The Blue Nib 37

Poetry, Fiction, Essays & Reviews
Chapbook 5 Contest Judge - an interview with Paul Sutherland

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Paul Sutherland is a Canadian-British poet/writer, who has lived in the UK since 1973, has fourteen collections, editing seven others. He’s founding editor of Dream Catcher journal now in its 38th issue. He runs creative writing workshops and widely performs his poetry. Leads seminars; mentors, runs Writers Retreats and collaborates with other artists. He appears in anthologies and journals. He reverted/converted to a Sufi Muslim 2004. Poems on the Life of the Prophet Muhammad (saws) 2014, A Sufi Novice in Shaykh Efendi’s Realm have followed. Turning freelance 2004 he’s won awards and grants for a range of projects. Much of his writing is collected in New and Selected Poems, (Valley Press 2017) a ‘unique ...an unflinching and forensic exploration of a life through language.’ The University of Lincoln archives his work. Amoretti, (Dempsey & Windle, 2018) is newly published and Red Streamers is planned for 2019. He attends West Wold Writers, Pimento Poets and Nunsthorpe Poetry Workshop.

Well-known and much published poet Paul Sutherland is our judge for the new Chapbook Contest and Blue Nib editor Shirley Bell interviewed him on 12th February and features some of his fine poetry below.

As our fifth judge, Paul says that he is looking for the unusual and things that will jump out at him. He is asking entrants to put down their most strange, wonderful, passionate thoughts and then of course, to edit them. He is also looking for structure and form but he feels you should trust your own vision.

Paul was born in 1947 and brought up in Hamilton, Canada, and was nominally a Christian although there was little overt religion at home. He remembers at age 17 realising that he should be writing poetry, containing his ideals and visions in words, not outside playing street football.

He spent a year at McMaster University before dropping out and becoming an orderly in an intensive care unit. He was influenced by heavy electric music of Cream, The Velvet Underground, Jim Morrison and Steve Miller Blues Band amongst others. He read widely influenced by the modernists, like T. S. Eliot, Pound, Virginia Woolf, along with Nietzsche, and feeling an affinity with the poetry and mystical-earthly thinking of the Japanese and Chinese.
Falling for an older woman, his next door neighbour’s wife: this unrequited love partly caused him to leave his homeland. He was encouraged to go to Great Britain as he had legal residency to stay in the country through his grandparents. He arrived in London in 1973 aged 25. He wanted to hike to the north of Scotland but ended up caring for the disabled in several residential settings in the west and east of the UK.

He was always searching for the spiritual, firstly through the filter of Christianity when he wrote his Holy Week Sequence started in 1986 and published in 2004.

In 1994 in his late 40s he went to York St John University to read English and History. There he set up Dreamcatcher magazine in 1996. Having often felt an outsider, his university studies transformed this attitude, giving him a wider perspective. He became interested in post-colonial studies, Canada’s identity as a colony, and wrote the poem ‘Canada America’ which appeared in his collection Journeying.

His influences at this time were the classics, especially epic poetry and plays: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton, the Faerie Queen along with the Romantics and Modernism. He was also inspired by modern art, particularly the work of Ben Nicholson which inspired his series, Ben Nicholson Miniatures.

He has written prolifically, and feels his Seven Earth Odes are important works from Canada. He spent 15 years trying to return to what inspired them. This proved impossible. Instead he wrote in black ink in journals recording his thoughts and exploring new ideas he encountered in the UK.

In 2000 he moved to Lincolnshire working as a Literature Development Officer. In 2004 he met his second wife whose own conversion to Islam in 1980 encouraged his spiritual growth. The same year he converted to a Sufi Muslim, a mystical branch of Islam. He feels this change was a major step for him to learn to value and appreciate and see the creative potential of “the other”.

This short article cannot give a full picture of this fascinating man with his eventful and peripatetic life of travelling, searching for the spiritual through his poetry, and using his complex responses to “otherness” to inform his body of work.

**Snow Around the Lake of Bays**

Lifting toward the Haliburton Hills, too serene
bare arching limbs weigh densely lined in white.
Tall spruce, pine and cedar carry the fallen mass
wear epaulettes without a sign of war or triumph.
Bendy roads, ploughed a ways, lead to dark ruts
along clover leaf bays, between smoothed banks
to window-bright-cottages decorated for a brief age.
Between converging slopes, into an unseen cleft
the day-light fades, looks to descend. Streamers –
in paling purples, cerised-reds and quiet ambers –
waver from in-shore waters out to the lake’s heart
as if all the known landscape is being pulled back
lured far out of reach, until nothing can rescue it

**Violet Louise Cunningham (1893-1978)**

Butterflies on and around buddleia blooms
recall my maternal grandma’s flighty hair –
to disappear into it, surrounded by her hug
as tender as the brush of peacock’s wing-tips.
Life turned upside down when her beloved
father remarried; she had to escape her home.

So old in the final framed photo on the bureau
– silky white threads combed to reveal her grief.
A century ago she’d floated a brunette through
English meadows among wind-stroked flowers
while fritillaries and skippers drank nectar as if
from her secret loving cup – a taste like chocolate.
Some migrate; but none as far as her. Unmarried
she fluttered to the new world with a near stranger.

Unknown Girl

Turning seven your sprightly fingers
swiped one stem of pink phlox from
the surrounds of a gentleman’s garden.
My wife and I placed your gift in a table’s
centre-piece vase; after you had left for
weeks and weeks it perfumed our cottage.

Gradually it turned to a petticoat’s white.
Those petals surrendered both their colour
and scent to tumble, speckling the water
in a back window ledge’s pint size glass.

But don’t imagine we disremembered you –
in our cold home – no matter how old you grew.
The season shifted far on to black winter
and the gentleman never noticed your theft.

In your Spring absence

This time it’s your art’s paintbrushes
on the window sill leaning towards
an imaginary sun; the daisies have
become white daubs across the lawn.

Those brushes each with their shaped
black hairs, filbert, fanned or tapered,
used, and not used enough to quote you
and paintings that might have been if...

I have to write about those ferrule beams
rising from your yolk yellow plastic cup,
imagine what they might’ve created if
you hadn’t leaned your love towards me.
Bijan

Younger from a much older tradition, you ‘just do’, take your place simpler than me. The teenage mum hands over to you, her new born, doesn’t prevaricate as sometimes.

She swings it out from her cradling sleeves into your arms, a baby crochet shawl tucked in. Your fingers stroke glowing cheeks; you kiss an infant forehead, squeeze a sugar-drop chin.

he lets you rub natal scent off on your skin. I wait my turn; she guesses some uneasiness though I feel none. I’m pleased to sway-away never wake the sleeping; intone naff phrases into pinkish curvatures and petit earlobes.

The pretty neck-and-head-scarved mother resists, though I’m invited into her company was in the birthing room, like you, though I’m bijan, your older brother, she shuns me when you’ve your children and I have none.

Exciting new collection by poet Dominic Fisher

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Dominic Fisher’s debut collection from The Blue Nib:

The Ladies and Gentlemen of the Dead

Dominic Fisher

Blue Nib Publishing

Dominic Fisher is from the Bristol/Bath area in the south west of England. He studied Art and English at UCW Aberystwyth in Wales where he also trained as a teacher, living for a time on the Dyfi estuary in a green railway carriage. He then went to Turkey to teach English language. From there he went to Spain to teach and met a New Zealander whom he married in Gibraltar. Returning to Bristol, he published poems occasionally, but work and family life took precedence. Recently he has devoted himself to poetry more full-time and he has been published in a wide range of magazines including *Poetry Ireland Review, Poetry Salzburg Review, Magma, Brittle Star, Raceme, South Bank Poetry, The Interpreter’s House*, and *Under the Radar*. A poem of his has also been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. He is the winner of the international *Bristol Poetry Prize 2018*, and *The Ladies and Gentlemen of the Dead* is his first collection. On his allotment there are foxes, and sometimes goldfinches and a sparrow hawk.

We are delighted to introduce you to Dominic Fisher’s work. Dominic says that “this collection of poems explores ways the living and the dead meet – for lunch, in an artwork, on an allotment plot, in the city. We meet poets, artists and others engaged in the struggles and contradictions of their own times, and encounter challenges from our own.”

**Water Paper Gold**

Keep them from us
with fences of water
wider deeper
colder than they know

Keep them from us
with bricks of gold
with visible fences
and walls of glass

Look how our horizon encircles
no deserts no blinded cities

Look how the sky is divided
into our sky and their sky

We are here
where our forbears fought for these
roundabouts and central reservations
these slip-roads these signs these limits

Where we are
we speak no ifs or buts
our own straightforward language
Where they are
is the Tower of Babel
an encampment of rubbish
one pair of jeans and no signal

Some say we should open something some part
that is itself a fence or wall with locks and gates

They say each of us is adrift in a shaky boat
migrating across equal seas the same terrains

They forget
our long lineage and its claims
its treaties maps and standards

Keep us in
with fences of privilege with preference
with ancestral divisions

Keep us in
with memories and forgetting
and our well-fed fears

Withhold from them
that little we have
with locks of water paper gold
with walls they see and we will not

The Wardrobe Mirror

Some days you wear the season’s weather
its cloud formations, its cloths of rain
you put on the upper atmosphere
it’s goose striations, textures of wren.

Sometimes I watch you become the sea.
Opening the door of the wardrobe
you pull out curled weeds pools blue-greens
you hang the foreshore from your earlobes.

There are evenings when you take your time
fix a column of jet to each ear
and Venus low in the south west shines
out of the folds of your hems of air.

Sometimes you are clothed in a field.
I lie there too, awake in the dark
counting the flowers or looking for keys
while you sleep in the intertwined plants.

Someday, dressed in wood, we’ll come undone
be loosened in sub-soil or fire
then put all the seasons’ colours on
all the oceans, as we did before.

Avenue Principal
Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, for CRL

This is a suburb, leafy, quiet, and if not
for the communards and déportés, it is well-to-do.

Bonjour, and how are you today Madame?
Thank you Monsieur, still dead, and yourself?

Still dead too Madame, tired of listening to insects.
Quite so, and rain trickling in at one’s ears.

The sound of trees drinking what is left of us.
Drinking and drinking, taller and taller.

They fade away together on the Avenue Principal
among sepulchres like narrow houses.

The grilles for front doors incorporate
crosses, roses, here and there a star.

Blackbirds blacker than marble monuments
eat the richest worms in Paris, sing

in green and yellow chestnut leaves
above Famille Forel, Famille Defourmental-Latierre
above Marie Elise Toussaint de Quiévrecourt
Famille Blanc, Famille Espace, Famille Éclipsé.

Madame, I regret I do not recall who you might be.
Nor I, nor why roots have tied us up together here.

Nightfall now. Sabotine, Boucher, Charpentier, Pecheur
and comrades are cuffed and cussed and dragged along.

No blackbirds sing tonight, Messieurs, and we suppose
the ironies are not lost on you

of your summary execution against the wall
of this furthest corner of a cemetary

where a Himalayan tree holds cones of flowers
in darkness in its many hundred hands

where a weight of letters was later lifted up
Dachau Auschwitz Bergen-Belsen Buchenwald
Could you eat a roasted blackbird, or just its tongue?
No my dear, no thank you, not just now.

A little wine though might be good, red wine like blood.
Yes, I remember. Something to enrich the rain.

So whose are those stone children, ours perhaps?
And what is this whispering of names, addresses?

It is a dissolution of what we were
the words we are, what we do not know.

It is our slowly turning into trees.

**Bee In A Poppy**

Bee near drowning
in more colour than we see.

Working the crown in your trance
you drench yourself in gold.

 Desire is between two poles,
the flower and the hive

but you must also dance
so the tribe can find the flower.

If there is no dancing
we will not survive.

**Black Star**

*i.m. David Bowie*

The first day one summer
a soot crystal
dark snowflake or flower
is falling through white space.

It goes below the lines
through the gateway of itself
into border zones
of other information,

drifts down from visible
towards invisible
where creatures light themselves,
settles on the sea bed.

*I’m not a white star*
I’m a black star

It is night at altitude
we are stone blind
among blizzards of asterisks.

Losing ourselves on the page
we become dark flowers
in white space.

It is the first day one summer.

Mary Oliver, Companion - Mike Griffith

By Michael A. Griffith | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Themes and images reappear in a poets’ body of work. If that poet is gentle with the delivery of these themes and images, their frequent inclusion is welcomed by readers. Mary Oliver was a gentle writer in this regard. Make no mistake: Not all of Oliver’s poems are warm and quiet. Indeed, some are stirring and stormy. But her delivery of even difficult topics is gentle and nurturing.

In his review of Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, (Poetry magazine, January 2009) Michael Hofmann labels Lowell as a linebacker in his approach to poetry and his personal encounters while giving Bishop the role of dervish, ever-skirting the literary world and its
assembled personae. If we must assign labels and roles to artists to help us understand them, I feel that Mary Oliver might best be understood as a companion.

I love and admire Lowell, Bishop, and Oliver as I have come to know them as poets through their works. I also enjoy them as people as I have learned about them through biographies or, in the case with Oliver, recent articles about her life and her book on writing poetry, *A Poetry Handbook* (Harcourt, 1992). But I can imagine Lowell the tall, imperious, at times obtuse guest, bearing over me, taking a bit of my life with him as he leaves after a visit. I image the demure Bishop accepting a coffee, then a scotch, then leaving with nary an excuse or explanation, just...going away, going someplace else. But I imagine I could walk the beach near Oliver’s home and chatting with her about the sea, the gulls just overhead, even the condition of the sky as we stroll. Being poets, we’d both eagerly jot down, then share, notes of our walk.

This is all fanciful, perhaps even farcical to those who know these three greats better than I do. But this is my essay, not theirs, so I hope you will humor me.

By considering beginning stanzas from poems by Lowell, Bishop, and Oliver, the case for the above-given roles for the three may become clearer.

Here the jack-hammer jabs into the ocean;
My heart, you race and stagger and demand
More blood-gangs for your nigger-brass percussions,
Till I, the stunned machine of your devotion,
Clanging upon this cymbal of a hand,
Am rattled screw and footloose. All discussions
End in the mud-flat detritus of death.
My heart, beat faster, faster. In Black Mud
Hungarian workmen give their blood
For the martyr Stephen who was stoned to death.

From “Colloquy in Black Rock” by Robert Lowell

Lots of noise here. Lots of crashing and thudding. A grace is present, of course, but it is a headlong grace, one going for the images and messages in the poem shoulders set with firm and fast steps lunging ahead.

Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery;
impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,
with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
and some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you

From “Arrival at Santos” by Elizabeth Bishop.
Like our short visit from Robert Lowell above, there is much action in Bishop’s stanzas. Yet isn’t it a somewhat quieter action, a somewhat more sedate view of a place and scene? And we get less of Bishop herself in this sample – indeed, Bishop is absent in many of her own works while Lowell is a presence in many of his. Our dervish is dancing as we observe the warehouses and mountains. She does not dance to be noticed; she dances so as not to communicate very directly of herself.

And now our companion, Mary Oliver:

Cold now.
Close to the edge. Almost unbearable. Clouds
bunch up and boil down
from the north of the white bear.
This tree-splitting morning
I dream of his fat tracks,
the lifesaving suet.

I think of summer with its luminous fruit,
blossoms rounding to berries, leaves,
handfuls of grain.

From “Cold Poem.”

We are given a tree-splitting morning full of guttural consonance, creating a stirring effect ala Lowell’s stanza above. The second stanza feel more like Bishop’s way with words, calming the scene down, calming and warming our morning walk.

All three sections from these poems deal with the natural world, Lowell and Bishop adding the impact of humans on the patch of earth they are addressing while Oliver brings to our attention nature unto itself. Each poet serves as our guide, but Oliver shares her dreams and imaginings with us in ways Bishop and Lowell do not. Lowell stirs us up, Bishop points, Oliver whispers.

Let’s join Mary Oliver again, this time while sitting on a rock wall in her poem “Knife.”

Sometimes,
when I sit like this, quiet,
all the dreams of my blood
and all outrageous divisions of time
seem ready to leave,
to slide out of me.
Then, I imagine, I would never move.

Plain language expressing plain thoughts, thoughts we can all share in and probably sympathize (if not empathize) with. Isn’t this what companions do, don’t they share with each other? Can we feel we truly share with Lowell in his pulsating pronouncements and in the landscape as Bishop places embellishments upon it? We can certainly understand and feel what both poets are saying. We can more easily, maybe even readily, share in what Oliver presents to us.

Oliver shares with us a visit from her reportedly abusive father.

The door fell open
and I knew I was saved
and could bear him,
pathetic and hollow,
with even the least of his dreams
frozen inside him,
and the meanness gone.
And I greeted him and asked him
into the house,
and lit the lamp,
and looked into his blank eyes
in which at last
I saw what a child must love,
I saw what love might have done
had we loved in time.

From “A Visitor.”

No hiding here; Oliver is the assumed persona, the “I,” of this poem. She again shares with us in a
conversational voice, perhaps confiding in us, inviting us to feel with her what she has felt, inviting to let us
feel it with her. We need not feel we are her friends, we merely need to share in her personhood, her identity
of a child whose love of a parent has not always synched-up as it should have.

One final sample, this from her oft-quoted poem “When Death Comes.”

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

If this isn’t one companion sharing with another about the coming of the big good-bye, I don’t know what is. Almost every poet has written about death, just as they have written about life, love, nature, moral issues, and emotions. Yet has any poet written about these themes as deftly while at the same time as seemingly artlessly as Mary Oliver? There is much apparent artifice and/or craftsmanship in much of poetry. In virtually none of Oliver’s body of work can we point to an example of over-crafted, over-worked writing. Labeled a “nature writer,” I find Oliver more a natural writer, a writer who presents poetry as if it were to be spoken and read plainly, shared as a companion might share her ideas and experiences with an invited guest.

The stanzas in this essay have been removed from context, since I cannot include an entire poem here due to copyright restrictions. Likewise, they were selected to help prove my point. Lowell certainly could and did write some poems with a gentler tone. Bishop, from all I have read of her works and read about her on a critical level, never bared her soul in a confessional way in her public writing. She was practically absent in a good number of her poems. Oliver is present in much of her poetry. But when he proclaims, how can we feel
as anything but an audience member to Lowell? When Bishop hides, shies away as she presents her observations, how can we feel all that comfortable? While Mary Oliver was a private person, we feel a sense of connection with her and the world as she presents it. She is with us as we accompany her on her walks in the woods or along a shoreline, while looking at an old barn that is being held onto by a fractured family, gazing up at geese, and a thousand other vistas. She shares with us as few other world-class poets can or will.

Shirley Bell introduces Issue 37 Poetry.

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Here we are again and another exciting collection of poems, stories, essays and reviews has filled an even bigger magazine! I have enjoyed choosing the poetry for this issue, and I never fail to be surprised at the variety of subject and form that appears in The Blue Nib files. Thanks to you all for supporting the magazine and please keep on sending me your work.

In this editorial I want to look again at the controversy between the worlds of open mike poetry and online poetry and the “traditional” perhaps more academic poetry, written for the page. We wrote about this in The Blue Nib last year in response to the poet Rebecca Watts, who wrote a notorious article in the February 2018 PN Review saying:

“Why is the poetry world pretending that poetry is not an art form? I refer to the rise of a cohort of young female poets who are currently being lauded by the poetic establishment for their ‘honesty’ and ‘accessibility’ - buzzwords for the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft that characterises their work.”

Wendy Cope, an award-winning poet herself, is quoted as saying that “Writing poetry that’s going to be any good does involve some kind of engagement with the tradition. There’s craft and technique.”

The Guardian Review on 16th February and the Sunday Times February 17th this year reopened this debate referring back to that PN Review essay. The ST quotes Nikita Gill, who has 52,000 online followers who read her poetry such as this:
I suppose I love my scars because they have stayed with me longer than most people have.

These predominantly young poets, often young women, have shot to fame through online media, YouTube, and blogs, reaching out to an audience like themselves and generating huge sales through accessible poetry, dealing with emotional upset, angst, relationships. Compared to the the cash-starved world of traditional poetry they are having massive financial success and are garnering huge audiences.

I can see the consolation in reading this work compared to more challenging poetry. But this poetry loses the joy of finding the less obvious pleasures of entering a poem, following its journey through whatever twists and turns there are, and taking away something that may stay with you forever. There is a real joy in intellectual challenge.

I am particularly interested in this debate because of the concept of gatekeepers. The Blue Nib launched online last year and has become a successful and much read e-zine and now a print magazine with this, its third print issue.

As an e-zine, our magazine differed from the multitude of poetry sites accepting anything and everything that poets wanted to post. The Blue Nib’s USP has always been that it is edited. I have acted as a gatekeeper in that I choose or reject poetry on what I perceive as merit. I look for poems that have been edited and honed. I can often see that a piece has been poured out in a rush of feeling and I regret the fact that with an editorial pen, such poems could be reduced to the bare bones of what they are trying to say. Polished in fact. And with every line break, comma and full stop earning its place. It is those polished poems that I am looking for. I also want emotion and an acknowledgement of the pains and pleasures of life, but I want them in a way that has tried to tame the beasts.

What else – never using the first word, looking for richer phrases instead of clichés, re-reading, revising, showing your poems to like-minded people (see the Pimento Poets piece). But always maintaining heart and integrity, not mere shallow facility.

I am asking for a lot but I cannot express the joy of opening a file and finding work that makes me jump out of my seat!

Shirley Bell

Poetry Editor and Editor-in-Chief

Poetry- James Finnegan

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

salut

*after Iggy McGovern*

from afterbirth to aftermath
from beetroot to bloodroot
from confusion to profusion
from eye-and-ear to pioneer

from fission to fusion
from hippo to hip-hop
from income to outcome
from jobless to homeless

from Ku Klux to Cuckoo
from lantern to lanyard
from Mandela to umbrella
from overseas to under siege
from Pantheon to penthouse

from quarterdeck to quarterback
from rain check to paycheck
from sickle and plough to tickle and howl
from unskilled to deskilled
from wasteland to waistband
from xylem to asylum
from yes men to Yemen
from zoom in to zoom out

exhausting joy

the female springer sees
the childless couple
and thinks
I will not be
your child

I will show you
my face of sadness
and accompany you
as far
as the dark

The Muse and Me

I ask the Muse
*how do I become a poet?*
She tells me to cop myself on
and come to my senses.

*Isn’t smell important?*
I wouldn’t bother, she sniffs.
*Surely sound has a place?*
She lets a pin from her pocket
drop on the sand.

*What about the visual?*
She says *Let me see,*
pauses, then,
*I’ll get back to you on that.*

*Taste must have a role?*
No sweat, says she.
*You gotta have movement and touch?* I say.
She flaps her arms like a penguin,
walks towards the sunrise,
brushes me aside.

I call after her,
*can I come back this evening*
*when you are in better form?*
She turns around slowly,
looks at me and says
*Maybe*
Thorn in my jumper - 1964

Eileen Ward called to our house:
a two-storeyed,
white pebble-dashed,
blue-doored home,
at the crossroads,
in Dundalk,
an eastern border-town.

A thorn caught in my jumper,
as I stuck my head through the hedge,
at the side of the house,
to see what she wanted.

Eileen raised a hand to block the sun from her eyes,
‘Francis has been knocked down.’

In the flashing frozen stillness that followed,
furl-leafed branches,
above the wall,
across the road,
swayed in the May evening breeze:
a lone bird flitted,
fencing off creeping grief.

Liam Campbell

Liam walks up an incline,
ever-so slightly hunched like the Hulk,
carrying easy gravity
on his shoulders;
thick-set, kind,
energised.
From behind,
his head is slightly bowed
as if genuflecting to the world
and the other
before him.

There was a time
he carried beer barrels
and drove a lorry,
but got into Tolkien
and now unloads
English literature
as carefully as water
in a desert,  
making minds marvel  
whilst helping quench the thirst  
of hungry hearts.

A sparkling talker  
who catches everything you say,  
and sings an original song  
on final day  
and whose Ecological Augury  
awakens one’s  
Love of Trees.

Poetry- Patricia L. Hamilton

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Bio  a California native, is the author of The Distance to Nightfall (Main Street Rag, 2014). She won the Rash Award in Poetry in 2015 and 2017 and has received three Pushcart Prize nominations. By day she is a professor of English in Jackson, TN, where her specialisations are creative writing and 18th-century British literature. She loves jazz, cappuccino, and travel.

Survivor

There’s no manual  
to instruct you  
when you receive  
the news via  
phone/e-mail/text:  
someone you love
crashed the car into icy water, was crushed in a train derailment or mowed down by a terrorist, put a gun in his mouth, or maybe just slumped over, dead.

No transmittable wisdom can lift you from the riptide that sucks you away from shore where the people who love you wave their arms, helplessly motioning you to stop thrashing and keep breathing so you can gather enough strength to swim parallel to the coast until you’re free.

You must use your tiny flashlight of faith, shining its dim beams into the blackness that engulfs you.

You may trip over gnarled roots, but that only means you’re surrounded by ancient trees, their arms cradling choirs of nesting songbirds whose joy will greet you at first light.

**Ordinary Time**

Through the open transom window
above the bathroom’s frosted glass
sunset-orange flares on the facade
of a skyscraper across the Thames.
In ordinary time, the light’s dying
is not a metaphor for anything.

Warm suds cascade down my back
and twine around my aching calves.
We have walked all day, learning
the neighborhood’s warp and woof
by threading through its narrow streets
to locate the grocery, the bus stop.

We aspire to look like natives,
not tourists greedy for candid shots
of local color, but our tongues
betray us, and our tennis shoes.
We fumble with unfamiliar coins,
teeter on curbs, unsure, untrusting.

After dinner we stroll the river walk,
dusk offering the day a benediction.
Light-shards dance on the water.
Tomorrow will be time enough
to gather up our scattered fragments.
Tonight we rest, the cooling air a grace.

Epiphany

Checking my rearview mirror
as I head east from the river,
I’m blinded by shekinah:
boundless, burning resplendence,
holy fire hovering over
the mirror-surface of the water,
reflected glory glazing
my rear window with gold.

Dazzled, I don my sunglasses,
flame-flare nearly searing my sight
as I speed away from that radiance,
wishing the light would last
yet dead with dread,
the cost of illumination
awareness of my own finitude
as I hurtle home in the growing dark.
Jane Simmons - New Poetry

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Song of Innocence

I plant flowers in our first window-box –
confetti-petalled geraniums, fuchsias
flamboyant as flamenco dresses,
trailing lobelia’s modest white stars.

They have not built on the strawberry field yet –
the ripening fruit nestles innocently in its straw,
nursing its splinter seeds, its growing runners,
and generation is an unfinished business.

On that beach near Zakros, we eat grilled sardines,
and tomatoes dripping seeds in red juice.

In ancient times, they smelted metal here –
today, languorous waves cannot hold their form.
Children are not thought of yet.

At the wedding, Mary showers us with rice –
how it stings when it hits.

Cornwall

We cross the bridge
over the full river
into Cornwall,
my body smuggling
our contraband.

Afterwards,
a strange confinement,
in hiding with our grief.
The road home will never
take us back –
some water never
goes under the bridge.

My cheated breasts
throb, engorged,
and I cry in the car –
as it rains outside
on cows in sodden fields.

The Stranger

Who is this woman, this wild-haired, red-eyed woman
who hates all pregnant women, all young mothers -
who would ram them with her supermarket trolley,
push them into duck-ponds, shove them into
the path of passing traffic? Who begrudges others
their first-borns, their new babies too, wants
to spoil their complacent cappuccino afternoons -
who wants to tear tasteful sympathy cards into shreds,
rip the heads off flowers, stuff bouquets headfirst into bins,
throw consolation chocolates, and well-meaning cakes,
back at their givers, strangle the smirking boys
who pass the note across the back row, who wants
to murder all the well-wishers, choke them with their words -
it was probably for the best - you can always have another one -
and haven’t you got your figure back quickly?

First Meeting

On the dark screen,
shapes shift, quiver,
coalesce into images.
Silver waves
lap the sides of a coracle
where you lie, curled
in the hull –
an apostrophe.
This round, your head,
this curve, your spine,

and there, your heart
beating, beating,
and your arms outstretched –
as if in greeting.

The Night Feed

Each the other’s new-found land, we are still
learning this world, you and I, learning each other –
you are only half-sketched, and I already half-erased.
In my thin white cotton night-dress, I am ghostly
by moonlight - raised by your cry, called cow-like
to milking, home across the narrow lane of the landing.
We are the only people in the silent, sleeping world -
I marvel at your liquid eyes, your soft breath
thin as a pale mist rising from summer fields,
your tiny fingers light on my blue-veined breast,
how I set you going, and how we keep your time.

Beached

Days later, we walk a cold winter beach;
you - my only living child - run ahead
on the bare sand, chasing after your father.
Each one of us is alone on a vast
expans, beneath a wild sky.

I study your reflections in the wet sand -
always that space
where others should be,
and sometimes are.

Suddenly, you stop and stoop, squat down
in that child’s pose, call out to me, and
I come to you - always I come to you -
to see what treasure you have found.
This time, a pale, new-dead fish
fixes me with its unseeing eye.

New Poetry- Arathy Asok

By arathy asok | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
strike

The farmers held
Dead rats in their mouths,
Wearing green loin clothes
Hiding what is left of their pride.

They sit in the capital city
Waiting for some eyes to open,
They sit for days
Unblinking at the cold.

Far away in distant lands
Their crops have withered in the heat.

Their children look at open skies with empty stomachs.

Cattle stray among stubs of what was once green.

The women with water at their hips look into a far horizon for a dusty bus
That will return the men,
Who left heir huts incomplete.

To death

I should not have played with you,
Death.

You seemed like life,
You seemed to return all that I had left
At the door of the desert,
(Which was mine
Without holding back.)
Tell me.

When you smiled and bade me enter
Could you not have said
That one day
You would take it all
Without even a single trace?

crusified

Jesus
Did it not hurt you,
To stand alone in the cross,
Crucified,
When that beast in robes
Fed himself into the little girl?

Did you not want to call out loud,
To pull your hands, your legs,
From the nails that pinned you?

Did you not bleed then the tears you could not cry?

Jesus

She must have heard you,
In pain,
And thought
You do not live.

(this is a poem based on case reported where a minor was found pregnant and the one accused was the priest. He was later found guilty and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. This is also to remember all the little ones, boys and girls, mutilated sexually by the powerful ones in religion)

Chala

In Chala market
The women who sold fish sat in the dark, that evening.

Their hands bulged out when they sat on the stone
Their legs dangling beneath them.

Oily hair above faces and voices that rang out in the evening heat,
They ate ripe jackfruit before wiping it on the slippery fish.

And suddenly the candles light the corners
The women and the fish
Rising up in prayer.

(Chala is a place in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India)
An Invitation

Come, Father, let’s wander London’s dark skies,
sit by the river, watch dusk silt and slide,
salute and swirl a glass of ruby red wine.

Let’s toast civilisation,
Forge radical ideas, unravel politics,
range our voices across continents.
Discuss Truth and Justice.
I need your advice on
The growth of greed and corruption,
Refugees, the Taliban, Isis, Corbyn
Brexit, Trump, Corporate Capitalism.

And, I’ll tell you of my children;
Your grand-daughter’s smile,
You would be proud. She is like you,
Except more beautiful.
You will love to hear of my gentle giant of a son.
He has your stature,
Tries to stuff his heart with pebbles and stones
By way of defence but sings strong.

At the close of play, Dad,
Before you fade,
I will hug you good night,
Press my cheek to your black, cotton, polo-necked chest
Breathe in your alcohol breath,
Climb into my bed,  
Go to sleep, a little drunk, feeling safe

**My hand reaches out**

You are framed in the Georgian door and forty years  
A string of water, your hair a grey, tangled mess  
It used to be blonde and gorgeous.  
I swallow hard, while garble streams from your lips.

**Hello! You're brown! How are you? How's your mum?**

Before I go forward to embrace, I take a step back  
It's always been like that.  
Demanding answers, you follow me into my brother's kitchen  
Where I have laid out  
Olives, anchovies, artichokes, trout  
Sea food salad, bread, cheddar  
You scatter a glance, take it all in  
Stop your chatter. Say nothing. My heart sinks.  
I have the old feeling that I've done something wrong  
I arrange the midnight red gladioli you bring

**Wine? Water? Tea? Orange?**

I ask  
You choose the last. I pour white wine into my glass

**It's been so long!**

You say. I nod.  

That was your doing. You took offense  
I gave it truly. I look at you now, cautious  
My hand reaches out  
To keep you at arm's length, safe distance  
But you come pouring, forthwith:

Your children and work, they come first  
Sighs and pride, everyday stuff. Then Mama  
The sisters with whom you have fallen out, again.  
But it is the angle of your eyes, the pull of your mouth  
The glance askew. The way you look at me  
With your nose. It tells me more  
All you haven't said. Everything I don't know  
And I'm not sure I want to, yet  
My hand reaches out.

**Perfectly Sweet To Slurp**

My eye has a squint like a bull's eye mint  
My nose is the shape of a chocolate flake
My ear is fashioned like a pink jelly bean
I have hula hooped cheeks
A cone of a chin that drips ice cream
My neck quavers over jubbly boobs
I have nipples like gob stoppers, over chewed
My bubble-gum tum is a bazooka joe joke
My bottom hangs, scoops of soft caramel
My thighs wobble like a shaky cream jello
My knees twist like aniseed drops
My shins are sticks of teeth pocked rock
I have feet that flap like fizzy fish
My middle toe is a pink string of liquorice
When I look in a mirror and see my reflection
I see a bag of delectable confection

She walked on water
Sweeping the sea
Brushing the waves
In the setting sun
While the tide rushed in
She walked on water
Across the ocean
Out to the island
knotted by ancient walls
Barren fields and rocky stones
She walked on water
Over heft and flow

Sweeping the sea horses
Heron and curlews

Poetry- Clare Morris

By Clare Morris | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
A LEICESTER TRIPTYCH

The Change: 2.15pm, 15/3/2018, Leicester Royal Infirmary

And so you sat down next to her bed,
With the bag of toiletries and magazines, your habitual offerings,
(the ones now in the bottom drawer that burn your fingers to touch them)
And she whispered with conspiratorial mischief about the matriarch opposite
And you laughed at the sudden shimmer of her words
As she joked with the nurses who took her for the routine procedure that would only take a moment or so
And you played Spider Solitaire to while away the time you didn’t realise was so short
Until you heard two screams that cut precisely through the air like the knife through your last birthday cake
And then the apologetic abruptness of the doctor with his hand on your arm as he showed you the photograph
(the one not mentioned in the coroner’s report),
The nurse’s tears, the evasive responses,
And you shocked and uncertain as you made phone calls,
Summoning the family in a voice that strained at each syllable,
Warning them of the change that no one wanted to explain or justify or own
And so you kept vigil as that home fire, once so bright, became ash, became dust,
While your anger burned deep and raw as still no one explained the reason for such silence,
So that now, months later, you lie awake in the near-dawn-dark,
Thoughts jangling like loose change in your pocket,
Wondering what you could have done to stop that day turning into night,
And so you wrote a poem and hoped that someone would read it and understand.

Listen, let me tell you about Leicester –

And I’ll tell you about our loyalty
With our hopeful matchday scarves hoisted high
In swathes of blue and white or green and red
As foxes and tigers prowl –
And our all-weather archaeologists digging deep in a cheerless carpark,
On knees, before our longed-for king -

And I’ll tell you about our literature
And that ruffian Joe waiting to entertain us on the stair with Mr Sloane
And Sue with her fractions and her secrets
And their word-wit that sparkles in unlikely places -

And I’ll tell you about our language
As we go down paggy sarvo wi’ Tezza, Bezza an’ Shazza
An’ if you tell us oo waree wi’ en we might let you come along too, duck -

And I’ll tell you about our light
And our streetlamps, Diwali-dreaming,
Alive with sudden illumination, warm as egg yolks,
As they pool their wares in Sainsbury’s puddles
Waiting for another Melton Road dawn -

And I’ll tell you about our love
And our Saturday-night serenading at the Palais de Danse
Where Mum met Dad
And knew that she’d found
Home.

The shoes we choose

(6.13am, Monday, 13\textsuperscript{th} February, Platform 1, Leicester Station)
They shape the sounds we long to make, our shoes,
The clickety-clack, the shuffle, the trot,
Tittle-tattle tales, some lies and some truths.

Loafers amble easily through life; dues
Not paid, they’re gone before it gets too hot,
They shape the sounds we long to make, our shoes.

Winkle pickers wait at alley’s end, ‘Who’s
A fool to argue with the tools I’ve got?’
Tittle-tattle tales, some lies and some truths.

Stilettos light their shimmy-sexy fuse,
Night out – squeezed in – corset tight – spill the lot,
They shape the sounds we long to make, our shoes.

Hale, hearty walking boots; naturalists muse
On thoughts fervour-fed, data-driven, not
Tittle-tattle tales, some lies and some truths.

The scuffed toe, the broken down-at-heel blues,
The preening, the keening, the God knows what -
They shape the sounds we long to make, our shoes,
Tittle-tattle tales, some lies and some truths.

Poetry- David Susswein

By david susswein | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Biography I am a writer from the South of England, right at the bottom. I have tried all my life to write well, to communicate, to talk to others; I cannot understand any other reason to write. Envoi, DreamCatcher, Picaroon Poetry, ShotGlass Journal, Tuck Magazine, Dissident Voice, an anthology in Farsi/English ‘Where Are You From?’ and others have heard my plea and answered. I want to talk that’s really all.

The First Apostate

You cast me — out!
name me other
ochre and marrowfat
melt on cooked stone
to pigmitize my new face.

you pierced me — cut!
marked me other,
conch shell and three
horizontal lines,
apophatic my new course.

set owls:
as hearing demons,
baited scorpions:
as crawling sentries
tasked wolfcubs:
mewling screams to terrify,

my brothers abandon me
divje-flute my only voice to speak,
jiahu mead my only solace
to drink. Drunk,
I fight blackened panthers,
visit ghosts of my tribes dead

visit Wonderwerk crawl myself into
embracing sediment. I will wake!
and in terror, moving blinded,
Out camp fires
with my burning feet.

see a distance,
coal stack, burning
a witch doctor experiments his mercies
Mudflat hovels turned to brick-bone
houses, my history run from terrors
to be forged in an absolutist steel,
a gods’ eye view of unproductive green
turned to a brown carapace of insects
manufacturer,

a hopeless forever and forever,
laying down in deep-baked coal-seams
In there, a fossilised skeleton
skin, blood, fat
hopes, dream and all stories,
dried-out and dead,
missing.

- Divje flute — one of the earliest examples of a musical instrument
- Jiahu — one of the earliest examples of an alcohol recipe
- Wonderwerk — one of the earliest examples of a human burial site.

**Crete and Sumeria**

“I’ll tell you this;” listening to the music in the bar,
“Once a time there were two countries,
one ruled by women and one by all men,
and they never ever met in all their days.

But in Crete there were rulers who were Just,
but in Sumeria; well they used the whip.
In Crete art was the highest calling,
but in Sumeria the strong-arm knew any race.

In Sumeria, women wore chains about the neck,
the men, though, wore glory and bronzed blood:
In Crete the men were pampered and oiled,
the women wore unctuous clothes and presided over all,

And Crete ruled the winds of trade;
but Sumeria used iron and powder
to burn all the maps that they could not read,
and although the nights in Crete were long and luscious,
the days in Sumeria were harsh and blood-ended,

And many writers and philosophers of the Cretan day,
said sometime soon the countries must meet,
and balk, confront and war with each other,
but...it was not to be, a volcano: ended all of Crete.

That was the dawn, you know, of creation –
do you like that wine? Anyhoos, if only the Crete
had survived; there would be like no war or anything,
‘cos you know that’s just a creation of men; just
like porn and all that terrible exploitation,
women you know, they are like just, so noble
and righteous with their birthing life out and stuff,
Do you want another glass? Anyhoos, that’s like
a bit what my play is all about - like that women
are so great and stuff, and we – have to chuckle –
men are just... not so great, a bit poor, really”

- Patriarchy is a system of male dominance, rooted in the ethos of a war which legitimates violence,
sanctified by religious symbols, in which men dominate women through the control of female sexuality, with
the intent of passing property to male heirs, and in which men who are heroes of war are permitted to rape
women, to seize land and treasures, to exploit resources, and to own or otherwise dominate- paraphrase of
a feminist tract

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind another glass-”

He clicked his fingers and shouted ‘garcon’
‘bring us another’; a waiter coming over,
refilling glasses not looking into any eyes,
it was not his job to make a judgement,
or see the girl’s eyes opening; to him

“Of course, y’know it’s like more than that
just a horribly complex story and-”

“It does sound really quite great!”

Moving in for the kill then:
this has to handled with subtlety,
and another wine-bottle moving off then,
a nice little cushion on the floor, then...
back at his/Sumerian little flat;
"Would you mind, if me, an evil Sumerian
stuck my hard thing about your Cretan slash?"

"Giggle, burp “Stick it Stick it!”

And in the morning, strangely, there was no volcano
dull and throbbing heads to be sure,
-more Cretan then Sumerian-
but just a dazed light little morning, panties
and bra to be found wherever they were lost, in sleep

Our proud Sumerian stood naked to his windows;
not caring at all were his clothes lay,

his back to the toussed bed and Cretan woman
the Cretan mouthed things about phone and number,
our Sumerian in victory deigned no real response,

"I’ll tell you this:
I have filed an ass-volley in my battle!
conquering complete, I need no further sacrifice
from your weaker kind
turn off your phone! and leaving me be…"

The woman who I have decidedly not named:

looked at his beautiful male-muscular form,
the taunt buttocks flexing in the sun,
gave up searching for her underclothes, and left,
with a thumping head to be sure,
but, still in her naked overcoat

retained a little shiverous dignity in her silence,
clasped her legs tightly home,
always around her easy-marks to be found,
on subwaytrain, streetcorners and anywhere
were an easier screw could be found.

Smirk, on her journey home.

**Cracked Dawn**

The heart left ventricle, right ventricle
the lips unpainted and laying red,
stains on the pillow; fresh smell of sleep,
unwaking lives living breathlessly beyond
the touch of shame; the red, is blood, her's she
has spilled in her own bed, sleeping awake
coiled in dream of losing child-ness
and becoming,

A time without need to dream, when the end
of sleep would mean a new face to show
light, her smell our smell mingled somehow in
the toilet. To fill the emptiness; hours
running between the taunts of memory
in the cracked dusk and floating dust of life,
I would wash your clothes, brush the hair
falling from your eyes; Sleep.

With me laying beside you smoking, smoke
tails clog the air the imperfect machine:
Me, your symbiont would between your
aorta and pulmonary veins, coaxing
your living flesh to warm, the heart as
a muscle that pumps blood thru the body,
seeping and surging, listening to the storm
of your body’s thunder... blowing colder.

**Encoupled Still**

The darkest sweet
the hour of our enmity, the
poisoned look, peroxide
hair. The still wanting,
that outlasts youth,
The mirror by
the exit, the crease
of lapel. The
lipstick smudge across lip.
The wanting still, that
ends in pain, in
pain behind the
eyes. The sour taste
of home, the bile in
the unbetrothed, the starved
hunger of it when
the wanting still
outlasts all the pain.
And the wanting
is all that’s left
in the twenty-sixth year
of the married bliss
of the husband
and of the wife.
IN THE DARKNESS THERE IS REST

In the wall
above every bed
I have ever lay upon
there is a window
so well hidden
not even the night
can find it,
leaving me with a lifetime
full of insomnia,
the relentlessly seeking sunlight
forever flooding the room.

NAME(LESS)

They separated us
at the border,
the nameless and the named.

I took two steps
to the named
but a skinless hand
stopped me,
a voice in my ear
saying I was without a name,
and must return
to my origin
and find the name given me
before I was named
by those without authority.

And so I find myself
back at the beginning,
searching for my name,
only finding nameless ones,
so many nameless ones,
their arms open,
welcoming me,
their embraces all too familiar.

STILL

Your coffin bought
before you were born,
the smallest one made
yet still too big
for your still form.

Such cruel earth,
swallowing a body
too small
for the box
that was its first and last home.

THE EIGHT DAY WEEK

You died on a day
outside of the week,
your funeral unattended
because those that knew
of your demise,
and they were few,
could not decide
if they should bury you
or name this undiscovered day
in your honour.

Either would have appealed to you,
I know,
while I also know,
you would have said neither,
just for the sake of seeding confusion
one last, knife-twisting time.
THE DOOR OF THE WORLD

There is blood on the steps leading to the door of the world, and small footprints leading nowhere.

An imaginary murder occurred here, before the door of the world, with imaginary witnesses and imaginary statements taken by imaginary policemen.

But the blood is real, its lead smell proving itself to the nostrils, and the back of the throat. Yes the blood is real, leading up the steps and under the door that opens into the world, when it isn’t locked, as it is now,

its keyhole a nightmare of cobwebs and rust.

New Poetry- Arthur Broomfield

By arthur broomfield | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
It was that kind of a once-in-a-lifetime
snow and hailstones day
so dreamed of by smug artists and Yale dons,
dendrological in a buns and sofa way:
King David on his throne,
Bathsheba pouring goat curd and curses
over the scone mix,
when the garlic guest strolled in,
carrying his masterpiece on a head
[true to his training],
the snow and slurry from his mosaic boots
beguiling the Axminster with rocks of ages.

“My ship is waiting at Giza”,
he explained,
“the clouds are bubble-wrap on the easel”.

We danced on the head of Cleopatra’s knitting needle.
Others sang the Horst Wessel
to the air of Blue moon in Kentucky.
The guest wept and changed his sou’wester
For an eye on the dollar.

Beloved

The latticed jaw of the old
rag and bone department secretary
glanced knowingly at the steel hull
of the egg and banana sandwich.

“Time for the séance,”
he announced to the assembled
gas chambers and matches in waiting.
These were the moments he relished,
longboats thrusting out to sea,
curraghs driven by tattooed oarswomen,
an old philosopher set on the remains of the planet Pluto,
memorising the book of Enoch.

“Now”, he rasped, fresh from the stench of the farriers’ meeting house,
“who can give me the pickled head
of the webbed foot profit
in an old hat box?

