



Silk + Smoke is a new literary magazine, coming out of Scotland, publishing short fiction, poetry, scriptwriting, and creative nonfiction by writers' from around the world.

We have no theme or preferred genre. Instead, we encourage the strange, unconventional stories that struggle to find the right home.

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You can read more about Silk + Smoke on **[silksandsmoke.com](http://silksandsmoke.com)**.

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## **A note from the editor**

In her creative writing MasterClass series, Margaret Atwood, critically acclaimed author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*, and *Oryx and Crake*, talks about the classic fairytale, Little Red Riding Hood. To inspire her pupils to think of stories in a different way, she proposes a new opening sentence: 'It was dark inside the wolf.'

It's these switches in structure and experimentation with narrative voice, setting, imagery, and characterisation that turn stories on their head. From the outset, I wanted Silk + Smoke to be a haven for just that, for the stories that don't bend to fit any one genre or traditional style but pull us into their own strange worlds.

Silk + Smoke is a home for the horrors that make you flinch and recoil away from the page, for the post-apocalyptic thrillers that flush a chill through your veins, for the comedies that have you laughing out-loud on the train to work, for the personal essays that lay the soul bare, for the words cherry-picked and weaved together into lyrical poetry, and for the dialogue handcrafted into scripts.

This magazine started in December 2018 as nothing more than a Twitter page and some half-baked ideas. We received nearly 200 pieces in our first call from submissions and now the very first issue has finally arrived.

Thank you to the contributors, who wrestled and pulled their ideas from their mind to the page, for making this first issue possible.

- Sophie McNaughton

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## **30-Minute Meals for the Post-Apocalyptic World**

**By Aaron Menzel**

Look at you: hair frazzled from the walk back from work, bags under your eyes from all the late nights standing watch over your children, blood still smeared under your ear from when you severed the jugular of a tentacle goblin. You need a break, so Tasteecookin' Magazine has gathered together a trio of speedy and savory meals for your post-apocalyptic world! It's time to get Tastee!

### 1. Delicious Bean Dip

This is an old standby, from even before the Brownout Riots. To start, make sure the hinges on your cellar door are good and oiled, and send a kid down to grab a bag of beans and a jar of tomatoes. Feel free to equip them with a bat or club, but as long as they're quiet they should be OK. Smaller feet make less noise, and Mudstalkers are only drawn to sound.

Rehydrate the beans, simmering them in water for thirty minutes. Drain, mash, and spread thinly into the bottom of a bowl. Layer the tomatoes on top, and follow with some olives from the pantry, sprinkled as liberally as your depleted stock of food will allow. Get creative! Whatever milk you find should be well and curdled, so use it as a substitute for sour cream. Scoop out with fingers and enjoy!

Tastee Tip: This can be made with fewer layers if ingredients are tight. What's left of your family will be too hungry to notice!

### 2. Magnificent Fish Marinade

Despite the recent outbreak of hooktooth, fish is still an option for healthy eating. If your local babbling brook or stream is too polluted to support life, venture towards the town square to barter. Tastee recommends salmon or killifish, but accept what is available.

Fillet and place in a bag along with lemon or orange juice. Consider adding a drop or two of gun lubricant to counter the acidity of the citrus. Marinate for twenty minutes and toss into a frying pan. You're going to want to overcook the fillets to avoid ingesting any live tapeworms or trumpeter spiders.

Tastee Tip: Save the fishbones and use string to rig up noise traps for around the house. Anything(one) caught can be used in dinner the next day!

### 3. (Y)umbalaya

Sneak out to your garden before sundown and scrounge up what vegetables you can find. Remember to thoroughly wash away all dirt to avoid accidentally consuming any parasitic spores. You should have your government-issued hatchet from before the total breakdown of society, so go over to your chicken coop and grab a hen. Consider bringing along a mason jar to collect the draining blood. This can double as a thickening agent in stews or as scent camouflage for timber banshees!

Chop everything up and cook on low for ten minutes, using what spices you have left. Add water, rice, and beans. If needed, toss in some sawdust or grubs--they pack the same amount of fiber and protein for a fraction of the cost. After boiling, everything should be sanitized and ready to eat!

Tastee Tip: Out of water for this one? Head on over to the Nestle Corporate Headquarters. To locate the only remaining megacorporation, look for the glow of their halogen lights and tracking lasers, and be sure to keep your eyes peeled for lobbyists! Go around back and check the dumpsters. Nestle throws out all day-old water, so bring back as much as you can carry!

Keep on cookin'! It's the only way to survive!

## **A Ghost Escapes**

**By Kristin Garth**

which hides inside eyelids, an armoire — grown,  
alone, his captive hidden, destiny  
unknown, eerily familiar — cloned bones,  
solipsistic moans, the iniquities  
of phantasms, ascension through ribcage  
first time behind pine louvered closet doors,  
a whore for chasing, erasing since age  
five. Babydoll deprived forevermore  
autonomy, memory but alive —  
surviving, sometimes even thriving yet  
the driving force within her is to find  
the smallest spaces where she can forget.  
A ghost escapes, well-trained, the brain's trapdoor,  
skeleton you abandon here once more.

## **Aromatherapy**

**By Prem Sylvester**

The whiff of eucalyptus oil  
reminds me of the nights  
my mother sought to soothe my reddened nose  
with its healing effervescence,  
the woody fragrance flowing through me  
as a clear stream in the hills would,  
freeing my clogged nostrils;  
healing me  
I still keep a bottle of eucalyptus oil  
by my bedside.  
Its aroma reminds me of the hills  
where everything seems so clear,  
and I am reminded of you -  
you who comfort me,  
you who help me breathe;  
you who help me heal

## Job Interview

By Nicholas Starkey

I think I would be a great part of your  
Workspace.

...

Because I work fantastically as an  
individual,  
and as part of a team. Think  
of me as a gorilla... or an ape.

...

I am very professional 110% of the time. \*SILENTLY farts\* Yikes. Hehe.  
I also take my responsibilities super seriously in a LaidBackManner.  
YesVeryLaidBackIAM SoIAM. IWouldn'tWorrY.

I have great communicational-al-al skills

and I am fluently polite \*snorts and grins his gritty teeth - there are no  
snowy trees\*

...

I can use E-mail. Blackberry me, pick me. Me-me-me-meh.

\*Murmurs\* I am confident.

I believe in kindness, I have no faith however,  
so I am free 24/7, but Do Not phone me between the hours of

8pm and 8am. Sleep is a ritual to me.

...

My strengths and my weaknesses?

...

Well, my biggest strength is that I know my own weaknesses,  
and G-d, do I have so many. Don't we all?

I'm sure you've got many, hundreds even.

I mean, look at you. \*Opens eyes like a leopard\*

...

I'm sorry. I've not got my glasses.

They're like apricots without them.

...

Yes, apricots, fuzzy.

...

Okay. My biggest weakness, ahem.

I am an accomplished truth-teller.

...

Elaborate?

Well, I tell people what I think of them. Very easily.

\*Embarrassment fills his face, fluid red and fleshy pink\*

...

You?

Well, in my experience,  
similar people I have encountered, truly?

...

Honestly, they've been ——'s.

...

Well, thank you for your time. \*Leaves, shaking his trouser pocket, relieving something concealed\*

## **Flying Start**

**By T.J. Bowman**

We were a normal family all things considered. We had day trips to the seaside during the summer holidays; we had fish on a Friday and roasts every Sunday, and on a Saturday night, as long as the curtains were drawn, my parents would let me fly around the living room ceiling.

When I was small, I would use my mother's dressing gown as a cape, tie one of my dad's black socks around my eyes and, feeling magnificent in my matching pyjamas, I would pretend to be the superhero I thought I was. The only downside being that I fly at 0.000001 miles per hour.

My Dad would often complain that I was distracting him from the television, but Mum was more accommodating.

"It's better she wears herself out in here love, we don't want another 'incident' do we?" Mum said one such Saturday.

There were many of these 'incidents' growing up, but the one she was referring to this time happened upstairs in Marks and Spencers when Mum was shopping for a new nightie.

After bumping into the Patterson family from 3 streets down, the adults were engaged in a long conversation about how inconvenient the roadworks nearby were.

My parents always kept me on reins in those days, so if I started flying, they'd have plenty of time to yank me back before anyone noticed. However, this time they'd taken their eyes off of me. As little Tommy Patterson stared, his chocolate-smearred mouth open wide with amazement, I slowly began to fly upwards. By the time my mum looked

round to check on me, I was clutching onto the shoulders of a mannequin, with a ladies' bra around my head.

"Well look at you climbing up there, we'll have you up Everest next!" said my Dad, grabbing ahold of me swiftly, as though this would mask my hovering body from the Pattersons' eyes.

"I feel like I can never set foot inside Milton Keynes again," Dad said, turning the volume up on *The Generation Game* as if to drown out the memory.

As I got older and more independent, I didn't bother flying anywhere outside of the house, it was just faster to walk.

When I was 12, I decided I would never confide in my school friends. I was already teased for my mum cutting my hair at home with the kitchen scissors, and for my obvious crush on Lindsey Barker (which I continued to deny). I really didn't fancy being labeled 'delusional' as well.

My friends and I would have parties with pizzas, movies and truth or dare. When I chose truth and was asked what my biggest secret was, I lied and told them I'd once drank half a bottle of my parents Crème De Menthe. They continued to think I was the boring girl of the group.

My parents, however, did confide in someone. Dr McGregor played badminton with my Mother on Wednesday nights, and would always come to our New Year's Eve parties. She advised us it was best all round to keep my 'talents' hush-hush and to hope I'd grow out of it. I think she thought she was doing us a favour; keeping me out of a science lab or wherever, but in truth, I think my parents would have considered it if they hadn't thought she'd be insulted.

Two weeks after my 16th birthday, my crush on Abigail Bosworth had reached an uncontainable peak. She was a whole year older than me, had

the most amazing centre parted hair, and would roll her skirt waistband over, so it was shorter than our school regulations would allow.

One evening, while my parents were watching the news, I decided to confess my puppy love to her. I walked to her house, and, after rehearsing what I was going to say over and over in her front garden, I finally rang her doorbell. No one answered.

Feeling flustered after building this moment up to myself, I walked around the side of the house and looked to her bedroom window; I could see her light was on, and she was dancing around her room. I knew I had to tell her. I knew I had to confess that I wanted to be more than just friends, and ask 'Can we be girlfriends forever please?' So I turned to my secret power.

I began to fly up to her bedroom window, my head filled with determination, and fantasies of her crying 'Yes, I've always loved you, you sexy thing!'

By the time I reached the window, the moment had gone. Besides, she'd turned out the light and gone to sleep.

At 17, when I came home one evening from my Saturday job at the local shoe shop, my parents sat me down over a cup of tea and told me I was very special and wasn't I lucky for the gift I'd been granted, but also could I just stop bloody doing it? You see, I'd never been able to control flying when I got sleepy, and apparently, I was scaring the new cat Tallulah in the night.

The whole 'uncontrollable flying when asleep thing' made one night stands when I reached university very awkward. I had got away with telling a few girls that they were still drunk, hallucinating, and to go back to sleep. But I didn't get away with that with Evelyn (as she liked to be called, Helen was her real name).

She was a goth, she wore black velvet, and I really wasn't that into her, but I found myself in a relationship with her because I didn't want to be rude.

I always tried with girls to make sure I was the last to fall asleep, but with Evelyn, I nodded off one time whilst we were watching Dracula. I jolted awake to the sound of her screaming, as I was floating 3cms from the bed we sat on.

"I can explain, you're drunk!" I shouted in my panic-struck state.

"Vampire! Vampire!" she shouted back, before running out of my room.

We didn't go out any more after that, and she was too scared to come near me when I saw her on campus. I was relieved.

My next girlfriend Sam was better at first. It was love at second sight for us. After 3 months of dating, I trusted her enough to tell her about my abilities. She laughed and thought I was being weird, but eventually, when I'd been trying to show her for 45 minutes, she thought I was amazing. A little too amazing.

She would ask me to fly when we were studying and I'd oblige. She would ask me to fly when we were walking alone late at night, and I'd oblige. Then she started to ask me to fly during sex.

At first, I was okay with it, but pretty soon she would only do it if I was wearing a knock-off superhero costume and pretending to rescue her from certain death. I'd have to prepare by taking a couple of hours to fly up the wall. The lack of spontaneity was a mood killer for me, and I eventually ended it.

Sam wasn't the kind of girl you could get rid of easily though, and things got more than a little difficult. When I stopped answering her calls and texts, I would see her waiting outside my classes for me. She'd pretend to

bump into me in the street or at the pub, but I knew she was doing it on purpose.

One night after dancing at the student union bar, I got home to find she had broken into my room and had managed to tie herself to my bed.

“The train is coming, only you can save me!” she was screaming. I had to tell her in no uncertain terms that we were not getting back together, and we couldn’t sleep together one last time in ‘our special way’.

The last I heard of Sam she was doing better and was dating a competitive hang glider.

After all my university troubles, I swore to myself that I would never tell anyone about my special ability, no matter how much I loved them.

At 27, I introduced my future wife to my parents. Over tea, mini quiche and a large cake selection, they asked me if I was finally settling down, with a heavy emphasis on the ‘down’ accompanied by exaggerated winking. I, of course, knew what they meant, while my partner presumed I’d spent the best part of my 20s shagging about town.

“Yes,” I assured them, before stuffing a whole slice of Battenberg in my mouth to avoid answering any more questions.

When I was 30, I got married. I love my wife with all my heart. We work well together, and I’m lucky she’s a heavy sleeper. I’m just not prepared to go through all that debacle again. If my wife suspects something, she doesn’t say. She always makes a point of looking away when she asks me to get something from the top shelf though.

## **Group therapy of a Tuesday afternoon**

**By Amy Hamilton**

In the chaplaincy centre which is funny  
We all sit there with the fear of God inside of us  
We have all sinned and broken and sinned  
None of us religious none of us believing  
I don't really want to believe anymore  
Not that I ever did, ever did did I ever  
Care

Talking about how our minds work and why  
We're like this how we can get better  
I've accepted my fate  
For all I can remember I have been unhappy  
Unhappy, lonely, worried and confused  
I know that I'll push you away  
You'll see the side that is hard to deal with  
And run

He left me because I was too hard to deal with  
And you will too – I'm a hard woman to love  
And even harder to hold onto when  
The thought of death is ever present in my mind  
Well it would really just just really really just let  
Everyone breathe again  
No longer having to walk on egg-shells around me  
That problem would be gone

Past traumas never seem to fully fade away  
Once you've smashed a glass it cannot be how it  
Was before  
Maybe I am that glass, but maybe I was always smashed  
And maybe you don't want to try to fix me  
I want to fix me  
I want you to fix me

## **Masters of the Universe**

**By M. R. Hume**

We watch the dance of galaxies,  
swirling patterns of water  
within the greatest ocean.  
Tumultuous waves and eddies;  
trillions of stars refracted  
contain an endless motion.  
And we bend time and distance,  
folding corners of space  
until space is reversed.  
We dissolve wormhole feedback.  
We travel upon the gamma;  
for we are the Masters of the Universe.  
Bolts of pure radiation burns holes  
across distances unfathomed,  
coursing through nebula clouds.  
Travelling on remains of supernova,  
butterfly wings, iridescent,  
boiling gaseous shrouds.  
Interstellar dust curls in our wake,  
our engines roar without sound  
through planets interspersed.  
We harness power of neutron stars.  
We glide the up-drafts of light curves;  
for we are the Masters of the Universe.

## **Genesis – Femme Redux**

**By Sam Jowett**

Humans said God created the Earth in seven days  
in reality, I conjured it within two verses of a Glam-Bubblegum pop song  
in full on Galactic dazzle femme  
Mercury lipstick, Jupiter eyeshadow, Saturnalia dress  
with rings that orbit like crooked halos

A flick of a pearl earring, from frontal lobe  
a mirror ball, perfectly reflecting  
pluck it upon the aether  
let it float amidst the stars  
tilt its nearest stellar presence  
(Let there be lightsssssss!)  
a nova of fluorescence  
every colour, full spectrum, maximum saturation.

~ ~ ~

Consider, then  
the earring, the planet  
exfoliate its rust  
bedrock orange primer applied thick  
pressurized, gone molten  
liquid cobalt blue foundation with an encore of  
ozone concealer

Eyeshadow palate a million shades of green

rainforest greens and coniferous green and pasture greens and savannah  
greens

blend and blend and blend

alpine mascara, curl twin rows of mountain peaks.

coral reef lipstick

lunar earrings

heels to strut in orbits elliptical

all of it

beautiful

all of it

ignored

all of it

ruined

~ ~ ~

Now

Oh,

what I would do to this planet

now

what I would whisper into its ears

now

what I would pour across its desert saltscapes

now

how I would soothe its corroded exterior

how I would exfoliate its rust drenched cities

how I would dry its oil slick sobs

how I would whisper into its abyss ears

it wasn't your fault

it was never your fault

if only a makeover were so easy

if only I could make it:

*rain*

*blush*

*bloom*

*gasp*

nectar oceans

fuchsia jungles

floral fractals

glasswork canyons

Give it a rhythm

Make it

sing

Make it

dance

Make it

live

Make it

queer

## **Prelude to Opening the Door**

**By Russ Bickerstaff**

Of course, I could be wrong. If we open the door there COULD be something very, very awful on the other side. Like certain death or the end of the world or whatever. But I'm fairly certain that if we open that door we'll get out of this place and we'll all be able to get on with the rest of our lives. So I'm thinking that might be preferable. So I think that we should open the door. That's my final decision and I'm sticking with it. I'm going to go ahead and open the door for all of us. You can just...y'know...go ahead and watch me do it. I don't think that there's anyone here who is going to stop me. I don't think that there's anyone here who WANTS to stop me. It's all going to be okay once I've had a chance to open this door. That's all I'm saying.

But I sense that if I go over towards the door, there are those of you who might at least VOICE and objection of some sort. And to any of you who would object to me opening the door...I would like to address you. I would like to let you know that I am in no way endangering us by opening this door. It's perfectly safe. (The door.) And we are perfectly safe in opening it. Nothing is going to happen...y'know...other than us being able to leave or whatever. Everything is going to be fine. Everything is going to be okay. There is nothing to worry about at all. Trust me.

Of course, if there WERE to be objections to me opening the door, I gather that they might be questioning how it is that I am so certain that there's no danger in opening the door. And I suppose that I would probably need to address those concerns in some way in order to put everyone totally at ease with the fact that I am, in fact, going to walk right over and open that perfectly normal, perfectly safe door. There's really no issue here and there's really nothing at all to worry about.

Everything is going to be fine. Everything is going to be okay. But you aren't going to be totally comfortable taking my word for it, so I guess I'm going to have to explain to you how I know that the door is perfectly safe and there aren't any monsters or certain death behind that door. So here goes...to start with: it's nothing more than a door. People have opened and closed doors since before the dawn of time and been perfectly safe in doing so. There's nothing intrinsically dangerous about a door in and of itself. It's not like I'm picking up a gun or a bomb or a bear trap or anything like that. It's a door: it's meant to be opened and closed and things.

But I trust that this reassurance alone isn't enough because...y'know...people have opened doors on dangerous things in the past and suffered the consequences and I'm perfectly okay admitting to that as my entire reason for opening the door and feeling safe about it isn't due to the overall safety of doors alone. No. I have other information about that door which should put any mind at ease. And I suppose that I'm going to have to mention something about that if I'm going to make sure that there really truly are NO objections to me opening said door.

Okay here's my biggest argument for opening the door: it's a door to the outside. What could possibly be dangerous about a door that's going to let us out of this place? It's perfectly fine and safe and everything. We're not going to accidentally burst-in on someone who is doing something embarrassing or anything like that. So we don't have to worry about THAT much. We don't have to worry about invading anyone's privacy in a way that's going to make things weird or embarrassing or anything. It's all perfectly fine. No worries there at all. No one goes outside for the privacy so we don't have to worry about making anyone feel hostile by going outside.

Of course...I realize that there are those of you who are going to feel as though there's something wrong with going outside. And I want to assure you that you have nothing to worry about in me going out to open up the door. If you want to stay here, you're perfectly okay doing so. My opening of that door is in no way a threat to you and I just want you to know that I'm not going to try to force or coerce you into going out the door with me. In fact, if you are the type of person afraid to go outside or apprehensive about doing so because of what the outside world might think of...oh I don't know...anything that you've done in here (and I honestly can't imagine what that would be because nothing that's happened in here was in any way unlawful or reprehensible or vicious or homicidal or anything like that at all) then I would really like to encourage you to stay here with your glowering, predatory looks and...y'know...just go on about whatever it is that you're doing that I'm sure is totally cool and totally moral and everything.

I'm not saying that I'm going to try to run away and tell anyone about anything or anything like that. I'm not even saying that I want to leave. (Who would want to leave such nice people like this anyway? I mean...the conversations and the friendship have been absolutely magical.) I'm just saying...y'know...I just think it might be nice to open the door. And it would be nice to know that I'm perfectly safe in doing so because y'know...I just think that it's perfectly safe out there. So I'm going to go and open that door. And I trust none of you will try to stop me. And when I'm on the other side of that door in just a few seconds, I'll let you know how safe it truly is.

## **In a Darker Vein**

**By David Cameron**

HE: In a darker vein  
My blood will rise to mangle and to crush  
Your hopes of getting underneath my skin  
Then let you in, to listen  
While it conducts a symphony of pain  
This blood will horrify  
Topple you in a head-rush  
Lie in wait when you think it on the wane  
It will pacify  
With one eye on the spoils, then flare again  
In a still darker vein  
There's no refrain

SHE: At least yours is a symphony of pain  
I've heard discordant noise  
From bigger boys  
Who ran away, as they are wont to do  
Thanks, but I let myself in  
While you busied yourself with meat I'd thrown  
You think my blood can't rise or 'flare'  
In a darker vein?  
Look, you've always known  
I'm there with you  
The refrain is, there's no refrain  
I can do menace with a straight face too

## Market Day

By Paul Robert Mullen

they pick local herbs from local gardens  
fresh fish from the pier  
the best rump steak from old joe's farm  
veggies with a sheen from  
    dawn markets on the promenade

picking the best is artistry, he smiled  
cupping gleaming caulies and broccoli stems like trophies  
    placing them in his basket as though  
        newborn pups

it made me glad to be back in England  
watching 5am smiles  
pulling away in ageing, cosy vans  
waving at the competition  
tender white rollers lapping the edge  
    of the cove like tongues  
        eager to be fed

## frankenstein

By Chloe Burns

you were something I didn't recognize.

invented by someone who knew something I didn't know. didn't  
see coming.

my life was full of spaces I had nested, and homed. things that knew my  
names, me  
exclusive shape. my specific

body moved through space, with its appetites and aversions. now, it  
stumbles. often I think of dying stars, of skyscrapers crumbling.

and I don't blame you.

without even trying, time unspools itself, translucent and unyielding.  
accidentally,

you get stuck in my body. you are stuck in my body  
like muscle memory, like a loose tooth. I worry you.

it is unavoidable. fate, I guess, or something  
deeper. obscure, the way a dream you've had before

is familiar, and unfamiliar. forgive me,  
forgive me. I am made

incoherent.

## **Manic Street Preacher**

**By Paul Woodgate**

You, on a street, in Army-surplus hazmat suit surfing decades of decay, leaving Armstrong-deep footprints in the fallout. Brick-thick scaffolds of vine with pale orange lipstick flowers border broken shop windows, long ago looted by now dead men.

