heard of you before?'

'No one has. They forgot to tell everybody that I was coming. Everyone was surprised today. In a good way.'

A single phrase from the TV penetrated their conversation – Charlotte Metropolitan High School – their school mentioned by name. The news report showed a clip from the school, the front entrance, the marble arch with the golden letters spelling the school's name, and the revolving glass doors leading into the brick building. Students and teachers, most of whom Stephen recognised, walked in and out, unaware of the camera in the distance. In the top right corner of the screen was a low-resolution headshot of his classmate, Sophie Lamb. The banner at the bottom read BODY OF MISSING TEEN FOUND. Stephen picked up odd words from the report; *culvert*, *decapitated*, *no leads*. His stomach rose with nausea.

'Stephen?' Melanie said.

He looked away from the TV. 'How did you get this number?'

‘From... I don’t remember her name, our physics teacher. We have a quiz on Friday and she wanted you to know what it’s on.’

It was odd. He had never, that he could recall, given the school or any of his teachers the landline number. ‘And she asked you to do it?’

‘She asked the whole class. No one volunteered so I said I’d do it. I can kind of see why no one wanted to, this is starting to feel like an interrogation.’ She laughed.

‘Sorry, just curious, that’s all.’ Stephen paused for a second before asking Melanie to tell him about the homework. Once he had the page numbers written down, he asked how her first day went. Melanie began answering but a deep voice on her end started to speak. Stephen could hear a hand rustling over the mouthpiece and Melanie’s voice, now muffled and indistinct, spoke to the other person.

‘I’ve got to go now. See you tomorrow,’ she said and hung up before Stephen had a chance to say bye.

Melanie’s voice had been soothing and Stephen held the phone next to his ear trying to imagine her on the other side. When he eventually put the phone back, he looked at the TV, hoping to learn more about Sophie. Instead, there was another news item about his parents, and all thoughts of Sophie faded.

There they are, he thought. *Again*. Another successful merger made possible by his father. Another minute in the spotlight with his mother next to him and another company under his name. Stephen’s throat dried up at the sight and he clenched his teeth. Asking them to leave him alone was one of the best things he’d done – he just hadn’t expected them to agree. His father had just nodded, once.

‘I’ll send you some papers to sign. You’ll get the Charlotte apartment. That’ll be close to school for you,’ his father had said before getting up to make a call. That was it. Stephen packed his bags and moved from the family home in the suburbs to the city. It’d been six months since then, six months without a word from them.

He turned off the TV and got ready for bed. In his dreams, Melanie’s voice came back and he pictured her as a blonde girl, face turned away, standing alone in darkness. She came closer – Stephen heard her foot against the wooden floor of his apartment – too close. The floorboards creaked.

His eyes flung themselves open. He threw the blanket aside, turned on the light, and looked around. There was no one there, yet he was positive



Fredrik Hakansson

the sound had come from nearby. Sweat ran down his face and back. He swallowed hard, got out of bed, and began circling the apartment, looking behind the curtains and in the wardrobe. No one was there. He checked the door: it was locked. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and wondered when he had started falling prey to his own imagination.



Ruby Hoffman

gallery district

subjects of the 21st century:

you

me

glass & absinthe on a waterfront
in berlin, with an unfastened
moon and watercolour eyes.

eat me / drink me
jewel toned graffiti spilled
into my bloodstream and
everything grew, trains and heavy rain
and rivers of synth.

driftless, smashed champagne
bottles sequin the periphery of canals, where
we've awoken somewhere unpronounceable:
mapped out by candyfloss club posters, elusive
as the edge of the planet.

the artist sculpted a tomb
in his own precise measurements.
'i dream of you in colours that don't exist,'
she wrote on the epitaph.

The Manchester Anthology 2014

two month anniversary

i can't sleep
the sky is what i'd envision
the middle of the sea would look like
alone, enclosing a million things.
i'm up more hours than the sun
and i pull apart strings, unthreading
every day
until all that is left is laid bare.

what remains is the bottom of the ocean:
when i finally touch the floor
i'm left wondering
 if *this is it*.
a hollowed-out ship, stripped
of its mechanism, sulks and lets me
stroke its inner walls, hunting for spare change.

The Manchester Anthology 2014

goldfish

write a poem about
life in an aquarium
the slow molasses of treading sky
where i sort through my head
trying to wander away around

things:
your belfast accent
the way the well-travelled rain
separates

when i get sad
i put it in a blues song

reduced to three seconds of technicolor
your voice gets caught and
i have got to get out of here.

elegy

the light filters
and the death of spring lingers.
you never know when
to come home, the acrid breeze remarks,
unsympathetic.
the changing of the seasons
is hard to define, and what is,
if you could only see it
the way i do, the first sunshine of summer:
from mid-afternoon and an empty suburban house
in stockport the colour of portobello road,
only to be reminded

*you've got so much to learn, and
i have wasted my life;*

all the shades of blue amounting to nothing:
a whole spectrum of darks blurred together until
the blind-eyed sun leaves
the bones to bleach.

The Manchester Anthology 2014

half life

in the hour before the sky
shallows, the air is full
of the hum of closing
shut for the night.

you breathe in kaleidoscopes.

i'm west, she said, where
it's raining in paris and
the colours are so monochrome
who's to know
if the sun rises or sets.

there is an exactness
where day and darkness become tangled,
and pieces of white hot morning assemble
an unreal blue –
the furthest spectrum
of a painter's sample strip,
as it's mended and almost
made whole by the glow
of somewhere that remains
just out of reach,
not quite out of bounds.

James Horrocks

Coconut

I've never seen a coconut
so hairy, or one
as tightly sealed as your lips.

In my Northern kitchen,
I hold the coconut
and its horsehairs
stick in my hand.

I stroke a knife along
an invisible seam
but it only serves to scratch
a very old itch.

You snigger at my attempt
to discover the entirety of the coconut.
I've never been able to cope with failure.

I bring out the mallet.

A reverse golf swing cracks the nut:

The two halves of its shell clip-clop
into a Barbadian bunker,
looking like a split Easter egg. Coconut water seeks
the Hurricane Canal.
And keeps going. And
going.

The milk splashes
onto the Arabian plate
filling in the cracks
and meeting what it shouldn't. The flesh rots
under Tibetan ground,
since it has been drained
of its blood.

And from my palm I pull a thorn.

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Future Conquest

– Crosby Beach, 22nd August 2010

1500

Marine AFC

v

FC United of Manchester

What happened doesn't change:

Two-nothin' win (two reds for them)
and a decent pub. Great.

You got some aggro'
but nothin' proper.

1300

A walk on the beach (you got to take advantage)
populated with lonely men

who didn't know how to sunbathe (they were stood up)
just rust.

1700

Some one of us (thinking that they all looked the same)
hung a red and white scarf

round the neck (to mark our future conquest)
of a sculpture.

And one over a sign-post:

'*Another Place* by Anthony Gormley'
100 figures

3km of shore,
standing the same (but apart).

46

2007

*Kids.
A coach full.*

I'm on it?

I am. Sat near a window.

Looking at what?

*The sea, sand
and a dude with his cock out?*

No – a statue.

*Oh, made of metal.
A bit shiny.*

At that time, maybe

*no, defo, he's...
there's loads of him!*

I was stood at this one

*with other kids
laughing
about a barnacle
sucking his iron moob.*

I barely knew
I was facing the sun
over a statue's shoulder.

On sore eyes
the iron silhouettes
on a yellow red green silver blob.

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A disco ball.
A badly attended club.

'Time to go'

From the sun, the beach and the statues
must look like hairs standing on a blonde arm.

It was the time of year where
beaches become as ignored
as everywhere else.

It was the time of day where
your arm hairs stand up.

*The coach sets off.
I turn my neck
to watch the men
shrink into school kids
stood looking
for the sun
and the sea
to make the horizon.*

Speaker

Give me your hand
and I'll stroke your
palm with a vinyl
player needle.

I'll hear in the
indentations
your song of heart
beat and hurt

or it might be
a replica
of what it aches
like to be shaken

by an 8-foot
subwoofer. Don't breathe.
This is the sound
of twice a frown

and rotation.
You may not hear
it. But you'll know.
It's there, and how

a black disc thrown
across the sea
will make ripples,
waves and trebles.

Now you're here
Let's listen
to Rahsaan.

Speaker

It had been panned
in its own year
but MLK junior
had a well-tuned ear.

Now we'd say 'huh –
hesitation?
Just pass the Act'.
Easy, post-fact,

unlike how he
made regular
time signature
change to 4/2

till the astute
cats sung only breves.
This is the chime
of half of time.

'They shot him down'
you may have heard
as if his music
was a gimmick

that would suddenly
pianissimo.
A daily gospel
is hard to dispel.

That's all gone
to silence.
Let's listen.

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The Fort

I sit inside
a fort to defend
myself from the living
room, a fort

I made from the cases
of my dad's cassettes,
to keep the sound
of the TV out.

The Dude lies on his back, on his rug, stroking his abdomen upwards,
while the two hands of a Sony Walkman cover his ears. His eyes open
and three people stand there. The one on the left hits him.

When I came back
to the house
I brought round a CD,
said 'you don't have to
rewind this'
then placed it
in the CD player's mouth.

Sue Kaberry

She Could Have Had Anyone

Gloria had never won anything before. She had always thought she just wasn't lucky, so when she won £1,000 at bingo, she was thrilled.

'We'll go to the pub,' she said to her friends, Audrey and Joyce. 'I'm buying.'

They walked over the road from the bingo hall to the Lancashire Lass. They played bingo every Thursday night, but they only went to the pub when there was a reason to celebrate: someone's birthday, or when one of them had won some money. The Lancashire Lass had survived in this former mill town because it had its own microbrewery, had kept its original Victorian tiled interior and served good food, hotpot, steak puddings, cheese-and-onion pie and Bury black puddings. The clientele were mainly beer aficionados, quiet and well behaved. The three women, Gloria and Audrey in their early seventies and Joyce in her late sixties, felt comfortable there. They looked around for a place to sit.

'Let's go over there,' said Audrey, pointing to a table in the corner.

'You go and sit down. I'll order. You like bubbly, don't you?' said Gloria. She felt bubbly herself, excited by her win.

'Oh yeah, great,' they nodded. They took off their coats and piled them on the bench with their handbags and settled themselves down.

'I want something sparkling,' said Gloria to the barman. 'Do you have any of that Asti stuff? We used to drink it at weddings.'

'Spumante,' he said with a grin.

'That's it.'

'It's not often we're asked for that. Everyone wants Cava these days.'

'I know it's old-fashioned, but we're old-fashioned,' she laughed and pointed to her friends.

'Had a good win tonight?' he said.

'Not bad.'

'Go on and sit down. I'll bring it over.'

He brought the bottles over to them with an ice bucket. He looked serious as he popped the cork.

'I'll have to keep my eye on you lot,' he said. 'We don't tolerate any fighting or bad language in this pub.' He poured out the sparkling liquid and winked at them. 'Enjoy, ladies.'

'Two bottles! You're going mad, Gloria!' said Audrey.

'Well, it's not strong is it? Besides I've never won anything before, so why not?'

'You're a jammy bugger you are,' said Audrey. 'You've only been coming to bingo for a month, and you've won more than me or Joyce ever has.'

'I won £500 once,' said Joyce.

'I remember that,' said Audrey. 'You only bought one bottle.'

They all laughed.

'Anyway, it's our wedding anniversary next week as well,' said Gloria. 'We had Asti then... you know, at our wedding.'

'How long is it?' said Joyce. 'It's 35 years for us, in June.'

Gloria looked at them both. She had known Audrey since they were girls – she was her closest friend. Audrey, always more outgoing, had encouraged her to go to bingo. It was there she met Joyce, a warm woman, friendly and good fun, rather like Audrey.

'Too long, I think sometimes,' said Gloria.

'She met him at the bingo hall,' said Audrey.

'Really?' said Joyce.

'It's true,' Gloria said. 'It was the Palais then. Audrey and I went every Saturday night.'

'We lived all week for it,' said Audrey.

Gloria had thought it sounded so continental, the Palais-de-Danse; its full name in lights across the front of the building. She'd spent her first week's wages on make-up from Woolworth's and some cheap cotton off the market to make a skirt with, all for the Saturday-night dance. Her mother had disapproved, saying she shouldn't spend her money like that. Not that she had much money, as she gave most of her wages to her mother. The smell of the place was in her memory: sweat, cheap perfume and Brylcreem. There was still a faint hint of it underlying the stink of lavatory cleaner in the bingo hall now, as if it had seeped into the walls of the place.

She heard her name. 'Gloria, do you remember? Getting ready was as much fun as going. Planning what we were going to wear, swirling our full skirts out as we practised dancing.'

Gloria nodded as Audrey continued talking about the glitter ball swaying from the ceiling, and how the light glanced around the room and made the place look so glamorous. About the band, dressed in dinner jackets, their instruments gleaming, and how sometimes there was a singer.

'They could do with something to liven the place up now,' said Joyce. 'It's got very rundown. I wouldn't be surprised if they pulled it down

soon. They all seem to be closing, the bingo halls.'

'It's all online now,' said Audrey.

She beckoned to the barman. He came over and opened the second bottle for them.

'Going down well is it?' He winked at them again as he filled their glasses.

'Was Jim your first boyfriend?' said Joyce, raising her glass.

'Don't be so nosy,' said Audrey.

'It's OK. I don't mind,' said Gloria. 'There was, well... sort of another one before Jim, but it didn't come to anything.' She felt the blood rushing to her face. It must be the alcohol: she was on her third glass now. She didn't usually drink more than two.

'There were always plenty after Gloria, I can tell you. She was so pretty. She could have had anyone,' said Audrey. 'But she was fussy. You didn't like the Teddy boys, did you?'

'That's true,' said Gloria. 'Those drainpipe trousers and beetle-crushers.' She shook her head and felt a bit woozy.

'One night this fella turned up wearing a suit with his hair in a short back and sides, very good-looking,' said Audrey.

'Jim?' said Joyce.

'No, Frank,' said Gloria. 'Anyway, that didn't work out. Drink up there's still this left.'

She reached for the bottle and filled up the glasses. Audrey and Joyce continued talking. It was Frank's suntan that Gloria had noticed. She'd only ever been to Blackpool for a holiday at Wakes week, and you didn't get much of a suntan there.

Frank had caught Gloria's eye across the dance-floor. He made a beeline and asked her to dance. They had swayed together to *Red Sails in the Sunset*, a slow, romantic tune. She can never hear that without it conjuring up the feel of Frank's arm around her as they danced, and the smell of him – sharp, cigaretty, male – and his breath like a tiny, warm breeze on her neck and ear. He'd been in Malaya, doing his national service and had only a few weeks left. The heat and humidity were terrible, he said, but the curry was tasty. At the end of the evening he had walked her home, his arm around her waist.