The blood red moon sailed by the blacked out window,
widows and childless crooned
the last verse of I’ll be seeing you,
a tribute in yodel to the ode of Saint Vitus.

Cill Rialaig Poems
To say their story is empty egg shells
on moon mirages,
twinkling watercress and cheviot sheep
with no strings attached,
she played the last deuce in the water lily plot.

The many options carved in sacred clouds
of mist and chewed gum,
known to three of the four horsemen,
plough on regardless of the shifting acrylics
and sneaky shadow with pitchfork feet,
reflect the shapely nude on the butterfly wings
that support the impressive palace.

Knowing this first she ate the laid egg
and carried them on beds of thistles and whooping cough
to the church of the confused chicken.

Poetry- Harry Dell

By harrygeorgedell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
There are words I will not write here, and not the ones already locked up in lizard skin.

No lock or clasp can contain them, or curtail their twitches and coils.

They eke out like poisonous vapor, to not exist and rob saliva of snapped flight.

Without the cross between eyes, blood is not content to simmer or bubble back down like toffee. It burns and sticks to those words, becoming a crust to chew and grind through the night.

It pools and swirls, stripping away the useless; a whirlpool streaked with enamel, stomach lining and whatever skin couldn’t cope.

Finally you’re left, thin boned and adrenaline squeezed; a delicately blown egg shell, kept in vinegar until its openings collapse.

into words I will not write here, and not the ones already locked up in lizard skin.

The Birdtable

There are three woodpeckers, seven sparrows two crows and a robin competing in airspace.

I am told the woodpeckers, which are longer than I believed them to be by the exponent of three, are unusual. They are chiefly concerned with peanuts.

I don’t know which of the seven is singing in the twitching pitch or why they would think it is acceptable. Is that flap rotary or lateral? Not knowing keeps the crescents out. The cups of tea are all unsipped, everyone has their own, saucer held haze.

In an instant of aerodynamic mechanical violence siblings tear a sausage to gristle with forks locked in scraping opposition.
But aren’t the tweeting birds nice.

A steel ball on a spike shudders information into fuselage and receiver when solid. Take the spacer away and letters blur into a lost pair of glasses and the machine will shake itself apart.

**Conversation**

I can feel that twist in your seat and for a moment I think it’s my bones wrenched into splinters; A fragment map for muscle and sinew to cling to in frayed alarm.

You’re fifty two blue shivers; Hazing a grotesque cypher, carrying the cluttered meaning of every eight in your thumb, every fidgeted ring, every secret knuckle crack.

And like school books on the train-lines your haywire back is a weapon levelled to keep me coiled against your stoop.

To help you would need an innocent cheek pressed to cellar chilled steel; a still bead waiting for the pressure motor whine to cut this face from inside to out.

Tight eyes dictate breathing through your shriek. We glance to white, then away our palms carrying our sequenced crescent signatures.

So I’ll sign off and hope this is the middle of the art.

**Void Gullet**

Rip out pages and crumple them gifting spit to each folded nook and chewing the choke out of each leaden word.

You must think yourself something truly
monstrous, violating solace between teeth.

The paper complains with
creaks and wet rips

but these pages drink, turning themselves
sodden with hunger, pulling taste buds
proud. Your tongue schooled into jelly, then a
fish-like sting as it
splits
and paper turned pulp
takes ownership of blood given if asked for.

If you spat, and let that soft blob shine
pink and smooth on the pavement,
quivering, half birthed and-
-you can’t.

Your throat opens and python stretches,
the baby squeezing it’s way down
bulging eyes and
pushing your heart aside
to make space for a secret.

**Necessary Bullying**

It’s time to take geek back, return to the
bite in the chicken’s neck, and give the bearded
lady an audience to wow. Just tell them
big tent is the latest app, and the portmanteau
is short for *technical argument*.

I promise you we’d all prefer it
to Star Wars lore in the early hours,
or Googled settlements to conversation
that might have lasted a happy drinking
hour

Now we can be completely sure
not one of us is left with a beer mat intact.
After all someone gets paid for picking
the bits out of the pint you didn’t finish.

I suppose I should have ripped mine into
the single link of hands held chain.

Or we could stand
with a networked shun for the screamed
and squawked payload instruction, owed
titillation and progress obstruction.

I suppose I should thank you guys though,
for living, bound up with lashes, in rigid
system; where there’s space for the hollow
and wretched.

Where misunderstanding could be stamped out
and clarity can coalesce as it drifts away.

New Poetry - Catriona Clutterbuck

By Catriona.Clutterbuck | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

QUEENS OF THE MAY

Mayday. White afternoon light
in the white mouth of the year.

Follow a blue thread of sound
to the braid of girls
in their convent-school years
song-circling the stations of faith –

grey chapel and tennis court,
silver graveyard and Canon’s Walk,
towering beech trees
baby-greening ajar
the cervix of summer
above our mantilla’d heads –

Hear again this, our petition
in the hymn of our changing flesh:
bring flowers of the rarest
CARVED HEAD AT JERPOINT

Seen at first, it’s a mason’s whim:
two long and delicate lines
chiselled to perfect balance
each side of his apple-round cheeks.

But this man’s entwined in no Eden:
look again – his arms are twisted and tied
to a crossbeam strapped to his shoulders
so his neck muscles scream for release,
drowning out the sweet pulse of forgetting
of self in the stretched hands of praise
of St. Kevin nestling the blackbird
in the shape of prayer’s cruciform.

No chicks can fly from the other’s stretched palms
forced to agony by human decree:
his yoke scores the flesh of each century still
seeking substance in enmity.

DORSET

Its hills appease me
like the negotiated comfort feeds
of a hardy child
nurtured on thick and thin
who will spend her life seeking
such button studs in time
as this cornfield by brown lea
under a wind-sharpened sun,
and finding them, wonder,
how is here a familiar sight?

EXPOSURE

The first aerial photograph
taken of us unawares
beavered us verso and recto into view –

our spring-straggly gardens,
muck of farmyards behind
and in between,

the strange valleys of our roof
above windows dropping lashes
before our widening eyes...
So often since then
we’ve slipped the house
that stopped the wind from Slievenamon

only to seek its shelter again
in the face
of the indifferent fields.

**SALMON**

The sea is free and cold
where you lived beyond conception.

Gills flickered my taste and you turned
to nuzzle my dusty interior.

You slipped the torn driftnets hung
for your sibling flushed out on the tide;

swam past the laborious flies
I cast each month from the shallows of fear.

You are in me now leaping weirs
towards the pool of your spirit-sinew

that churns with the silts of your spawning
freshly breaking through.

**Poetry- Clara Burghelea**

By clara_burghelea | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

**Process of Detachment**

I expect my son will let go of me when he’s five.
I will go back to just being Clara.
So ready to unspool from the erupting teeth,
the needy eyes, the extra hugs, the sticky fingers
and slip back into my old unprompted self.
The one who walked hard and spoke loudly, flirted, craving to feel armies of ionized butterflies prick her backbone and warm her cheeks.
Of course, my body will stay proof of my shortcomings, the twitching finger of the world pointing at the curves, folds, scars. Little aware of the invisible.
The dreams of the young woman sipping her latte at the corner of Franklyn and 7th Street, a book of Dorianne Laux poems in her hand, the nimble autumn breeze brushing her naked ankles.
The sleep-deprived, heavy breathing, nursing mom who could not take her eyes of the translucent skin of the stubborn eyelids that took two weeks to open.
In between, there is a poet who craves the particulars of other people’s frailties so she could match her own, nib and heart probing the wound that lurks behind ecstasy.

**To This Day**

loss weighs on my heart like a tender bruise of light
the dregs of its architecture still teaching me to love details-
the doctor visits, the IV drip nights, the overlooked everyday conundrums we shared on your good days around the kitchen table covered in flowery oilcloth, braids of white garlic and dried chili twigs of thyme and brown laurel spicing and feasting the roofs of our mouths, the crumbles of the day or the untended bones.

**Limenas, Half-Light**

The sun dissolved into violet loose glitter, the buttering sea washing my feet. By dark, I’ll be a ghost, blueprints in all things.

**Dylan Everett: New Poetry**

By Dylan Everett | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Textroots. (5 poems)

Text/isle roots

Tree flow she knows no end in the wind and dirt and poison she breath, no breeze no delicate hope, no dirt in the wind, no scope in the leaves that breathe dead stars, we antelope with horns we winged things we shivering motions we broken dreams we all inhale the same dead stars.

Tree flow and rain it comes in plains in eyes from far away, these rains of lost time, these schemes these entrails these endless rays that come down on the leaves that sway, that tribute that might unleashed and breadth of purpose not known. I come I pounce I pride I sway I live among the branches. I gather I distort I dwell I fold. I come to gather branches like antelope horns like rays like tombs like wings like flowers. I come to sing along with lonely trees and breath the song of the long dead stars.

Particulars

There is only the faint far off trembling of your hands, and a cry that stimulates with passion treasured as though a new horizon. Contrasted against the excesses, blue, blue, petals of theory, straight ray of disordered truth, these brush strokes are straight, these fates and gushing with pretty colour buried deep and ringing, the particulars nobody will recall, nobody is uttering back to the rapture, all like a heavy lullaby, flowing through inner eyes unhinged, and utterly the trance is a delight, and the disaster the disaster is utterly beautiful, we do not see it, and straight like a swarm of directed night birds the time comes, and my flood is your delight, and the old plough is rusted in the dead field, like a child just born to time, oh I imagine many things in my pages and cocoons, here a silk of ink or breath, I imagine many things, in my shadows on the river slowly fading, I imagine, I imagine too many things.

Teacher of dirt and mist

The gatekeeper breathes breathless three eternities, savage and elegant in formation, guardian of antelope,
leaping in the stream, guardians of earthly and subtle suggestions, mare that drinks the tender cold, his lessons are marks the march toward the sea, the breeze dealt, wrapped in the mud of what we can bare, all for nothing a secret emerges into unity, there is the cultivation of dreams turned into dirt and mist, the scattered hymn of a body bound in remains, its codes an apparition. Dense are the proverbs of the old, sealed are the wild, sealed and remains of immortal balance I do not see, I stand because the earth has beaten me up, a cell flows into the draws of sense, to remain an organism old and young, multiplied as though infinitive, this dare to teach in catacombs living in disguise, my deposition of internal faith, comes and fades, promises broken in spontaneous light, drawn with care, in the colours of a sun set mind.

Tending instincts

The treasure rising with the tide, and resting on the rocks of guardian storms, thrown like ashes, a subtle art of borderlands, as he walks in disguise his accomplice of shadows drifting drifting, the contentment of the exiles, drifting on a plain of unseen pleasure.

Anonymous swell of secrets form and gathered clouds unsurpassed, as times desire rests in rules of change, subterranean dreams of gravity and masks of place, unfold on darker paths, beneath the godless skies it breathes, divine fragments bound in rhythms, that forge another greatness as they fade, to unspoken reverences and promises once made between relative strangers.

The equatorial plain.

Reeds sway and the idea of the sun alone is felt, my text/isles sway and wait, entropy toward unchanging shores, and twinned death, in absent things that hunt my name. Omniscient trickles, the onyx bird in rhythm, the lord of his eruptive orbit through mezzanine shadows, his squawks in Spanish gold, old suns, distant rounde, distant and near in winged death. His celebrity not known, his transmitted disease, suffused with suicide, yet transported in vague clarity, vague certainty, transfigurative ordeals, about this way the equatorial saint, the middle of a bird in flight and bound by magnetic lines, magnetic rhythms. All lost in cosmic shadows and old suns, all lost and nearing the equatorial sin, the slender in the dark, the bodies cast in endless passion, endless.

Emma Lee- New Poetry

By Emma_Lee | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

A SMUDGE OF CINDERS
My teacher looked at me as if breezeblock wasn’t a word she knew. I had pushed my sock down. It was itching the scabs on my leg. A breezeblock had fallen from the stack in the yard. I splashed cold water on my scraped skin. My mother said to leave it. My teacher asked if I’d seen a doctor. I frowned. We weren’t to bother him. My teacher held her pendant and ran it back and forth along its chain. I wanted to wet a paper towel and dab it to cool the cuts, but I’d been taught not to interrupt an adult’s thinking. I pushed the other sock down so it matched. My teacher seemed to have forgotten me. I crossed my fingers that she wouldn’t speak to my mother. I was supposed to keep my cuts hidden by pulling my socks up.

**A SMALL HALO OF CONSISTENCY**

Yellow was the colour Van Gogh wanted to drink so happiness would radiate inside him. These primroses have waited out a long winter before emerging. Drops of sunshine not strong enough to melt March snow. They were buried when flakes fell, each a small bite of cold, something that might be shrugged off, but they carried on falling, barb on barb, leaving small wounds, an invisible tracery of white scars on pale skin, a blank layer that smothered. The primroses stayed in the dark.

The nutrient-grabbing narcissi flowered, expecting rain to shower praise but were greeted by damp indifference, a cold shoulder of crystals. Once their trumpets had fallen silent, their attention-seeking frills had faded, the primroses time their assent.
THE COLOURS OF A PANTHER

“I saw a black panther,” a voice on the radio.
A so-called expert repeats it. I change stations.
What other colour would a panther be?
Harborough’s countryside is hedged green fields.
The shadows merge into significance.
The radio is now off. I wanted the throb
of a cello undercut with yearning, not commercial pop.
Cats are adaptable and secretive,
content in their own company and a patch of sun.
Easy to let my imagination run with the suggestion.
I pull into town, run errands, until I’m caught.
It should be a simple decision: a pizza.
There’s your favourite, but I want my choice
if only I knew what that was. A man, who doesn’t
look like you, stares. I’m his way. I grab,
stumble to the checkout and pay, slump into my car,
hands, clumsy with keys, paw at the wheel.
Black is never just black. I don’t remember
my drive home, only that I was alone.
I discover the pizza I snatched wasn’t
your favourite as I put it in the oven.
There’s a shadow where you used to stand.
A smear like silky fur on my cheek.
My heart feels as if it’s been clawed.
Maybe panthers don’t just come in black.

UNDERSTANDING GHOSTS
(i.m. GWJ 22/10/1954 – 09/09/14)

Hold your head up; you’ve got a pretty face
Yours: reddened by alcohol in your belly.
You’ve just jolted me from my memory
of a novelist telling me I shouldn’t hide trace
of a published poem just because the period
was for stories. He thought evil lacked lustre,
wanted to look at the person who saw ogres,
even if told in the form of a ballad.

I thought he could see my ghosts, the crippling
self-doubt. His gruff impatience was saved
for those who were lazy, unimpeded.
He knew some writers needed nurturing.
I’m weighed with the loss of a talent
you will not stain by your ugly intent.
Poetry- Matt Spittles

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Matt Spittles has written poetry from a young age drawing inspiration from his experiences and observations in the natural world. He has lived in Lincolnshire since 2011 and is a keen walker, angler and traveller. Matt is a member of The Hub Writers in Sleaford and Lincoln Writers Group.

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**Spring**

Soft sunlight on stone steps,  
late March light, quietly balmy -  
spring is ahead of herself,  
radiating in the purple crocus.

A past alive in the watching shadows  
that drape silent messages,  
like dark cloths on tables  
where no-one will sit again.

At the entrance to the gallery  
there are ghosts in voices,  
memories dancing,  
out of control.

In the hushed coolness inside,  
I had seen the gentle curve of a neck,  
so much like yours,  
immortalised on canvas.

**Daffodils**

Beneath an outline of oaks,  
out of the earth-mire, early again,  
up through the damp grass, dull-mud,
into a premonition of spring –
Constable’s skyline running
into soaked ground.

In manicured gardens,
to stare at teary windows.
become radiant between showers,
catching the breeze full on,
turning heads, they sway,
like anorexic models.

Each year, surfacing in triumph,
drunk with anticipation,
egos in full bloom –
until they sag, almost as soon as grown,
adrift in that moody metamorphosis,
sullen edge of late March.

Drifting with their last smiles,
beneath the windy-white cumuli,
sensing their sudden end
the Daffodils begin to fall –
amber-yellow skulls dashed,
washed back to memory.

**Curlew**

Canal sleeps, silent
beneath the breeze-ripples,
letting its Mallards
nuzzle the reed beds.

Late March
peers into a looking-glass
of pale wetland,
face-up to a heron-grey sky,

Thickening its cloud,
fingering the trees, leaf-empty,
left to stand and shiver,
against the bleakness.

Suddenly, beyond the watery-eyed
sodden ground,
from the plough’s red soil –
alone, skyward, a Curlew rises.
Empty Highway Home

The road is clear, but for the weather
lashing down liquid intermittently, my wipers
doing overtime at midnight, after a John Mayall
gig in Stoke, driving home to Nottingham.
I am afraid of the dark, blank road,
driving rain blotting out the white markings,
guiding forces blurred, no companions
to keep me company, solitary, moving at speed.
I hold on to music, Black Sabbath belting out
another riff on the CD player, I figure if
control escapes me I’ll go out with a bang
of drums and Tony Iomi’s crashing guitar.
Focussing on Ozzy’s often underrated lyrics
“I love you still” fits the bill then memories of
my ex overtaken by 85-year old Mayall’s strong,
tall figure, speaking that evening of being 25 years sober.
A drink would be fitting, after surviving this ordeal,
you and Mayall competing with thoughts of
death on this dead road, but it’s after one
when I park, and the wet dark forbidding.
**Losing You**

As the sun sinks slowly through an ever-changing sky, your eyes in the light darkened, opened to reality’s bite, cruel night blights the soul. Love lost in the turning hands unresponsive to touch as the bland rain constant in morning makes its own music washing any fragment of sentiment away, to restart again. Through the years we have learned defence strategies, coping mechanisms for loss, the cost of emotion, the sum total of physical pleasure, love’s expense account hits hard, cannot be repaid. And so, the change has taken place, your hair splayed across the pillow, empty arms content not to hold me, intent on the opposite, determinedly single, a mistake has been made, we recount our vows.

**Bar girl, Street 110, Phnom Penh**

The sweep of her jet-lack hair as she glides past me, the head-turn white smile and cheery eyes, that small body so capable, dreamy stare, sitting down after serving me. I smoke and she smiles, crinkle-nosed in disapproval, and though YouTube plays in one of her ears, smiles still and observes the manic street through an open doorway. She has seen everything today, and continues to, all human life passes by this bar, tourists, junkies, locals scraping by and begging for change, and, for each one of them, a wide smile.

**Roses**

Roses, painstakingly picked by one whose hand is held in addiction their faces turned toward me, that sharp velvet red
which shouts its presence,
assures everybody all will be ok.

From the window, I hear the regular Sunday
morning activity, kids playing rugby nearby,
screeching, desperate voices, gleeful
though, filled with endeavour.

It struck me: should these roses be fit for the occasion
if you passed away early, and I had to lay them

by your desperate grave.

**Ceinwen E Cariad Haydon- Poetry**

By Ceinwen2 | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

**BREAKWATER**

[response to ‘La Pointe de la Hève, Sante-Adresse’, Claude Monet, 1864]

Dusted by sand,
fanned by spring breezes,
she lies in her shingle bed.

She and her lover,
dreamed through yesterday:
held real life below the waves
and screamed with joy
to see it splutter and drown.

He gave her a seaweed band –
she saw a diamond, yet
mocked her own credulity.

Uncoupled at last, panting,
sweat-sheened and sated,
the air cooled,
darkness
long-shadowed their bodies.

Her husband stood above
stared down.

No time to run before
his knife cored her lover’s heart.
Seconds later,
her own.

Today
she lies prone
alone in her shingle bed,
fanned by spring breezes,
dusted by sand.

TIGHT CHESTS
‘Golden Shovel’ form after Selima Hill, Snowdrops in the Light of the Blaze

I always hear my child’s breathing,
her snuffling, watch in case
something
is wrong. He retreats
to his man-shed,
prefers to get out,
escape into darkness.
I doubt he’s alone –
more like with a girl
in a snowdrop nightie,
skin like cream and
pink rhododendron cheeks.

I hear sounds.
Is it their fire crackling,
in his wooden bolt-hole?
Do they have no fear of conflagration?

Maybe he covers
his old headmaster’s daughter?
She was my rival, naturally.
She like me,
was once asthmatic.
I still am
and now my child
wheezes and coughs,
her throat dry,
lungs tight, She gasps
as if she knows
her father loves elsewhere

and we’ll be abandoned soon.
Fantasy or fact,
our lives are unbalanced,
forever.
He’ll still play with us,
when he wants to.

UNDER CANVAS AT LA TOUESSE

lightning splinters the heat
electrifies the steel-pan sky

rain’s drumbeats
drown out our voices

you thrust to its rhythm
my back arches and I scream

later sluiced
in the shower-block
my skin winces
sore
stung by your vexed love
and my own lust

TRIANGLE

In the fuzz of near-dawn,
I mistake
the mound of your belly for hers.

In a daze-dream, I stroke you both

whisper two distinct names
un-severed from either by forced choices.
Half asleep, I join you hip to hip
held

suspended

I fight wakefulness
scared to face daylight’s losses.

THE SEAL HUT, THE HOLY ISLAND OF LINDISFARNE

Ferocious winds drive petrol waves
and land driftwood –
knotted, pitted, gravestone grey
on stones, towed smooth
shaped by ebb and flow and ebb and flow
of tides. All nested in a stirred expanse
of drenched, beached beige.
Shifting shallows of sea-ground shells,
tiny pixels: black and white, maroon and brown.
They grimace lips of life and eyes of death.

Hail stranger, pilgrim.
Your empty arms, heavy-leded
by her absence, reach down. Your hands
grasp rocks and heave weathered timber.
Far horizons startle nerves to build and not erase.
Your work preserves this lifting space
to enclave drifts of salt-stung breeze.

You will return her name to breath,
reclaimed from silted caves of grief.

Here, in this shelter wild-sourced -
your shoulders touch once more.
hers and yours. As you pray
you dare not look
your eyes tight shut.

The Seal Hut was a wood and stone structure positioned on a remote sand dune on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. It was created using items that people had collected on the beach. Visitors left mementos of loved ones and items found in the environment. It also housed a book in which people could write their thoughts, reflections and memories. The hut was significantly damaged in an arson attack in 2014.

New Poetry -Roy Liran.

By Roy Liran | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Beached boats at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer

He divides the canvas
in unequal halves of
equal size, a bladed
horizon for skies and earth,
for man and woman, rich
and poor, birds and poets.

The easel shifts on the
burning sand, reacting to
the brushes and to the
knife’s applied pressure,
causing lines to
wobble, planes to interact.

The seasonal seagulls
think his tilted cap an
unlikely tourist nest, and
none approach for
all his naked crumbs.

Fishing boats like clay
cooking pots send
wooden masts spooning
across the border, to test
the imminent waters.

Soon, beloved. Soon, there
will be startled crows flying
over yellow fields of wheat.

***
One unlistener or another

At someone’s someone’s funeral, dutifully solemn yet unavoidably detached, automatically checking out the prettier mourners. One

among a theater made of stony faces, all gaping at the covered gurney. A relative trembles her
goodbyes to the unlistener. A mild rain keeps time on the colorful parasolesque bouquets. Umbrellas

flower among the marble slabs, augmenting one meaning or another for the endless names, but great legs would be great legs anywhere.

***

Cavatina

soon, the path will end

off a cliff, or shriveled into broken rocks in the inner desert

but not against a brick wall, not that

of a roadside diner where a waitress walks barefoot and the coffee’s warm and sweet, sitting

at the window-side booth to challenge all passing cars to stop and pause a while, where

some days are not as long as others, but not as short, and someone plays the last song on the jukebox, over, and over again,

like leaves
yes, that, after all

***

**Secret intentions**

It matters that they are unequally ripe, you say,

but in a good way.
I show you that something

is exposed under one tomato’s peel, pulsing in the pulp like so many veins and continents

and place them on the counter as would a doctor, vulnerable,

so you will see for yourself.

If I had proposed, then, you would have accepted.

I plant the narrow-leafed ash to ward off the sun, and build a wall to fool the wind

for you, yet you persist –

Is that the meaning of the ash?
Is that the meaning of the wall?

The stones in the stone wall are simple stones, while the ash’s intent is spreading more ashes.

***

**Colibri**

At eighteen the time has come to be wed.

A husband was found. A dress sewn somewhat tightly. The seamstress said – raise and lower your arms. Just like a bird.
A small hall was rented. A band played Aris San for the dancing, and you spread your arms up and down and flew in all directions, but could not be relieved. Like a hummingbird.

**Caron Freeborn- New Poetry**

By CaronFreeborn | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

**Arrhythmia**

When I was a little girl I worried about infinity - there’s a galaxy beyond this one and then beyond that one and beyond that and beyond that and beyond that and beyond that and beyond until my daddy told my mum I had to go the doctor.

**Beat**

Dr Thacker had a colour telly and smoked big funny ciggies wrapped up loose smelt remember remember the fifth of November pressed inside your noona if your tummy hurt or you’d got some nerves in your head until Lisa’s mum took him to the judge for what he did
to the beautiful lady in the wheelchair
(though I didn’t know what it was)
and I never thought much about infinity after that
but I did wonder – a lot – how it felt to be beautiful.

Beat

I never worried about all the forevers with you
because I was long cured.

Beat

My tongue furred with I could’ve would’ve should’ve
but I scrubbed it out with Dettol like my nan ignored
the foul metallic smell.

Beat

I watched you go got on a train went to prison to see Dr Thacker
to remind my heart how to

Beat

I never figured out how it feels to be beautiful.

The man who isn’t dead

In the doctor’s for a smear
I glimpse him: grunting
wheelchair-bound grin
too big snorted face.
A pity for his daughters,
if they are his daughters.

And then I see the man
beneath. I know him, I say,
grabbing a daughter’s sleeve.
I know you, I tell him, trying
to meet his eye. His look
droops, slides. It isn’t a gaze.

You don’t, she says.
Not this him.
You don’t.

Oh, those useless fingers once-
strong inside me. That lolling
Polish tongue that savaged me with
come and all the world’s words and
want, with want. With want.

The daughter/nurse, the one who talks, calls him naughty. My heart attacks itself.

**Things I should have done by now**

I have never inhaled; I have never even not-inhaled; I have never tangoed under Argentinian sun or even in Blackpool come to that; my orgasms have been single thoughtful and without abandon - gay or otherwise - and I have never had anal sex nor wanted to - Marlon Brando can keep his Lurpak and don’t talk to me about enemas. Just don’t. And I have never cut up prose with pinking shears to abstract tapestry and tortured stitches into different measure.

I have never known one of the world’s hottest chillis developed in Lincolnshire by Nick Woods. I have been to Lincolnshire but have never eaten Infinity not once.

And yet here is smoke, thick and blue and glutinous, held in my lungs. You reach in (no Marlon Brando), wind it on spiky fingers, swallow it down. It’s sweet, you say, light as this heart. (I’m not sure whose heart, and don’t like to ask) And at last you give me a blow-back, chilled with desire (I’m not sure whose desire) and this, you say, this is your poem.

(           )
I’ve never even asked for a fucking poem.

**How she discovered her type**
Well, the type of man she wanted wasn’t gay. She now knew *that* much. Those men who need you to whip them and hold their hands (gently, softly) and tell them it doesn’t matter when – frankly – it fucking does. The in-denial men whose submission is thin as an envelope. She posted that one home.

Her type wasn’t artistic. Thin men who ink your soul but choke on words, who paint you into a corner who go over the lines whenever (and this is often) they stroke their pen. The shifting-focus men whose oils are thicker than their blood. She scribbled that one out.

There was one man she loved and he loved her back but in the middle of a war he took a bride so that was that. She sent them a wedding gift (didn’t even much poison the robe).

And then she spotted him, through the telescope she’d been given by the astrological society. Younger. Sweeter (he tasted of acacia). Scored through with the damage of earth and mortal lives, but intact, still intact. At least, he was.
We listen.
You with your cider, me with my scotch.
We say
nothing.
It’s been a long time coming,
this companionable hearing, this cosy
voyeurism: through the marriages,
restraints, deaths; through the bruises,
tatters, in vain. But we’re better off
than poor Peter White though we don’t say so.

Most of the words we have said
have been to others.

There are so many years in our pockets
we daren’t stride out into the water.
Yet there is this, there is something: 
we have what is left of each other.

Fiona Sinclair- New Poetry

By Fiona123 | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Evanescence

You claim not to dream. 
But I know some nights, 
during REMs anarchy, 
your body jolts as if defibrillated, 
your whimpers chill more than screams. 
I do not wake you; in case you remember

Nature’s Seconds

If I had longer arms, I’d be a stripper. 
We share the joke like a joint. 
I think there might be a niche market for crip porn – 
Always up for converting your handicaps into assets 
you have already researched, 
but are not sure if you could fake sexy, 
still, an option should a bruiser of a bill loom. 
What with my disorderly body ‘s two fingers 
up to medical science, and yours failing to fully unfurl 
in face of second generation thalidomide deniers, 
we both regard our bodies as nature’s seconds, 
attention seeking with their repertoire of symptoms, 
miser mean with pleasure,
So, we will not be sorry to shrug off…

Retail Therapy

What are you up to tomorrow?
I am already spoken for, but,
could always be led astray by
naughtiest girl in the school mischief.
You are off to Whitstable, on a shop lifting binge
I windscreen wiper shake my head envisioning
local rag’s gloating headline
Retired teacher caught.

You were coached by a savvy cousin,
who supplements her own meagre benefits
with four fingered discounts,
using toddler’s buggy as poacher’s pockets.

Disability has given you the perfect cover with
arms delicate as sea horse wings, poppet stature.
So, wearing a larger bra, you stuff with mascara,
nail varnish to create an instant push up.
You don’t do it for the stuff though,
but the heart riot as you case for CCTV,
high of using teeth, deft as a mouth artist,
to pop tags with tool bought off eBay,
euphoria clearing the store with swag.
Have your standards though, never hit independent shops
but shrugged they can wear it, at Primark, Tesco. Boots.
Now no amount of ciggies or coffee will cure
your pacing need to shoplift score again.
Should you get caught, have contingency tears
you will work like a silent movie heroine.
Trumping store’s accusations, with your mental health card.
Because after a lifetime being the object
of bold stares, impudent questions,
with every stolen eye shadow,
you live up to your nature outlawed body.

Majorelle Gardens*

He considered developers’ plans to dig up the gardens
philistine as shredding a Monet.
So wielded fame to see them off.
Now a sense he is still custodian beyond the grave,
as Majorelle becomes a Marrakesh must see.
We crane up at giant bamboo; stems thick as drain pipes,
pause to take in cacti arranged like installation art,
admire preening birds of paradise plants,
become figures in a living willow pattern as we rest on a pagoda bridge
observing red dragon flies hovering over lily encrusted koi ponds.
At each new feature, we must pause and wait though, as the view is hogged by women with glad rags on, who use the garden like the backdrop to a vogue fashion shoot. We shake our heads as they deploy repertoire of poses before cameras trained by doting partners. The gallery of his couture is like entering another section of the garden; a sartorial flower bed of vibrant colours. I fizz over like a shaken coke at sight of legendary trouser suits, gorgeous gowns, playful hats; shed a few tears as prototype bottle of ‘Opium’ ambushes; my mother’s signature perfume.

Other visitors to the gallery skim outfits in silence, not reverential more bored or piqued at photo ban. My response is no faked orgasm, but daresay, I am making a middle-aged spectacle of myself, as eyebrows are raised and elbows are nudged. Later, I ponder if this caffeine high response is peculiar to me; then remember the middle-aged man who on entering Manchester Science Museum, Pirouetted on concourse at choice of exhibits,

Oh marvellous! Where to start!

*The former home of Yves Saint Laurent

**Eccentricity**

A pimped mobility scooter; its hood trimmed with bagged pink candy floss camp as Liberace’s cape. As the sun falls into the sea, cue to flick on LEDs that transform into burlesque carriage. No decrepit drag queen conveyance though, but granddad in beige slacks and short sleeve shirt. Boy on a bike belts along the promenade, towing an old dining chair roped to a railway porter trolley, his mates in *Who can stay on longest challenge* their laughter tossed into the air like mortar boards. Retired gent in safari suit and jaunty cap, stalks the high street baring bathroom scales and portable blood pressure monitor, offering peripatetic health checks to old boys who have over indulged on Raki and Baklava. It’s not just the sea and sun we come here for, but this nostalgia for life enriched by eccentricity once an accepted part of our childhoods; bred out years ago.
**the art of casting shadow**

i love that age is slowing you  
i might can catch you now  
between  
the light and dark  
before it falls  
and the twilight that dapples skin  
washes away  
now while we lay as two leopards  
in our long wise contentment  
intentionally blemished  
where nothing hidden lies  
but exposes all  

**days when trees paint blue**

too soon morning drags a finger  
crossing the dew  
prayers the sun won’t later burn  
everything that was once wet  
the recluse of surrender  
is surreal in surround  
there is no one here but him  
i play amid his strengths  
him knowing that weakness  
that i tear apart easily  
then just walk around broken
what he calls brave
today the chimes hang stilled
this texas sky deceptively blue
he grounds me
in the good dirt
where i set my leaves
when my arms shake
and only falling is left
when even branches
are begging root

when understanding water

i cannot take my hands
and shape some things
some are rough
unapproachable
a blinds eye
caught mid spook
a young colt shy
of what the wind catches
and
dances his nervousness
against the rein
i can only wait
and steady and breathing
sit deep finding the center
where i left it
between two thighs
under a seat lies a dynamite keg
“easy” my stroke of his neck
as he likes it
and because i don’t yet
see what he sees
i don’t question him
i don’t expect to ignite a match
in this wind

tumbleweed

your goodbye
wagered such distance
no hand could be seen
even raised openly
in slow sweep remember me
not fisted or
middle finger gruffed
teeth ground
arms shouldered
in hurried hung
your hide
hidden by the hill country
you’d recluse to
i imagine you camouflaged

months of debris on skin
your stick and leaf identity
your shadow and dark in their forefront
your eyes white
toned to midnight
my calling and your no answer
when
a lone wolf pup howls tonight
i think of you

the red in red

i can now see myself
no longer cardboard
among all these browns
among the golden grass
in its yellowing death or
the doves dressed grayscale
their best’s pressed dirt hint
wintering in barren branches
the arena sand is pale in its dry
still soft in its broken down of wither
and my perimeters are lined
by far too many board planks
for my sawyer to sway
painted fence-white
today finds me
feeling red bold
a cardinal
trying on her husband suit

David Ratcliffe - Poetry

By david ratcliffe | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Slipping his moorings

Less than an hour earlier, he’d knelt thumbs crossed; on failing to receive a signal he slid solo on a one-way voyage, slipping his moorings with no one at the helm drifting toward a squall no lenient heart had charted.

Senses long since mutinied lifeboats cut adrift, alone like never before, he no longer sought an afterlife just wished to withdraw.

No one could navigate his depths, no flares were witnessed, no comms picked up, no search was undertaken.

An hour after the storm, calm waters lapped the shore delivering his corpse; a gift no parent should unwrap free from pain leaving nothing but pain.

My Bike’s Too Small

I pine for the days when wholesome, homespun wisdom wasn’t seen as doublespeak; a time when intimate gatherings where less, well ‘intimate’.
A time before I’d followed the tributary leading to her turbulent depths.
To her eyes, an elegant corridor soiled by the foot traffic of mawkish nomads who’d provided cadaver samples I chose to ignore.

To the bejewelled source of her porcelain neck that sent shafts of ornate light through the core of my virtue carrying promises I dared not deliver; chose not to decline.

So I hurtled beyond delirium into a netherworld, like I’d fallen from my bike in days of innocence, though now I’m full-grown, my pain too great, and my bike too small...

**Perennial Smile**

Your perennial smile did not winter so well; sunlight has cracked the veneer, your grey-blue gaze weeps and full primed lips tremble with each tug at the ligature around your caustic tongue.

The once sweet taste of lies now decompose in my mouth; your beauty turned foul in the landlocked autocracy you’ve ruled with derision, where borders to reason are manned by regulars who now question your credentials.

I repel at the odour you emit, that sweet nonsense I’d thought sublime. With obeisance withdrawn I now burn my placards and vacate the barricades, leaving heartache at the frontier of broken prophecy, with you in my rear-view mirror.

**Shaped**
Between your opening salvo
to the question of my interest
I’ve visited ancient embers
with its dead in barrows,
punched a hole through the
inelastic membrane of the future
to where I’ve writhed, fixed
within the silence of a scream.

Your annoyance first alarms,
then amuses; the interrogation
providing relief at intervals,
each chastisement forging, mauling,
cajoling, until softened to paste,
I am driven to servitude.

Fixed in the profile of your angles
you’d consider me rapscallion,

wishing passage to my thoughts;
though for you to undertake
that crossing I should warn
this vessel holds a solitary lifebelt.

**Stagnant Pool**

I am a simulation in repetition,
a compromising vagabond
tied to the mast of endeavour
with no desire to travel.

I follow followers in vacuous
ignorance imploring part of my
smile find purpose become
real, spontaneous, my own.

Wading a stagnant pool that
defines me, curiosity stemmed
by stemless algae forming
around the corpse of forbidden
passage. I’m overcome by
indifference, loquacious thoughts
swim around a taciturn shell on the
liquid side of a landlocked dream.

**Unreliable Witness**

Leaving words unwritten
of thoughts indisposed
I finally conceded to fatigue,
logging off from the familiar,
while at odds with accounts.

Deleted files from my hard drive
attracted the self-appointed detective
working the night shift
who’d become perplexed
at disturbing images
demanding investigation.

As the mind closed down
he poked around
viewing the ‘out of whack’
box set of my autobiography
as the corrupted files played
nonsensical encounters.

Evermore confused and defeated;
his trilby slid over his eyes
as he fell asleep on the job
leaving the surreal episode
to drift into perdition.

A place where erased memory
of the dead presides
over varied reports
of time and place
about cold case events,
though nothing was taken
or body was found.

Recklessness befell mindfulness;
repentance recoiled
at the midpoint of torcher
as the grainy image closed
and woke the gumshoe
who questioned this unreliable witness
now seeking counsel.

**Linda Imbler- Poetry**

By limbler | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Egghead Knows Best

An old friend and I once
played a game of Trivial Pursuit with my brother’s friends.
At one point,
a kid asked my dad for an egg
to stiffen up his Mohawk hair style.
My friend then asked him
if he always played his records backwards.
The kid replied that it wasn’t necessary
because all today’s demons instead listen to CD’s.

Inferno

Today it seems I’ve swum in fire
floating from the ignition point of flames
neither scorched nor scalded.
I glide from perdition out of the blaze
carrying no tears, but only buckets
clutched firmly, pails filled with
water meant to relieve the red-hot
broiling pain of those still consumed
by what was once that
conflagration’s ceaseless consequence.

Inge

The world is not yet diminished.
The beautiful lady-
with the sun in her hair,
the stars in her eyes,
and the enchantment of the moon
in her soul,
full of gratitude for time given.
She will become another
being,
light.
At second glance,
will she still be Dutch?
Or perhaps when she turns the corner,
Mes cal ero

Or
Thai?
How inspiring that those with the biggest hearts
create the smallest distance
between each of us
and they keep the most luminous stars
in their eyes.
Tell the children,
so that in latter years,
they may watch for her.

**Michael’s Memories**

Michael’s at the locked door staring in the window beyond the glass,
waiting for the owner’s key to turn and bring him a smile of pages
as he recalls the old bookstores of his youthful days.
The glare of fluorescents reflecting off the lily whiteness of paper,
the touch of supple leather and the smell of binding glue,
the weight of multiple tomes upon his arms,
muscular in their day.
The once muscular arms of Michael.
Michael’s on the mountain’s high top watching flexible branches sway.
Shadows play around him reminding of times around the campfires
with friends telling genial and generous stories,
* wearing vests for warmth as midnight draws near and upon still burning coals lie
the vestiges of burned hot dogs and dripping marshmallows.
The smell of coffee grounds and pine in his nose,
* pine tree scent in his nose,.
The once juvenile nose of Michael.
Michael’s holding his guitar and strumming up and down the fretboard.
Waiting for his fingers to imitate the ease of moving the strings.
Remembering the first-rate songs of his yesterdays.
familiar chords constructing glorious harmonies massaging the ears.
Musical satisfaction by means of limber digits,
nature’s physical gift once sent to his hands.
beauty produced by him,
from the once bending fingers of Michael.

**Relegation**

Instead of Asian jungles
you chose Bohemia,
so he went in your place.
You staggered through your new land,  
adopted soil clinging  
to the bottom of your shoes,  
while he returned from his new land  
without feet and a heartbeat.  
“Thank God it wasn’t me,” you cried.  
No loud thunderous “You’re welcome,”  
and you will sit outside Heaven’s gate,  
forever exiled.

Lucy Durneen- New Poetry

By downtothe_sea | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Hill of Moses

That argument about the Brontës, I  
am thinking of it again  
– of Emily, I mean, the  
unremarkable virgin –  
I am thinking of her out of the blue,  
climbing the Hill of Moses.

The Stockholm wind is like the wind  
of Haworth moor,  
(“loud,  

    wild”),  
a ravaging of snow-lit stone. I’m waiting
in front of Katarina,

the church burned twice, and cursed
(they say); I am dancing on its
bloody foundations, her

watchmakers and milkmaids, visiting them
now like I am family. I bring flowers
to strange graves.

Let me tell you as a rule I do not
write poetry –
some words last only as

long as the light, which
disappears fast here –
but Heraclitus was wrong about rivers.

Nothing changes quicker than light.
Emily knew this, how light is
two things at once,

a fast-descending storm,
a breath of lightning
You do not have to break a

heart to see it’s ruins we desire
most. And you ask why I have never read
Charlotte.

What a strange thing love is, a storm
coming in from the blue, the
deepest, oldest, blue.

“He shall never know
how I love him,” says Cathy,
says Emily, “Not because he is handsome, but

because whatever our
souls are made of, his and mine
are the same.” Emily will

lure you into the dark, a friend
once told me; Charlotte would
lure you into a Post

Office. This is one way to divide the
world, the Romantics and
the Pragmatists, the

Catherines, the Janes, the rocks and
leaves, or frost and
fire, the ones who have to remind
themselves to breathe, the
ones who can’t forget,
can’t
can’t -

[there is a hole in this poem, its
body is open. Do not cover
it up, Emily is telling me, the

thing this poem is trying
to find, its shipwrecked
heart - ]

speak of the beautiful and wild and
insane and genius; I am saying, not all leaves fall
in winter, some of us are
coming home to the haunted
moor, we are sucking the mouths of
ghosts. I am not going to read

Jane Eyre now; I am too old, I am fatigued
of love. I am in love
with cities and cathedrals, with

the air skimming over the
Saltsjön, I am not in love
with people. Baudelaire said the face

of the city changes faster than
the mortal heart. I don’t
know what he thought about rivers,
or light, but what the hell has happened
to Slussen?
Later in a café I will order

tea, I will write you of
the view, broken all the way to
Kungsholmen.

I will tell you that an island
is a study in loneliness, an unrequited
dream.

You will pick the shards
of the Moon Tower out of Mälaren
Lake. How very small the city is, I will
say, compared to the sea.
I have always loved these misty, grey
days, slate grey like the sea

when everything feels like it is
the sea. I have always
loved the dark.

Light is like truth, like a poem, you
never step into it the same way
twice, but Heraclitus,

I have no language for
the darkness, I hide in it like
fur. Our souls, yours

and mine, so angry, so tired.
Soon we will have stopped laughing, and
you will no longer eat cake.

Charlotte is talking so loudly. My tea arrives
and Emily whispers that she prefers lemon
in her Earl Grey.

Be careful, she is saying,
the days in between where you are and
where you want to be
will have been your life.

New Poetry- by Anne Walsh Donnelly

By Anne Walsh Donnelly | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
My Therapist and her Bumble Bee

It circles overhead, like a drone,
as we revisit childhood wounds, talk of adult loss
and all that lurks in the space between.
The bee buzzes and burning beech crackles

in the stove beside us. Smoke seeps through a chink
in its exit pipe, clouds the room, waters my eyes.
The incessant buzz overpowers our words,
until the bee lands on a window sill.

She takes a tissue from its box,
approaches the insect. I’m afraid it will sting
her hand. She folds the tissue
around the fuzzy black and amber body

as if wrapping a gift, then lifts her parcel
opens a window and releases the bee.
Its buzz fades and I’m jealous of its joy
in being free. Beech wood smoke

follows the bee into April air.
My therapist turns, with a smile that tells me,
this will be the last time
I see her pull a tissue from its box.

Children’s Games

I used to say Holy Mass with the seriousness of Bruegel’s children.
The big rock in the paddock was my altar.
Mam gave me her best lace tablecloth,
the one she had laid on the kitchen table at Dad’s wake,
said she couldn’t stomach having it in the house any more.

I covered myself in an old sheet, more grey than white
and drew a black cross on it with a marker.
I shaped soda bread into circles with Mam’s pastry cutter
and scraped red jam on it, hoped Christ wouldn’t mind his body
coated in strawberries.

I used Ribena instead of wine for God’s blood.
I had to be the priest even though I was a girl. My brothers
always fidgeted at Mass on Sunday so they didn’t know the prayers.
They only agreed to be the congregation at my mass
cos they loved strawberry jam.

The day I told Father Considine about God sitting on my bed
and reading me stories, he said,
“Don’t be telling lies, the Almighty is much too busy
to be reading children bedtime stories.”
I wiped my eyes, like Mam did after chopping onions,  
“Was He too busy to save Dad from Callaghan’s bull?”

After that I stopped going to Mass  
so did Mam and my brothers.  
God still visits me every night.

**Sepia Strangers**

There’s no photo  
of parents holding me  
at my Baptism,  
or standing beside me  
at my First Holy Communion.

There’s no photo  
of Dad escorting  
me down the aisle  
or Mam holding  
hers first grandchild.

There’s no memory  
of Dad’s laughter  
Mam’s cry or the smell  
of his smoky pipe  
and her perfume.

There’s no photo  
of sitting on Dad’s shoulders  
when he walked in august fields  
or clutching Mam’s waist  
when the bull bellowed.

There’s no memory  
of sucking a lollipop,  
Dad might have bought  
me after Mass  
or tasting Mam’s apple pie.

All I have,  
is a sepia photograph  
taken on their honeymoon.