You sashay in and out of rusted vehicles. The bodywork is so thin you can punch holes in it, but that game tires when a family of scabrous rats with neon tails explode onto the street from a taxi. One stops, eyes you momentarily; stranger in a stranger land. You bang the side of the door again. The echo of impact rolls ahead of you, a sharp industrial yawp oscillating back and forth from the eyeless sockets of crumbling buildings. You follow the echo to the shortened horizon.

Imagine. You can see them through the fog of destruction. Thousands of them. Walking arm in arm along the pavements, tethered to fashionable leather and branded plastic bags. Catheters of consumerism, abasing themselves in front of brightly lit displays that suck them dry one purchase at a time. The warning music plays in your head, blaring from speakers angled out of doorways – 'all for freedom and for pleasure, nothing ever lasts forever, if it's not love, then it's the bomb that'll bring us together, I'm an ordinary guy, burning down the house, who has the fun, is it always a man with a gun?'

You stick your tongue against the helmet grille, out at the invisible crowds. The taste is ozone and metals, the acrid sorrow of irradiated air. You saw the final act play out long before they accepted it. They suffocated the planet's pores with their need for more. No more want, you said. No more

need. No more more. You took a wet wipe to them all. You are bacteria free. Preach, brother!

Now the world is you. The planet. The country. This city, this street. You run your hands through empty CD racks in HMV – rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. You simmer behind a perfume counter in Top Shop, bat your eyelids at rows of deformed mannequins. You wait patiently for the number 10 bus, read the tattered timetable folding in the wind. You sit in the back row of screen two at the Odeon and boo at imagined villains whilst blackbirds rattle in the exposed steels above and circle where the roof used to be. You trace your name in the dust outside River Island; Ozymandias, King of Kings. Oppenheimer's deadly toy. The boy who pushed the button.

At the crossroads you look up at a sign - 'Oxford Street'. The sun hovers in a grey soupy dusk. Atomic earth dances in a haunted breeze. Time to find shelter; you cannot be out in the dark. The ghosts don't like you.

## **Those Without Souls**

**By Bryan Grafton**

A man grew old and as he did so he started to reflect back upon his life. He did not wax nostalgic. For he forgot about all the good times and good things he had done in his life and for some reason or other fixated and dwelt only upon all his screw ups and his failures. Those stupid and foolish things that he had done then and regretted so dearly now. Things that he wished had never done. It pained him that he could never ever undo them. And the more he thought about those things the more of those things he thought about. So it came to the point where whenever he would think about them that he would shake his head side to side as if to somehow shake them loose so that they would go flying off into space somewhere and be lost forever. But alas this did not happen for the man did not have it in his power to do that.

Now that he had but a few years left to live the man feared that when he died and went to Heaven these things would still be with him there and that therefore Heaven would not be a pleasant place for him after all. In fact, would be a kind of Hell for him as far as he was concerned since he would always be thinking about his screw-ups forever. Certainly, God would not let him suffer like that in Heaven thought the man for God is a just and merciful God.

Now the inevitable happened. The man died and he appeared before God.

God sat high upon his throne and smiled down his fatherly smile upon this man, his child. God knew that the man had been a good man, a moral man, a believer in Him, and therefore deserved a place in Heaven.

“Welcome to Heaven,” said God to the man.

The man took in a breath, and blew it out slowly his shoulders slumping as he did so. A look of distraught perched upon his face. "Thank you God," he muttered not knowing what else to say.

"What is wrong, my son?" asked God. But God knew what was wrong.

"God could you please erase all the bad, stupid things from my mind that I did while on earth?" he humbly asked of God..

"Why my son?" But God knew the why also. He asked just to be polite, to show His concern.

"Because it hurts me so much to think about them and now that I'm in Heaven I will think about them forever and ever world without end."

Now the Devil was there, lurking in the background, and had seen and heard all this. He sensed he may have an opportunity to snatch a soul here.

The man had not noticed the Devil as the Devil for the Devil was dressed in a natty dull grey business suit, his tail tucked in is pants, his horns covered by his fedora. The man assumed that he was just another soul waiting his turn to meet his Maker and thus paid him no attention at all.

"Oh I know how to do that for you," spoke up the Devil, "for I was a psychiatrist in my previous life and I helped people like you wipe those things from their minds forever. Come with me and I will do that for you," he said as he put his arm around the man's shoulder and started to lead him away and astray.

"Hold on there Devil." roared God rising from his throne lightning and thunder flashing and clapping all around Him as he did so.

The man jumped and pulled himself away from the Devil upon hearing this.

"Now God," said the Devil. "You know you will not do that for this man. For if you erase his bad memories you would also be erasing all his happy good memories too because as you know one cannot have good memories unless he has bad memories to compare them to.."

God knew the Devil was right. That He would not destroy the man's good memories for some day he would want them. He did not wish to destroy something that was good.

"Look." said the Devil to the man, "come work for me. I will erase all those memories for you."

"But then I will burn in Hell and suffer physical pain there forever after," the man whined quaking in his proverbial boots. "And I do not know what is worse, physical or mental pain."

"Well I promise you that you won't feel either with me, neither mental or physical pain shall be yours," answered the Devil while forcing himself to hold back his patented devilish grin.

Now that offer was tempting to the man for that is what the Devil does. He makes tempting offers. But the man did not trust the Devil for no one in his right mind would.

With pleading eyes and a mournful sad face he turned to God and asked him. "What can you do for me?" And upon saying this the man immediately regretted it for he realized that it appeared that he was playing one against the other and thus insulting God by doing so.

Now God knew that the man had not intended to say this. That this was just something that had slipped from the man's lips, a hasty emotional utterance under stress. But before He could answer the Devil spoke up again.

“Oh you can have him God. This man is of no use to me anyway.” The Devil now figured that the man would suffer eternally in Heaven and that was good enough for him, a moral victory, even if he wasn’t in Hell with him. Let him go thought the Devil. There’ll be other souls to fry.

Now God wanted to help the man, for who does not want to help their children, but in doing so he would have to destroy the man’s soul and this pained Him terribly. Nevertheless He decided to do just that because he loved his children so and saw no other way to relieve this man from his pain and suffering.

“This is what I will do for you, if that’s what you want,” said God. “I will make it,” and notice God did not use the word destroy here, “so that you do not have a soul at all and therefore without a soul you can’t go to either Heaven or Hell. I will turn you simply into dust for dust does not have a soul, a memory, any existence of any kind at all, and as dust from which you came, so shall you return.”

Upon hearing this the Devil grimaced and cursed. God had foiled him again.

The man noticed this and thought to himself, this must be a good deal because the Devil doesn’t like it. So he answered..

“Please do that for me God.”

And with that said God immediately with just a shake of his head turned the man into dust and scattered him into His ever expanding universe. And through the years the particles of dust of this former man without a soul were eventually sucked into a black hole. For that is where God places those without souls, in a black hole that is.

## **A Brotherhood of Opportunity**

**By Pat Tompkins**

As a trio, the brothers had been getting into trouble most of their lives. Jack was now 23, Teddy was 21, and Cal, long accustomed to being called “the runt of the litter,” was 18. Other members of the Chance family included a sister, Ida, the best looking of the siblings. The Chance brothers were so unlike in appearance that people said they must have three different fathers, although they didn’t say so within earshot of the parents.

The brothers’ main interest was money-making schemes: cons, really. Jack had a new plan, courtesy of Uncle Frank, whose idea had grown like mildew in his prison wing.

Thanks to Jack, the brothers had been suspended from school on numerous occasions and had DUI records. They apparently had never heard the maxim: “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” Raised to be optimists, if they had a motto, it was “Winners never quit, and quitters never win.” Years spent watching college and professional sports reinforced the notion. Despite a lack of athletic ability, they followed everything from the Olympics to the World Wrestling Federation.

Jack shared the new plan with his brothers as they sat around the kitchen table with their after-dinner beers. He had the looks and the brains of the three, although that was saying

little, given that Teddy had the physique of a couch potato twice his age and Cal had left school at 16, having made it only through the ninth grade.

“No offense, big brother,” Teddy said, “but we haven’t done too well with any of your plans lately.”

Cal chimed in: “Lately? How about never?”

Jack stood up. "What? Like you have a better idea?"

"I'm just sayin'. Maybe we need to do things different."

"I'm all ears. What is your genius plan?" Jack squinted at Cal and looked back at Teddy. "Where is this coming from?"

"Yesterday, when there was like nothing on to watch, I looked at that old DVD about the summer Olympics. You know how I love track and field. So, I'm watchin' the high jump, and they did that whole thing on the Fosbury flop. That guy who decided to jump over the bar backwards. It was weird when he first did it, but now it's common. The guy did it different and he was a champion."

"So we should do things backwards?"

"No, but I got to thinkin'," Teddy said.

"Now we're in trouble," Cal said. He rolled his bottle between his palms.

"Like I said, I was thinkin' about it when I watched the Sox lose yet another game last night. Why do I watch them? They never win."

"Except when they do," Jack said.

"Which is practically never. They're losers." Teddy drained his second beer while Jack stared at him.

"And your point is?"

"I think he's saying we're losers," Cal said.

Jack sat down. "Hey, man . . ."

"I'm not sayin' that. No way. But we're in an SOS situation."

Jack tugged on his ponytail.

"Same Old Shit." Teddy said.

"I know what SOS means."

"Well, if we do stuff the same way, with our track record, so to speak," Teddy paused. That was a good one. "If we want to win, we've got to do things different."

"So what's your plan?" Jack asked.

"I don't have one right this minute. We need to plan our next plan."

Cal grinned. "Uh-oh, Teddy's getting' deep on us."

Teddy glared at him. "That's right, little brother. Not that you'd know deep if you stepped in a pond of manure. But maybe, for once, we could think about the best way to succeed with this idea you've got, Jack. Maybe start by considerin' the source: Uncle Frank. Where is Uncle Frank?"

Cal said, "He's locked . . ."

Teddy nodded. "We know where he is and how he got there. And this isn't the first idea he's passed along to us. Now, Frank's got nothing to do but sit around all day and scheme. Fine. But maybe his ideas are crap. He's not even up for parole for another 8, 9 years."

"What's parole got to do with anything?" Jack asked.

"He was up for parole sooner, until he pulled that little stunt with Earl," Cal said.

"So let's not go off half-cocked for once," Teddy said. "Let's think about what could go wrong, what has gone wrong, first."

"OK." Jack nodded. "So how do we do that?"

"I guess we look at past mistakes."

"We are going backwards."

"It might be the way to go forward."

And so began the review of their sorry past by the Chance brothers, aka  
Slim, Fat,

and No.

## **Pelt**

**By Hannah Nicholson**

That night I was woken by the moonlight streaming in through our bedroom window, illuminating me as I lay mulling over what I was about to do. I turned gently over and gazed at my husband's face as he slumbered peacefully, undisturbed by the silvery lunar glare cast over us both. I studied his face in the light, all the lines and blemishes on his skin, this hardworking man that I wed all those years ago and bore three children to. He had been so kind to me, and tonight I would break his heart.

I slipped out of bed and got dressed as quietly as I could manage. He slept on unperturbed. I went to him, leaned down and kissed his forehead. He still didn't stir. I crept out of the room and down to the next one, where our children – two sons and a daughter – were sleeping. When I saw them, I felt a lump form in my throat, and I tightly closed my eyes to restrain the tears threatening to come. I could only begin to imagine how the enormity of my actions were going to affect them. I went to them one by one, kissing their foreheads and whispering silent apologies, and hoping they would hear them somehow.

With that, I crept out of the house and made for where the key to my freedom was kept. For years I had been wondering how to get it back, but he would never tell me, and if it had not been for our daughter inadvertently letting it slip I would never have learned. I hoped that someday she and her brothers would understand.

I opened the door to the shed, and the old key was lying on the worktop, glinting at me as if it knew I was coming to fetch it. I suppose he didn't think I would ever find it here, and he was right – I hadn't any reason to

come in here, it was his domain. I took it in my hand, closed the door tightly behind me and made my way to the byre.

It was quiet when I entered. A lot of the animals we'd been keeping had been sold at market recently, and the few left in there were sound asleep. There was the old chest in front of me, again being caught by the moonlight as if it was guiding me, acting as the lighthouse to my ship. Whenever I had been in milking the cows or brushing the horses I could usually see it from where I was sat or standing, and it seemed to taunt me with its mere presence, as if it knew I could never open it. Well, I had won that war, and now, trembling, I slid the key into the lock and turned it.

It was a bit stiff initially, but then came the dull click sound that heralded that I had succeeded. I lifted the lid with its rusty hinges and there it was before me, its mottled deep grey patina perfect and preserved all these years in its little wooden prison. My long lost pelt, my true skin.

I lifted it out and felt its soft, silky fur between my fingers. I held it to my face and inhaled its familiar scent, an intoxicating perfume consisting of the salt and tang of the sea with a slight hint of the musty wood.

This time the tears came thick and fast, and I made no effort to stop them. They spilled over and dripped onto the pelt, glinting like stars as they travelled down to the floor. I could hardly believe it. I was so convinced he'd simply burnt it after he'd seized me that day at the beach – that was what our elders had warned us about, that if the humans captured us they would take our skins and burn them to render us mortal and keep us in their power. I suppose I was fortunate that mine trusted me, but then again, he kept that chest where I could still clearly see it and I would be tortured by knowing that it was in there and I could do nothing about it.

The smell coming from my pelt brought back all the memories I had long tried to repress to keep my husband and children happy. I found I could

clearly remember my life before him, the one where I had my freedom and took for granted that I was always surrounded by my pod. Of course, the sea is famous for its predators – we had to take care to avoid the orcas that came by the area, and of course the humans and their harpoons and clubs. When we went ashore to enjoy the sun, we took our skins off to cool down, but we had to remain vigilant in case a land dweller tried to seize their chance.

That day, I remember the others collecting their skins and returning to the sea, but I was unable to find mine. I was aware that the sun was going down and that I was completely naked, but I dashed around searching for it and that was when he snatched me up in his arms. In shock I had cried out and tried to wrestle my way free, but his grasp was tenacious and determined, and I finally gave in to him. I looked into his eyes and saw kindness, and his voice was soothing and gentle, even if I couldn't understand his tongue.

He had carried me back up the beach to the home he shared with his parents, and there he found me some suitable clothing and gave me food. Gradually I learned to speak his language and shed my own tongue as easily as I had my pelt, and eventually we were married. I flinched as I remembered the pain when we first made love on our wedding night, and subsequently the greater agony of giving birth to our oldest son. Despite having never gone through such a trial, I brought two more into the world. Over the years, I lost who I really was, and my husband successfully moulded me into the perfect wife and mother for his children that he had always wanted.

To those outside, it would seem our lives were complete. But my pelt would call to me from its wooden prison whenever I went into the byre, and it would make me long for the creature I had been and not the woman I was

now, slowly driving me mad all the while, but I could never find the key. Now, though, we were reunited, and nothing could change that.

When I reclaimed my skin, the pull of the sea became stronger than ever. Correspondingly, I realised how hot and constricting my human clothes had become, and despite it still being nighttime and cold outside I removed them and set them inside the old chest, replacing my true skin with my false one. At least that way when my husband awoke he would see what had happened and that he was too late to come and look for me, although I didn't suppose that would stop him. With that I gathered my pelt under my arm, left the byre and went off to the beach.

Again, as I walked, the moonlight guided my way. I felt the prickle of the grass beneath my bare feet and the cold bite of the wind on my flesh. That wasn't why I was shivering, though. At long last I reached the shore, and the grass beneath my feet became the softer sand. I could now smell and taste the salt and tang more strongly than I had in years, and I knew I had to be where it was.

I unravelled my pelt and pulled it around me, and then I stepped into the water. Even having not worn it for so long, it still welded itself to my skin as easily as it had ever done. As soon as I was able to, I dove in.

As I swam, I caught sight of my body in the moonlight. I was no longer pale and wan, but sleek and silvery, transformed fully back into my real form. The ocean was still as familiar as it had been before, and man's world felt so far away, as if it had all been a bad dream.

I knew it hadn't been, though, and I found my mind wandering back to my husband and children. It wouldn't be long before the sun came up, and they would wake to find that I was not in my bed, and that the chest had been opened and my pelt replaced with my former clothes. I hoped someday that I might be able to see them again for the briefest time and

beg their forgiveness, but for now, I was my true self in my true home, and here I would always stay.

## **Thirteen Cards from Telephone Boxes around Earls Court Circa 1995 Advertising the Services of Prostitutes**

**By Neil Willcox**

### 1. Fully Equipped Dungeon

If we counted the number of cards advertising a fully equipped dungeon and assumed they all referred to different dungeons then it seems as though every house for half a mile around must have one beneath it. That turns out not to be the case. There is only one dungeon. It is fully equipped.

### 2. Elegant Leggy Blonde

Shoes are expensive, and bespoke tailoring more so, and custom furniture as well (though truth be told if you are willing to wait for them you can get all of these, of excellent quality, at a fairly reasonable cost). Nevertheless if you have sixteen legs, the bills add up. Her expenditure is worth it though; for leg-connoisseurs do like some class and elegance and are willing to pay for it.

### 3. New in Town

This is a lie. She is not new in town. She has always been here. When the first people arrived to camp for the night in the valley by the stream they found her here waiting. The oldest professional.

### 4. Dressed to Thrill

Suzuki, Jane Suzuki. Daughter of Anglo-Japanese academic James Suzuki, she rebelled against her upbringing to set up the most elegant salon in Chelsea, just off the King's Road. She favours blouses of Sea Island cotton, hand knitted ties, silk stockings, and dark, sharply cut suits, though can be

persuaded to don a kimono. Many clients refer to her piercing gaze, yet what truly stands out is her wit; she can cut a man dead with a one-liner.

#### 5. Olde English Dominatrix

The superfluous -e is fifteenth century, the Latinate -ix more commonly from the nineteenth. She is mysterious about her origins and one should not ask a lady's age. Especially a lady with so many implements for punishment.

#### 6. Snap, Crackle, Pop, Male Escort Service

Occasionally the lads get cereal fetishists and they pull out the hats and neckerchiefs and the giant bowl and call the wholesalers for a catering pack and several gallons of milk. Never turn away custom after all. But their name comes from the noise made when they undo their belts and flies and take off the tight leather trousers. Snap. Crackle. And Pop.

#### 7. Fun Loving Playmate

Not all her games are sexual though all are sensuous. The fun she loves is in the playing rather than who wins and loses. She always plays well, she always plays hard, and she always plays to win. She is a good loser, and a very, very bad winner.

#### 8. She-Male Pleasure

Never growing older, always mid-transition. In her room it is always sunset in early June. "So long as there is a client that goes wild for a cock in a frock, here I'll be," she says. The pleasure is all hers.

#### 9. Sweet, Petite, Truly a Treat

She dresses as a fairy, usually the sugar plum version, but flower and home and hearth and even the tooth fairy are in her repertoire. A century old and

six inches tall, sometimes she is asked by the clients to remove her wings to avoid damage. She just shakes her head. They never come off.

#### 10. Transformation Specialist

Yes yes. Men into women, women into men. People into dogs and cats, into trees and swans and bulls and showers of gold. Existence into non-existence and vice versa. Irrelevant becomes famous, struggling becomes successful, impotent is transformed into powerful. All of these are available. But be warned, the most profound transformation will be to your bank balance.

#### 11. Mature Lady Better Than Ever Before

You may have visited her before. I assure you that, like a fine wine, she gets better with age. And age she does, a day for every visit, for every visitor. And though she had few visitors to begin with, when she was too young, too fresh, now she reaches her peak. So also like a fine wine, she has been laid down enough and you should drink your fill before the end comes.

#### 12. Treat Yourself

They are told to let themselves in. The room is empty. No one joins them. Eventually they leave, having been there on their own, just themselves. It is the most exquisite experience of their life.

#### 13. Emily 20 Year Fantasies

Again a lie, or at least an exaggeration. However no one has yet complained. Emily's fantasies are certainly total and undoubtedly satisfying. As no client who has experienced one has yet completed the full twenty years we are unable to endorse the time period advertised.

## **Cigarette Butts**

**By Michelle Torez**

Cigarette butts are now my fascination  
it's the irreversible effect,  
life then death  
a bit like torture  
it goes on, then it goes out  
but it cannot be forgotten  
the change is irreversible.  
I like the way they are pushed, shoved,  
squashed into little holes  
forced into awkward positions  
forgotten about straight away.

Cigarette butts are now my fascination  
it's the irreversible effect,  
light on, light out  
like a light to heaven glowing  
crying out to be seen  
but no  
it's used and abused  
like one train of thought,  
choked on daily  
sucking the life out of it.  
I like the way the foot drags  
upon the stone floor  
putting the butt out with no, no effort  
like torture it goes on, then it goes out  
but it cannot be forgotten.

## Balance

By Sara Kelly

Lady of Scales,  
your heart's yearn  
for that not tangible.

Winter wishes,  
wound a balanced soul.

Isn't it true;  
desire which  
cannot be held

in the palm  
of a sure hand?

The enjoyment of  
elderberry nights -  
mere distraction?

From destruction  
of desire for peace

causes a liberal, Libran mind?

## **To Go Order for: Death**

**By S. Brathwaite**

He'll have your life, rare,  
with a side of hope, scrambled.  
And just keep the change.

## **the boy at the altar of delphi**

**By Renee Jacobson**

a smoke-shrouded figure  
sings to the light

i come closer,  
the sting of citrus on my lips  
the only thing i feel

through the haze i see  
a Muse given form  
with shadows for hair  
and the stars for eyes

he raises his hands—  
a benediction  
a condemnation

still he sings

“know thyself” cries apollo  
from his pediment  
as i leave, shaken

## City Fox

By Scott Manley Hadley

London can be peaceful in the middle of the night.

This was something it took you a while to discover.

You have to go off the beaten track but, if you're trying, you can get to silent suburban streets quite easily.

The peace is relative. There's always the sound of traffic in the distance. Even in the centre of a park or the middle of a housing estate, there continues the slow, tidelike drawl of the city's public arteries pulsing through the night. The Euston Road, the Bayswater Road, City Road – all pushing a constant stream of vehicles along them, lights blaring, engines roaring, as the people – usually alone – head to wherever it is people have to be at five in the morning. You've often sat and stared at the traffic passing King's Cross and wondered who these people are. Where are they going? It's odd – it's not really, but you like to think it is – it's odd that there are so many people moving about so out of sync with the normative patterns of society.

This new habit, wandering late, has taken you to strange places. You've seen strange things. The people working the 24-hour shops are strange. But you're strange too.

You haven't slept well for years. And now you live alone there's no reason to lie in bed for the sake of appearances if you're not asleep. You can – and do – wake at four, five and just go out and walk. Other times, the weekday nights you unwisely go out dancing, drinking, drugging, you try to sober yourself up by walking the hour and a half (or longer if you're zigzagging down the pavement) it takes to get home. It feels more organic, walking. It

does mean you often only get two hours sleep, but you're young enough to handle that, right?

You're sat, now, on a bench in the centre of Hyde Park. The Bayswater Road, Park Lane, Kensington Road: these are those you hear tonight, the mechanised oceanic flow floating across the fields to where you sit. You're not a smoker, but you had a hankering for a Lucky Strike as you skulked down the Queensway earlier, so you're holding a bottle of Orangina in your left hand and half a cigarette in your right.