'Gloria, Gloria.' Audrey was speaking to her and waving a hand in front of her face. 'Is there anybody there?'

'You were really off on one then!' said Joyce.

'Thinking about Frank, or was it Jim?' said Audrey. 'The quiet ones are always the worst.'

'I was miles away... in the Palais on a Saturday night. It's all coming back, going there again after all this time and talking about it now.'

'Well, come on then, tell us about it.'

'There's not much to tell.'

'Tell me about Frank,' said Joyce. 'I don't know this story.'

'Well, honestly it's nothing...' said Gloria, as Audrey filled up their glasses.

They raised their glasses to her.

'Oh, well... OK... if I must. Frank walked me home. We got on so well. He was lovely. He was going back on the Monday, so we met in the park on Sunday. We walked and talked for hours. He was due to be de-mobbed in a few weeks, and he asked me to write and wait for him.'

'Why was he on leave if he was due to be de-mobbed?' said Joyce.

'His father had died, so they let him come home for the funeral.'

'Oh,' said Joyce. 'Did you write?'

'Yes,' said Gloria.

'So... what happened?'

'Jim. Jim happened,' said Gloria. Her words were slurred.

'What do you mean?' Joyce said.

'Take no notice, Gloria,' said Audrey. 'She's like a dog with a bloody bone.'

'I don't mind,' said Gloria. 'I'll tell you what happened. It was Jim. He was always pestering me to go out with him. I told him I was waiting for Frank, but he said, "Don't bother with him..."'

Audrey and Joyce were looking at her.

'It's nothing really,' said Gloria. 'But what he said was... what Jim said was... that Frank had told the lads that we'd... well, had sex.'

'And you hadn't?' said Joyce.

'No we kissed and snogged a bit.'

'Did you believe Jim?' said Joyce.

'Yes.' Gloria looked back at Joyce, but she couldn't seem to get her face in focus. 'Why did Frank lie? Why did he lie?'

She couldn't articulate the words clearly. Her mouth wasn't working properly.

'I stopped writing to him, and when he came back I was going out with Jim. We married a few months later. I was pregnant. It's nothing now, but then... well, it was shameful.' Gloria felt tears welling up. 'The

baby... she was stillborn.' A sob rose from deep within her. She looked down, dabbed at her eyes and sighed. 'I never knew what happened to her, they wouldn't tell me. Jim said it was for the best, that it would give us time to get on our feet.'

Audrey put her arm round her. 'Come on now, love. Don't cry.'

'I couldn't get over it. Silly really. Jim said I was silly, and my mam said, "You've made your bed, you must lie in it", so...'

'I think... a taxi,' said Audrey.

'I'll ring for one,' said Joyce.

'Come on, love, you've had a great night and a bit to drink. Think what you can do with £1,000,' said Audrey.

'Nine-hundred and something now.' Gloria wiped her eyes. 'Sorry.' She blew her nose.

'No need to apologise,' said Joyce. 'We're all friends here.'

No one spoke in the taxi until they arrived at Gloria's house. Audrey squeezed Gloria's hand and whispered, 'Take care, love.'

The house was quiet and dark with only a dim light in the hall. Jim was in bed. Gloria walked into the lounge and sat down with her coat still on. Her head was spinning, partly from the alcohol but also from the conversation. The words that Audrey said were going round in her head. 'Gloria could have had anyone.' She took off her coat and went upstairs to where Jim was lying in bed half asleep.

'Jim,' she said. He grunted.

'Jim, listen,' she said.

'I'm asleep,' he said. His eyes were shut.

'Jim, do you know why I married you?' said Gloria.

'What? What time is it?'

'Never mind that. Answer me.'

Jim opened his eyes and looked at Gloria. 'What is it, Gloria? What's happened? You've been drinking.' He propped himself up on his elbows.

'Do you know why I married you?'

'Why did you marry me? You were pregnant,' he said. 'That was it, wasn't it?'

'I married you because of what you said to me about Frank.'

'Who?' said Jim.

'Frank, you said he lied about me, remember?'

'No, I don't,' said Jim. 'Go to sleep, Gloria.' He lay back.

'You said that Frank said... that I'd had sex with him,' she said. 'Now do you remember?'

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‘Oh,’ said Jim. ‘I’d forgotten that. You didn’t believe me, did you? I made it up to get you for myself.’

He laughed and turned over. He did not see the impact of his words on Gloria. How in that moment she realised that her life had been based on a lie, that perhaps she could have had a different life. That she’d had choices that she had not known about. That she could have had anyone.

Mike Kiely

from *Seafarer*

I spent that evening with the waves. Again and again, the breakers rolled in, rearing above me and curling, up, up, over, and then swallowing me and toppling down into the crash of bubbles. Hungry, they seemed to me, their jaws gaping open and biting down. This was my first time in the sea alone, and I think part of me wanted to be consumed. I let the waves knock me over. I dived under them, into the murky rush of seawater. I tried to ride them on my bodyboard, but I kept losing my grip, slipping off, seeing the board ride away with the white foam. It was getting late by the time I came out. Most of the families had left the beach and a few of the amber streetlights were already dotting the town's waterfront. I crouched in the water and clung to the board, my hands shivering, their skin mottled with cold, violet splotches. As the next wave rose above me, I turned my back on it, held the board tight against my chest and, as the wave came down, closed my eyes. I heard the roar, felt myself being lifted and thrown forward. The force carried me across the shallows and skidding over the sand to within shouting range of my elder brother.

'Hey! Dan!' I called, tasting the salt on my lips. I picked myself up and ran towards him, the dry sand collapsing under my feet. He was sitting cross-legged, gazing down at his mobile, a little square of harsh white light in the softly darkening evening. He looked up when I got close. 'Hey, did you see?' I shouted. 'The wave! I caught the wave!'

He looked down again and turned his mobile off. 'I've been waiting for fucking ages.'

He got up, tossed me the towel he'd been sitting on, scattering sand into the air, and marched off towards the steps heading up to the town. I grabbed my trainers, wedged my feet into them, feeling the sand scratch, and picked up the plastic supermarket bag with my clothes in. As I followed a few paces behind him, I kept my head down, watching my footsteps disappear in the shifting sand and shadows beneath me. He stopped to throw something in the bin by the steps and that was when I saw it, the shell. Under my foot, a little circle of white, poking out of the sand. I let the sand that had collected in its curve spill out and rubbed its contours between my finger and thumb. It was only a few centimetres wide. Rough and ribbed on its convex side with messy brown-and-white stripes; white as milk and pebble-smooth on the concave side. I threw it in my bag and ran after my brother. There was nothing remarkable about it. It stayed there in my bag for the rest of the holiday. And I have

it still. It's on the desk before me, and I pick it up and rub it between my fingers every so often. I've become sentimental as I've got older, or maybe I always was.

It was the last week of July, and we'd come to visit my granddad, like every other summer back then. I'd turned eight that April. Dan was 14, old enough to find his younger brother embarrassing rather than endearing. Granddad had asked him to watch over me that evening. Dan was a stronger swimmer than me, but he hadn't wanted to go in, preferring to sit wrapped in a fleece and read his magazines and the texts on his mobile. We didn't talk much in those years. I think he'd been having a hard time at school, and he didn't seem to enjoy staying with Granddad. I pulled an old T-shirt over my sopping wet trunks as we walked past the bright lights of the high street with its bars and souvenir shops. The town must have been on the wane for years, I guess, but I was only just becoming aware of the cracked windows in the pubs and the strip clubs in the side streets. For me, these holidays still meant melting ice cream and beach football and the water; the water, above all.

Granddad was watching the news when we got back, with the volume on high to help his hearing.

'Good swim, lads?' He looked smart, with his checked shirt done up to the top button and tucked into his trousers. I can dimly remember that he was always messier when Gran was still alive. Ruddy. I remember the feel of his big woolly jumpers with little bits of old paper and wood chippings caught in the fibres. His big, hairy hands. His red face with the wrinkles deeply grooved. That face was whiter now, even a bit grey. Our parents thought it did him good having kids around.

Dan flicked off his sandals in the hall. 'I had to sit and wait for him for two hours.'

Granddad stroked my hair as if I were a puppy. 'Little fish are you?' he said.

I ate my sausages and mash, and looked at the flooded plain on the TV screen. The people piled up sandbags, dug ditches, brought in huge diggers and pumps and helicopters, but they couldn't stop the water. No one could.

Later, I sat on the kitchen side and ate a yoghurt as Granddad washed up. The window above the sink was open and I could see across the backyard to the next row of terraces, sloping down towards the beach and the black sea beyond. I waited for 10 seconds or so, and there it was, the beacon from the lighthouse out on the headland, where we used to

go for walks with Gran. You got a good view across the bay from there, with the waves wrinkling the surface of the water. Sometimes, when the sun was shining down, the clouds left shadow-islands on the surface, and you'd wonder if there was something lurking beneath. We never went up there any more, though.

Everything seemed a bit quiet that night, apart from the laddy cheers every so often from the bars on the waterfront. And the waves, of course.

'Where are the seagulls?' I said.

Dan laughed as he poured himself a glass of something dark and fizzy. 'They sleep at night, you idiot,' he said.

'Oye,' Granddad said.

That night, I lay awake in bed, listening to the waves. They were always there, like a background tune that never stopped. Roaring in, roaring out, the sound louder or softer depending on the tide. When I was younger, Granddad used to joke that the ribs visible beneath my chest were the first sign of gills developing. I'd practised my breaststroke so much that the movements of arm and leg felt natural, not forced. Four times a week, sometimes more, I'd be there at the pool, tying my goggles tight, sucking the air down, then putting my head under the surface, muffling the sounds of the outside world and entering that strange space of blue and bubbles and psychedelic light patterns. I knew the sea was different, though. Wilder. Like comparing one of those wild hunting tigers we used to watch on TV documentaries to their cousins sleeping behind a cage at the zoo.

I was up early the next day, ready to go out again, but Dan was still in bed so I sat through three episodes of a cartoon. We got to the beach at 11-ish. He wanted to go in this time, and he pulled the board from my arms as we walked down the beach.

'Fine,' I said.

I raced away through the shallow water, kicking up the spray as I went, and after I'd dived in, I kept away from him. It didn't seem long afterwards when I lifted my head out of the water and saw him walking away. Board under his arm. The sun reflecting on his wet skin. Maybe he'd called to me, but I hadn't heard anything. He expected me to tag along as usual, but the water was cool and the underwater sand slipped silkily between my toes. I watched him splash his way out and meander past some kids on the beach, back towards home, not looking back. Then I turned and swam out.

Beyond the first three or four lines of small waves, the sea felt calm, just gentle undulations of the water. I didn't want to get too tired. So I stopped kicking, turned over, lifted my legs to the surface and lay there with my arms out gently treading to keep me afloat. I squinted at the sun above, letting the rays split and stretch through my eyelashes, then I shut my eyes and saw the neon solar imprint in the darkness. Water splashing against my legs. Ears under the surface so I could hear the distant rumble as the waves crashed down and the granules of sand scratched over the stones as the water pulled back. Gran never liked swimming in the sea. 'You don't know what's slinkin' around under you,' she'd say. It didn't feel like that to me, though. More like being in bed, the cool sheets wrapping around your body. The sound of the waves drifted away after a while, replaced by that deep, alien echo of the sea at rest.

I've tried to remember that day so many times. I'm a light sleeper, and every so often I get to 3am or 4am and just give up and start thinking back, consciously trying to colour in the white spaces I've forgotten. I'm not sure how long I lay there in the water. I'm not sure what I thought. Eight is so young. I'd never heard of rip currents then. What I do remember is opening my eyes to see a world tinged blue: the sky, the water, even my arms under the surface. I brought my legs down, expecting to hit sand or stones, but there was nothing. I flapped, struggled, took a mouthful of seawater and coughed it back up, feeling the rough saltiness in my throat. The water was cool, getting cooler the further I went down. And that lumpy black silhouette that kept getting obscured by the waves, was that the land?

Alex McFadyen

from *Death Mask*

1

‘So these people, they’re nae living... they’re dying. And I’m nae interested in dying. You got anything bigger than you in your life, Jim? A passion? A legacy?’

This was how I remembered the last conversation I’d had with Cap Frazier. It had got pretty philosophical, in a way. We’d both had a lot to drink and it had been late, the end of a long day.

Five days later and I’m still flicking through photos of him online. Shutting my laptop, I close my eyes and rub my face. His voice remains. The words shadows now, dark memories echoing through my mind with a ghostlike insistence.

‘See, most people these days... they just feed the id. You know Freud?’

I’d nodded. I’d read it back in the 80s, as an undergrad. It had seemed convoluted at the time, and Cap’s take on it was no less so.

‘Well Freud, he said your mind has these three mechanisms: the id, the ego and the superego. And mos’ people, they just feed their id... their lust for flesh, for blood... and they think they’re living. But they’re no’. See, your id is just a disguise worn by your death drives...’

I got the sense at the time that he’d used this speech before, probably to some other half-cut hack, unable to sleep and in need of company. Still, you had to admire the man’s conviction. He really believed everything he said at least sounded good.

That had been a week before the news came through. Fourteenth-floor window, sheer drop, zero chance of survival. The irony wasn’t lost on me. Not that he’d been talking about actual, physical life and death. Plus, the vote was still five months away, so he wasn’t dead yet. Not on his terms, anyway.

I could feel the whole thing spinning round my head continually, like a coin circling the drop in a charity donation game. Except I wasn’t any closer to the penny dropping. It was all still murky. Why kill himself? Yeah, he was a drinker, divorced... depressed, perhaps. But sociable. Cap had thrived off the energy of those around him. He’d worked his whole life for independence, from grassroots to deputy leader. Giving up this close just didn’t make sense.

I left my small, windowless study and went into the bedroom. Here I had an old Pioneer stereo, a bulky piece of equipment from the early 90s that I’d kept for partly nostalgic, partly economic reasons, and I reached

to the cassette shelf above, selecting Portishead's *Dummy*. I needed something to uncoil my mind.

I reached into the drawer below the amp and pulled out a bottle of Laphroaig Quarter Cask, which I'd been saving since my birthday, and then went into the small kitchen adjacent to my bedroom to fetch a glass. Returning to my room, I poured myself a large dram and collapsed back into the battered leather chair in which I'd been attempting to make sense of the previous week's events.

I'd been following Cap's campaign for the past year, attending local meetings, listening to speeches, following him as he went door to door, town hall to town hall, not just in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but up and down the country, on a relentless mission to drum up support for his lifelong goal: an independent, sovereign Scotland. He was an ambitious man, an idealist, but he also knew the difficulty of the task facing him. There were powerful interests who had no desire to see him succeed. Business always favoured the status quo; stability and consistency were what they wanted from politicians. A hands-off approach. This was poison to men like Cap Frazier – men who had a vision, and a wish to shape society.