**Professional Couple Available**

*Found poem from the Mayo News 16th October, 2018*

Quality Suffolk ram,  
reliable, fit and energetic,  
many years’ experience  
as painter, decorator and caretaker.
Black head and cross bred ewe,  
self-motivated,  
professional gardener,  
proficient in housekeeping.

Willing to care and maintain  
property or anyone  
who may need a service,  
all options considered.

In exchange,  
require a two-bedroom cottage  
with a twin chamber septic tank  
and grinder pump.  
And all utility bills paid.

**Philip Dunkerley- New Poetry**

By dunkerleyphilip | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

*Burt’s Bees*

*i.m. Burt Shavitz, co-founder of Burt’s Bees, d. 2015, aged 80*

Weary of the push and frenzy of Manhattan,  
Burt lit out in his old pickup-truck for Maine,  
pausing only to hive-up a swarm of wild bees  
from off of a fence post along the highway. Luckily  
he’d been taught bee-keeping by a friend  
years back and carried some old gear with him.  
Somehow, he managed. A willing workforce  
gathered and garnered in field and woodland  
while he sat by the road, swearing at the
customers, who, liking his cussedness,  
still bought the sweet golden honey he sold  
in old pickle jars. Burt’s Bees took off.  
But it was Roxanne who saw the potential  
after he’d given her a lift into work one day.  
She found the two-hundred pounds of beeswax  
stashed in the turkey-coop where he lived,  
and she turned it into big business. Honey  
made money; beeswax smelt of success.  
He didn’t want it. She went industriously on  
innovating, moved production to North Carolina,  
harvested as she went. Scale increased.  
He lit out again, back to Maine, to hang out  
in the cabin he called home. Didn’t even  
keep bees; they no longer gave him a buzz.  

**Landscape**

- is the ragged fringe of earth  
catched between the crust below and swirling air above.  
- is in secular motion,  
rising and sinking more slowly than imaginings.  
- is a flotsam biosphere,  
playing out battles on a substrate of eroding rock and soil.  
- is assailed by wind, rain and waves,  
all driven by the energy of a profligate star.  
- is where life strives,  
strains upwards towards the sun, is held down by Earth’s mass.  
- is used and abused by man,  
avaricious to own it, fearful of its vastness.  

- is a fount of emotion,  
colours like flowers, sounds like birdsong.  
- is there before our eyes,  
in dreams and memories; tell it in words.  

**Scalding and Sweet**

Following the trace of the outcrop,  
threading through the thorn scrub,  
we skirt round the black-tipped spears  
of the sisal and the giant cacti.  
Naked red earth, dry, stunted trees,  
waiting, waiting six years for the rains.  
In the heat, minutes of long seconds  
drag towards three o’clock.  
Forty-one in the shade, if there were any.  
Air, mouth, skin, everything parched.  
A dog yaps, accuses us long before  
we find the house in the clearing.
Squat, four corners, sun-baked ochre, 
dilapidated, a brown frond thatch 
The dog advances, small, noisy and nervous, 
skinny chickens pick at an old corn cob. 
From under a stained brown hat 
the smile in spite of hardships. 
‘Antonio’, he says – his hand is leathery. 
He has nothing, but orders coffee. 
We sit under a tree on a hand-made bench.

In the dark kitchen, a thin woman stirs the fire, 
puts the pot on to heat the water. 
The house smells of people, the people of animals 
He is illiterate but we talk of work 
– our minerals, his missing rain. 
A five year old in a faded Ronaldo shirt 
watches, dirty rubber sandals, dark eyes.

The coffee comes, scalding and sweet 
in a small glass. We nurse it. 
It took Ronaldo four hours 
to fetch the water with his donkey. 
In the shade of the mango tree we swap stories 
and place names. He speaks of the abundance 
the rains will bring when they come. 
And they will. This time. God willing.

**Nevados**

*Vivimos en pleno desierto* 
says the notice by my shower 
at the Azapa Hotel. 
*We live in a full-on desert.* 
Parched, I head for the bar, 
remembering my journey 
from the Altiplano, 
where ice-capped volcanoes 
feed clear-running rivers; 
rivers that suddenly plunge, 
cutting precipitously

the dry Andean ramparts; 
to race tumultuously 
down bright green ribbons, 
through naked hills 
of rock and sand 
of the Atacama desert; 
to flow by ancient stone glyphs 
(signs of a vanished people) 
that never feel 
the cooling breath of rain.
Water from the *nevados*.
Rivers reaching the coast.
Ice for my *pisco sour*.

**Ibis**

The piping voice of the ibis,
suddenly, clear in the early-morning.
I go onto the balcony, look out
between the tall buildings and over
the red roofs of the city landscape.
I hear the call but cannot see the bird,
broad wings, outstretched neck,
down-curved bill. I remember
when I first saw ibis, in a green valley.
What is this creature doing here,
bird of river, marsh and field,
fllying invisibly over built space?
Now, gone, my mind echoing with
otherness, elsewhere and loss.

**Karen Poppy- New Poetry**

By Karen Poppy | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

*Hello, Goliath*
I will write you
As I know you.
Finally, I’m not afraid.

Sharp light of your being,
Come toward me.
You can dance, laughing.
You can tell lies.
You can say anything.

You can make others
Hate me. Giant you,
Little me. Yet, I
Have something hot
In my tiny hand.

A pebble. I place it
In my mouth. Sing out
This small, round rock.

My voice, a slingshot.

**In Case of Emergency**

The poetic voice has
Invisible instructions:
Crack open in case
Of emergency.
We avoid the shards, but
Some cuts are necessary.
For we work close
To the pain.
Closer than anybody.

I’m ashamed
Of my own miseries.
The shame of survival,
Of some death inside.

Still, my words flare,
Wet from my throat.

**The Trail He Made In the Snow**

The trail
He made
In the snow:
One long line
Of blood from
Drohobycz to
Russia.
Not those
Circular paths
He made
As a boy.
Clean and
White
Along with
Paw prints of
His dog,
By then,
Long dead.

His parents,
Young sisters,
Aunts, uncles,
Shot
Just before
He escaped.

In that forest,
Same spot
Below birch
Trees
He used to
Peel
Of their bark,
Of their skin.
Write love
Letters
On them
To an
Imaginary
Sweetheart,
Not knowing
Anyone real
To write to
In his small
World.

My grandmother,
Esther,
My father’s mother,
Said to me,
“He had such a chip
On his shoulder!”

It shocked me.
“Grandma,
His whole family
Died and he
Walked on bloody Feet all the way To Russia. He was forced Into the Russian Army."

“It was my family Too,” she said. “Grandma, My grandma, Murdered!”

She cried, And I, I felt shame, Red stained Like that Blood In the snow, But deeper Because I had also Seen his sisters.

Their father,
I don’t see him.

Pushed into
The forest.
My entire
Family there.
In the dark.
Except for
This cousin,
Who escaped,
Who etched
With his feet
Into snow
One long line
Of blood from
Drohobycz to
Russia.

Birch bark
Crumbles.

Snow melts
Away.

But all
That is
Written
Remains.

Concho

I.

His eyes, dark water
In which I’m never
Lost or drowned.

Limpid, clever.
He tells me to chill.
His mind melds to mine.

I braid his grey mane,
Tighten beauty
Against all threats.

Calm the stars
Of my fates.
But I can’t keep him

From his. Less than
A month. He’s kicked,
Dies, corpse dragged
Through the dirt.
My skinny one,
Culled by the herd.

II.

He loved maple leaves,
Sneaking a bite
On the trail.

I'll never forget
His words as I rode—
Mind-to-mind:

“Chill baby, chill!”

**Your Loss, My Imperfection**

Someone else’s mother, not you.
She believed in her son, born
Perfect. Tiny cherub flown into
Midwife’s arms, silken skin sponged
Clean with impeccable newness.

All her sins completely expunged
By his beauty, the round wonder
Of his unfocused gaze, the smiles
That would come and become laughter.

You, you knew of my imperfection,
Even then. A startled, skinny soul.
A daughter. You had waited so long.
The wrong thing, an ugly foal.

You pretended at pink-tinged happiness.
Ashamed that you did not believe less
In what you missed, when everyone
Else proclaimed me perfect, beautiful.

Now I am everything and nothing.
Not boy or girl, man or woman.
Not someone with an invisible golden
Halo, reflecting perfection, beauty.

But that erasure of my gender
Does not bring back your innocence,
Or delete it. It just stands clear,
Another example of your loss,
My imperfection, come by honestly.
Love conquers all

says the unbroken heart
the playful, unbroken heart
as love stands over me
in a gas station restroom
I dance before the mirror
to an unfamiliar pop song
playing over the speakers
love has conquered this place too
why would it bother
this is a filthy facility
with a condom dispenser, fifty cents each
“manufactured with pride”
for any man who should want
I walk out of the restroom
I head towards the exit
of this building conquered by love
I look around and see
soft drinks, gossip magazines,
newspapers and cigarettes
do I want one drink before I leave
do I approach the pretty girl
standing there among potato chips
and overpriced candy bars
I leave with saucy wings
but not before the man
at the register asks if I want
A free drink today
of course I accept this offer
and move on to another place
soon to be conquered by love

A Tale of Revenge

When I was just a kid, living in the Gardens
I was not yet the thrower of stones,
the tosser of toy trucks,
and cinder blocks.
Often at my mother’s expense—
the windshield of her car cracked into
a firework bloom—
In those days I was the victim.
Stones thrown at me, over and over
by some brat from the neighborhood.
I was trying to make my way back home.
But the stones kept coming. Until luckily,
though I didn’t immediately sense my luck,
one of the rocks knocked my glasses off and
launched them into the grass of an empty lot.
Was this what brought him running, or
was it his mother’s appearance at the back door?
Soon both of us were searching the lawn.
“They are probably really expensive, right?”
I did not know their price but did not think
It could be very high. But, I nodded my head.
“Oh yes.” I said. “Very expensive.”
He kept looking toward his mother
who was now slowly walking our way,
I had already found my glasses,
hid them behind my back, and slipped
them into my pocket. I waited and watched
while he searched and searched the grass.

The Valley

Here i am again
back in the valley
a deep depression
below the mountains
a worker asks me several
questions about my “history”
and my “preferences”
I’d prefer she didn’t ask
someone else takes me
to another room
he tells me to strip
then gives me a dirty look
as if I’m doing something wrong
he holds a pen and paper
studies my nakedness
noting any scars or cuts
I am now led into my room
I rest my now-clothed body
the bed will remain unmade
and I will not do my laundry

Stitches

I was eager to arrive at the hospital
The ambulance ride was uncomfortable.
I spent the entire three-hours
staring out the window.
As we passed my favorite restaurant
I thought back to what the doctor said
while I laid in the ER: “You live
in America. You should laugh.”
So when I arrived at the hospital,
I tried to be funny.
Being the joker for the other residents,
making them laugh.

*In America,
you should laugh.*

I don’t recall many of the jokes.
There was plenty of material
in the morning routine,
which included questions
about our bowel movements.
Trust me.
I was funny.
For certain.
And that way
no one noticed the stitches
on top of my head.

Stella

The words “Trust no one”
were tattooed across her chest.
The design was not the best,
but it told me I could trust her.
If she trusted no one,
What about her friends?
What about her family?
What about the tattoo artist?
A misunderstanding,
but she insisted I was gay.
I could not convince her otherwise
“Its ok, I’m bi.”
I let it slide. Maybe,
she had no brothers, friends
or family like I did. Perhaps,
she was a little strange.
My father is gay,
but I am straight—
a fun fact I used to tell
my classmates.
“It’s not your fault.” they’d say.
I had never considered that.
It doesn’t work that way.
Everyone in the hospital
was a little strange,
including Stella,
whom I trusted.
Though, she told the girls
and other patients I was gay.
They nodded their heads
and assured me “It’s okay.”

Sally McHugh- New Poetry

By smch | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Blue Atlas
Tracing the grids of the blue atlas
my finger runs down the page,
charting the north Atlantic ocean,
Lisbon,
Africa with its Sahara winds blowing,
Freetown.
Latitude, longitude, lines criss-cross,
I lower my touch across
the Tropic of Cancer,
Equator,
and the Tropic of Capricorn.
Changing course at the Cape of Good Hope
I cross seas into the Indian Ocean,
cruising down under Australia
skirting Van Diemens land
into Cook’s territory around the Tasman sea.
And there it is,
New Zealand,
our future home.
In my top bunk bed I anchor this atlas,
filled with excitement,
dreaming of our new start, exciting voyages
by curious shores and distant lands,
exploring the expanses of the sea.
We never went,
don’t know why.
Waves of small talk, utopian worlds
crashing in on a ten year old child.

Until Today

You got the news today
your mother was not your mother,
as you knew her.

A week old
handed out the side door so
Chrissie could not see you leave
in the big black car.

I took you and delighted in my new bundle,
straight to the church where the Christening was performed.
Then you were mine
it said so on the birth certificate
I was your mother and your dad
your dad.

Until today.
Now you know you came from
the womb of another,
I was quick to forget.
No thoughts of Chrissie
until today.

It was the way.

Was I wrong?

_Thou shalt atone for the hurt and deceit_
_Thank her for the gift of a child,_
_a living lie of fifty years._

But when the big black car dropped us home
and I held you in my arms
it was the truest day of
my life.

_Climate Change_

Love lies in the bottom drawer
neatly wrapped for another time.
Its dusty presence stirs,
rises, at unprepared moments,
settles, on a dad kissing his baby at Sunday Mass.
Tracing his finger across her face,
she smiles,
nose to nose they meet
like Eskimo’s greeting in a frosted igloo.
On my solid block of floating ice
cold as the deep lift-shaft
of an abandoned mine,
I remain frozen, adrift,
a rusty toy with no wind-up key
just out of reach
in my museum glass case.

_Letter to an Unknown Man - Lover of Art and All Fine Things_
(After Guy Gafotte)

Admit it Sir, if you were to die not having
lunched on the grass with Manet or
lay with Olympia on your shabby couch
you’d probably be enraged.
Your biological imperative to ogle,
objectify women for your lustful desire
springs forward like a protruding penis hiding under a monk’s scapular.
To you Sir, that painted female is no human being
she is not flesh, bones and blood like you
nor was she created from the rib of Adam, as an equal,
she’s as limp as that brain in your pocket.

The Human Species

The human species has given me
a calorific choice of glorious
guilt-ridden shit
and consequently, a fat arse
The human species has given me
a family, some of whom
I’d like to let loose down the Amazon,
then do a rain-dance to the Gods
to bring on the crocodiles

The human species has given me
an insatiable urge to be devil incarnate
to spit abuse at Sunday mass
nip naked ‘round St Brigid’s cross
dye my hair purple
and tell the boss where to get off
The human species has given me
skip loads of ludicrous crap
I’m supposed to be satisfied with

James Walton- Poetry

By jwalton53 | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Rap, rap, rap, rap, ill tidings call

It came like rain on windows
a specimen in a jar,
the lid too tight for breathing.
I fumbled through the program
how those Austrians can dance,
but it was only distraction.
Among the seals from Kaikoura
the black sand of carbon footprints,
your South Island smile.
Brushing your hair at the station
how it fell fell fell fell,
my hands these brittle things.
Only yesterday I cleaned the drawers
the orange oil won’t let go,
sorting through the ones to send you.
The old farm by Tarra Valley Road
tree ferns bowed down after snow,
the forever of a late Winter’s day.
I’ve spread them out like a Tarot Patience
readings given brazed futures unheld,
tenets of lapsed things holding to landscape.
Now they have nowhere to go
caught as they are in the what of it,
while I think on the eulogy your children ask for.

from the north hide

the black swan soothes a promenade
bills through a pennon of underwing
a swamp harrier dallies in pirouette
as echidnas scowl their annoyance
a dauntless of pardalotes
whizzes to my ear
my season’s first tiger snake
alive to water sways a ripple
frogs all bassy spruce
echo themselves
a rebound of Spring sky
laughs back at a sprawl of sedge

where a frame of sleek water
breaks by a fatal leap
a smile of grey herons cast lives
out of this growing warmth
the wagtails and wrens weightlessly
jete a jete on the floating bank
the arcade oil by tea trees
lets go the thrush’s call back
to a place I cannot bring focus

**First, 1975**

The first drive east. Out past dauntless new
suburbs scattered like a teenager’s room.
Asleep in the future. All that aspiration watching
from the cosy dissemble of the city’s embrace,
but curled like a cat, the tail flicking impatiently.
My first car. The HD station wagon
early morning, no other traffic –
the world in hibernation except for us.
Pages turned quietly in a slow read, no frantic jittery
cartoon of flipping characters, the year after colour.
Through towns only read about, where lakes enter sea
and you were talking of how your sisters
all wanted to be the first to cry ‘beach’.
We promised never to have straphanger days,
travelling in a capsule of repleting dawns.

**Boldrewood Parade**

I think I finally see clearly
out of those trespassed estate streets
where the sounds of looking
are dusted over by unmade roads
like some early Drysdale,
a veteran’s emphysema in a backyard shed
skew whiff late afternoon shadows
stretched children playing cricket
the warty rabbitoh
with all his skinned specials,
next door’s son dying of knife wounds
on a rotting front porch

later they used tweezers to pull the fragments out
saving his parents some grief
when laid out for relatives to bathe,
from under the kitchen table
listening to women in scarves talk
my mother’s cigarette burns
to my hands were always accidental
I have to be sure of that.

Butterfly Leap

I split wood today
and as the autumnal rush
of orange moths hovered
thought about Kathleen and her trapeze
holding on eight years old
shipwrecked in the ditch between tours
an elemental balance without wings
ballet slippers gripping toes out
in a child’s swotting focus
al dente to waves no fear in the twist
a dance of agile insect bearing
throw of body an insolent somersault
held steady on the tightrope
circus and animals going down
the Tasman Sea no safety net
pulled herself out to a life boat
untethered so free of harness
as merchant sailors span their tales
on the Wellington to Melbourne run
stooped and Galapagos
picking her up from Thornbury
a great grandmother to Sunday roast
she finally told me the mystery
of perpendicular flight

Denise O’Hagan- New Poetry

By Denise | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
A Stain the Shape of Italy

It’s when I least expect it
Stilled in a queue, perhaps,
Or stalled at traffic lights,
That the fingers of my memory
Pick at the past
Loosening the scabs of memory:
It’s irresistible.
One little prod
And the present flakes away
As I’m clutching my mother’s hand again
Down the cobble-stoned short-cut side street
Softened by the tread of centuries
To where her dressmaker lived;
Or recoiling at the garish wallpaper
In a rented room in a house for foreign students
With swirls and whorls on green and cream
And a stain the shape of Italy
Which made me homesick;
Or wincing at the bulge of vein in my father’s temple
As suited and tied and elegant one last time
He strains up the sloping steps of St Canice’s
To see his grandson, his own father’s namesake,
Live to be baptised.
That these milestones of our lives
(laboriously recounted, photographed,
Or documented in countless other forms)
Are glued together by such details
We scarcely realise until later
When they emerge with doubled force
From the backrooms of our memory
Where, pasted in by the years,
They had lain dormant, waiting
For a moment such as this.

**Separateness**

The silence
Between us
Thickens and grows
And flows around us
Like a third presence
Waiting, malevolently,
For one of us to break it.
How did we
Get to this point?
Is there a line running
From the quickened heartbeat
The clutched hand
Of youth
And easy collusion
Of middle age
To this?
Was the end
Implicit in the beginning?
Or did we
Take a wrong turn
Creating a fault line
Damaging ourselves
And dislocating the ‘us’?
My thoughts are heavy, clunky
And going nowhere.
Years of misalignment
Have made us wary
Suspicion lies coiled
Between us, serpent-like,
So we take refuge in routine,
Imbibing the evening news
With our chamomile tea
And the other rituals
Of stale, safe domesticity.
But all the while
Nuggets of resentment
Weigh down any deeper disclosure
And neither of us
Wants to admit
To boredom.

*For My Cousin in Faenza*
The hollow of time
That hangs between Christmas and New Year
Found the four of us
Bound (was it really on a whim?)
For Faenza,
That city of arches, mist and gloom
And, of course, ceramics,
So startlingly and exquisitely colourful
They hardly seemed to fit in at all.
Those days
Indistinct, hazy, blurring at the edges
Form part of the landscape of my mind
Its contours indistinguishable
From my remembered version of it:
The muted beauty
Of roads dotted by the tips of cypresses
Walks through Renaissance colonnades
And furtive late-night liquors
Sipped while the city slumbered
And we fed on laughter and conversation.
How to understand
What we felt then?
Faenza,
(surely the city merits its own line)
Or Faventia, as the ancient Romans knew it
With its Etruscan, even Celtic origins,
Was elegant, contained and onomatopoeic.
You could not hurry in winter in Faenza
Time was slowed to a point of utter stillness
And transposed to this foggy alternative reality
We could, at last, breathe free.
I realise now, though I didn’t then,
That we were all escaping something
If only a certain disjointedness in our normalcy
A lack of pieces fitting snugly together
Even me, sensing as only the young can do
That primitive, universal lunge towards
Inhibition.
We were always going to return.
Our journey by train as nebulous as the fog itself,
Yet we were fortified, buttressed against what lay ahead
And something had, to a degree,
Shifted.

The Passing of Things

I slip off my shoes and sit down
With a good five minutes to spare,
My eyes on the hands of the clock
As they drag their slow way round.
The minutes are heavy.
I have always been
Fascinated with time,
This notion
That we can partition up
And measure
The passing of things,
Put a line like a child’s ruler
Between past and future
Whereas in fact
The transition from
Now to then is indefinable
In the very act of grasping it
It is already gone
If it ever existed at all.
Perhaps this is why
I am drawn
To memories
Recordings, reminiscing
And all manner of traces
Like my photograph album
Obsessively arranged
As if in that arranging
I could superimpose
An order
Or clarity
Perhaps even a meaning
That may never
Have been there
When then
Was
Now.

**The Flick of a Lizard’s Tail**

Salmon-coloured, two-storied villa
Like a giant terracotta pot
Burnt in the sun:
This was my first school.
But memory is a fickle beast.
It’s not our teachers’ faces,
Far less their lessons, that linger
But the flick of a lizard’s tail at recess
In the shell-encrusted flower pot
Behind grand columns of ivy
On crazy paving.
Or the dark bruise of foliage
At the end of the playground
Into which we’d dash
At the ringing of the bell
To play the games all children play
And hide our own confusions.

Or the impatient crunch of gravel underfoot
As we waited for the bus to take us home
Past those familiar ancient paving stones
Straight as the ruler we used in maths
Brushed by grass, shadowed by pines
And heavily layered in history
but which, to me, was simply
the place I found
my pet snail.

Poems by Brina Platt

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Brina Platt was born in Lincoln City, Oregon. USA in 1994. She has devoted her writing to raising awareness of mental illness and the escapism to be found in travelling. Her poems have been published in Esprit Magazine and Ripple Magazine. She is currently working on an MFA at Kingston University.

As a Consequence of

In the hallway my father is a long
Sigh as he decides whether to
Enter my room. The dog ate the lights—or maybe that was me.
I wonder if my mother draws music notes on the floor
From the shadow of the cell’s bars— rumor says a caged
Songbird doesn’t sing. In the darkness I rummage through her things:

A golden coin my father later pawns for money,
A half-used bottle of perfume, matches, a crinkled cigarette
Carton, a strand of hair I floss my teeth with

Because we can’t afford toothpaste. Every month
We receive the same automatic voicemail:
“This is UGI calling to inform you that—”

I eat them too and only incoherent garble
Comes from my stomach, or perhaps it’s a hunger
Intercom and I swallow a bucket of spit. The pain is empty and constant,
Fear does not have a taste when forced down the
Throat. Fear smells like cat’s piss outside
My room; my father drinks wine resembling piss so I can’t eat

That too and I wonder if I lit a match would we see light again?
My brother squeezes through a mouse hole one day
And never returns. I hear him in the wall, and wonder if he

Has any light, maybe he has eaten the electrical wires.
I think about if I, too, could escape,
Except I already ate the matches for warmth.

My father whispers, “How much longer?”
We don’t talk about prison in our house.
My mother calls somedays, five minutes that spark.

I close my eyes— those moments satisfy us for now.

**Photos from Kanab, Utah**

i. Mountain face: August
Even with the threat of torrential downpour
And rock slide, tourists collect in
Barely-moving vehicles (some stand on
The opposite brink, taking the same
Picture again and again).
The heat holds us still,

Melting our tires. For a moment
The rocks beside my car move
Like waves: a stream of red, and orange
And white. I reach out to feel the current
Rushing passed before crawling forward.
Perspiration is the only liquid
In this dehydrated landscape.
ii. Dusk, highway

The mountains reach
For heaven in the rearview mirror.
If only they knew, like the wild bay
And palomino mustangs racing
In the distance that beauty is here,
On this unlit highway. In an hour
Night stars will shimmer like long-lost
Pearls crying for discovery.

iii. Morning, the shop owner

She laughs, arid like the land
Around me and says—
They call this place
‘Little Hollywood’ but no one
Makes it. There are no
Second chances here.

Katrina E. Halfaker- Poems

By KatrinaHalfaker | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Katrina E. Halfaker holds a Bachelor of Arts in Rhetoric and Anthropology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Though a native of the south suburbs of Chicago, she currently lives in East Central Illinois with her husband and three cats. Her work has also appeared in Silver Needle Press.
the midwest

one broken white scale on a rubber dumpster lid hints;
when opened, within and under peeks a takeout burger bag
and styrofoam cup, probably full.
last week there was a television, still operational.
附近，树木的根向上伸展，
像幼儿在床铺上伸展。
teenage boys at the park stomping on bees in soda cans,
drenched humid soil like burnt popcorn fast in the nose,
next door, homebody honeymooners,
a couple licking each other’s papercuts in happily ever
mediocrity.
down the street, a raccoon perching on a trash can
eats a slice of tomato lazily,
his paws turning it stolen to examine,
like he has nowhere to be soon,
and nobody really cares.

***

This too, is introspective.

There is something to say
about the swiftness of contact and separation.
The cheetah, in a sprint, does not bend its neck.
The gaze goes unchecked and, like the head, is rapt
in the promise of consummation.
The cheetah’s coat roils in the run,
its muscles folding like pounded chamella dough
underneath the skin.
The fur flutters less noticed.
All is connected. No pauses.
Its rib cage exposed in the extension
screams human; the slung hips not unlike my own.
The belly and pelvis a folding cave, a dark warmth
elongated.
The cheetah’s toes flex for impact and know
the chill of hard packed soil and bent grass
before the body,
spread themselves into it as I do,
when naked in the night of a ceramic tub.

The cheetah sees, then goes.
The cheetah’s back legs glide to its front,
like a porch swing in a rough wind,
maintained.
The cheetah, in one vigorous second, will breathe
one hundred and fifty times.
Its claws will fling shards of dirt into the air,
never retracting- the full earthbound touch
occurring only half of its journey.
The cheetah, like the poet, uses a stalk and chase method.
The cheetah is, by academic standards, unsuccessful.
Less than forty percent of hunts are followed by a kill.
The cheetah abandons prey.
And after every bold bolt of movement, the cheetah dallies,
relatively inactive, occasionally prostrate, for a long period.
Only the cheetah knows why.

***

**Terrorism and Waterfalls**

Erna, her plain ceramic cookie jar
too high in the kitchen nook,
the tiled floor under dentist yellow light, a sheen of plastic crème designs and tessellations.
Erna, her spine like a pickle curving
as she stoops to pour boiling water from a coal dark pot
onto the burgundy ants piling up in front of us-
where the sidewalk crack waits as weeds encroach-
and their colony hill, careful not to let the stream splash. The ants throwing their legs and feelers upward
as they drift in the steaming puddle
what must be miles in an inch, for them.
Erna, her clean beige carpets calming
my bare feet. The glass candy dish on the doily, offering an explanation. I turn my covers down,
lurch to the basement with a sense of invasion,
notice the folding screen by the washing machine.
I cannot put myself behind the panels.
Erna, standing at the stove clicking up a new fire,
measuring out another baptism,
inconsequential duty that it is.

***

**Lessen**

From my father
I learned to make cleaning cloths
from torn jeans –
nothing too used to be useful.
I learned that depression and poverty are best friends
and they eat your passion up like huntsman spiders –
all bite, impersonal,
and that labor is invisible if labor is the commodity
and all people are divisible if all people have anxieties
and almost no one will ask for your story
unless you use *that tone of voice*.
From my father
I learned dystopian authors often write about their neighbors
and that every president was once a boy in training
just like us.
From my father
I learned heroin is a high more like having your bones replaced
with steel rods and the world too electric than
euphoria of the pedantic
and alcoholism is genetic so
I should be careful.
I learned that coincidence,
if not fate, is still meaningful
and if a wealthy man runs me over
with his middle class car
I should go for the jugular.
How to be sincere when saying sorry
for who I did not intend to be
but was, anyway,
how to empathize with boundaries
and afford myself a meal out
once in a while to avoid that
sucking crush of feeling five dollars and three cigarettes poor.
From my father
I learned how to draft eulogies in advance
because forgiveness is a skill requiring we imagine
our most loved dead.
I am from my father
and from my father
I learned that you do not
stand on train tracks at dusk
in your only formal suit
with your hair slicked back
because our sole sin in life
is to create suffering
where it need not exist
and there is no acceptable apology for this.

Thomas Bailey- New Poems

By TomBailey | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Thomas Bailey is 21 years-old, and lives in London. He is currently studying English at Cambridge, and is editor of his college’s annual poetry publication. His work has been published in Agenda’s Online Broadsheet, The Sentinel Literary Quarterly, Acumen’s Young Poets Section, Off the Block, and The Cambridge Student, among other places. When he gets drunk, he forces his friends to endure lengthy, self-indulgent recitals of his own poetry. He always regrets it in the morning.

Al-Kateeba Square

for Luay Kaheel and Amir al-Nimra

the two boys were playing football
on a rooftop in Gaza city

when they first heard the missiles
carving wounds across the sky

then the lights of the sun went out,
and the afternoon choked,

and for a moment, brief as the clouds
of smoke, a country held its breath

in Ramallah, where they speak of justice,
we watched as mourners filled the streets

and back in Al-Kateeba Square,
a mother kissed a photograph

again and again and again

saltwater

and meanwhile, it’s not missing you
that makes me like this; it’s not the thought
of your soft lips brushing against mine
or the sound of your feathery breathing
across the pillow; it’s not the thought
of your delicate hands tending
to the tulips, or the fact that
nobody cleans the windowsill
now you’ve left; it’s not even
the remembered moment of you
standing in the evening sunlight
with fingers poised at your cheek
to brush your hair behind your left ear;
but the thought of your nails on his skin,
your hot breath moist on his neck
as he fucks you and I get fucked
on whiskey and Xanax somewhere,
because I always did have trouble sleeping
and I dream, sometimes, of drowning,
of thrashing around among the fishes,
and once I dreamt my hair into coral,
the polyps rooting into my skull
and I woke to find you there beside me
and your arms held me like the arms
of the ocean, before you left me for him,
before saltwater ever tasted so sweet

The Ecstasy

we are drifting through every shade of evening
like ink-drops suspended in water
curling softly upwards
breathing and dissolving

you fold into me as our lips touch
and our fingers fumble
in the darkness
to knit us back together

love is an old and difficult word
and we are dangerous, brief
say it, quick
before they pour away the stars

Llanto Por Una Vecina

for Agnes

And how strange it is, to think that you’re dead:
every day we have to remind ourselves
that you won’t be standing out on the street
to welcome us home again, dewy-eyed
and wilting, slightly, from all the years of drink.
I remember how you would rest your arm
on the letterbox for support, how the sunlight
would mellow as you smiled, so full of love.

I will think of you, when I leave the milk out
for the stray cats you fed every evening,
and at night, I'll walk down to the shoreline,
drenched in the light of a Spanish moon,
and I'll lie on the sand like you taught me,
and feel the tide as it creeps about my feet.

Other Voices 1: Individual Poems selected by Shirley Bell

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Lecture Notes from a Poetry Workshop

Be prepared to ask stupid questions. The kind of questions that invite ridicule. Surrender to the imps and golden threads. After all, everything William Stafford said is true. Dream in earnest, especially when awake. You cannot live without dreams. Make a partnership with silence. Even when the stillness is loud. Seek a language that improves the silence until you have fashioned a poem that looks like Kansas. Become the pilgrim of the poem. A Buddha lost in the territory of myth. A land where you find a plastic strawberry and a marble on the path before you. A memory of every haiku about spiders. Do you recognize your grandfather’s pocket watch? The one with the photograph of a burlesque dancer inside its cover? It holds the lifeline of the last surviving ash tree. Our baseball cards were never thrown away by our mothers. Find a poem in Breakfast of Champions. Make a fool of yourself as frequently as you can.

Michael Brockley
The Dream Tree

The sky is dark with fear.
with the moon a yellow parachute
making shadows long.
Salena is with her two children in the bathroom
before bedtime. Badriya and Amin wash their face,
then the car bomb goes off.
Salena runs, squeezing their hands.
Her shoes stick in the mud
then she abandons them.
Reaching a border post, they are refused entry
since they lack paperwork.
Salena gives the guard an unspoken favour.
She tells Badriya and Amin about the dream tree.
It sways its branches when you sing to it
and it makes your dreams come true.
The moon shines over the campsite,
a forest of yellow plastic sheets.
Badriya and Amin touch the sheets rippling in the wind.

Diarmuid Fitzgerald

Icarus

“That blue,”

he said again and again,

finger pointed at the dingy hospital wall.

His body trembled

as if he lay on a “magic fingers” bed

on high—on the derangement setting.

Yet, later, he sang

softly, and so sanely,

we hoped he was coming around

“And I was feathered—
he screamed.
And I flew’’

They found him walking on the railroad tracks
twelve days ago.
He was clutching what was left
of his Gibson twelve string.
He said his name was Icarus.
God knows what he had dropped.
The docs didn’t.

They waited two weeks,
then warehoused him for the long term.
His parents had means—
so it wasn’t a bad place.
For a while, we’d go to visit.
But, he would just stare at the sky
as if it held an invitation—
a summons to the day
he had flown so high
he had almost touched the sun.

Steven Deutsch

Neruda

I rode through the desert swearing
an oath to the sacred spring.

All night I scraped heat from my hands,
my chest. Slowly my eyes returned.

I could feel tears, and pain receded
to the back of my throat.

Here’s what I brought:
the face of a lizard burned

into my skull; a deck of cards
with fifty-two queens; a bucket of sand

that turned red in the moonlight.
I offer you these:

hang them from a maple
branch beneath a squad of squabbling crows.

**Steve Klepetar**

**Fireweed**

Grown wild, unclaimed and loose in lanes,
he peed higher, spat further, swore louder
than any other latchkey street weed.
Green acolytes, summoned with strangled
banshee howls, drawn to worship as he spoke
to us in bloodied tongues for a dare.
Envied for knowledge of hidden pathways
by the railway, and his dead bat in a matchbox,
which some could see for tuppence.
Pursuing the lost, always the first over fences,
through unknown undergrowth, into rank canals,
all consequences ignored in a rush for wheels.
Admired as risk taker, hands free on old bikes,
the world upsidedown in the canopies of trees,
a body confident in the friction of bare skin.
Solemnly, we’d gift him our bruised fruit,
liberated from the floor of the Saturday market,

consumed when the rhythms of real life paused.
No quarter sought or given, games played for keeps,
committed to blood and rain and wind and sun.
And though at twelve, his spark burned fierce,
it burned short from dying embers; snuffed out
in a consumptive breeze, warranting five perfunctory
lines of local news and a cheap cremation urn.

**Jonathan Humble**

**The Waun in June**

Horses and cattle gone.
The grass grows long.
Old mine-shafts plugged,  
bramble and fences surrounding.

Drift mines are suggestions,  
tracks of shifted stones.

I miss the horse-riders,  
tent mushrooms, disappearing lovers;

even dog-walkers rare,  
bounding hounds lost in reeds.

Now’s the time of year  
for looking downwards :

Bird’s Foot Trefoil, Lady’s Smock,  
Llysiau Taliesin underfoot ;

fallen daylight stars,  
small delicate stories  
pressed inside a book.  
Draw curtains, turn the pages.

Waun – moor in Welsh

Mike Jenkins

Blue Room

Margot  
sits in her cabinet of treasures  
thimble  
by thimble recounting the days  
blue  
is the sound of her unfulfilled wishes  
blue  
in the face she sinks to her knees  
heavy  
with keys and boxes of boxes  
heavy  
as rabbits the dragonflies flee  
time  
is forgiving but always backwards  
time  
is the measure Margot doesn’t need

Miriam Calleja
Tombs of Yuma

Margaritas salted lightly on the rim
I-8 West for 170 miles, toward San Diego
Nothing but beige sand dunes and tumble weeds
I see the wall- Black
Stopping you from entering.
Why?
I am just driving, speeding at 80
Wondering what you see through those slim slits.
I hear you wade through the waters of the Colorado
Your little boy drowned,
The border patrol isn’t allowed to save him
For fear of losing one of their own.
Fighting for a chance
I want you to have it
Why don’t we give it to you?
Why can’t we let you have it?

Jennifer Fytelson O’Brien

Chris Boyland- Poetry

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

The Astronomer

I have gazed down the wrong
end of this telescope, for far
too long now. The moon is in
me, my ways of doing and being
are basaltic maria, formed in the
volcanic erupting of “who am I?”
and “why do I?”, now long since
sedimented into layers of “just
because” and pock-marked by
the occasional meteoric impact
of “but . . . maybe . . . this?” I
am become selenic, maintaining
a steady, synchronous orbit, always
showing the same face, waning
and waxing in accordance with the
unalterable almanac of “alright?”
and “see you later”. I am predictable
immutable, iron-cored and old, but
sometimes . . . only sometimes . . .
I can lift the seas like blankets, toss
them over your darkened coasts and
wash away the me you think you
know in a sudden tide of “when we
were young” – when the pattern of
our stars was undiscovered.

Grief

There is a house called “Grief”,
that I have built. I cut down the
tree that was our life together
and sawed it into planks. I mixed
my tears with mortar to cement
the bricks and filled each room with
your absence until I could barely
squeeze in the door. And now, I
sit by the fire in my new house
and boil memories of you to make
my soup, so I can drink you down
and have you keep me warm
again.

Jenny Dark

Saint Joan of Arc
Sainte Jeanne D’Arc
Sweet Jenny Dark,
Blessed inhabitant
of “Bigmouth Strikes
Again”, who spoke to
me while I lay beneath the
duvet, praying for some
divine immolation of all
my anxieties.

Patron saint of short-haired
girls, rival to Marlene and
Suzanne Vega, for poster
space on my teenage walls.

Patron saint of visionaries
and wild ones, confidant of
St Michel – who barbecued
the devil at the end of long
fork.

Patron saint of smart girls in
men’s clothes, patron saint of
not waiting to be asked before
speaking, patron saint of not
knowing your place –
or knowing that your place isn’t here.

Patron saint of worriers and
lost sheep, patron saint of sheep
that don’t know they’re lost,
patron saint of sheep that borrow
wolves’ teeth – to try them on for
size.

Patron saint of being burned alive
on the front page of the Daily Mail
for multiple heresies – the principal
two being cross-dressing and being

better than the English at their national
sport.

Patron saint of winning the argument
even after you lose the war – a talent
that must be as much in demand in
heaven as it is in Edinburgh.

Send us your blessings,
shepherd girl.
The heretics have lit
their bonfires again.
Leela Soma- New Poetry

By Glasgowlee | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Leela Soma came to Glasgow in 1969 with her husband. She worked, until her retirement, as a teacher of Modern Studies. During this time she took up creative writing under the tutelage of Laura Marney. She followed this with Creative Writing Classes in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Glasgow.

________

**Mother tongue**

Pollen drenched, the rain in the bark,
The roots deep in sepia earth, boughs
And branches thick with green leaves
The young shoots from the fallen seeds
In all the wilderness, the native tongue
The original syntax, within you, camouflaged
By a new language in the land of exile
Fleeing from war, landing on the unknown.
Memories of the language flowing in the soul
In the locked place of lullabies, the tunes fresh
Like dew drops on newly blossomed lotus
Delicate, fragile rekindled by the music of
The rustling leaves, the faint tune from mother’s breath keeping heart and soul alive with longing
For those soft words, comfort of mother’s arms
To hear familiar sounds, cadences, nursery rhymes.

**Just things**
Cotton, soft to the skin, the perfect bedlinen
Or starched heavy, flattened with coal-heated iron
Bleached, dyed in different shades, batik designed
Years of slave history running through strung out veins.
Sugar, cane rich, green and tall under the tropical sun,
Nurtured, tended and cultivated to sweeten our tongues
Crushed and juice extracted, pure molasses, thick and brown
Like the bodies of those auctioned welts marked like lines of cane.
Jute, the humble vegetable fibre, soft and shiny grown in East Bengal
Made into coarse, hessian, gunny bags to hold rice and twisted into rope
A billion jute sandbags despatched from the British Empire in India
To the trenches in World War 1 for those who died in that futile war.
Bales of cotton streaked and branded with the blood of slaves
Bags of jute imprinted and inscribed with colonial stamps
Fields of cane sugar made into molasses and golden syrup
Just things which have made the world sweeter
at the cost of human lives.

Passion

Leaden and tenebrous skies lighten; palm fronds
sway silhouetted on the wall by a crescent moon.
I stand on the edge with a searing wordless wound.

The brutal pain, the sadness of being an object of desire
Cast aside like a faint memory, evanescent like a dream.

Fleeting passion, our long separation unbraids memory
our affair is only a chimera, ephemeral as a full moon.

Emotional geography collects like plaque.
You’re imprinted in my soul. The sung and the unsung
words an embroidery in my heart.

I sit in the darkness nursing
my void till the sun creases in the horizon, the saudade
of half-light,
going over and over the honeyed seep of memory
of what has been, of what could have been, of a love that
Left me at sea sifting for words in the white foam of a wave.
Springtime in the great Atlantic north east

The mountains scream
of renewal
but the air still smells
of winter
standing outside I sip
from a tired cup of coffee
waiting for a lazy sun
to arrive
I have resigned myself
to residing within
this tiny hamlet
for the sake
of others
but I feel like
a third baseman
in the court of Camelot
waiting for the inning
to change
for here the seventh inning stretch
is a way of life
& the game just drags on
like that visit to grandmas
the one who smells of mothballs & ben-gay
& all of her food
tastes like it was maderom a cookbook
about the Great Depression
this town has a way of settling
into your lungs
like powder made from bricks
& every road
out of town has a sign
that reads
“ you are now leaving the borough common-
thank you for not overstaying your welcome”
every time I read that
I think I should have
taken their advice

Terry Smith

Spring Road

You might splash around in these crystals
for coolness, or to lose yourself in spontaneity and light;
you could pull flowers, or read graves
in an ecstasy of detached nostalgia;
because this is no necropolis,
more a village fete,
and words come off the stone airily:
they sing of love and regeneration,
of strength and fragility.
They tell of release and longing,
of fragmented memories too precious,
too hard to reassemble;
they sing to me long after time
and the relentless chasing of days
have taken their toll,
have taken me away for more years
than is seemly;
and far, far too long for sorry.

Robert Dunsdon

Reading Backwards

Seminary days, I spent time
reading Hebrew. The book’s cover,
a heather, like woven canvas,
the text, heavy marks of black ink
on cream-colored paper, I felt,
despite my grade-schooler stumblings
over mystifying words, on a journey.
I remember reading backwards,
from right to left, seeking what I knew,
the sacred meanings in the words.

Now, I read backwards into yesterday,
words I penned, words that said
I knew what I didn’t know I knew,
words that sometimes touched, under
layers of subsoil, topsoil, and leaf litter,
under layers and layers of accretion,
thecold rock. Dad was dying, and I
was writing. But, with my eyes, and
in my day-to-day, I couldn’t see,
I wouldn’t see. There on the page,
in my own words, in my poems,
the bare truth speaking back to me.

Charles A. Swanson

Hazel Wood Histories

a window through the laurel
and that’s where he’d usually be
basking in the shade
peeking out

if you were really quiet you’d hear him
unable to contain the fizzing of his youth
all scabby knees and blue bruises
on skinny legs

there was a doorway too
it led down through the hazel wood
to the river that gets louder and louder
until the ridge

where the big boots had marked
succulent thorns sprout
he alone kept the path in dust as raspberry season passes
a bonanza for birds

he’s too old for hide and seek
now his voice has broken
the elder finding infirmity from a borrowed kidney
transplanted

Siobhan Atkins
She began to prefer taking tea, alone
In her SoHo bedroom
Often with the door to her tiny cell closed,
heavy shades half-way drawn

Something about knowing that the neighbors’ could
“See inside her pantry”, she once tried to tell me

The unused airline tickets piled up on the bookcase,
Sent from New York City, round trip
By her sister
Invitations from the officially placed and decorated,
Along with Post Office phone bills
unopened, unpaid

She’d only open her door for me
When I stopped in on Tuesday afternoons
And only if I promised to bring her news
Of how her son, James, who was killed in the Troubles,
Was making out, up in County Tyrone

She’d sit, and talk, those afternoons
As I picked up a bit,
But she’d tell me it was time to leave
As shadows darkened her slow, sad, room

“Fine, just fine,” I’d always tell her,
“He cannot wait to get back home
Should be back, any day, now.”
She’d smile and walk me to the door
“That’s why I just can’t travel, these days
I need to be here, for my James.”

Then she’d lock the door behind me
And I’d head to Millroy’s on Greek
To wash down my lies
With the slightest shine of her ancient eyes
as I do every week

PW Covington
tropical-looking tree, pulled ourselves onto
the garage roof, and sat on the slanted edge until
the nerve arrived to push off, me and my brother,
Sal. I was older and full to the brim, taking
the leap with something like savoir faire while
Sal sat sometimes for an hour or more summoning
up a mystery very deep inside before letting go.
One day an idle cop was prowling nearby
and saw him perched like a boat’s bowsprit
on the rusty tin roof and eased his sedan up the
graveled driveway to investigate. “Get off
the roof!” he yelled through his rolled-down
window, “You goddam fuckin’ monkey!”
And Sal tumbled like an acrobat through the bright air.