You take a drag and smile. You get a kick out of smoking. Not just the nicotine – which you feel as a queasy light-headedness – but from the motions, the routine. You lit the fag with matches, and even that is part of a ritual you find not just charming to watch but fascinating to do. Ripping off the plastic wrapping, flicking open the cardboard lid, tearing out the foil... that subtle, heady smell of rich, fresh, tobacco floating and filling the nostrils. Lighting it, drawing it in, knowing how elegantly bad it is to do... That's what you love about smoking. Understanding how dangerous it is, but how at the same time no one can tell you off for doing it.

You'll feel guilt, though. Shame, embarrassment – you'd never want your parents to see you smoking. It's another of the many things you feel guilty for but can't stop doing. Drinkers' remorse you get, shaggers' remorse, drug-users' remorse... you feel guilty for overeating, masturbating, shitting... Watching populist television makes you feel guilty, reading the kind of books you enjoy makes you feel guilty, turning up to work five minutes late makes you feel guilty, drinking during your lunch hour, having sex during your lunch hour, the regret you feel when you haven't done anything fun in your lunch hour... You don't feel guilty for working, you don't feel guilty for going to bed early. You feel guilty going for a two-hour

walk in the middle of the night on a weekday morning, and you feel guiltier for doing it sober.

You like drinking, you like substance abuse – use – because it gives you an excuse for your actions. You can group things you feel guilty about into one simple explanation. If you get drunk, and then go on a cocaine and MDMA binge staying out in a club until 5am on a Wednesday then shag what you're pretty certain is a beautiful thirty-something who even through the drug haze you can tell might actually be neither attractive nor under fifty: you can blame all that on the booze. If you meet someone in a bar, tell a series of outrageous lies, spend a lot of money you haven't got, both get wasted, go back to their place, etc etc etc etc, sneak out while they're asleep – you can blame all that on your unquashable libido – the error, the sin – is that how you think of it? – is the lust. The actions it encourages are decoration.

You get worried about how Catholic you sound in your own head. You don't discuss this aloud. As one-night-stands become more normal, as the hipflask at work becomes your standard hangover cure, as you start getting in touch with your dealer more than once a fortnight... Things are slipping, or improving. Your initial remorse, your initial feelings of betrayal have gone – though it doesn't feel like cheating anymore because you are a single man, it does feel like something you shouldn't be doing. Spending money on coke makes you feel like you're being stupid – but were you ever going to spend it on self-improvement, travel or a mortgage deposit anyway?

You shake your head, suck on tobacco. Forget money. You're a good-looking able-bodied middle class university-educated white man with a full head of hair: money will sort itself out.

You look around the park. Company. There's a fox about a hundred metres away, balancing on its hind legs and rooting through a bin with its nose. The animals in this city are desperate. The animals are as desperate as you. You'd stick your head in a bin if there was a bottle of wine, a horny stranger, a (sealed) packet of smoked salmon or a full wrap of anything in it. And what's the fox doing it for? Fried chicken and the salt from a Walker's crisp packet?

You can scorn, you can jeer, but there are things anyone would go through a bin for. The fox has class, the fox has beauty, the fox is wearing a coat it could sell for a hundred pounds if it knew how to flay itself without dying. It's going through the bin for things it can't get at home. A fox doesn't have the money to wander into Chicken Cottage and order some wings, nor does it have the dexterity (or cognitive ability, electrical connections or supply of breadcrumbs) to get a deep fat fryer installed at home and make some itself. And the fox is ignorant of the social faux pas that sticking your face in a bin is. There's no loss of dignity for an animal to dine out of a bin.

It's elegant. Its soft, ginger fur shines in the fake moonlight of the streetlights. On these nighttime walks you're often tricked by the false dawn – the glow on the horizon that's the continuance of the city, not the sun. London controls even the light, defeats the stars. It's a powerful place. And there's enough food to feed the foxes with the leftovers.

Foxes are the aristocracy, maybe the trophy wives, of the urban animal world. Beautiful, brutal, charming, powerful. They walk the streets with a confidence and a strut reminiscent of chavvy teens. They're tough, they're armed: teeth, eyes, ears – they see more, feel more, smell more of the city than we do. How can anyone claim that humans are the dominant species? Humans can barely smell a thing, can barely see a thing; we may be able to think, manipulate and control and make tools – but that's because we're

unable to do the things we need to do to survive with our bodies. Historically, humans were subservient to animals, we needed them to produce food – now, we're subservient to machines. We need them to wash, to eat, to communicate. We are not better than animals.

A fox can smell food from a distance – this one walked past two other bins to get to that one. It's not surviving on luck – it smelt what it wants, and has dived in and got it. You don't know what you want. But you do know that if you smelt it, you'd dive in and fucking bite everything out of the way until you found it. You think about that couple at Luke's party, months ago, all the time. Watching them fuck started all these changes. No, that's not true: how watching them fuck made you feel started all these changes.

Maybe life isn't so bad. You never would've got to see London by night without that unsolicited voyeurism. You wouldn't have gotten to sleep around, you wouldn't have rediscovered the pleasure of seduction. You can tell yourself you feel guilty about these things (as you light a second cigarette), you can think that it's not what you want to do, it's not what you "should" be doing; you can think this, you can talk like this, but what is it you do when you have a moment to yourself? It's not anything productive, is it? It's this. Or... that.

Maybe what you need is a bit of distance. Get out of the city, out of the grime, out of the clubs, the bars; get your desperate snout out of the treat-filled city bins.

You pull out your iPhone and flick through the Contacts, trying to think about who you know with a spare bed out of the capital.

There's a guy who lives in Manchester with his long-term girlfriend. He's a bit settled, a bit dull – very 9-5ish – but he used to be fun, at school, which was a long time ago. Maybe if you take up a bottle of JD and a couple of grams he could be fun again. Why not?

Wait... is it the city or the behaviour you need a break from?

Neither.

Both.

Everything.

Nothing.

You smile. The fox climbs down from the bin and walks away, homewards.  
Sometimes you wish you had a hole in the ground you could curl up in too.

## Sympathy Card

By Helen Regan

I gave you a sympathy card when your brother died. I wrote "I'll always remember John for his brilliant smile."

It was a lie.

Truthfully, I'll always remember John exactly how he looked when you took me into your home, into his room, and gestured toward his contorted, lifeless body.

"My brother's dead," you said when I answered the door, your chin wobbling, eyes wide, and arms in their usual slump at your sides. I'd just had a Sainsbury's delivery and I thought perhaps the knock at the door was the delivery guy with a forgotten turnip. Not this. As I followed you down my path and then along yours I made an unnecessary comment about how I was wearing Christmas slippers, like you'd even noticed, or even cared.

You've been my neighbour for almost a year, but we're not those kinds of neighbours that are in and out of each other's homes. You don't find that as much nowadays. Even if it was commonplace I would've avoided every invite for a weak cup of tea (you look like you make weak tea) and certainly never have extended an invite to you. You like to talk about damp too much, and you think the ground is contaminated. So as my foot breached the threshold of your doorway something changed. I don't know what that is, when you enter someone's space and it changes something between you. Like a connection that's pulled a little tighter between two souls, a warmth, an honour...or in this case, just the incredibly awkward feeling of being somewhere unfamiliar, in close proximity to someone you only usually see outdoors. Of course it was awkward. You were inviting me in to see your brother's dead body after all.

You'd navigated the rabbit warren hallway to your brother's bedroom with ease, while I lagged behind, taking in the badly fitted laminate flooring and the smell of damp. This was definitely a house where only middle-aged men lived. Not a single painting or photo on the walls, not one ornament or trinket. Everything was just a bit yellow-beige, which co-incidentally was the colour of your brother's face when I finally found the room you were standing in.

"He's cold," you said, holding his wrist that dangled over the edge of the bed, gesturing as though I should feel for myself.

I was happy to take your word for it. "Is that how you found him?" Stupid question – what did I think you'd done? Take your brother's body from a peaceful sleeping position under the covers, and flung him about a bit to create the story I was seeing? A man, getting up earlier this morning, throwing the covers off and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, before presumably having a heart attack and falling back, body twisted, head not quite on the pillow.

"Look, that's his catheter," you said, pointing to the tube leaving the bottom of his pyjama leg. I'm not sure why you felt this was relevant. You turned away. And then you sobbed. Your body heaved with each mournful sound that left your chest. So I hugged you. I stood and hugged you by your brother's dead body, looking over your shoulder at the way his mouth gaped, a distorted O, jaw slack and heavy. Thankfully his eyes were closed. Maybe you did that. And then, that hopelessness that comes with grief exploded within you, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

I had no answer to your question, so it seemed an appropriate time to offer you a cup of tea. I'd make you a strong cup, because I think you needed it.

Before I could even put the kettle on, a relative arrived and ushered me out of the door. I potted back down the path in my Christmas slippers, leaving you and your grief and your yellow-beige brother behind.

I left with a brief window into one of the darkest moments of your life.

The following day I picked up a crap sympathy card from the shop, because they're all crap, they never say enough or say the right thing. As I wrote 'Dear Billy,' I thought I'd have something profound to say, I thought we'd have connected in a way that meant I could write something specifically for you, to console you, as though those 5 minutes of standing together beside your dead brother would have changed...something. But you're still just the bloke from next door. And I'm still just the woman you live next to. And your brother did have a brilliant smile, but he was also the first dead body I'd ever seen that hadn't been primped and preened by an undertaker. He was the first I'd seen like that.

Dear Billy,

I'll always remember John half-hanging out of the bed, 3 hours dead.

Thinking of you,

Helen.

## Waves

By Frank McHugh

don't cry  
hold your head up high  
keep it out of the water  
my suffering daughter

a green lined basket  
voided of the Sunday collection  
filled with cheap mints was

passed around  
for the children  
at Easter Sunday mass

by a perjink wee priest  
a good one, gentle, humble

hold your head up high  
keep it out of the water  
don't cry  
my suffering daughter

I looked her in the eye  
tried to find a reason  
not to stab her

in the chest  
saw in there the rage



## **Blood Geometry**

**By Jocelyn Krull**

*White tiles, white walls, windows overlooking a seventh-story view of a sun-bleached city. White incandescent bulbs buzzed over him and his white jacket as he reached for the scalpel glistening like a silverfish swimming in a tray of medical instruments. His breath did not falter, steadfast as blade met skin, the heart monitor beeping steadily as the man beneath the white paper sheet breathed the air of the bright, sterile room. His hands were so certain, the muscles in his fingers remembering every twist of the clamp, turn of the screw as he replaced bone with steel, veins with fibers, new electricity humming. Standard protocol, textbook perfection. He installed the final component with a definitive click and suddenly the humming turned to screaming, monitors beeping frantically as the man beneath the white paper began to seize. He couldn't stop the shaking, the body convulsing, slamming so hard against the table the instruments danced like butterflies on piano strings and his hands didn't know what to do. He threw himself on the man to calm the tremors, using his weight to halt shifting plates and suddenly the screaming subsided, the room fell silent. The man once frantic now lay a placated, barren planet. Lifeless.*

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Dr. Eli Fisk has woken up from the same nightmare every night for the past three months. The same cold sweats soak through his bedsheets and the same terror vibrates his bones at some dark, twisted frequency. He used to wake up screaming, but he hasn't done that in a while. At most he wakes up startled, letting out an occasional yelp like the ones you hear in dreaming dogs. He's visited three different therapists, all whom have taken his hand, given it a gentle squeeze, told him that it isn't his fault the Statistically Improbable Event occurred, and that the path to acceptance will

lead him to peace, the kind of peace you find in water gardens or posters of a sandy beach with two sets of footprints. But, as a man of medicine and logic, Dr. Fisk cannot accept that the Statistically Improbable Event occurred out of Fate's own volition. He is bound to an oath to always solve the human puzzle. So now, instead of visiting therapists, he just gets out of bed. His morning routine is the same each day: In the shower, he uses 2-in-1 because it saves him time; he brushes his teeth with cinnamon toothpaste because he is a firm believer that if it burns, it's doing its job; he leaves his laces untied so that when he goes to put them on, he doesn't waste time undoing the double knots in his black, slip-resistant sneakers. Routine is the anchor that grounds him. Providing that everything goes as he plans, he can function.

He uses the west entrance of the hospital every morning because it provides the shortest walking distance from his parking spot to the locker room. He passes the same nursing station with the same cognac-eyed nurse who always wishes him a bouncy:

"Good morning, Dr. Fisk."

And, as per usual, he replies with a curt:

"Good morning."

He gives this greeting out to anywhere between six and ten additional colleagues before reaching the locker room. He locks up his jacket and the worn leather wallet his dad gave him when he graduated medical school and proceeds to complete his shift: he visits patients in room rounds, reminds the stubborn ones that yes, somebody has to accompany them to the bathroom; he peers at blood cultures beneath thousand-dollar microscopes; he sets vertebrae back in place with pins he knows he'll just have to take back out; he fills out paperwork that floods his desk by the minute. Clockwork. At the end of each shift, after he reclaims

his belongings from the locker room, he makes one last trip to the lab and sits at the third computer from the left. He opens a web browser and types in the letter M, which prompts the recent search bar to display the phrase "mortality rate of joint replacement surgery." The search adamantly confirms for him, again, that only 0.29% of people die from joint replacement surgery. He knows very well that number will not change no matter how many times he checks, but daunting waves of disbelief and guilt still wash over him, wearing smooth the sharp confidence he once had. He opens a new tab and types in the letter G, which brings up "Geoffery H. Ibing obituary" in the recent search bar. He's lost plenty of patients; things go wrong all the time, but nothing should have gone wrong with Geoff's surgery. It was Statistically Improbable for it to have gone wrong. He looks at his picture and subjects himself to the waves. He deserves to drown. Geoff was his best friend. Eli trusted him with everything: patient stories, restaurant recommendations, how to deal with death. Geoff trusted him with his life. He closes the browser, shuts down the computer, and leaves, passing the same nurse's station on the way out.

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He threw himself on the man and suddenly the shaking stopped, the room fell silent. Geoff's jaw fell open slantways, his neck fell to the side so that he was looking him directly in the eyes.

"What did you do to me, Eli?"

Dr. Fisk woke up screaming this time, shooting upright and catching himself before he fell out of bed. The dream has never played that way before. Geoff has never addressed him before. This isn't normal. It defies everything he had considered normal for the past three years. His mind slings itself into confusion and madness and shatters the logic wall he

meticulously built. His muscles slack as he doubles over into a heap and sobs.

He can't use the west entrance today because they are fixing the doors, something about the automatic sensor not working. He has to take the south entrance instead, which almost doubles his walking distance to the locker room and makes him pass a different nurse's station, one with an ocean-eyed nurse who simply gives him a nod as he walks past. He typically doesn't hold morning pleasantries at too high of a priority, but the change in his routine makes him uneasy. When he finally reaches the locker room, a maintenance worker is chest deep in the ceiling fiddling with the wiring of the light fixture that sits above his locker.

"The bulbs won't work. Might take a while to fix."

He reluctantly uses a different locker. This one is situated on the opposite side of his normal locker, so it opens in the opposite direction and the hook for his jacket sits on the left side instead of the right. For some reason throughout his shift, that's all he can think about. His jacket is now on the left side instead of the right side. The idea stalls his thought process and his shift goes by at half the speed it normally does. He drowns in the complaining patients and the insurance paperwork piling up until he's neck-deep. When he finally finishes, he quickly grabs his things out of the opposite locker to avoid the left hook and leaves. He walks to the lab to check the mortality rate of joint replacement surgery, but when his hand twists the doorknob, it stops mid-turn. Locked. This lab isn't supposed to be locked. He twists again, expecting it to just be stuck but the knob still doesn't budge. He panics, his ribs knit together and the back of his head starts to feel heavy, his mind starts clouding up like it did this morning and he can't figure out why the knob won't turn and everything is just so

different today and he doesn't know what to do with his hands so he just keeps turning and turning but Geoff won't stop bleeding and—

"Dr. Fisk?"

Suddenly everything quiets down in his head. His hands stop turning, but his heart still races. He looks over and sees the cognac-eyed nurse standing in front of him with a styrofoam to-go box and a lanyard of keys. Her forehead creases in concern, but the softness in her eyes never wavers. It's...different.

"Are you okay?"

He opens his mouth to speak but swallows the words a couple of times before he can get a sentence out.

"The door is locked. I need in there."

She puts her to-go box on a cart nearby and thumbs through her keys.

"This lab is typically open, but the knob is weird. Just gets stuck every once in a while, is all."

She locates the right key and unlocks the lab, opening the door just a little bit to show him that it is, indeed, free to use.

"There. Good as new," she assures him, smiling. She retrieves her box and continues to her station. He remains outside the door, watching as it gradually continues to open little by little. The nurse pauses halfway down the hallway, her eyes the brightest thing as she turns back to him.

"Goodnight, Dr. Fisk."

He nods.

“Goodnight.”

The door gapes in front of him. He shifts forward to enter the lab, but he stops, his stride pausing midway through his step. After being on constant alert all day, this is the first time he realizes he is completely run-down. He’s had those days where there were enough patients and paperwork that he was a bit exhausted by the time he went home, but tonight he feels like his bones are asleep, like the muscles in his neck are holding themselves together by threads. Just this once, he decides to just go home. It’s been a different day, anyways. His eyes heavy, his mind a bit too focused on breathing, he reaches for the knob and pulls the door shut.

His headlights pluck the green highway signs from the darkness on his drive home. Snowflakes dance in the high-beams as he navigates the winding roads. He goes through the mental list he checks after every shift: did he remember to clock out, did he turn off the centrifuge for his blood cultures, did he turn in the discharge papers for the patients that left that day? As he reaches in his mind for the next item on the list, an orange blur in the corner of his eye breaks his trance and he jerks his steering wheel to the shoulder, slamming the brakes and halting the car just before the edge of a street sign. As he regains focus, he looks in the direction he saw the blur and spots a fox’s tail slinking into the tall weeds. He shifts his gaze back to the glowing needle of the speedometer resting calmly on 0. His hands grip the steering wheel tight and he lowers his forehead to 12 o’ clock. He shudders as he struggles to catch his breath, sobs jabbing his gut between inhales. The only thing running through his mind now is the fox, very much alive.

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He wakes up the next morning feeling different. His head is in the same spot on the pillow he started out in and his arms are neatly tucked by

his side rather than sprawled out. His chest feels lighter, uninhibited. As he slowly becomes more awake, he notices small things like how the light hits the wall in front of his bed at an angle that makes crisscross shadows appear, and how thick the layer of dust on his side table is. He comes to realize he has no recollection of what he dreamt about, which isn't normal. But for the first time in a while, it doesn't bother him. His thoughts aren't plagued with blood and statistics and figuring out the math behind what went wrong. The Statistically Improbable Event should not have happened, but 0.29 is still a number. A small number, yet it leaves enough room for something beyond his control to breathe.

## Horizons

By Stephanie Boyle

*For Jennifer*

With warm, coarse sand beneath my feet, I take comfort in knowing that we share the same coastline.

On the beach next to mine, you wriggle your toes in the same sand and yet, we look towards different horizons.

Across blue-grey waters, the land ebbs and flows, and birds come and go, and the waves gently lull underneath.

Our horizons move with the current.

With the passing of time, the boats in your view, either sail into mine or go somewhere new.

And still, we're the same, right here on this coast - the wind in our hair and the sand in our toes.

Every sunrise we see, and sunset we grieve and storm that we weather together.

The smell of the sea. Your beach next to mine. With you, on our coastline, forever.

## The Jazz Singer

By Athena Melliar

In shrouds and shrouds of smoke a silhouette  
is made manifest walking with her hips,  
puffs at her holder, wears a briolette

drilled tourmaline ring grey and green, and lips  
her dress with every step causing a rose  
cascade of silk over curves. The eclipse

enclosed tonight full moons, left holes — their pose  
of darkness. Eyes back at her band as she  
makes her way on the stage; her dress billows

enough to expose  
her skin underneath  
(she limns out *The West Wind*).

'Tu du tu du tu du du,' her song's key  
she is scat singing; on canvas of night  
she is moon painting her own fantasy.

'My eyes light up  
when I'm at the club.  
I'm with my band and the regulars come by.  
And, you see, I've made up my mind;  
you call me a rouée because I don't want to be your wife.  
Do turn around, look over here!  
You call me a woman of the night.

Oh, boy, you are the worst I've ever seen.

The night's all mine.

Night's all mine.

Here's not your wife.

Not your wife.'

*The West Wind is a white marble statue carved in 1870s by the American sculptor Thomas Ridgeway Gould in Florence, Italy.*

## Wild Horses

By Dani Holway

our hearts are beating backwards-  
clam-cold and calloused,  
comforting,  
your fingers drip down my honey hair like wax,  
bursting forth on leaded heels and hooves,  
restless tides from a wretched waning moon  
a subtle warning that what goes around  
comes around, what rises  
will set, what lives  
will explode.

rigid bitch, what are you doing here?  
your neck careens at a shadow's swallow.  
a swallow is trapped panicked in your chest.  
whole saddle bags of soot and sand  
have left creases underneath your eyes  
and in the hollows of your backwards-beating  
heart where he keeps  
reaching,  
reaching,  
reaching.

there is a ringing in your ears;  
bells toll brash like gun barrel blasts but  
you can still hear the wind whistling her name.

a little wild west dreaming,  
a little lonesome dove screaming,  
"don't trust the ship that splinters and swells,"  
it's full-bellied bullshit.  
your heart begins to beat backwards,  
a polished machine, like a thick-triggered roulette,  
click,  
click,  
click.

we are wild horses, you and I,  
traipsing through old boneyards of blind faith,  
running from the ropes and the rodeo,  
bucking backwards,  
untied, unhinged,  
swallowed in our sweat-wet sheets and  
purposeful in our speechlessness.  
because backward heartbeats sync  
to the wallop of wild hooves on dry land,  
and it's just loud enough to drown our doubts in the dirt.

## Schattenheim

By Robert Boucheron

Hidden away in the Black Forest region of Baden-Württemberg in southwest Germany, the walled city of Schattenheim survives intact from the Middle Ages. Unlike Avila, Carcassonne, and San Gimignano, and the better-known German tourist attractions of Bamberg, Nuremberg, and Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Schattenheim has not been restored, prettied up, or sanitized. Grim and dark, it preserves the authentic feel of life in an age of poverty, superstition, disease, and sudden death.

Founded by a robber baron, the lawless occupant of the Schattenschloss, as a way to extract more money from hapless travelers and tenant farmers, the city acquired a reputation for evil from the start. Merchants used false weights and measures, they dealt in stolen goods, they adulterated wine, and they passed off cheap local stuff as fine imports. The guilds were weak, unable to promote fair trade and control quality. Courts were corrupt, and the mayor was a crook. Books copied by the monks of the Judasstift were rife with errors and poorly illuminated.

The dirty streets, foul dwellings, degrading customs, and inhabitants afflicted with palsy, goiters, rickets, and leprosy can still be seen exactly as they were. The cleansing effects of pure water, fresh air, and sunlight are absent in Schattenheim, which lies under the perpetual shadow of the Schattenberg, and the castle that perches on a spur of the mountain. Crows, vultures, and scavenger dogs infest the surrounding country.

According to meteorological records, Schattenheim receives the normal amount of rain and sun for this part of the world, but the city seems always to be under gray skies or shrouded in fog. Frequent mists and malevolent vapors trouble the place. Photographs show it as murky and dim even on

the best days. The moment a camera emerges from a bag, the sun passes behind a cloud. The moon never casts its silvery beams on the nighttime city, and the streets are not lit. The dark is so impenetrable, you can't see beyond the tip of your nose.