The cigarettes I'd bought earlier that day were all smoked so I reached for the electronic replacement. Another birthday present – from my sister – that had sat, unopened, on my desk. It probably wouldn't do my craving justice, but it was worth a try. The vapour was sweet, and had an odd texture, slightly too thin. Not unpleasant, but not deeply satisfying either. It didn't interact properly with the whisky lining my throat to provide that nostalgic sense of a timeless pleasure. Nonetheless, it would have to do; the shops would have shut up for the night by now. Leaning back into my chair I exhaled and thought again about that last conversation I had shared with Cap. Nostalgia for a lost place was what had driven him too. The hope of recapturing some imagined past, frozen in the memory, and reigniting it. I heard a faint buzz in the pocket of the leather coat I had thrown onto my bed when I'd come in.

It was my editor, Mackenzie Stevenson, probably ringing to see if I'd written anything concrete yet.

'Jim.'

'Mac. I was gonnae call you in the morning.'

'You still on the Frazier piece? Go' anythin' yet?'

'No' yet. Still chasing a couple o' leads.' This was a lie.

'Aye. Thought you might be. Listen, Carol's working on a feature

about data surveillance. Pros and cons, that sort o' thing. Wants your help. Need you to leave the Frazier piece.'

'Mac—'

'Look you're nae gettin' anywhere wi' it. The coroner'll be reporting in a week and we can look at it again after that. Possibly. I know you liked the bloke but I've go' a paper to run. Cannae waste time.'

'Are you tellin' me I've go' to leave it?'

'Aye. Best to leave it. Understand?'

'It wasnae suicide Mac. I knew him. He wouldnae jump.'

'Jumped, fell—'

'People don't just fall out o' windows.'

'He was a drinker, Jim, you know tha'.'

'I'll be in tomorrow, I'm nae droppin' this.'

'Like I said, maybe when the coroner reports... if there's new information we can talk then.'

'We'll talk tomorrow.'

I hung up, drained my glass, and poured myself another. There was something I wasn't being told. Carol Porter was one of the best people at the *Herald*, and she'd worked on tech magazines for the best part of a decade. There was no way she'd asked for my help on that opinion piece. Someone else had made the decision: Mac, or someone higher up, maybe? Mac was a good editor most of the time, because he dealt in honesty. That meant he was a crap liar. I'd get to the bottom of it in the morning.

The next day arrived with an ache inside my skull, which I decided must be the fault of the e-cig. I took a few drags with my coffee then binned it before getting in the shower. Best to stick to the real thing, and damn the consequences.

Traffic into the city was slow moving and the frustration was palpable. I didn't mind, though, it gave me time to plan my entrance. Storm into Mac's office and headlong into a soliloquy about journalistic integrity and the stench of foul play or take a reasonable approach: 'Look Mac, I know you're under pressure, we all are, but Carol can handle this surveillance stuff herself; I'm really onto something with Frazier, I'll have copy for you by the end of the week...' I played both scenarios out in my head and decided to start with the second, and if that failed, launch into a tirade.

I was lucky to find a space in the street, outside one of the many plastic chain restaurants that had installed themselves in the ground floors

of Glasgow's red sandstone battlements. Cheap food and bookmakers occupied the lower reaches of its buildings, an apt metaphor for the city's society. The elegant Victorian architecture in the upper echelons remained untouched. Visible, but out of reach.

When I arrived, the office was already alive with keyboard chatter. I nodded a quick hello to Carol, who threw me a sympathetic look – so I was right on that count – before returning to her phone call. Mac's office was at the far end, glass-walled with vertical blinds, semi-closed. Through the gap I could see he wasn't alone, another man was inside, but I could only half-see his back. Mac was standing up, his visitor seated.

I knocked twice then went straight in. Conversation stopped abruptly and a head turned to see who had interrupted. The seated man was known to me. Steven 'Bad News' Sharp – the managing editor, and second in command – regarded me with a mixture of indignation and contempt. He had cropped hair and a lean, grave face – tanned I supposed from time spent aboard some yacht.

Mac spoke to break the uneasy silence: 'Jim. See you still havenae learned to knock.' He shot me a look.

Sharp moved his mouth into a smile and extended a hand, but his pupils remained unchanged, hostile.

'Jim. Hope you're working hard.'

I took his hand and met his gaze with a flicker of a challenge, before smiling.

'And you, Steve. Always nice to see you walk among your flock.'

Sharp turned back to Mac. 'I'll see you on Friday at the dinner.'

'Aye. Yes. See you then. Look forward to it.'

'Eyes on the prize boys, don't forget,' Sharp said, closing the door behind him.

'Wha' the fuck do you think you're doin', Jim? Burstin' in here and then bein' sarcastic? You're a friend, but I'm nae gonnae lose ma job because you cannae rein your tongue in.'

Mac ran a hand through his greying hair, and then hitched up his brown birdseye trousers, a habit he had when he was annoyed.

'Wha' did he want?' I said, sidestepping his anger.

'We'll get on to that in a minute. Wha' do you want?'

'An explanation. Why am I getting moved off the Frazier murder?'

His brow furrowed.

'Firstly, you're nae gettin' moved off, you're gettin' moved on.'

Secondly, if you've got evidence it's a murder, then we can talk. Have you?'

'How do you explain it?'

'I don't. I'm nae police, and I'm no' a coroner. Now, have you spoken to Carol?'

'She doesnae need ma help, Mac. You know that.'

'Look. It's a big piece. Zeitgeist stuff. War on terror, the internet... people are worried, Jim, and it's our job to tell them how worried they need to be. London are on it. We need to be too. Carol can cover the tech angle; I want you on the political side. Anyway, government intrusion into private lives... should be right up your street.'

'Aye, sure but—'

'Look. Why d'you think Steve was down here. Just for a wee chat?' I smiled. Mac was still an old anti-authoritarian at heart. 'He wants us to be writing about how the government's forced all these big firms to hand over everyone's private info. I'm nae convinced it's as simple as that. So, even though I've told him we'll go wi' that line, I'll let you follow the story. If there's collusion and you get evidence, we'll print it. Fair's fair?' I could see there was no point in arguing further, so I nodded. 'I've arranged for you to meet with the press liaison at Starlight. They'll show you round the office so you've at least got a feel for wha' the company's like. Then you can start digging in a bit deeper. You're on a flight to London later tonight.'

'Tonight?'

'Aye, Steve had to pull some strings to get you a meeting this quickly so no complainin'. And remember, as far as he's concerned, and they're concerned, you're writing about them as the victims in this. So, best behaviour. Alrigh?'

'Aye. No need to worry about me.'



Chapter One

A gust of air hit Agnes in the face. At home, battling against the elements made her feel grounded and self-assured. But here, underground, the wind wasn't natural. It was a downdraught of heat, carrying along hot dust that stripped her skin and caught down her throat. It blasted through the tunnels as a train flew past, whirling newspapers and bright snack wrappers about the floor. At least it was movement, she thought, as the newspapers fell still and a stagnant mugginess returned.

A circus of nerves about her presentation kept her mind darting, and she had already got on the wrong train twice. The compartments were crammed, the maps confusing, and she had wasted an hour already. She held onto the rail for balance as the train swayed from side to side. The company she would be interning for had asked her to do a presentation about herself, so the rest of the team could get to know her. It portrayed her academic achievements with the Open University, her own independent online branding company, which had some minor projects under its belt, and her vision of the role. Each slide flitted over in her mind like the adverts past the train window. It struck the right tone of 'ambition' and 'achievement' without any hint of arrogance, and had taken a full week of work back home before she was happy.

She alighted at Wapping and made for the exit, choosing to climb the stairs rather than join the scrum for the elevator. The heat was predatory, and her laptop bag scored into her shoulder. Finally she emerged outside, but there was no relief to be found in the open air. The street wavered in direct sunlight, car tops glittered and buses sweated as they careered down their lanes. Faces swarmed around her, glaring or ignoring her, their attention absorbed by their mobile phones. She had never seen this amount of people in one day. Shining glass office blocks rose as high and as mercilessly as cliff faces, reflecting the rumble of inexhaustible activity that stretched in every direction. Agnes inwardly shrunk away. She squinted round for a clue to her next direction and found she was on Wapping Lane. This was the street. Finally, something was going her way. On the closest building was the number 277 displayed in dark brushed metal above the door. She needed number 223. Agnes set off, counting down the street.

She had trialled the presentation on James, Lorna and her parents before leaving. James had been an unholy pain in the arse who

contributed nothing. 'This is *your* thing,' he told her. 'What am *I* ever going to tell you?' Her mum had been surprisingly insightful, and her dad clapped at the end. Lorna, as always, had given the best advice. But after just one morning naively trying to navigate the city, doubts were beginning to creep in. An islander's biopic might not cut it.

Number 223 she reminded herself, looking round. She was at 259. She checked her watch and picked up her pace. Twenty minutes to go. Ideas about integrating digital interaction and creative participation into her presentation suddenly jumped up and danced about her mind. How was she only noticing now? New branding, new media, in new ways – that would have piqued their interest. Then the staff would have seen a little innovation and forward-thinking. As it was, the presentation would most likely send them all to sleep. But there was no time to change anything and the last thing she needed was an interruption to what she had meticulously rehearsed. The more she tried to ignore the flow of new ideas, the more convinced she was that this had been an opportunity to showcase 'aspiration' and 'creativity'. She was presenting to a branding/public relations company after all – ideas were what they were interested in, not a succession of curriculum vitae strengths. She arrived outside building 223 with only five minutes to spare and stepped through a rotating door into a large lobby. The cool relief of shade and air-con prickled and stiffened against her clammy skin. There was a faint smell of chlorine. The floor was polished black granite. A small water feature played on her left, and a man sat at the desk to her right.

'Hi there, I've got an appointment with Authentic Brands.' Her accent rang out as heartily as her dad's. The guard had two radios on his belt, which he seemed to be ignoring. He looked young with patchy stubble. Maybe 24, certainly not much older than Agnes.

'Sixth-floor-out-of-the-lift-go-right.'

'Thanks.'

Agnes moved toward the lift and pressed the illuminated button. The doors slid open immediately. A mirror was placed against the back wall, and the floor was a replica of the lobby granite. The lift rose quickly, dragging her stomach. Could they just send her home and cancel the internship if they were disappointed? Her eyes searched her face in the mirror. She smoothed and readjusted her ponytail.

When the doors opened, Agnes found herself in a corridor with rough grey carpet and bleary pieces of abstract art hanging every couple of metres. She turned right and spotted 'Authentic Brands' on one

of the doors. Her showreel of gawkiness loomed, and she hesitated a moment to consider her options. She could ring in and say her flight had been delayed, then she would have the rest of the night to rework it, but they would wonder why she hadn't called earlier and might get suspicious. Perhaps she could tell them she had got travel sick, but then they might think she was a flake. She was just going to have to work with what she had. She knocked on the door and received no answer. She knocked again and pushed the door open into what appeared to be a busy workplace. Light poured in from the window directly opposite. It spanned from floor to ceiling and showed the building on the other side of the street. Six people sat around a table in the middle of the room. Everybody had earphones in or was talking on the phone. Nobody looked up or noticed her entrance. There were two doors on her left that looked like cupboards and on her far right was a conference room. There were posters of previous events and launches lining the walls. A dummy stood in the far corner with multicoloured glossy lanyards artfully spilling from its neck. It was exactly as she'd imagined. Her chest contracted with excitement. Directly in front of Agnes was a reception desk with an arrangement of orange carnations, a computer monitor and a brushed brass name plaque. Sat behind the desk was a woman with immaculate chocolate-brown hair that dropped to her shoulders. She was watching Agnes.

'Can I help you?'

'Hi, I'm Agnes. I've been told to arrive for a 4.30 presentation?'

'Which company have you come with?'

'Oh, err, I start tomorrow?'

'Oh. An intern?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'I didn't have you in the book, but Russell told me to watch out for you. Sometimes the interns just don't show up. I'll fetch him now,' she said with a glossy smile, getting up. She walked away, her high heels echoing like pistol shots on the lacquered wood floor. She leaned through the conference door at the other side of the office. Agnes glanced down at her trousers, shirt and pumps. The woman turned back as a man came to the door and gestured for Agnes to come over. She followed. He wore a clean-style suit. Just like the building, he could have been cut from chrome and glass. The room was almost entirely blank apart from a walnut veneer desk made to accommodate one person, and two metal filing cabinets in the corner. There were no signs of personality

or permanence or human attachments at all. The glass window behind Agnes looked back out onto the team of staff.

‘Agnes, let’s have a quick chat,’ he said in a low, thrilling voice, putting his hand out to shake hers. ‘How was the flight?’

‘The airport is probably bigger than my entire island put together.’

‘Ha! Fantastic. I’ve always meant to make it up there. Edinburgh’s a gorgeous city, so I’m told. Of course, you know that.’ He sat down at the table with his hands clasped in front of him. He waited for her to say more, but Agnes couldn’t think of anything to say. She had never been to Edinburgh. She took the seat opposite him.

‘Well, I’m Russell. I’m the one you have been emailing, obviously.’ He waited again, but Agnes stayed mute. He cleared his throat. ‘We’ve got a couple of events coming up – hang on, we need to get an email set up for you,’ he said, pointing at her, smiling and picking up his phone. He dialled three numbers and waited. ‘Chris, could you set Anna up with an email address?’

‘It’s Agnes,’ she said. ‘My name. It’s Agnes.’ Embarrassment flooded her face.

‘Right you are,’ he said, looking over apologetically. ‘For *Agnes*, Chris. Thanks. Oh, and Chris, set up a presentation space, OK?’ Agnes squirmed at the mention of the presentation. Russell put down the receiver. ‘Sorry, the last girl was Anna. Force of habit.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Anyway, you are going to be doing a bit of office work for a while, admin and data collection, that sort of thing,’ he said, leaning over the desk. ‘That way, you will get to know our suppliers, how we operate, what we are all about. I’ll need you to take care of some of the clients when they come for meetings too, act as a sort of hostess.’

‘Sounds perfect,’ Agnes said, glad to have finally made an enthusiastic noise. He carried on, mentioning a few projects, a few innovations. She already knew most of it from the company website, but asked questions to string out the introduction and make an impression to balance out the inevitably disastrous presentation.

‘Anyway, we’ll re-evaluate in three weeks, see how you are getting on,’ he finished.

‘OK. What exactly will I be evaluated on?’

‘Well, we can be clearer on that after Laura gives you your brief – she will be your supervisor, basically.’

‘Right.’

‘Well, I’ll introduce you and show you round.’ He stood up,

straightened his suit and smoothed down his dark blond hair. Agnes rose from her chair and followed him through the glass door back into the main office space where the other employees were now stood talking and drinking tea and coffee together. The woman with the chocolate hair was still sat at the desk on her phone.

‘Watch the step,’ Russell said, but it was too late. Agnes tripped on the runner below the door, and her arms flew backward as if attempting a comical, wild flight. Seven coffee drinkers saw it happen, and seven mouths smiled into their cups. Russell gave her a sympathetic look and motioned towards the door. In a moment of horror Agnes thought she was being dismissed, but then Russell walked up to the chocolate-haired woman who had greeted her. ‘You’ve already met Laura; she will be your supervisor.’