Alec Solomita

tehi tegi

black witch, tehi tegi of triskelion.
ride in the silent, laughterless, stillness
on capall ban, past holthans and haggards.
Lead your adorers to the great river
and by your black arts make it passable.
Lead them, six hundred to its deepest place
command the winds, churn the torpid waters
drown the sacrificees in this sad place.

    oh lovely seductress the deed is done
no ling for fires, absent children’s voices,
an old tramman tree and Jenny nettles.
Be thou cleverest and finest beauty
transform thyself. Pipistrelle, daubenton?
Capall ban become porpoise forever.

Ray Jones

Kitchen Break

The kitchen door burst open as a raging bull
grunted and stamped with discontent.
He ranted white noise that fell on deaf ears
as she played her favourite song on repeat in her head.

She didn’t want or need to understand him.
Rasps, grinds and shrieks tried to pierce
her bubble but they may as well have been
wet peas squashing in the sink.

His breath erupted like a boiling kettle burning, quaking, spewing foul gases into the room. The hissing
vapour transformed into butterflies in the mists of her daydream
of happier times and she sighed that last breath of summer.

His fiery autumn words fell like dead leaves onto the cold
tiled floor as he realised a lonely time lay ahead.
He knew that she was free of him
as he watched her stir grains of frost into her mug.

The ring of the spoon against its walls sounded the last chime of their journey together. He left the room,
crumpling a snowdrift carpet in the hallway and he picked up his clinking, chained keys and walked through
the front door.

It slammed shut with a giant thump, like the close of a stone coffin lid in a crypt, but she didn’t notice a
thing. He was just
a ghost of winters past, silently fading away as her lips touched warm chocolate froth and all was good in the
world.

Jason Conway

Helen Angell- New Poetry

By HelenAngell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Helen Angell is a poetry and non-fiction writer based in South Yorkshire. She has had poems published in
Route 57, Medea and Esoterica. Winner of the ‘Beats Working’ Music Journalism Bursary at Sensoria
Festival in 2017, her music journalism also features in God Is In The TV and Dynamic online zines.
In Clifton Park

They unleash their dogs here,
stones that skim over grass. Ears
erect, long tongues loose.

Passing, we chance smiles. Faces
more hard-bitten stay shut.
On down the avenue where the storm
has stripped the branches raw,

to the gates, and the ivory silence
of the Cenotaph,
where for a month now,
people have replaced poppy wreaths
blown by the wind.

First Snow

We talk in clichés
about the snow. How it silences
everything, makes even grimy parts
of Newcastle pretty.

And yet, when that first flake fell
like a piece of cotton in a mill
onto my black scarf,
sound spread out its arms
and waited, until I opened
like a soft hand.

Handkerchiefs

They come in four square boxes
bought by my auntie for 50p each
from the carboot sale. Each one
no more than a centimetre deep,
from an era of boxes:
soap, chocolate, hat.

The top one dated chic, a blurry and back-lit
photograph, yellow and pink ferns on black.
Over that, a chain of cut pink roses,
lilac crocuses, an English garden
Kahlo headdress.

I flip the lid.
Under a layer of plastic,
pinned and pink-ribboned,
three mounted folds of Irish linen,
labelled in gold Celtic script.
I lift up a corner, unfix
the first bow.

It is the smell of life, trapped.

Quicker than Pandora, I reseal,
close the lid on time, keep the light out,
let no one know I’ve been there.

They have come from the same house clearance,
stored in a lined drawer for Sunday best.

I open the wardrobe,
remove the label from the silk shirt.

**Nan at the Jigsaw Table**

Your crabbed hands are readied
a finger-stretch from the board,
to weigh a piece,
rotate it between finger and thumb
until memorised.

Then the cardboard click fit
of lobed piece, nose first,
locked tight.

On these Saturday afternoons
I fix upside down skies,
reveal carol singers
immersed in lamplight.

You tell me about the first time
you sat on Grandad’s knee,
“You’ve got legs like Betty Grable,” he’d said,
about your first job at the grocer’s
on Cranworth Road
where you bagged sugar,
about the last time
you walked along Ingoldmells’ beach.

We turn back to the table
and lift new pieces.

On the floor by your feet
two fallen fragments, faces down
blank backs up,
tarot cards waiting to be turned.

**Leaving**

On Sunday afternoons Dad would fall asleep
on the settee in front of the football,  
heavy in the stink of vegetable farts and stale beer,  
breath on the edge of snoring.

His body overlong on the gold velour;  
top half serene, a boy, arms folded underneath  
the cushion or in prayer on his chest;  
bottom half cricked, legs tight in pike,  
ankles crossed at the bone in air.

His nubbly feet rub, friction  
of black ribbed nylon.

We close the living room door on him.

Iain Twiddy- Poetry

By itwiddy | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

PRACTICE RUN

I’m looking through a cold bedroom window  
hedgehogged with condensation at a rose bush  
pricked with autumn frost, though still glowing red  
like the sting that might be his knees, by now,
wherever he’s gone, training for the marathon,  
Ewerby, Haverholme, running with the river  
through white-padded ploughlines, or anywhere  
just as well France or Greece, till he was back;  
Africa, even, where at the end of the race,  
the leopard, locked on to the neck of the springbok,  
had seemed to bring it whispering down,  
with the ease of frost releasing a rose.

THE SCRAPER

I can picture it outside the church door,  
a scooped grey H driven into the lawn,  
like an axe-blade with two chopped-off handles  
 honing the frost, slicing the siling rain.  
A scraper, after ditches and sludge-banks,  
yard-muck, the labouring roads, for feather-  
flecked women, slodgers embarrassed to stand  
given the big animal language of their hands.  
Nobody used it, whatever it was,  
by the time we drove there, whether or not  
it really helped, scraping the body off,  
before words got to work on the inside,  
on what was left of whatever it’s called,  
upbringing, nature – what the hell – the soul.

BREATHER

After the shattering road, and the clutching  
flush of shadows cast by the Redmires pines,  
after the three draining reservoir blues  
and the rough-cut tyres gouging up the track,  
with the sweat leathering, the water bottle  
delicious with dust, up, to Hallam Moor,  
out among the deep gorse calls of the grouse  
and the oceanic slapping of the wind —  
just back, slamming past the gravel-splashed rocks  
into July evening light like a fist  
sprung open, the metal become muscle,  
down through the sheep fields, through casts of sparrows,  
down to the breathtaking curve of Fulwood Lane;  
where I stopped, to watch over the city,  
and saw, in the sun filling the valley  
the shadow of another, and felt that the blood  
running its currents was the chain going  
nowhere, for all of it – the hills, the brook,  
and the upcast light of Saturday night  
in all the raw expanse of twenty-four –
amounted to nothing more than your absence.

SATSUMA

Waking before dawn on Christmas morning
to the stocking at the foot of the bed:
crisp and crackling, as heavy as a log
and red as the licks of the fire downstairs.
It bulged with bumps of plastic and wrapping,
like a snake that had swallowed a whole pig:
we tugged out figures and cards, reaching deep
so the wool shucked our sleeves bare of our arms.
And always, in the toe, as an old joke,
was a satsuma, cold to the hand, bland now
beside the net of gold coins and the more
piled up downstairs into the needles of the tree.
I never knew where the name was from.
Where they disappeared to after Christmas.
I never dreamt then of ever leaving home,
that some day I would, like an afterthought,
come to stand in Satsuma, at the toe
of Japan’s long stocking, feeling the glow
of the winter sun pulling up as wholly
as the memory unsleeved from its cover.

Mary Wight- New Poetry

By Mary Wight | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Mary Wight lives and writes in the Scottish Borders. Her poems have appeared in various magazines.
SIGHTSEEING

Bellies sweet with prawns and Guinness, they dawdled back along the strand needing nothing more.

A sea trout, eyes gone, body gleaming still, lay as if waiting for a wave to swim it back.

She took a photograph as he struck out ahead warning of the tide, footprints already filling.

She saw him climb a wire, then, half-blinded by the glare, only miles and empty miles of sand.

She was running, stumbling, flailing, dumb.

******************************************************************

HARD ROCK

Rain bowled in from the ocean until it seemed all was liquid except the rock itself, and unseen bells.

Afternoon marooned, we drank whisky on a narrow bed but even peat and iodine could not distract from a darkened line that seeped beneath our door: the creeping stain an unwelcome metaphor.

Yellow light found me in a cemetery, steam like breath around my feet. Whispering a by-rote litany I observed an hour, a half hour pass, day fell to night behind stained glass.

Late met, we held hands, splashed through shop-front pools of light where rows of plastic abbeys swirled in snow, and your thumb stroked my wedding band. We left the rock at dawn, went on.

Waking to darkness now
on rainy nights, I see those abbeys glittering
still, the unseen bells grow loud.

**********************

BRINGING ALSTROEMERIA

Bringing
wet green stems
of alstroemeria
you
astonish me,
knowing
the gift.

I listened
once
to you
read Neruda,
thought
then
as now,
of the heat
in loving,
awe felt
in mystery,
life
emerging
from
places
of dust
and emptiness.

I cup
my palm, soft
against
the blade-straight
cut—
stitches where
a womb
was pulled.

Bringing
wet green stems
of alstroemeria
you
astonish me,
knowing
your gift.

**********************
ROCKING

Suddenly one has the right eyes.

Rilke.

Day follows day, broken by
the uninvited press of night on
a shape named by its parts:
head, breasts, belly, legs.

Unwatched branches still
make bud. Footsteps tramp
unseen streets and rain
when it falls, is only wet.

A swan chasing a moorhen
across the pond is
complete, wing-water spinning
rhinestones into April air.

A white cherry-blossom lands
on my sleeve, petal edges
tinged tongue-pink.
It rocks there—

like you, perhaps about to fall
or be lifted, travel on.
Like me, holding my breath,
suddenly weeping.

Poetry from David Bankson

By QuothTheRaven42 | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
I regret, like coiled flowers I burst when loosed, but the loosing is part of who I am.

I could never stop that sort of liquid: a river rushing through my teeth, rushing through my veins,

leaving an imprint on the memory-foam mattress, crusted with a coat of flesh

where I used to lay my heart. It’s the voice of second-person recognizing my fervent thoughts—

You aren’t good enough for the love which you seek. I regret,

therefore I am salt in a potted plant. It is vined like pothos,

dropping leaves between the floorboards as they yellow and fall away. I look

for every one. But you swear you heard
the weeping willows
outside my gaping door.
They sucked away the entire sky,
leaving nothing except chartreuse.

**Birth Certificate**

When I was born you started
the symphony. I was born after
writing a love poem,
after raising expectations,
after losing a line
of shoelaces, after forgetting
why I was being born.
I was born without a device
stitched into the flesh of my hand
and without my name tattooed
into my palm, with no cruise control
or doing 90 on Westheimer Blvd.

On the ace of a blackjack,
though the map disagrees,
unexpectedly I was born—despite
popular opinion. I was born satiated,
with a large tree out the window,
with the Texas breeze upon my cheek.

Before I was born, we met
and decided where to smoke.

After I was born, Mr. Rogers taught us
how to love, not talk.

Like twin rosebuds, we were born
between the grass blades and the stars.

“Monologue from the Margin”

His voice hardens behind shadows
& a fraction of obscurity,
his disrobing loose as a clown’s pocket.
In this poem, green energy is unlikely —
the form, an alarm of stop
lights. Took moments to write.

Now he toes the line of margin, sews it up.
See the top and bottom, a voice. Everyone
can see him. He is full of fire,
the bad kind that burns small hands.

Soon the words will stop in his throat.
Soon the words will stop in the world.

We need help with the stanzas,
the message is too hard to express
without you. He forgot something
here — grimace too dark
in the light — barked words
like a trumpet, but we ignored them all.

Dick Jones- New Poetry

By Dick Jones | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

BERTRAGHBOY BAY

Where the ironstone wall
gathers fuscia and salt;
where the swifts stitch blue
air to the scrub-grass; where
herring gulls mob the heron;
where cormorants hang wings
on the wind to dry; where seals rise
gleaming on a flood tide; where
the rain drifts in a milk-haze;
where the sun is thin as a coin;
where the rainbow really ends.

TOUCHED

We’re in a hospital lift going up
from ground floor to the seventh,
just the two of us, strangers and
I’m thinking (as you do) what if

the cable breaks and we drop like
a stone in a well? So how would
you reckon the moment at which
to jump before the point of impact?

Then, with a jolt, the lift just stops.
We look at each other, look away.
Too soon yet for that dreadful intimacy
that unravels all reserve. Now it’s grunts

and chuckles, pantomime impatience
and some random button punching. Then
comes language, blunt and businesslike.
“Right. Now what? Should be an alarm

somewhere or a ‘phone. Let’s see”. But
all from me. My partner in misfortune
hasn’t moved. Within the ticking silence,
he is motionless, head cocked like

someone listening for a distant birdcall
or for bells on a breeze. And even as I
watch for a flicker, both unfocussed
eyes tip back to white and, still without

a word, he drops straight down, within
the circle of his standing, like disembodied
clothes. My first impulse is just to
leave him like some 3-D puddle that I

have to step around as I organise escape
or rescue. Two disasters in succession
out of a blameless morning seem unfair.
But then, as unexpected as the other,

both eyes open, wide and blue and his lips
kiss air like a baby blowing bubbles.
He’s going to die; we know it, both of us
in a simultaneous heartbeat. And I kneel,

like a bad actor genuflecting, and I lean,
fingers spread against the tin-can wall
and watch the urgent lips trying to mould
words out of the unaccommodating air.

I stoop to listen – more, maybe, to read
the fragile shapes in flight. “Touch me”,
he breathes. “Touch me”. But I hesitate:
unlinked, I’m free, like standing water;

once connected, there’s a current drawing
me towards another place. But then I cup
his cheek as I might a child’s and, on a long
unwinding breath, he speaks quite clearly –

“Mummy” – and he doesn’t breathe again.
And then, with a jolt, the lift glides
upwards, graceful, silent, as if no time
had passed for anyone, as if I might step

through those doors, untouched, untouchable,
as if the light should shine as brightly evermore,
doors open, close again, as if the axis of
the world still held as trustworthy and true.

SNOW IS A LANGUAGE

Snow is a language
that speaks only to itself.
A multitude of syllables;

a downward drift
d of Babel words. They
sit upon our ears,

our lips, our tongues,
these nouns and verbs.
Such a clamouring

of utterance
should fill the world
with sound.

Yet in the narrow lanes
and out across the fields
to the skyline, the aspiration

of this language is
to an all-encompassing
white silence.
STILL LIFE

Each morning they organise your bones
into the wheelchair, stack you leaning
out of kilter. Thus I find you, wall-eyed,

feather pulse and mouth ajar. This is
a stillness you are learning as silence
silts up your blood. I name you: ‘Mum’,

I call, quietly at first, as if this were
only sleep and you might resent the passage
interrupted. But your shade is walking

a broken road on the far side of dreams.
I keep my coat on, lean in the doorway,
breathing in the alkalines and salts

that are your presence in this world.
Beyond, through narrow windows, rain
drifts like smoke. The trees shift

their high shoulders, hefting their leaves
like heroes. I can see the lift and fall
of their evergreen breath, the slow,

dispassionate pulse. Such senseless beauty,
propping up the sky as if there were no
tides turning or falling stars, no ashes to dust,

no time at all. You speak – a half-word,
cracked in the middle. Syllables drift
like fumes. Somewhere in that steam

of meaning, the filaments of memory:
the horn’s tip of a lover’s moon,
a song’s dust, the eye’s tail catching,

not quite catching, doorway phantoms,
window ghosts. Grief crosses my mind:
its hydrogen release – from local pain

to lachrymae rerum, all in one ball
of fire. It would be a simple thing
to self-heal, here against the lintel,

watching not the rise and fall of your
fish-breath, your insect pulse, but
the immortal trees beyond. Too easy;

but death looked in and turned away,
indifferent, and now it’s down to me,
the blood-bearer, to wish away your life

for you. The house ticks and hums.
A voice calls out, thin and querulous;
another coughs. I turn down your light.

There, against the window, dusk outside,
you are becoming your shadow
cast against the shifting of the trees.

MIGRANTS

Each night before I go to bed I check the kids.
And because they lie so still – an arm across a throat,
a cruciform, half in, half out, a starfish beached –

I have to lean across to find a shadow pulse, a rising diaphragm, a hair that floats on an outbound breath.
I have to do this, but I know, of course, that it’s only

in their dreams they’re out at sea. And that it’s only this night’s tide and the sleep it brings in which they seem to drown.

Poetry from Sandra Horn

By Sandra Horn | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

PATHOLOGY MUSEUM SPECIMEN

Here, held in limbo,
floats not-quite-life;
unable to decay,
unable to begin
as dust flies to raindrop,
raindrop to river,
river to fish:
lithe, silvery fish.
As ash lifts in wind-flow,
wind flows to berry-bud,
berry-bud to bird:
high soaring bird.
As earth turns to wormcast,
wormcast to rootlet,
rootlet to tree:
burgeoning tree.

BALLROOM DANCING ON ROBBEN ISLAND

‘Shall we begin with a waltz this morning?
One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three, turn.’
Did you dance to a wind-up gramophone?
A radio? Or was there no music and you sang,
clapped rhythms you remembered from your youth
as the slow years passed and you grew old?
One-two-three, one-two-three, were you straight-faced
or did you giggle as you stepped and turned?
Did you smile, close your eyes, imagine
that you held a woman in your arms,
that the concrete floor was sprung,
the naked lightbulbs chandeliers,
as you danced at Government House?
Or did you weep for loss and fear?
Where was hope, then?
A cruel ghostlight fading with the dawn,
yet another, yet another dawn?
Or your lodestar, shining through the nights,
steadfast through the days, beckoning you on?

DRIVING THROUGH THE WEST COUNTRY, HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY

Exeter: hoar-frosted stone throws light back at the sky.
Mist on the river, white and soft,
Like something one might lay across a wound.

Remember Treblinka.
Remember Babi Yar.
Schubert on the radio: Litanei for the departed;
Ruhn in Frieden alle Seelen.
May all souls rest in peace.

Remember Auschwitz.
Remember Me Lai.
Tiverton: the river dances, flinging spindrift high;  
A lone duck frolicks in the waves.  
Tom Lehrer’s gravel voice: So long, Mom, I’m off to drop a bomb.

*Remember Rwanda,*  
*Remember Hiroshima.*

Remember the burden we carry;  
Unslaked bloodlust, hate in our minds’ dark places,  
Always waiting its chance.

*Remember Srebenica,*  
*Remember Bergen-Belsen.*

Enmore: a small child jumps in puddles, his face alight with joy.  
A boy and girl walk in the field,  
Lit by the evening sun,

*Remember, remember, to keep them from the dark.*

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**Poetry- by Fiona Perry.**

By Dave Kavanagh | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Now I have the puddle
Wax of a thousand
Blessed candles burnt

In a kitchen shrine
Your last upright
Embrace cushioning me

Comforts to conjure
No more sinewy
Morphine cries or

Muted transmissions
Of constant sorrow
Just essence

Of the thing
Crystalline like the
Scent of jasmine

Tea buds unfurling
Water-wakened
In a cup.

Absorbent baby blues scan flock
wallpaper, cot bars, honeycombed
crochet with metronomic flickers
of exploration. An imprinted
search for signs and symbols;
patterns and systems; fractals
and constellations. Neurons

Extend, ceaselessly connect,
burn out, regenerate in a close
approximation of normal
but newborn beware,
your gene-primed mind is built
on a fault line-
synapses lie in wait for hurt
powerful enough to activate massive
misfirings. When the time
comes. The damage will seem

Absolute. A bloody rampage
down rabbit holes to the screech of a
needle skipping on black notes. A perpetual
trammel of obsessions. The like
of which causes surprising, pitiful crying
out to God. But this you should hold
and remember: We are not the authors of our
own thoughts.

Despite what a short circuit to the neuronal
loop running from the orbital frontal
cortex to the cingulate gyrus,
striatum, globus pallidus, thalamus and back
to the frontal cortex would have you believe.
Your brain- even when broken- is a miniature
universe. A wonder.

Alchemy
Stowe Gardens 2011

We have departed the British Worthies
And crossed the River Styx
To ascend the Temple Of Ancient
Virtue steps. Small hand nested
In big hand. The crescent exedra and
Its reflection opposite us, doorway-framed.

She tests the acoustics of the dome
With a set of molecular scales before
Notes unadulterated as gold ingots glide
From her mouth up into the vault,
Fanning out, ribboning downwards
To anoint the crown of her head.

Reverberation tightens in my veins,
Pulses, momentarily, in my opened throat.
And when she stops. In the sparkled silence.
I’m sure I hear a multitude of suspended fossils
In the masonry, creak and burst into life.

Writers’ Coaching Clinic : Anne Tannam.

By Dave Kavanagh | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Someone recently asked me why I decided to run a monthly writers’ coaching clinic. After all, I co-facilitate a weekly writers’ forum, so was this this simply more of the same?

The best way I could explain it was that the weekly forum focuses on the writing itself while the clinic focuses on the writer. How do we look after ourselves as writers? How do we design and sustain flourishing creative practices that will keep us writing, long after the first flush of excitement at getting our thoughts down on paper passes?

As we all know, talent is never enough to make a great writer. Sure, talent is a very important ingredient, but without resilience, good writing habits and strategic thinking, many of us struggle to either begin or sustain our practice.

Here are some some examples of what writers typically bring to a creative coaching session:

- I want to start writing but don’t know how to begin
- I’m struggling to find time to write
- How do I support myself as a writer?
- I’ve hit a writer’s block and don’t know how to move through it
- How do I know if I’m a good enough writer?
- How do I go about submitting my work for publication?
- How do I pull together a collection of poetry/short stories?
- How do I keep going with my novel?
- How can I take myself seriously as a writer?

Through the coaching process, writers identify where they want to go with their writing, define what success looks and feels like to them, discuss the challenges facing them, explore options open to them, and finally, choose a way forward that’s just right for them. My job as a coach is to really listen, hold the space, guide them to the process and applaud loudly when they take a bow.

The monthly Writers’ Coaching Clinic is held on the last Saturday of every month from 10am to 12pm, at Books Upstairs on D’Olier Street, Dublin 2.
It’s hard to choose which one of my travels had the biggest impact on me - I’ve been to 35 countries (36, if you count Transnistria) and counting. When I travel, it’s like I’m another person; a better version of me. I’m sure there is a host of psychological studies out there about changed mental states, about the endorphins flooding your brain when you travel, all the new input and stimulation that can get you hooked for life. All I know is traveling is one of the few times I feel truly alive. Travel addiction is probably why I’ll always be broke. The minute I get a bigger sum on my account I’m looking for the next destination. But since I must choose one I’ll go for Petra, Jordan. That one made into my book, got itself a whole chapter, so I think I can safely say it made quite an impression.

I was living in Israel at the time and was between two jobs, so I thought why not take a Crusader castles/Petra trip while I’m having time off? I had to go down to Eilat, an unlovely tourist city, as the only safe checkpoint to cross from Israel to Jordan was there. Even so, being a solo female traveler, let’s just say it wasn’t without risk. A big belated thank you to the Japanese tourist, who let me team up with him for the duration of the crossing.

Beyond the border there was a host of driver guides you could select from and hope you’d end up with a guy, who won’t rip you off too much. All in all I was lucky with my own driver, whose name shamefully I can’t recall anymore (in my defense, almost a decade passed since). After a night in Aqaba early next morning we were heading north through landscapes of arid land, ticking off the compulsory items; Bedouin tent, a flock of camels on the ridge of a hill, tea with the Bedouins. Our first destination was Kerak, the famous haunt of the infamous Reynaud de Chatillon (well, famous if you’re a crusades buff like me), who liked throwing his
opponents off the walls with a wooden box around their head, so they wouldn’t lose consciousness before hitting the ground. An all-round not nice guy. As you enter the castle, you’ll encounter self-appointed guides, who will ask for some compensation only at the end of the tour - you can get away with a few dinars less if you haggle; a general rule in the Middle East.

Another crusader castle later (Shobak, or Montreal, as it was called in the 12th century) I arrived to Petra in Wadi Musa, where I spent two days. I don’t remember the dorm of the hostel, but I do remember the common dining area - under a motley awning on the terrace, while the sun setting behind the mountains painted the sky with pink and blue stripes, glazing the squat, flat roofed houses of Wadi Musa with a rosy glow. I agree, corny like a Hallmark postcard, and so much more beautiful.

I went into Petra at the earliest possible time next morning – it was still not completely devoid of tourists, but there was much less of them than there would be later on. The magic started on the wide, rocky path leading to the Siq, the narrow ravine through which you enter Petra proper. It amped up in the Siq, you know the part from Indiana Jones? What you don’t see in the movie are the faceless statues, the inscriptions that are barely more than an outline, the niches you can only guess the purpose of, and the stairs beginning at the most improbable places, only to end after a couple of meters. It’s those steps that struck me as the most mysterious and surreal, hence my title.

As you get to the end of the meandering ravine, you have the Treasury unfolding in front of you gradually in the last bends. It’s where Indy finds the grail, past an elaborate set of booby traps. I just found some camels for rent and a hut selling camera essentials. Will get back to that one later. There was no crusader or grail inside the Treasury, just a big room and two side rooms carved in the striped sandstone; see it was the tomb where they interred king Aretas, ruler of the Nabateans, the people who originally populated Petra.¹

So there I was, walking (almost) alone among monuments half sunk into the sand, the door openings of the silent tombs yawning like dark mouths. The whole place has such a Lovecraftian atmosphere that I’m positive he must have read about the place (I didn’t find any evidence of him having actually traveled there in his biography).² At any turn you’d expect a fall of pebbles in the wake of night-gaunts swiftly retreating into their haunts, where they hid from intrusive eyes during daytime. I’m like a kid in a candy store at archaeological sites, so you can imagine my frustration, when first my batteries died on me, then my only memory card got full. In both cases I was deep within Petra, happily exploring, so twice I had to race back to the Treasury approximately a km away. Pro-tip; stock up on batteries and memory cards before you visit Petra.

Past the Urn tomb, the Corinthian tomb and the Palace tomb, the most lavish graves apart from the Treasury, you walk down the Colonnaded street, where the Hellenistic influence is possibly most strongly felt. I climbed up to Al-Deir, the Monastery, used as a church by the Byzantines - latecomers in this forgotten city in the sand. Up on the lookout stand still for a minute and soak up the silence as you take in the rugged mountains through layers of clean, dry desert air in the company of an empty hut, a Jordanian flag and a scarecrow, for some strange reason (there was not a patch of wheat in sight to scare birds away from).

If you have time and energy and your feet are not dead yet (I went in sandals – don’t be like me. Do the smart thing and take hiking shoes) do climb up to the High place of Sacrifice, a high plateau with two obelisks at one end, a water basin for ritual purification and two altars at the other. One altar has a delve and a channel for blood sacrifice, where a cursed people offered virgins on nights of Full Moon to the Great Old Ones – but I got carried away.

As I said, foolishly I took sandals, but even my used and abused feet couldn’t stop me from going back on day two – this time entering through a different route, Wadi Mudhlim, a gorge running around the back of Petra, used by the Nabateans to divert flash floods from the Siq.³ Once you got out of Wadi Mudhlim, and if you still
got legs to climb with, do climb up to Jabal Al-Khubtha on steps that are worn to nothing at some places. Of course there is a crusader fortress here as well on top of Al Habis, but really it’s a modern trifle, built around 1116 by Baldwin I, king of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem. I found an alternative route up - barely more than those time and weather worn hints of steps on the sheer rock surface and hundreds of meters of nothing on the other side. From the top you have a spectacular view of all of Petra. You can visit at night as well for some extra dinars, but I think the real McCoy must have been back in the 19th, early 20th century, before the tourist hordes, when the only sign of human presence was the scattered fires of the Bedouins, and the night-gaunts and other unnamable horrors could creep and stalk on the ancient rocks and gather unmolested on the High place of Sacrifice in remembrance of forbidden rituals. Petra is on the list of endangered monuments, eroded by acidic rain and excess tourism, so who knows how long they can continue to do so?

Bibliography


Of Buses, Bombs and Bartholdy - Clare Morris.

By Clare Morris | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Of Buses, Bombs and Bartholdy

I love allusions – can’t get enough of them. Put it this way, if allusions were gallons of bath water, I’d wallow in them up to my oxters and beyond. There’d be no stopping me: a passing reference to *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, an affectionate nod to *Sea Fever*, oh yes, splish splosh, pass me my rubber duck and bath bombs, honey, it’s going to be a long (and very enjoyable) night.

Maybe it’s the getting the reference (or even the joke) that attracts me; a kind of insider dealing that appreciates the relative merits of poetic shares before they are floated for public consumption. I must admit, though, there’s an undercurrent here that troubles me: if all this suggests illegality, there’s also more than a hint of elitism too. You can only be in my gang if you know the password. But if you develop that thought further, it perhaps reflects an attraction prompted by fear: a fear of otherwise being left out in the cold; of not knowing how to judge something and what to think.

When, as a young girl, I first began reading poetry, I did not know what to think or rather what I was *allowed* to think. I knew that some poems had a profound impact on me, so much so that I learnt them by heart, not because I was instructed to, but because I liked to hear their sounds rolling around in my head, or tingling on the tip of my tongue, while I completed tasks that were more painful or prosaic like the weekly cross country or waiting for a bus (the two often occurring concurrently as I have an appalling sense of direction). I couldn’t put into words how or why I felt so moved by this pattern of words as it washed to and fro across my consciousness. I didn’t really want to either; it was my shared understanding with the poet, a risky, heady, secret space, ring-fenced by allusions. So, the pattern of my public literary appreciation became an explanation of what the poet meant in line x; in all probability, an explanation so dull and dense that no one felt inclined to hack through the foliage to the real heart of my private response. Of course, it meant that I never really shared what I actually thought but that safe space of explaining the reference got me through and avoided embarrassment.

Safe? Did I say ‘safe’? Well, maybe. A local bus, when heading towards our pedestrianised market square periodically plays a little jingle to warn us of its presence. It’s all very allegro vivace. It’s in the key of A major. In fact, more than that, it offers an uncanny echo of the opening few bars of Mendelssohn’s Symphony No 4 to passing shoppers. Time after time, as soon as I hear it, I start humming the rest of the phrase, with Pavlovian expectation, much to the confusion of those around me. A smile, a nod and “Ah Mendelssohn” butter no parsnips here. It may be his Italian Symphony but this is Red Hook, not Sicily (well,
Boston, Lincolnshire, actually, but I couldn’t quite find an appropriate allusion). So, what of the composer of this merry bus jingle, did s/he have Mendelssohn in mind or was the similarity purely accidental? In other words, is it just me? Well, yes, maybe …

Of course, there is initially a safety in allusion-spotting for the young critic, but it only takes you so far. What happens when you turn the tables and you’re the one creating the message, whether in words, music or image? Take the title of this article, for example. Is the reference to Bartholdy, the surname so disliked by Felix and Fanny, a step too far for alliteration’s sake or does it emphasise that in giving something a title, we cannot necessarily guarantee that it will convey the associations we intended? How do we allude effectively? Do we endeavour to include while at the same time creating a sense of exclusivity to make that allusion seem hard-earned and therefore perhaps more valued?

At a meeting of a local writing group, when it came to my turn to share some recent work, I realised to my horror that my printed copies were still on the bus and all I had to offer was the crumpled original in the bottom of my bag. To fill the yawning silence, I mumbled something about the poem being “a comment on my relationship with poetry” (as I attempted to smooth out the creases), with “err, a little word play on current trends” (further smoothing of creases), “um and it’s shaped like a fountain pen” (lifting the tattered page aloft and smiling weakly), “err, old school, you know.”

Clearly preferring his parsnips plain, someone commented, “It looks more like a bomb.”

And on reflection, it did.

Clearing my nervous throat, I began to read:

**Beating time**

She pitched her tent, that evening, in the field at the back of the Poetry Hotel, where rooks, those sunset spell-weavers, wheeled widdershins above the bins, and tried, as before, to sign in with Michael, the cherub-faced desk clerk, who, for some reason, always made her feel nervous and forgetful.

Her fountain pen, purchased for the occasion, warm with the promise of gentle verse in italic script, hovered in hope.

Intoning the password, or so she thought, she asked, “Can my rhyme chime in time in a line sublime?” as her pen nib bored into her palm, mixing blue with scarlet.

“Such old-school stigmata raises no eyebrows here,” he sneered.

“Raise,” she countered. “Plural noun.”

The register open, Mike closed it with a slam,
bashed a door, shouting, “There’s too much allusion to muse on!”

She learned that she had no creditable currency to offer.

Back in her tent, the hotel’s neon light reflecting in her teacup,

she watched as sparrows perched on telephone wires,

like errant crochets in search of a stave.

She strained to hear their music

but struggled to beat

 time.

Did it bomb or go down like one? Well, I’ll leave you to decide.

I would be interested to hear what others think about how much or how little we should provide as background information but that’s for another day, I suppose. In the meantime, I must dash – I’ve an allusion – I mean a bus – to catch.

Thank you for reading.

The Burden - Essay by Mike Smith

By Mike Smith | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

The Burden - *The Gardener* by Rudyard Kipling.

By Mike Smith

Several critics of Kipling mention this story. It comes in the 1926 *Debits and Credits* collection, late in the sequence of short story publications.

Written in the shadow of ‘The Great War’, it stands comparison with the earlier, and perhaps more controversial *Mary Postgate*, and like that story, is regarded as one of his best. Frank O’Connor though, in *The Lonely Voice*, his 1963 study of the genre, singles it out for an in-depth analysis. Describing it as ‘clearly a masterpiece’, he nevertheless goes on to use it to justify, and explain his contention that either Kipling ‘is not a real writer’ or that Chekhov and Maupassant must have ‘something ... obviously wrong with them’.

He goes on to confess, or at least report, that ‘I found myself rewriting the story as it might have been written by Chekhov or Maupassant’, which one has to admire, if only for the sheer hutzpah of the claim. He undertook this in order ‘to see what would happen’, which seems to me a perfectly reasonable motivation.

What it leads him to is an alternative story, and one from which he is able to draw conclusions about what is wrong with Kipling’s version, and what is right with his. It comes down to a sense of what the story ought to have been about, instead of what O’Connor believes it actually was about.

There are two elements here to hold up to scrutiny. The first is the issue of whether or not O’Connor’s view of what the story is about is viable (correct would be too strong a word, for we can only speculate about what Kipling might have intended). The second is whether or not a story ‘ought’ to be anything other than what the author has presented us with. Even in the case of a story we think badly written, or badly conceived, I’m not convinced that we can say it ought to have been done differently, though we might wish it had been.

Briefly summarised, *The Gardener* tells the story of a middle class woman, Helen Turrell, who brings up what she claims is her dead brother’s illegitimate son (by an Indian woman), but who is in fact her own, (by an Indian man). The secret is kept from us by Kipling’s usual sleight of hand. The story opens with what ‘the village knows’, and Kipling makes no attempt to force us to see beyond that. Expanding on the tale, he reports what Helen says, and leaves us to be duped just as the village has been. It is for the eponymous gardener, who has miraculous insight to make the truth plain, eventually. This takes place when Helen visits the child’s grave, for he has become a casualty of the Great War. ‘Come with me....I will show you where your son lies.’ As a thinly veiled metaphor for God, the gardener is tending his ‘plantings’, the tens of thousands of young men killed in the war, and implicitly knows all their stories, even the ones not known to them. His introduction, at the beginning of the penultimate paragraph of the story, tells us in an aside ‘- evidently a gardener’, a typical Kipling hint, in that ‘evidently’, that we should take note. The last words of the story reinforce the nudge: ‘...she went away, supposing him to be the gardener’.

Perhaps the most powerful image in the story is the description of the cemetery, still under development, if that is the right word.

‘....a merciless sea of black crosses, bearing little strips of stamped tin at all angles across their faces.....nothing but a waist-high wilderness
as of weeds stricken dead, rushing at her.’

Many of us will have seen the pristine, neatly kept cemeteries of the War Graves Commission, and will have been stunned into silence, but how much greater must have been the awesome sight of ‘the entire crowded level of the thing’ unfinished?

The most powerful speeches are those of the child himself, when, angered by his ‘aunt’s’ sharing with friends of their secret, that he might call her ‘mummy’ in private, he delivers a series of prophetic statements which encapsulate the tragedy of their situation.

‘You’ve hurted me in my insides and I’ll hurt you back. I’ll hurt you as long as I live.’

‘I will! And when I’m dead I’ll hurt you worse!’

‘Lots of little boys die quite soon. So’ll I. Then you’ll see!’

After his death, when the prophecies have come true, the aunt-mother, as she travels to the graveyard, meets a woman who has practised a different deception. Working as a photographer for relatives who cannot make the trip to France, she has visited repeatedly the grave of a lover whom she cannot publicly acknowledge. Breaking down, she reveals this truth to Helen, and in doing so brings Helen to a bitter recognition of her own loss, and of her son’s, which goes back, of course, to the initial adoption of the lie.

O’Connor’s main criticism is with the presence of the gardener. He is the final false step, we are told, in what have been a series of false steps by Kipling. O’Connor’s own version, dispensing with him, ‘moves out of the world of Celestial Gardeners and Celestial Choirs’ and into the one where ‘having an illegitimate child is….a terrifying and humiliating experience.’ O’Connor’s story makes Helen, he says, ‘a woman of heroic stature’.

Analysing the difference between the two versions, and trying to ‘put a finger on’ where Kipling has gone wrong, O’Connor reveals what he thinks this story, and short stories generally perhaps, should be about: Kipling, he tells us, ‘is not really thinking at all of that mother and son’

The point here is not only what O’Connor doesn’t like about the story, but how, I believe, he misinterprets its purpose. He goes on to say that Kipling is thinking about ‘an audience and the effect he can create.’

The underlying thrust of O’Connor’s study of the short story form is encapsulated in its title. That ‘Lonely Voice’ belongs to an individual. It must, and a lonely one at that. But not all short stories can be shoehorned into such a tight definition. It is not, I think, the mother and child that is the real focus of this story, nor any particular individual, but it is the state of the nation, and of the wider world. It is the predicament of God, dealing with such a world. Far from being a distraction from the true focus of the tale, the Gardener, for whom the story is named, is the true focus, and a couple of distinct statements make plain his role. When Helen arrives at the cemetery, Kipling tells us, ‘The place was still in the making.’

Most commentators writing about the short story, will tell you, at some point, how important are their endings. Some, and I include myself with those, will say it is the most important, that the whole of the rest of a short story is only the preparation for your arrival at the ending. The ending here is at the war graves cemetery of Hagenzeele Third, with its ‘twenty-one thousand dead already’ and ‘still in the making’. And it is here, at that ending that ‘The Gardener’ of the title introduces himself to us. It is he, ‘evidently’, we are asked to consider, ‘supposing him to be the gardener.’

There are large chunks of this story that have been neither quoted nor described in either this essay, or in
O’Connor’s analysis. Michael’s life and war service, and Helen’s deepening involvement in the life of the bereaved relative take up pages of text, but that does not shift the focus of the story, nor the point of telling it, remaining just another part of that preparation for our encounter with the ending, the contextualising of that ending. It is not merely what we know, but what we feel that will give point, and power to the closing words. This is in the nature of short stories, and makes O’Connor’s remark about creating an effect for ‘an audience’ one that must be interpreted rather than simply denied. Kipling was trying to create an effect, but not at the expense of what the story is about.

As is his common practice, Kipling interleaves his stories in this collection with poems. Some, unattributed are implicitly his own. Following The Gardener is a poem called The Burden. O’Connor does not refer to it. Should we consider these poems alongside the stories to which they appear appended? Should we consider the stories in light of the poems? In this poem a lonely voice calls upon Mary Magdalene in the line that closes each of the three verses: ‘Where is/ Where can be/ Where shall be the greater pain?’ The pain is of unending grief, and of maintaining a lie. The fourth verse brings a reply, which is that God has ‘rolled the Stone away.’ Once again, the focus seems to be on the supplicant, but ends on the actions of God, and again ends equivocally, for is that ‘rolling’ a continuation of, or an ending to the speaker’s pain?

If this story is a tragedy, it is not, as O’Connor tells us it ought to be, the tragedy of a woman and a boy, but the tragedy of a gardener, ‘bending over his young plants’.

The Wandering Bard- Essay by Frances Browner.

By Franner | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Biography: Frances Browner grew up in Dublin, spent twenty years in New York and now resides in County Wicklow. She has been writing fiction for over twenty years and has had short stories shortlisted for competitions and one took 2nd prize at the Dromineer Festival in 2010. Others have been published in Ireland’s Own and Woman’s Way magazines, anthologies, and in Sixteen and the HSE online journals. Memory pieces have also been published in Ireland’s Own, in the East Hampton Star and Montauk Pioneer newspapers on Long Island, and broadcast on Irish radio for Sunday Miscellany and Living Word. She self-published a collection of her work – You Could’ve Been Someone, in 2015, and compiled two volumes of
memoirs – While Mem’ry Takes us Back Again – stories from Irish people who immigrated to the US, 1929-1964; and Coming Home about people who returned home after many years abroad. Her poems have been published in the Ogham Stone and Skylight 47 and online for Ink, Sweat and Tears, Tales from the Forest, the Ulster Voice and Poems on the Edge. A graduate of UCD, Dublin and City College, New York, she tutors creative writing and history with a community education board.

Post navigation

I have found a new hobby – reading my poems aloud in front of an audience. After writing my first poem five years ago at the Cork Short Story Festival, I enrolled for Colm Keegan’s poetry workshop in Dun Laoghaire Lexicon. A subsequent online course facilitated by Kevin Higgins has resulted in me now writing more poems than stories.

On a rainy morning in July 2016, seven members of our Facebook group, Poets Abroad, met for the first time in Books Upstairs, Dublin. Instead of coffee and a bun, we enjoyed coffee and a poem. Audrey travelled from Australia, Leslie from Minnesota and Dick from Barcelona; the remaining four from Wicklow, Sligo, Galway and Cork. We asked Alvy Carragher to start proceedings and then, in front of family and friends and strays off the street, we bared our souls. The result was ecstatic, the reward, euphoria. Afterwards, we couldn’t be parted, but stayed in the bookshop café for hours, chatting. D’Olier Street is an Aircoach drive from Dublin Airport, and a DART or train ride from other parts of Ireland. Books Upstairs will rent you a room and they hold regular events. www.booksirish.com

A month later, I qualified for ‘Bring your Limericks to Limerick’ in the Savoy Hotel. Every year, a shortlist of twenty contestants are invited to recite their entry in front of an audience and a panel of judges. Although I didn’t win, I was thrilled to be competing in my father’s city.

In September 2016, I attended ‘Readings from the Pallet’ in Corrigan’s bar, Banagher, County Offaly. At this annual soiree, poets perform on a pallet. In my mother’s county, I read verse and my memoir, The Carnival Girls. Watch out for posts on That Beats Banagher and Corrigan’s Corner House Facebook pages. A bus will bring you there or a boat along the river Shannon.

The following February, I participated in ‘Over the Edge’ in Galway City library on Augustine Street. One Thursday a month, from 6.30-8.00 p.m., local poet and teacher, Kevin Higgins, presents well-known writers, followed by an Open Mic. Arrive before 6.30 to sign up. That night in 2017, Skylight 47 was launched and I read Mussels, which appeared in the publication. Galway has a train and bus station and is close to Shannon and Knock airports. www.overtheedgeliteraryevents.blogspot.com

One Monday night, I popped into ‘Ó Bhéal’ in Cork city. Every week, at 9.30 p.m., in the Hayloft of the Long Valley Pub, Winthrop Street, a featured poet is followed by Open Mic and a Five-Word challenge. Punters call out random words; choose five and get twenty minutes to produce a poem, which they then recite. The audience pick a winner and the prize is a pint. Cork boasts a busy train and bus station and an airport. www.obheal.ie/blog

In January 2018, I was back in Limerick, this time reading An Exile’s Return at Nelly’s Corner café. ‘On the Nail’ takes place on the first Thursday of the month at CBI, 51 O’Connell Street, 8.00 – 10.00 p.m. Guest poets are followed by an Open Mic – musicians and storytellers are also welcome. Limerick has bus and train
In September 2018, I returned to Banagher for the 25th Anniversary of the Pallet. An anthology was launched and a candle engraved to commemorate the occasion. A Dutch contingent read poems about the town they love to visit. Mine was The Lock House, also in the book.

In October, my friend Chic, who lives in Holland, suggested we check out the Poets of Haarlemtown Underground Reading in the Wolfhound Irish Bar & Kitchen. Haarlem is half-an hour’s train journey from Amsterdam and accommodation there is cheaper than in the city. The event is organized by the Irrational Library headquarters and each participant receives three free drinks. There is no guest poet, just an Open Mic for “novices, veterans, preachers, deceivers, spoken word artists and propaganda visionaries.” Despite photographs of my face concealed behind a page, I enjoyed reading, and listening to poets from all over the world perform in English and Dutch, while I chomped on bitterballen. www.irrationallibrary.nl.

On December 8, I crossed the country to Ennis to attend the Poetry Art Exposition at the Record Break vinyl store, art shop and coffee dock. Twelve pictures had been created in response to twelve poems and all were showcased side-by-side. The expo was initiated by café owner and poet, Sinéad NicSíoda, and the Poetry Collective. I read Seven, which had inspired artist, Jim Orr, to create a portrait of an evil nun, based on Durer’s ‘Portrait of the Artist’s Mother.’ This was the second year of the exhibition and Sinéad intends making it an annual Christmas celebration. Check the Record Break Facebook page and www.thepoetrycollective.com.