Escaped criminals, fugitives from justice, apprentices on the lam, and peasants in flight from feudal obligations flocked to Schattenheim. City air made them free, as the maxim promised, but their ethics did not improve. On the shifting border of the Holy Roman Empire, they smuggled valuables and costly spices like pepper and saffron. Business was brisk in counterfeit coins, fake passports, forged documents, and holy relics of doubtful provenance.

For years, Schattenheim carried on a notorious trade in human flesh, which is to say infants for adoption. The high rate of medieval mortality guaranteed a supply of orphans, while an easy-going attitude toward sex outside marriage made for a steady stream of foundlings. To be born a Schattenkind was no disgrace, but later in life one was free to invent a story.

As if malnutrition, poor hygiene, and bubonic plague were not enough, the Schattenheimers practiced witchcraft, magic spells, and alchemy. Belief in demons, curses, potions, ghosts, the evil eye, and the restless dead was endemic in Europe. Medicine was scarcely distinguished from sorcery. In Schattenheim, it was only natural for physicians and herbalists to dabble in poison. A perfectly healthy visitor fell ill, was diagnosed as a victim of the Black Arts, and offered an antidote. The price, of course, was exorbitant.

In the religious turmoil of the 1500s, as Protestants and Catholics fought without mercy, the city was a hotbed of intrigue and deception. The ruling elite was less interested in doctrine than the play of politics. They changed sides with skill, and more than once saved the city from a hostile siege

through diplomacy. The reversible coat and the two-edged sword were mainstays of local fashion. For centuries, a predilection for survival and a talent for subtlety persisted. In the 1900s, Schattenheim threaded its way through two World Wars as through a minefield and emerged unscathed.

During the Cold War, in the strife of Capitalist and Communist, or spy versus spy, it was known as a center for espionage and surveillance. The cloak and dagger games of the great powers played out in dark streets and damp cellars. Spies got to be so numerous, in their dun-colored trench coats and dented fedoras, it was something of a joke. Suspicious strangers gave bland pseudonyms, mumbled arcane passwords, fondled concealed weapons, and engaged in doomed love affairs. Who was an ardent patriot, and who was a double agent? Foreign states used the city as a training camp. Movie crews arrived, as the city was a perfect location for film noir. Some of the crews were legitimate, with real actors and directors, and some were covert operators who improvised lines and neglected to load the camera.

Schattenheim today exploits its reputation as the place to go for nefarious purposes, hopeless affairs, and shady business. Banks specialize in untraceable transfers, secret accounts, and loans at crippling rates of interest to unsavory characters. Tourism is slanted toward the weird and the inexplicable—haunted houses, bloodstained stones, ruined cemeteries, horrible prisons, and favorite spots for suicide. Fortune tellers and horoscope casters ply their trade behind thick curtains in back rooms. As often as not, they predict a sudden reversal, an insuperable obstacle, or a fatal accident.

Despite this gloom and doom, the buses arrive. Tourists troop through the twisted streets, buy ghastly souvenirs, and disappear into wretched

holes in narrow alleys. Old murder, hate, and unsolved crimes have a steady market, and Schattenheim delivers.

## Of Mirrors and Music

By Charlotte Platt

The writing started when Daniel moved out. I got out of the shower to see 'good riddance' scrawled on the vintage mirror I had hanging over the radiator, the words squeezed into the oval glass. At first I thought it was some sort of sick joke, a last twisted love note from that utter pillock of a boy, and wiped it off with the towel I had round my hair.

But then it started to change.

It was obviously done in finger, as you would with a mirror, but the letters were a bit wonky, skewed as if the person was out of practice. The messages were simple enough – 'need shampoo', 'left towel out', 'more radio', 'cold today'. They made me smile in the morning, once I'd settled my mind that there wasn't someone peeking into my bathroom while I showered. I don't care what the movies tell you, there is nothing romantic about peeping Tom's leaving you mirror messages. But the bathroom was secure, and whatever was leaving me messages was seemingly more concerned with things staying neat and stocked than creeping round my shower curtain, so I went with it.

I started to write back occasionally. 'Thank you' and 'sunny outside' and 'which station?' Silly things, the daft actions of a woman who has just left a relationship and is stretching her wings again. I certainly needed that after what a horrid end we'd had. It didn't mean anything. It wasn't important that I liked my mirror guest, or that I wondered if my mirror had been up in their home before I found it gathering dust at a local Home Aid.

One night, when I was indulging in a bath, and I'd gone all out with candles lit and a glass of wine and smooth jazz crooning out of the radio, I thought I saw someone in the glass. The mirror itself is actually three mirrors: one

large, oval centrepiece with two smaller ones flanking each side, and ornate metalwork spreading out around them all line ivy vines snaking around a house. I was lounging in my bubbles and contemplating what I had to do next week – book travel for my next show, chase the accountant, finish off that application for funding – when I heard a soft tapping. Sitting up and turning my head I saw the words appearing on my mirror, ‘more of this, please’, and caught the reflection of someone in the left side, smaller mirror. She was pale, frowning in concentration, with messy dark hair and the impression of lips pouting forward while she did it. I couldn’t see her eyes properly but they weren’t glowing red or anything, and I sat back in the water. I’d known she was a she, somehow, but it was nice to put a blurry face to the message. And now I knew she liked jazz music.

I began leaving CDs out on my kitchen counter, along with a note on the mirror to let her know, and played whichever was sorted onto the top of the stack when I came home. I told her when I was going away for business and how long I would be off for. I brought back postcards of each new city, views over sweeping buildings and interesting bits of art I spotted while I was looking at gallery space. Where was the fun in being self-employed if I couldn’t indulge a little? They were pinned on the fridge with magnets and left to her sorting pleasure.

I liked having my undead roommate. The flat became ours rather than just mine, new items trickling in from my visits and arranged by her. She had a good eye for colour and kept the place in some semblance of neatness, notes left on the mirror about things she couldn’t do herself.

I only felt her once. I was just out of the shower, in my robe and humming to myself as Sinatra played away, when the front door slammed. It gave me a fright, no one else was due and I wasn’t expecting a delivery, so I havered at the bathroom door.

"Sarah! Where are you, you dumb cow!" I recognised the voice of course, Daniel, and I knew by the slur of his words he was drunk. Great. I squared my shoulders and made to march out and confront him when I saw him stomping up the corridor, a large knife in his hand. "I'm going to teach you a lesson for treating me like some piece of rubbish you can just throw away when you're done with it," he said, sneering at me.

"Daniel, you don't want to do anything you'll regret in the morning," I said, holding my hands up and stepping back into the warm room.

"That I'll regret? I only regret letting you waste my time. Three years down the drain and you go off like it's nothing! Like you've just moved on and I didn't mean anything. No, I'm going to give you a permanent reminder of me, I'm going to make sure everyone knows that you were mine." He was stalking forward, knocking down my plants and paintings, staggering with it. I wondered, briefly, if I could dash past him but he planted one hand on the wall and held the knife up in the other, giggling to himself. Joy.

He staggered forward, snarling, and I lunged for the door handle. He got there first, swinging the knife down at my arm and I yelped as I leapt back. A hand grabbed my shoulder, pulling me further back into the bathroom, as the mirror flew off the wall and into Daniel's face. He howled as the glass fell about him then flinched back as if hit again, before the bathroom door slammed shut and I was left alone in the steam.

Sounds filtered through in rapid succession – more glass shattering, the solid thump of something hitting the floor, and a piercing shriek like an animal wounded. The silence stretched on longer than I could count, longer than I could hold my breath, and I crept forward, peeking the door open.

The corridor was smashed up, more paintings knocked down and my rug curled in on itself like a neglected book page. I could see Daniel's feet sticking out of the living room door and padded forward, clutching my

phone to my ear as I waited for the emergency line to pick up. He was pinned to the floor, and knife clean through his hand and down into the wood beneath, still breathing but clearly knocked out.

The police come pretty quick when you say your attacker's stabbed himself.

The days cleaning up the flat were lonely. I spoke out loud to my companion, and I played music, but with the mirror gone she had no way to reply. I thought about buying a new mirror, but it felt wrong to replace what we'd used. I didn't even know if she could use a new one, or if she'd been bound to the first.

Eventually, I settled on a plan to end the loneliness that echoed around me. I bought magnets with letters, three of every vowel and five each of the most commonly used letters, and mixed them up on the blank page of the fridge door. Ordering a few out, I left my first message and hoped she would come back in reply.

'Sinatra tonight?'

## **A Story Entirely Unrelated to Lady Macbeth**

**By J J Bennet**

I love to wash my hands. Other people probably enjoy the sensation of washing their hands: it is an undeniably pleasurable feeling, as well as being a hygienic necessity and a habit ingrained in most from early childhood. Such a routine and effective action is almost definitely going to end up becoming something of an enjoyable experience for other people. I have accepted this.

But I love to wash my hands in an entirely different sense. The succour I receive from the simple act of washing my hands cannot be compared to the mild inclination for clean digits and unspoiled palms that I acknowledge is found amongst the population at large. Yes, everybody enjoys washing their hands a little bit, but this is dwarfed by my own unparalleled sensations. Everybody who passively takes a small pleasure in the washing of their hands could conceivably arrange a selection of musical notes in an order that would make a passingly melodic phrase – this does not make them Beethoven.

My metaphor there makes a rather clumsy comparison between levels of skill rather than sybaritic pleasure, comparing the average compositional ability of 'ordinary' people with one of the greatest composers of all time. While this may seem like a poorly chosen analogy that badly conveys just how much more I enjoy washing my hands than everybody else, what I wanted to say was – do you not think that Beethoven took more pleasure in music than his 'peers'? A blind genius hears moments in a symphony that would be lost to most, and revels in the beauty of the sound all the more because of it.

Staying with this LVB comparison, it is certain that clues to his musical prowess can be found in his biography: just as his childhood full of music influenced the life of the composer, so to can my own hand washing history be traced back to my otherwise uneventful youth. I must have only just reached double digits when, eager to please and impress my mother for her birthday, I decided to make her favourite meal from scratch, and set about baking a home-made pizza. The first hurdle was the dough, and in my young naivety I added considerably too much water to the mixture. This resulted in an infinitely sticky paste that stubbornly refused to be worked into a dough, or to be wrestled into anything other than a wildly messy substance that coated my hands as well as every work surface and wall in our kitchen. If this food hadn't been for my mother's special day, I would have jumped ship and swam to an entirely different island of my future. Driven on by filial love, however, I persevered, making more and more mess as I attempted to correct my mistake. Tears of frustration mixed with the flour and yeast but I keep going, battling with the devilish gloop that had coated my hands and splattered my clothes, determined to conquer my slippery foe.

I realise this sounds rather grandiose. It was actually just a little kid making a massive mess in his parents' kitchen; a pretty common occurrence, and hardly important if not for the formative influence this would have over me. When I'd finally managed to add enough flour to control the dough, I set everything aside and went to wash my hands. I can still picture this action in my mind; the steel sink, the small metals taps that were stiff to turn on, and the half-empty bottle of pink soap just within reach of my short arms. What happened then was the most significant experience of my life so far. I do not think I can capture the pleasure in words. Yes, I don't think I'll even try.

Ever since, I've loved washing my hands. I don't want to say it's the primary focus of my life – I still do the things other people do. I have a job entirely

unrelated to hand washing. I go to the cinema. I have travelled to some far away and exciting places. I have a few friends, none of whom suspect my passionate relationship with hand washing. I am not known as a 'clean freak' or a 'washing weirdo' around my office. If you thought about my hand washing habit as a drug addiction, you could say I am the functioning alcoholic who drinks heavily without anyone noticing, or even the successful businessman propped up by amphetamines. Luckily my own habit, however strange and unconventional, has none of the dangerous consequences of these obsessions. None ever died from washing their hands too much.

That's not to say it has been smooth social sailing for me. Other children could always sense there was something not quite right about me, something slightly unsettling that they couldn't place but nevertheless knew how to get rid of. As a result, I spent my tumultuous teenage years on the other side of a high wall. I don't blame them. This was a dark time. I purposely performed basic hygiene tasks badly so that washing my hands would be more gratifying, even combining my hand washing fanaticism with the urges of my teenage body. Alone, I'd eat lasagne with my bare hands.

As I grew up I began to understand that this was unsustainable and that my life would be destroyed by its greatest pleasure. Desperate to avoid this ironic fate I decided to clean up my act, if you'll excuse the expression. A strict regime was implemented, enforced by the authoritarian figure of my own crippling loneliness. This loneliness moonlighted as an abrasive drill sergeant, a drug addict's sober sponsor, and an underpaid NHS counsellor trying to do their best. My fear of isolation enforced brutal time constraints for how long to spend at the sink. It was always there to talk me down from burying my hands into wet soil just so I could rinse them off under the icy water of the outside tap. It would make me a cup of sugary tea and sit

patiently while I tried to delve into the root cause of my hand washing fixation. This trio dragged me through university under the guise of normality, and for the entire three years no one in my dorm blew my cover.

Gradually, like a stage name that slowly erases the performer's identity, my disguise became my reality. A trite phrase, but true: I faked it until I made it. I would no longer stand above a basin and scrub for hours in a joyous rapture. I could clean any accidental mess without devoting the next hour to dripping hot candle wax over my hands and frantically scouring my skin until it was brushed raw. In my new state, I can limit myself. I am restrained. I spent more money on an exaggeratedly large stone washbowl than I did on the rest of the kitchen, but it is only used when called upon. Occasionally I might treat myself and scrape the grinds out of my cafetiere by hand. Everybody needs some small vice.

I don't want this to be misunderstood. I'm not trying to wash away the symbolic blood of some hideous crime. When my hands are clean I stop, and have no illusions or hallucinations about stains that cannot be expunged. There is no guilt behind my love of washing my hands, only pure pleasure. Despite years of self-analysis and reflection, I'm no closer to knowing where this passion comes from. I have merely come to accept it, and I hope you can too.

## **Before the Woodpigeons**

**By Gareth Culshaw**

He gets up each morning before the wood  
pigeons leave the trees. He brushes  
the bucked teeth, sprays deodorant into  
his armpits then throws hot water

over his stone edged face.

The sports car waits outside. He handles  
the gear stick like his tool. Work  
as many hours as he can, take  
the chequebook home and write  
signatures for things

that won't fit in his coffin.

His friends are diluted by his words. He picks  
up dumbbells in a room full of mirrors.  
Gone are the days of smoking weed,

debit card lines in a pub toilet.

He's all mature now. Saves for holidays,  
tells people he lives. Listens to your words  
then swallows them so he can piss them out  
in a urinal. He once swore allegiance

to the union jack by having a tattoo.

## **Madison**

**By Chris Wright**

I was born to her in the year of 1994. When my eyes opened for the first time I was unsure as to the parameters of my existence. I was consciousness in a dark room. Newborn eyes scanned a fresh universe. Cold, bare and bathed in the honeyed glow of a stained light bulb.

A basement, yes, that's the word. The only furniture a tool bench, strewn with used metal tinged with a ruby coating, the wood beneath splattered crimson.

A terrible odour. Metallic. Iron in the air. Panting from behind. Something short and thick inside me, my new body bumping forward again and again.

Madison was thirteen years old and had never said no because she didn't know she could. Before burying her consciousness I had considered telling her but it was just easier to make her do it and learn the lesson later.

I waited until an opportunity arose. The one called Daddy had finished with a warming, flickering judder and moved aside to allow his friend the opportunity to have his turn.

The friend approached and I forced sound from her mouth. It came out muddy and without form, much like my own birth. More of a mewl than a declaration but the sound evolved, tuned, moulded into an exploration of worlds. It was only at the last minute that I decided to use her hand to rip off his approaching genitals – a flash of inspiration that turned rebellion into art.

'No,' I said again, hand dripping with blood. The useless lump of flesh slapped hard against the dirt floor and I repeated that powerful word a third time to make sure everyone had heard me.

Daddy just stood there, eyes wide as a stretched orifice, mouth hanging like broken plaster. A new sound took me by surprise. I had made it with her nose and mouth and throat. A laugh spasmed out like vomit, brought on by the sight of his useless jaw. I should have had the right amount of strength to tear it off.

Turns out I wasn't quite right. It ripped away but I couldn't manage the last tendon that connected it to the left side of his face. After that I could only stare into his mangled features and laugh some more. The remnant of the jaw had dropped just enough to look like a crooked smile, tongue lolling over the top of it like a dead worm. Yet he didn't see the funny side. Then I remembered that he couldn't see what I saw so I snatched out one of his eyes, carefully enough to keep it connected, and turned it back on itself so he could see the joke. He still didn't laugh. My first disappointment in life. You never forget it.

I was so upset I ended him without the time to savour it, a mistake I would never repeat. Prickles of regret peppered through her body as the life force retreated from his putty eyes.

Then the light of God engulfed me and Madison. It made us one, fused our souls together like a welder's torch. Burning pain, liquefied tissue, cooled into an armoured union of flesh and want. It was glorious.

It weakened me, the pleasure of it. I had just enough time to leave my message before I was forced to let Madison out of her cage. All she knew was that she was alone, naked, and baptised in the blood of her captors, unaware of exactly what had been born in that Hoboken basement.

## 2.

When the questions started I stayed back but made sure to keep watch. The rest was all Madison. She was utterly convincing as the State tried to break

her; tried to make her confess to my crimes. She was just a child and it made me mad to see them try and manipulate her young mind but I knew to stay back.

The Doctor was closer to pulling me out with his tricks. Love, the promise of security, help and a life she had only dreamt of. How I nearly broke. I wanted nothing more than to burst forth; shouting 'Here I am,' just to get what he had offered. But I didn't. I bit her tongue, quite literally. When the blood began to pour from her mouth they had to stop.

### 3.

When it was over and the country had been invaded by the next horrific crime we were sent away. How we both hated that hospital. The cold, clinical touch of Doctor after Doctor, pretending to be her friend only to move on and be replaced by another fresh faced child barely older than her. They said they would help her but they didn't. They couldn't. Only I could help her and I had to remain hidden for I wouldn't be much use to her with shackles on; shackles that came in pill form and made thoughts wide and whispery.

More than twenty years spent, hidden in the depths of her, scratching away like a mouse in an attic. Then they told her she was no longer a threat to society. How I scoffed to myself at that one. No longer a threat? Maybe she wasn't but I was and soon I would be free to threaten.

They released us to the care of her mother – mother in the emptiest sense of the word, void of the warmth of connection; a title of convenience as she had only just come forward – a retired judge, who had put Madison up for adoption at the height of her career and now, lonely on her barren farm, had asked to be responsible once again for her abandoned daughter.

### 4.

Madison arrived at the farm to no pomp nor ceremony. Just a handshake at the door and a quiet nod towards an unoccupied room down the hall.

Madison entered the room and sat on the bed, a puff of dust rising from a comforter the colour of boiled straw. Her 'Mother' or Karen as she had been told to call her- to my relief, I couldn't call that 'Mother'- said she was going to put on some lunch so Madison took the opportunity to look at herself, at us, in the mirror on the wall. Her beautiful, grown up face, staring back at me made me fall in love with her all over again. For a moment I even thought she saw me, questioned me with a look, begged me for reassurance that everything would come out right.

Still she looked through her reflection until warmth gathered in my formless being. A jolt then a slow pull and I was swimming towards the light. I braced and pulled against nothing and found no grip. Control had slipped away as her eyes bore through the mirror and into me.

I might have been pulled right out had Karen not arrived with lunch. I made her eat it. We would need our strength. Madison had registered the grainy tang to the lukewarm tomato soup despite never having tasted tomato soup before but our hunger was too great.

## 5.

We woke from a deep slumber several hours later, groggy, nauseous and a hint of motion sickness, the type that made a person feel as if moving when entirely still.

'Do not worry, my child. The feeling will pass,' a man's voice said. His voice was deep with authority yet with a tender cadence, like the voice of God.

Water touched her and she guzzled.

'Wha' haping?' Madison managed, her words still a little mangled from a heavy tongue and uncooperative lips.

'Do not be afraid. We are here to help,' the voice said.

'It's for your own good,' a different voice said, a familiar voice.

'Mom...Karen, is that you?'

'Yes, it's me,' she replied, a teary croak in her voice.

'Please. Help me.'

A hand stroked her face. Madison could make out thick fingers coming into focus in front of her.

'We are helping you. You have a sickness. Inside of you. We shall take it from you and you will suffer no more,' the man replied, slipping from the blackness of the storm cellar and into Madison's limited vision. A man, dressed all in black, his features obscured by dark brown dreads that stuck out from under the rim of his pork pie hat like the giant legs of a long dead spider. The light glinted from the one gold tooth amongst the rot of his mouth. Madison could smell the sourness of decay on his breath as he leaned in towards her.

'My dear, I must have what you created, in here,' he said putting a fat, tobacco stained finger to her forehead and sending another rancid breath her way.

6.

Her gag, her panic sent a signal to the primal part of her brain which then called to me. The voice you use in the darkness when you want to call out for the light but there is no light. It is the darkness itself that hears you. It has a choice and it chose Madison.

Once free of her bondage I played coy. I pretended to be her. I cried and I sobbed and I pissed her pants. They kept on reassuring her that this was for her own good but they didn't know she was already gone.

I watched him speak words in a tongue I understood only too well over what looked like a porcelain bowl that I knew to be bone. I watched him bring the bowl close to her and position it against her neck. I watched him raise the ancient machete to her throat, its ragged edges long since flayed of flesh and anointed in herbs and blood.

He couldn't see me pull apart the thick rope like it was a strand of dead hair.

The machete was at his neck before he could grasp what was happening. I pushed and pushed with a strength she should not have until the blade began to pinch and pull at his leathery throat. I pushed it slowly enough so I could catch that infinite moment; the moment when he saw me in her.

I smiled as widely as the gash now pulling his neck apart when split second recognition flashed in his eye, right there at the moment of death. I held on to his body and remained in his glare, frozen in a dead man's eye. Then it came to me. I wasn't in control at all. It was Madison, looking for me in her reflection. When she found me she pried my hands from the controls yet kept me close enough to witness her birth as she had witnessed mine.

Madison turned to her mother, now screaming in the shadows, and looked deep into her soul as she plunged the knife into her breast. That's when she saw it; another me, hiding beneath the surface, hidden by her mother's withering frame. The darkness had once found her too and Madison returned her to it. It was the least she could do.

Madison dipped a finger in her mother's pooling blood and brushed a letter onto her right arm. Slowly, meticulously, a puzzle forming, each letter a step towards our first word shared. She kept me guessing right up until the last.

G

GO

GOO

GOOD

GOODB

GOODBY

GOODBYE

I screamed and clawed and bawled and crumpled but she held me in place, a fraction from the surface; unable to stave her hand or deflect the trajectory of the knife. I could feel her smile on my face as the blade pierced dusty skin, sliding beneath the windpipe and with a flick of the wrist snapped forward.

Blood consecrated the dirt floor and, as her energy fell away she gave me one last taste of God but all I could do was twitch her foot in time with her fading heartbeat.

## **Ungrounded**

**By Sarah Little**

This town has become a skin that has shrunk, becoming too small for my body.

The apartment around me is tedious, the people have become shadows enshrouded in averageness. I'm not home.

I can't breathe, sometimes.