‘Hi Agnes, I’ve emailed a list of tasks over for tomorrow,’ she said, holding out her hand, but she was interrupted from saying anything further by the shrill sound of her phone. She pressed a button and pulled the microphone nearer, nodding dismissal at the pair of them.

Russell moved towards the two doors Agnes had thought were cupboards. One turned out to be a small, dark staff kitchen with a fridge, two cupboards, a bin, a microwave and a kettle. The other door led to a messy and confined print room. ‘Men’s and Ladies’ are outside in the corridor,’ he explained as he closed the door to the print room and turned to face the main office. The space around the computers was covered with notepads, sheets of spidery structural designs, colourful graphic designs, photographs, and pens, mugs, tickets and other odd bits of merchandise. Russell pointed at a seat at the far end of the table. ‘And that is your spot,’ he said. ‘So, Agnes, any questions?’ Everybody was looking at her.

Her heart started thumping as she remembered she would be doing the presentation in front of all of them. Her eyes flashed to the group of colleagues still holding their coffee mugs. ‘Yes, I need the Wifi password for the presentation,’ she said, trying not to betray any nerves.

‘Ah, Russell. I haven’t had time to set up the space. I got distracted with something for Laura,’ said a woman from the group. It must have been Chris from the earlier phone call.

He glanced at the clock: it was nearly 5.15pm. ‘Well considering the working day’s nearly up, it can wait till tomorrow.’ Relief quietly inched through Agnes. That gave her plenty of time to overhaul the presentation tonight, and tomorrow she would blow them all away. People would say,

‘Look what can happen. A girl living in some out-of-the-way place for 22 years ends up steering the capital like a herd of sheep.’ A sense of excitement grew, and she smiled to herself.

‘Who’s ready for a drink? Perhaps we should give Agnes a traditional intern welcome,’ Russell said, glancing over to Agnes. His eyes seemed almost flirty. The rest of the group sounded enthusiastic.

‘I’m not sure. I only arrived last night, and I haven’t had a chance to unpack or anything,’ Agnes said. She hadn’t expected to be going out.

‘Come on, we’ll make intros at the bar. Laura, you in?’ Russell called across the room. Laura didn’t move. ‘Laura?’

She turned her head and pointed at her mouthpiece, her lips moving silently into the microphone. She held her first finger in the air before finally putting her hand on the dial button.

‘I’m only going if Agnes is going,’ she said, looking pointedly in Agnes’s direction.

It was a crucial situation. She knew she needed to impress and she badly needed to reorganise her presentation. She managed a smile and tried to be nonchalant, as if she felt at home. ‘Sure I’ll come,’ she said. Just one drink. The presentation could wait an hour or so, after all. Now she had got the internship, what she really needed was to see the city. To see everything in the city. In her belly was the hearty conviction that life was beginning.

Nathaniel Ogle

from *Iron*

Part One

If you have managed once to disobey the powers that be, you cannot say, 'I've shed my shackles for good!' A struggling mutt may snap its chain and flee, but it will be trailing several feet of iron still fastened to its collar.

– Persius, *Satires*, V: 158–60

1

It's no warmer inside, and it's just as empty. With a place like this, repairs can only go so far. The air droops, needs wringing. I've brought in logs from the woodshed and refuelled the fire. After stringing my boots to the rack above the hearth, I close curtains, turn out lights. I had been able to keep myself busy with chores and upkeep, but now it's a matter of filling the time. I started building a bridge across Mossdale Beck five months ago and only got as far as laying stringers. The autumn cold set glue in my knuckles. I couldn't measure a single mark or drill another screw. I was forced to pack it in, but now I understand something my father would say in a bind like this: the only thing worse than work unfinished is having your hands tied till God-knows-when.

Yesterday I hauled in the unused timber. In the past two weeks the wind's picked up and the tarpaulin kept whooshing down the valley so I stacked the lot in an empty room upstairs. When I'm weary and wondering how long the cash and I will last – which is often – I stand at the window in that room, see the joists and trusses arcing over the beck like a hammer's claw, and I imagine standing midstream on one of the crossbeams and watching the wobbly reflection in the water below. I can get across the beck in waders, but I talked to Cecil Montgomery, the harelipped farmer who owned this cottage before, and I asked to take a crack at a bridge. That was back in May this year. He got the go-ahead from the area ranger in June and he was happy to source the wood – just as long as I paid for it all myself.

'And if it's botched,' Cecil said, 'that's on you.'

He horseshoed his mouth, the surgery scar.

I said, 'Can you halve the decking order but double the plank length? I want to saw the planks in two myself.'

‘Take longer, won’t it?’ He talked out of one side of his mouth. The harelip, I guess.

‘Aye, but I like to saw,’ I said.

‘Find it fuckin’ mind-numbin’, meself.’

I thought, That’s the point. Then I said, ‘Time flies.’

He snorted. ‘Yeah, when forgettin’ who the fuck y’are it does.’

I hardened, looked at the cottage door.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Keep losing me tether. Nowt personal.’

‘The job’s easy enough,’ I said. ‘Given the weather.’

His hair, stiff and thick as heather, stood still against the breeze. He rubbed a red patch of sunburn on the side of his neck, and I became aware of my jowls, then the tyre around my waist. Before moving here from Manchester I got day-long hankerings for cheese on beans on cheese on toast, and in bed at night I’d pluck up gherkins from a jar and laugh at what I’d become.

I said, ‘I’ve got the tools myself, you know.’

Cecil tested the stability of his canines with his tongue. He pinched his eyes against the sun, looked at the summer sky as if expecting rain.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I wouldn’t let you have the place if I thought you weren’t handy.’

Working a knot in my triceps, I remembered the day I left the school and ransacked the DT storeroom for tools. I used to teach senior school Geography but often filled in for Design & Tech, and after school I held a mostly ignored woodworking class. Besides, my father taught me all I need to know.

Right then Cecil doubled over and sneezed into his mitts, a full-bore aacchoo. He came up frowning, but sneezed twice again. When he was clear of it, he swiped the back of his hand across his nostrils, and looked at me.

I waited a beat, then said, ‘Bless you.’

He nodded. ‘Hay fever,’ he said. ‘Fuckin’ tablet’s not kicked in.’

When I didn’t say anything, he nodded and made toward his Rover. He said, ‘I won’t be round for a bit. Wife and I headin’ – well, never mind. Me sons’ll be in charge. Go see ’em in Conistone if you need owt.’

‘Okay.’

He looked back over his shoulder. ‘And I’d clean out them gutters when rain comes an’ all.’

I watched the Rover ease across the ford, brake lights trundling down the valley. The bridge was planned that night. Even in summer, most

days were leaky and I was at the window watching. I'm stood there now. It's getting on dusk. Red lights blink way up in the sky. West, I think. America. The Caribbean. My dog nuzzles my ankle, rests his throat upon my foot. He's a Golden Retriever/Irish Setter cross; known as a Golden Irish, but I prefer to say Resetter. I got him the day before I came out here, named him Orpheus because dogs suit epic names.

Come spring next year, I'll be out as many days as I can, and Orpheus will chase rabbits and grouse across the heathland. I'll get back to work, find my bearings, brace the stringers, install decking, the railings, everything fastened and sound, and it will be a good thing to do. I imagine it. Rigidity deep and warm in my vertebrae, hands scuffed and splintered, knots of dandelion seeds riding the breeze – a time of childhood, padlocked muscles, sun peeping behind the clouds, streaking splinters of light from thalweg to topmost ridge – and the accidental honour of wellbeing, a feeling of gum in the ears after a long sunburnt afternoon, a feeling like the squeeze of pressure when an aeroplane drops down a shelf of air; a good thing, this bridge, one of success, accomplishment, something that Cleo – ah, Cleo – I had almost forgotten you and – not yet... but one thing: I had a wife. She died.

2

Though Cleo's dead she ain't really gone because I'm still her brother.

Been trying to get my head around those words all morning. Popped in my head from nowhere and it might mean fuck-all, I don't know, but somehow I feel like it's true. Uncle Dwayne's in the passenger on the megaphone blasting, 'Scrap metal... All types of electrical items... Without charge... Radiators... Ironin' boards... Hoovers', and I'm driving us through Hulme, watching magpies swoop past and strut down the wet pavements like police, and I'm thinking, Though Cleo's dead she ain't really gone because I'm still her brother.

I tap Uncle Dwayne on the shoulder. Megaphone crackles silent. He looks at me. Says: 'Ey?' Gold tooth is glinting. Making me want to gip.

I say: 'Not being funny but you know Cleo's dead, right?'

He looks puzzled, then sad. Says: 'Yeah.'

I say: 'But I'm still her brother, ain't I?'

Pauses, says: 'Yeah,' like a question.

'So that sort of means she ain't gone, right? Like she's still here somehow.'

He thinks for a sec. Then says: 'But she dead, Ise.'
I look at the road. Magpie swoops. I gear down for a bend. Think:
maybe just gone then.
I say: 'Never mind.'
Uncle Dwayne lifts the megaphone.
'Scrap metal wanted... All electrical items... White goods... Without
charge... Ironin' boards...'
I see him look up at where his memory is.
I remind him: 'Hoovers.'
'Hoovers!'

*

I turn us off Streford into a little estate of flats and houses. Stop in a
communal carpark. Can hear the wheels roll over the wet. Sounds like
lips opening.

A woman comes out right away. Says: 'There's all sorts round the
back of my place. Over there. Help yourselves, lads.'

Dwayne tells me to get on it. He knows someone around here that
owes him something or other.

I go down the side of a block of houses that's shaped like one big sofa
with one house's balcony being its neighbour's kitchen roof.

Suitcase. TV. Two toasters. Kettle. Scraps.

I rifle through for something valuable. Hands hating me for it. Weird
how hands feel warm when they get cold enough.

'Oi.' A voice from behind puts a chill in my chest.

Think of the worst. Be ready.

But stood there's a stumpy suit, eyebrows all lifted.

Mad relief. God, I can't even remember when police were the only
things that made me nervous.

I say: 'Yeah?'

'Listen. You know there's another way to make ends meet, mate.'

I don't know what to say. Blue suit. Silver tie clip. Shoes shiny as
black ice.

He says: 'Where you from?'

'Moss Side.'

'Thought as much. You know, I've been where you are. You remind
me of myself. What are you, 19?'

'Twenty-two.'

‘Thought as much. Listen, brother. There’s no shame in wanting better for yourself than *scavenging* like this. I know you think your colour is bound to hold you back but, look at me, I’m living proof, bro.’

Really don’t know what to say. One time I’d love to get my fist against his throat. But I just want to laugh. I kiss my teeth. Rummage through scraps.

He keeps chatting shit: ‘I’m trying to help you here, mate.’

‘Don’t need help. Mate.’

‘Well, it certainly doesn’t look that way. It looks like you’re desperate, if you want to know the truth. Can you *really* not find a job?’

Don’t say anything. Doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

‘You shouldn’t let people tell you this is all the life that you deserve, bro. This animal life.’

Don’t say anything.

‘You have a choice, you know. You can choose to break free from this kind of life, from *scrounging* and PlayStation 2 and whatever else you do, and realise your real potential, the *real* you.’

Laugh: ‘Real you. Right.’

‘Because it really is up to you, you know. Things have changed.’

‘Have they? Must’ve missed a meetin’.’

Hear him laugh. ‘That’s right. Blame everybody else. I hate to be the one to tell you, mate, but the only person you can blame for this is yourself. Not your age. Not your colour. Listen, you’re just like me—’

That’s it. I say: ‘I’m nothin’ like you.’

Stood now, facing him. He pockets his hands. Smiling like he’s won. Says: ‘You’re lucky. I’m *not* going to call the police.’

‘Why? Coz I’m black?’

He frowns, he tuts, he walks away. Shoes clip-clopping like a horse on the pavement through a ginnel onto Stretford Road that’s mad with cars.

I get the toasters under my arms. Head for the van.

*

Sun’s on its way down.

‘Where now?’

Dwayne says: ‘Let’s knock it on the head, ’ey? The take’s okay. Let’s make it the last.’

I get us on the Mancunian Way. Head west. Say: 'Don't know where he gets off, him. Acting all high-and-mighty like that.'

'He's no good. Doan fret, Ise.'

'Just coz he's got money.'

'Nah. He just dickhead. Thinkin' he's God's gift. Doan fret now.'

'It'd be all different if I had money.'

'Maybe. You got some Cleo's money?'

'What money?'

'When Cleo die.'

'There was no money that came our way.'

'No for your father?'

'None.'

Uncle Dwayne makes a humming sound. I take us off the Way, round the ring road, onto Chester Road.

I say: 'Where's her money gone, then?'

After a pause, he says: 'Her husband.'

'Nick?'

'Yeah.'

'Cleo's money went to him?'

'If no' in she will, then yeah.'

I indicate to turn off for the yard, but Uncle Dwayne tells me to keep on. Someone to see in Stretford. Sky's still light, but just. We pass Kwik Fit, Chester's Steak House, car dealerships, the red row of shops and takeaways, houses here and there, the blank-faced offices, Cash Generator, a tower block, depots. I think: Prick Fisher's probably halfway round the world. Living it up with Cleo's cash. Sunshine, cider, beaches, sea. I want to ask Uncle Dwayne if some of the cash belongs to me. Hate to sound like a vulture, 'specially when it comes to Cleo, but why does Nick get the lot? I think about what I can do to make it right.

1.

Autumn

Was it because Leanne had tossed her silver purity pledge ring in the ocean? James had imagined her doing it, hurling it into the Georgia Straight. Then she'd given her virginity to Benny Crestwell while a Slipknot album blasted in the back of his minivan. That's what Chris Gagnon's sister told him. He'd pictured that too, Leanne's red hair spread out beneath her as Benny crawled all over. After three years of waiting, she'd given it to Benny because he sketched her a few times at the First Baptist arts and crafts class.

Leanne had told him on the phone – 'Benny says I'm his muse.' That's all it had taken – a few words of flattery and Benny's 'artistic hands'. Don't forget the swarthy, Italian-looking looks. Upon hearing that, James had thrown his own ring in the ocean.

Now he was trash on the sidewalk. The whole town knew it. Mr Tremblay uncled up to him at the A&W Burger and told him: 'Can't be helped. There's nothing to do but get out of here, son. She's made you look like a loser.'

Was it because it rained every day in Courtney? Was it because the job with Roche in Toronto had fallen through? All this and more.

Dear old dad saying: 'If nothing comes along you'll have to go up to Fort McMurray, there. You've got all those college debts to pay. Plenty of money up in the sands. Can't be staying around the house.'