The following week, I joined Poets Abroad fellows, Dick Edelstein and José Luis Regojo, in Barcelona for their ‘II Recital Poéma en el Raval Recital’ in Café de les Delícies, Rambla del Raval 47. Three guest poets performed in Spanish, Catalan and English, followed by Poets Abroad and an Open Mic. A medley of colourful characters took part. We dined on escalivada and tortillas, and sipped Cava. Only one glass for me in case I forgot my words. Haunted by the Dutch photographs, for the first time I was reciting from memory. José and Dick hosted a second recital in February. A third will take place in April. https://revista.poemame.com/2018/12/16/ii-recital-poetico-trilingue-poemame-en-el-raval-de-barcelona/

On holiday in Florida in January, I googled ‘poetry in Tampa.’ Up popped ShamC in Safety Harbor. On the 3rd Wednesday of every month, Ed Derkevics welcomes ‘poets, spoken word artists, musicians, storytellers and anyone who has an original work to share in less than seven minutes.’ Sign-up starts at 6.30 p.m. and Open Mic is from 7.00 – 9.30. Beer, wine and soda can be purchased. Donations are accepted and appreciated. My friend, Hilary, and I enjoyed a wonderful night in this colourful venue, full of talent and fun. Comment cards were passed to poets after their presentation. One of mine remarked: ‘Your voice is like a warm blanket on a cold night.’ How’s that for encouragement! Domestic and international flights to Tampa airport. www.safetyharborartandmusiccenter.com

Meanwhile, our Poets Abroad has become an annual affair. Books Upstairs was followed by a morning in the Model Arts Centre, Sligo, June 2017, with Kevin Higgins, and an afternoon at the Hot Spot Music Club, Greystones, June 2018, with Colm Keegan. This year, we are planning Essex in June and Minnesota in September. In between, I have read for the Bray Arts Journal in the Martello Hotel, and in Bray and Pearse libraries on Culture Night.

At Christmas, I gathered students from four of my creative writing classes around the fire in the Hot Spot. We sipped mulled wine, munched mince pies, and shared Remembrances of Christmas Past. They too caught the bug and we will meet again in March, in Dun Laoghaire. My next plan is an Open Mic for Greystones.

So, that’s it, I’m on a roll. Rolling around the world reading my poetry. This hobby brings new friends, new acquaintances, new teachers and new students, as well as new places to visit. All are free of charge and
within walking distance of hotels and B&Bs – check booking websites. I’m hooked now, addicted.


Aspiring to a watery heroism - Essay by Nigel Jarrett

By Nigel Jarrett | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Nigel Jarrett is a former newspaperman and a double prizewinner as a fiction writer: the Rhys Davies Award for short fiction and, in 2016, the inaugural Templar Shorts award. His first story collection, Funderland, published by Parthian, was praised by the Guardian, the Independent, the Times and many others, and was longlisted for the Edge Hill Prize. His debut poetry collection, Miners At The Quarry Pool, also from Parthian, was described by Agenda poetry magazine as ‘a virtuoso performance’. Jarrett’s first novel, Slowly Burning (GG Books) was published in 2016, as was his second story collection, Who Killed Emil Kreisler? (Cultured Llama Publishing). Templar is about to publish his three-story pamphlet, A Gloucester Trilogy. Based in Monmouthshire, Jarrett writes for Jazz Journal, the Wales Arts Review, Arts Scene in Wales, Slightly Foxed, Acumen poetry magazine, and several others. His poetry, fiction, and essays appear widely. For many years he was a daily newspaper music critic, and now freelances in that capacity. When he can find time, he swims.

Aspiring to a watery heroism

by Nigel Jarrett

When I was learning to swim with my brother and his friend years ago, a Commonwealth backstroke
champion was wind-milling up and down the pool. The swimmer was John Brockway and our teacher and his coach was Bill Cambray. He was working; we were playing.

I don’t know why we were the only four in the pool. Maybe a busy Cambray was fitting us in with coaching duties. Our parents had obviously paid for the lessons, which involved the three of us travelling six miles by bus to the baths. I do recall that après-swim refreshment in those days was a cheese roll and a mug of steaming Bovril, the beverage a putter of hairs on the chests of us boys.

By the time we three tyros had dog-paddled to the end of the pool with Cambray dangling some kind of safety pole in front of us, the blurred champion had churned his way to twenty lengths. It was the supreme example of inspiration on site.

I don’t even know why our parents thought it important that we should be able to swim: most of us taught ourselves in the local council’s outdoor ponds chlorinated by a man wearing elbow-length rubber gloves and carrying a large tin of white powder, which he cast on the waters after closing time like Millet’s The Sower.

Though I learned only the breaststroke – I’m still working my way towards a passable front crawl and backstroke – I’ve never deserted swimming as a form of exercise. My visits to the local leisure centre usually see me completing eighty lengths in just over an hour, which is a mile in old money, however slowly. I can relate to a mile in swimming terms: it sounds more like an achievement than however many metres it is to run. I’m also helped these days by ‘how to do it’ videos posted on the internet by the National Swimming Association; you get views in slow motion of an aquatic exemplar from back, above, front and beneath. The joys of technology!

At my age, there’s no way that swimming will restore an Adonis shape and musculature. But it makes me feel good, even when I realise the up-and-down motion is boredom spelled in capitals. Into rivers, chemicals from farmer’s fields dribble; in the sea, flotation impedes progress, and jellyfish lurk, as well as those fish that sink themselves in the sand and stick a needle into the water to spike the feet of unsuspecting bathers. Give me the indoor pool, preferably without a human swimming machine to show me up.

Well, I believed almost everything in that last paragraph until I read, on its publication in 1992, Haunts of the Black Masseur by Charles Sprawson. The title was intriguing, the author’s biographical vignette on the back cover a mere revision of the paper’s surface, like a perfect entry into the water after a perfect dive: Charles Sprawson studied at Trinity College, Dublin, deals in nineteenth-century paintings, and recently swam the Hellespont. Impressive, what with all those tankers squeezing through the gap that separates Oriental and Occidental (one assumes he took the shortest route across); but at least they wouldn’t be travelling as fast as a Commonwealth backstroke champion in training.

I treasure the book as one of those literary oddities: a singular exercise in obsession. I kept looking out for a further Sprawson title. None arrived. I just went on swimming after its example – almost a deification of the swimmer and diver – sometimes in places wilder than the municipal baths. Then, in February this year, I read the following headline in The Economist’s review pages: Charles Sprawson Wrote A Celebrated Book: Then He Vanished. I could have told them that. Momentarily, I recalled an illustration from the book, of a Weimar high-diver, photographed in mid-flight against the skies by Kurt Reichert over eighty years ago and about to disappear from one element into another. Mr Sprawson, aged 76, was hospitalised in London, and bemoaning his dilatoriness in writing a sequel to that first book, still his only one. I can’t imagine what a follow-up would be like; I just hope it might have more examples of the ecstasy of taking to water: whether salt, fresh, or mildly chlorinated.

The book’s publication coincided with a campaign in my town to re-open the local lido. We were surrounded by them in the old days, before the arrival of what I’ve heard described as ‘Elfin Safety’, a means of
protecting the delicate and mischievously charming among us against a playground environment unaccountably rendered perilous. When I and Mr Sprawson were young we used to climb trees, play on concrete, swim in rivers, scuff bare knees, and dab our cuts with iodine. Rivers weren’t as deep and fast-running as the Yarra, in Australia, in which a sixty-year-old Annette Kellermann is pictured in his book performing some sort of underwater ballet movement. ‘Come on in’, Ms Kellermann seems to be saying, a column of bubbles rising from her mouth to the surface. Swimming was something we did, like playing football on a piece of rough ground: it was play; it had no context; it was done before goggles were invented. We were aware, because we also went weekly to ‘the pictures’, of Johnny Weissmuller and Esther Williams, Hollywood film stars who’d managed to appear on the screen via unlikely story boards about swimming. Weissmuller, of course, was also a celluloid Tarzan, after fame as a champion swimmer, an athlete. Then again, but only in summer, we would enjoy days out or holidays at Barry Island and Porthcawl, on the south Glamorgan coast, where the sea was briny, if a tad grey and opaque.

By the time Sprawson’s book came out, I was still swimming but not regularly and not for the unselfconscious joy of it. I could understand why some were put off by thrashing their way up and down a 25-metre pool, however cerulean its waters. In 1992, I began swimming for health reasons; it was preferable to the gym, which more than ever seemed like an outpost of the Inquisition, its punishments self-administered. *Haunts of the Black Masseur* brought all these disparate elements together, not only placing the reader in illustrious company but also endowing swimming with an almost mythical quality. Suddenly, immersion became a ritualistic experience, or one made it so. Most of all, it was pleasurable again. Floating, diving, swimming: they were all raised in stature. One even began to lose weight, a peculiarly twentieth-century achievement but really a bonus.

Sprawson’s book reminds us that bathing has luminous antecedents. In the 1800s, the English believed it to be an instrument of moral and social reform. The Japanese swimmer was once an icon of samurai pride and nationalism. In America and Germany swimming came to signify escape. And the author cites many examples of water and one’s communing with it as an enveloping presence: Byron racing towards the breakers at Shelley’s beach funeral; Rupert Brooke swimming in the buff with Virginia Woolf in water ‘smelling of mint and mud’; and Edgar Allan Poe’s mysterious addiction to swimming in rivers on his own. For Byron, swimming was a mania. The Byronic Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, who bathed ‘voluptuously’ in the river Jordan, swam often in the Nile while his servants slapped the waters with oars to keep the crocodiles at bay. There was always something slightly potty about these aficionados, not least the immortal Captain Webb, who dared defy the lethal vortex below Niagara Falls. The madness is exemplified by Poe’s belief that the diver expressed the uncontrollable urge to self-destruction inherent in us all. Well, he spoke for himself as far as I’m concerned.

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Perhaps, and at its most congenial on a good day, swimming can, in Swinburne’s words, transport us to ‘another form of life’. But it would be a recent phenomenon. For centuries, swimming in Britain was rare and sporadic. ‘Only those able to rise above popular superstition felt free to enter the water,’ Sprawson writes. Spectators were amused when in 1726 Benjamin Franklin stripped and plunged into the Thames, making his way from Chelsea to Blackfriars. Although philosophy tells us that every time we dip our feet into a river it’s a different river, explorers have been fascinated to discover waterways that feature in the literature of antiquity; for example, Richard Chandler’s visit to Greece and Asia Minor in the 1760s allowed him to indulge a fascination with the stream of the Ilissus, into whose sacred waters Socrates and his disciple Phaedrus had dipped their naked feet as they conversed. Sprawson’s is a veritable litany of how literature is suffused with the urge to take a dip, from Scott Fitzgerald’s aptly named Dick Diver in *Tender is the Night*, which traces the moral disintegration of ‘an incomparable swimmer’, to Yukio Mishima’s *The Sound of Waves*, in which the author celebrates his newly-discovered love of swimming in transposing the Hellenistic idyll of Daphnis and Chloe to the Japanese island of Kamijima.
It’s interesting to note, as a photo of the Sutro Baths in San Francisco in 1900 illustrates, how much Sprawson’s characters were swimmers, not loungers. The Sutro is an almost industrial set of tanks and diving boards. No ‘leisure pools’ for their clientèle. My municipal pool is full-length, and the early-morning session begins at 6.30am, summer and winter. I can swim those eighty lengths in ninety minutes in the lanes reserved for fast and slow performers. No diving, though (Elfin Safety). I’ve read *Haunts of the Black Masseur* four times. On each visit to the pool I feel it inspires me, if only to the extent that in moving through a frictionless body of water, I’m in good company. I hope Charles Sprawson bobs to the surface soon to extend it for me. Reading his book is just like swimming itself, even at my non-heroic level.

*Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer As Hero*, by Charles Sprawson (Faber). Pic by Artem Verbo

ENDS

**Translation.... an Act of Seduction**

By Dave Kavanagh | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Dr Anna Pia is based in Edinburgh, a language graduate with a Doctorate in Education (2008) and an interest in language, dialogue and identity. She started writing seriously in 2011 and has a history of writing for different audiences. Anna has been published in the Times Educational Supplement many times, the Scottish Educational Review and other academic and professional journals. As an HM Inspector of Education she has written and edited national reports for a range of audiences.

What makes for a good translation? What are the boundaries between translation and authoring? What skills should a translator possess? Beyond the mechanistic replacing of one word with another, a minimalist scaffolding of sentence or paragraph resulting in an article or book, what more is there to it?

My time as a language undergraduate is well behind me. Nevertheless as a translated author now, I am intrigued at the growing literature on translation and the link with creativity, increasingly commented on by writers and academics. I am an Italian Scot and a devout francophile and I have maintained and nourished my fluency with these Romance languages throughout my life, and added several other languages although not to the same degree of fluency. My memories of translating for the purpose of university assignments are still live, as are nights poring over Garzanti or Le Petit Robert. I still remember the exhilaration of breaking the code of the foreign language; hacking into cold unfriendly phrases; excavating words to find their true meaning and breaking their resistance, to then arrive at a kind of nirvana... wonderful freedoms and flow, the satisfaction of rendering the sense of the writing into a known: my own familiar language that is; somehow moving from the constraints of my linguistic limitations, to a language where I had all at my disposal and which permitted the making of a complete piece with its own integrity and heart. To arrive at a place where I could craft and enjoy playful accuracy was both a joy and a relief. The opposite was also true; the tailoring of a well articulated piece of English to fit the limited frame of my own knowledge of a foreign language reduced the art of it, deadened its spirit, drained it of its energy, leaving only a bleak sequence of words: a lifeless artefact. Very recently, having avoided any form of serious translation throughout my life, and reserving any linguistic experimentation for the purposes of direct communication only, I was suddenly thrust without any choice, into a position of having not only to translate seriously (and for publication, the time frame very short indeed) but of retranslating chunks of my own book previously published in English into Italian. I had consistently rejected any prior suggestions that I might take up the challenge of translating the whole book myself, preferring to leave that painstaking task to a professional. Leaving aside my doubts about my own linguistic competence, having finally concluded the book some two years before, I had no wish to revisit a house I had fully inhabited for the several long months it took to write it; a house where I had laughed as well as struggled, where I had been both warm and overheated to being lonely and cold; no wish to meet again those loved and not so loved long since gone. I had no wish above all, to meet the bumbling, stumbling, emerging self, the nuances and changes of self..the self that in no way resembles the me of now. This article records a few of the challenges of that piece of translation work. It suggests too I hope, a sense of what exactly might be involved in the process, what the characteristics of a good piece of translation are; what skills are both essential and useful for an excellent piece of work; and the immense potential of the simple act of translation. In translating my own book, I confronted a number of challenges. There was generally a need to be more precise; and on reflection, my overall experience of language and of diverse terms of reference is the need for much more precision in say, Italian and certainly French where the language is much more nuanced. So, I found myself surprisingly aware when working in Italian of the power and effect of the use of verb tense. The unexpected use of the passato remoto/past absolute or past historic can create drama or finality and at certain points of my story, it was just what was required. The imperfect tense used effectively can be lyrical and evocative; can conjure up a certain ambiance and it served me well when I needed to set a scene. The passato prossimo a go to past tense has a certain philosophical edge, linking our present still with the past. The subjunctive leads us to conjecture and possibility and in Italian I found gave a neat, concise refinement which I had conveyed in other ways in English. This imposed need to “pin down” while at times difficult to determine also presented opportunity; and I found, in translating from the English, it offered scope for additional effect or sharpened my Italian prose. I had to be much clearer too with regard to terminology: Did
I mean a bar or café? If I meant an eatery what kind of eatery? A restaurant, pizzerìa, brasserie, trattoria, ostería, to mention a few; not forgetting too that terminology also varies from region to region in Italy: cappuccio, cappucino; caffè con crema, caffelatte? I also had to think very carefully about humour when describing certain situations since it is rooted differently in different cultures, adapting the appropriacy and tone of my language for a different readership. To what extent too, should I intervene in portraying aspects of lifestyle in a Scottish city... the taking of afternoon tea; the role of the beloved, chilled coffee shop; the central importance of baking, baking tins and consumption of cake; of snacking; breakfast practice and fare? Finally, for me there was the major question of style, tone, rhythm and indeed temperature; the problem of writing in a language that maintained the inherent energy of a book, it’s warmth, intimacy or formality, respected its voice and cadence and conveyed its central themes as directly, with the same immediacy as the original text.

Current writing about translation defines the exercise as a negotiation between two cultures. In her work on communication, dialogue and dialogicality (the dynamic between self and other voiced or unvoiced, interdependence, leading to identity change) Marková (2003) makes a strong connection between culture, tradition and language. Linguists will readily agree. A language and specifically its idioms, sayings and proverbs, articulates a certain culture, mindset and values of a particular society. Further to this, a language incorporates a history. This poses enormous challenges for the translator. Not to be underestimated. The translator stands at the intersection of where cultures do not conveniently align, is a pivotal figure in that negotiation, and therefore requires a suite of skills in addition to linguistic expertise. To be capable of embodying one culture in the authentic words of another language requires an understanding and indeed lived experience, combined with an interest in, an instinctive knowledge of and “feel” for the culture and history of the target language. Additionally, if justice is to be done to the original text, some research, some hours with the historical archives is adviseable and a complete psychological shift may even be necessary. A good example of this might be the social and historical significance of the emblematic fish supper or a poke of chips in Scotland. In a book for a foreign readership this needs some explaining. What does the meal consist of? What is its history? What are the social and cultural practices and attitudes to it? In Scotland it is a go to meal on the move; a snack after hours; an easy take away dinner. These habits indicate very basic differences in attitudes to food since I can think of no equivalent in Italy and a “fritto misto” is an entirely different proposition. There is too on these islands, the ubiquitous issue of social class and its markers and distinguishing features. The behaviours of different societal groups in relation to that Scottish meal differ widely as do they in many areas of public and personal life in Scotland. It is equally challenging to write for non English speaking readers about schooling, the Governance of large organisations, career structures or about accent. It also difficult to convey the full significance of choosing to take up croquet or play football. “Une soirée dansante” is not the same as a dinner dance or a ball and “una cena” is not a dinner party. There is a kind of aimlessness about “Les randonnées” (walking as a serious pastime) and a comic aspect to “le footing” (jogging or running).

The main task of negotiation as I understand it, is to reconcile difference, through persuasive means; to give ground where appropriate and to be immutable or take unilateral action where not. The overall goal is to communicate effectively and in so doing the act of translating may indeed go far beyond the original text. A translator is then, never objective nor can she adopt a neutral stance. Unlike online translation tools which are less tha helpful and can lead to serious trouble (I still remember a billboard outside a taverna in Greece announcing “randy fish”) human agency, reflection and making hard decisions together with the ability to write well are essential. The continuous dialogue between translator, text and author, initiated and acted upon by the translator whose task it is to appeal to a new readership is fertile ground for creativity and may lead to a new, vital iteration of the original text authored differently. To sum up, translation as I experienced it as both a writer and short term translator is a way of communicating with energy, appetite, imagination, openness and flexibility. As a successful negotiator while fully respecting the piece to be translated and in the pursuit of drawing in the uninitiated, the culturally unaware but curious, inviting investment, there must be no coyness about progressing or indeed departing from the original text in order to remould, create new text... its umbilical link to the original generally discernible but also different. Vygotsky emphasised the
importance of words in the growth of consciousness as a whole. While the original work must be honoured, what has developed from it I believe should be of equal importance. And for those fortunate and willing enough to be able to read and understand both narratives, as a pair, they should build a picture with greater impact, more colour, wider appeal and more to say. What I saw initially as a burden I now regard as a privilege. For from that unique perspective, I believe that I gained an insight not available to many. The unlooked for gift of speaking to two distinct audiences whose cultures I value and love equally, allowed me both to challenge and to flatter. What I learned from the experience was the value of a good translation, of a translator who is both a linguistic and cultural expert; is respectful of the original text and its sentiment; when necessary going beyond the brief; and the high dependency of the author into whose hands it falls.

Samantha Maw reviews PACT by Jessamine O Connor

By sammy_maw | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Jessamine O Connor is a Dublin born poet living on the Sligo Roscommon border in the west of Ireland. She facilitates The Hermit Collective (an award-winning arts group), and the weekly creative writing group The Wrong Side of the Tracks Writers. She coordinates conversational English classes for Ballaghadereen Failte Isteach and is involved in a shared storytelling project. PACT is her fifth poetry chapbook since 2013, and in 2020 Salmon Poetry will be publishing her first collection. O Connor is the winner of the Poetry Ireland Butler’s Café Competition (2017), the iYeats Award (2011) and the Francis Ledwidge Award (2011), as well as being shortlisted for several other awards between 2010 and 2018.

PACT is a self-published collection of poems. Reading self-published poetry is always a bit of a risk because you can never guarantee the quality of the text, but PACT is a real treasure. It is a polished, uncluttered series of poems, fearlessly exploring the realities of life. O Connor draws you into her world, and you feel connected with the themes and feelings expressed. It’s almost like you are sat together, putting the world to rights over a glass of wine. This sharing of secrets is emphatic from the start; in her title poem she uses simple staccato words to describe the sound of the crows that used to congregate around the roof of her house and then in the last verse the pace slows down:
I miss their eternal silhouette standing guard on the pot,
On the house, over me, underneath, dislodging their foundation,
Whispering up our secret.

I like how O Connor challenges the modern self-obsessed mindset in `When I grow up`.

When I grow up I want to be fashionable.

I want to throw away clothes every season
and wear what’s new.

I don’t want to think about who makes the clothes, or how young,
Or exhausted, or mistreated they are, I want to be cool.

This is a poem that exposes our true intentions as human beings, and the raw truth of it made me cringe a little. It is immediately followed by `There was no Funeral`, about loss and society’s oblivious approach to it. The juxtaposition of the two poems suggests that our priorities are pretty messed up.

O Connor touches on themes such as pollution, domestic violence, old age and death, the quest for perfection, war, poverty and homelessness. The poem `Notice` is a painful recollection of a disrupted childhood; a young girl and her mother being forced to move from one undesirable location to the next, trying to find somewhere to call home.

and it took years
to learn that we can paint the walls, put up shelves, pictures,
or take them down, grow food, shift things around,
that it’s allowed – no one is coming to throw us out

So, my children don’t know what it’s like yet to move, be insecure,
To not know where you’re going to be, or for how long,
To keep everything always half unpacked-

But I will never forget.

The collection is also infused with hope and humour throughout. There’s the delightful eroticism of `Organic`, the list `Christmas list` poem (where Vajazzles, Magic knickers and Anal bleaching are discussed), and the short poem `Stubble` about the intricacies of kissing a man with a beard. O Connor uses a variety of different techniques that constantly offer up delightful little surprises. The way she shapes the words, the sounds she uses, and the simple, unpretentious language make this collection an absolute must for your bookshelf. I read it a few times over and enjoyed it more each time. Although hard to choose a favourite, `Welcome – the island speaks to refugees` would be a valid contender. It reminds me of what it means for us to be truly human and that life is not just about protecting our small privileged corner of existence.
WELCOME

the island speaks to refugees

I open up my craggy arms, my cliffs,
this shift of whirling gulls,
stretch my beaches wide,
reach out my hands
made of coral, stone and sand,
scatter islands like roses
or breadcrumbs, to show you
where to land
and when you’re close enough
I’ll lift up the rough cloth
of my hedges, fields and loughs,
wrap its patchwork cloak around you,
gather the lush green folds
and rolls of sequin blues
to make an earth cocoon
for you to grow in
because when you’re rested
and ready to stir
it will be my pleasure
to watch your wings unfold,
unfurl in my cloud-thick hair,
sprout your new roots feet deep
into my lungs and feed me
your fresh air.

You can buy a copy of PACT from the author’s website: https://www.jessamineoconnor.com/
Lady Jesus and Other Poems Arathy Asok

(Authorspress, www.authorspressbooks.com)


“Lady Jesus and other poems” is a collection of contemporary, unflinching poems that don’t back away from politics or patriarchy. In “They Ask me Questions I will not Answer”,

“They looked to see

What crowds were being formed,
That thought of the little raped girl,
The boy who wrote poems
(And was jailed),
Of the pregnant woman
With the stillborn child in her lap.

And when they put back the pieces together
They looked to see
If I was one of them.
That was what they wanted
After all;
To know if I was one of them."

Initially the narrator seems full of anxiety and paranoid as if she’s on trial – it’s not specified in the poem who “they” are or the context of the questions – and her answers could have serious, negative consequences. The “if I was one of them” sounds more benign, as if the probing was to see if the narrator was a suitable applicant. But to someone who has encountered discrimination or prejudice, such questions are never benign and interviewee never feels a sense of belonging and will never been “one of them.” The notes of reassurance, “put back the pieces together”, “after all”, are deliberately false, as if the narrator is playing down the experience to reduce her ordeal. This theme of pushing away negatives to focus on positives is continued in “Women, Mine,”

“Because all they want you to see
Is the soul in a complete circle.
You let your eyes slide past
The bullet holes, the bleeding wounds,
For you only see
The lifted hands gloried,
In the sun.”

“See” is repeated; it’s an instruction to look where directed, to the warmth and nurture of the sun and away from man’s warfare.

In the title poem, the narrator walks around a closed house,

“The home has become a house.
She has died, rotting on the cot,
She who smiled at me like a wild gypsy,
And told me to hide love letters under the green leaves.
Without her the jackfruit tree is bald.
The fisherman does not look in.
Here again,
I wait for the wind
Under a sky
To carry some smell
That I missed
Which would pour
Water down my spine
Closing the hole they drilled,
On my hand My feet My breast.”

It’s not clear whether the house is locked shut or whether it is open but narrator feels going in would be trespassing. There’s a double sense of abandonment: the woman who died alone and the narrator’s martyrdom, the last line a reference to stigmata, and a feeling that others, such as the fisherman, have moved on but the narrator can’t yet. The linking of narrator and victim
is repeated in “Muslim, Rohingya, Three Years” where the narrator feels part of her is rotting after witnessing a drowned Rohingya girl,

“Her face is bloated. Her eyes closed.
On her red dress, the butterflies are still alive, flitting on the half opened flowers.
She does not seem surprised.
Where are the others who walked with her?
The mother whose hand she left the moment the water took her in?
The sister she laughed with a moment ago?
The father she looked from afar?
The brother who carried her around?
The friends under the tree with whom she played before they came to kill?
I cannot see them. The water is cold where she floated bit by bit into my eyes.
Was she a Muslim? Was she Buddha’s enemy?
I do not know. The moment I saw her face I felt the rot spreading,
And now I am almost dead.”

The poem ends with the dismissal of the idea the girl’s death had anything to do with water or religion; a man-made death. The questions are rhetorical. The questioner knows the girl is alone, her family and friends forced to leave the country they thought was home.

“Lady Jesus and other poems” are poems that witness and record, in direct, clear vocabulary. There’s no room for ambiguity and it’s apparent the poems take sides with the repressed and unrepresented, those who find themselves victims of prejudice and discrimination. However, they shy away from preaching and don’t harangue the reader into agreeing with the narrator’s viewpoint.

Emma Lee
"Dreaming of Stones" is split into six sections, Hours, The Time of Our Lives, Possibilities, Wild Places, Love and Monks and Mystics, and comes with an introduction and afterword by the author. There are 108 pages of poems and each feels like a meditation or prayer with Christine Valters Paintner’s faith a huge influence and source of inspiration. “This is not a Poem”, immediately after the introduction, sets the tone and ends,

“This is not a poem, but me taking off my clothes and stepping eagerly into the cold mid-December sea."
This is the silence between breaths and in that stillness 
this is me saying yes and yes and yes.”

Three is symbolic, in Christian faith it represents the Holy Trinity, but the last line does feel exaggerated and a bit too close to a line from Meg Ryan in “Harry Met Sally” where she’s demonstrating a act she claims is faked. The atmosphere captured in the poem evokes the sense of calm space for being and creating. Another frequent motif is the moon, in “Compline”

“Stars silver
in the violet darkness,
all the midnight wanderers
– cat and wolf, owl and bat -
roam night’s trails
ears attuned to another voice.

Step through the doorway
into silence and dream time”

The moon here is a nurturer of creativity and her darkened realm is not only one of dreams but one when restricted sight can lead to artists being forced to sense their environment differently. I think the aim of “cat and wolf” is to imply harmony but cats are crepuscular rather than midnight seekers. In “Pendulum”, the moon offers wealth,

“A silver coin sails across
the black sky making everyone
who sees it rich.

I know too what it is to feel
my poverty when the bowl
of night rolls down over me
with its ceramic thunk.

Some days I am swollen with
possibility, a ripe peach,
fingers sticky with sweetness,
while others I am hollowed out,“

These are sensual images. The harder consonants in the middle quoted stanza echo the sense of a heavy bowl whereas the rhythm grows lighter in the third stanza where optimism returns. Although Christine Valters Paintner’s faith is of utmost importance to her, most of these poems are not directly engaged with her faith. An exception is “Please can I have a God” which includes the stanza,

“Please can I have a God
whose voice is the sound of a girl, long silent from abuse,
now speaking her first word,
who is not sweetness or light, but the fierce sound of
‘no’ in all the places where love has been extinguished.”

It’s a faith that includes doubt and courage through adversity rather than one of absolutes and certainties. A similar note is achieved in “There is no time for love to be born,”

“There is no time for love to be born
in a world flailing under fear,
trampled by terror, crushed by callousness.
There is no room for love to be born
under the heft of pressing grief,
no open portals in the perpetual busyness
or the list of endless tasks minted newly each morning,
where ‘to do’ never seems to include ‘love more.’”

However, there’s also a feeling it’s written for those who already agree the world is a terrible place. It aims for a note of optimism to end on, “when all else nudges use further toward despair,// suddenly we feel the wild impulse arising,// to say yes.” which echoes back to “This is not a poem” that starts this collection.

The final section is a series looking at monks and mystics. “St Dearbhla’s Eyes” is inspired by the myth where, when her betrothed says he loves her eyes, she takes them out and gives them to him only for him to flee. She washes her face and her sight is restored,

“She looked at the world
as if for the first time,
she could finally see
how her God was always
on the side of freedom,
how everything glistens,

and how we must risk everything,
trust we were meant
for this, as if telling
the truth for the first time,

as if our hearts
had been plucked out too
and set ablaze
for all the world to see.”

It seems she was better off without her betrothed and in her freedom found the courage and willingness to see the world properly without bias or prejudice. The strive for clarity and strength to open up is a theme throughout.

“Dreaming of Stones” is a long collection and whilst a lot of care and attention has gone into crafting and polishing each poem, the voice behind the poems didn’t vary much. It’s one to read in small chunks rather than a sustained reading of the whole collection. That said, it’s calm voice had a seductive feel to it.

Get it now on Amazon
The life of war correspondent Marie Colvin, by Lindsey Hilsum.

Marie Colvin was a brilliant war correspondent who paid the ultimate price when she was killed in 2012 (aged just 55) in a mortar attack by Syrian government forces on the besieged town of Homs. This 400-page biography by her friend and fellow war reporter Lindsey Hilsum, Channel 4 News international editor, captures the complexities and contradictions of Colvin’s personality: her extraordinary bravery (often amounting to recklessness), her wild partying, her alcoholism, her dedication to the underdog and the victims of war, her depressions, her miscarriages, her suicidal thoughts, her chaotic love life. As Colin Freeman commented in the Spectator of 1 December 2018: ‘Husbands and lovers came and went, leaving her private life as chaotic as any warzone, and often less fulfilling.’

Colvin covered most of the major conflicts of recent decades. She was the archetypal ‘parachutist’ moving from one war zone to another: Libya in 1986, Iraq in 1991 and 2003, the Yemen in 1994, Eritrea in 1998, Kosovo in 1999, Zimbabwe in 2000, Gaza in 2004, Pakistan in 2006, Afghanistan in 2010, Tunisia in 2011, Egypt in 2012 and so on. While reporting on the assault by the Sri Lankan military on a jungle zone held by the Tamil Tigers in 2001 she was shot – and lost the sight of her left eye (pp 234-240). The large, black eye-patch she sported afterwards became, in some way, her ‘trade mark’: it symbolised her uniqueness and her special courage.

Colvin never completed a book: she planned a biography of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat with whom over the years she developed a particularly close professional relationship but it never materialised. Yet a collection of her writings, On the front line: The collected journalism of Marie Colvin (Harper Press 2012) does show her greatest strength as a journo: namely in being able to describe with minute attention to detail and with compassion the horrors she often witnessed. And Hilsum quotes regularly from her despatches.

But what makes this an unusual biography of a journo is that it includes (at the end, pp 374-375) a very moving, ten-stanza poem, ‘Reports of my Survival May be Exaggerated’, by Alan Jenkins, one of Colvin’s
former lovers. He actually read it out at one of the memorial services for Colvin – at St Martin-in-the-Fields, off Trafalgar Square – where, amongst those present, Hilsum writes, were the foreign secretary and the head of MI6, the intelligence service.


The title of the Colvin tribute plays ironically with the phrase ‘reports of my death have been exaggerated’ (attributed, falsely, to Mark Twain), used when a character who is alive but presumed dead. Here, Colvin is sadly dead – but is given a magical ‘living’ presence. Jenkins begins;

How can you be lying there?
Immodestly among the rubble
When we want you to be here
In some other kind of trouble –

Luffing up, in irons, perhaps,
Just downstream from the Dove,
Lost in South London, without maps
Or capsized in love.

What’s keeping you? A kind of dare?
Come back and tell us how you stayed
One step ahead, how you gave fear
The slip, how you were not afraid –

The first stanza, then, sets out the structure for the poem (four short lines, here 2 and 4 slightly indented with 1 and 3, 2 and 4 rhyming) and its lyrical tone – tempered by the sadness of mourning. The first line captures the surprise and disbelief at the tragedy. In line three, Jenkins uses the ‘we’ voice as if to represent the group of Colvin’s many friends, relations and admirers whose presence provides some kind of comfort to the poet. ‘Lost in South London, without maps’ captures, affectionately, Colvin’s somewhat scatty nature while ‘capsized in love’ (following the ‘downstream’ and ‘capsized’ motif) alludes to her difficult love life.

Jenkins continues to address Colvin – as if he’s willing her not to be dead. He entreats her to ‘come back’ and tell how she gave ‘fear the slip’.

In the next stanza, Jenkins finally takes on the ‘I’ voice: conversationally he says: ‘Look – here’s my idea./Come back – this time for good.’ And, with the first reference to Colvin as a war reporter, he tells her: ‘Leave your flak jacket and your gear/In that burnt-out neighbourhood.’ By the end of the next stanza he is pleading with her: ‘Marie, get up off that bloodstained floor!’

The poem is split into two, five-stanza sections with the indents now appearing on lines 1 and 3 in the second section. At the start of stanza six, Jenkins imagines Colvin throwing her arm around him and talking – with an ‘unearthly calm’: ‘Can’t you take in that I am dead?’ And she advises: ‘Learn to expect the unexpected turn/of the tide’ (so continuing the ‘downstream’, ‘capsized’ theme).

In the final two stanzas, Jenkins (through Colvin’s voice) evokes the intimate times they spent together:

And filling ashtrays filed the copy
You would read – or not read – with
A brackish taste and your first coffee
Contending on your tongue; while Billy Smith,

My street cat rescued from Jerusalem,
Barged in, shouting, from his wars ...
As many lives as his – and now I've used them.
I wish I’d made it back to yours.’

‘Filed the copy’ is a reference to Colvin’s work as a war correspondent. While her beloved cat, Billy Smith, can perform human activities (just as a dead journalist can in Jenkins poem) and so barges in ‘shouting’ (not ‘barking’) from his wars.

And the poem ends unsentimentally on a down-to-earth note with Colvin realising she has used her ‘nine lives’, saying simply: ‘I wish I’d made it back to yours.’

While the poem is wonderful, then, there are still significant problematics about the book as a whole which have been largely ignored in all the reviews in the corporate media. Throughout, Hilsum’s attempts to place the events Colvin covered in a broader political context are woeful, merely following conventional narratives. For instance, there is no mention of the fact that the 1986 US attacks on Libyan targets incorporated a deliberate attempt to assassinate the President of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi. Indeed, the notion of US-led Western imperialism indulging desperately in a series of adventures (dubbed ‘humanitarian’ in the rhetoric) driven by the demands of a massive military/industrial/intelligence/media complex against largely manufactured enemies is nowhere considered.

Thus, the 1991 Gulf conflict, in which 250,000 Iraqi soldiers perished (according to Colin Powell, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, writing in his memoir of the conflict) was solely the fault of ‘Saddam Hussein’ and ‘his’ August 1990 invasion of oil-rich Kuwait (pp 128-129). In 1999, according to Hilsum, the Serbian conflict erupted after Serbian forces marched 45 Kosovar Albanian farmers to a forest at Račak and shot them (p. 186). To oppose the brutal Serbian rule, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began to fight for independence. No mention of the fact that the KLA was effectively a creation of the CIA which funded, trained and supplied it with weapons. And that the conflict was largely an attempt by NATO (in its 50th anniversary year) to establish a post-Cold War raison d’être.

Get it now on Amazon

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PERSONA NON GRATA- reviewed by Samantha Maw

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Isabelle Kenyon is the editor of Fly on the Wall Poetry Press[1], and the author of *Digging Holes to Another Continent* and *This is not a Spectacle*. Kenyon writes in the introduction that *Persona Non Grata* is `curated from love and the desire to make a change`[2]. Proceeds go towards Shelter UK and Crisis aid UK to support those suffering from homelessness, poverty, disaster, war and oppression around the world. Fly on the Wall Poetry Press has also produced an anthology called *Please Hear What I am Not Saying* for MIND, the UK mental health charity.

This collection includes the poems of 45 different writers from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures, and the range of poetic forms reflects this enormous diversity. They have all come together to speak out against injustice and to promote change. The anthology is split into seven sections, each focusing on an aspect of social injustice. These sections tackle a vast range of issues such as homelessness, racism, domestic violence, alcoholism, drug use, mental health, sexuality, women’s rights, refugees, war, grief, invisibility and politics. British attitudes to these issues are a recurring theme; I found it an uncomfortable reminder of our collective tendency to sweep suffering under the carpet and retreat into our comfortable lounges to drink tea and discuss the weather.

*18 million starving, think*
about Yemen over your afternoon tea, just for a second,
then reward yourself a cake for piety.\(^{[3]}\)

In fact, not only do we sit back and drink tea, we are sometimes guilty of being poverty `tourists` when we come across someone in our neighbourhood who has fallen upon hard times:

The watching curtains twitch
those who sat cosy, chicken dinners on laps
watching the Real News far far away safe distance
suffering, you are too close
just outside and close enough to smell\(^{[4]}\)

In Nigel Kent’s poem, *Sleight of Hand*, a homeless man suffers the indignity of a rich man’s mockery and it reminds us that not only are some people indifferent to suffering, on occasion, but they are also positively gloating. They enjoy stealing even the `fledgling hopes` \(^{[5]}\) of a person in dire need.

There is a `them and us` thread that winds its way through the collection. An underlying fear keeps the disadvantaged at arm’s length. It is a fear that can dehumanise, as Marjon van Bruggen highlights in her poem, *Stripped*.

Did he once love and live
had a wife and kids, maybe
a too small suit, neatly pressed
preserved for that special occasion?

Who took it all, and took even
more in dark silence, until
he had nothing left but this?\(^{[6]}\)

This sense of otherness is also conveyed in Jennie Owen’s *The Refugees*, where the subjects of her poem almost become animalistic,
unaware in their hoof and claw otherness,

that they have not obliterated their cages,

their sunken ark,

for good, just yet.^[1]

The refugees believe they are being shipped to safety, yet the locals wait on the shore like hunters, `all their ducks in a row`.^[8]

In *Sostenuto* by Judith Kingston, commuters observe a man ravaged by war, as they hug their bags and children close to them,

worried they might catch his wasting, or his fleas, worried

he might want things that were theirs.^[9]

Raine Geoghegan tackles the plight of the travelling community in his prose poem *Keep Movin*` through the language of a Romany Gypsy (glossary included!). We get a glimpse into a world where the inhabitants are always strangers and can never claim a piece of land for long. Despite this, there is a deep-rooted sense of loyalty and togetherness in the community. They sing together and thank God for their blessings; `All together in the poove (field), the best of times`.

Sometimes the lack of humanity shown by those who have more is counterbalanced by the surprising generosity of those who have very little. Maureen Weldon’s *Bus Stop Woman*[10] is a cheerful, talkative, loving sort who can see (it seems) into the souls of others, despite her circumstances. In *Sonnet for a Homeless Woman Named Beth*, the subject of the poem `blows kisses to each passer-by who smiles at her`^[11] as she lives amongst the small tents and blue tarps of her own temporary neighbourhood.

Ceinwen Haydon reminds us that despite the hardships there is lots to celebrate, and the small acts of kindness between strangers mustn’t go unnoticed:

*Let’s celebrate-

my bus arriving two minutes early,*
the old lady who gives
her last humbug to the driver
because he smiles like her late husband
and the Sikh boy who gives her his seat.\[12\]

There is often a dichotomy at play in these poems; the sparkling Christmas window displays in the high street at odds with the homeless seeking shelter and food on the wrong side of them;\[13\] A wrecked car `ridden with joy and fired to skeleton'\[14\] becomes home sweet home, a haven with its windows blown out; the British drop bombs on a country and then provide it with aid\[15\]. Danger and safety; love and hate; hope and despair are awkward bedfellows on every page.

But I think that’s the point. The world is overwhelmed with suffering, and people who ignore, encourage or instigate it. This anthology holds nothing back - it presents humanity for what it is and there is no escaping how far we can fall. Yet at the same time, there is hope. We just need to look past our tv screens, listen over the noise of the radio, and see beyond the empty promises of our power-hungry world leaders. At least we can control how we behave and how we respond to the suffering we encounter. At least we can try to keep our hearts open to the bigger picture.

Love is a doing word
so let’s all keep in mind
that in a world already tough enough
at least we tried being kind.\[16\]

\[1\] https://www.flyonthewallpoetry.co.uk
Review- case of mis en abyme by Carla Scarano D’Antonio

By carlascarano | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Carla Scarano D’Antonio moved to England (Lancashire then Surrey) in 2007 from Rome (Italy) and started attending creative writing courses. She obtained a Degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing with Merit at Lancaster University in October 2012. Her work was published in Shipwrights (an online Swedish Review), Purple Patch, First Edition magazine, Northern Life, audio Flax Anthologies: Vanishing Act (Flax 020), Flash Mob (Flax 026), Cake, the Beautiful Dragons Anthologies Heavenly Bodies and My Dear Watson, London Grip, Lighthouse, South and Poetry News. She self-published a poetry pamphlet, A Winding Road, in 2011 and won the First Prize of the John Dryden Translation Competition 2016. The prize was awarded for translation of some poems by Eugenio Montale that Keith Lander and Carla co-translated. She publishes recipes, travel journals and opinions on her blog: carlascarano.blogspot.co.uk/ She is currently working on a PhD on Margaret Atwood’s work at the University of Reading. Website: http://www.carlascaranod.co.uk/

Poems in the case

Michael Bartholomew-Biggs
The new collection by Michael Bartholomew-Biggs features both poetry and prose in the frame of a whodunit detective story. The narrative is gripping from the first to the last page with a good balance of humour, lyricism and well-crafted ironic undertones.

The setting is a poetry workshop in a remote and renowned locality, Weald Barn, in Kent where two famous poets, George Hamblin and Steven Prince, lead a small group of six well published and carefully chosen poets. The title of the workshop, ‘Delighting in the dark side’, sets the theme pointing out both the mystery story that is going to develop, and the mysterious ‘dark’ human side.

In the best whodunit tradition, the collection starts with the death of a poet, Eric Jessop, who fell from a cliff near his home by accident, we do not know if he was pushed or committed suicide. His partner, George Hamblin, was away, or so he says, and supports the suicidal theory reporting to the police that Eric was depressed and suffered from a writer’s block. Since the beginning the story specifies its main intertextual reference, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*, in fragments of poems Jessop left on his desk before dying. They recall Winston Smith’s rebellion and O’Brien, where the two characters are linked in an undefined relationship mirroring each other and merging in one person, maybe Eric Jessop himself:

but I can only guess your fierce resentment
of the state we reached – both cheated by my own O’Brien
who after all and all the time has been in charge

The prose narration spells out the plot and the different characters, the leftist poet, the romantic woman, the experienced actress, the disillusioned man, the beautiful woman and her lover, and the solitary but attentive observer, Stanley Spenser, who is going to solve the case, or nearly. In a fascinating not at all idyllic world of poetry the two tutors reveal themselves to be fierce rivals both coveting a lucrative poet-in-residence post, jealous of each other’s work and reputation and competing on who is going to control Jessop’s legacy. There
is enough motive for a murder, or two, while the speculations of the audience increase.

The relationships between the guest poets and the tutors and among the tutees themselves are tainted as well by jealousies and overstressed competitive attitudes, which show their weaknesses and ‘dark sides’. The poems are written in different voices that add characterization to the individual poets and reveal their secrets, exposing loneliness, isolation, sexual drives, petty revenges and murderous tendencies.

The majority of the story is told from the point of view of Stanley Spenser, who does not seem to be related to the famous painter, whose surname spells different. He keeps a low profile, witnessing and drawing rational and well reasoned conclusions, being a mathematician in his daily life, eager to put his QED (quod erat demonstrandum, what was to be demonstrated) at the end of his maths proof. He is shy and reserved, ‘quiet and invisible’, a man of few words but keen observations. More a Mycroft than a Sherlock Holmes.

Disturbing images of razors, knives, chopping boards and the infamous rat torture evoked in Orwell’s novel emphasise the heavy atmosphere of Weald Barn not only in words but in flesh and blood. All the poets, except Spenser who keeps at a distance and whose language seems to have dissolved in a ‘permanent uncertainty’, are fiercely attentive more to the success of the others than to their own. Their ‘dark side’ seems to be only a ‘mean side’, self-deprecating and incapable of generosity, rather than anything mysterious or unspeakable. The two tutors are precise examples of this thinking with their inconclusive skirmishes. It is a morally grim world of gifted poetry and well-crafted lines but poor feelings that reveal human flaws and fears in a relentless struggle of self-affirmation at the expense of others. The characters mirror each other reproducing similar attitudes, or similar ‘dark sides’, incapable of stepping back or of having a wider view, except for Spenser, who puts the pieces together. Finally, ‘fate’ entrusts him with Jessop’s lost manuscript, An Image on the Retina, that we can fortunately read in the second part of the collection.