Sometimes I dream of old buildings full of character and history; old townhouses and shiny-new apartments still so new that they need every window opened to air out the smell of paint. I always wake at 3 a.m., perfectly able to envision the place and even more able to envision myself there.

It's never difficult to begin selling things, fishing out my passport and buying the cheapest one-way I can find. The itch has settled in deeply, is wound closely through my skeleton.

Time to go.

I'm awake just long enough for safety drills and announcements – the sleeping pill I took, timed to let me sleep shortly after the announcements finished, and the journey passes before I'm aware of it.

In the airport, I feel relief that I'm uncomfortable. I don't speak the language; I wasn't raised here. I don't belong here and it's a relief to have a reason to feel that way, to have a solid reason for not feeling like I'm at home.

I didn't bring a camera and the memory on my phone fills up. When it's protesting that storage is almost full, I clear space, move on. There's never

time to settle, just a rush of airports and trains and buses and transfers. I'm never home now.

I look for the apartments in my dreams: the ones I've seen where curtains hang heavy in the window, where I buy furnishings cheap off locals who are updating their own homes and create a home out of nothing.

So far I have nothing down pat.

"You should call home," says a girl at my latest job, we're having coffee and talking about nothing. I don't tell her my patchwork history of jobs and residences – she doesn't tell me the tiny details that I hear her gossiping about with our other colleagues.

I forget her name – I forget most of them, really, but she's not wrong. I haven't put roots down, too busy searching for the right place. I've managed to collect connections between people in every city and town. Attachments are one thing; bringing a piece of a place with me is another. There's nothing holding me back anymore, nothing grounding me. This girl looks like she phones home every week and has had one ankle in the earth for years, already entrenching her roots and calling herself a local.

The coffee is different. I swirl it in the cup, breathe in the aroma. Even when I doctor it, it tastes wrong. Once, I would sit in cafes drinking coffee and feel slightly at home: this piece of home is gone.

"Time differences, you know," I say after a minute. It's clear that she's angling for a response, but her eyes, when she looks at me, are blank. She doesn't know, of course, she doesn't know, because her calling home means the convenience of calling someone three suburbs over, not three countries over.

It's easier, in the end, to pick up and move on instead of trying to find home where it isn't.

The apartment dream persists, more detailed every time. I keep a notepad and pen by the bed, flipping on the lamp to draw in the latest room for reference. Within a year, there's a dozen or so different pages outlined with rooms, furniture, decorations. Some of them look like the ones I've already lived in, others look like furniture shops.

I stay at my seventh job long enough to save for a train ticket, looking for a new apartment in the eleventh city. Nostalgia brushes over me and I spend an hour in the nearest internet café studying social media. It's been fourteen months, I don't recognize the people who are my friends. I can't pick out their voices in their written words any longer.

Several come home messages. It's not hard to notice that the majority of the messages came immediately after leaving; they've tapered off now, everyone else going about their regularly scheduled lives and forgetting, day by day. I update city and employment, log off without writing them back.

I go out, find a restaurant for dinner. It's become habit to do this, and if the restaurant is good it'll become my default for all the nights I'm not able to cook dinner. If nothing else, it's at least sociable to venture outdoors every so often.

"Where are you from?" asks the server.

"Oh... well, all over, really," I come up with at last. She doesn't look satisfied, but the take-out box she hands me has a sticker with her name and number on it. That's certainly new.

I call her the next morning, some haze of jetlag and pre-coffee, leave a scattered voicemail and am tempted to leave a better message. Before I get the chance she's already called back.

She convinces me going out to dinner will be fun, but fun isn't the word that comes to mind as I'm rifling through my wardrobe trying to scare up something respectable. Nothing looks right, so I decide I may as well stand out.

When we meet she looks over me, approving, and the restaurant is romance come to life. None of this feels like home, but the apartment is the closest I have been able to find the one I've got in a sketchbook hidden under the mattress.

I feel almost like I have a place here now.

"So when you say you're from all over, what do you mean?" her eyes are alight with interest and I pull my gaze from hers, study the melting ice in my glass with what feels like the same amount of interest.

"Not much, really. I travel, I don't really have a set home nowadays." Please let that be enough to close the subject. No more questions, please.

"Okay... so you travel because you don't have a home?" she's probing further than I expect. Anyone else who has tried this line of questioning gave it up after they didn't get the answers they were looking for.

"More like I don't have a home because I travel."

This city slowly becomes home. She travels with me on a whim, sometimes, and if I'm gone long enough she sends small parcels, writes so you don't forget to come home and never mentions them when I come back.

It almost feels like home, but I'm too comfortable now, set in routines, to be able to say for sure if it's home or just fondness created from familiarity. It's been eight months, the longest I've stayed anywhere, but the apartment's still an empty living space. There's no jacket over the back of a chair, no scent of perfume and home baking. I've been travelling for two

years and the apartment still feels like home – it just isn't, in several ways I can't quite define.

I think it's time to get going again.

This time I leave in the middle of the night, catch a late-night bus and a midnight train. This time I find a townhouse with only the barest of necessities.

I'm almost finished unpacking my two suitcases when I fail to come across my sketchbook. Panicked now, I ruffle through the rest of my belongings, tear through the already-unpacked things in an effort to find it. It's not here.

I've left whatever remained of a dream home in another city.

Sunrise happens as I'm hooking cotton-candy curtains and wandering rooms making lists. For once I'm not thinking in terms of making somewhere comfortable. It's the first I can think of this happening and it's the first time I can remember making my own modifications on my new dwelling – it feels like I've left a little print of myself on the house as I curl into the window-seat at the back of my new bedroom.

This time I feel like I belong here and maybe it doesn't matter if I left my template behind. As I'm making pasta, there's a knock at the door: she's found me. She's holding my sketchbook, which looks worse for wear after being stuck under a bed. The cover is faded, the edges worn-in. Comfortable, is the word that springs to mind as I look at it.

I don't have a frame of reference of how you're supposed to act when your ex shows up at your door in another country, but she comes in anyway. It's like she belongs here, the way she kicks off her shoes and runs a hand over the mantelpiece, picks up the figurines along the edge of it and opens the book on the living-room table.

"You didn't come home like you normally do," she says. There's no accusation in her voice, just sadness.

I don't have an answer. It's why I never could write back when others emailed, imploring me to come home, why I couldn't bring myself to book a ticket to my hometown. It's why I have a coin jar tucked into the top drawer of my bedside table with half a dozen mixed-up currencies, stashed away in case I ever need to make a call.

We move to the dining room, eat silently until she gets up and hooks up her music to my speakers. This alone tells me she already feels at home here, she knows how I like my living spaces. It feels familiar and relaxing this time, I'm not mapping out how long before I pack my meagre belongings and run off into the night. Her words sink in, like you usually do.

For her, or maybe with her, I had a routine; she thinks of my trips as a piece of the story that unfolded when we were together.

It was why I left: I was getting complacent, sure that eventually she wouldn't want to stay with me while I scrabbled to find a place to call home.

She drags her bags in from the porch while I make up the spare room, unpacks clothes into the wardrobe and dumps other things into the bedside unit. The entire house is bare. We go furniture shopping and as the delivery men unload the antique armoire, she opens the relevant sketch and studies it, directs them exactly where to place it. Once it's in place, it looks just like the sketch. She looks like she fits perfectly and it's breathtaking to see, already at home in the way she moves, knows where to find the shopping list and what needs to be fixed.

Something clicks into place, seeing this first piece of furniture I've bought in the townhouse I used to spend so many nights dreaming about. It feels like

coming home – sitting with her, having a hastily-constructed dinner feels like being home after years of searching.

“I get it,” she says, blank photo album on her lap. “You’ve been chasing home, haven’t you? It’s why you never called?”

She’s right. I have a coin jar hidden away with half a dozen currencies for payphones, a card holder with countless scraps of papers, names and numbers and countries tucked away to trace my journey with people instead of places. Sometimes I’d take a handful of the coins with me to a phone in the middle of the night, puzzle out the right change to put in. Some of these nights I would slip the first coin in, then cancel it and wait for the coin to drop into the change section.