That's when James saw the advertisement in the Genomics section of *The Scientific Canadian*:

Better Lives Through Livestock:

We seek ambitious scientists with strong backgrounds in developmental biology, cell biology, signal transduction, and/or gene regulation and experience in biochemical, molecular, and/or imaging techniques. We are also interested in applicants with experience and interest in vertebrate embryology, genetics, and the characterization of genetic models.

Our facility in Idaho affords free accommodation in the comfortable and friendly atmosphere of our close community.

Going south did not excite him, but the cash got him revved up. Good money and a way out. He applied.

The telephone interview was with a gruff-voiced Texan – Doctor Mulligan. Mulligan quizzed James about all the elements of his postgraduate research. After 30 minutes, he said, ‘I tell you what, kid, you’ll do. You can start right away.’

He was to get himself to Boise and they would arrange a flight from there.

‘You’ll pick me up in a plane?’ asked James.

‘The roads are bad out here. Flying’s faster. We’ll get a private contractor to carry you halfway from Boise, then Pastor John will deliver you to us in his own plane. You’ll get an inspirational view over the mountains. We fly and the Lord flies with us. You believe in God, don’t you boy?’ inquired the Doctor.

‘Yes sir. Yes I do.’

2.

A bloated cloud, bright and white, cast a shadow for a moment over Platt’s Field before drifting off towards the distant spike of River’s Peak.

Roy and Stevie watched it float over them. They were slouched down in the rear bed of Roy’s red Hilux pick-up with a crate of stubbies. They were parked, nose uphill, on a grassy incline overlooking the tarmac apron down in the valley. The airstrip was cracked, spurge grass poked through. All around them the forest and the mountains beyond.

Roy stood up and stretched. He looked at his watch then at the sky. Roy had dark hair, cut very short at the back with a long fringe slicked over on the right side. He was taller than Stevie by a foot. Roy used to be a tackle and his upper body was still mighty. But a few years off the turf had broadened his trunk and robbed him of his V shape. He was wearing his orange and black number 11 shirt, as it was the last one that still fitted him. Roy’s chin had developed a new hanging section of flesh. Not quite a double chin, but something that confused the GI Joe line of his jaw. Roy picked up a fresh beer and sat back down.

Stevie was mouse-haired but bleached it blond. He’d never been on the football team. Stumpy legs inherited from a proud line of Lublin craftsmen made running, for him, a little troublesome. He’d always had to roll his denims up. For Stevie, it was always shop and the wrestling team. He’d got his left fist in the breast pocket of his green parker jacket, the other hand was fiddling a plastic cigarette lighter.

Stevie stood up and raised an invisible rifle to his shoulder.

'I tell you what be real sweet. Just gettin' a load a' guns and goin' out to the desert and just shooting them all off. That be something.'

He scanned the tree line opposite for enemies. He squeezed the trigger and his hands shook. 'Dakka dakka dakk.'

'You got a gun. Why don't you just shoot that?' asked Roy.

'It's a pieceovshit.'

Stevie fired off more rounds into the mountain opposite and then slumped back down.

'Brandon's dad was in Denny's today,' said Roy.

'Yeah?'

'Yep. He was talking all big about buyin' Brandon a place in Houston for college.'

'Shit.'

'Yeah. Buyin' a place for that little shit-fucker. That shit-pipe lovin' little freak. Fucking asshole.' Roy brought down his fist hard on the truck's side. For a moment they sat in silence.

'You seen his mom there?' asked Stevie.

Roy gave a satisfied little grunt.

'She was there.'

'Wearin' one of them skirts?'

'You know it.'

'Fuck me, she got the nicest tits I ever seen. And that ass.'

'Yep. But she spent the whole time sittin' on it. She didn't get up once. Lisbet and Brandon's dad did the fetchin' and carryin', she just sat there like a queen.'

'Urgh. He's whipped,' said Stevie.

'Sure, but I wouldn't fuss about bein' whipped by Mrs Ross. She's so tight, it'd be worth it.' Roy brought his legs up and put his hands behind his head, smiling all over. 'If she was mine I'd keep her sitting on her ass. That ass would just be for me.'

'Nah. Not me. She should be walking that thing all over the place. I'd want people to see her. Want 'em to see how she is.'

'That's fucked up, Stevie. You some kind of voyeurist or some such?'

'"Some such?" What're you? Some kind of hick fuck?' said Stevie, laughing.

'No more 'an you. Shut up. I'm sayin' you got to keep a pussy like that in the house.'

'Shit Roy, that's why you are so hard up.'

'Fuck you!'

'Ain't nuthin'. Ain't nuthin'. I'm just sayin' if you want to keep a woman like that, then you gotta act like you don't care. That you don't give a damn if she stays or goes.'

'Bull! You don't know. When was the last time you got some?'

'Fucked your mom while you was out flippin' burgers this morning.'

Roy swung around and pummelled Stevie's left arm. They laughed as they punched each other.

A pin flash of light in the sky stopped the scuffle.

'Shit. Here we go. You see that?'

'I ain't blind am I?' said Stevie grinning.

'Why do you have to be such a little bitch?'

Then they heard the buzz of engines.

'Looks like a luck-day,' said Roy.

'Yep. Let's see what the gods have brought us.'

The shape in the sky resolved itself into a two-engined prop-freighter. It was grey with a red stripe down its side. It flopped onto the apron, breaking hard, stopping with its tail bouncing a little into the air.

'Easy does it,' said Stevie.

Roy stood up, but Stevie pulled him back down.

'Not yet. Let 'um get unpacked.'

Two figures got out of the aircraft. Even at that distance they could see that one was a bear of a man.

'That Ajay?' asked Stevie, squinting.

'Yep.'

'It's a miracle that fat-fuck can get airborne.'

'Damn straight. He got to get his seat fixed right back against the cockpit wall.'

'Jesus.'

The other figure was short, compared to the giant Ajay, and slim, like a teenaged boy. Ajay unloaded three large black hold-alls from the plane's belly, throwing them onto the concrete without looking. Ajay waved farewell to his passenger then clambered into the plane. In a few minutes the plane was gone.

'Praise the Lord,' said Stevie.

The figure on the runway sat down on one of the hold-alls.

'Now?' asked Roy.

'Now.'

They jumped off the back of the truck and got into the cab. Roy

switched on and spun the truck around. The man in the valley turned to look at them. With a whoop they charged at the figure standing on the runway.

‘Look at the fucker run! Run you bitch! Go on now, run!’

He did, nervously and uncertainly, as the truck came at him. He dodged just as the Hilux flashed past. Roy twirled the wheel sending the Hilux into a spin. He straightened the truck and charged again. The guy started running in tight circles so that they had to pull a series of doughnuts to keep on him.

‘He’s a tricky fucker!’ shouted Roy.

‘Keep on him! Get him! Get him!’

Roy kept on his prey. The guy began running along the airstrip towards the shacks at the southern end.

‘Where’s he goin’? Ain’t no one there.’

The guy lost his wind after a few minutes and fell down in the long grass next to the runway. Roy and Stevie got out of the truck and walked over.

‘What did you run for? We ain’t gonna hurt ya.’

The guy lay on his side, gasping for air.

‘If you didn’t run then you wouldn’t be tired out would you, faggot? Where you from, faggot?’ asked Stevie.

He was not as young as they had thought. He looked like he was in his early twenties. He wore a green fleece coat and a pair of tan trousers. The laces of his hiking boots had come loose. His features were even, a long straight nose and brown eyes. His hair was a light brown, worn long so that it covered his ears. The lips were a bit too red, giving an impression of the feminine. His face was flushed and sweaty.

‘I said, where you from?’

‘What do you want?’ said the guy.

‘Holy Shit! He’s a fucking Canook! You getting this, buddy? Fuck me, what the hell is a Canook doing here?’

‘I’ll bet this faggot is another one of those cult freaks over at Riverton,’ accused Roy.

‘That right, faggot? You a cult boy? You one of them freaks from that Church of Jesus the Douche? What you doing here in a real country? Come to fuck our women, faggot?’

‘What’s your name, Canook faggot?’

The guy said nothing so Roy gave him a sharp kick in his belly.

‘Get lost, okay!’

'Oh! You hear that, Roy? So disrespectful. This is our country. Name, bitch? You do what we say. You ain't in Can-na-dar now.'

'James.'

'For real? Hewwee! James? James Bond, Jamie boy, Fuck.' Roy kept laughing, a high-pitched, melodic sound. It made Stevie crack up.

'Well, James, you going to get your faggot Canadian ass up and hand over your wallet and your cell and your bitch passport.'

James stood up and tried to run again.

'Aw, fuck no!' shouted Stevie.

Roy tackled James and he fell hard on his face. Roy hit him in the kidneys.

'Get up! You fucking get up!'

Roy turned James over and, grabbing him by the front of his shirt, hauled him to his feet. Gasping, James emptied the pockets of his fleece and his slacks.

'A hundred bucks? You fucking kiddin' me?'

'Aw shit. All right Jamie boy, let's see them bags,' said Stevie.

They dragged him back to his luggage. James watched as they invaded his cases.

'Shit, what's all this crap? What's all these books? I don't get you, faggot, you don't got nuthin' better to do?' They laughed at him.

'This one's got clothes. Fuck me, Jamie boy, you got shitty taste. Look at his panties!' Roy held up a pair of powder-blue jockey shorts. They kept laughing.

'Shit, what's this?'

James winced. They'd found his microscope.

'Some kind of bullshit,' said Stevie coming over to look at it. Roy and Stevie looked at each other.

'You steal this J-boy?' asked Stevie.

'No. No, it's mine.'

'Fuck me, it's got his name wrote on the bottom – "James Fran-kel".' They both laughed.

'Shit, you are one queer sonovabitch!'

James watched them refill a bag with his clothes. They put the microscope on top. The books they tossed on the runway. Soon his biology texts and novels were littered around, pages flapping.

Then they beat him. He told them to stop. Roy got serious and started hitting him hard in the face. Leaning over and hitting him hard, as if he was at work. Roy's jaw jutted forward and the corners of his mouth came

A.E. Pearce

down. As Roy hit him, a little bit of drool escaped, landing on James's neck. James begged them to stop. Asked them 'why?' Stevie laughed all the while. They told him that it was because he was a faggot. Roy and Stevie got in their truck and drove off, leaving James for dead.



Emma Rhys

from *Praxis*

The clouds pass and the rain does its work, and all individual
beings flow into their forms.

– I Ching or Book of Changes, Wilhelm/Baynes translation

The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps
o'er a cold decree.

– William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Chapter 1

Deryn's bra-strap keeps slipping down her shoulder. There's always something to ruin her image; always some lack of coordination. Up against the ticket barriers she fumbles through her purse for her Oyster card, queue forming behind her. She wonders whether she'll have to dance today and hopes not, as she slaps the card down and hurries through the barriers. Audition, interview, workshop – interpretative trees and cats perhaps, but not dance routines, not today. She's not applying for musical theatre, after all.

But there will be some dance – for improving posture and physical awareness onstage – if she gets on to the course. Deryn usually ignored what her body was doing: anxious thoughts dismembered her. Her mother used to tell her to look around more when they were out together. That's why you're so clumsy; that's why you slouch. It was as if walking headfirst would get her there faster. Deryn's drama teacher called her a timid turtle: she wouldn't have encouraged her to apply for a prestigious drama school.

Deryn walks a little way down the platform then waits on the yellow line in front of the tracks. She can hear birds. She imagines a string coming down from the station roof, hooking the back of her head and pulling her up straight. It works – she feels taller. She scans up and down the platform and checks the board: Clapham Junction, three minutes – same as her monologue for the audition. Suddenly she feels as if the world around her has slowed down while everything she's doing has speeded up. She checks her watch – her arm shoots out like a salamander's tongue. She holds her hand flat – it's trembling. Four o'clock: two hours until her audition. Her shoulder tickles – she swats her bra-strap like a fly.

She wonders if this hyper awareness is an effect of the antidepressants.

She tells herself she's not nervous about the audition, despite her shallow breathing, her stomach clenched to trap butterflies. She thought her mother's death had clipped those wings, made it impossible for her to feel anything but grief. It must be the antidepressants. They're supposed to make you anxious at first: perhaps that's how they bring you back to life.

As the train pulls in, she hurries past the fuller carriages then bounds inside just as the doors close. Sitting in the middle of an empty row she aggressively tucks her vest top under her bra-strap and squints at the low sun. She won't be back till dark. She notices a woman at the other end wearing sunglasses and curses herself for forgetting her own. They're good for hiding shyness, fear: dilated pupils or the whites of your eyes, arousal or deference. That's why they're cool – eclipse the world and you're above it.

The train stops and an old woman steps on, sits directly opposite her and stares without flinching. Deryn stares back and tries not to relent with a feeble half-smile. *Ada* would have relented – what did people see? A needy baby bird. She changed her name after her mother died, to be closer to the name her mother had wanted: *Aderyn*, meaning bird in Welsh. Her dad had thought it silly, said her mother couldn't pronounce it properly and refused to compromise with Deryn, insisted on *Ada*. Perhaps it was a condition for his staying around.

The underground train is busier but after a couple of stops she can sit down. She catches her reflection in the blacked-out window: they're gonna hate me. No. Think character. She considers taking out her monologue when the train stops and more people pile on. It'll be rush hour by the time she gets to West London.

An attractive guy glides into a seat, takes out an iPad and disappears. It's an art travelling on the Tube. She'll get used to it.

The train jolts, lights flicker. What if she fucks up? The Devil's fingers twitch, ready to tear the expectant space into a gaping hole impossible to fill.

She takes a deep breath and stretches out her legs, her Doc Martens like anchors; they're too hot for today but she hates wearing sandals or ballet pumps: her shoes keep her grounded, something has to. Dresses were out of the question: she'd float away, disappear entirely.

At Victoria, she changes onto the District line. The train soon rises out of the tunnel and the announcer calls her station: Turnham Green.

An encouraging name: suggestive of growth; of turning. Today is a Turning Point: Hexagram 24. She'd received Hexagram 36, Line 1 that morning: *With grandiose resolve a man endeavours to soar above all obstacles, but thus encounters a hostile fate.* She hadn't read on but glimpsed the absolving words: *But he has somewhere to go* – no blame. Pursuing a dream is inevitable, never mind wounded wings.

As she walks down the steps, she takes out her monologue. The paper is crumpled, the ink faded, but a glance at the first word and the rest tumble out into her brain:

'If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do...'

Quite. She knows her lines, she knows the Method. She knows this doesn't guarantee a good performance. The moment can always give you away.

But she's in London now, she thinks, as she touches down her Oyster. She's going to a real drama school with proper drama teachers who'll only know her for her performance, not the quiet, conscientious girl who needs to raise her hand more in class. They won't see her. No one will again. Ada's a corpse and Deryn's burying her ghost.

She walks out into the late-afternoon sun, steps around wilted bouquets outside a flower shop then turns right off the main road and takes out her phone – two minutes away, straight ahead. The website had said it was past The Tabard. There it is – its pub garden twinkling with fairy lights. She imagines drinking there with her coursemates, talking animatedly, wearing sunglasses.