Besides the engaging detective story, the collection features some outstanding poems that reflect the themes proposed by the story and go beyond them. In the witty ‘translation’ ‘In San Giminiano’, a poem that characterizes the ‘author’, Barry Wigfall, the handsome guy who makes a couple with the beautiful Abigail, the name of the supposed original author, Bartolomeo Grande (the great Bartholomew), an ‘obscure poet’, self-ironically alludes to Bartholomew-Biggs; word games and sexual puns follow supported by self-reflexive footnotes:

They have put their mighty erections
in every imaginable passage of our city
to prick the sky

The central poem of the collection is ‘Re-reading Nineteen Eighty-Four’ attributed to Eric Jessop. It is a re-interpretation of Orwell’s novel focusing on the main characters, Winston, Julia and O’Brien. It refigures the relationships in ‘Winston’s strange affection for O’Brien’ and in the couple’s reciprocal betrayal. The poem is a hall of mirrors where the characters reflect each other ‘cheated by the same O’Brien’ who is absent, displaced, and finally is identified with the subject, vanishing in it.

A similar sense of displacement is in the sonnet ‘Emotional Trajectories’ where the lovers are lost in an ‘empty darkness, stretched between them, hides them’. There is not a conclusive contact between them only a continuous revolving.

The poems of the final section, An Image on the Retina, emphasise once more the betrayals, suspicions, fragility and fights that characterize human relationships:
it’s still a mystery
the way in which these things all hold together.

(Adagio)
time grinds our truths to pulp – no jokes or gaps –
and guzzles what was us

(Double Entry)
The city is reticent about its past.
Too-many-to remember layers
of betrayals, failed alliances
and deals unrealised are locked
in legal boxes and confessionals –
or else denied as utterly
as an unmarked grave.

(Urban Concealment)
The ‘mirror-image doppelganger’ mockery of home from home’ is repeated in the images of the final poem,
‘An Image on the Retina’, where the bull’s eyeballs reflect the slaughterman, like Winston reflected O’Brien.
We think we look forward toward the future but we only look back ‘too often at ourselves/mirrored in
opinions and shop windows’, we are trapped in reflections, stack up accusations, and are lost in regrets. The
conclusion is not joyful, but it is appropriate to a murder mystery where, as in life, death is the only final
serious matter.

Review of The Narrow Way of Souls

By anhedonianow | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
In this her third volume of poems, *The Narrow Way of Souls*, Irish poet Eileen Sheehan presents us with another superb collection. This is a poet whose work never fails to thrill and delight in equal measure, and as she grows in stature (one poem here is part of the Leaving Cert English school curriculum 2019-2022 in Ireland) readers have the pleasure of journeying with her, following her on the tantalizing twists and turns she likes to take, and growing, glowing in wisdom alongside her.

Eileen Sheehan’s poems reek of the earth, that’s *earth* and *Earth* - one poem even has the title “Earthed” and could be an alternative title for this wonderful book. Nature abounds and sucks you in to its teases and torrents, as Sheehan writes of “globs of shorn blossoms pooling on the road”, “windborne seeds”, “dandelion clocks” burrows, buttercups and birdsong; and of course this being Ireland there are plenty of “weeping skies” “torpid clouds” “cloaks of cumulus” and even a garment that “reeks of rain.” (I’m quite aware that I have used the word “reek” in this paragraph twice, as many times I have lifted my nose from the book having
the sense of real life odorously presenting itself between these fine pages).

As well as being about the earth/Earth the poems feel fashioned of the earth (“she had earth on her feet / Earth between her fingers / In the supermarket we left a trail of earth down every aisle”), as Sheehan brings her typically deep sensuousness to every line, whether it is about young girls playing shop, or how “love conducts itself in waves from skin through skin” or “salt waves washing me / he was wind caressing me”; Sheehan is as unafraid of writing about the body, its beauty, its decay (and inevitable death, see: “At Scartaglen Graveyard”, “Pre-emptive” and “My Father, Long Dead”) as she is of “the grass and the leaves”, “rose hip and haw”. In fact it is unfair to label these rural or nature poems; there is far more than that going on as Sheehan can just as easily bring us a poem about Zeus and his “lightning bolt”, the Foreman vs. Ali fight in Zaire, and some kind of cryogenic facility in Moscow – she also mentions Twitter (“Trending on Twitter”) in case you think that this is not a poet of the Now.

This is a poet who knows how to put together a bunch of poems that are varied and complement each other in every regard, and she is wise enough and as likely to move between pronouns (a confessional “I” or “you”) as she is to a “he” or “she” or a narrative that always seem to have full and satisfying closure (and often disclosure).

Sheehan also has the nails to be able to scratch beneath surfaces, and is, in my opinion (and to use one of her own phrases): a “reliable witness” to this world. She is unafraid to provoke when necessary, as the final line of “Crawthumpers” attests to (no spoilers here, you’ll have to discover that feisty one for yourself) and if I can borrow further, from the second last line of that same poem: “Wielding, without understanding”; I am inclined to think of this masterful poet as one who manages quite the opposite, she wields, with a full and impressive understanding of who and where we are.

The poems are punctuated by intermittent haikus, and while personally this reviewer is no fan of the haiku form in English, here they provide welcome and reflective pithy pit-stops as the reader makes its way through the remarkable collection.

If there is a fault with these kinds of slim volumes of poetry, it is only ever that they are too short: I could easily have read on and on, and for this exceptional poet to keep feeding my hunger for their craft and tact. For now though, I will simply go back to the start and enjoy these terrific creations again (and more likely then again), and also return to her first two collections: Song of the Midnight Fox and Down the Sunlit Hall which I have used and perused on many occasions, and look forward, with a keen, if not downright greedy anticipation, to what she has to offer next.

*The Narrow Way of Souls* by Eileen Sheehan is published by Salmon Poetry (Ireland) Price: €12.00

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**Jane Simmons reviews Hannah Sullivan’s award winning Three Poems SB**

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Jane Simmons continues her reviews of contemporary women’s poetry with this review of Hannah Sullivan’s award winning Three Poems.

Hannah Sullivan’s debut collection recently won the prize for poetry in the Costa book awards. At the award’s presentation, Sinéad Morrissey said of *Three Poems*:

A magnificent debut . . . assured, cool, and anthropological in its focus on a life lived via distinct stages and in discreet contexts. The elasticity of her poetic gift – the sheer range of what she can make language do and say – coupled with formal mastery, ensures we’ll be reading this collection for years to come.

Later, Morrissey praised the collection further, saying:
Hannah Sullivan’s *Three Poems* is an astonishing debut, challenging the parameters of what poetry can do. Her collection stood out even amongst this year’s outstanding and diverse shortlist. Rarely has such a significant poet arrived so fully-formed.

This is only the second time that a debut collection has won the poetry award

Until winning the award, Hannah Sullivan was best known as an academic. She received her first degree in Classics from Trinity College, Cambridge, in 2000 and then spent a year as a Kennedy Scholar in the Comparative Literature Department at Harvard. After studying for a Master’s degree in Cultural Studies at the London Consortium, she went back to Harvard in 2003 to begin a Ph.D. in English and American Literature. From 2008-2011, she was an Assistant Professor of English at Stanford University in California, where she taught undergraduate courses on T. S. Eliot, the 1910s, British Modernism, and Book History, and graduate seminars on 20c Authorship, Textual Criticism, and Literary Periodization. She is now an Associate Professor at New College, Oxford.

In 2013, Hannah Sullivan received the prestigious Philip Leverhulme Prize for her outstanding contribution to English Literature. In addition, *The Work of Revision* (Harvard University Press, 2013) was awarded the 2014 Rose Mary Crawshay Prize from the British Academy and the 2015 University English Book Prize. *Three Poems* (Faber, 2018) is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for Spring 2018.

The first poem of the collection, *You, Very Young, in New York*, follows a young woman living in the city

*standing around*

*On the same street corners, smoking, thin-elbowed*

and tells of the

*huge lost innocence at which she aimed*

the *lost innocence*, of course, is the acquisition of experience which the young woman yearns to achieve but which is never attained. After this *you* sleeps with a former lover, the poem doubles back on itself and the narrative of its final section rejoins that of the first section of the poem where the *you* stands on Fifth Avenue at dawn and watches
unlit cabs go by

and, like the idea of lost innocence

recede like long perspectives

It is never made clear in You, Very Young in New York, whether you is a substitute for I - that is, the younger self of the poet, or whether the poet is addressing another person.

You, Very Young in New York (an extract)

Rosy used to say that New York was a fairground.
‘You will know when it’s time, when the fair is over.’
But nothing seems to happen. You stand around

On the same street corners, smoking, thin-elbowed,
Looking down avenues in a lime-green dress
With one arm raised, waiting to get older.

Nothing happens. You try without success
The usual prescriptions, the usual assays on innocence:
I love you to the wrong person, I feel depressed,

Kissing a girl, a sharpener, sea urchin, juice cleanses.
But the senses, laxly fed, are self-replenishing,
Fresh as the first time, so even the eventual
Sameness has a savour for you. Even the sting
When someone flinches at I love you
Is not unwelcome, like the ulcer on your tongue

Whetted on the ridges of a tooth.
And when he slams you hard against the frame,
The pore-ticked sallow bruise seems truer
Than the speed, the spasm, with which you came.
So nothing happens. No matter what you try,
The huge lost innocence at which you aimed

Recedes like long perspectives, like the sky
Square at the end of Fifth whitening at dawn
Unseen, as you watch the unlit cabs go by.

The doubling back of this first poem is developed further in the second poem, Repeat Until Time – a poem which takes repetition as its subject and incorporates it in its structure. It is divided into numbered sections and moves through different times and places, from San Francisco to Rye in England, once the home of Henry James, before finally arriving at Nevada and a representation of a nuclear bomb test

Now nothing will be the same again

And everything will be as it always was.

The third poem The Sandpit After Rain takes as its subject the death of a father and the birth of a child. This poem is divided into four sections – but unlike those in the second poem, these are each given titles. Unlike
the momentous events, these titles are simple, domestic, *Stuffing a Chicken*. Near the end of the poem, the speaker explains it has been *a year of life events* – the language is borrowed, but its use by the poet to refer to such momentous events is clearly an example of bathos or irony.

This wit alternates with melancholy as she juxtaposes the birth of her first son

*hauled out, in a windowless room*

*Somewhere near Paddinton to Radio Five Live*

with her father’s death:

*there is no necessary season for things*

*and birth and death happen on adjacent wards,*

*that both are labour, halting and startling.*

In each of the three poems of the collection, Sullivan moves between comedy and tragedy, social commentary and cultural satire, demonstrating her ability to represent the most intimate experiences in the powerful and inventive use of language and imagery, and her interest in poetic form – reportage, prose poetry, rhyming couplets, tercets and quatrains with irregular rhyme schemes:

*When things are patternless, their fascination’s stronger.*

*Failed form is hectic with loveliness, and compels us longer.*

It is a quotation which sums up her achievement in this debut collection of poems. It certainly deserves the acclaim and accolades it has been awarded – and makes Hannah Sullivan a poet to watch.

Get it now on Amazon

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**Fiction Editorial – Mimi Gladman**

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
I have received many amazingly high-quality submissions over the last few months, and have struggled to squeeze them all in, so this edition of The Blue Nib is surely fatter than ever before. This issue is bursting with a wide range of excellent new fiction, encompassing themes as diverse as mortality, the uncanny, coming of age and the quest for new life.

Diana Powell’s work *The Cabinet of Immortal Wonders* is beautifully dark, visceral, fantastical and sumptuously described. This is a disturbing and richly imagined story, and a nightmarish feast for the senses. *You’ll Die as Fish* by Susan Anwin is open to interpretation, as a relatable workaday scenario leads to unexpected feelings of pervading alienation, on an aquatic theme. Meanwhile, Ruth Brandt’s *A Village Street in Winter* continues the watery motif, with a chilly tale set in the unthinking cruelty and unfocused apathy of childhood.

*White Ink* by John Higgins is a gritty, contemporary coming of age tale with grief at its heart, while *The Depth of Ambition* by Anna Hayes also has a liminal feel, with a core of quiet optimism. *Venomous* by Abigail Walker is a short piece with an immersive, hallucinatory quality as it describes a night out, and is cleverly interspersed with musical references.

Other stories hint at a differences and accommodation between sometimes thoughtless younger characters, and emotionally fragile but essentially strong older characters. With *Goodbye, Mr. Fox* Anne Walsh Donnelly brings us an assured tale of grief, misunderstandings and hidden hurt. Meanwhile, Paul Brownsey’s *People Don’t Think About Things Like That* also tells a well-characterized, intelligent and engaging story encompassing independence, old age, loneliness – and a clumsy attempt to do the right thing.

Teresa Sweeney’s well-observed tale *Parallel Lines* focuses on struggles with conception, and associated ambivalence and relationship strain. She has an ear for dialogue, and a pithy turn of phrase, and is a writer I look forward to seeing more from. On a related theme, Edward Lee has written *Blight*, which focuses on early pregnancy loss, and is full of quiet desperation, longing and regret, as well as a strong appreciation of the essential at the core of a relationship.

Finally, *Late Capitalism* by Rob Schofield is something completely different, and a complete treat. This story I found wry, dryly humorous and full of unrepentant glee – as well as an incisive message on the state of modern society.

*The Blue Nib* seeks to champion new talent, and no submission goes unread, so do keep them coming. And if you have published work that you’d like us to consider for review, then let us know.
Venomous- Fiction by Abigail Walker

By Shirley Bell | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Author Bio: I have been writing and reading since primary school, which my teachers refused to believe - repeatedly sending me home with their staged book, all containing four words to a page and big pictures - until I read aloud from Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, my chosen ‘free-reading’ book, to my reception class. Perhaps their disbelief is what sparked my determination to continue defying their expectations; I went on to read English at the University of Nottingham. Like many of you, in my spare time, I create or explore whole universes, squeezed into twenty-six letters and some random dots and dashes. Sometimes, it’s worth reminding ourselves of that and thinking – isn’t it just incredible?

Drinking starts early; the alcohol is flowing, the conversation is flowing, and there is music filling the gaps in the background of the plain studio flat. Exposed red bricks are stacked one atop the other on one wall; a neutral and modernist abstract piece of art hangs from them, unnecessary and unexplained. Windows in two of the three magnolia walls have lead diamonds in them, and you’re counting how many there are crossways and top to bottom, corner to corner and altogether. You’ve done it a thousand times, but you do it again. The fourth wine bottle is getting quite empty and you’re all ready to go, you’re just emptying your glasses, draining every last drop before you get in the taxi, all in one taxi, it’s a big one and from its window you can see you left a light on. The light comes through the diamonds in the window pane and makes scaly patterns on the ground, yellow snakeskin, beautiful, like diamonds in the sky, and then they’re gone, or rather you’re
gone, heading towards the city in a car that isn’t your own driven by a man with a heavy accent and terribly stained teeth, but the scales are still there on the street for anyone passing by to see and talk about in whatever accent they want...

It is cold outside so you all rush in together, out of the cold into a busy warmth that matches your giggles and a stifling cloud of perfumes and odours rising in the warm air from the multitude of bodies inside, swirling upwards in a circular motion much like your heads, and there is music, such loud music, like a heartbeat; the heartbeat is deafening – so loud that it is not just in the air, but within every person, echoing around the cavity of their chests, copying the original – every person has two heartbeats tonight, and two views of the room wavering before them, swaying, beating, all saying we’re young and we’re reckless, we’ll take this way too far, to dawn perhaps, sharing the cover of the dark

you examine your two duplicate views of the room, the mass of individuals moving as one, clinging to each other and the noise like a true lifeline, remind yourself that if vision is the only validation then most of my life isn’t real, the room looks large, and full, and loud, with black walls and mirrors and metal bars swamped with people, and the other bar – why is there another bar in front of the other bar with tenders serving tenders serving people? – is lit like an emergency walkway on an aeroplane, this way to the emergency exit, come this way, follow the lights and each other and it’s working, people flock to it like vultures to a carcass, drinking it dry, the smell of burning bitter alcohol and sweat and smoke machines is osmosing ofmosising diffusing everywhere and becoming normal, you barely smell it any more, forgotten the taste and smell of a world that she’s left behind

the door to the outside – two doors? – swing to the beat and you wonder how everything has been taken over by it even as you step in time to the same beat on your way to the bar to ask someone thinking more clearly than you how it has taken over so fully, but she lives in a fairy tale somewhere too far for us to find and your question changes half way out of your mouth and instead of an answer a drink is pushed into your hand, and something small and hot and flickering, and someone else’s money crosses the counter; thank you, you say, but it’s too loud – too loud – so instead you smile, you smile, nice to meet you where you been, and both of him smile back, wait for one flame to vanish, one drink to be drunk – swallowing in time with the beat, too fast, too fast, spinning – and place both hands on the small of your back, you’re way too beautiful girl, do you find me attractive, I’m looking for a reason why you really set my world into motion, do you feel the beat in here, the chemistry, I need you like a heart needs a beat, time to dance, dance with me, move to the heartbeat of tonight, maybe we can get to know each other, I just met you and this is crazy, that dress looks great on you; you are flattered, you know I know how to make em stop and stare – unstick your foot from the shining wet sticky sweet floor to twirl, heart beats fast, colours and promises; you smile, he’s tall, dark, handsome, you have so much in common, maybe he’s the one, and he smiles – both of him smile? – do you smoke, let’s get a breath of fresh air, check yes Juliet are you with me there’s no turning back for us tonight, two cigarettes, two lighters, two plumes of smoke from four lips, none of it yours; the taste of menthol and whisky, stars spinning above, you look up into the night sky and see a thousand eyes staring back, the cobblestones spinning below, the heartbeat of the collective dancer stretching the fabric of the building, an elastic band threatening to snap like the half stripes on his shirt broken cut off cut short, red and yellow and black and yellow and red and yellow and black and yellow and red and yellow and red and red

back inside you stretch it more, music surrounding you, hands laid on you, heart is beating double time, whirling with music that pounds through the cavity in your chest, filling it and expanding it, feet on the ground, head’s in the clouds, the room is spinning, or you are, or both, and liquid spills over and runs down your hand as another plastic cup is pushed into it, sloshing in time with the heartbeat of the room and you smile, please don’t stop the music, I wanna take you away, let’s escape into the music, DJ let it play, you smile and twirl and smile, everything that kills me makes me feel alive and this is living, yes, this is living, this is what we live for, this is what life is all about
the cup is empty so you cast it aside, try to put it on a table, miss, I feel the love and I feel it burn and a warm body presses close to you; I feel the chemicals burn in my bloodstream, so tell me when it kicks in, living is all about the places we go and the people we meet – a whisky and menthol whisper close to your ear that makes you shiver and goosebumps rise on your arms as the bar sways and its emergency lights move moving blurring and swaying and shifting, disappearing from your view and you smile and twirl and stumble and smile you’re dreaming about the things that we could be and spinning and smiling and you trip slip whirl follow we don’t know how how we got into this mad situation you’re so hypnotising could you be the devil could you be an angel you breathe in menthol and jack daniels and the alcohol is sweet but bitter or maybe bittersweet and strong and overwhelming and red touch black venom lack no venom if red’s on black but what’s that about yellow red touch yellow and what now about a fellow with red and yellow it’s slipping away gone gone you smile and the beat beats and the lights spin and the beat beats and yellow slips into green and red and blue and I have hope that inside is not a heart but a kaleidoscope and then purple and orange and gold and white and magnolia and black.

Parallel Lines- Fiction by Teresa Sweeney

By teresasweeney | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

We were stuck. Stuck in our marriage, stuck in our lives, stuck in this fucking car.

‘How could you be so stupid?’ he said.

Five minutes from the main road and the next petrol station. Ten minutes from the overflowing pumps we had just driven past, and I’d run out of petrol.

‘It was too expensive there,’ I said, ‘I wanted to wait until we got to Apple Green.’

‘What, two cent cheaper? That would really make a difference when you get your ten euro’s worth.’
‘Oh, fuck off.’

I’d had to listen to him, for over ten minutes now, going on and on. I would have gotten out of the car except it was pissing down, Baltic, and pitch dark.

‘Where the fuck is Bob? He should be here by now.’

Bob was always good in a crisis. Especially ones that weren’t caused by him, as he had an unnatural amount of bad luck in life. Last year his dog died. She was run over, suffered horrific injuries and had to be put down. It was Bob who drove over her in the jeep. The huge Labrador, gone deaf with age, was asleep outside the house, in the middle of the road, where she had taken to sleeping in the last week or so before her untimely death. Anyway, Bob never saw the dog. He was jerked into reality when he felt the large bump and grind of his front and then rear wheels. No one could say the dog’s name for six months after, such was Bob’s upset.

‘That might be him,’ I said.

A car’s headlights, not dimmed of course, until almost on top of us and our flashing indicators, lit up the inside of my dirty Kia. I tried not to see the shabby, old jeans I wore, nor Damien’s impeccable trousers beside me. And I tried not to notice our body language as we both leaned away from each other, almost crouching on top of our doors, ready for escape. It’s just stress, I told myself.

‘Bollocks,’ Damien said.

The car kept on driving. Not Bob then. Its full headlights went back on illuminating the dark, the falling rain and the long grass either side of the narrow country road.

‘There’s still time,’ I said.

‘Not fucking much.’

I worked out that if Bob got here with the can of petrol in the next ten minutes, we could still make it there on time, if there was no traffic and we ran from our car to the doctor’s office. I pushed away the thought of using the can of petrol to set Damien on fire.

‘I just don’t understand, who goes fucking driving, in the dark and pouring rain, past a petrol station when the indicator is telling them it’s below fucking E? Who? Or is it you don’t want to go there. Maybe that’s what it is.’

In the dark he turned to me, I could see his face outlined, the straight jaw, slightly large nose, the whites of his eyes like two Polo Mints staring.

‘That isn’t fair,’ I said.

I rested my head against the cool, damp window. It always came down to this. Who wanted a baby, who didn’t, and who wouldn’t say either way. Me, in other words.

‘So why couldn’t we have taken the van? Why insist you drive when there’s no fucking petrol in your car? A subconscious sabotage.’

‘Oh save it for your fucking book.’
It was a strike below the belt. Damien had been writing, or at least talking about writing, this great science fiction book since I first met him in a pub back in 2012. I’d read two chapters so far, because that’s all he’d written. And yes, it was actually good, if you were into futuristic type stuff, which I was as it happened. But I wasn’t sure he’d written as much as a sentence in the last two years.

‘Nice one, Meadbh.’

I didn’t bother to apologise.

‘We’ll never make it now anyway,’ he said.

He sighed.

‘Three fucking months waiting for this appointment and we’re stuck on a back arse road, thirty minutes away in a fucking Kia.’

‘Well why didn’t you drive then? I didn’t hear you offering?’ I said.

‘Bull. You heard me well, but you ran out the door and started up this piece of shit instead. The van not good enough to be seen in, is it?’

It wasn’t. A big rusty, faded red Hiace. Who the fuck would want to be seen in that?

‘I didn’t hear you. I would have happily gone in the van.’

Bright lights came around the corner behind us. Please be Bob. If I didn’t get out of this car soon I’d be done for assault.

‘At fucking last,’ said Damien.

Damien opened his door as the car pulled in behind us. Bob got out, taking a can of petrol from the boot. I opened my door, felt the wet, cold air hit me, rain pelting the top of my head.

‘How ye,’ he said.

I popped the fuel valve and Bob started to pour.

‘Ye have enough to get you to the next petrol station. Better stop there and fill her up altogether.’

‘Bob, you are a legend,’ said Damien.

‘It’s a rotten night to be stuck on the side of the road,’ said Bob.

He looked at me, a smile on his face. I rolled my eyes.

‘Don’t start him, Bob. I’ve already got an earful.’

‘Genius, isn’t she?’ said Damien.

‘Ah, sure we’ve all been there at some stage. Not to worry.’

‘Thanks, Bob,’ I said.
‘Not in this fucking weather we haven’t,’ Damien said, seething.

I wanted to punch Damien. I wondered if there was any petrol left in that can, and I thought of the lighter in the car.

‘Right. I’ll leave ye to it.’

Bob nodded at us and went back to his jeep, the empty can of petrol swinging in his hand.

‘Come on, if there’s any point,’ said Damien.

I gave a final wave to Bob and went back into the Kia. My jeans were damp already, and clung to my legs making them itch as I sat. We pulled our seatbelts on in unison. In so many ways we moved at the same beat. Without realising it, Damien was my parallel line. But the distance between those lines had grown wider.

‘We’ll have to stop again so. More time wasted,’ he said.

I didn’t answer. Just started the engine and wondered if this was the beginning of where we ended, or had that started to happen long ago. I pulled out from the ditch, pressed the accelerator down hard. How much would I miss Damien if he wasn’t here? Five years is a long time.

Damien moved in his seat, pulled at his jacket. It was his good jacket, the one he wore on rare nights out, or when work demanded meetings. The sleeves of my old, puffy cream coat started at me from near the steering wheel.

Five minutes of silence, a hard uncomfortable silence, brought us to the illuminated green and yellow lights of cheaper petrol. I pulled up at a pump. There weren’t many cars. The wet and cold kept people at home.

‘Do you want anything?’ I asked, releasing the seatbelt.

He looked at me, in the brighter lights I saw his eyes were rimmed red. Had he been crying? Shit.

‘No,’ he said.

I debated asking him if he was OK. But that was stupid. He wasn’t and it was my fault. Anything I said now would only irritate him more.

The cold wet air and fumes of petrol and diesel hit me as I got out. I pulled up my hood and shivered. I was glad to be out of the car, it felt like the spaces inside had shrunk.

The thick smell of petrol clung as the tank began to fill. I actually was only going to put in ten euro worth, but I wouldn’t please him now. I let it fill up to thirty. Overdraft again.

I walked quickly into the shop. Damien was probably watching me and would accuse me of moving slowly, as if we weren’t already late, as if I didn’t care where we were going.

‘Thirty petrol, thanks,’ I said at the counter.

A featureless blank face surrounded by dyed blonde hair took my card and tapped it. I waited for the receipt that I didn’t need.

‘Thank you,’ she said.
I shoved my card back into my wallet and ran out to the car. My stomach gave an unusual lurch as I sat inside.

‘Seriously?’ Damien said.

‘What?’

‘The first time ever you put in more than ten quid. Are you actually wasting time on purpose?’

Fuck you, I thought. *Fuck this.*

‘Because you always give out when I only put in ten. I fucking ran in and out of the shop.’

‘You did, yeah.’

I started the car, blinking back tears. I want to turn around and go home. Wait, no, not home. Not where he would be. Maybe the pub would be a better option. The pub, a bottle of gin, and no Damien.

The road was quiet, I drove above the speed limit. A few times Damien stretched his head over to look at the dial, checking my speed. I could smell his shampoo, the soap from the shower he had before we left, so careful to present himself well to this doctor. While I sat flicking through Sky.

Neither of us spoke the rest of the journey, our anger fizzling through the cool air. I made it there ten minutes faster than normal. But we were still late.

Damien didn’t move as I parked the car, turned off the engine.

‘Come on,’ I said, ‘he might see us still.’

He turned in his seat, facing me. I felt panic rise in my chest. I didn’t want him to speak. There was no doubt now what he was going to say.

I opened my car door quickly, hopped out, closing it behind me and stood in the rain. My heart pounded hard. I waited for him to get out too. But he didn’t.

Through my car door window I could see the blurred, rainy outline of him and his good jacket. I pulled up my hood, standing alone, the rain falling hard. I felt my shoulders start to dampen already, my runners soaking up the wet puddle I had managed to land in. Finally, he got out of the car.

Without looking at me, Damien walked slowly to the building entrance. Around him sheets of rain fell, firing down like highlighted darts, I concentrated on the back of his head, the bulls eye.

He pushed in the glass door, the illuminated white floor and walls inside made me squint. I was surprised when he held the door open for me.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

Then the unexpected happened. As I stepped in, he let the door close, and as it did, he pulled me into a hug.

The smell of our wet clothes and the feel of his arms tight around me caused my eyes to tear up. I felt his warm breath in my ear as he whispered, ‘We’ll figure this out. Either way.’
Jean-Baptiste Bécoeur is dancing with the flamingo again. A waltz – the dance has slunk across the border into Metz, even as far as the King’s private chambers, it is whispered. ‘Look,’ he says, to his captivated audience, ‘how beautiful she is! So perfect in her pink finery! So exuberant!’ And then, as he swoops and twirls in his passion, a single feather floats to the floor. Jean-Baptiste stops.

The eyes of the peacock flick across to the tortoise, who mouses in return. The macaque gibbers to the sloth, behind its long, elegant fingers.

A single tear slides down Bécoeur’s face, meandering between a red pustule and a weeping sore. The birds in the Cabinet behind him bow their heads in sorrow.

‘Jean-Baptiste! Jean-Baptiste!’ His mother is calling him again. ‘The Doctor is here.’

Which one is it this time? Dr. Jameau? Dr. Bertrand? Or an entirely new member of their tribe, come to try where the others have failed. Yes, a new one, because there is maman again, saying ‘Jean studies birds!’; the excuse she has proffered all the others, in explanation of his eccentric ways – the silence, his wanderings, his fascination with the morbid … the reasons for their visits.

What, first, did they think she meant? That he copied watercolours from his Histoire Naturelle, watched the sky through his spyglass from the attic window, gazed at the habitual lark in its gilded cage? ‘All harmless enough’ they would imagine, until he led them through to the nursery, that had become his study, and waved his arm towards his handiwork there.

He had seen their slippery words and fawning manners drop from them, then, as they stared at the crow slit from beak to tail, its entrails in a dish at its side; at his jars of dermistid beetles, moths and mice, waiting for his latest preparations to put an end to their lives; at the rotting turtle-dove on its perch, its eyes already gone, its feathers lying like a burst pillow beneath it.
How it made him smile to see their various attempts to avoid the stench, a hand or kerchief to the nose, in a pretence of sneezing, or a backward step towards the window or door!

‘My apologies,’ he would say, ‘but it will improve. So far, I have been able to use nothing but what is available to hand ... spices from the kitchen – cinnamon, pepper; tansy from the garden; turpentine, alcohol, camphor. Sadly, as you can see, none is sufficiently effective. But one day, when I am older, if I persevere with my studies, I will find a recipe for a preservative that will make my birds immortal!’

‘Tut, tut, Jean, such talk is blasphemous! Why not, instead, tell monsieur le docteur how you capture your birds?’ his mother would simper, encouragingly.

‘There are various ways, monsieur. A noose for birds who walk on the ground. All one has to do is frequent a favourite feeding or nesting site. The birds are particularly vulnerable at their nest; it is quite easy to catch them then. For those who roost higher, birdlime is useful – spread on a branch, their claws become stuck fast to it, and they linger there until I can retrieve them. Unfortunately, my mother sometimes forbids my excursions, and then, by the time I reach them, they are already beyond my needs. Fresh is best, you see, monsieur. Alive to start, best of all.’

‘Jean? Jean?’ She has entered his room, now, and is shaking his arm. Why can’t she let him get on with his work? Why can’t she let him be? It has always been the same. These constant interruptions, accompanied by her eternal twittering. He has seen the mother birds behave in just the same way. Oh, the fuss as he approaches their chicks, as if by noise alone they could deflect him from his purpose! It is a cacophony almost as deafening as the trilling and chirruping of the lark in his nursery cage.

‘Do you remember that first lark, maman? You put it facing my bed, thinking its song would sooth me! ‘Ssht, Jean, ssht’ you would say. ‘Look at the bird, how she sits there contentedly, and sings for you!’ How I hated its perpetually open beak, its unfailing merriment! Do you remember when it died? How you thought the cat had strolled in and frightened it? But no, it was not the cat at all.

It was, simply, on that particular day, I could stand it no longer, so I opened the cage and removed the bird. With my hand wrapped round its throat, the beak moved in pitiful mime, but its heart pounded with a beat almost as loud as its song. A twist of its neck seemed to calm it, then another, and, finally, there was no sound at all. Peace at last! And I returned it to the cage, to stand it upright on its perch again, but it wouldn’t stay! No matter how hard I tried, bending its claws, pummelling its body, it kept collapsing to the floor. And, already, its eyes were dull, and its feathers limp, their lustre gone. I could not understand it. I wanted to make it right. I wanted its beauty to return, for it to live again in its death, if that’s what this was. Alas, I did not succeed then, but I have done so since! And soon, my achievements will be the envy of all who witness them!’

‘Jean, it is I, Madeleine.’ And so it is. The face in front of him shifts and shimmers, before steadying into a fixed shape. Not his mother, after all. Of course not – his mother has been dead these fifteen years. Buried in a box in the ground, for he was not allowed to preserve her in his Cabinet.

So, instead, here is Madeleine, his wife; but the doctor is real enough, though not Jameau or Bertrand, or that ‘new’ one – they too have long departed. Still, whoever this one is, like the others, he wants to see his ‘patient’s’ creation, having heard, no doubt, of its wonder. For the Cabinet of Jean-Baptiste Bécourt has improved a thousand-fold since those early days, with their childish attempts... a million times, even! He has learnt so much since then, his training as an apothecary put to good use, the years of experimenting with fifty different chemicals finally reaping their reward in his discovery of the perfect solution, the secret of eternal preservation.
‘See,’ he says to this latest man, ‘how the birds perch effortlessly – so unlike that first lark! Others appear as if in flight. I use frames and wires to mount them, cunningly hidden by branches and shrubs. A stage designer from Italy has painted the background, so it is as realistic as possible. That is why I have added a few quadrupeds, to add to the sense of setting. The sloth, the monkeys, the deer. And insects – the ‘food’ for the other specimens. But it is the condition of the creatures that is the real success, the birds, especially. See how they remain unblemished after all these years, their coats pristine and shining! Of course, I outgrew the garden varieties long ago, and turned to the exotic. So picturesque, so fitting! The flamingo was brought to Metz from the south, by an itinerant dealer. The penguin has travelled even further! And look at the bird-of-paradise. My methods are perfect for such rainbow plumage, not simply preserving it, but enhancing it, even. Burnished gold, emerald green, ruby red – brighter than the hues nature gave it. Consider, also, the brilliance of the cardinal bird! It came from Surinam, and was destined for the Jardin des Plantes, but I was able to bid a higher price. The King would be jealous, I think, if he knew!

Ah, the King... Do you remember when the old king, his grandfather, came to Metz, Madeleine? August, it was... ‘44, I think – yes, he was on his way to the front, to see the War for himself. The entire town was so excited by his visit, then distraught at his sudden affliction, fearful of blame! And Louis was near death – prayers were given, there was talk of last rites. But I helped cure him, using my pharmaceutical knowledge. And though his standing was diminished afterwards, my name became famous throughout the land. It will be famous again, throughout the world, even, when my Cabinet is known! It is so much more than stuffed creatures displayed in a box! See how they live, how I have made them immortal. I am the only one to have done this. And through them, I will become immortal, too!’

‘Jean, this is sacrilege! Only God has such power. The Bible says ‘moth and dust doth corrupt’ on earth. Man is not supposed to lay up its treasures, let alone...’

There, his mother is back again, quoting the gospels to him, as usual. Others have said much the same, some going much further, calling him an enchanter, a necromancer. The peasants, even, have whispered ‘devil’. Ignorant yokels! Idiots! Jealous all, because he and he alone has vanquished the corruption of the flesh.

This man, this doctor she has brought, seems, at least, to appreciate what he has done, praising and wondering at each new discovery. The heron, the bustard! The humming-bird ... amazing how it hovers, its beak within the flower, yet I see no means of suspension at all!’ He flits about the Cabinet, examining everything, and ohhs and ahhs and coos in amazement – as annoying as that first lark.

Too much so, perhaps? What if he is not really a doctor? How has Madeleine found him? Perhaps he is a rival come here to spy, to find out the secret of his recipe, so that he can steal it away, and become the most famous conservateur in the land. Come from the Museum in Paris, or across the border from Mannheim, for the Germans covet his work, too. Employed by the ‘Academie’? Perhaps, even, Madeleine is in league with him, has had an assignation with him, and now they will run off together, taking his masterpiece with them.

And, sure enough, the man is no longer the strange doctor, but Levaillant, his former pupil, whom he once trusted, the one person he has shared his recipe with. ‘Arsenic, Val! That is the key! So many trials and errors, until, finally... Other substances, yes – I mix it with camphor and potassium carbonate to form a soap, ‘savon arsenical’! But white arsenic is the crucial ingredient. Eight ounces of it, for each finished portion. Strange that some call it a poison, strange that some say it debilitates and kills. But that is nonsense, nonsense! Otherwise, how would it preserve the birds, and make them look so well?’

Fool! He should have realised! Levaillant and Madeleine have become lovers. Together, they are planning to take the recipe and the Cabinet to the king! To reap the rewards that should have been his long ago. And before they go, they will kill him, and leave him here to rot...
...perhaps they have already gone, because rotting is what is happening to him.

Something shifts in his lower jaw. He puts his finger in his mouth, and feels the tooth give beneath it. Blood. Then, with a little push, the tooth has dislodged itself entirely. And another. And, examining the blood on his fingers, he sees that the nails are yellowed and striated. And his head – his head hurts so much!

But at least the Cabinet is still here – too large, of course, for easy removal – and the animals are all in place, and remain so perfect. Except for that one flamingo feather...

Jean-Baptiste roots about amongst the stones and creepers and shrubs, blinking closely, this way, that way, all around him. Ah, the eye of the lizard has fallen onto its rock, but it is made of glass, an artificial construct, not of the creature. And here, at the edge of a woven nest, another feather! Snow-white, this time, from the swan, surely – but it is only a down feather, like the flamingo’s, and really, no more than would loosen through their everyday behaviour. A little squabble perhaps, an over-enthusiastic courtship dance. Now he finds the tooth of the badger, but that, too, is false – unlike his own, it is made of porcelain. No, on the whole, everything is in good order, everything is just as it should be. It is only he who spoils the show. For here is another tooth, dribbling from his mouth, tumbling down his waistcoat, on to the head of the disgusted peacock. And here, what is this hair? Long filaments of grey drape themselves over the leaves of the jacaranda. And there, the surface of the turtle-shell is dusted with flakes of desiccated skin. All fallen from his body, all witness to his decay.

He sees himself then, reflected in the mirror that serves as the drinking-hole he has provided for the animals. He sees a man far older than his years, his hair mostly gone, his cheeks sunk by the lost teeth, his skin covered in sores. He sees and doesn’t see, for his vision comes and goes now. Just like his mind. Bécoeur sinks to the ground, and weeps silently – his body racked by dry sobs, because the arsenic has dried his tears. ‘What have I done?’ he asks the lizard. ‘What have I done?’ he screams at those who watch him from without, whilst banging his forehead against the glass.

‘Come away,’ Madeleine tells him, sweet, gentle Maddie, who has been faithful to him all these years.

‘Help me, my love, help me, please!’

‘Take my arm,’ says Levaillant, the only one who has ever believed in him.

‘You must rest,’ says the kindly doctor, for, it seems, there is a doctor here, as well as his old assistant. ‘And stay away from the poison. And from your specimens. It lingers on them still.’

But how can he stay away from his Cabinet, his own perfect world, his paradise?

Besides, it is too late now. The doctor knows it, in truth; and Levaillant – that is why he has returned, to be with him at the end. Madeleine knows it. That is why she is crying...

The flamingo and the toucan, the purple gallinule and the gentle dove – all have known for a long time. Only he did not.

Bécoeur is dancing with the flamingo again. No, no, no. It is Madeleine he dances with now. And there is no waltz, not even a minuet. A vague shuffle is all he can manage.

‘This is foolish, Jean!’ his pink feathered wife tells him. ‘The doctor said you must stay quiet!’

‘But it is good to dance, my little bird! Do you not know that dancing is an antidote to the poison? And music! Sing, my sweet! La-la, la-la-la!’
Yes, surely he has read this somewhere, in some journal, or paper. But, no, no, he suddenly remembers - that is what you must do if a tarantula has bitten you. And yes, he has one in his Cabinet, spinning its web between the bushes, and catching the flies and the moths, but it has never caught him. He has always been careful to avoid its den, just as he never steps near the scorpion, or the snake, that waits behind the mossy boulder, with its fangs visible, ready to pounce. None of these things has poisoned him. He has done that himself.

Still, his creatures are grateful for his efforts, for here they are, lining up on either side of the two dancers, applauding as they stagger past. The birds on one side, led by the royal swan, the quadrupeds on the other, led by the grinning monkey. To the left, the wings beat together, as furious as the humming-bird’s; to the right, the paws clap together, in frantic union. And now, they are cheering, squawking, barking, howling, screeching, until their master collapses to the ground and his heart falters and stops, just like the lark.

White Ink- Fiction by John Higgins

By John Higgins | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Yet another pretentious arsehole spouting off about aesthetic theories. What is he looking for? To see how long he can shitetalk before sand falls out from between my legs?
In some gaff. Four a.m. Fag ash falling all around. Burning into the carpet. Empty cans crushed. Stacked into teetering pyramids. Voices colliding. Fights starting. Techno blaring from the speakers in the kitchen. The beat ripples through the gaff. Waves carrying everyone up, up, then down, down, down, then up, up, up. Gesticulating hands. Someone’s racking up coke lines on the coffee table. Snorting through a fiver. Fingers crush snot between nostrils. Wild blinking. Curtains drawn. Pupils wide. Everyone talks a mileaminutelikethisysee? And amidst all this, I’m stuck. Stuck listening. Stuck watching. Stuck passive.
–nd I guess we just, I dunno, it’s a pure cliché but I feel a real connection with him, y’know? he’s saying. I’m nodding, all I can do really, having lost track of whatever the fuck it is he’s talking about. –Again, it’s so trite, but he was one of the greatest thinkers of our time, y’know, like, when it came to thinking about, uhh, less abstract, more concrete branches of philosophy. He’s showering me in spit. His wide-rimmed glasses bounce about on his flushed face. Sweat rolls down in rivers from between the shocks of brown hair that makes a fringe. –Like, sociological theories, about the nature of work, the nature of art. Fuck, the, the
nature of, uhm, cats, y’know? As opposed to the more, uhm, the more unus— uhh, esoteric branches of philosophy. Like Descartes, Sartre, uhm, Nietzsche. We’re on a battered couch. He’s got me pressed against the arm. He’s jabbering so close to my ear. I wipe the spit off my glittered cheek. My fingers tingle as they touch my face. I sharpen my focus, look around. Everything is a little weird. The MD has kicked in. I swallow back the encroaching feeling of vomit and clench my teeth. Before long, my molars are grinding against each other. I wanna talk. I wanna get on this guy’s level now, talk shite, talk and talk and talk. Everything I have to say seems so important. And it is. Everything we all have to say is so, so important. I try to take an interest in what he’s saying.

—Yeah, and he was the, the, the, uhm, the last person to see his girlfriend before she drank herself to death, and I reckon he carried that guilt with him. Perhaps beating himself u— uhh, flagellating himself, I guess. I want to say something. I’ve read Bukowski too. Some of his poems are good. Some a bit meh. And his books aren’t the best. But now we have a connection. Now this guy, now he’s stopped talking about aesthetic theories, about how to live, now he’s just spouting pure facts, I reckon I can begin to relate, to join in. Facts are harmless. No one gets het-up over facts.

—He was a bit of a rapist though, weren’t he? I say. He stops. He leans back. The side of my face goes cold. No more hot breath and spit.

—That’s... a bold statement.

—No, no, he says it himself. In Post Office, I think? That he raped someone? And there was some interview I saw, where he said, what was it now? That he was raping some English teacher.

—Well, I think.... He goes quiet, looks away.

—I mean, how does one— one: the word feels cheap in my mouth— reconcile his personal life with his work?

—Well, he begins, —well.

—Like, uhm, William Burroughs. Or whatshisface? Roman Polanski?

—Well.

—Like, isn’t there a certain hypocrisy? Creating these, as you call ‘em, meganarratives? Metanarratives, I mean. And not adhering to any form of moral worldview yourself?

—Well.

—And then, I’m proud of myself now. I’m talking. Engaging. Not sitting dead-eyed and simpering. Feeling like I’d been in college. Before I’d had to leave. —And then, couldn’t you consider that kinda work, maybe, propaganda? In a sense. Like, Bukowski bullshitting about hating everyone, when everyone should hate h—

—Well, I think, he finally stammers, —I think it’s hard to get a grip on the work of Bukowski, or Burroughs, or even Roman Polanski, Kerouac, uhh, Ginsberg, Terry Southern, Hemingway, all these, uhm, controve— err, contentious artists, it's hard to get a grip on what makes them tick when you’re a woman.

I shut up. Not because I agree, or because I’m busy formulating a response to this, but because. Just because.

Skagging in work. Veins have been replaced by icicles. Shooting right up my legs. Hands tremble. Writing food orders down, notebook looks like a drunk spider danced across it. Hateful faces staring up at me. Can feel them surveying me. The waitress is only visible when she looks out of place. Go back to the kitchen. Don’t talk to the chef, or anyone else. Just rip out the order and stick it to the order board. Like a conspiracy theorist’s wall, this board. No one takes down the old orders, so the same stuffed chicken breast, mash, no gravy, extra carrots instead of peas will get made four or five times throughout the course of the day.

No energy to talk. Just wanna.... what? All options are off the table when you skag. Can’t go to bed, ‘cause you’ll sweat through the sheets. Junk food and grease don’t cure it, not like they do with a hangover. A pure waiting game. Eyes sting. Cheap fluorescent strips above. Blinking is a chore.

Not free of drink’s revenge either. Every step makes my brain roll around in my skull. Stomach churns. Cider and vodka. And an undercooked chicken burger. Can still taste the garlic mayo and the freezing lettuce. Every face pisses me off. I go up to the bar and fill two pints. Sight of the bubbling lager makes me retch. Heads turn to look. Don’t bother playing it off. Stephen, the barman, continues twisting a pint glass beneath the bleeding cider tap.
Load my pints up on trays. Take a hasty slug of a glass of warm water. Droplets drip from my chin onto the tray. Bang the tray down. They say thank-you, two friends, boyfriends, who knows, and start to whisper about me as I walk away. My own fault, I know. Hey, they got their pints. Minimum wage equals minimum effort. Craving a fag. Can see myself rolling. Licking the skin. Tucking the tobacco in. Lighting it. Fizzle of the skin burning. Exhale. I glance at the clock. Three hours left ‘til my break. Jesus Christ.