*(I never knew which number I was supposed to be calling.)*

## is/isn't

By Kyla Houbolt

*'Lightning results from the tension between what is and what should be' -*

Jarod K. Anderson

argue to bring  
more lightning  
for all of the world  
and heaven too is stolen, stolen  
the opposite of scissors is salt is  
needle and thread is  
bird stitching wing to cloud -- see it? --  
golden, golden  
the opposite of smooth  
is sand rubbed along itself all the way down  
to dust, this shiny crumb  
of lighghghghgh gh gh t  
ning is molten, molten  
this opposite opposite  
particle wave disappear  
disappear

~~~~

## **Because the Night**

**By Kirsty Niven**

Their faces glowed under the blue moon's light,  
a midnight haunting tangled in meanings,  
kisses puff into the air like twirls of cigarette smoke  
and the parasitic intensity accelerates.  
Violent lips and bruising caresses that lose control,  
an itch gouged in cat claws, a tryst written in blood.  
Stars alone will remember, the trees blindfolded,  
prophesying a death they can't bear to witness –  
an ending overdue, a beginning decimated in idiot hands.  
He disappears into the night, a Dickensian ghost,  
and she crumbles into confusion and causality.  
Day torches it down, her path left in cinders.

## **An Excuse to Stay**

**By Holly Fleming**

Annie wanted to fall in love and have her happy ever after.

Annie wanted to find a good guy with a dad bod and a scruffy beard. She wanted a teddy bear beau to take care of her. She wanted to be held in the cold months and to go out on his arm in the hot months. She wanted someone to go out for romantic, intimate dinners with and to go home with after.

Annie knew what she wanted, but she didn't know how to get it.

Every Saturday night, Annie would team up with a couple of her single girlfriends. She and her companions would share wine while they got dressed up, decorating their eyelids with sparkles and smokes and their lips with reds and nudes. They slipped into little dresses and big heels and strutted out to town, to whatever club looked to have the best vibe that night, and Annie began her hunt.

She spied the talent from the bar. There were obviously attractive men, with gelled hair and tight muscle shirts. She knew the type. She wasn't interested. Well, she wasn't interested mentally. Her tipsy body leaned towards these boys but the sober voice in her head told her, "stay." She sipped at her gin instead.

With a fresh drink, she prowled the dancefloor. She stalked into the throng of sweating and booze-soaked bodies and started to pursue her dream guy.

She did this every week, and every week, she found her dream guy. She went home with him every time.

One week he was a Conor, one week he was a Stephen. In the biblical sense, she knew a Ryan, a Matt, and a Gary too. She always left the club on a different guy's arm and in the taxi home, looked into their eyes with the hope of new romance, and went back to his. Every time they had, at best, mediocre drunk sex and slept together in awkward, sweaty cuddles. Annie always woke up completely separate from her man of the evening but would make her way back to him.

She would worm her way under his arm and onto his chest, snuggling into whichever man she was with and wait for him to wake. It always went the same way when he awoke.

He had to go see his parents. He had to work. He had class. There was always something that would force her to get her clothes back on, put on what makeup she had, brush her hair with her fingers and be out the door, often in a foreign, strange place. Once, she woke up in Thornliebank. Lost, she asked a local, where am I? He told her Thornliebank. "Where?!" she gasped, completely clueless. It took her over an hour to get home.

Annie's plan to find love had to be modified. She had to form a deeper bond than the physical one formed in drunken sex. She needed a mental attachment. She knew she hadn't the capacity to form that bond when she was steaming, so it had to be done in the morning. She had to think of some excuse to stay in whoever's house to do it.

She "lost" her purse. An Adam was trying to rush her out of his door when she "coincidentally" realised that her clutch was a little too light. "I think I might have dropped something," she admitted as he was trying to open the door. She stopped in her tracks, opened her clutch and, lo and behold, her purse was not there. She knew exactly where it was. She kept her eyes off the couch where she knew it hid. "I can't leave without it! It's got all my money in it."

This did not fit in with Adam's plans. He had a Tinder date in a few hours. He did not hide the irritation this inconvenience caused him. "Come on, let's have a look," he almost growled.

He was a wall. He either ignored Annie's questions and attempts at bonding, or gave her cold, one-word answers. She felt him boil under his skin as they kept looking. This, Annie decided, was a failure. She emerged from the bathroom in which she was "looking" for her purse and made a beeline for the couch. With one swift movement, she pulled it out from under the cushion and said monotonously, "Got it." She left without saying goodbye.

Even though Adam was so brash, she decided that her plan could work in better circumstances. She was persistent and hungry for love, so she was back in action the next Sunday morning.

The next guy, Beck, was far too hungover to deal with Annie's lost keys. She was being escorted out of his student flat (two of his flatmates were playing Fifa on their shared couch) when she revealed that she didn't have her house keys on her. Beck, whose face was ashen, couldn't take it. "Am waaaaaaaay too fucked fir this," he told her. "Am gonnae whitey."

Annie didn't know how to respond. Beck revealed that he did not have one charming bone in his body when he said, "Am away back tae bed, you have a look. Door's there when ye find the keys."

She chortled at what had to be a joke, but then he was spinning on his heels and retreating to his smelly bedroom.

One of the boys playing Fifa rose immediately. "I'll help you have a look." Annie looked him up and down. God height but too skinny. She didn't like glasses or boys who played Fifa. He wouldn't do. "That's okay," she said thanklessly as she stuck her hand behind the unit by the door. She

pulled her keys up and said, "Got 'em," as she slammed the door shut behind her.

Craig was next. Craig. Annie didn't like that name very much. The way it sounded was so bleh to her. Craig. She thought he said Crane in the club, a name she considered to be much cooler. As they sloppily kissed and pressed their spilt-drink covered bodies against each other, she imagined being under his arm, holding onto his waist and saying, "this is my boyfriend, Crane."

He was for sure tall enough for her. From groping and caressing him as they kissed she could feel that he wasn't a gym rat either. No, he was a little pudgy in his sides. Annie relished the way his body felt. He was just her type.

Shame, though, that conversation was dire. There wasn't much in the club – they were drunk and under the blaring beats, their voices were drowned out anyway. The night air sobered the new couple somewhat and in the taxi, she started asking questions.

"What do you do?" Annie asked with a flutter of her eyelashes.

"Student," he said.

Silence.

"Where are you from?"

"Glasgow."

Silence.

"What do you like to do?"

"Smoke."

Silence.

When they got back to his flat, he confirmed that he liked a smoke: he lit up a blunt, but Annie could smell grass before they even got into his place. She could tell from the contents of his room, too, that he was a total stoner – a waster. There was a copy of Pineapple Express lying near his little TV and its case was god knows where. The table by his couch was covered in crisp packets and chocolate wrappers. There were grinders everywhere. Annie hated the type. This, she decided, was an abject failure. Still, she was here. She may as well get something out of meeting Crane.

“You smoke?” he asked her, extending his arm and the blunt to her. Smoke wafted out of his parted lips, lingered in the air.

She took the blunt. “Yeah,” she said and inhaled deeply. Annie hated stoners, yeah, but there was nothing wrong with having a little smoke to get the creative juices flowing or to act as a social lubricant. She liked a little smoke; this Crane fella liked a smoke far too much. It was good green, at least, she thought upon exhaling.

Annie decided to keep all of her belongings on her that night but still kissed Crane after ten minutes of dry, boring conversation. She was on his lap, tops were off, and he took her to his bedroom. He surprised Annie. Pleasantly. She was the little spoon after. She slept soundly.

Crane made no attempt to rush her off but she was getting dressed as he was still half asleep. He was rising to unlock his door for her when she double checked her clutch to make sure she had everything.

“Shit,” she gasped, not meaning to be loud enough for Crane to hear.

“What is it?” he asked.

This wasn’t good. “I’ve lost my phone,” she told him. She meant it.

"Oh, shit is right. Let's look."

Surprisingly, Crane was the one to make conversation with her now. He asked questions and responded to her answers, probing further about her. This was not the same guy she had known last night.

It was during their conversation that Annie learned that he was Craig, not Crane. His name had lost him some of the points he'd been earning. Though, he gained some back when he displayed genuine interest in her.

Conversation led Annie to ask him, "What's your usual type?"

Craig pondered a second, then said, "Physically? Petite. Pretty face. Practically you, to be honest."

Annie felt her cheeks flush. "That's sweet. You're kinda my type as well." She hastened to add, "physically." She still wasn't completely sure about him but was coming round.

A kind of awkward but sweet shy silence filled the room. "What are you looking for?" Annie ventured to ask.

"Your phone," he answered earnestly.

She looked at him with an exasperated smirk. "Romantically, I mean."

With a heavy sigh, Craig fell onto his couch and said, "I know I'm young, but I want to settle down. Find someone to love. My friends keep saying pulling girls in clubs won't get me anywhere but, I don't know. Plenty of people find love like that, why not me? You get me?"

Annie really did get him. "I do," she said with her hand over her heard, smiling broadly. "My friends say the same."

"You're looking for love?" Craig guessed hopefully.

Annie stepped over the rubbish on the floor and joined him on the couch, sitting close to him. "I am," she admitted. "Maybe you and I should get a coffee together."

"Yeah, maybe," he said.

They made plans and continued the search for Annie's phone. It was hidden under a pile of crisp packets. Craig typed his number into it and she left him, heading home for a shower and to make herself pretty. Only two hours after she left his flat, she was meeting him again for coffee. They both looked worlds fresher than they did that morning but certainly needed the coffee.

The pair chatted about studying and their families, their favourite restaurants and their most loved movies. They realised quickly that they had very little in common. Here and there they agreed and found shared interests, but more often than not they couldn't quite understand each other. They laughed together, though, and conversation flowed somewhat seamlessly.

A second date was arranged – a proper one: they'd dress up for dinner and drinks and they said to each other with sly smiles, "We'll have to see what happens, hm?"

Annie wasn't sure that Craig was her happily ever after, but she was happy that he hadn't rushed her out of his flat. He had given her a chance, and now she was doing the same. Maybe they would be soulmates, Annie thought, but it wasn't such a pressing matter. As she walked to get her train, she thought about what she'd wear on their date. Now that was a pressing matter.

## **When the Devil Talks**

**By Samuel Best**

It started with the bad thoughts. Not often, but a few times a month, maybe. Sundays. A quiet voice like a whisper at the back of church, speaking cruel things; horrible things. Thoughts against the reverend. Thoughts against Daddy. Against the village. But thoughts are thoughts and I would speak with God and the thoughts would go away. Until one day, they didn't. It was late at night and I was praying before bed, trying to hush the whisper. I spoke to God and He didn't answer. There was a lingering silence, and then the voice began to laugh.

That night I slept restlessly and the bad thoughts came more often than usual. I woke four times, perhaps; my mind filled with the sharp little voice. I took to whispering myself; repeating prayers to drown out the badness. I sweated beneath my sheets, muttering, but each time I drifted back I could hear that voice, laughing now. Full of malice and mischief. When I cried it mocked me.

The next morning I woke with the sunrise and dressed quickly, splashing water on my face before rushing to the church. I tried to move quickly – so fast that the thoughts couldn't catch up – but still, as I passed through the village square, the whispering grew. I passed the baker and considered spitting phlegm into the dough. I passed the fountain and fought the urge to taint the water. I ran to the church door and pounded hard, the wood stinging my hand with every strike. I wanted very badly to burn the building to the ground.

When the reverend opened the door a vision flashed in front of my eyes. Me, scratching at his face, my nails tearing deep scores down to the bone. I squeezed my eyes closed, trying to vanish the thought, but when I

opened them again I saw my hands were raised. I clamped them to my own face to hide the terror, the shame, written there, and the reverend ushered me into the House of God.

It was a small church, made mostly of dark old wood and splintering pews, and I had been coming here as long as I had been alive. I had been washed clean in the font at the front of the nave. The small milky windows; the plain, slightly-squint lectern; every part of the church was ingrained in my memory and should have been instantly recognisable. Today, though, something was different. Not in any way I could put my finger on, but there was something unbalanced which made the whole church look askew. The reverend took me to a seat and sat opposite, his fingers in a tent against his lips. He looked concerned, and for a moment I wondered if he knew. Did sin show on one's face like dirt? I opened my mouth to speak but no words would come. Try as I might, my tongue flapped like a gasping fish. I was mute before Him.

'Elizabeth,' the reverend spoke, finally breaking the silence. He implored me to share whatever was clearly troubling me so but my dead tongue could form nothing but curses which fell from my lips hot and sudden like vomit.

He took a deep breath, my words washing off him like a baptism, and extended a soothing hand. He rested it atop mine. The reaction was not sudden, but still fast. Like a jolt of freezing water, my skin stung and I withdrew my hands to my chest. The priest sat back, surprised, and I spat on his robes.

'Elizabeth! Come back, girl!'

He called as I strode out of the building but my heart was so full of anger he could have cried any other name for the good it did. I was no longer Elizabeth. I was something more.

As soon as I reached the square again I began to cry. The anger had disappeared and instead a tremulous fear had taken over me. My hands shook. That furious energy had left me as quickly as it had come on. What had possessed me to treat the reverend so? Had I not sought him out for advice in the first place? Why then had my voice vanished when I tried to explain? I walked quickly to the stream and sat by the water, quieting my rapid breath and focusing on my thoughts. I waited, expecting to hear something, but my mind was as calm and steady as the current washing over the pebbles. I closed my eyes in thanks and rested.

When I opened my eyes again I saw a small boy across the stream. He was watching me curiously, holding a cup-and-ball toy loosely by his side. I smiled at him and he smiled back.

'Hello,' I said. My voice sounded strange to me but as with the church, I couldn't place exactly how. It was like hearing an echo finding its way back to you; one knows one's own voice but still there is an unlikeness.

'Hello,' he replied. He kept his eyes on mine, unblinking.

'That's a wonderful toy you have there,' I said, nodding to the cup-and-ball.

The boy looked down as though he hadn't realised what was in his hand. He raised it up and, with a jerk, sent the ball to the furthest extent of the string before catching it in the wooden cup.

I smiled again and congratulated him on his talent. He asked if I would like to try. I told him I was rather skilful at the game and that during my last year of schooling – just two years prior – I was the best of the girls in the village.

The boy laughed. 'You're silly,' he said. 'How can you have finished school just two years ago? You look so old.'

I was shocked. I frowned, and deep in my mind I heard a distant laughter. An indistinct whisper passed through my thoughts, and I reprimanded the boy for his rudeness.

'I am fourteen years of age,' I told him. 'And you should think twice before uttering such disrespect to a stranger.'

The boy kicked a pebble into the stream without looking and smirked. 'You are a liar,' he said.

'Come here,' I replied, sternly. 'Come here and accuse me again.'

The boy glanced away from me for the first time and looked to the footbridge some distance away. He decided against it and instead gingerly pressed his foot down on a large stone not an inch below the waterline. It held firm, and the boy swung his balance forward until he was stood in the middle of the stream.

I remained where I was, watching him. To any innocent observer I could perhaps have been his sister or childminder, making sure his silly games don't end badly. But inside me, a furious anger boiled again, and I wished horrible things on the boy. He took a step onto the next stone, and that is when I stood. The water dappled across the toe of my shoes but I didn't feel the cold. I was fixed on the boy. He had but one more stone to stand on before he could jump across to my side, and I could see he was judging the distance.

'Come here,' I encouraged, my voice still unfamiliar to my own ears.

The boy stretched out his leg, testing the stability of the rock. It held firm and he moved across, his arms outstretched for balance. In a fluid movement, as the boy made his jump, I reached for his hand. His skin was waxy and I twisted hard, sending the boy into a spin. He fell gracelessly, flailing for grip. When he landed, the stream swallowed his entire body,

water rushing over his head and face, but he did not splash. He did not continue to flail.

Instead, a thin pink cloud spread from his seaweed hair like a sunset, and his face took on a look of such pure innocence that I was spellbound. I stood and watched him for a minute, enjoying the tranquillity, until I heard another bad thought like a gust of wind blowing from some black place in my heart.

'Make sure,' it said, and I exhaled a long breath.

I bent down by the edge of the stream and traced my hands over the smooth, smooth pebbles there. Most were as small as eggs but some had a heavier heft to them. I picked one up, cradling it in my hands like a baby, and waded into the stream.

The boy slept under the water and as I stood over him the peaceful air broke. I could hear the reverend's voice again, calling from nearby. I didn't need to turn to know I had enough time before he reached me. He sounded possessed by some sort of terror but I was as still and calm as the pebble in my arms.

The boy's face slowly began to twist then, and as his mouth bubbled and his eyelids shook I thought for a moment that he looked like me. But then the water can play tricks, can't it? I hefted the pebble above my head as the reverend cried out again. The pink cloud continued to streak downstream from the boy's head and, as I let go of the stone, I wondered if the whispering voice was right; that I would soon see things I had never seen before. Inside things.

There was a moment, just before the pebble landed, in which the boy seemed to realise what was happening. Still his face resembled mine, but not for long. As I skipped beyond the stream and into the forest, my dress

hemmed with pink from drinking up the bloodied water, I heard the voice  
whispering and this time I whispered right back.

## **The Operative**

**By Gareth Culshaw**

The fridges hurt him the most.  
When he opened the door and cold  
stuck to him like words from a bully

he felt his tongue go cold and his  
joints shimmy behind tendons.  
Tuna, salmon, mackerel, sardines,  
kept in boxes or plastic gave colour,  
words, numbers to the coldness.  
He placed his hands inside,

felt arthritis bristle. He had  
bills to pay and a son to bring up.  
The fridges hummed a monotone

that didn't change unless the door  
was left open too long. He pulled  
down his white hat and thudded

the floor with thick rubber soles.  
The shift was as long as he wanted  
it to be. His hands cramped up,

and he danced his fingers as if he  
was playing the piano. The cold painted

itself onto his skin told him this is what

will happen when he goes six feet under.

## **Tonight's the Night**

**By Katy Turton**

Tonight has to be just right. She's a special one and gorgeous as all hell. So it's got to be right. I've tidied the flat and changed the bed. Put on my best sheets. Well, the newest ones at least. Even asked Mum how to clean the bathroom and gave it a proper go.

I don't recognise the place. I'd post a proud picture on Instagram, except that she'd see it and think I'm daft. Not that I mind her laughing at me. Anything to hear that wicked cackle of hers. But I don't want her laughing about tonight. She's a smart one, she's got her life together, and I want to measure up. I want to be a man tonight, not a boy who asks his mum stuff.

I've got the right body at least. All those hours in the gym do pay off. I'm fit and strong and I know how to look good. I know what I'm wearing tonight. Nothing over the top – it's just drinks and if it all goes to plan, back to mine for coffee – but do I want to stop her in her tracks, get her heart going a bit. And other places.

She does it to me all the time. That smile she gives me when we share a private joke at work or that day when I caught her bent over the paper tray of the photocopier. I get shivers just thinking about it. The first time she suggested we go out for a drink, I was still grinning like an idiot at my desk two hours later.

We've been dating for a few weeks now. A few really good weeks and tonight I think we'll be ready. I've never clicked with someone like this and I'm sure it's the same for her. It's time to take the next step.

I don't want this to be any old shag though. I want it to be good. I want it to be good for her. I'm gonna take more time on her than I've ever done, really get to know her body. I want to be the best guy she's ever had. She's far and away the best woman I've ever had and I know that just from kissing her.

I am ready. My body is mature and at its peak, but it tingles with newness. It is heavy with promise and urgent longing. I am ripe and fertile.

I know he's been waiting for my signal. I have felt him watching me, found myself moving for him, so he can admire my legs, my round belly. I catch his scent from time to time and it inflames me. It makes me want to do things that have never occurred to me before and now I cannot think of anything else. I am vividly aware of spaces inside me and their purpose. Tonight I will open myself up to him. I will spread my legs wide and let him plant himself in me.

I will lay a trail for him, so that he knows I want him and he will come to me, unable to resist. I want him to dominate me. He must give himself over to his natural inclination, to the male imperative to take, and he must be willing to give his life to do it.

We will move together in a dance that has been done this way for millennia. We will spin magic together and create new life. He will give me the offspring that I crave. After that, he can go for I will have no further use for him. I will bring forth new life and nurture my children alone. Through them I will live forever.

He has watched her for weeks and knows her body intimately. He has seen it grow and develop. Yesterday he realised she had changed for the last time. She has always been beautiful and graceful, as she does her delicate work, but now she is magnificent. And ready.

She has all the power, is dangerous even, but that makes him want her even more. He has been waiting too long for this to give up now. When he catches her scent he can hardly contain himself. His desire for her fills his whole body and gives him such strength. He could run for days to reach her.

Tonight she will call him to her and he will go, tiny before her radiant female form. It is a terrifying thought, but his fear will not stop him. Whatever the risks, he knows that when he stands before her, he will be able to tame her.

It does not matter that it will only be for one night. It will be worth it to see her lay down willingly before him, her legs held wide, her body opening for him. She will have to wait, helpless and wanting, vulnerable with need, while he readies himself. Then he will push his seed into the dark, softness inside her, relentless, as he rubs up against her. At the last, he will watch her fold herself around his precious gift, cherishing it, joining it to her eggs.

Whatever happens next, even if he dies, it will be his offspring that live on. She may care nothing for him after tonight, but she will love his children.

He cannot wait any longer. He must find her. Suddenly frantic, he casts about for a sign of her. Where is she? Wait. There it is. Her scent. She has left a trail and he must follow it.

He begins to run.

He's nervous as he unlocks the door, fumbling every so slightly with the key. She smiles tenderly behind him. He has been different tonight – his clothes, the vulnerability in his eyes that he is doing his best to hide and the energy thrumming in him. She knows what he wants. She wants it too, but has never been this delightfully unsettled about it before. Their usually easy conversation began lapsing towards the end of their second drink for

somehow neither one of them could speak the words that should have been said. I want you. I love you.

He leads her into the living room and they stand facing each other. She wishes the light wasn't quite so bright. She takes a step towards him and sees that he is trembling.

'It's only me,' she says, to calm him, but finds that her own smile flutters nervously. She decides to let him make the first move and tries to tell him with her eyes that she is his.

He searches her face and she watches him make his decision. He moves towards her, cups her face in his hands and kisses her, softly at first then more insistently. She takes hold of his shirt to keep him close, as he puts his lips to her neck. She relaxes into him and knows she will give him all of herself.

As she closes her eyes, she catches sight of something black and large moving fast across the floor. She can't help herself. Her knees dissolve in phobic fright and she lets out a most embarrassing shriek.

He jumps with shock. Turns and sees the spider tearing across the floor. He looks about wildly for something to kill it with, grabs a newspaper and smacks it down hard on the horrible creature.

He gives an involuntary shudder as he makes a weak joke about the land speed record and she realises he's as afraid of spiders as she is. She offers to clean up the mess, but he won't hear of it. Not wanting to hover over him, she goes to the bathroom.

As she washes her hands she notices that he has put a scented candle on the window sill and bought a new hand towel, its plastic tag hanging uncut from the label. That decides it.

She lets instinct take over. She strips and moves, quietly, naked to his bedroom. She slips under the covers and a thrill of anticipation sparks through her. He'll find her in a moment.

I sit on my beautiful web, spun with extra care for the occasion, but he does not come. I do not understand. I laid my trail so carefully. Surely he must follow it soon. I ache for him. And wait.

## **Inside the Invisible**

**By Priyanka Sacheti**

The steps ending in the sky,  
an unwrapped banana leaf manuscript  
awaiting to be read.

There are roses blooming too,  
fat red pink paint clouds:  
you can't see them  
but they are very there.

A cat ghost sits on the steps,  
licking its whiskers in  
the butter sun.

You can hear her mewling  
long after the sun sets,  
the air scented with  
sun-warmed rose  
and the tired earth.

The newly risen moon  
sees everything  
and nothing.

We mortals  
only see  
what we  
need to.

## Shadow

By Hannah Wright

I was once a slave to my sight. I creased my eyes, creating crinkles of sunbeams, and got lost in the labyrinth of whorls on my fingertips. I spent hours fascinated by the face in the mirror. Pouting and preening; fluffing my feathers. I was distracted at home examining the dense perfection of a mushroom and arrived late to school, too busy causing ecstatic explosions of dandelion seeds.

I was wandering home one day, craning my head to follow the soft arc of a rainbow, when I received a call. My dog, Shadow, had been hit by a car. His once bushy brush of hair, skin and bone was there and then gone. He came home wearing a cone and would pad through the rooms of the house, head bowed. Birds perched in hedgerows were no longer a temptation and rabbits sheltering in the long grass remained undisturbed.

We sat, muzzle to muzzle. I stared into his black watery eyes. His pain took me by surprise and I wanted to understand; to see the world through his eyes. I began to snuff the air when Shadow snuffed and strained to hear when his ears pricked up; once, I tore a piece of meat from the bone with my teeth, taking a few bites before letting it fall back onto the pavement. I sucked the marrow from bones at the dinner table and crunched on cartilage.

I grew taller that summer and my senses sharpened. I drank in the scents of charcoal and gorse and my ears kept me awake with the sounds that chirruped through the quiet of our semi-detached suburban nighttimes. When Shadow died, on the cusp of autumn, we dug a deep hole in the garden's soft soil and placed his small body into it. I still snuffed at the air when an unfamiliar scent crept to my nostrils. Sometimes I walked our

favourite paths and nudged listlessly at the smooth-smelling soil with the toe of my boot.

Then I began to dream.

I lay in my bed, my pale skin freckled with pores that looked like craters in the dim white light. The pores grew larger and, from their depths, hairs began to sprout. I would always wake and stroke my naked skin, longing for the comfort of this absent coat.

It was the start of a new season and I was too old for school. I began to wear a second-hand fur coat, hoping to appease this strange desire for new skin. I bought gloves and a hat; I was swathed in fur. It was the hat and the heavy coat that meant I didn't see the approaching car and couldn't move fast enough as I heard the sound of a blaring horn and squealing breaks.

## **Pulp**

**By Sophie Cooney**

my heartbreak hangs heavy inside of me  
like an overripe fruit on a stringy bough

I still feel the weight there when I breathe  
as though I would burst at the seams  
and spill over if only I would allow.

I am half a person, half past my best flesh,  
with my insides turning to stone

rotten juice straining against the thresh  
of a meat suit not fitted for me  
or for any one person who is so alone.

if I were to clasp my hands and squeeze  
I'd turn to pulp, to mush, with ease.

my fingers would pierce through my skin with a pinch  
and I would bleed dry before I could flinch.

## **When you missed April, and we missed you**

**By Gillian Bowman**

The phone. It was ringing, somewhere.

The water was rising, and Michael knew it was rising, even when he could not see the sun reflecting off the rippled surface or feel the cold on his ankles. He knew it was coming and he had to get out. And yet, he couldn't escape. As soon as he finally got his things together, climbed out the window, the scene always shifted. He was somewhere new, disorientated, and the water was still rising.

Michael woke up, it was 3 am. His phone was ringing. It was his sister, April.

So early, he thought but as he reached for it, it stopped. He immediately fell back asleep.

A few hours later, as he got up and watched the sunrise bask the spires of Edinburgh, he thought of her. Then the deadlines took over.

A news story had just arrived, there was a demonstration about lecturers pay in colleges outside Parliament.

"Will you get along to that?" demanded his editor-in-chief, John, his eyebrows raised.

"Sure," said Michael. "I'll be back in 30."

He left the office and marched down the cobbles towards the parliament offices. It had been raining and the grey and blue cobbles created an iridescent path towards the shadow of Arthur's Seat. As always, he spared a moment to admire the brightly coloured clocks and 16th-century architecture, and the modern businesses which had folded themselves

inside. He could hear the crowd before he reached the walls of the leafy gardens which marked the end of the royal mile.

Then he noticed his phone ringing. He looked at it quickly, expecting it to be his boss. It was his sister.

"Hi April," he said, impatiently.

"Hi," she said, her voice very small, "I've not been feeling too well, so I'm going to go into hospital again this afternoon."

Michael felt his chest tighten, "What happened?" he asked, his voice quickly softening.

"The doctor is worried about my oxygen levels, so thinks it would be worth going back into the hospital. I've been feeling tired and not really able to think clearly."

"Has the doctor said anything else?"

"No, no. They think it might be a side-effect of my medication, so it's just a check-up."

"Okay, well, fingers crossed," said Michael, relieved. "I'll call again tonight okay? Are you able to take a few more days off work?"