She comes to a sprawling red-brick building – this must be it – and walks through large wooden doors into a porch with red and gold carpet and a placard on the floor: 'Auditions, 3rd Floor, Studio B'. The second set of doors suddenly fly open. A middle-aged man, ginger-haired and red-faced, marches past wearing what looks like a white cotton onesie. Deryn watches him light a cigarette and blow the smoke into the sky. She hesitates. She has time but she doesn't want to risk an unimpressive conversation with a potential tutor. Shit. Think character. She fingers the pack of cigarettes in her bag, then decides he doesn't look in the mood for company.

Outside the plain black doors of Studio B wait two girls around her age. They're laughing as she approaches; seem already to be friends. Deryn

sits on the floor next to them, wishing she'd had a cigarette. A woman with short hair and bare feet comes out of Studio B, followed by a boy wearing low-slung jeans. He looks Japanese.

'How'd it go kiddo?' asks one of the girls. She looks Indian.

'Fuckin' A,' he says, putting headphones on and stepping over their legs.

Deryn pulls hers in and immediately regrets it. He doesn't look at her.

'See you out front,' the girl calls after him.

He doesn't turn but raises a peace sign as he walks away. They're all friends. Did she miss a meet-and-greet?

The girl turns to her. 'Hiya. What's your name?'

'Deryn.'

'Pretty name. Where you from?'

'Wales.'

'Cool, never met a Welsh person before, have we, Kel?' She looks at the blonde girl sat opposite, who shrugs and grins as if she'd made a joke.

'You just done your A levels then?'

'Yeah,' Deryn lies. She'd only managed one before her mother died.

'We're just here cus our drama teacher says we shouldn't waste our talent,' she laughs. 'I dunno, it would be cool but it's only foundational, innit. I've been offered a place at Oxford.'

'You can defer though, Dev,' says the blonde girl.

So, they're friends from school. Deryn was trying to forget her friends as they'd forgotten her. She didn't blame them. In the evenings, watching films at home, Ada was a giant. At school the next morning she'd shrink so fast she hardly noticed, until she realised no one was talking to her. She could only possess herself in her imagination: other people were a constant reminder of who she was not.

'What are your names?' Deryn asks, smiling to keep her mouth from trembling.

'I'm Devyani; that's Kelly.'

'Cool. When you on?'

'Now,' Kelly says, rolling her eyes.

'Fifteen minutes ago,' Devyani says. 'They're running late.'

Deryn wants to take out her script, visualise, begin emotional memory. She wishes they seemed more nervous. They obviously aren't taking it seriously or are too cool – probably didn't even cry when they

were born; may as well be wearing sunglasses.

‘God, you look so scared. Doesn’t she Kel?’ Devyani says.

‘Don’t be mean,’ Kelly laughs.

‘I’m not. You OK, Deryn? Fancy some gin?’ She reaches into her bag. ‘Kiddin’. Gum?’

‘Gin yes, gum no,’ Deryn says. ‘Thanks, though.’

‘You got any Asians in Wales?’ Devyani asks.

‘Yeah, course,’ Deryn hesitates. ‘None in my school, though.’

‘No way, I’m the only white girl in our school,’ Kelly says.

‘No way,’ Deryn echoes.

The door opens.

‘Devyani Mistry?’ the woman says.

Devyani stands up quickly, suddenly looking nervous. Deryn’s stomach flutters.

‘Come with me, please,’ the woman says, holding the door open. ‘Take off your shoes.’

‘Good luck,’ Kelly whispers, as Devyani pulls off her ballet pumps.

Deryn peers inside the studio – black walls, black floor: dark as the womb. Acting as rebirth. She flexes her toes against the hard interior of her boots.

‘Can you two – Deryn and Kelly I presume – wait in there, please,’ the woman says, pointing at a green door that Deryn hadn’t noticed.

Kelly switches on the light. Inside, the desks have been arranged in a circle – for ‘table reads’, Deryn thinks.

Kelly turns to her. ‘Comin’?’

‘Just have to go to the bathroom first,’ Deryn says. ‘D’you know where it is?’

‘Nope,’ Kelly says, lifting herself up onto a desk.

Deryn walks away wondering if Kelly and Devyani like her. They seemed to find something funny about her. Had they already cast her as country bumpkin? And would she adopt their image just so they’d like her but she’d hate herself? Shit. But she couldn’t spend her life not talking to people, could she?

In the toilets, Deryn stares at her reflection:

‘I am Portia.’



Charlotte Rowland

Tasks

As night sets itself unsteadily in front of windows
meant for more, you limit yourself to bindings of your own choice.

How I am involved is uncertain. The dark magnifies
space out of proportion, attaching me to you even without approach.

Your body, inexactly, begins to feel like blossom.
Hands cusped, I catch you, in pieces, engaging in the motion of fall.

The Manchester Anthology 2014

Home Comforts

Stored isthmus-like on the floor
your body secretly files unmanaged space.

As you read I offer small talk,
draping the balconied evening.

Untouched glasses
signal the mystery of *peau est peau*,
as all of darkness courts
the silhouette you freely give it.

Silky lights
curtail my next move.

Rendition

If made to, you, who do your deeds by night, listening faintly to Prokofiev,
would choose its late freedom to commit to memory.

Instead, you lose yourself in photographs of cleared esplanades,
coveting blue. Outside, lean-tos announce various entrances.

Loose surfaces make an event of wind.

The coast purls. You respond by mildly keeping pace.

The sky, you predict, is all image.

You fall in and out of sequence
as though night made you feel most watched. How settled it gets
depends on your fingertips, equipped to steady
the sea's depth and pointe. On cue, firth lines ricochet.
Fanned pennants convene against a fetched scape. By the window,
the morning reclines. You lean in. Lights still flicker for the shoreline.
The record ends. These are your certainties.

The Manchester Anthology 2014

Trust

You know it isn't everything to keep all your secrets intact, without give,
as if it were common to make your own view.

I am beginning to feel elsewhere. If you were to carry me, loosely,
through and into this light, I would reason your darkness against it

even as you kept me in the white of your hands.

I am held in several grips.

The day slips away before you can grasp it,
leaning you against a stillness leaning itself on the hunched body of night.

Waking I

Two ports, neither of them named, take on the one given light
as if, having asked for a vaster fill of sky, it were all their own.

If I am to have you, such a scene, involving blue, must be held
against you. Your insistence on giving me the quietude I want

prevents me from accurately hearing any echoes from outside.
You close our night with a tenderness I would endow the rain.

Together we twine our interior with the rayed streamlet of sun
seeing us, with promise, to the end of this harboured day alone.

Waking II

Enough to silence you completely, the light's composed swiftness
in coming through the windows gets you thinking of continuation.

As the depth of day approaches we use one another as provisions,
rationing your extreme care for detail with my lesser need to hold

part of the latching sky. I am not trying to retell night's intimacy
but uncover how, in the exchange, I can make you appear, in all,

to be with me. I had thought you had a vision of me. I had thought
it was enough. Now, you believe in permanence. This, at least, is.

Stefanie Sabathy

from *Luna Moth*

Chapter One

Everything was strange to her. This country. This city. This house. It was already late morning, so the grey light falling in through the kitchen window was probably as bright as it was going to get. Joy thought she saw something move out of the corner of her eye. She turned around but there was nothing there. The 16-year-old sighed and wondered whether her homesickness was getting to her. Or maybe she should just stop listening to Ben. He was eight and still believed in magic and little people living in curtain folds. Although he couldn't see them, he was absolutely certain that he could hear them breathe.

If only she was old enough to book a direct beaming pass back to Vienna. They had come here the old-fashioned way – by plane. Although the year was 2120, her mum still doubted that the transmission of beaming was safe. She was afraid they might not get to their destination whole. Joy sighed. Her mum was so 2090s.

A few weeks ago, she had been thrilled when she had shown Joy and Ben the old house in the online directory of *Retro and Vintage Living*.

'Isn't this exciting? We are going to move to a charming little English country house.'

Joy had wanted to stay home. In Vienna. But those days were history. Just like the days of their happy family life. With Ben still able to see, and Mum still infatuated with Dad. And Dad... still alive.

She glanced at the old kettle. Liking tea was essential in England. Black tea with milk. What an odd drink. Mum hadn't bought any coffee. As if that made them more English.

Everything in this old house seemed either small, if it was a room, or broken, if it was an object. She wondered if she would ever get used to the tiny bedrooms, the spring-loaded doors that were far too narrow, or the window latches that kept falling off.

Joy thought about skipping breakfast when her mother came in, casually dressed in jeans and a jumper for a lazy Sunday. Her fair hair was loosely put up.

'Good morning, darling! Isn't this little cottage enchanting? Come here...'

But Joy didn't go for the hug. Her feet seemed stuck to the ground. What if her mum had stayed in England with her dad back when they

had met? Why had he not just convinced her to stay? She told herself that this was 16 years ago. But she couldn't let it go.

'Mum? Why didn't you stay here in the first place, you and Dad?'

Joy swore she saw her flinch for a split second but it was hard to tell with Mum. When her mother answered she seemed totally calm. Like always.

'Joy. I needed help raising you, we had no family here and—'

Joy interrupted and she knew her tone sounded reproachful but she did not care.

'What about Dad's family? Have you ever thought about them?'

Her mother seemed to be weighing up her words. Then she replied quietly and very slowly.

'Darling, of course. Your father was happy with the decision.'

Joy looked straight at her but her mother had put on her poker face. Joy would never be able to hide her feelings from the world the way she did. She had to get out. But then she stayed and heard herself say: 'But you do realise this does have an effect on all of us, don't you? In Vienna I could have graduated with all my friends, and Ben had finally found friends in primary school. How does your perfect plan cover that, I wonder? First, you destroy our family life and almost run off with Alex, and now you take us away from our home!'

Joy knew she had gone too far, but she couldn't stop. She was shouting now. 'If it hadn't been for Alex, Dad would still be alive and you know it!'

As Joy went for the door and pulled it open, she could already feel the tears streaming down her burning cheeks. Storming out of the kitchen, she hastily wiped them away and almost ran into Ben. He was barefoot and still in his pyjamas. He opened his arms wide and smiled. In one of his hands, he held *Grimm's Fairy Tales: Revisited*, currently his favourite book. She hesitated but she couldn't bring herself to hug him just now.

'Sorry, Ben. I need to be alone for a bit...'. She had to turn away quickly in order not to see his sinking arms and his fading smile. Instead, she concentrated on getting into her trainers, not bothering with the shoelaces. She was thankful that she was already properly dressed. In the countryside, gossip seemed to travel especially fast and she wouldn't have liked to be seen running around crying in her pyjamas.

Joy grabbed her coat from the banister of the stairs and pulled the front door open. She could hear her mother's voice shouting from the

kitchen as she hurried outside: ‘Joy, stop – don’t you walk out on me like that!’

Then the door clicked shut. Joy turned and ran.

The next day, Joy felt as if she had hardly slept. Somehow she got out of bed and through her morning classes. She was still ‘the new girl’.

‘Next, please!’

The woman with heavy make-up behind the school cafeteria’s cashdesk sighed when Joy hastily started searching for her student ID.

‘Love, have it ready – I haven’t got all day!’

Her manicured nails tapped against the till. Joy quickly handed over her card. The till-lady was just one more reason to avoid school lunches. But Mum wanted her to have something hot and healthy. Joy didn’t. She got burgers and fries.

At first, she couldn’t see a free table. There was the group of popular black kids. The next table was taken by a few Asian girls, but they mostly kept to themselves. Joy felt too tall, too white, not English enough and not exotic enough. Her eyes were unnaturally green, her hair shoulder-length and brown. She didn’t do small talk and dreaded having to talk about what had brought her here. After the first few weeks, they had stopped asking her questions and left her alone.

Joy finally spotted one of the single tables set apart from the rest of the kids. There was only one chair and she would have her back to the corner. Perhaps the architect had felt pity for the outsiders who wanted to keep their distance.

‘Hey, you!’

Joy looked up into a boy’s freckled face. His grin reminded her very much of the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. The boy’s ears stuck out and were framed by unkempt blond hair. Joy had seen enough. But he moved in closer.

‘You, I know you can hear me!’

Joy shot him a look that she thought would freeze an army to the spot but he was unfazed.

‘I kinda need something from you... I’ll keep it short and then you can enjoy the rest of your food in deathly silence, deal?’

It was time to leave. But when she got up, he grabbed the chair of the table behind him, and blocked her way. Then he put one hand on her shoulder, gently pushing her down on her chair, and sat down himself. She was so surprised, she let it happen.

'I'm James, by the way. This'll just take a sec,' he sneered.

Joy frowned and looked at him in disbelief. No, she would not take this. Nobody talked to her like that. She was just about to throw some nasty remark in his face when his grin suddenly froze. They both sat there motionless, their eyes locked together. Joy's body was paralysed; she could not move a single muscle. The surge of panic within her gave way to a sudden chill, starting on top of her head and running down her back, into her toes. Then, as abruptly as the sensation had come, it was gone and she felt she could move again. Confused, she looked at the motionless boy who had introduced himself as James.

'Hey, are you okay?' she asked him but there was no reaction. He had not altered his pose an inch. His eyes and mouth were wide open. It looked as if his movement had been captured in time. Joy stood up and looked at the students around them. Everyone had come to a standstill. The ones that had been talking to others had stopped in the middle of their sentences, their faces grotesquely distorted. Others were leaning in towards their friends, stuck in gestures with their spoons or knives. Joy slowly turned around. It was all of them: the staff behind the counter handing out food, the students queuing for the cashier – wait, the woman at the till was missing. The girl whose turn it had been to pay was still handing a note in the direction of the till but there was nobody sitting there. Joy let her eyes wander around the cafeteria. Everyone except her was paralysed. It was only now she realised that there was also no sound. It was like a thick layer of snow had covered it all, muffling everything. Joy had never experienced such a complete silence and it made her shudder.

She turned towards James, her hand slowly reaching out for his shoulder. His gaze now seemed ghostly, his eyes staring into nothingness. Her fingertips reached his black jacket. She felt the leather, but the shoulder beneath it was unusually hard. James did not react at all. In fact, he didn't seem to be breathing. Her hand touched his throat. It was like that of a sculpture. Her own pulse was racing now. What had happened? She wanted to scream but her throat was too tight and no sound came out. She put her arms around herself to feel the warmth of her own body and the movement of her chest going up and down. She held on for a few moments and then let go and took a deep breath. She needed to know if the rest of the world had also come to a standstill.

Joy slowly moved past James and walked through the cafeteria, careful not to touch anything. When she came past the middle of the

cashier queue, she stopped. It was hard to believe what she was seeing. One of the girls had just been pushed by someone behind her. The girl was leaning forward and had let go of the tray, which hovered in mid-air. The things on the tray had moved to the front and the green pea soup had spilt out of the bowl into the air, but it was just as immobilised in the moment as everything else around.