−Late night, Leese? Mary asks. I’m pretending to be busy in the freezer, pulling at the bags of meat on the shelves, rearranging them. Love the feeling of the cold. Stops the sweats. I could fall asleep in here. Mary poking her head into the freezer and asks this question.

I turn to her, holding a big packet of chicken fillets by a corner. −Not late, just busy.

−Hungover?

−Nuh, no, I reply. I swallow vomit eddying around my mouth.

−Third time this week. Why’d you do this to yourself?

−Seems like a good idea at the time.

−So does…. yeah. Are you just gonna hang out in the freezer all day?

−I’m doing something.

−Uh-huh. She leans against the freezer door. Wisps of smoke snake between her legs. She shakes globs of frost from her black pants.

−I am.

−OK.

−Just lay off me. I’m not feeling well.

−Se−

−Self-inflicted. I know. I raise a hand. The sleeves of my white shirt are stiffening. The skin beneath is probably red. My eyes are drooping. −Just let me do this job.

−Don’t break your back doing…. whatever it is. But be out in the restaurant in 10 minutes.

Mary leaves. I extend the middle finger at the ajar freezer door and grit my teeth. Such a patronising cunt. Only here six months before me. So eight months in total. And acts like she’s been given the fucking key to the city. You’re a fucking waitress, like, get off your fucking high horse.

I move the chicken fillets to three different shelves, stacking them beneath pork, beef, lamb, then replacing them in their proper place. Taking a deep breath, then, and exhaling puffs of white air, I go back to work.

Sitting in the kitchen. Housemate talks as a gust of steam blows from the 69 cent pizza burning in the oven.

−So not the best night? he says, sliding the pizza off the barred shelf onto a chipped, purple plate.

−Same old shite, I sigh, rolling on the wooden table. Strands of tobacco shudder from my shaking fingers and cover the novels and copies flattened out on the table.

−Jesus, d’yeh wanna use me gran’s mass card as a coaster as well? Bernie tuts, sitting across from me, slicing his pizza with a butter knife, pulling his copies and the three novels, chunks underlined with black biro, away from me.

−Sorry, I just−

−Don’t matter. G’wan, what was shite about it? The crust crunching between his teeth fills the smoky room. I roll, finish rolling, go to the kitchen door, unlock it, stand out in the cold, light up, smoke.

−Ah just… same old faces, y’know? And then the new faces, I just− I just have no interest in getting to know them. It was fun the first few times, but after, I flick ash out amongst the weeds in ‘our’– the absentee landlord’s, really– garden. −but after a while, they just all become the same. The lads either wanna get into your head or into your pants; the girls are hot and cold all the time. Water drips from the gutter. Soaks the cotton? or whatever shells of my slippers. Feel my toes slime over.

−Thought you liked those girls? He dips quarters of pizza into mounds of taco sauce and mayonnaise. No wonder he’s so fat. I don’t even bother to catch myself.

−Ehh, they’re fine. But they’re just fine. Jesus Christ, all they want to talk about is drugs. Taking pills,
snorting coke. Drugs and piercings. It’s fucking maddening. I flick the rollie away. I’m already craving another. I feel a film of scum over my teeth. —Last night, I continue, going to the sink. I let cold water gush into a plastic cup. I gulp it down. Washes away the scum temporarily. I know it’ll be back. I fill another and sit back down. Bernie licks cheese from the webbing between his fingers. —Last night some guy came up to me. He sees I’m off my chops and starts talking. He’s fucked too, like. And he’s bullshitting about Bukowski and lecturing me on whoever else, Kerouac, and aesthetics, and I’m fairly certain he told me about his fucking novel too, I laugh, —and normally, y’know, I’d be up for chatting, I’d engage, but last night, Jesus, it took real effort, real, real effort, just to talk. Just to open my mouth. And it wasn’t the MD before you say it. Then when I did talk, I— I made a fool of him. I was fairly nasty. I just didn’t wanna deal with him. And then I looked around, looked around at everyone, and I realised I didn’t wanna deal with them either.

Bernie washes his plate. His back jiggles beneath the cheap white T-shirt. Size of a handball alley, or something Flann O’ Brien said. He turns around, drying his hands on a dishtowel. Tits jiggle. Making the DETROIT MOTOWOKS slogan emblazoned across his chest shimmer like a curtain in a thunderstorm. I try to focus on his eyes. My eyes make a compromise and stare at the dab of cheese clinging to the side of his mouth.

—I dunno, ta be honest. Maybe give them all a break? he shrugs. —Maybe trying going against whatshername? Beth? for that manager’s position at work?
—That cunt has that thing in the bag. Be pointless.
—Maybe going for a position of responsibility would do you good?
—But Mary has the job.
—And that’ll give you the kick you need. It’s either that or quit. Are yeh gonna live your full life without any desire to improve your position?
—I’ll improve it the minute I can afford it.
—Ah sure look, if you leave everything down to money yeh’ll never do anythin’. Yeh may as well jes’ kill yerself. He stops. He takes a jerking step forward. —I’m sorry, I, I didn’t mean it like that.
—Thanks for listening, Bernie. I’m gonna head to sleep.

It isn’t really his weight. Nor his unpleasant dietary habits. It’s not even the self-absorbed life advice he doles out. Really, it’s the textbooks, the scribbled-in copies, the novels, all laid out there on the kitchen table. Jesus, I did Arts too, but you never saw me reminding everyone all the time. Saw. Saw. Fuck. I turn to face the wall. The smell of the cooling radiator. The orange streetlamps burst through any crack they can find in the curtains. I sit up and reach for the rollies on my dresser. I roll. Take the ashtray off the stack of books. Some had been for college— Wuthering Heights, obviously; The Castle of Otranto; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight— and some were bought in an ill-judged hope to get back to reading— Revolutionary Road; American Pastoral; Zami. That all ended, of course. All over. Saw it all. Don’t even notice the books now. Now it’s just, get up, work, have some kinda dinner, go out, and/or go to sleep. Routine, the death of ambition. Ah who’m I shitting? I had the choice in school. Took it, actually. Blazed through the Beats. Razed through the Romantics. Chewed on Classics. Messed with Modernism. Etc. Only the best for me, only the best. An evolution in terms of search history: best serial killers books, best psychological books, best crime books, best Russian books, best existentialist novels, best French novels, best French existentialist novels, best Postmodernist novels, best Modernist novels, best Classic books. Had my chance, and stopped. Why? To fit in. As if all the other students in St. Augustine’s Girls School had cameras in my room. Behaving with propriety at all times. Jesus fucking Christ.

Swing open the window. Cold air gushes in. Rain crackles off the pavement. Lights in windows. Some students, some parents, some kiddies. This time of night? More than likely students and insomniacs. Down the street, some aftersesh. The house hops with music. Can smell the cans from here. Not missing fuck all. But the students, all standing around, everyone so full of a promise, everyone infused completely with potential.

I wear trackies over. I know this gaff. Kinda. Been here once before. I head in. Just one look. To feel whole
again.


Bernie. Pizza. Cheese between his fingers. Copies. Novels. Lines drawn beneath ‘and thus I make my fool my purse’ and ‘old father, old artificer, hold me now and ever’.


And skagging. Pouring pints. Warm water cutting my teeth. Seeing students swan in. Feel their pity. Poor girl used to see her around college. Couldn’t hack it.

And then the mass. Right slap-bang in the middle of all this. Don’t show up hungover or anything. Sit right through like a good girl. Less people here. Less than had been at the first anniversary. And substantially less than the month’s mind. And then substantially less than had been at the funeral. All those eyes, unblinking, watching my mother being lowered into a mound-bordered chasm in the ground. Very few of them here. My brother goes up for communion, accepting the little wafer of tasteless paper in his splayed hands. I don’t. I sit and watch. Mam would have made me go up.

I press my knees together and point them at the stained-glass windows. Let everyone sidle by. Whispered sorries from the older women. The sound of footsteps on the marble.

–oday to remember a good woman, a loving mother, Father Fitzpatrick’s watery eyes search for me and Jamie, piercing us with a pitying gaze, –and a much-missed friend. Bridget Houlihan. A lot of people come and go in this parish, another look at me. I let him ramble. His reminiscence is of no comfort, not anymore. It wore thin after the third or fourth eulogy at the funeral, delivered by one of Mam’s colleagues from the shoe shop, or maybe it had been one of the town’s local characters? Anyway. All these half-baked memories. All this bullshit. And now this cunt. Blathering on about fond memories when they don’t really mean a shite to him, not really.

After. Standing outside the church. I light a rollie. I catch myself glancing over my shoulder. –At least you don’t haveta worry about Mam seeing ya.

–Every cloud, silver lining.
–Can I have one?
–No. Ash spills onto the ruptured tarmac. Cars pull out of the car park. Meet the steady stream of traffic on the road. A procession of the same makes and models, the same matte colours.
–C’mon. I’m 16.
–Don’t care. I turn my back, Jamie spins around with me. He keeps talking, on about how he buys his own in Mannion’s anyway. I’m not paying attention, on him or on the bushes being brushed by the wind ahead of me. I’m waiting for
–Lisa, I didn’t expect you to come this year, Father Fitzpatrick’s voice lisped behind us. I turn. Slowly.
–Wouldn’t miss it.
–Good to see you back. Even under the… circumstances.
–Mmm. I fidget with the rollie, caught between an adolescent need to hide it from sight, and a rebellious desire to suck down on it, to blow smoke rings in his face. I find myself caught, instead, in a purgatory, rolling the smouldering cylinder between my fingers. –It’s, uhm, nice to come home, I guess.
–And you, young Jamie. Fitzpatrick’s eyes alight upon him. He’s not a paedophile, we know that for sure—he’s much too personable, and interested in actual pursuits to be a nonce— but there’s still that stigma, that instinct to tell him to fuck off. –Your Granddad was saying you’re refusing to come to church?
–Yeah, Jamie grinned. Voice dripping with a bullshit desire to stir up controversy. Makes me cringe. Reminds me of myself.
–There’s always a seat and an ear here for you, for you both, anyway. I expect him to bless us. Instead he
holds out his hand. We shake. He walks away.
−He’s definitely eyeing me up.
−Oh definitely, I reply. −Gonna make your hole look like that flag of Japan.

Leaving home. For the first time in ages. Left money for Jamie—schoolbooks, some chicken fillet rolls, the odd box of fags— in an envelope. Gonna leave me short for rent this month. Who cares. Handed it to Granddad. He invited me home again. Home to stay. Hard on him too, bringing up yet another kid, all on his own. Probably invited me to stay for less-than-altruistic reasons. But I can’t. I really can’t. The house isn’t a house anymore, it’s just a series of walls, a dusty bedroom with some old Beat poetry, a bathroom with a bloodstain, a couch missing a mould.
So I leave. I walk across the town, schoolbag on my back. It’s cold, but the schoolbag pressing against me makes my back sweat. Faces appear in shop windows. And disappear. It’s only that Houlihan wan. That’s all. Just that Houlihan wan.

Waiting at the bus stop. Unsheltered from the breeze. Smoking, waiting for Mam to turn the corner, to slap the rollie out of my hand and shriek in my smug face. An adult now, look I’m an adult, I can do what I like. Well I can. I realise this as I climb onto the bus. Everything has rushed towards me, everything has slotted into place. I’m an adult now. I find an empty seat and the bus starts. It rumbles away. My head is pressed to the window and I watch everything disappear, watch home turn to countryside, turn to ruin.

Blight- New Fiction by Edward Lee

By Edward Lee | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

My hands are wet. I washed them before I left the house but didn’t dry them, the towel in the bathroom already used to clean up some of the blood. I dry them now, wiping them down the front of my shirt, palms first, then the backs. I do it four times in total, palms first, then the backs, the repetition relaxing my anxiety-tightened skin.
There is still some blood under my nails, gathered in the corners, so tight it almost looks black. I raise one finger to my mouth, ready to dart the point of a canine between skin and nail, but stop myself. That wouldn’t be right, tasting that blood.
Blighted Ovum, she called it in that distant, matter-of-fact way doctors have of imparting medical information to the layman, almost like an afterthought, added to the end of a conversation they were only giving half their attention to, the next patient, the next file, already drawing their mind. Blighted Ovum. Everything has a name, a title, a designation, from things so small, so insignificant, we are blind to them, to events so irrevocably life-changing they echo through our lives forever. Most of us don’t know these names, until circumstances cruelly insert them in our our lives. Blighted Ovum. A harsh description for a harsh experience. An apt description in its harshness. Blighted Ovum. Blighted. Blight. Something that impairs or destroys. Yes, very apt. And what it destroys more than anything else is hope.

I crave a cigarette before remembering I gave up in solidarity with Jane when she gave them up after we decided that we were going to try for a baby one more time, and for all intents and purposes I did quit, sneaking the occasional one or two in work, or when out for a few drinks with friends. One or two, here and there. A vast improvement on the thirty to forty I used to smoke a day. And when that pregnancy stick had declared us pregnant I had stopped, completely, no more ones or twos here and there, not even keeping packets hidden in my usual hiding spots around the house.

With no cigarette to smoke I put my hands in my pockets, as though that might ease my cravings, my fluttering hands restrained, and sit on the wall, staring up at the clear night sky, thinking without thinking, yet thinking about everything.

The sperm fertilizes the egg, and the egg in turn attaches itself to the uterine wall, but the embryo itself doesn’t develop. Cells develop, a pregnancy sac is formed, and the body believes that it is pregnant and acts accordingly, from swollen breasts to morning sickness. And positive pregnancy tests. Weeks can pass with the happy mother and father believing that there is a healthy baby growing inside the woman’s womb, right up until the first ultrasound at twelve weeks, when it is revealed that the womb is empty, or the pregnancy sac is present but empty.

Or the mother might start bleeding, which might mean nothing, depending on the amount of blood, but when added with painful and regular cramps can mean miscarriage.

Even though the sky is clear I can’t see a single star, so maybe the sky isn’t as clear as it looks, because where we live, on a clear night, the sky dances with stars. I can’t see the moon either, but that is simply because it’s behind me on the other side of the house. If the bedroom curtains were open the moon’s light would be shining on Jane as she lies on the bed. But the curtains are closed. I know this because I closed them, after it was all over, the only illumination the digital display of the beside clock.

Most nights we would leave the curtains undrawn, capturing a piece of the sky to gaze at as our eyes closed. And on full moon nights the room would be coated in an ethereal shine, a silent lullaby. Some nights, with the air warm, we would leave a window open, the natural silence of the night a comfort, occasionally interspersed with the gentle language of nocturnal animals, the perks of living in the country, our nearest neighbour a mile away. I must admit, born and growing up in the ever noisy city of Dublin, it took me some time to adapt to such a sudden silence, the absence of sound louder than the constant audio of city streets, while Jane, a country girl through and through, couldn’t have been happier moving here, even if it was out of depressing necessity, with house prices in Dublin beyond our budget.

When the empty sac is discovered there are two possible routes to take. You can allow the miscarriage to run its course naturally, which can be speeded up by taking a tablet with the name Misoprostol, which breaks up the sac so it can more easily pass. Or you can have a D&C, or dilation and curettage, which involves opening the cervix and scraping the uterine wall. Both are unpleasant and painful, to say the least, but in most cases doctors would rather not perform the D&C.

In the long bush that runs along the wall I’m leaning on, the silence of the night is broken by some animal scurrying, and as though this was nature’s starting gun, I hear an owl hoot in the far trees and something like a cat pealing in heat, though I have never seen a cat in this area in the three years we’ve been living
here. Just as quickly as they began, the noises cease, silence ruling the night again. I strain to listen, waiting for some further sound to ignite it all once more. But there is nothing. Nothing, as though I am the last living creature left alive in the world. I feel a need to hear a sound, any sound, the silence feeling thicker as it presses against my ears, so I cough, short and sharp, but a noise all the same, a noise that it is quickly swallowed by the muted night.

I shiver, without feeling cold. It isn’t a cold night, hasn’t been for a least a week, summer finally making an appearance, two weeks into August. Which reminds me. It will be my birthday tomorrow. Forty-one. Not the most viable age to be a father, the endless literature we have consulted tells us, the various problems that can arrive in any pregnancy greatly increased the older the father is. It’s not the worst age either, fatherhood possible for most men into their sixties, seventies, but the likelihood of various genetic deformities occurring...

But would it matter what was wrong with your child when you’ve been trying for so long, waiting? You wouldn’t love them any less, would you? Besides biological programming, it would be a cold heart that couldn’t swell at the sight of your newborn baby, their brand new lungs screaming their first cry of broken music. I’d like to think I would love my baby no matter what. I know I would. Now, at least, now that I’m older, wiser...

We’ve been married for nine years now, Jane and me, and for five of them we’ve been trying to have a child. We’ve been successful, to a point, Jane becoming pregnant twice already, but sadly both pregnancies miscarried, the first at six weeks, the second at nine. We didn’t think we’d try a third time, the two miscarriages hard on both of us emotionally, while the physical strain was hard on Jane, her body having to endure that pain and stress, while all I could do was hold her as her body betrayed her. But we wanted a child, that never went away, that need, that almost consuming desire to increase our family by one, by two. And it would increase tenfold when we saw our friends with their newborns, the mix of delight and tiredness in their eyes.

No, I must be honest, if to no one but myself. When Jane said she wanted to try again, one last time, her declaration seemingly coming out of the blue, but which, of course, was something she’d been mulling over for a while, coming at it from all angles, as she always does before making any big decisions, I was hesitant. I was coming to some kind of peace that I would never be a father, though peace may not be the right word. A reluctant acceptance, possibly, a whisper of the realization that this was punishment for... past choices. Whatever I might call it, and however right or wrong I might be in the name I gave it, Jane wanted to try again, one last time. Third time’s the charm, and all that. One last time. And if not, then not, we would accept what we could not have, our family staying at two, not three, not four. Two. And being two is better than being one, being alone.

We opted to go the route of letting the miscarriage run its course, with added assistance from the tablet, or tablets to be precise: four innocuous looking white ovals a pharmacy might give you over the counter for a headache. That evening, coming home from the hospital after the ultrasound had revealed the empty sac and broke our hearts, Jane took the four tablets. We were told that it would take four hours for the pills to take effect and that the process could take up to twenty four hours from start to finish. Any longer than that, or if there was too much blood, Jane was to return to the hospital immediately.

I held her hand as she swallowed them down, and continued holding her hand as we sat on the bed, not even attempting to find comfort in inane small talk; after all, what did the weather, or elections, or disasters in far-flung lands mean in the shadow of what we were waiting for? We simply sat there looking at nothing, waiting. After thirty minutes we both lay down on the bed, hands still held, and looked at the ceiling, I seeing mistakes of my past writ large on the ceiling, Jane seeing I don’t know what.

Time passed as time does when you are waiting for it to pass. The tablets had been taken at four-twenty-four, and at seven-fifty-two, the pain arrived.

When I was twenty my eighteen year old girlfriend got pregnant. We’d been careless one too many times, too drunk to bother with a condom, too horny to wait to buy some. Statistics won out over dumb luck. We
weren’t the first to fall into this lazy trap in the history of the world, and we certainly were not the last. Neither of us was capable of being parents, adults in age but not in manner or mind, our youth and our relatively new freedom constantly colliding, and though we’d been together for three years at that point, both of us knew without knowing, or, at least, admitting, that we were not going to be together forever. In truth, our relationship had already run its course, a shared loneliness delaying that realization from becoming a fully conscious thought yet.

And we had been unfaithful to each other many times, in that cruelly casual way young people can be, such deceits easily forgotten when the heart is young, old hearts not as resilient, as myself and Jane foolishly know after too much drinks one night led to the wrong choice on Jane’s part, an act that she confessed to, and something I have come to terms with, though it took me a long, angry time, the stress of which possibly contributed to the first miscarriage...

At first my girlfriend wanted to have the baby and keep it, while I wanted neither. Right from the very start I did not want to be a father, could not picture myself as a father, the very thought of it frightening me like I’d never been frightened before, the possibilities in my future suddenly limited. And as the weeks passed my feelings and fear did not change. Neither did my girlfriend’s. She was adamant about having the baby, yet she had yet to tell her parents she was pregnant, stern Catholics to the bone. I hadn’t told my parents either, but for very different reasons; they would have simply viewed it as further proof that I was a waste of space with no prospects beyond the dole queue. I couldn’t not, would not, give them that satisfaction. So over many weeks I leaned on my girlfriend to have an abortion, saddling her imagination with all the responsibility raising a baby would entail, and the ending of all those freedoms she had just been introduced to, turning eighteen. I convinced myself I was doing it for the both of us, that it was the right thing to do, though of course I was doing it for me. I knew that, even as I was doing it. I am not proud of it, but what’s done is done, I can’t change it. And if I did change it, if I could actually go back and change it, what would my life be like now? I doubt I would be with Jane, and I love her. I can’t imagine my life without her. Why else would I have forgiven her her infidelity if I didn’t love her? Why else would I be willing to have a child with her?

Eventually my girlfriend changed her mind. Or gave in, would be more apt. She went to England to have the abortion. I did not go with her because we couldn’t afford the money for the procedure and two flights, though her sister went with her, so at least she wasn’t alone. Another moment not to be proud of, not going with her, and, another moment of being honest with myself, I didn’t want to go because... because... I don’t really know. I just didn’t want to be there when the pregnancy was gone.

Less than a month after the abortion our relationship did what it had been preparing to do for months and collapsed in on itself. We went our separate ways, and... that was that. I’d like to say that not a day goes by that I don’t regret not going over with her, but I’d be lying. In time the abortion fell to the back of my mind, and it was only when Jane had the second miscarriage that I thought about it, the taste of cruel irony on my tongue as I held my crying wife, my own sadness shaking my body. And now this Blighted Ovum, this blight.

In the hard weeks after Jane’s second miscarriage I made the foolish mistake of mixing alcohol with Facebook and looked my old girlfriend up. There I found her profile picture, her smiling face much as it had been twenty odd years ago, three mini clones of herself sharing the picture with her, along with a man standing proudly behind her, the same man she started dating after we broke up.

I was struck with an icy jealousy at first, seeing her with her beautiful children, her proud husband, but it slowly gave way to a bittersweet acceptance, and a happiness that she, to all appearances, seemed happy and fulfilled. She did deserve that. She did.

I held Jane’s hand as the Misoprostol did its devastating duty, sitting on the edge of the bath as she sat on the toilet, pain crushing her stomach and shaking her breaths as she cried. The two previous times that she miscarried I’d been with her, holding her as her body rejected the ill-formed fetus. I held her as she cried and gasped in pain, bloody lumps making sickening sounds as they fell into the toilet bowl. But those times were nothing like this time now as the tablets forced her womb to push out the empty sac. I had never seen her in so much pain. She was pale and sweaty and cramped up with it. So much pain she couldn’t bear the
pressure of my arms around her, so all I could do was hold her hand and whisper “It’s okay,” and “It’ll be over soon,” sentiments which sounded empty even before they left my mouth, her grip growing tighter and tighter, while her other hand held the side of the toilet seat.

And the blood, so much blood. Clots of it falling from her as though it wasn’t just the deceiving sac falling from her, but her very insides, her womb, her stomach, her liver, lungs, kidneys and heart, until all that would be left would be bone stained red with what little blood remained.

And then it stopped and I helped her back to the bed, her legs weak and her back an explosion of agony from sitting on the toilet for too long. With a towel beneath her she lay down, keeping her body as still as possible to lessen the pain that was still howling through her body. Then I returned to the bathroom and, without looking into it, I flushed the toilet and cleaned the rim and the seat where blood had splashed, so she wouldn’t have to see all that blood if she had to come back and go through it all again, which she did, four more times. Four more excruciating times when she would bleed and howl, then retreat to the bed, while I cleaned up. Four more times until it seemed it might be done, ten full minutes without anything passing out of her body, and even then we let another five minutes pass before I helped Jane back to the bed where, the pain having drawn so much from her that she was too tried to even feel it, she fell into a deep sleep, and where she still sleeps as I stand outside our home, breathing air that doesn’t smell like blood, thinking about Blighted Ovums, and blights, and...

All marriages have ups and downs once the honeymoon period has faded, some more than others. Myself and Jane have had our ups and downs, though I don’t think we’ve had more than other couples I know. That hasn’t stopped me from wanting to… walk away. Not leave, but simply walk away for a day or two, walk outside the door and keep walking, stopping and walking back when I feel ready to walk back. When Jane admitted her night spent with another man I… I wanted to walk away, and only come back when I trusted her again. But I think if I had walked away then, I would never have come back, because I’ve never trusted her since, not in the way a husband should be able to trust his wife. I think that is more my problem than Jane’s. I don’t know.

I do know that I love her. Everyone does. Even my parents, who never liked any of my past girlfriends, love her, my mother insisting that Jane call her mum. While my dad is delighted to have someone to watch soccer with, my interest in sports is non-existent.

And I know she loves me. Isn’t that enough? I’ve seen married couples who clearly don’t love each other stay together and be utterly miserable together. Who could want that kind of life?

Asleep as Jane may be, I have left her on her own too long. Yet I do not move, the silence of the night holding me. I can’t help but wonder if we’ll try again. This last time technically not being our last time, not our third time’s the charm, because, according to the doctor who knows so much while knowing so little, there was nothing there. It wasn’t a pregnancy in the true sense of the word. It was a Blighted Ovum. There was nothing there to lose, no baby to miscarry and, for this, according to our doctor, we should be grateful, we should take some solace. We should be thankful that there was no baby to lose. Yet, it had been there. Only in our hearts and minds, yes, but there all the same. We believed there was a baby, our baby, growing inside Jane. And while we were nervous, scared that she could miscarry, we grew more confident as we got beyond the six weeks of the first miscarriage, then the nine weeks of the second miscarriage, until we were less than one week from fourteen weeks, that holy grail time when the chances of miscarrying are less than one percent. This baby had lasted longer than the others. This baby might be born, this baby existed, this baby that had various names tested on it, boy or girl. This baby, our baby existed... until it didn’t and...

I don’t know if we’ll try again. It’s not something we’ve discussed, because it wasn’t something we could discuss, not during those weeks leading up to the discovery, lest we jinx the baby growing inside Jane. And as our confidence grew with every passing week, it wasn’t something that needed to be discussed. I doubt we’ll be discussing it anytime soon. My heart, as bruised and battered as it feels right at this moment, doesn’t want to risk such pain again. And Jane? Can her heart endure it? Can her body for that matter? While the physical pain of this will fade, the mental pain will last some time yet, I think.
I’m suddenly very tired. I should go back into the house, lie beside Jane, be there when she wakes. But just for a moment I will stand here, under this starless sky and try not to think what has gone before or about what is going to happen. Or about anything at all.

**People Don’t Think About Things Like That**

**Fiction by Paul Brownsey**

By Dave Kavanagh | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

The puppy squirms in Janine’s muscular arms as she rings the bell, but its squirming is eager, its energy indistinguishable from delight — delight in being in her arms, in wherever it’s going, in the whole of life.

Unusually, there’s delight on Janine’s face, too.

Archie readies his own smile as the door opens, the door once sealed off by his father’s unexplained warning: *Don’t go into Uncle Bill’s by yourself*. As always, the house exudes cleanliness, no old-man fug or mustiness. Bill’s shirt is fresh and ironed and he wears a tie.

“Hello, Uncle Bill,” Janine cries, showing no resentment at all that his face stays inexpressive, which it doesn’t have to do, for it’s still boyish, uninhibited by the stiff or sagging elderly skin that make it hard for feelings to exhibit themselves.

Then the old man’s eyes focus on the puppy. Already the puppy is heaving and wriggling to get at him, and Bill darts in a hand to caress its neck, and the puppy’s licky ecstasy passes back into Bill and his face becomes a big soft smile. “What’s his name?”

“Hasn’t got one yet.” Janine is trying for archness, not helped by her big face and big voice.

“Well, come in, wee big man,” Bill says, tickling its chest.

She releases the puppy. As fast as its soft overlong legs allow, it bounds after Bill with little cries of tail-wagging joy, yodels rather than yaps. Bill spins round suddenly, causing Janine and Archie to halt and bump into each other. He drops on all fours to face the puppy — no stiffness, no creakiness of limbs — and makes the same noise back to it, like one dog to another.

Janine’s face wears a snout-like appearance which Archie can read as a pleased conspiratorial look. She says, softly for her, “Told you.”

In due course they are all seated in Bill’s sitting-room, except for the puppy, who alternates between darting away to sniff at some boxes and torn-off paper, and scooting back in devoted love for more pattings and strokings from Bill.
“Books,” says Janine, eyeing the boxes and paper and the volumes lying among them.

“Books,” says Bill, as though confirming Janine’s identification of something she might have had to hazard a guess at.

He adds, “Complete sets of Scott and Dickens. Of the novels of Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. Came this morning. They should keep me going.”

Janine snorts. “That’s what I say to the old ‘uns when I give ‘em their laxatives.”

The old man switches to a cuddly baby-talk voice. “An oos passing his little literary judgements, then? — Ooh, piddling on The Heart of Midlothian.” Showing no annoyance at all, he lifts the puppy onto some of the discarded wrapping paper, then fetches pail and mop from the kitchen and wipes up.

“They’re easy to house-train,” Archie says in an apologetic tone he sees isn’t needed.

“Wish my old ‘uns were.” Her voice turns heavily sentimental. “So how are you, Uncle Bill? Still missing Tony?”

He’s still holding pail and mop. “What do you think, given that we were together for forty-two years and ninety-six days and he died eleven weeks ago today?”

Happily, Janine doesn’t say Be like that, then, even though she won’t be seeing Bill’s manner as a shield against overwhelming feelings. Instead, she points to a large framed black-and-white photograph of a young man on a motor-bike. He wears a peaked cap. Somehow he’s both exaggerating the macho Marlon Brando pose and grinning sweetly in a way tough guys never do. “And there he is,” she says.

The loud unrestrained slide of compassion in her voice reminds Archie that he knew there was compassion in her the first day he saw her, when she was working at the supermarket. Hopping in time to her own raucous rendering of When That Midnight Choo Choo Leaves For Alabam’, she’d kicked a stack of supermarket baskets all the way from the checkouts to the Tesco entrance. The boss tore her off a strip in front of the customers. Misery for herself was so naked in her face, so untouched by ego, that it told Archie she could find compassion for others, too. After the telling-off, she stood there bawling, tall and all alone, oblivious to customers criss-crossing around her. Archie went over and looked up into her face and said, “Well, I thought it livened the place up.” She’d flinched down at him as though a customer had taken over from the manager to berate her. “No, I’m on your side. I’m Archie—yes, just that; my dad wouldn’t have me put down as Archibald because it’s old-fashioned, but he liked Archie because it’s a name you can think of a nice guy having.”

“Tea, while I’m on my feet?” Not staying for an answer, Bill returns pail and mop to the kitchen. Janine points to the puppy as it follows him with emotions on its face that humans lose—adoration, total trust, an unclouded sense of being in a good, good place. Bill’s baby-talk voice comes from, the kitchen: “And would oo like tea, too? Wag your tail for Yes. Oh, you do. But no sugar for you. We don’t want you getting diabetes like Stuart Lawson’s wife. Fat, so fat. Stuffed herself with sweet things all day long, so it was her own fault she had to have a leg off. Oo don’t want to be a three-legged dog, does oo?”

The smirk and elbowing Janine gives Archie express a shared triumph, not just her own. She calls, “I take sugar, Uncle Bill,” and laughs out loud.

It’s not to be just quick mugs of tea. Bill brings through delicate-looking cups and saucers, tea strainer, tea plates, milk jug, a fruit cake that looks home-made, a china tea-pot, posh biscuits set out on a gold-rimmed plate. He sits down and then does a pantomime of noticing something missing. He gets to his feet like
someone who has to struggle to do so and is off to the kitchen again. Janine sneaks a biscuit — they've not been offered yet — and has eaten it before Bill returns and plonks down a sugar bowl without a word. The boy in the boyish face can be priggish.

But Janine’s good humour remains intact. “Doing things properly,” she says. Taking up her cup and saucer, she lifts her little finger and sniggers.

“You can’t let yourself go,” Bill retorts. “Robert Follis — he didn’t shave, his garden was a tip. He smelled. He ate out of tins. Literally, sometimes: couldn’t even be bothered to heat up beans. Had a heart attack and died eleven months after he retired. If you let yourself go, the whole organism becomes slack and open to attack.”

He pauses before pronouncing: “Only had himself to blame.”

“Your friend from work,” Archie comments. Which is too much like congratulating the old man on remembering people, on avoiding dementia so far. He adds, “I suppose it could have been the other way round: he was already ill without realising it and that made him give up on things.”

“No,” Bill says with finality.

Crumbs from the biscuit Janine is munching — her third — drop to the carpet and the puppy bounds across to lick them up. She crumbles a whole biscuit onto the carpet. Bill, glaring, allows the puppy to scoff it up, then snatches it onto his lap. “No need to hoover,” says Janine. She sniggers again. “I never do anyway.”

“You do your best,” Archie murmurs before telling Bill, “Jannie has been having a spot of bother at work.”

Bill’s face is expressionless again.

“Yes, Janine’s care home, it’s been taken over by new owners and all the staff have been switched to zero-hours contracts. She never knows what work she’s getting.”

Bill has risen to his feet, the puppy slipping scrambling from him. “Zero-hours contracts are a terrible thing. No sick pay, no holidays, having to hang around unpaid in case the boss happens to want you for an hour or two.”

He sits again, sadly. “But what can I do about it? Everything that’s been built up to protect ordinary people is being dismantled bit by bit to feed the greed of capitalists. It’s the one compensation, that I won’t be here to see the end of the process.”

“They just want me out,” says Janine.

“No,” Bill says, with finality again. “It’s not just about you, Janine.”

“Velda Macdonald gets called in all the time. All I got, two evenings in two weeks.”

“I expect it’s just the luck of the draw,” says Archie.

“Bloody well isn’t!” she shouts at him. The puppy whimpers and runs behind Bill’s legs and doesn’t peep out. “It was that wheelchair.” There’s a clumsy emphasis on that, as though she were identifying the wheelchair out of several before her.

Archie says to Bill, “It was just a bit of fun. There was a cake for someone’s birthday and Janine was handing
it round in the lounge and she got up on this wheelchair like it was a children’s scooter and kind of scootered back and forth giving people their slices and tea. It livened the place up. It was supposed to be a party. But the wheelchair jammed and she upset a cup and a splash went on one of the old guys, and the manageress gave her a dressing-down in front of them all.” Bill has taken the puppy back on his knee, murmuring reassurances after its fright.

“I didn’t hit her,” Janine insists to Archie. “I just, like...” She flaps a hand.

Archie explains, “A gesture like, *Oh, go away.*” He pleads, as if before the judge, “That’s all.”

The boy in the boyish face is censorious. “Like Boadicea in her chariot. I trust I shan’t get tea upset over me if I have to go into a care home.” Janine starts to cry and Archie covers by saying to Bill, “So what are you going to call it?”

“It is not mine to give a name to.” Bill’s voice makes clear that Archie’s question was not a surprise.

Janine has looked up. “It is.”

“No, it is not.”

“But we bought it for you,” Janine wails. “A present. We thought now you’re on your own, you’d like a dog. He’s *lovely*.”

Archie says, “I like the idea of a dog having a proper name, Colin or Fiona or whatever, not a doggy name like Rover.”

“I am grateful to you, Janine —” This sounds clipped and official. Bill puts gratitude into the voice. “Janine, it was a nice thought, very nice, and, yes, I would love a dog. I’ve always wanted one. But Tony’s allergy meant we couldn’t. And now I can’t have one.”

“Not letting yourself go, you were going on about it. Exercise, best thing for you. I have to take my old ones walking in the grounds. The dog’ll *make* you exercise.”

The clipped official manner returns. “I do not need a dog to induce me to exercise.” His voice suggests that this would be an unworthy reason for having one anyway. “Tony was lesson enough. He would not take exercise. After his first stroke, the doctors told him again and again: exercise will help you recover and stay mobile and prevent another stroke. But would he listen? Just sat there watching his endless crime shows on TV. So it served him bloody well right. I walk at least four miles every day. My best time for four miles is an hour and thirty-one minutes.”

“Well, then.” says Janine. “Walking the dog’s no problem. Easy-peasy. Just take it with you.”

Bill stares at her as if he’s walked into a trap, but seems to decide that such cunning is beyond her.

“I pleaded with Tony: going on like this, you’re going to leave me a widower sooner rather than later. But he was too selfish to think of me.”

Archie says, “Don’t be too hard on Tony. He was one of the good guys.”

What looks like anger on Bill’s face finally emerges as a grin, which encourages Janine to say, “Lovely guy. Now don’t you be selfish about this puppy, Uncle Bill. He’ll be ever so upset if you make him go away now.”
But isn’t Bill’s grin what they call a savage grin? It’s still trained on Archie. “Different from your father when Tony moved in with me. Daddy says I’m not to come in by myself. Now the son defends Tony against me.”

Bill has turned to Janine. “I’ve told you, Janine, I cannot have a dog.” He’s stroking the puppy again and murmuring baby-talk.

“It’s had its jags, if you’re too bloody mean to pay for them. But I suppose you don’t want to pay out for a few bloody tins of dog meat.”

“I am seventy-four. I might collapse and die at any time. Try to think what that would be like for the puppy. The terror. The fear. Locked in with a corpse. Starving. Alone. With oo’s ickle floppy ears.”

Janine snorts and starts to say something but Archie says, “They’re probably hard-wired to respect the pack leader’s body.”

“This is stupid,” Janine shouts. “It’s only a dog.”

Archie starts to propose a daily ‘phone call to check that Bill’s okay, but he interrupts: “I will not take the risk. I know what it’s like to be abandoned. Left.”

Janine turns to Archie. “Oh, I give up. He’s your uncle, not mine.” She’s crying again. “You do something nice for people and get it thrown back in your face. Frightened the dog will starve to death if I die. Fuck’s sake, people don’t think about things like that.”

Archie is half cuddling her, half helping her to her feet. She continues, “It’s because I gave it him. Never wanted you to marry me, great big lump for his precious bloody nephew. Well, serve him bloody well right if people don’t care. Hope he drops dead and it eats him. Come on, we’re leaving.”

Bill is murmuring, “Sorry, wee big man, I know we’d get on, but you don’t understand it’s for oo’s own good. Weally, it is.” He’s tickling it under its chin and it’s trying to lick the finger and Janine, a burly punishing angel, interrupts her lurch for the door to grab the puppy from his lap.

As he goes to follow her out, Archie’s feet are caught up in wrapping-paper from the books. He says, “You know how she is.” It sounds lame but he’s resisting saying Sorry for her behaviour.

“If I were too mean to look after it,” says Bill, “meanness would be another little life-support mechanism. How could a mean man spend all that money on all those books and then conk out before he’s read them? Got to get my money’s worth, haven’t I? Assuming I don’t get macular degeneration. And Oliver Twist won’t be sniffing around a corpse, terrified and starving.”

“See you, then,” says Archie, thinking he sees tears in Bill’s eyes and feeling more sure they’re there as, exiting, he hears Bill say to the room, “That would have been a good name for you, wee big man — Oliver Twist — ‘cause oos got a twisty tail.”

She’s already in the passenger seat, holding the squirming whining puppy under one arm while she punches her mobile. “Get in,” she commands, then winks. She says, “Uncle Bill, I’m just throwing the dog out the car. In the road. Outside. You better take it in or it will get run over and squashed. Or starve. Right, drive off.”

Archie stares. “This is a joke, right?”
“Drive off!” As Archie obeys she opens her door and throws the puppy out.

She giggles at Archie as though he's in on the plot. She starts singing *How Much Is That Doggie In The Window?*

She says, “He loves that puppy. We’re all looking for someone to love. He’s got someone, anyway.” There’s an odd emphasis on *He*, as if she’s still looking.

Next morning she comes to Archie with fear on her face.

“That was Cruelty to Animals ’phoning. He’s reported me.”

“Bill wouldn’t do that.”

“He bloody has!” she shouts.

“Don’t take on, Jannie. It’ll just be — what? — he called them out to look for it.”

“No, they knew about me throwing it out the car. Made a complaint about cruelty, the bastard. Could I be taken to court? They want to see me.”

Archie’s mind flies around probabilities. “I don’t think it’d come to court. I mean, people do a lot worse to animals. You see photos. They’ll probably just have a word with you. Actually, look, we’ll say it’s our dog, it just ran off after we visited, not cruelty at all, you asked Bill to look for it for you because you had to get away to work your shift at Fynloch Lodge.”

“But I don’t want it back!”

“He just got hold of the wrong end of the stick, an old man, losing the place. I mean, he’s seventy-four. You said, ‘The puppy shot out the car like someone threw it.’ Yes, I heard you say that. Two against one.”

She’s bawling like she did the day of *The Midnight Choo Choo*. He tried to say *two against one* in a special voice to convey a deeper sense in which they are united, though he knows he’s too shrimp-like for it to get through. He can do things for her but will never be able to comfort her, he being so short and slight and having an odd thin concave little face, for these things must make her believe that he only took up with her because he was desperate for a woman, any woman, not from love.

**A Village Street in Winter- New Fiction by Ruth Brandt**

By ruth1 | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
Ruth Brandt’s short stories and flash fiction have appeared in anthologies and magazines, including the *Bridport Prize 2018, Neon, Litro*, the *Aesthetica Creative Writing Annual 2017, Into the Void* and *The London Reader*. She won the Kingston University MFA Creative Writing Prize 2017 and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Write Well Award. She is Writer in Residence at the Surrey Wildlife Trust.

For a couple of days that winter it blew warm. Half our street, the south facing half, glinted with ochres and terracottas in the strobing sunlight, while the north facing side radiated arctic blue. Uphill, land warmed by the unexpected heat gave up its water and the river began to rise. None of us worried much about the river, after all for a brief while we had our street back to play in. Even Matt the Frost came out, loitering on his blue side of the street, posing spikey figures in its shadows, his bobble hat erect, his gloves pulled to the ends of his fingers, arms jittering, throat grunting.

“You kids, why don’t you dance too?” Mrs Gregory suggested, as though it was up to us to lure Matt the Frost from the dark side. “Go on.” She went as far as placing her radio on her doorstep.

Frizz, Sarah and I had no intention of dancing.

“He’s mental,” Frizz said.

If Sarah or I had said that, Mrs Gregory would have cuffed us. Instead she pulled her coat close.

“Go on, Bun,” she said to me.

I shrugged. What was the point?

It was Mr Drake who warned about the river. Nothing much, just a comment as he passed us by on the melted side of the street.

“Don’t go near the banks, kids,” he called.

The minute his door was shut we crossed the shadow’s stark line to investigate. From behind a dark bush came a shuffling and the flick of a knitted hat. I paused. Was that Matt hissing or river water scraping through reeds?
“Hey,” Sarah shouted, and I found I had been left behind in the shadow zone, alone with the scent of Matt the Frost.

I ran.

“What?” I called, glancing behind.

“Look.”

A rug, a genuine green and blue patterned rug was rushing down the river.

“My granny’s,” Frizz said, but we all knew that Frizz had no granny. He had no dad either, just him and Matt and their mum, who never came out, not even with the sun.

“Matt most probably pissed on it,” Sarah said.

“Crapped,” I crouched to mimic.

They both laughed. See, Frizz didn’t mind the joke being on his brother.

“I’m not fishing it out,” Frizz said. “Not whoever’s it is.”

So we threw sticks and grass at it as it came near and then, when it did nothing but wallow in front of us in the current, Sarah and I turned to fart it on downstream.

“Better get home,” Frizz said.

Frizz always had to get home.

“Go on then,” Sarah said.

Over the next few days the weather stayed fine. We didn’t go back to the river, mostly because Frizz didn’t come out. Something or other about Matt, he told us through his window. All sorts of things Frizz told us, none of which ever seemed quite right.

Mrs Gregory said to leave Frizz and his mum be for a while. Stop pestering. That poor woman with that lad. Sarah and I skateboarded a bit. Did nothing mainly.

About the fifth day the air warmed till there was talk of it reaching season-change temperature. The sun rose earlier too, set later, and Matt the Frost reappeared, except his gloves were off, his hat nowhere to be seen. The sharp shapes he’d earlier pulled became curves and bends. Still the shade dominated their side of the street, still he remained in the grey glow of winter while on our side green blades sprouted in Mrs Gregory’s front lawn.

“You,” Sarah called. I don’t know what she wanted. I don’t suppose she did either. “You, frosty boy.”

Matt just stood there, then jumped into a star, then curved into an S, and a shape that could have been a C and could have been an O. And he dropped a shoulder and then a hip, lolloping like a puppet. No longer Matt the Frost, but Matt the Drip, curving and bending and melting.

“Mental,” Sarah shouted.

“Mental,” I copied.
“You two stop that!” Mrs Gregory called.

Sarah turned her back on Mrs Gregory’s front window and squeezed a sloppy fart through her teeth.

I swear that Sarah was making this noise to Mrs Gregory. I swear that she wasn’t pointing any of it at Matt, but for a moment he froze into angles and sparkles again, before wailing, like a child who’s had his nose pulled. And then he ran, all elbows and heels, like no part of his body belonged to any other part, like he had been built from donated limbs and organs.

Sarah pissed herself laughing. I did too. We went back to our skateboards and paid no attention to where Matt had gone, never even thought of him till about ten minutes later when Frizz’s door slammed and Frizz was out.

“Tosser,” Sarah shouted into the gloom.

“Tosser,” I copied.

“Got your skateboard?”

But Frizz paid no attention. He darted between the bushes and gates, peering over bins and rose twigs.

“Oi, tosser,” Sarah really yelled this time.

“Where’s Matt?” Frizz yelled back.

I was already beginning to feel a bit edgy, like frost was settling in my chest.

“Your guess,” Sarah called.

“Where’s Matt?” Frizz was on repeat. “Where’s Matt?”

Perhaps we all knew where Matt was, or perhaps we all took the hint of the direction given by one of us, because without saying anything we ran towards the river. Frizz kept calling for his brother as he ran. A snot bubble appeared out of his nose. He didn’t bother to wipe it away.

I was the first to see Matt. Right on the bank where the river flowed over the grass. In the shade behind the trees. The water was up to his ankles and in his hands he held that rug, the blue and green one. He swirled it up over his head and his body did this swaying thing like the reeds in the river, while his spare hand reached out to grab clean air, which he clutched into his chest. His dance seemed to go on for hours, and as he gyrated a plume of suspended droplets glistened above him in the air.