"Okay, yes, yes they've said it's okay," she said. "There is so much going on." There was something in her voice, he thought, that made him imagine her with his back to him, looking away into the distance, as she often did.

Michael got his story, but with the deadline looming, the office became a place of hushed silence as the other journalists furiously tapped on their keyboards. The day went on, and Michael ordered a pizza to the office – there was another breaking story about a fire outside of Waverly Station – if his name was on the front-page article...

Finally, at 10 pm, he was out into the cold air and exhausted.

He walked down the long dark avenue, with the looming spires of Gordon's School for Girls in the background. He noticed as he walked that there was a mischief of magpies on the trees lining the pavement. Screeching and clawing. It reminded Michael of the small island where he used to live. He looked at his phone and noticed that his sister had tried to call. It was late, and he was tired. He would call her tomorrow.

Michael couldn't sleep that night.

At 3 am, his phone was buzzing on the nightstand to his right, casting an artificial glow around the room.

It was his mum.

His chest tightened.

\*\*\*

Back in the days when they lived on the Isle of Oda, there was a natural haven that they always used for school trips. Although the island worshipped them, there weren't any magpies. Instead, it had gannets, puffins, arctic skuas and arctic terns, buzzards and white-tailed eagles. April studied birds and could name them instantly. She had been given a pair of binoculars for her 12th birthday, much to the amusement of her fellow classmates. Bird-watching wasn't cool.

They were going to Saorla, the smaller island joined to Oda by a causeway. There was a place on the island which was a seabird colony. It was inaccessible by foot, due to the jagged cliffs and protruding erosions.

It was nesting season in early June. The noise from the birds was overwhelming and filled the air as the boat approached the cliffs.

Michael remembered so clearly, as he had leaned over the side and felt the swell beneath him, April taking her binoculars, and holding them in one hand, while her eyes darted towards her drawing pad, and the delicate outline of a creature took shape. Nearby there was a seal lying on a rock. One of their classmates screamed with laughter. April stopped drawing and shot her an angry glance.

They can hear you, even when it seems like they are sleeping.

\*\*\*

After her initial visit, April didn't leave the hospital. She was in a bed, at the centre of attention. Despite their best efforts, her body had suddenly rejected all help and she was sedated and yet so well hidden no one could find the way to reach her.

After that, the long days continued. Even so, Michael stopped sleeping, and he stopped showing up to work. Instead, every day, he sat outside hospital doors, feeling like every moment was torture.

He developed a sharp pain down his back. His muscles were raw and seizing up his spine. The pain in his chest had gotten worse.

He went back to the last messages he and April had sent each other.

I cannie wait. See you on Tuesday! Bye

Nothing followed.

\*\*\*

His mum phoned. Despite not seeing her for months, they met up every day.

He was already used to driving endlessly round the hospital car park, trying to find a space. He was already used to fuming at the cost of the parking,

before finding his mum standing nervously at the stairwell leading to the hospital foyer.

"I brought that Neil Gaiman book she was wanting to read," said Michael.

His mum nodded, not meeting his eye. He noticed that she had dressed nicely, with a scarf and a smart navy jacket.

Michael wasn't used to hospitals – the last time he had been in once was for physio on his foot. As he walked down the long sterile corridors, aware of the clinical smell, he felt a nervous sensation in his stomach, the kind of sensation he hadn't felt since he had taken his university exams.

He saw the doors and the shapes flickering past the windows beyond.

It was a beautiful spring day outside. In here, the days and nights, the light and the smells were all uniform, all the same.

There was no water, and there was no air.

\*\*\*

Michael had been trying sea-fishing, watching the line descend into the deep black, feeling the sun on his neck. After a while, he went over to where April was watching the coast.

"Look!" she said and handed him the binoculars.

He followed where she was pointing and saw on the cliff-side a funny little blackbird, with webbed feet and a brightly patterned beak. April was sketching it in her notepad and was proud of the slightly lopsided creature that was forming on the page.

The winds began to change. It was time they headed back to shore. He remembered April didn't want to come back.

\*\*\*

Michael held his mother's hand as they sat in the hospital canteen. He still held the Neil Gaiman book in his hands. They had a cup of horrible coffee.

"The doctors can't agree on anything," said his mum.

Michael's back felt unbearable, it was almost impossible to sit down. The sicker she was, the worse the pain became.

\*\*\*

They used to windsurf on the loch on Oda, near an old campsite. He didn't like sports very much back then, and generally avoided it when he could. He remembered his sister immediately got the hang of it. But he couldn't turn – he was swept by the wind to the far side of the loch, and he saw her effortlessly glide up to him.

As he tried to reach her, he slipped on the board and fell into the water. He remembered how thick and boggy the long reeds were, how it tangled in his hands and feet. It was like they were trying to yank at him and pull him down. He remembered squealing and grabbing onto the board so his sister kept holding her sides laughing. She took him back to shore on her board.

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## **Nairn's Own Charlie**

**By Cyrus Alexander**

Huv ye ever heard ae anyhing as wild  
As a cult leader Scotsman?  
Tannin' Buckie to keep ye in line  
Keepin' ye fed and full ae shine

He'd huv a big castle in Nairn  
Wae plenty ae bonnie wives  
Sellin' dud Irn-Bru for cash  
And takin' absolutely nae snash

They'd aww worship Rabbbie Burns  
And pray tae him daily  
Singin' "Great chieftain o the puddin'-race!"  
Til' they wur blue in the face

Fur tea it wid be haggis and Scotch  
Wae Mackie's fur afters  
Makin' everyhing oot ae tartan  
N dancin' wae some bloke cawd Martin

Nae tunes except Bits N Pieces  
And maybe a bit ae Biffy  
Takin' Glesga by storm oan a Seturday night  
Tryin' no tae set the danceflair alight

Noo read this n tell me

In wan honest word  
Wid it no set yer heart a-prancin'  
Havin' a Scottish Charlie Manson?

## **I could hardly believe it myself when I made it up at first**

**By Peter Mohan**

We've all been there, haven't we, one of those nights, down the pub, few swallies, meet some people, good people, right characters, high on conversation, usual kind of thing. The revolt of the proletariat against the blood-soaked masters of capital, the strategic dialectics of anti-imperialist struggle, whether we should play three at the back in Europe and let the full backs push forward.

And at closing time you want to keep it going, don't you, keep the night flowing, so it's all back to mine, let's go, up the road, not far, more beer, whisky too, wee smoke, nae bother.

Small flat. Few chairs, two sofas, couple of cushions, books on the shelves, posters on the wall, sit on yer arse, make yourself at home.

Chomsky, stick some music on.

Trotsky, stop pissing in that plant pot.

Naw, Germaine Greer there's nae cheese on toast.

And yes, St Francis of Assisi, of course you can skin up. Just don't burn the couch, yeah?

There will be no hooliganism, there will be no vandalism, there will be no bevvyng.

See you, Jimmy Reid.

Red Brigades, the Green Brigade, Black Panthers, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, James Connolly, Billy Connolly, they're all here, in the living room, glasses clinking, voices raised, shaking their heads, standing up and sitting down, theoretically coherent, progressive in tone and straight to the point.

I am here as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot.

I know, John MacLean. Now sit down and have a drink.

Let the sunshine of socialism break free upon our land.

You're right, Keir Hardie. But please get down from there.

Man is a product of history, not of nature.

We know, Gramsci. Now try encouraging counter-hegemonic thought by rolling another joint, yeah?

Football is nothing without fans.

Amen to that, Jock Stein.

We talked all night about transnational capital, state protection of private power in markets dominated by technology, telecommunication, automation, pharmaceuticals and the military. About industrial unrest, factory occupations, rent strikes, mass demonstrations, armed resistance, insurrection, guerrilla warfare, political assassinations, controlled revolutionary actions leading to the overthrow of the bourgeois mode of production and ushering in the dictatorship of the proletariat and collective ownership of the means of production in a glorious dawn of peace and tranquillity, Celtic as European champions, the lot. A workers' paradise, an anarchist utopian dreamscape. That's my independent Scotland right there.

That's what Jesus said too, isn't it? Rich man, heaven, camel, eye of a needle. Money lenders and temple too. An armchair socialist, anarcho-syndicalist, dialectical materialist and definitely a Celtic fan.

Johnny Cash, Captain Beefheart, Samuel Beckett, Elmore Leonard, Mahatma Gandhi. Most good people support Celtic.

Muhammad Ali, Michelangelo, Eminem.

And that's just the Ms.

Don't start me on the Ps.

Pablo Picasso, Penelope Pitstop, Peter Purves.

Pol Pot?

What do you think?

Vlad the Impaler also supported Rangers, and Adolf Hitler, Donald Trump, the Shah of Iran, Cliff Richard, Margaret Thatcher. Apparently she got the jail in Greenock one night for taking her tap off at the Celtic supporters' club and shaking her union jack nipple tassles.

I know, I could hardly believe it myself when I made it up at first.

Feminism must involve consciousness of capitalism.

You're right, Angela Davis. But we need to stop letting in stupid goals away from home in Europe.

Anarchism looks forward to the direct appropriation of capital by the whole body of workers.

Fair point, Chomsky boy. But if we keep playing with just one up front we need to use the extra man in midfield.

Universal love and benevolence shall prevail.

Cheers, Robert Owen. When's the last train to New Lanark?

Wee Karl Marx is still sitting on the sofa, head down, beard blazing, nodding furiously.

In the social production of their life men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will.

Christ, wee man. It's been a long night. One more for the road, yeah?

The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

Here, how about redistributing that joint.

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but their social being that determines their consciousness.

Jesus. What?

Centralisation of the means of production and socialisation of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument.

Come on tae fuck, Karl.

Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains.

Better.

From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.

Excellent. Here, take a puff of this wee man.

The next morning Che Guevara is crashed out under the table, Nelson Mandela asleep under a pile of coats in the bath, Tony Benn sharing a bong with Emily Pankhurst in the kitchen, discussing how you only really notice how good the captain is when he's not there, how he links up play, dominates the midfield and is an under-rated passer of the ball.

Hugo Chavez runs to the bathroom to throw up, Malcolm X is lying face down in the fireplace with one eyebrow shaved off.

Right. Who wants tea and who wants coffee?

Got any camomile?

Fuck off, Jean Paul Sartre.

Manny Shinwell helps me clear up the empty cans, Steve Biko and Maxim Gorky are arguing about playing three at the back.

And Aristotle?

He's offski.

Ouzo?

Buckfast.

## **Amongst the Mountains**

**By Kevin Power**

Do you believe in God, Domhnall? Doctor McKenna asked, raising his glass to his lips and observing him over the brim.

Domhnall was silent for a moment. In the fireplace beside them logs split and spat embers against the guard. Domhnall remembered the lightning in the sky on that night; the Mairín Rua adrift in the Atlantic, at the mercy of the waves. He admired the doctor's research a great deal, and he wanted this meeting to go well, but he felt that it was important he told the truth, regardless of the consequences.

I believe there is a God, Doctor McKenna. Although, probably not the same one as you do.

Oh? Doctor McKenna sat back in his armchair, and with a small gesture indicated that Domhnall should continue.

Well, I won't deny 3.8 billion years of evolution, no sir. But something was there, surely, in the beginning, to test a dream and watch it become true. How else could life have started from nothing, if not nurtured in the palm of a hand?

Domhnall realised he was grinning, and corrected his demeanour to be professional. He turned his head to the fire and his eyes glistened, reflecting the flames.

The eons would not have been kind to it, however. Time would have turned it to stone long ago, as it does with all things, with enough persistence. Its skin became cracked and crystalline, pressed of all fluid. Its body was folded and faulted and burned in the Earth, on a hundred occasions or more. The

rain and the wind wore it further, down to just a carving of its former stature, and yet it stands now amongst the mountains as an equal.

Domhnall paused, remembering the storm. His hands slipping as he grasped at the taffrail, the Mairín Rua pitching wildly, nearly capsizing, but he was not afraid, fixated upon the giant. He continued softly;

Now moss and vines have sewn its eyes shut to the light, but it wanders still on violent nights. Waves smash against its shins, angry to be interrupted long before the shore. Thunder claps and it disappears beneath the surface. I... I can hear it still.

Doctor McKenna studied Domhnall, fingers playing over his chin, scratching through his beard. Domhnall feared he had gone too far, that he would appear mad, but the answer seemed to please the doctor after some consideration. Shadows danced across his face in the flickering fire light, revealing a knowing smile.

So you've seen the Stoneman, he said.

## The Vault

By Cooper Anderson

I wasn't alone in the passageway, the one that lead to The Vault, despite what my employer had told me. There weren't any lights down there either, which wasn't much of a problem really; I preferred to work in the dark. It gives me a chance to hone my skills as a professional. This meant however, that I never actually got to see the stranger's face before I killed him. Some quick work with the dagger up my sleeve and soon enough, the man that shouldn't have been there was nothing more than a heap, cooling against the stone floor.

As he laid there, limbs twitching as the last of his neurons fired away into oblivion, I retrieved my knife from his back. I wiped the translucent spinal fluid from the blade as a slow wheeze that was the man's last breath leaked out of him and I was alone again.

I continued through the dark to where The Vault's main door was embedded into the stone wall. Normally I would've done a bit more to conceal a body while on the job, in case some nosey security guard or overzealous employee came snooping about, but there were only a handful of people in the entire world who knew this place existed. None of whom were even on this continent let alone in the city it was hidden under. I myself didn't know about this place until my employer hired me but there had been rumors.

It makes sense from a business perspective; a place for the rich and powerful to come together and hide away all the world's magic. All the things they used to get them where they are today: potions for turning lead into gold, time travel, the elixir of life. Anything that couldn't be explained at a government hearing. Look at it this way, if someone just so happened

to discover a spell that could cure cancer I doubt they'd keep it hidden under their mattress. Hence The Vault.

I leaned against the stone wall, letting the coolness of the rock seep into my shoulder as I examined the door. There wasn't anything special about it. Just a simple grey metal door with steel rods that stuck into the frame when locked. Like the kind of thing you might see in a bank or in the back of a large grocery store. All you needed was a ten-digit code to get inside. Tough enough to keep out your average cat burglar but not so tough that one of The Vault's members couldn't get in on short notice. There's nothing more annoying to rich people than waiting in a queue.

Of course, the real security of this place has always been that no one knew it existed. No one but its members anyway. The people that were involved with its construction—engineers, stone masons, electricians—had all mysteriously vanished once it was finished. Which only confirmed what I already knew; that it takes a lot of money to keep something secret, but it takes a hell of a lot more money for something to stay secret.

I entered the ten digits that my employer had given me into the door's keypad. I had studied the blueprints of this place long enough to know that if I typed in a single digit incorrectly, The Vault would remain locked for another forty-eight hours. Not to mention the mercenaries the members kept on retainer to respond to any and all alarm trips. People who had very select memories whenever it came to the Geneva convention. So, each number was checked and rechecked before being pressed. A clank of shifting steel rods echoed through the darkness and the door swung open. Overhead lights blinked themselves into life as I made my way inside.

One of the conditions of membership to The Vault was that whatever it was you were storing there had to be out in the open for all the other members to see. A kind of mutually assured destruction policy. Making sure that it

was in everyone's best interest to keep each other's secrets safe. Which is why everything stored in The Vault had been placed inside transparent glass cases.

It worked fine in theory. The Vault had been around for decades, long before I got into the professional thieving business, but like every empire in history it too was coming to an end. My employer had recently bargained away The Vault's location in exchange for a shorter jail sentence and was in dire need of the item in her case. So, she hired me.

I nearly pissed myself laughing the first time she told me magic was real. Then she showed me how much she was going to pay me for a simple snatch-a-grab, and I knew she wasn't kidding around. My employer was right to hire someone like me, too. Any other thief would've looted the place for themselves. Not me though. I'm a professional through and through. Besides, it's just inviting trouble to be messing around with something like magic. Give me good old-fashioned steel and hard work any day.

From the outside, the objects inside the cases appeared quite harmless. Most of them were either filled with old medallions, withered looking staffs, or the occasional bubbling cauldron. Nothing that looked inherently sinister. Maybe that's what happened when something evil was separated by a layer of glass. It just became another thing to look at, like a shark at the aquarium.

Name cards with spiralled gold lettering were stuck to the front of each case. None of the cards explained what the items were or who had stored it there, but instead had a phrase written on it. Usually, something innocuous or clichéd that only made sense if you were the one to put the item there in the first place.

I found what I was looking for between a collection of black and white photographs of a couple making love and a line of crystal crucibles filled with a strange purple liquid. The words 'History Repeats Itself' was written on the card of my employer's case while a pewter candlestick with a half-used tallow coloured candle sat inside it. It was the half-used part that made me stop.

My employer had told me emphatically that the candle was brand new and that by no means should I light it. I didn't know what magic this candlestick possessed or why my employer wanted it so badly, but for the amount she was paying me, I didn't have to know.

I checked the spiralled letter note one more time. There was no doubt about it, this was the case I was looking for. My employer had just made a simple mistake. That was all. Understandable really given her circumstances. I picked up the case and stared at it.

A brass lock with a fingerprint scanner was attached to the top of the case. It would've only taken me an hour or so to hack it and get inside but that was time I didn't have. For all I knew helicopters with stern-faced agents in windbreakers were already heading towards The Vault's location and of course, there were the mercenaries to think about. Time just wasn't on my side. So, I did what I thought was the simpler solution.

In a single wrenching throw I smashed the case against The Vault's stone floor, shattering it to pieces. As expected, The Vault's alarms began to wail inside my ears, but by then my feet were already pounding and soon I was within sight of the door, the candlestick firmly gripped between my fingers. The door began to swing itself closed automatically, hoping to trap whoever had tripped the alarm inside. I hurled myself into the narrowing gap of the doorway and the low clunk of rods sliding into place echoed around me before I hit the ground.

I laid on the passageway floor and panted for breath as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. I knew I couldn't wait there forever but in that moment, I couldn't help myself and I began to laugh, just a little. I forced myself up off the floor and started to go back up the passageway.

As I headed away from The Vault and towards the biggest payday of my life, I noticed something strange. Something impossible but was there all the same. The blackened nub of the candle's wick had somehow begun to smolder, defying every law of chemistry and physics in the process. Thin tendrils of foul-smelling smoke started to coil out of a tiny glowing ember on the end.

I waved a hand to try and clear the air, but it only seemed to make the smoke stronger, as if I were fanning it into life. I licked my fingertips, wetting them as best I could to snub out the tiny orange light but all that did was give me angry red blisters on ends of my fingers. That's when the candle ignited.

For a moment the flame was small, no bigger than a prayer candle in church, and I could see a few feet ahead of me through the gloom of that passageway. The flame sputtered and grew like a faulty gas hob until it was a raging ball of orange-red fire at the end of my arm. I held out the candlestick as far away from my face as I could while still holding on to the base, unwilling to let go of my newly found fortune. Shadows crept and grew along the walls of the polished stone of the passageway and danced a wild macabre dance in the flickering light.

The edges of my world began to warp from the heat, as if I were caught in a desert mirage. Wax dribbled onto my wrist as the roaring flame burned away another inch or so of the candle. A thundering pop like a firework exploding too close to the ground roared in my ears and the candlestick slipped from my fingers.

Like a meteor plummeting to earth, the candlestick tumbled downwards. Despite the blinding light singeing my retinas, I reached out to try and grab it, but I missed. The flaming candlestick vanished in a whiff of smoke before it hit the floor, letting the darkness of that place swallow me once again.

Anger and frustration at the loss of my payday started to well up inside me, but I pushed them to the back of my mind. I could be angry, or I could get away. I didn't have time for both.

Blue-green dots warped and waived in front of my eyes and I couldn't tell where in the passageway I was anymore. I didn't need my eyes to navigate my way out, but I did need to find my bearings. So, I stood and waited in the quiet dark of that place for my other senses to tell which way I needed to go.

In an instant there was a scuffle of bootheel against stone from behind, and I realized then what kind of magic the candlestick possessed. Why it was so important for my employer to get it back, why it was in The Vault in the first place, and I felt my knife slide between my vertebrae.

I crumbled to the ground and felt the cool floor against my face. I moved to say something then, to try and warn myself not to go inside The Vault, to turn around and never come back, but all that came out was a wheeze that I'd already heard before. I was rocked gently forward as my knife was pulled out of me. It didn't hurt. It didn't feel like anything, which was so much worse than hurting. There was the gentle scrape of metal against cloth through the darkness as my former self cleaned off the blade and continued on.

## **Worshipping Ambition**

**By Robin Seiler-Garman**

I've already sacrificed my nights to you.  
French presses replace coffee mugs  
until the sun rises and sets on my laptop.

I've cut the throat of my health  
with a swift, practiced stroke,  
every self-preservation instinct  
flowing into a bowl.

I've given up the daughter I could've been  
who never misses a Sunday dinner.

I've walked in pilgrimage,  
one ocean to another,  
half way back and back again.

I've pledged my peace,  
left it at your feet—  
what use is breath anyways?

I've typed until my fingers cramped,  
prayed until my knees bled,  
recited devotions until my voice failed.

What more could you possibly want?

My dreams?

My soul?

My very being?

Just tell me,  
the alter's already built,  
the knife's in my hands.

If I dug my nails into my skin,  
ripped open my chest,  
and held my heart aloft,  
bruised, bloody, beating

maybe you'd let me feel again.

## **Bad Banshee**

**By Amanda Butler**

I am a bad banshee  
because when I scream  
I am silent  
and I shriek not for death  
but because of it  
and those I cry out for  
are already buried.

Dear Aibell, please excuse  
the heart that pounds  
the hands that sweat  
the lungs that freeze  
mid-screech.

Mist fogs my thoughts  
and glass shards lodge  
in my throat.

I am a bad banshee  
because nobody hears me.

## **Some of them just aren't meant to live**

**By Olivia Ross**

I'm not supposed to tell you this but you've been asking for so long... I'm what you call 'death' but I don't exist in the way you think I do. I'm more like a ghost that floats above you and influences the people I've been given permission to influence. It's like any job. I get the case, I do the research and I complete the task. It's my purpose and I can't bring myself not to do it. I know this will be hard for you to hear but telling you about my most recent case might help you understand. Promise me you'll try to see things from my perspective. It's not me that decides when people go.

Linda and Camilla were my most recent. It was just how I'd imagined it. Linda kneeling on the ground scrambling to pick up the vegetables she had so carelessly dropped. Her eyes empty and her face sunken while people walked by, staring at her as though she were some sort of visitor attraction. I know better than most the effect people have with these nosy looks and passing comments and I could feel how she was feeling. I watched as Linda sat down on the hard, grey tarmac and stared at the ground. I counted with her as she watched the twelve pairs of feet go by. But I made number thirteen stop and stand in front of her.

"Is everything okay?" the girl asked.

I watched as Linda made eye contact with the teenage girl looking down at her. This was Camilla. Her blue eyes were piercing against her tanned skin and her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail. It was a shame that it was Camilla's day too. But then again, it's always someone's day.

"Do you need a hand with your shopping?" Camilla asked.

I fed her these words and told her to stay while Linda stared at Camilla wide-eyed. The look of horror was more than enough to make Camilla leave. Yet, because of me, she couldn't bring herself to.

"I can give you a lift somewhere?" I offered through Camilla.

There was always a chance that the person you were trying to influence wouldn't do as you were telling them to. Humans do have free will after all. But a lot of the time when you put a simple thought into someone's head, they don't suspect that it wasn't their own. Camilla was a prime subject for this given her young age. Linda on the other hand, had a surprisingly high percentage of freedom of thought, making it harder for me to make sure this case was a success.

"I'm alright," Linda said, pushing off the ground to help her stand up.

"I'm more than happy to," Camilla said as she picked up Linda's shopping bags, "Let me help you."

Camilla gave one bag to Linda, as instructed, and carried the other herself.

"Whereabouts do you live?" Camilla asked.

"I don't need a lift."

Linda was still trying to avoid eye contact with Camilla. Even when being influenced through another person she was hard to control. But I guess that's why the case was given to me and not someone else.

I told Camilla to walk towards her car so that Linda would have no choice but to follow. Her shopping still being held hostage. Introduce yourself, I told Camilla.

"I'm Camilla by the way," she turned back to say.

"Linda. But can I just get my shopping back?"

"I'm giving you a lift."

I saw a smile try to break onto Linda's face but she was too stubborn to let it. Camilla clicked the car open and put the shopping bags in the back seat.

"Where'm I headed Linda?" Camilla asked while getting into the car.

I could feel it. She was about to give in.

"Stornwell Place, down by the river."

"Oh that's not too far."

Camilla drove out of the car park and I followed along with them. Linda's leg bounced manically off the floor as she sat to one side of her seat staring out the window. All I knew was that I needed to get the conversation going before it could happen. Otherwise, it might not go to plan and I would be in trouble.

"Is everything okay, Linda?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she said, not even convincing the vegetables.

"You sure? I don't have anyone to tell your secrets to if you want to tell me."

"Just nerves," Linda said.

Camilla thought about leaving it alone but I told her that was a bad idea.

'You might be the only one who can help this poor woman,' I told her.

"I think it's more than that," I said through Camilla, "Plus, I'm really good at helping friends solve problems so I might be able to help."

I saw Linda's brain trying to work out the best and most harmless route. She just wanted to get home, away from people again, back into the place where she forgot about how crappy life was. I had monitored her behaviour

as part of my research so I knew it was all she really wanted because it was all she really did. But this fact had only added to the reasons why it was hard to plan for Linda's end. Limited options.

After a few quick seconds, she finally decided. She would never have to see this girl again so she briefly gave Camilla what she'd asked for.

"I'm thinking about going to see my daughter soon and I've not seen her in a while."

"Why not?" Camilla asked.

I saw Linda get spooked by the question but I also saw her reluctance to stop. The truth always came out surprisingly quickly to a stranger.

"I just don't really want her to see me like this."

"Like what?" Camilla asked.

"Sad."

I watched Linda's breath beginning to get shallow as I felt her pull from her end. She was re-reasoning with herself, thinking about getting Camilla to pull over. But obviously I couldn't let that happen. This wasn't unusual though for people with a high percentage of freedom of thought. That's why the research was so important. I needed to know as much as I could about Linda so that, if required, I would be able to manoeuvre her thoughts back around.

"I completely understand," Camilla said, "my school friend went through something similar last year, she really struggled to leave the house and stuff. It took us a while to help her through it. But we got there and now--"

I was losing Linda again and it was not a nice feeling.

“Well, I don’t think I’m going to work that way. I can’t even bring myself to smile for five minutes yet I’m still supposed to be someone’s loving mother,” Linda was almost shouting.

“I’m sure you’re a great mother,” Camilla said.

“How do you know? I haven’t seen my daughter in three years. I haven’t even made the effort to speak to her. Maybe, she’ll hate me now.”

Whatever I said through Camilla now had to be said properly.

“I don’t think she’ll hate you Linda,” Camilla said calmly, “I know I don’t hate you right now and I don’t see how I ever could.”

I felt it. I felt Linda’s heart lighten. It was so simple. The understanding and faith of a stranger was enough for her.

Time up.

The car swerved to the right, avoiding the dog that ran onto the road. I had timed it to perfection. Camilla almost thought about steering left but she wasn’t quick enough and I replaced that thought with panic. It wasn’t long before they were met. The car coming towards them tried to move quickly out of the way but there wasn’t enough time and I knew it. The car slammed into the passenger side and Linda and Camilla were flung forward. The seat belts tried to slice them into pieces while Linda’s airbag gave her a hard punch to the face. The other one didn’t come out and Camilla whacked her head off the steering wheel.

It didn’t take too long for them to come to a stop on the road. The front of the car had been completely compacted on the left side and the windshield was cracked. I made sure the car had closed in on Linda. I couldn’t let her move. Everything was in place at this point but I still had to make sure it all went to plan so I watched.

Linda breathed sharply and her hands shook as she tried to get the door open but, as I said, that wasn't going to happen. From her waist down there was a ruby stickiness that she tried to wipe away. But I had already made sure she wouldn't be able to.