When Joy was walking through the open sliding doors of the cafeteria, they all of a sudden started moving towards her. At the same moment, the noise around her hit her with full force. She could hear how the tray fell to the floor and how the bowl shattered into pieces. There was shrieking, laughter, and about a hundred different voices all talking at once. When she turned around everyone was moving again. Joy felt dizzy. Perhaps all of this was getting too much for her and she was going mad. She decided she needed some fresh air. But what had happened to the blond guy? Her eyes searched for the table in the corner. The last thing she saw before she left was James, in his leather jacket, looking at the empty chair next to him in complete bewilderment.



Julia Tregoin

from *A Matter of Time*

Have you ever been able to pinpoint a moment in your life that changed everything? Ever regretted a rash decision you made that cost your world? And have you ever wished with all your heart and soul for the chance to go back in time and change a stupid choice to the right one?

I have.

And have you ever woken up one morning and wondered why, as you went to put your feet over the edge of the bed, you were climbing out of it backwards?

Well, this is happening to me now. Right now. If you can call it 'now' any more, it's turning suspiciously into 'before'. I am staggering backwards out of bed and taking off my pyjamas, pulling on my boxers, then my clothes, and walking backwards towards the stairs. Gravity brings me to my knees as I reach the top and it's clear, even without remembering, that I'm fairly hammered. I'm crawling down the steps but I'm facing upwards, and I can't say it's not unnerving but I don't seem to be able to do much about it.

And now I am taking an empty bottle from the living room floor and draining vodka back into it. Not much at first, but I already know there's more to come. If I didn't have the memory of it, the haze in my head makes it pretty clear. Probably best to get rid of it anyway. I fall gracelessly onto the sofa and my limbs sink heavy into it. The TV soothes my mind with its random squawking from some reality show starring vapid human beings who are currently my only companions. I feel alternate affection and hatred for them. My head clears as the minutes and hours tick back. Thoughts begin clinking against my skull and I wish the vodka bottle wasn't getting fuller.

The room is a stinking pit of empty beer cans, overflowing ashtrays and old, encrusted pizza boxes. I feel a sense of disgrace because it's not actually my house, it's Gerard's house. He's my best mate and has been for 18 years. I would do anything for him and he would do anything for me. He *has* done anything for me. He's given me a place to crash my head. After everything fell apart, I had nowhere to go. But I know he's tired now because I've been here for a while, stuck. I don't know how to get out of this funk. It's hard when the bottom is a level up from you.

And so I am going back through dinner (rancid Chinese), daytime TV (inane entertainment), lunch (an old pizza slice), more daytime TV and then breakfast. Ever seen coffee turn back into water? Cracked eggshells

become perfectly smooth? I climb back into bed and the sun retreats. I feel an impending sense of disaster. The past is where I have been trying to get away from. If there was one comfort to me, it was that every day was a step further away from losing that good thing I had.

And I'm off to bed again, feeling sick and headachy, only to wake up hours later to crawl down the stairs again. And before long it's yesterday afternoon and Gerard is having his rant. Only everything he says sounds like Klingon. But if my memory serves me correctly (and this was after the first half of that bottle of vodka), he was saying something like I was being an idiot and hiding myself away and that I needed to get it together, that Sarah was the best thing that had ever happened to my sorry-for-shit life, and I should go beg for her back, take whatever punishment she decided to dish out. I can't say I was listening much the first time round, but it sounds about right.

Still, I guess he's got a point about my sorry-for-shit life. I never amounted to much. Apathy is ironically powerful. After finally leaving the village at 18, I tried university, intending to take on the world. But that didn't work out – neither university nor taking on the world. I came back confused and broke, and got stuck in the first job that was offered to me, at the local estate agents, run by Mr Matheson, a recently separated middle-ager who had just bought a Lexus and fancied taking on a protégé. He sold the Lexus six months later when his wife let him back in the house, but kept me on at least. He truly believed I wanted to be there, that he had given me an amazing opportunity in life. When he gave me my misspelt name badge on my first day – 'Philp Baker' – I think I died inside a little bit. I kept the badge on purpose to remind me that my stay was only temporary. I've been 'Philp' for eight years.

And now Gerard has stopped his rant, or rather not started it yet, and has been messing up the kitchen, taking empty beer cans out of the bin and strewing them all over the floor, closing the curtains in the living room where I sit in my funk, and finally leaving the house while I fill the cans up, in turn, doing everything not to think about what I've lost.

And so it goes on, back a day, back a week. I can predict my movements without having actually lived through them: eat, sleep, drink, watch TV. In various orders. Occasionally I weep like a loser, but let's not talk about that.

I wonder when it will stop. Perhaps if I am lucky, it will speed past that week one month ago. Past that decision that ruined everything. Perhaps

if I am lucky, it will stop at some point long before. I already know a good time. I was six. I had just made a dinosaur farm. The world seemed full of endless possibilities and yet the future was blissful nothingness. It was just me and my stegosaurus and my chickens, and the farmer trying to milk the raptor.

And, damn it, now I am back in that week I don't want to remember and it's Friday lunchtime and I am moving my stuff out of Gerard's house and into his car. He has that sympathetic look that I haven't seen in a while. He slaps me on the back and squeezes my shoulder in that reassuring mate kind of way. I don't like to tell him that he won't feel like this in a few weeks. That our mateship was going to be hanging from the rafters, swimming in a vodka bottle, unable to get itself up from the sofa.

Gerard is a hard-working kind of guy. He's a solicitor in the city but never wanted to truly leave the village, so bought his house here and commutes. I'm not sure why he's friends with me sometimes, but I guess that bond of loyalty you make in school never goes away. I saved him, you see, in primary school, from some kids trying to do him over for his lunch money. Told them I'd stick their heads down the toilets every damn day if they ever bothered him again. I was a big kid; they believed me. The little bespectacled French boy and I became friends that day, shortly after I saw the Top Trumps cards that had fallen out of his pocket. I was a big fan of Top Trumps, and he was a big fan of not being beaten up for his lunch money. Our friendship kind of worked on things like that; I guess most friendships do. They work on that loyalty and helping each other out in the tough moments. He got me out of more than a few scrapes too. Probably more than I ever got him out of, but I guess that first gesture was the big one, the one that counted, because I didn't know him, because I stood up for him as a fellow human being. I think he saw something good in me. And maybe there was. Then.

And so I'm shifting my things from Gerard's car back into the corridor of the flat. I say 'the' flat because it's no longer 'ours', and by 'ours' I mean mine and Sarah's. I am setting down the suitcase and spreading my clothes around and then I'm putting the key in the lock, twisting and twisting, and banging and banging, because the deadbolt is on and I don't want to believe that she's kicking me out. I don't want to believe this because it is making me feel sick. And now I am leaving, heading backwards, and I start wishing and wishing to be playing with my dinosaur farm because I know what's coming next and it's not pretty.

Sarah and I met two and a half years ago. We met in the Blue Frog and Whistle, as that's where anyone meets in our village. A friend brings a friend who brings a friend, and then said friends kind of get together, kiss, shag, shack up, get married and make babies. Sarah was a friend of Gerard's now ex-squeeze, Eleanor, who liked people to call her by her full name, including pronouncing the second 'e' like an 'a' to give her a four-syllable name, 'El-ay-an-or', because she thought it sounded posh. She wasn't posh. She liked to eat stinky cheese-and-onion crisps and let rip with gassy belches. Gerard said she was exotic. I thought he could do better. But I smiled and nodded and said I liked her. Because that's what mates do, until said girlfriend fucks us over, or gets boring, and then we nod in agreement at what a cow we always thought she was. Unless we do the fucking over, in which case it is the mate's duty to tell us we've been an idiot.

But I digress; Sarah was the interesting one, and Sarah was nothing like her friend. She had a more refined manner and long fine fingers that she liked to wrap around her gin and tonic. We didn't like the same films but she had a glorious smile and, when she turned it on me, I felt like I could walk a tightrope between tall buildings. Gerard was right that she was the best thing to happen to me in years. She was actually the only thing to happen to me in years. I was 26 and still living with my parents. Apathy had me in a tight hold. But when I started dating Sarah, I finally felt free. I was a hot air balloon ready to soar and do a million great things with my life. The admiration of a woman can do that to you. And great sex will make you feel invincible. And so, two and a half years later, there was 'our' flat, and 'our' coffee machine and 'our' future, but that frantic, tantalising sex was less and she was looking at me with wide eyes and playing with the ring finger on her left hand, and leaving *Pandora* magazines around the apartment. Only I didn't exactly rush to do anything about it. I can't say I didn't care about her, and I can't say I didn't think about getting married to her, but I also can't say that the thoughts were ones that filled me with unending joy. And they should have, shouldn't they?

But perhaps I was just scared and I should have got the ring when she first hinted. Perhaps I shouldn't have avoided talking about it, twitching whenever marriage, or weddings, or phrases like 'together forever' came up in conversations. Perhaps Sarah would have been in a more forgiving mood if I had made some kind of commitment already. Her patience was worn too thin. We were both nearly 30. It was time to sort

Julia Tregoing

it out, everyone had said so. And eventually I began to notice that she had stopped tapping her ring finger, stopped leaving magazines, started looking at me from the corners of her eyes, started criticising things I did. I can't say it made me want to rush to the jewellery shop, but I guess that boat was sailing, and it was my boat, and I was the only one on it.



Alan Whelan

from *Silence in the Valley*

Zuko pushed open the door to the shebeen. The space was filled with pulsating music and the unclean air of burnt boerewors and a full urinal. Filling the doorway, he waited for his eyes to get accustomed to the new light before making out Lucky Lulama wiping down a tabletop and, closer, the silhouettes of three men drinking at a corner table.

‘Where is she, bruh?’ he asked. ‘That bitch-bitch Candy.’

He slammed the door into its flimsy frame behind him, but it rebounded open, shuddering the table in the corner and toppling a glass to the floor.

Before the men had time to answer, Lucky Lulama stepped into the rectangle of sunlight, and said, ‘Zuko, it is early yet. Too early.’

‘Have you seen her?’ he said.

‘She has not arrived. Look, the time.’

Lucky Lulama waved above the cash register at the Castle Beer clock that showed 6.30pm, then walked behind the bar, under a banner that read: *A merry heart is good medicine.*

When he first started bringing Candy to the Lucky Strike they would not arrive until the bar was full. But now, five years on, as he demanded more money, she started work earlier. And if she didn’t earn enough during the night she picked up some breakfast trade. Candy had more than once suffered the consequences of arriving late for work.

Zuko cursed, then called, ‘Beer, gogo.’

He counted out coins in his palm, then upended them on the bar. ‘My last,’ he said with an effort.

‘Yah, a cold one. Is good; is too hot, Zuko,’ said Lucky Lulama, placing a Heineken through the grill.

‘If you were a white, the sun would melt you today,’ she laughed, and threw the coins into the till. ‘And you would turn the colour of my tomatoes! Aiye!’

Before picking up the beer, Zuko used his forefingers to wipe the sweat from both eyelids and flicked it on the floor. He sat on the only barstool with the bottle between his legs and leant an elbow next to a handwritten sign: *Leave your guns at home – your caring management.* He looked over at the three silhouettes, which formed into Jesus, Little Mabhuti and Jonno; or, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, as Lucky Lulama called them.

‘What’s up, chana?’ said Jesus. ‘Poverty has struck?’

Zuko ignored him, and asked, ‘Where are the girls-girls?’

'The salon, man,' said Jesus. 'It's cool. Chill.'

'I fokken chill when I chill. Don't wise me, man.'

Jesus put his elbows on his knees, and said, 'Is cool! We living in paradise.'

He smiled and slapped Little Mabhuti's palm.

'Eish! Pa-ra-dise!' he repeated.

Little Mabhuti shouted, 'More cool chillin' beer, gogo!'

Everyone at the table roared, even Jonno, whose head was dropping.

Zuko kept his eyes on Jesus and took a swig of beer before checking his cellphone. He pushed a number, put the phone to his ear and, through clenched teeth, hissed, 'Fokken voicemail, man.'

Lucky Lulama swept up the sand from the dirt floor that had blown in behind Zuko. She threw the full pan out the door then pushed it closed, returning the drinkers to ghosts in the twilight. She brought three fresh Castles to the corner table and held her arm outstretched. 'The money.'

'Always the money, gogo,' said Little Mabhuti.

'If you look hard you will find somebody's rands in your pocket,' she said.

When Lucky Lulama left their table with a 50 rand note, Zuko dragged up his stool.

'This is our problem, my brothers. Not too much the money.'

'Not *enough* money,' said Jesus, avoiding Zuko's eyes.

'Fokken rands is the problem,' said Zuko. 'We need more-more.'

'Yah!' shouted Jonno, who had just caught up with the conversation.

'The girls, man. What to do?' said Zuko. 'Charge more expensive?'

'Increase the prices,' said Jesus.

Zuko let that one go. 'What must we do?' he asked.

Little Mabhuti swigged from his bottle, then said, 'Not charge more; work more longer. Four stukkies each night is for four of us, okay, but why not more hours? Lucky Strike is open, where is the girls?'

'I like, I like,' said Zuko. 'Is possible.'

'It certainly is possible,' said Jesus.

Zuko, eyes blazing, swigged his beer deeply.

'So the girls must be here,' said Zuko. 'Now-now. Fokken kak.'

'All in good time,' said Jesus, opening his palms. 'Woman's time is not men's time.'

'More shit from your book learning?' said Zuko, slamming his bottle onto the table.

'You may wish to acquaint yourself with a book,' said Jesus. 'It may calm you, my bruh.'

'Nyo kanyoko!'

Jonno and Little Mabhuti erupted with laughter.

'You may curse to me in Xhosa all you like,' said Jesus, 'but only when you offend in Zulu, may I be vexed. In the meantime, English will answer our needs.'

Zuko stormed out of the shebeen and up the hill to the Beauty Girl salon fitted up inside a container. Because of the incline the container was held up at one end by cement blocks. He stood in the shade with one foot up on a bench, exposing his ankle and a glint of steel. He looked inside. Candy and One-eyed Sara were sitting in chairs as Beauty and Patience set their hair in cornrows. *Four girls wasting their time and the crew's money. Nearly sundown and they do nothing.*

Candy was aware that she was the subject of Zuko's stare, but merely waved a hand dismissively. 'Coming,' she called.

He said nothing. She then looked directly at him. He didn't blink.

'I may not leave with my hair like this,' she said.

One more word.

'Is time enough,' she said, returning her attention to her image in the mirror.

Zuko pulled himself up into the container and snatched a pair of scissors. With his other hand he grabbed Candy by the hair and slammed her face into the mirror, cracking it. He pushed the closed scissors up against her cheek like a finger in a pillow. The other girls screamed but Candy knew to keep quiet.