Then my mouth called, “Matt, hey Matt.”

He jarred and twisted to see who was calling. When he spotted me, he smiled for a whole forever – Matt the Frost, Matt the Drip, Matt – before a gust of chill wind shattered hail down on him.

Mrs Gregory got there fast. Crunched through the ice that was already reforming to drag him back from the edge. And as she pulled the sodden rug from his hand and dashed it to the ground, Matt’s face jerked the smile into sharp teeth and creases, and water cascaded out of his mouth down his chin.

Then Frizz did this thing. He grabbed his big brother round the waist, held his fingers interlocked until Mrs Gregory prised them apart and put an arm round each of them before leading them away.
I clamped my numb fingers under my armpits.

“Why didn’t we dance with him?” I asked Sarah.

At least I hope I did.

**Goodbye, Mr. Fox- Fiction by Anne Walsh Donnelly**

By Anne Walsh Donnelly | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

Anne Walsh Donnelly lives in Castlebar, Co. Mayo. Her work has been published in several literary magazines such as Hennessey New Writing in The Irish Times (July 2018), Crannog, Boyne Berries and The Blue Nib. Her poems have been highly commended in the OTE New Writer of the Year Award (2017 & 2018). She won The Blue Nib Winter/Spring 2018 Poetry chapbook competition and the OTE 2018 Fiction Slam. Her debut poetry collection “The Woman With An Owl Tattoo” will be published in May 2019 by Fly On The Wall Poetry Press.

The kitchen window creaks as Luke pushes it open. Sticks his head out, sucks in the morning air. It’s laced with the smell of the wretched fox that won’t leave his hens alone. They don’t give him eggs anymore but that’s no reason to let the fox take them, he thinks. Aren’t they entitled to live out the rest of their days in peace just like he should be, instead of being evicted from his home. Luke squints as he searches the field nearest the house for a smudge of red fur. He’s there; Luke feels it in his bones.

Damien’s Land Rover comes rattling up the lane. Luke jumps back from the window, the mug of tea in his hand flies and lands in the fireplace where the remains of last night’s turf lie. Only a minute before he’d stoked it just for the smell of the peat smoke that evokes the picture of Walter in his mind.
The squeal of the rusty hinge on the door of the Land Rover drags Luke to the window again. He watches Damien march to the Whitethorn ditch with a sign and his sledge hammer. Luke strokes the week old stubble covering his jowls. He’d hoped after yesterday that Damien would change his mind. He flinches as the hammer pounds the stake. Walter’s sheepdog yelps in the yard.

Luke grabs the shotgun from the top of the kitchen dresser, pushes the back door open and steps onto the dirty flagstones. The weapon is primed and ready. He strides through the farmyard and into the field. As if sensing his presence Damien turns.

“You gave the estate agent an awful fright yesterday,” says Damien.

He props the sledge hammer against the galvanised steel gate and wipes his brow.

“I was hunting for the fox that keeps taking my hens.”

Damien narrows his eyes.

“I’ll do what I have to – to protect my farm,” says Luke.

“Only it’s not yours, never was.”

Luke entwines stick fingers around the barrel until the only thing that separates him and the shotgun is a film of sweat stagnating in the hollow of his palm. Then he takes a deep breath.

“I’ve lived and farmed this land with Walter for the last thirty years. That has to count for something.”

Damien swats at the bluebottle buzzing around his head.

“Not in the eyes of the law.”

Luke stares at him, looking for the boy with the floppy fringe that Walter and he loved. The boy who ran from his father’s farm in the evenings to help them bring the cows in for milking, and much later the man who got the priest to give Walter the last rites as he grew cold in his bed.

Luke couldn’t cry at the funeral. It wouldn’t do to be seen upset. Walter wouldn’t have wanted that. He heard someone whisper “shirt-lifter” in the graveyard. And that nearly loosened his taut face. He opened his mouth, closed it again and gritted his teeth. Then grabbed a handful of earth, threw it on the coffin and waited until the last shovel was scattered over Walter’s grave.

“Will you come to Mulligans with us? A hot whiskey would warm you up,” Damien said, when the gravediggers left.

“What was he doing so close to the pit when the slurry was mixing?”

Damien couldn’t answer, just wiped his eyes, and the two men’s umbrellas leaned against each other as hailstones battered the nylon canopies.

“Nothing will ever warm me again.”

That night Luke sat in Walter’s armchair in the kitchen, leaned towards the hearth, clutched his ribs and stared into the peat ashes.

“Why did you have to go before me ... why?”
He ruminated until the rooster crowed and brought another December dawn to his door.

Now as he stares at Damien, his head’s addled and he doesn’t know who to be madder with, Damien for putting the farm up for sale or Walter for not making a will.

“I don’t have any rights to this place if anything happened to you,” he’d said to Walter, after Damien’s father died.

What if Walter went the same way as his brother, he wondered as the bed creaked and Walter rolled towards him; took hold of his face.

“Nothing’s going to happen. I’m in great health,” he said as his lips moved towards Luke’s.

Luke felt himself go hard as Walter stroked his chest and played with the knots of hair that covered it.

“I’ll look after you. Haven’t I always?”

Luke closed his eyes, inhaled his lover’s freshly showered body; a hint of manure still lingered on the back of Walter’s goose-skinned neck.

Damien checks the stake to see if it’s steady, then picks up the sledge hammer and starts to walk towards the Land Rover as if there’s nothing more to be said.

“That’s not going to stay standing for long,” says Luke as he raises the shotgun.

Damien shouts over his left shoulder.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you doing this?”

Damien turns, stops and kicks at a clump of bulrushes beside him.

“It’s my land now.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Put that gun down for a start.”

“Your uncle’s heart would be torn in two if he saw that sign,” says Luke as he tries to still his shaking hand.

“I think he’d understand.”

“Well if I don’t, how the hell would he?”

The cattle low in the top field. Damien turns to look at them.

“Have you not milked the cows yet this morning?”

“I was just about to, when you arrived.”

Damien whistles for the sheepdog, who nearly knocks the gun from Luke’s hand as he rushes past and mooches around Damien’s boots. He stoops to pet him.
“You’ll have to sell the cattle too. There won’t be room on your land.”

Damien stops petting the dog and stands up.

“I know.”

Luke can hardly hear his voice. It reminds him of the time Damien told him he’d been bullied in school because of Walter and himself.

Luke had ruffled the auburn hair on Damien’s bowed head.

“Pay no heed to them bucks,” he’d said.

He knew it wouldn’t happen again because he’d be roaming through the fields later that evening hunting foxes and he was sure to happen upon some of those lads and that would be the end of the teasing.

Luke lowers the shotgun, edges closer to Damien and scans his frame. Is there any bit of that boy left in him at all, he wonders. His throat feels raw as he speaks.

“Do you know where I feel closest to him now?”

Damien shrugs his shoulders.

“At night beside the fire when I’m trying to finish the crossword in the Farmers Journal.”

“He was a great man for the crosswords.”

“And he loved helping you with your homework.”

Damien pulls a bulrush from the nearby clump and winds it around his forefinger.

“I miss him too,” he says.

Luke clenches his eyes shut for a minute. He’d managed this far without crying, sure as hell not going to start now. He hears the soft thud of Damien’s boots moving towards him.

The horn on the Land Rover beeps. Luke’s body shakes and he opens his eyes but all he sees is a watery haze. He drags the sleeve of his shirt across his face and turns his head towards the lane. Then he glances at Damien who stares at the shotgun in his hand.

“Shane’s in the jeep.”

“Jesus, why didn’t you tell me before now?”

“You didn’t give me a chance.”

The boy pokes his thin face out the passenger window. Luke’s shocked by how pale he looks. Almost as white as his father.

“He’s still talking about the story you read to him the last time you visited.”

Luke shoves the shotgun behind his back.
“Fantastic Mr. Fox? I used to love reading the Roald Dahl books to you too.”

“Remember when I used to go hunting foxes with you? Mam nearly had a seizure, when I told her you let me have a shot.”

Luke can still hear Damien’s whoop of joy when he managed to shoot a crow.

“Aye and you had the finest aim of any young buck in the parish.”

“I had a good teacher. Though, I don’t remember you ever killing a fox,” says Damien.

Luke gets a sudden urge to hug him. Then the sun bounces off the “For Sale” sign and he shields his eyes from its fiery rays. The shotgun slips out of his hand. He wipes his sweaty palm down the side of his trousers, hip cracks as he bends and picks it up. Damien grabs his arm.

“I don’t want to sell.”

“Then why?”

“I have to find some way of paying herself off. She wants a divorce.”

“What? Jesus Christ, why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“We haven’t exactly been on speaking terms lately, have we?”

Luke looks down at his mucky boots as he remembers the times he wouldn’t answer his mobile when Damien rang. But there’s that little voice reminding him of the way his hands shook when he read the solicitor’s letter, saying he was entitled to nothing. Luke couldn’t bear to talk to Damien then, couldn’t believe he would sell his home out from under his feet. He raises his head.

“No, we haven’t,” he says as he holds Damien’s eyes in his. He flinches, at the sight of the red capillaries scattered over the other man’s pupils.

“If I want to keep my own farm I have to buy her out. That’s why I have to sell this place.”

Luke can’t look at him anymore. He turns away.

There’s a flash of red, half-way down the field. Instinct propels him to raise the shotgun, aim –

“Luke, don’t.”

Damien runs towards the Land Rover. It’s the shriek that paralyses Luke’s finger. His grip slackens and the shotgun lands on the grass. The white tip of the fox’s bushy tail disappears into the blackthorn hedge at the bottom of the field. There’ll be another time, Luke thinks as he walks towards the jeep where Damien is hugging his son.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten Shane. It’s just that I’ve been after that fox for the last week.”

“I thought foxes only come out at night,” says Shane.

“You never know when they’re going to show up,” says Luke as he reaches into his trousers pocket and pulls out two euro.
“Here, buy yourself some sweets at the County Show on Sunday.”

Damien takes the coin and gives it to Shane.

“Thanks,” he says. “Why don’t you come with us?”

Luke puts his hands back into his pockets.

“I’d only be in the way.”

“I could do with some help to keep an eye on this lad,” says Damien as he brushes Shane’s fringe out of his eyes.

“You’re a great father. He’s lucky to have you.”

Damien lowers his head and leans towards Luke.

“The house feels so empty without her.”

Luke turns and looks at his half-closed back door.

“I know what you mean.”

Damien puts his palm on the back of the older man’s shoulder.

“You could move in with us.”

“I could,” says Luke as he takes a step back, walks to where the shotgun lies and picks it up.

“And maybe it’s time you gave up hunting foxes.”

“Aye, maybe it is.”

After his tea Luke throws last week’s unfinished Farmers Journal crossword into the fire. He takes the shotgun from where it leans against the corner of the mantelpiece and swats the midges that crowd his face as he steps out into the evening sun. The hens scatter as he walks through them towards the slurry pit. Just as he’s about to lift the hatch of the pit he sees his prey, skulking near the door of the hayshed.

Luke’s eyes run along the fox’s long sleek body, from his bushy tail to his pointed ears. He raises his shotgun, finger slides over the trigger. He can see the black whiskers on the fox’s muzzle twitch but the animal doesn’t move.

The hens clucking turns to squawking until the gunshot silences them and the only sound that Luke hears is the hiss of air escaping from one of his tractor’s tyres, then the swish of branches as the fox disappears into the wood of pine trees behind the shed.

“Goodbye, Mr. Fox.”

Luke lifts the hatch off the pit, throws his shotgun into the slurry and bangs the hatch shut.
I was working at the bed factory earning fuck all and enjoying it even less. The boss had already told me I had promise before I had the idea of going it alone. I don’t get why he thought I had promise. Probably it was because I was first in every morning; but you’d get there early if you were sofa surfing in London. Have you seen the size of the settees they squeeze into what the bastards call open plan living spaces? I was first in because I was making myself scarce before whoever it was that was putting me up that week came downstairs for breakfast. It’s always a good idea to get out before you’re asked to move on and besides, the boss had let me have the keys to open up. No doubt the lazy sod fancied an extra half hour in bed and no doubt he’d smuggled a Sleepmaestro Deluxe out the factory gate and into his cosy double bedroom with fitted wardrobes and en suite. Oh yeah, he loved his bedroom. The fucker never stopped going on about it.

Mum used to say I had a head full of ideas and for once she was right. Actually, she said stupid ideas, but when it comes to memories I prefer to be selective. What use are ideas if you don’t give them a chance to fly? I’ve learned not to dismiss them, however daft they may sound. I didn’t think the boss would go for it, but the plumbers were hard at it within a month of my suggestion about putting in showers for the staff who cycled in. That worked out well when I ran out of friends with sofas to sleep on. Don’t get me wrong: there were no fallings out, but people can tire of the smell of feet. So another idea I had was sleeping in the factory, where as you can imagine there was no shortage of beds. The trickiest thing was killing time until the second shift finished, but after ten o’clock I could let myself back in and have the whole place to myself. It was a sweet gig all in all. There was a kitchen and a television in the staff room, toilets and showers (what a great idea that was) and a showroom, which I bet would have given the boss’s beloved boudoir a run for its money. After a while I worked out I could save quite a bit of my monthly fuck all and that was when the ideas really started flowing.

My mate Ronnie, who had put up with my socks for two months without a single snarky comment, needed a new mattress. He didn’t say why, but it wasn’t hard to work out given his passion for water sports. He wasn’t after anything other than a recommendation or a second or a return or staff concession. I could have done any of those and he would have been happy. But what I got to thinking about was the old five-finger discount. If the boss could do it, why not me? There were lorries going up and down that road all hours. No
one was going to bat an eyelid at one more van loading up before midnight. I told Ronnie I’d get him a junior Sleepmaestro for nothing as a thank you for putting me up; I even promised to throw in a waterproof mattress protector. He was cock-a-hoop and one Thursday night at about eleven he turned up with an Aussie called Ryan. Ryan is a man with a van. Now he’s my man with a van. Earlier in the day I’d got Tommy, one of the old fellers, to give me a hand wrapping the mattress and shifting it to the door. He’s been there twenty-odd years and didn’t ask a single question. It was just another mattress sitting by the loading bay and waiting to be collected. Did he wonder where it was when he got in the next morning? I doubt it. I picked him because he’s one of those who don’t give a fuck. He doesn’t say much, but you can tell he’s alright. God knows what he must have thought of me ordering him about. I used him a few times and feel bad about never dropping him a bung.

After Ronnie it was one of Ryan’s mates. Ryan shares a house with three other Aussies and a Kiwi and one of them is a retail consultant. I thought what the fuck is a retail consultant? Who needs a consultant to tell them what to buy? But that’s not it. A Retail Consultant (it’s in Capital Letters on her card) is someone who can tell you which shops will be on the high street this time next year and how we’ll do our shopping in ten years’ time. I like Lauren because she’s full of ideas and like a lot of the Aussies I’ve met she’s not shy when it comes to telling you what’s on her mind. She wanted a divan – the kind with a drawer – as well as a mattress, but the factory specialised in metal frames with slats. Divan was a dirty word to the boss, although he was happy enough to use it in front of his department store clients. Lauren said she’d be fine with the same as Ronnie – she had tried his, I don’t know in what circumstances – so I let her have one for free because I was keen to pick her brains.

You’re wondering how it’s possible to sneak stock out of a bed factory without anyone noticing. Fair enough. I wondered the same myself and I knew I wouldn’t get away with it forever. No, not forever, but I was game enough to push it until another opportunity came along. I kept my head down and my hands clean at work. I made sure to volunteer for anything that came up, especially the crappy jobs. It was in my interest to clean the staff room, for example, as it was a bit like my doing my housework. And when the boss started moaning about invoices and filing, I offered to give Mrs. McInerney a hand on my breaks. Later on he agreed when I said I thought she had too much to do, but I couldn’t believe it when he made me temporary Stock Controller without an interview. That put one or two noses out of joint, but after a few boxes of biscuits and doughnuts everything settled down. Ryan and Lauren’s housemates were my first paying customers and then we got a good thing going with Ryan’s expat buddies. He got a commission for every referral and a flat fee for deliveries. Even with Ryan’s cut I was saving plenty, what with paying no rent or utility bills; but it wasn’t easy to manipulate the stock figures and anyway I was getting itchy feet. I wouldn’t say I’d had any moral issues with the bed operation, but Mum did teach me right from wrong and I can’t remember who taught me this – maybe I learned it for myself – but I do know it’s good to quit when you’re ahead; especially if you have an idea about what to do next.

My boss was getting twitchy about reduced productivity on the one hand and online mattress companies on the other. He didn’t know which way to turn. He couldn’t understand how his well-oiled machine could be producing less, but the facts were plain to see in my stock figures. Clients were warning him about new companies that were sourcing beds in China and selling them direct. Lauren had told me about people buying mattresses on the internet. I couldn’t believe that anyone would think it was a good idea to spend a grand on something they’d never tried out. But that was the future, according to Lauren and the clients who were threatening to cut orders. When the boss confided in me that he was thinking about letting some of the older fellas go and installing cameras, I figured it was time to jump ship and move on to Phase Two.

I learned something really interesting from the back-door selling. I mean, we all know everyone loves a bargain, but what I think my original customers liked most of all was the cloak and dagger stuff. It made them feel special – as if they’d got one over on their neighbour or were sticking it to the man or something.
I’m not one to dwell on what goes on in people’s heads, but this felt like useful knowledge. The question I asked myself was how far would people go to get that feeling? And also, I suppose, how much would they pay? One night I went with Lauren and Ronnie to a secret gin bar in a scruffy part of the East End. It was in the offices of an old warehouse, but you could walk up and down the street without finding it. We did, and we weren’t the only ones. What you had to do was text someone who was already inside who would text the manager your number who would call you up and open the door while you were still on the phone. If he liked the sound of you, that is. I don’t even drink gin, but by the time Lauren’s phone rang I was desperate to get in. It was fucking extortionate but I fucking loved it.

Thank god it was Tommy rapping on the back door the next morning. I must have looked and smelled a right state when I opened up, but all he did was nod. Anything for a quiet life, our Tommy. The showroom stank of booze and there were no windows to open to air it, so I had to get the cleaning stuff and make out I was giving it a good going over. That Mr Sheen made me gip, but I held it together and when the boss arrived he couldn’t praise me enough. I was just the kind of person the company needed if it was going to survive all this market upheaval. Yeah, right. You should have seen his face when I told him I was leaving.

* 

What you have to do is create a demand for your products and services. In my case, the demand for beds and mattresses was already there. The traditional market, as Lauren put it, was saturated (her words) and on its arse (mine). But I had come to know about beds, so I was stuck with the product. I wasn’t about to launch a website and grapple with Google and I wasn’t interested in sitting in a shop or a showroom all day. Well, not exactly. What if I was hiding behind a door and deciding whether or not to let you into a club you’d heard about from a friend who’d heard about it from another friend? What if you couldn’t find any mention of this club online or in any kind of directory? You’re getting interested now, aren’t you? Soon you’ll be having sleepless nights worrying about missing out. And if you can’t sleep, maybe you’ll start obsessing about your mattress and bed frame. You’ve got to get in. You’ve got to get a new mattress. Gotcha!

I got the idea of calling myself the Sleep Consultant from Lauren’s business card; I take full credit for not providing my proper name. I once heard a woman telling her husband that it’s all so thrillingly enigmatic, so I guess that worked. After two weeks of Lauren talking about the Sleep Consultant during lunch breaks and in the queue for coffee, a colleague called Adam took the bait. Lauren arranged for Adam to meet Ronnie for Saturday brunch in an East End pub. Ronnie – who would have thought he would be such a good actor? – played my client and although he went a bit off script, Adam was hooked. Two days later Adam was pulled from a meeting to take delivery of an envelope from a cycle courier. The cycle courier, a Kiwi called Samuel who shares a house with four Aussies, waited for Adam to sign a copy of the non-disclosure agreement that was inside the envelope. Three days after that, Adam received a text message containing an address, a date and a time. The following Monday Adam pitched up at an old East End print works and knocked on a grubby wooden door. He eventually made his way up some steps to an ante room where he met the Sleep Consultant for an introductory consultation. Three quarters of an hour later, having answered thirty-seven questions and after signing a second non-disclosure agreement, Adam left without having seen a single mattress or bed frame. One month and two consultations later he took delivery of a two and a half thousand pound bed and pocket-sprung mattress. The mattress is a dead ringer for the Sleepmaestro Deluxe, but without the label. If you look carefully – and everyone looks carefully – in one corner of the mattress you will see the words Sleep Consultant hand-stitched in golden thread.

After Adam it was easy. The business works on a referral-only basis and I’ve even got the clients – always clients and never customers – to hold the first brunch meeting in the same pub. At some point in the process the client hears that they have undergone a vetting procedure which started in the pub – they think I’ve been giving them the once-over – but actually there’s no such thing. Each client is sworn to secrecy and I reckon they wouldn’t blab even without the threat to take back products if the terms of the NDA are broken. As if I’d
go and take a bed back. At the second meeting they are shown through to a room with bare walls and floorboards. There are two beds – one metal, one divan – under the sash windows and six mattresses are propped against the walls on either side of the beds. I make a big deal about selecting a mattress and placing it on one of the beds. The clients can take as long as they like to lie on the mattress, but the longest anyone has taken is twelve minutes. Sometimes they ask to try a second mattress. No one has ever tried a third, let alone all six. My old boss lets me have the Sleepmaestro Deluxe and Junior at cost, as long as I give him a wedge off the books at the end of every month. I ship the divans and frames from China and change the labels in the showroom. The only money I’ve spent on marketing was for the business cards. They’re dead cheap online.

It’s still hard to believe that people will creep up a dingy staircase, knock three times on an unmarked door and wait to be asked for a password. I know I’ve created a monster, but it’s a monster that people love to pet and feed and I’m happy about that. Ryan says it’s an indictment – I think that’s how it’s spelled – on late capitalism. I say it’s the end of fucking days.

You’ll Die as Fish- New Fiction by Susan Anwin

By Julianna Bihari | Issue 37, 15th March 2019

“May I help you?”

The woman, her phone stuck to her ear, was one of those businesswoman-types, discreet although expensive-looking earrings, dark hair smoothed back into a ponytail, flawless designer suit. “Hold for a minute, please.” She turned towards the assistant – a nondescript girl somewhere in the middle of her twenties.

“A chicken, a vegan and a beef, all in whole wheat wraps. Can you make it chop-chop, we’re in a hurry.” Megan turned back to the phone. “No, Johnny, I told you I won’t be able to hand in the report by Wed. I thought we’ve been through this. I need another three days...”

The same girl took her card at the till.
Megan dropped her phone into her bag. “Took you a while.”

Her glasses flashed, as she looked up at her. “Sorry, I’m all alone and it’s the lunch rush…”

“I really don’t think this is my problem. You should talk to your supervisor.”

Megan fought her way through throngs of teenagers to the table where her colleagues sat. Her face crumpled in disgust after the first bite from her chicken burrito. “This is cold. Are yours cold too?”

Bill shrugged. “Not the best I’ve ever had.”

Megan stood.

Marcia rolled her eyes. “Come on, just let it go.”

“Marcia, this is cold. Not lukewarm, not partly hot, cold. I will not put up with this shit.”

The other two exchanged looks.

She elbowed her way back to the cashier. The girl was serving a bunch of teenagers.

“Hey, excuse me? This burrito is cold.”

The crowd was watching her. The girl did her best to ignore her.

“Hello? I’m talking to you! You deaf?”

“You are keeping up the line, lady…”

Megan turned to the guy. He had the look of a tourist, with a silly, colourful hat perched on the top of his head. “Mind your own…”

“You’ll die as fish.”

Her head snapped back to the assistant. “Excuse me?”

The bafflement on her face looked genuine. “I said, ‘gimme just a sec’?”

“Come on,” someone further down the line called out.

Megan didn’t budge. “That’s not what you said.”

Bill pulled her away from the cashier. “We’ll eat somewhere else.”

“Bill, I paid for that burrito!”

“You’re my guest for a burger in the joint next door.”

“Burger? Really?”

He suppressed a sigh. “They have salads, too.”
It’d been a long day. She had a lingering feel of guilt over the scene at the eatery, but she brushed it off. You gotta stand up for yourself if you don’t want others to walk all over you. She mixed herself a gin and tonic. A night of reading and listening to music – she more than deserved it.

You’ll die as fish. The glass stopped in her hand. What the fuck was that supposed to mean? Doesn’t matter. Probably just misheard something.

The meeting on Friday drained her. Her report was top notch as always, yet Johnny still found minor mistakes to nitpick over. It was stifling hot in the office due to some glitch in the ventilation system.

“I thought you’d drink all the water from the jugs on the table and then some more,” Bill remarked.

“It was a sauna in there. You didn’t feel it?”

It was a rhetorical question, of course. His damp red ringlets stuck to his temples and dark spots blossomed in his armpits. “They say the heat wave should be over in a couple of days.”

“It better be.”

Megan went into the restroom. She didn’t drink tap water as a rule, but she was still parched. She splashed her face, make-up be damned, then glanced at the mirror, rubbing the nape of her neck.

She opened the tap for one last draught, but her hands never reached the beam of water. She stared at her hand for what seemed like an eternity. The moisture dried on her goose-prickled skin. A wave of dizziness washed over her. The world darkened for a minute and she had to hold on to the sink. She glared at her wide-eyed reflection, taking in the air in small, frightened gasps. It’s not there. I just imagined it…

But it was. A small, round scale.

“She said ‘you’ll die as fish.’ A week later I find a scale on my finger. It was real, Charlie, I wasn’t imagining it. I didn’t eat fish that day. I don’t even like fish.”

Charlie chuckled and shook his head. He sipped from the wine, smacking his lips. Megan felt like slapping him. Good thing we aren’t serious. “It wasn’t so funny for me, you know.”

He tsk-ed. “Let me take a look.”

She knelt by the sofa. Charlie drew the curtain of shiny hair away from the nape of her neck. She held her breath unawares.

“No scales here. Better?”

“Yeah.” Although she wasn’t so sure.

The air conditioning still hadn’t been fixed at work. The heat drove her crazy, which resulted in flare-ups with the cleaning lady, the gardener and various colleagues.
“Ready with the financial plan?” Her boss stuck his salt and pepper head in the door of her office.

“Johnny, you’ve asked three times just this week. You’ll be the first to know when I’m done, alright?” She could afford such a tone - Johnny was lost without her.

Megan blew out the air. She needed to cool down now. She went into the bathroom on the third floor. She avoided the one nearest her office since the... accident. Careful not to look into the mirror she drank herself full, wetted the nape of her neck and was about to dry her hands, when a silvery glint caught her eye. Her glance dragged to the mirror almost against her will. The air escaped her mouth with a hiss.

The scales covered the back and the side of her neck. She tried to scrape them off, but all she achieved was bloodying her neck. The sight of the scales opening slightly under the strain made her stomach turn.

Her hair unbound to hide her neck, she went back to the burrito joint in the lunch break. There were two guys behind the counter this time. She went straight to the cash register.

“The end of the line is by the door, lady,” a man balancing fizzy drinks on his tray grumbled.

“Just a sec.” Megan didn’t look at him. “Listen, there is a girl working here, about this tall...” she lifted her hand to her shoulder’s height, then her words died away. She couldn’t even give a proper description of her.

The cashier didn’t do a good job of hiding his annoyance. “Quite a couple of girls working here, ma’am.”

“Do you have an employees’ list? You know, with photos?”

He scratched his net-covered bald head. “This is not the best time...”

“Look, the sooner I can look at that list, the sooner we get done here.” She ignored the pointed remarks coming from the line.

The cashier came back with a laminated page. She scanned it with slightly trembling fingers. The girl was not on the list.

“We were here about two weeks ago. She made me a cold burrito... was she fired?”

He shrugged. “This list is refreshed every time there is a change in staff. No-one fired or newly employed in the past month. Now if you don’t mind, we are kinda busy here.”

She took off the mirrors in the anteroom and the living room and threw away her powder compact. She’d have to go on without makeup but that couldn’t be helped. She didn’t want to throw away the whole bathroom cabinet, so she just covered its mirrored doors.

“Charlie, do you see anything on my neck?” she asked later that night.

“Not this again! What’s up with the mirrors, by the way?”

“Please, Charlie.”

He gave in with a sigh. “Nothing, just like the previous twenty times.”
"He’s lying, Megan thought. Her stomach clenched with panic.

“How can I help you today, Megan?” Dr. Richardson settled in the armchair with a cup of green tea.

Megan stirred her own tea listlessly. “I think something is happening to me. I… don’t even know how to explain without sounding crazy.”

“Megan, we are not here to judge or label. ‘Crazy’ is an outdated notion most therapists wouldn’t…”

“Yeah, yeah,” she waved impatiently. “I’m seeing things…”

“What things?”

“It’s, uh…” she rubbed the nape of her neck, then caught her hand away when she realized what she was doing. But that gave her an idea. She drew her hair away from her neck. “Can you see anything here?”

Her heartbeat drummed in her ear in the silence that followed.

“What am I supposed to be seeing?”

Megan felt frozen inside. She’s in on it. They all are.

“Scales,” she said flatly.

“Scales? You see scales on your neck?”

Oh, don’t act like you don’t, she felt like snapping. I need to find another therapist.

Dr. Richardson’s velvety brown eyes searched her face. “When did you see them first?”

Megan didn’t feel like talking about this anymore. She wanted to call Dr. Richardson out on being a part of it. And then she’ll be convinced you are crazy. She wondered if she could be hospitalized by force. You’ll have to act along not to raise suspicion.

“About a month ago. We went to Cheney’s with the guys for burritos, and there was this girl… she’s not working there anymore. Don’t know how to find her… she said ‘you’ll die as fish’ or something like that, and the first scales appeared about a week later.”

“Why would you want to find her?”

“So that she’d…” she fell silent. Take her curse off me. You know how that sounds, right?

This wasn’t her usual inner voice. It was an unpleasant, smirking voice she didn’t recognize. “To… to talk with her? Clarify this misunderstanding?”

Dr. Richardson took up her clipboard. “Megan, have you heard about autosuggestion? It is a known phenomenon; you are not alone with it. You believe this girl cursed you, and your brain makes you actually see scales on your neck.”

Megan flinched.

“With the right methods you can persuade your brain not to show you things that are not there. Is there a specific time or place when you see these scales?”
“I don’t see how this girl should have the power to get me to hallucinate stuff.”

Dr. Richardson glanced discreetly at the clock. “She doesn’t, Megan. Your mind does. Tell me, when do you see the scales?”

“Whenever I look into a mirror.” Or at a window, or any kind of reflecting surface, really.

“Can you feel them, when you touch your neck?”

“No.”

“Are you up for an experiment?” She pulled out a pocket mirror from her purse.

Megan swallowed. “I’d rather not.”

“The only way to snap out of this delusion is facing your fears, Megan. The first step is acknowledging the problem. Only that way can you eventually let it go.”

She eyed the mirror as if it was a coiled up snake. “You think I’m going crazy, right?”

“I’d rather not use that term…”

“Whatever. I’m not here to argue about semantics.”

Dr. Richardson hid the mirror in the shelter of her hands. “I can only help you if you are willing to let me help, Megan.”

“You think crazy pills can sedate me to the point where I can’t see the scales anymore? ‘Cause let me tell you, I’m more and more willing to give it a try.”

“I don’t think they are necessary, Megan.” Dr. Richardson looked at her with maddening patience. “You don’t have to do it now. Take your time.”

Megan held out her hand for the mirror. She hadn’t seen her reflection for weeks, keeping her eyes on the ground if she walked past windows or buildings with shiny marble covers. So far she managed to snatch her glance away in time when she came across the occasional puddle.

“That’s very brave, Megan.”

Oh, shut up, she wanted to scream.

Her reflection was fuzzy from the shaking of her hand. She stabilized it with her other hand.

“What do you see?”

She had no words for what she saw. Her voice was a hoarse croak. “It’s…”

One of her eyebrows was gone and her hair was receding to give place to scales. They covered half of her face. Her left ear disappeared; in its place was a cut that opened and closed to the rhythm of her breath. Her nose began to flatten. The left side of her mouth lost that curve she was so proud of, transforming into a ragged, shapeless cut. Even her left eye was affected; instead of the light green, almost yellowish hue she was born with, it was a round, expressionless silver with no white around the iris.
“Megan?”

“This is not me. It cannot be. Why am I seeing this?”

“What are you seeing, Megan?”

She snapped the mirror shut. “Never mind. I’d like to go home now, if you don’t mind.”

Summer passed and the weather finally cooled down in the first weeks of October. She stayed in her cottage by the lake. She quit her job – she couldn’t handle going there every day, all her colleagues acting like they didn’t see.

Charlie kept on calling for a while, then stopped. Megan didn’t mind.

She took long baths in the evenings. Always bubble baths, to hide the surface of the water. She held her breath and closed her eyes, locking out sound and sight, submerging in the comforting dark and silence.

She didn’t notice how time flew during these baths… once she got out of the tub and realized that three hours had passed. But if her skin felt itchy and crawly when dry...!

She took off her clothes and walked to the end of the jetty. She sat and swung her legs above the water, not minding the fin flapping in the mirror of the lake. She lowered herself into the chilly water and swam in the soothing, silky darkness. Here she could be truly herself at last.

She went deeper, not noticing or caring about her lungs screaming for air, or the black dots swarming at the edge of her vision. Who needs lungs when you have gills? She opened her mouth and breathed in the dark water.

The Depth of Ambition- Fiction by Anna Hayes

By annacatherinehayes1987 | Issue 37, 15th March 2019
The structure rose up in front of us, like a giant, half-decapitated ‘X’ marking the spot.

Of what, I didn’t know. This didn’t look like a place where anyone would hide or find buried treasure and we were both too old to humour such a foolish narrative in our minds anyway.

I hadn’t seen him for years – we wouldn’t have moved in the same circles but I knew him from school and we would have exchanged the odd few pleasantries over the years. Running into him in the only bar, in a backwater town somewhere in the not inconsiderable space between San Francisco and Los Angeles was almost beyond belief.

Until I realised that he was lost too. He didn’t say as much but you could tell. You could always tell when a person was lost. There’s a certain listlessness in the eyes, coupled with an overwhelming desire for connection that gives the person’s true feelings away.

His car, a battered old scrapheap he had bought for the price of a packet of peanuts, had given up the ghost about a mile north of this … outpost … and he’d been holed up at this bar, borrowing bicycles to get around, ever since.

I’d only stopped in to grab a bite to eat and use the bathroom – I’d planned to be much further down the road by now.

But he had latched onto me almost the minute I walked in, waiting until I chose a table furthest from the bar, before following over and engaging in that awkward ‘Hey, remember me?’ conversation where, half the time, the desired response is ‘I wish I fucking didn’t’.

But this wasn’t one of those times. The road had been long enough so far and I was actually quite pleased to see a familiar face even if, realistically, it was someone I knew about as well as the barman who had served me my drink. We ate together and reminisced about school days, mutual classmates, and the obligatory ‘where everyone was now’ routine.

‘Probably in the dole queue,’ he’d joked when I asked about one particular character that anyone from our era would remember.

As the evening wore on, continuing south started to feel more like a chore than anything else. He had
courteously offered a couch in the room he was staying in, before, more courteously, offering to take that
himself and give me the bed.

That, and a bottle of cider, was the deal breaker.

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In the morning, he woke me before dawn and, while I’d only had a couple of drinks, my eyes were bleary and I
swatted at him like an epileptic punching at a fly.

‘Get up, I want to show you something. We need your car.’

Fifteen minutes later, sleepy and with greasy hair tied in a messy knot on the top of my head, we were driving
my rented Amorak across what was once a main route but was long out of use. A flimsy metal barrier was
strewn haphazardly across the road, one which he swiftly flung out of the way before signalling for me to drive
on.

I had an image in my head of some poor sod driving out here from some far away hub of civilisation to check
the barrier. He was an older man, someone coming up on his final few years of civil service. He wasn’t too
good with computers so they put him on simple manual stuff: driving errands, courier work, non-strenuous
things. I pictured him pulling in at the junction, shaking his head at the sight of our blatant vandalism and
righting the barrier. In my mind, he contemplated driving in further, just to make sure someone hadn’t strayed
where they shouldn’t. But he’d been told never to drive in there and so he didn’t. There could be 95 dead
bodies around the cusp of that rocky outcrop but poor ol’ pensionable Percy wasn’t going to risk disobeying
orders.

I relayed my Pulitzer narrative to my passenger and he laughed, adding his own quotes here and there.

‘You always did have an active imagination.’

‘How would you know?’ I asked, more aggressively than intended. He chuckled, saying that while it didn’t
often seem the case, he had paid attention in classes.

‘You stopped talking though,’ he said after a moment of slightly uncomfortable silence.

‘What?’ I said, pulled from my reverie.

‘When you were about 16 or 17, you went quiet in class. Just … all of a sudden. Like, one day you were telling
us why some book was shit because the author couldn’t decide what they wanted to write about. The next day
… not a word. Why?’

I swallowed a lump in my throat and pretended to watch an invisible object on the road.

‘How much further is this place?’ I asked, making a show of tapping the petrol gauge even though there was
enough in her to get to the moon if I’d so desired.

To his credit, he didn’t push. I could sense him watching me for a long moment before sitting back and telling
me that it was just another few miles.

‘You cycled out here?’ I asked him in disbelief and he nodded, saying that he’d changed a lot since school.

***
'It’s been abandoned for decades,’ he was saying excitedly as he clambered from the truck, his eyes wide with delight and I thought he looked younger in that moment.

We weren’t old but we weren’t young either – not by today’s standards. We were in a limbo-like bracket where everyone else our age had either made it or had no intention of ever doing so. For most people, there was no grey area in those categorisations.

I squinted in the sun before pulling my sunglasses back down from my head.

‘What the hell is it?’ I asked finally, perturbed by this giant X-shaped structure that seemed to be missing a quarter of its form.

He turned to look at me, an incredulous look on his face.

‘It’s a diving board,’ he said, stepping back to point out the steps to me and I nodded, finally seeing it properly.

‘Why is it abandoned?’

‘Because it’s in the middle of nowhere? I don’t know. Come on!’

He grabbed my hand and ran towards the base of the structure which loomed on our collective horizon, imposing itself on the otherwise barren, desert landscape. I wondered how anyone had thought it a good idea to build something like this out here.

The steps had a chain across them but it was about as effective a deterrent as sugar water was to wasps. Without thinking, we clambered over it and made our way up, higher and higher, past the first diving post, onward to the second one and, with his insistent tug on my hand, up the final flight of steps to the highest point.

The actual boards were long gone so we were left to peer over the steadily corroding metal railings around our humble vantage point. I went to lean on one of them, without thinking, and he pulled me back, suggesting I find something more trustworthy to hold me up.

‘Well, that’s a fucking laugh,’ I replied without thinking and he raised an eyebrow. I shook my head and told him that hadn’t been directed at him.

‘Here, try this,’ he said, sinking to the ground and turning onto his stomach. At full stretch, he almost reached the length of the platform. Slowly, he edged forward so his head hung over the edge. Cautiously, I mirrored him, giving a bit of a joust with my hip to get him to move over a bit. I eased my way to the edge of the platform, only then realising that I hadn’t actually seen what was below this structure.

A swimming pool – obviously. But it was unfinished. Not abandoned. It had never been completed. You could tell from the way the concrete and tiling were dotted around the space. It was hard to see from up high but the pool was deep – I supposed it had to be if you were diving from this kind of height.

‘What the hell was this place?’ I asked, more to myself than to him, a dread feeling washing through my stomach for some particular reason – the height, perhaps.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, turning his head to look at me, ‘Maybe it’s time for you to re-start your active imagination.’ I laughed and shook my head.
‘I wouldn’t know where to start.’

‘Try,’ he said, pushing back from the edge and twisting to sit on the ledge, his legs dangling over the side, kicking back and forth like a child on a swing. I immediately felt nervous. He looked down at me and held out an arm so I could manoeuvre myself into a seated position.

‘There was an accident,’ I said lamely and he scoffed, telling me I could do better than that.

‘Come on,’ he said pleadingly, ‘Write the story – what would you call it?’

I sat quietly for a minute, thinking, running different thoughts and scenarios through my head, wondering why in the name of God I was sitting 30 foot up, staring down into a half-finished swimming pool, alongside a guy I hadn’t seen for ten years.

And, like the splash of the diver who never got to use this monstrosity of a structure, an idea came to me.

‘I’d call it... The Depth of Ambition. And it’s the story of a town.’

He nodded, telling me to go on. I pursed my lips and thought about it for a minute.

‘So ... the place where we are. It’s an outpost, for want of a better word. But 20 miles that way is a bigger town, with services and facilities and all that jazz. It’s plodding along, it’s doing ok. Then one day, this ... I don’t know, rich businessman decides he wants to put something in this town, a factory or a power plant or something that people will see as the answer to all of their worries. Job security, good wages, pensions, and all of that excitement, that infection of good news trickles down and suddenly you’ve got local government fixing roads to nowhere – just in case this guy might put his site at the end of it. They start splashing out on business parks and office blocks because, as the old adage says, if you build it they will come.’

I take a deep breath, feeling myself on a roll now. I glanced around at our surrounding. It’s the middle of nowhere – how it ever made sense to anyone, government or private, to put a swimming pool out here, is beyond me.

‘This place, this was part of the deal. Our big businessman, as a gesture of social responsibility, agrees to a philanthropic donation towards a sports complex. He discovers that the local high school has a good swimming team – elite athletes, possible Olympians, especially one guy who’s a great diver. He has some all-American name like Josh or Zack. He’s like a god in the town – he keeps winning trophies, keeps racking up those gold medals, everyone loves him.’

He was looking at me now with a smirk on his face, listening as I rattled off the segments of the story, one-by-one; carefully, like someone ticking off a checklist.

‘The work begins here. For some reason, they build the diving boards first, like a modern-day Tower of Babel. Josh has been promised the first dive off the board on the day that the grand opening takes place – he’ll go down in local history.’

I pause, working the next part through in my head. It’s been a long time since I concocted anything even resembling a narrative. He looks over at me.

‘I’m guessing the diver doesn’t go down in local history?’ he prompted. I smirked and shook my head.

‘No, he goes down in national history instead. He takes part in a cliff-diving competition, just for fun: does his first dive, fine, 85% points; does his second dive and same again, slight drop maybe. On his third dive, he
decides to add an extra spin to it – now he’s never done that before but hey, he can do anything, right? That’s what he’s been told, that’s what he believes, and his coach always says that self-belief is the most important skill of all.’

I let the notion hang in the air for a minute, swallowing back the words as if, suddenly, the story is real and I’m recounting it with the tension and emotion that I’d be feeling if that were the case. I felt a lump thicken in the back of my throat and my pulse speeding up – I could feel my whole body beating along with it.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked me and I nodded, saying I was just trying to figure out the rest of the story. I took a deep breath, trying to get my body to return to normal, pulled my knees up to my chin, wrapping one arm around my legs to hold them in place, cocooning my suddenly aching stomach.

‘So the boy dies,’ I said finally and he raised an eyebrow at that, which forced me to adapt the story slightly, ‘Or as good as. The extra spin doesn’t come off and he smashes into the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. The media – local, national and international – run with the story for weeks. He has catastrophic injuries – paralysed from the neck down. All of his hopes, his dreams, his determination, his will to win, all now confined to this lumbering chunk of metal and rubber; a crutch that rather than serve as his helper, thwarts and trips him every inch of the way.’

I pushed back from the edge of the platform and stood, twisting around to survey the sheer isolation around us.

‘The work doesn’t stop here. They plough on, a new notion in mind, to name this place after Josh, as a tribute to him, to his efforts, to a glittering career cut short so tragically. It’s not an inspiration, it’s a reminder that dreams can be dashed just as they can be achieved. And for most, the former is, more often than not, the reality.’

I could see the story now, in my mind. I recognised the locals from the bar the previous night. I heard them whispering amongst themselves – they’re talking about the big businessman being romanced away from the town. I imagined a big boardroom, full of investors, and a multitude of strings but, really, the only string that matters is the one with a big bag of money tied to the end.

He listened as I recounted this notion, which is hardly earth-shattering: investors who don’t give a shit about giving a lifeline to a dying town in denial, or providing an outlet for kids who otherwise hang listlessly around parks and picnic benches, desperate for adventure but resigned to never-ending boredom.

I shrugged: ‘The big businessman doesn’t care either and when he pulls the plug on the whole job lot, pool and all, there isn’t even an outcry. There is a sense of surrender to it all – like rebels laying down arms, knowing all along that their resistance was futile and this action was inevitable; that their disenchantment is permanent, and that hanging around on an empty road won’t help you find the answers you’re burning for.’

I paused for a moment as he turned to look at me, wondering if I’d finished but afraid to ask and break the spell.

‘The town and the outposts around it carry on, slowly disintegrating, eating themselves from the inside out. Those who can, leave. The others are ghosts in a place that didn’t even notice them dying.’

His knee was twisted up, his elbow leaning on it and his face on his hand. There was silence for what seems like hours before, finally, he spoke.

‘The Death of Ambition,’ he mused, ‘I like the play on words.’
I shrugged as he pulled himself to his feet to look out across the horizon, remarking that the town’s ‘Tower of Babel’, at least, commanded a breathtaking view. I nodded, thinking to myself that the temperature had upgraded from hot to sweltering. I wiped sweat off my forehead though I wasn’t sure if it was from the heat or the sick feeling I had in my stomach while telling my story.

‘I’m just thinking,’ he said suddenly and I looked at him, eyebrow raised, inviting him to continue. His warm smile beamed back at me and, for a minute, I thought it was probably the most genuine smile I’d seen in ten years.

‘The ones that get out, the ones who escape the town...do they find their answers?’

I thought about it for a minute, stretching my arms over my head while stifling a yawn.

‘I think that’s for the sequel,’ I replied finally and he groaned, saying he wanted a more committed answer than that. I moved towards the steps, feeling that the sermon on the mount was over.

‘I think they do, if they choose the right place to look,’ I said somewhat cryptically. He held my eye for a moment before nodding slowly.

This time, I reached for his hand and tugged at it to follow me - away from imagination, and back down to reality.