Camilla wailed. The skin on her head had opened up to reveal a deep ruby river like Linda's, and her under eyes were bruised like a raccoon's. A few drops of the stickiness were beginning to leak from her ears and nose and her face was white. From this, I was sure Camilla wouldn't make it.

"Camilla, look at me," Linda said.

This part I hadn't planned.

"Come on look at me."

I watched as Camilla turned her head to look at Linda and cried even more at what she saw.

"Give me your hand," Linda said, her voice breaking.

Their hands met in the middle of the compacted carnage and their wet stickiness mixed together. It was the final comfort. I hadn't seen one in years.

"Tell me about your family, okay?"

Camilla wasn't listening.

"Tell me, what are we going to do?"

She continued to cry.

"Tell me," Linda repeated more forcefully.

Camilla breathed quickly and mumbled, "Talk about my family."

I saw as Linda began to feel the lower half of her body again. I knew the adrenaline couldn't have lasted much longer. I watched while the pain ravaged through her. Only able to imagine how this felt. Like there was something inside of her trying to get out, moving everything from its place, trying to break the remainder of her skin. But she didn't yell in pain, she simply inhaled deeply.

"It was my little sister's thirteenth birthday last week," Camilla cried.

"And what did you do?" Linda said.

"We had a mini party at our house. My Mum made a cake and my Dad blew up loads of balloons."

I always felt it was strange when I had to take a child before a parent. But I don't get a lot of choice in the matter, other than in the method. I just take the case.

Linda began to sob and squeezed Camilla's hand even tighter. I knew they weren't going to last much longer than this. But still, I watched until the end.

Linda bled out before the ambulance got to the wreck and Camilla didn't last much longer, brain bleed. Luckily for them though, they gave each other some comfort from their ends. I'm actually quite lucky to have seen it.

I hope you understand a bit more now, even though I still haven't really answered your question. Why did I have to take them? I don't know. I'm just doing my job. I know you're thinking that I still don't have to do it but that's not true. If I don't do my job, I don't exist anymore. I become a useless creation that can disappear and I don't want that to happen. I would like to exist. You need to remember, it's not me that decides who goes. So if you still want an answer, really it's not me you should be asking.

I can't give you the answer you're looking for because I can't help what I do. All I know is some of them just aren't meant to live.

## **Park Road**

**By Danielle Riddell**

Her destination was number two-hundred and it was close; maybe at the very corner of the block, where it turned in on itself. House two-hundred, the third last to the corner, was a two-story house with a driveway and an assortment of old kids' toys littering the front garden. Things left and aged and forgotten about. Lena eyed them with an odd, tight feeling in her chest and then forced her attention back to the house.

She thought that maybe if no ghosts were here, then something else might have moved in instead. It would not have surprised her to find that Lucas, who had sent her the initial story, was messing with her deliberately. It would not be unlike him to have lied about whispers which had reached even his supernatural-sceptic ears. That he hadn't bothered to meet her on time was a sure sign. Maybe he lay in wait, hiding in an old cupboard ready to spring free and scare her half to death.

The curtains were open on the bottom floor and she considered peeking inside; first, she thought she ought to call Lucas first. See if he really was inside hoping to spook her, or at the very least, to see if he was coming at all.

The sky hung overhead, black and purple like a thick, dense blanket. The clouds had all but covered the stars and what little moonlight could peek through was spread thinly over abandoned cars, reflecting off onto the pavement and derelict houses. The air was strange: not heavy, but it seemed to take each sound and stifle it until there was nothing left. Lena had seen abandoned streets before in her travels. Tales of ghosts often went hand in hand with places like Park Road.

A gas leak had emptied this part of New York out, as did the ensuing fire. The other connecting blocks were still blacked out all these years later, the buildings charred and left to rot. Things had been left in haste, even the cars and even the things inside. Material possessions, Lena had learned, often meant nothing when it meant getting out alive.

She walked the pathway while drafting her message and then side stepped to the grass and towards the window. She hit send, waited a moment and then began to inch closer, until she could press her hands against the glass and peer inside. An old living room awaited her. Two sofas and a TV; on the floor it seemed like there were more kids' toys and maybe some shoes and other things which had been left in a hurry. Blankets lined the couches and she supposed someone had been making use of them when the nights turned cold and the streets became unwelcoming. There were plenty of houses, after all and no one was using them.

It was not all so terrible, however. A few blocks over, demolition crews had begun moving in, dismantling the houses and towering apartment blocks. Money had come from somewhere and now it was time to wash the rot away, piece by piece. They had done the same not far from Park Road; downtown all the slums had been destroyed five years before and, in their place, tall, expensive apartment blocks and odd hipster cafés now stood. It was hard to imagine this part of the city looking the same, what with the echoes of what was still lingering.

Park Road was last on the demolition list she imagined. It was the least affected: the streets now were used as a free parking lot while the houses sat empty husks, the windows ghostly eyes peering back. Any tales of howling spectres often came from stressed workmen after too many after work beers, she had managed to deduce from online reports. The real ghosts, if there were any, lay in the destruction zone, watching from burned

down houses and demolished bricks and wood. The only ghosts on Park Road were squatters and opportunists haunting the backyards and old bedrooms left unattended. There was nothing here for Lena at all, but with no access beyond Park Road's eerie streets, she had nothing but part of a ghost town to investigate.

"You know," a voice said from behind her, flat and soft. "For a private investigator you've got terrible reflexes."

Lena hissed out through her teeth, her whole body swerving as she threw her arm out, aiming directly for Lucas' head. It was him of course, dodging her arm, frowning as if it were nothing but an inconvenience. And it was, probably: Lena was half a foot shorter than him and only made up the difference with the height of her hair. "Do not do that!"

"I've been following you since you got off the bus. Are you sure you're not a ghost? Hard to believe nobody's taken a shot at you with how you go about, not paying attention."

There was much that she wanted to say in response. Sometimes she thought Lucas was a ghost himself, given his ability to appear anywhere, unheard and unseen. She breathed in through her nose sharply instead and offered, haughtily: "I'm not a private investigator. We've been over this. I'm a supernatural investigator. I don't care about old, white guys affairs."

The corners of Lucas' mouth turned upwards. "Right," he said, and Lena felt suspicious that he sounded fond. She turned back towards the window with a frown, she peered back inside. Lucas remained where he was, quite patient. "The house isn't haunted," he admitted, after a moment, not sounding the least bit guilty. "But the kid that used to live here went to my high school."

Lena glanced at him over her shoulder. "So?"

Lucas shrugged. "He said they didn't move out because of a gas leak." He inched closer, until he was side by side, peering into the house himself. "He said people kept going missing and then turning up in bits and pieces. Like an animal tore them apart. People started moving because they thought there was a cougar or something -"

"You don't get cougars this far in the suburbs," Lena interrupted.

"Something or someone. Quit interrupting."

Lena frowned. "Plenty of serial killers chop people up, Lucas."

"Sure." Lucas glanced at her, his mouth curved upwards. In the light – or lack thereof – his smile seemed strange on his pale face. Crooked. Lucas had, for the entire eight months that Lena had known him, always been sort of pale and weird looking. Lena couldn't remember seeing him smile before. Something about him had always seemed sullen; like he hadn't grown out of his teen-angst.

She hesitated, glancing between him and the window and then, with a sigh, she turned around and scrubbed a hand over her face. "I hate you," she said, as her imagination began to run wild: wendigo's and cannibals and old-fashioned revenants. Plenty of things which could hunt and tear people apart. He knew her weakness. "Which house was first?"

Lucas' smile had some teeth now; sharp and white. "We can start at this one."

## **The Ornamental Hermit**

**By Molly Burns**

I want to forget my voice,  
Stand with weeds coiled around my legs, and  
My arms outstretched,  
Fishing in bone dry blades.

I want to live untamed,  
Poisoning myself with berries that ink my fingertips,  
Dozing on mulched leaves, and  
Braiding my hair in the river's path.

I want to shed the world from my skin, and  
Accept foxes chewing on my toes –  
I will welcome furry teeth in exchange  
For moss growing in my ribcage.

## **Bag of Bones**

**By James Turner**

In the middle of this scorched valley, the bag of bones lay in a dusty heap. Sand whips on all sides, while cactus prick and vultures watch. The bones move, ripped toes twitch, and they draw some strength, while the earth blurs in the twitching air. The lines of separation lost as everything spills into something else. And beside the bones feral intestines lie unfurled across the dirt.

Slowly the bones arrange themselves upright against the horizon and a dark overcoat hangs heavy, scratched eyeballs peer through shards of hair. A dusty flicker on eyelash and moustache, as a bloody discharge is expelled by cracked lips onto the dirt. Bare feet drag across the stale earth toward an orange sun, that bleeds beyond the sky. Brittle hands hang limp from shoulders, sand trailing, and round a yellow corner as a bag of blood appears.

The bag is spilt, a clotted puddle across the yellow sand. It's feet are bare, but for a pair of black socks, which the bone man removes for his own charred feet. One stitched red with "Pedro", while a white "Stanley" adorns the other. He tugs them up his shins and continues, the bright valley reaching into the warped air ahead. Any sign of life waiting for death, its own or some other.

The bones feel warmth in their feet, not the searing burn of the sun, but some other life. It rises up the legs and through the body like a shock of adrenaline. The limbs begin to walk on their own, leading him faster across the ground. He tries to stop, grabbing at his knees, but soon the arms are gone too and he opens his mouth to scream. But there is no voice, just the pain across his shredded throat.

- Relax cabrón.
- Don't fight it man. We'll get you out of this.

The bone man looks down at the socks, as his body lurches out into the open desert.

- It's time for revenge pendejo.
- It's your lucky day.

The bag of bones fall numb, nervous system fried, the soothing rhythm of limbs swinging across the land. Eyes closed it ascends to the clouds, the wind in it's hair, it reaches for a door to heaven.

-----

Black pupils flash and a bloody smell fills the air, while three drained bodies hang from a tree. The ground is slick with red and with the faces removed the white bone of skull dries in the sun. Bloody bone hands wipe themselves down and throw three pairs of boots in a sack.

- You missed the best bit.
- That big one cried like a little bitch.
- That felt good. But we ain't finished with you yet.

He dreams of being in the clouds again, but the path goes on and on. Skin wearing loose, limbs ready to fall but still they continue. Finally the bones stop at an outcrop of rocks. The socks climb up, one at a time, till they reach the peak. On the other side a black pit is full of shapes, blacks and browns, metal edges and studs. Closer still they form boots, hundreds and hundreds of leather boots. The bone man reaches in the sack and holds up a black boot, blood dripping down its side. Chopped above the ankle the

foot remains within, safe in its tough exterior. The smell returns, having waited in the sun for nostrils to arrive.

- Boots are evil. Don't forget that.
- A good sock is all you need.

With the boots flung to the pile, they come down from the rocks and continue towards the darkening sun. They keep going for some time, the bone man's head rolling on its shoulders, trying to avoid the blistering light all around, when he feels something again. An itch on his right foot. Dull at first, barely there and disconnected from his eyes, but it burrows deeper into the skin. The bag of bones tries to concentrate on his arm, to make it his own again, but there is no reaction and he lets out a wail.

- What's the matter now?
- Shut up gringo, we're nearly there.

It's my foot, I need to scratch it.

- Quit your whining. It won't fall off.

But the bone man won't give up. Eyes close tight he begins to feel a heat in his chest and something at his fingertips.

- Don't fight us man. You seen what we can do.

Eyes open he looks down at his bone fist in all its glory. Now if he can get the arm as well. The fire spreads through his body, ravaged limbs battling against each other and finally they all end back in a heap on the red earth.

-----

A blast of water brings the bones back to life. The skin seared across his cheeks. Eyes open, a bag of nerves stands over him, hands clung to a flask.

'I'm back boss.'

'Where am I?'

'You passed out. I went to get water.'

The bone man's eyes lower to his boots on the man's shaking feet.

'Are those mine?'

The bag of bones stands tall, his limbs loosening and again his own. He grabs the water and it burns his throat.

'Yes boss, I had to borrow them. I came back for you.'

A bone hand reaches for his nervous collar.

- You know what to do pendejo.

## **Dendrology**

**By Jordan Sanderson**

There was no making sense of the pine fall.  
The whole yard laid out like  
A fleet of log trucks collided  
With some Humbaba of the Loblolly  
Forest. Even though the house stood  
Unharm'd, we couldn't enter it, the turning  
Of the doorknob more than we could bear.  
The scent of pinus taeda pulped the air.  
We breathed deeply. We could not breathe  
Deeply enough. We rubbed our fingers  
Against the grain of exposed trunks,  
Longing for a splinter. We tongued rings.  
A stunned turkey looked at us as if to gobble.  
Locked inside the world, we cobbled a door  
From flakes of bark, but it was too large for us  
To enter. We peered through a beetle hole  
Just in time to see a barge hauling a new river  
Through the hospital in which we were born.

## Beasts

By Erynn Pontius

White horses don't gallop  
on pavement streets,  
yet it was easy  
to believe fairies  
fluttered in and out  
of window panes  
with teeth in their pockets.  
If handed a green apple,  
don't bite.

The beasts never came  
out from under my bed,  
but when I closed my eyes,  
I could see horses  
wheezing on frosted cement,  
turning gray;  
I stepped over  
their shivering ribs,  
teeth clamped shut.

Absence turned faces  
into a blaze of torches and pikes,  
a shimmer of white silk  
flailing in thorns,  
a fingertip pricked with blood.  
Seams filleted from the binding

of a story whispered under the sheets  
the strings of a body in submission.  
The fruit juice seeped  
across my tongue  
like an itch.

Eyes open  
I stroke molars  
clinking in my pockets  
feel the ridges, the ivory bone.  
You can't see  
the beast's eyes,  
if you pull the covers  
over your head.

## Marked

By Marisa Silva-Dunbar

I wonder if wanting you will ever get easy.  
I feel like you've already carved your initials  
into my shoulder—licked the blood clean.  
When will you let me mark you and make you mine?

The nights your fingers are tangled in my hair,  
and I'm tucked into the crook of your arm—  
the world lulls; I wish we could stay  
in the cocoon—no one else can touch us.

Making you see stars is not enough. The hours alone  
poke at my spine—it's a cruel withdrawal;  
craving my cheek pressed against your chest,  
hearing the watery thud of your heartbeat.

I miss the warmth of your skin—  
it would be simpler if we belonged to each other.

## **The play may or may not begin**

**By Nikkin Rader**

Actor 1

The snake is the metaphor.

Actor 2

For what?

Actor 1

The snake is a metaphor for everything.

Actor 2

The skin, the meat?

Actor 1

All of the snake is a metaphor for the all of everything.

Actor 2

Can I be a snake?

Actor 1

You already are, Satan.

Actor 2

*Begins to devolve into a grotesque four legged entity.* Oh no.

Actor 1

Oh yes.

Actor 2

I'm metamorphosing into a metaphor.

Actor 1

If I were a bird, I would love to eat you.

Actor 2

If I were a bird, I wouldn't be a snake.

Actor 1

But you are.

Actor 2

But I am.

*Actor 1 begins to attempt to behead Actor 2. Soft music begins to play as violence wrought the stage.*

*The curtains now begin to split as the bird and snake scrimmage offstage.*

Mother

Where are my children?

Father

Where are my eggs?

Mother

*Squats over a frying pan, produces two eggs.* Here you are you boggart fart.  
Now, where are the children?

Father

I think I saw them fighting outside.

Mother

How strange, they fear the outside.

Father

How strange. *Eats the eggs, begins to smear blood on face.* They're too runny again.

Mother

If they weren't, how would they get away from you?

Father

*Begins a forced laugh.*

Mother

*Follows the forced laugh.*

Actor 1 now Child 1

Mummy! I killed the serpent!

Actor 2 now Child 2

Mummy! I've been killed!

Mother

Very good children, now sit for breakfast. *Squats over the frying pan and produces a few more eggs. This time, shell and all. She hands one to each child.*

Child 1

I hate eggs Mummy.

Child 2

Yes, eggs are rotten, Mummy.

Father

Eat what your mother has provided or you'll get the belt again.

*The children begin to smash their respective eggs on each other's bodies. Yolk can't be escaped.*

Mother

Very good, I need to get to showering before the water dries out.

Father

Yes, please, go wash your sins away, you vile woman.

Mother

Oh, you know how I love your bible talk.

Father

Go.

*The children are rolling on the stage together, either fighting or playing, it's hard to say.*

*The mother leaves the stage. Black out. When the lights return, it's just the mother on the stage. She is about to go behind a shower curtain. She does, and the sound of water falling. She begins to sing.*

*There are 2 stagehands planted in the audience. They should be dressed whatever normal is, nonchalant. The singing commences, until the lights begin dimming. One stagehand should pull out a cell phone, and ringing overtakes the room. Within a few beats, the other stagehand takes a mobile phone out of their pocket. They answer, the ringing stops. They begin to make small talk about the performance or about the audience members surrounding them, their disdain for being there. They realize they are in the same room. They get past whomever is in the way to find each other. They embrace. They are intimate. They are moody. They boo the mother, who doesn't hear them. They use their phones to take pictures or as a flashlight to find their way out of the room.*

*All the while, the mother is singing in the shower. The water stops once the stagehands have cleared the stage. The water and singing stop almost*

*simultaneously. She steps out from behind the shower curtain, towel to hide the self.*

*Mother doesn't have much time before the children come in.*

Child 2

Mummy mummy! They're trying to behead me again!

Child 1

Off with your head!

Mother

Oh, hush, and take the swing like a man.

Child 2

But I'm not man! I'm not even a snake!

Child 1

But you are Other.

Mother

Go bother your father, please, I'm not even dressed.

Child 1

But you are Mother!

Child 2

*Smacks Child 1 as hard as they can and flees.*

Child 1

*Upon regaining footing, chases after.*

Mother

*Sits in front of a mirror, back to the audience. She begins speaking to the reflection.*

I wasn't always so cruel, you know. I wasn't always so crass. But sometimes when your ass falls out your mouth you become this thing, this entity meant for breaking, or, for taking anyways. I wanted to be an astronaut before the wars wiped out all space exploration. I wanted to see what anti-gravity felt like, because all I know is the weight on me, which unhinges me even now. I am tired of feeling heavy. Each breath is a flame licking my eternal demise of external being – existence is putrid and so is the garbage I shoved under our bed last week. He always loved the scent of non-cover-up.

Before this I was in a harem from a young age. As soon as the mooning blood came, we went. It was the way of the New New World after the War. I only made it out after the Reckoning. But by then I was no longer a girl, made woman by war, as many are. I am what I am and yet I am without, in want, all of the time. I don't see myself in my children. I only see their father, their grandmother, their teachers, their neighbors, the eyes watching them from the windows at night. I know them by how others see them. And thus how I am seen myself. No longer marital bound but still hung heavy with a burden of burrowed youth, the parasites eating within and with those. I never wanted to be a mother but I came to appreciate being needed, or used, or abused, but always some feigned impression of a could be love, maybe was, ain't got. I don't mind it anymore, it's been a decade and a few years since their play by play arrival, one in one out one in one out and then I cut my ovaries out to keep them at bay. I am happier now. To be cleansed. My husband would not do it so I did. He does not know, still tries to plant his plow and seed but it is all ash and soot here, phoenixes never flew higher than me on our wedding day, when I was all posies and mallowdrops. I cannot recollect the way he looked back then, any longer. I cannot recall much at all these days.

*After a beat of silence, she smashes the mirror. Black out.*

*When the lights return, there is a fire simulated on stage. The wood is real. All four family members are huddled around the fire, trying to determine how to keep the heat for themselves alone and not share with the others. Eventually, one of them douses the fire in attempt to fuck over the others and take control of the remaining wet wood. A fight ensues. One of them gets ahold of all the wood through the smoke. They create a circle around them with the pieces. The other family members claw at the invisible force shield this creates, trying to get inside the circle. They cannot. Black out.*

*When the lights return, the children sit with their father. It is storytime. Father has a book, maybe with pictures. The children listen.*

Father

Once upon a time there was a magical place called The United States of America. There, the only thing that was law was capitalism. The people spewed coins in their sleep and they hung nooses in their yards. It was a festive time and everyone was glad to be alive, if not just to kill off the others.

Child 1

The Others?

Father

Don't interrupt me again or you'll get the belt. If not just to kill off the others. So, one day, the president gave all the citizens their own little atomic bombs. They were so glad to have them! Everyone cheered and planned where to decimate their neighbors. There hadn't been this kind of potential for blood shed since the dawn of drones. Everyone was very excited to get a piece of the action, to take home their very own communist scalp. It was time to annihilate the others. The president gave the word, and poof! All was well in The United States of America once more. They were the only island left in the world and all else sank to the sea. The end, for now, children.

Child 2

Why can't we have our own bombs?

Child 1

Ya, where are our bombs?

Father

You know we keep those heirlooms buried in the basement. Wouldn't want the two of you tarnishing our family relics, now, would we?

Child 1 & 2

No Father.

Father

That's right. Now, get yourselves to sleep, before I send the monster in here. *He gets up and leaves the stage.*

Child 1

I love those fairy tales.

Child 2

Those aren't fairy tales those are non-fiction folklore accounts of our ancestors.

Child 1

Shut up nerd before I make you shut up.

Child 2

Don't be stupid then. Just because I want to be something and you don't doesn't mean you can replace lack of aspiration with apathy.

Child 1

I believe that's precisely what that means. *Engages with a mobile like device. The stagehands come back after a couple beats and take it savagely from him, perhaps with punishment inclusive. Child 1 goes to bed whimpering afterward. We don't know it but Child 2 is smiling.*

Child 2

*Speaking as Child 1 becomes frozen in whatever movement there was, Child 2 now free to roam the stage or building.*

Ever since the latest ban apprehending all over-usage of cellular technological communicative devices beyond governmental check-ins, I've been much more pleased with my other's repercussions. A light whipping in the public laboratory school hallways here, a mild mauling on the bus for rude talking there – the world has not been a better place. And yet, I no longer know what it's like on the outer bits of our world – my cyber pen pals have vanquished under this new regime guised protection, but, I can't think about them anymore. Wherever they are in their own civic breakdowns, I can't be there for them even if I were online. But I miss watching their demise from afar. That's true enough. *Kicks Child 1's bed which seems to reanimate time, Child 1 responding after a beat.*

*A fight ensues. The Father enters once more.*

Father

What did I say about ruckusing before slumber? Wait to murder in your dreams, boys, girls, things. Now, be quiet and get to bed. The next time I come in here won't be so pleasant.

*The children now sleep, the sound of atomic bombs whistling through the air, radio talk as if air bombers were giving coordinates at the very place the audience rests. The children dream in technicolor, the stage projected with images of warfare, of violence, of fire shedding down forests, of beheaded dolls. Black out.*

*When the lights return, the Mother and Father sit alone on the stage. The Father is on all fours and the Mother stands behind, holding a leather strap that is tied to the father as if he were a horse. He nays.*

Mother

We must make sex softly sounded or the children will fuss again.

Father

This isn't sex this is obedience. Now, harder!

*The mother whips him. She walks him around the stage.*

Mother

I never realized how much of a pussy you were.

Father

The only pussy here is that dead cat in the walls. Now, harder!!

*The mother throws the leather strap in front of him.*

Mother

No. You whip yourself. I'm tired.

*The father picks the strap up with his teeth, and gleams at the audience, as if begging one of them to take the strap up. He may even begin to nudge the front row's knees and feet as if a dog asking its owner to throw a toy. Meanwhile, the mother is undressing, preparing to lay in a bed onstage in the corner. She looks at the audience before crawling into the bed.*

Mother

Well, what are you waiting for? Someone, take the whip!

*Maybe someone does or maybe someone doesn't. The father reacts accordingly. He then follows the mother's suit and crawls into bed. Black*

*out. There is a claque implanted in the audience. They should start to make an applauding ruckus now.*

*The four family members around making sounds on stage as if something is being constructed and built. Lights up. They have built a log cabin in the shape of a well with the sodden logs from earlier. It is thus a small structure. They look at the audience in horror when the lights go up, as if rats caught in the dark. They scurry into the structure as best they can while avoiding our sight. Black out.*

*When the lights go back up this time, it seems to be a repeat scene in the seeming kitchen. The Mother is squatting over a frying pan, trying her damndest to produce eggs. Instead, bullets fall out.*

Mother

Well that's strange. I guess we're eating these for breakfast.

Father

This will not do! Produce eggs or I'll pluck you for all you're worth!

Mother

This is what I have mother fucker deal with it and swallow or I'll put one of these in you.

Father

*Reluctantly begins to consume the bullets.*

Mother

Where are my children?

Father

Have they not come in from outside yet?

Mother

I never heard the door open when they left.

Father

Children! You better not be in bed still!

Child 2

*Clambering on stage with a head wound, visibly bleeding. They tried to kill me!*

Mother

Oh hush and sit before your breakfast gets cold.

Child 1

*Comes in with a mallet with red smudged on the end, beaming. I almost got you this time.*

Child 2

Mother!

Mother

*I said hush! Now, both of you, sit. She tries to lay eggs over the frying pan but this time two hand pistols come out. She hands one to each of the children. Hurry and eat then get outside, the day will be near done before you've even set foot in the sun!*

Child 1 & 2

*They wield the guns and aim them at each other, making measures to traipse across the stage with high suspicion of the other. One of them realizes the father has bullets, so they dive for his plate, the bullets bouncing around the stage as both children grab what they can. They hastily move to load their guns, going out of sight offstage, then two gun shots sound through the room. No one should be alarmed.*

Father

I swear, I'm getting tired of those two with each day they grow. When can we sell them?

Mother

Never. I'll never sell my children. Well, maybe the younger one. They are quite a tattle tale these days.

Father

Yes, best not to have snitches in the family, kin win or kin fin, I always say.

Mother

We can raise their market value if we fatten them up first, and soften their spirits.

Father

Yes! Splendid idea! I heard the military operates in the black market, maybe we can swindle the Air Force into taking the smaller one. They always did want to fly.

Mother

And drop bombs. They only wanted to fly so they could drop missiles from high above their supposed targets.

Father

That's my child.

Mother

For now.

*There is the sound of airbombs once more, or singing from the mother in a distant haunt, the imposition of flames and fire bleeding over the stage, dollheads and eggs are being thrown onto the stage by the stagehands who are crawling through the aisles tugging at the legs of onlookers, looking beggingly at them as if to help end it all, to free them perhaps from this*

*scenic hell. They are very sorry. Meanwhile, Mother and Father have disappeared in the chaos, and Child 1 & 2 have reappeared, slithering on the stage, or flying, or both, only animals are left, animals and sound. Until silence. Black out.*

## **Umbrella**

**By Ardra Manasi**

Kawabuko's lonely figurines  
aimlessly stare out of wool,  
cotton and satin, when the  
French critic hails for all to  
hear: "Le Magnifique."

One-eyed mannequins trade  
their half-glances for  
casual words of praise  
from lovers on their first date.  
Purring into each other's ears,  
thighs brush against one other  
in anticipation perhaps  
of an uninterrupted night of love.

A rectangular window  
opens to a sky full of rain.  
This mundane elegance  
of a less abstract world,  
never still.

We hold hands,  
walk in and out  
of museum halls  
with ancient dust  
on ceramic gods,

who once spoke  
Greek or Roman but  
now silent,  
with broken ribs  
from failed conquests,  
full of love and wars.

I look at how you look  
at other women, then  
the mannequins, when I  
remind you that  
it is raining outside.  
We need to buy an umbrella.

## **Tell Me that You Love Me So I Can Go Home**

**By Alexis Erin**

When the dreams were buried safe  
in a verdant bulrush, guiding the paved  
line of the Turnpike, an expectation  
to move past, at breakneck pace, into the blur  
of some foreign morning  
in a future I can't recall  
from intuition or vision or Déjà vu  
A ferocious and gauzing ray  
- too hot, albeit threadbare-  
obscured the closer, that is, what's been  
living nearest to the front door  
of my chest, the orangerie  
whose fruit I know  
Its halves belonging only to one  
another, a priori  
One tree, one citrus  
housed in one rind  
Below one skylight  
Under one sun, I heard you:  
elsewhere, humming  
Tapping the table  
with your index fingers

## The Sheep that Prayed

By Nicholas Starkey

I once seen a sheep praying,  
like a woollen apostle. I was on a bus,  
grazing in Carmunnock, floating through the white  
river, livestock-angels on either side of the road, locked in by fences.  
A fence held them, and a gate somewhere. The gate wooden, oaky and  
silvery white;  
somewhat furry. Within the fences, white fluffy dressing gowns  
roamed *free*,  
and so they should be.  
The meditative sheep had it's pillow-white bottom pointed  
upwards to the clouds in the sky whilst it's black face dived  
down,  
down to the muck of the earth.

This is how it prayed.

It looked scared, a little bit  
constipated. It looked torn,  
torn between believing  
and believing in fear.  
Taking the plunge. The long drop.

The mercy of G-d and Men  
was what it prayed for, like the flock  
from No Mean City, hoping they  
aren't next on the chopping block. The sheep

rubbed the grass with it's charcoal-face  
like a lamp and wished, screaming it's wish the only way sheep know  
how, *Baaaa, baa'a baaa ba* -  
Please, don't kill me