'You have time enough now?' he said. 'Time enough to waste? My time?'

Blood oozed from her eyebrow and smeared the broken glass in which she could see his fractured reflection, making it appear as if he was looking at himself.

The chairs were pushed over and Patience and One-eyed Sara retreated far inside the container. Beauty was pulling on Candy's T-shirt. 'My God, Zuko, please!'

'Save yourself!' said Zuko. 'Jesus will deal with you.'

Candy's hair, half plaited and half frizz, was coming out in his fingers. Zuko kicked the chairs away and the other two girls ran from the container. Beauty stayed in the corner. He pulled tighter and Candy began to struggle, but with every wrench she lost more hair.

‘Be merciful!’ yelled Beauty. ‘She will go to work.’

He didn’t hear her, but when he caught sight of himself in the mirror he smashed the scissors into the cracked glass. Candy’s eyes were clenched and tears were forming in the creases.

He pulled her face to his, chins touching. ‘Look at me. *Look at me.*’

She complied.

‘Pay no heed, my Candy, and what can happen?’

Candy whimpered and pleaded with her eyes. Inside, her mind was replaying flashbacks that told her Zuko would now likely commit one of two actions, both entailing violence. She could feel the tickle of blood on her cheek and opened her eyes to see that Zuko had eased his grip to watch its flow. He bared his teeth and lost a globule of spittle from his lower lip, which made Candy flinch. He stuck out his tongue then licked the line of blood from her face. He released her hair, grabbed a large shard of the broken mirror and dragged it down his bare arm. A reflex made him pump his fist and a 10-centimetre line of red formed on his skin.

Holding the bloody glass before him, he said, ‘My arm, your face.’

When Zuko saw the blood dribble into his palm he stabbed the shard into the seat of a chair and jumped out of the container. Jesus was there with the two girls who had fled and a small crowd who had left their shacks and the spaza next door to witness the scene. Jesus looked in at Candy who was on the floor holding her head and weeping.

Jesus said, ‘Is too much. The girls must work, but suffering we do not need. And my fokken salon, man.’

Then he repeated Zuko’s words back at him. “‘Work the day and the night”? “Charge more expensive”? How? Look at her. For all our desires, we must be reasonable.’

Zuko looked back into the container. Candy was holding a towel over her eye as Beauty helped her to her feet. Zuko put his foot up on the bench then placed his bloodied hand on his ankle. The crowd caught the significance of the move and quickly stepped back, including Jesus.

Zuko held out his cut arm, allowing the blood to drip into the dry earth, and said, ‘You be reasonable.’

Then he spat at Jesus’s feet and walked towards the shebeen.

Antics

I love your tumbleweed moments
giving eyes the glaze
in shops when you offer a thought
on urban etiquette;
let out your dream of dinosaurs
and hear it fall
into the mundane;
or use words like *finials*
as the youngsters check their phones.

I love how you're out of sync
when they look to me
as you show off your knitted trolley,
your decoupage case;
how you're fine on fifty milligrams
when the world panics
has you shut away
all because of your antics
when you talk to the wind or stream.

I love how you want to make a box
lined with batik, fill it with odds,
brought up on *Bagpuss* and *The Wombles*;
your flash performance
in vocal-centric style;
how you rick a home-made chimney
out of Slimfast tins;
how you turn an Ikea nightmare into
something Japanese.

Angel of the Cosmos (The Mural)

You stretch on a chair and wear something throw-on. The mural
you make is streaked in ultramarine; globes of peeled paper, plaster;
forms you infer from light – alien super earths
all brought together in the galactic centre.

I observe and confer from the cherry red swivel chair
your itch to smash the kentia palm vase, stick slivers as mirrors,
get someone else to curse themselves and shape its smithereens,
encrust those seas with shrapnel. Your what-ifs cascade–

like Muji frames, tiled across and over; dabbing toenail varnish,
red to accentuate the pareidolic skull; crackle glazing
the skirting boards – nitromors, tangerine dream, fireburst
with shocks of magenta; stick lights lighting the unsunned corner.

You burn magnesium bright as I come over occasionally, brush
your feet through your chaussettes, Vangelis playing in the background,
as you sublimate with a scourer and matt glissando strokes.

I trust your guesstimations when you say this is destined to be

a true aurora borealis of coloured auras and orbs.

You unpeel again accretions of layers, a neighbour's décor –
greens, dirty mushrooms – and insist on a star field over it,
starboard side; plumes of hot gas in a nebula. You stand back,

hands on hips, head cocked to one side, rhapsodised, zoned
somewhere remote, full flow. I have to temper though the madcap
proposals, since you would happily bolt a chair
up there or fibre-optic cable, fix false limbs and eyelashes

on paint, when I would go for the more sensible gold leaf.

And when not looking you write *avec le fantôme* in lipstick
on the shabby chic shelves, shocking pink, freshly sponged boho,
old rose, hiding your signature from it.

It Starts with Her Awkward Hairline

the bit behind her ear, along the bone,
I accidentally on purpose stroke
as the comb starts to move freely. Her head
between my knees, a kiss on her lobe –
something she wouldn't get in a salon –
and fingers that look for further lugs.
The part along her neck too, the transition
of neck and scalp, like beach and sea
where hairs grow upward. Once she
hid it from view, calling herself simian;
and now it's a *zone*, one she says I made
for her, that wasn't there before.
I kiss this too, following the teeth
and say: 'Repeat: "I am beautiful."'"
She says: '*You* are beautiful.' Still that's
better than it was, as I work on her
one stage at a time. All that's left now
is the style, and I start back with the comb,
fan out a fringe as she watches TV.
The filaments are the days we've got left.
Roots of silver I cover with cosmic blue.
And here an echo, almost unheard.
I did this for another. I was smaller.
We had an electric fire. She wore
rollers. And it was far from a chore,
rather utmost pleasure, untangling
strands until they flowed like rivers.
I still seem to know how much pressure
to apply, not to hurt a single nerve.

The Blind Photographer

How is it you see through your pinhole?
What you call a two o'clock aperture lets in
shocks of pink, giving-it-large green, magenta;
the rest bleach. Form for you is like gazing
through frosted glass so that lamps look like
daubs of hue or big fish scales. Sometimes
you catch shadows on ceilings. Once, back-lit
against encroaching sea, when the light
was perfect, my black fleece gifted us
contrast and you saw a jelly bean.

You defy prejudice. Since the days
of knowing your right eye would never work
and your left would slowly deteriorate,
you set about learning the golden mean,
Quattrocento, single point, to conceive
what it might be like for things to fall
outwards. You've never known three
dimensions, but spent a lifetime projecting
arcades. In managing this, you're a seer.
Your eye *is* a camera; and with knowledge

of how things lit before it all started
to fade, readying yourself in advance, by
looking for forty years at the world twice
as hard as twenty-twenties among us,
you're an artist. Your Flickr page reads
as a diary of long goodbyes, a path to
abstraction – light documents you call them;
more like *visions*, the closest analogue
to your periphery, how you share a lens
through the graininess of pixel devices.

You tell me the blind world is beautiful,
that once it's possible to get past the fear
everything becomes cosseted, so inward.
Your genius hangs everywhere. I love
what you do with sunlight, how you're able
to capture the limits through small spirit
lights that fall on walls without most of us
noticing. I love how you call them *numens*,
invoking all that's lost in the world
as blocks of visitation on contact paper.

The Manchester Anthology 2014

Spider

To the lintel – and there just a *thing*,
trembling hosiery. Fishnet thick

that black snarl against stucco,
that pinwheel galaxy, mons pubis –
silk steadying over a fan heater.

October's false widows prise their way
in. No Wifi, nothing to contain
the vacant web with names
like orb-weaver, *Araneidae*, *house*, *garden*...

And so I resort to something worse –
the glove of a werewolf suit,
green stars off the tops of tomatoes
or simply a shadow of legs on the ceiling.

Since in the middle of that mass of neither
vegetable nor mineral – up by the lintel –
a white hole portends nothing

but a sudden quickening.

The Waking Hours

Mother doesn't know me now. The hours beat like a metronome.
Sunrise strobes ever faster on the sofa. Rain veins down
the window. It beads for hours in the downpour.

Bachelor curtains smack of the same yellow by the serving hatch.
Ghost décor. Must have fetched it from a photo. Even my rug
is retro. A Carpenters chord on the radio. Mother sung
by the cassette recorder. Fondue pots boxed or let go.

Over the road, years line up bungalows of what I've become.
Decades ago she wanted to try for a girl – South Drive or
High Meadows? – who knows now the hours slide indoors

past yucca where flows a familiar five o'clock smell of soup
readied and served in new households. All seems as it was:
uneventful – and still I'm drawn to woodsmoke over barracks,
winters when snow was four feet high. Where did it go?

Even though they've long since papered walls, even though
Betamax and *Star Wars* toys are pushed to the attic, dreams
never let go, never move on. I'm left staring at floorboards.

Mother calls in repeats of spring. Links daffodils to melanoma.
Dreams slander her voice.

Father sleepwalks. Sun-kissed dementia on cruise ships
with his new partner. Water-damaged film goes unrestored.

Hours pile regrets on the sofa – the art college girl with angel wings
I was too shy to talk to, the lesbian, the one who looked like a cellist
who got back with her ex, the one who preferred her lecturer...

And when hours weigh their shades on sills, it's the end of summer.
Not school this time, rather a nursing home. To forget it all
except the wrench from mother's arms. This is the place it starts.
To forget the names I strove so hard to grasp.



Contributors' Biographies



Jack Brodie is working on a novel and a short story collection. Now 23, he started writing in 2011 and published his first short story last year, in *Neon*. He is the 2013/14 recipient of an AHRC Award to study on the MA.

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Joss Burns was born in 1991 and raised in Donegal in the north-west of Ireland. He enjoys writing short stories and is in the process of working on his first novel. Having finished his undergraduate degree at Bangor University, he now lives in Manchester. Joss's story *Lost Light* appears in *The Dublin Review*.

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Sarah-Clare Conlon's prize-winning work is published by *Salt Publishing*, *Comma Press*, *The Manchester Review*, *Paris Lit Up*, *Stand* and *Flash*, who called her 'one of the most interesting and inspiring authors writing flashes today'. A former editor on *Elle* and *Nova* magazines, she proofreads for Arts Council and other organisations. She is writing a novel and short-short story collection.

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Contributors' Biographies



S.E. Crowder writes fiction, poetry and non-fiction. She is working on her first novel, *Beyond Land*, and a collection of short stories. In 2014, she was shortlisted for the Poetry Republic Short Story Prize, longlisted for BBC Opening Lines, and won a place on the West Midlands Writer Development Programme. She lives in the Staffordshire Moorlands.

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Charlotte Haines did her undergraduate degree at Cambridge University, where she studied English Literature. After travelling extensively, she now lives in a small Lancashire village with her dog, Rufus. She is currently working on her first novel, *All Good Things*, which is a piece of speculative fiction.

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Fredrik Hakansson, born and raised in Sweden, first came to the UK to gain his BA in English and Creative Writing from the University of Birmingham. Afterwards, he went back to Sweden to write, and created a blog that gained thousands of followers. He studies both poetry and prose in Manchester.

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Ruby Hoffman writes poetry, predominantly to contemplate her ubiquitous transatlantic state and to preserve all the places she's touched. Besides writing, she spends her time bartending at a club, pursuing good coffee and better music, and translating sunrise in the city. She also freelances and reviews for various music publications.

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James Horrocks is a writer and musician from Manchester. His work explores the relationship between the two mediums, with many of his poems taking music as a thematic starting point or attempting to create sounds influenced by music.

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Sue Kaberry worked for many years in the National Health Service and as a university lecturer and trainer. She has always enjoyed writing and has had work-related articles and research published. Since her retirement in 2006, she has found herself compelled to write fiction.

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Mike Kielty studied English at Cambridge University and Magazine Journalism at City University London. He has worked as a reporter at the Press Association and the Financial Times Group, and as a travel writer for Rough Guides. He now teaches English as a foreign language for Mustard Tree, a Manchester charity.

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Alex McFadyen is a recent English Literature graduate from the University of Manchester. Raised in Munich, he moved back to the UK in 2000 and spent his formative years in Nottingham and London. When not working in bars and restaurants, he writes about the power that institutions exert over the individual.

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Emma Nuttall is a contributing reviewer for *Creative Tourist*. She also works with Manchester Literature Festival, delivering reading groups at primary schools. Her current novel-in-progress is *Bad Faith*, in which Agnes gets whipped into the world of PR: planning events, creating personas and building brands. Agnes ends up drifting further and further from reality.

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Nathaniel Ogle was born in Darlington, in 1991. He is a graduate of the University of Manchester in English Literature. His poetry has appeared in *Black & BLUE*, *Now Then Manchester* and *Aviary Magazine*, and his prose has appeared in *The Cadaverine*. He lives in Manchester and is writing his first novel, *Iron*.

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When Salman Rushdie was asked about **A.E. Pearce**, he replied: 'I don't know who that is.' A.E. Pearce is a writer from Norwich. He has been living and working overseas, returning recently to attend the Creative Writing course at the University of Manchester.

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To paraphrase Alan Bennett on the best moments in reading, **Emma Rhys** has taken many a writer's hand as it has reached out to her from a book and is now extending her own – hoping to freak someone out.

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Contributors' Biographies



Charlotte Rowland is a graduate from the University of Manchester with an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry). She has undertaken internships at Carcanet Press and *The Dark Horse*, and has a background in visual arts and gallery work. She is currently working on a collection of poems.

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Stefanie Sabathy graduated from Vienna University in 2009 and taught English and German in Austria and Mexico. In 2010, she attended the Oxford Summer School of Creative Writing and started participating in Vienna School of Poetry competitions. Stefanie has been offered a place for a Creative Writing PhD and is finishing her first novel.

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Julia Tregoing was born in Sheffield and graduated in English from Nottingham University. She has worked in Spain, Germany, Italy and Australia teaching English to adults and children. Her contribution is an extract from a short story and she is currently working on a novel exploring trauma, memory and altruism.

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Ghostwriter and business writer **Alan Whelan** has written three non-fiction African travel books, *African Brew Ha-Ha* (Summersdale, 2010), *The Black Stars of Ghana* (Inkstand Press, 2012) and *Empire Road* (due 2014), and is contributing author to *The World's Great Adventure Motorcycle Routes* (Haynes, 2012).

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Patrick Wright is a writer and academic living and working in Manchester. After his PhD on the sublime at the University of Manchester, he has taught at several universities. At present he is a lecturer with the Open University, teaching subjects across the humanities including Creative Writing.

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Contributors' Biographies



X, **Vona Groarke**'s latest poetry collection from the Gallery Press, was a Poetry Book Society recommendation for spring 2014. She teaches in the Centre for New Writing at the University of Manchester.



Ian McGuire is co-director of the Centre for New Writing. He has just finished a study of the American novelist and short story writer Richard Ford.





