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**WRITING
EAST
MIDLANDS**

AURORA

National Short Fiction and Poetry Prize 2025

Writing East Midlands in partnership with Society of Authors

The Longlist & Shortlist



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Poetry Longlist

Miss Gaia Theory, Tom Nutting

Green strawberries, Mary Mulholland

Achilles leaves me in norwood junction, Alison Tanik

Hospice, Michael Socrates Georgiou

Smaller Heavens, Dawn McGuire

Lesbian Line Closing Day (1999), Amy L. King

How Not to Bath a Cat, Lauren Colley

Flapping Along the Bottom of the Sky, Paul McMahon

warm weasels @ Amar elHusn, John Gallas

Disassembling Their Conservatory, Eliza Mood

The Heart of Halliwell, Ashia Mirza

Post-Coital, Tash Walker

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Uxbridge Moon, Ishita Uppadhyay

Another Bracelet, Melissa Emmett

The Fabled Draw of Blood, Jonathan Greenhouse

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Self Exam: Finding Your Cervix, Kate MacAlister

It is a serious thing, HLR

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1982-2002, Richard Goodson

My Wife Was Not Winter, Ivy Raff

recognizable, Ivy Raff

Lunchtime on Free School Meals, Fae Wolfe

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Two Late Millennial Men Go Skiing, Harry Dobbs

All of Them, Chris Neilan

Curiosity's Cat, Danielle Smith

Callback, Anne Frost

The Woman Who Turned into a Jellyfish, Rozie Kelly

Vauxhall, Christian Anthony

The Bog Lap, Luis Sit

Millimetres, Charlotte Sinclair

The Caregiver, Sam Naylor

Since the Fish Started Screaming, Sam Dawson

The Abbey Lawn, Georgia Boon

Life Drawing, Mary Byrne

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Muddy, Sheila Bwakya

Gabriel, Pauline Hughes

Provident, Ash Stokes

Company, Holly Catton

Instant Coffee, Sam Wait

The End of Our Tether, Dave Pescod

Tan and Brown, MJ Lehr

Burned, Jo Bardsley

Someone with Something to Say, Lucy Grace

Conkers, Jane Batkin

Uncle Dave was a Raconteur, Robyn Jefferson

In the Drink, Chris Williams

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Uxbridge Moon, Ishita Uppadhyay

He asked me to touch him- I felt
through jeans, silent nipples, stymied by cotton.
I felt a sunrise, a breath, a desire pattern.

He dipped out of the room- returning in new heat,
Wriggling on top of me, a matching set
Stockings, garter, panties, bralette
Weakly visible under the Uxbridge moon.
He glows, in a white that creates light of its own.

With hands over my eyes- he kissed me,
We flipped, I tasted cold lace, he looked afraid,
A stranger on the single bed,
Briefly alive, in the only house there ever was.
A fine slit sewn in, the opening of a tulip bulb,
Spring time.

There is a cold air passing through this house,
A chill enters his mother's room.
In the morning, she drives us to the station,
There is a sad voice on the radio,
It carries.

The Fabled Draw of Blood, Jonathan Greenhouse

This witch is a hunched architect in the hardening of sweets, grows as fat as a spoiled cat when those wayward siblings appear, their clenched fists offering a dark forest's fallen gifts: A din of droning bees freshly flown from the sweetened paste of their honeycomb, dizzied by their tireless haste for queens. Greta & Hans huddle, heavily wheezing, as she hovers, then hoists them up like two stray birds letting loose cries needling into nothingness, as frost trails the woodsman's muted songs across a distance repelled by the Great Outdoors' natural pull. Outside her sagging hut: A crap-splattered chicken coop, twin mangled tires from a tricycle, rags apt for dressing dolls. Listen, the witch whispers, ghosts gallop in the night, embody love or fear. Her blind mongrel barks as thunder rolls, the sky racing in reply. It's the wind, she shrieks, or branches butchering the breeze. Owls deliver their nightly accolades from their carved-out oaks' infinities, hooting homage to feats revered by Homer, his epic battlefield a famous feast, carrion tendering the famished beat of waiting wings. Snow slowly drifts in nothing's shape, a secret scraping of atoms adopting every form it drapes, seconds advancing as the witch sets back her watch, a stream which timely freezes as the hours pass. She winds a rope around their legs, dangles them upside-down to swing like banshees sing: With wild abandon. She's just obeying her grumbling belly, like the secret fox who bows as moonlight slips the henhouse, stars dotting freckles upon heaven's shadowed skin, a christening of its carbon-copy connect-the-dots constellations according to her fantasies seeking a sound & soundless sleep. Who weaves her ending? Who weaves theirs? The draw of blood is refuge, too, Hans chanting That's the side where wild beasts roam, & Greta gasping This is the side our people call home, their grandma gently spinning them as she prepares their favorite treats, both chomping on her witch's hat, this cotton-candied confection.

A Breakup, Detached, Jonathan Greenhouse

"I hope you experience a quarter of the goddamn betrayal and pain...!"

- A young woman howling into her phone as she passes me in the street

I hope you experience a tenth of the panic of an alpinist slipping through a crevasse as his newborn baby stares down from above. Your gift will be a third of the visceral agony of a sentient lemon torn of its rind, of a birch tree loosened of its uncurling bark, of a thrift-store skirt grieving its tattered hem. May you revel in a brief spell of eternal rest, only to be stripped of it, hurried back to redress the sorry shitshow of your prior life. You'll know three times the terror of going up in a hot-air balloon that won't stop rising, seventeen times the embarrassment of a horde of ex-lovers exposing your intimate shortcomings in tell-all memoirs, a hundred times the despair of heteronormative purists bogged down by their loveless heterosexual marriages. One screw loose; then two; then what once was seemingly stable will collapse. May you be a thousand times as pointless as a circle, as an empty period, a million times as claustrophobic as a giraffe in a low-ceilinged jailcell sticking her neck into flypaper, incapable of freeing herself of attachments, a gazillion times the annoyance of an infinity of passersby endlessly speaking into cellphones to estranged lovers so everyone can overhear.

Self-Exam: Finding Your Cervix, Kate MacAlister

self exam: finding your cervix

- 1. A reusable plastic vaginal speculum*
- 2. A hand mirror*
- 3. A "Love Thy Cervix" flashlight*
- 4. Organic lubricating jelly*
- 5. A beautiful step-by-step instruction sheet*

– Instructions from: The Beautiful Cervix Project.

forget the fumbling hands the witch trials purity cults for a moment

exhale resistance and settle here take heart find something

to lean against you will know when to open up

come into contact with yourself you always knew where to look

this experience matters unseal the mystery the bones

built around secrets take yourself back

to the moment you still knew: your body

belongs to *you* can you remember a time before

you were marked exiled to be regulated and controlled

your body below the waist a daring frontier?

why do we call the instrument a blade?

we were taught you can't walk into such a disputed territory

unarmed soon you will see

there is nothing to be governed within you

everything becomes a dismantling threat

you will see nothing

that comes between

you and your flesh

there may be a scar

a dome shiny smooth even

sometimes the raw surface is exposed

the cells are red and raging

some people are born with this trait

there will be no definite border

you successfully failed the obedience test

you will see

the blood of the past

It is a serious thing just to be alive on this fresh morning in the broken world, HLR

– for Z, after Mary Oliver

I wake & open the app, discover that I'd experienced eighteen
minutes of unremembered dreams. I wake & want so badly
to disappear into the aether. I wake & think, 'One day I will

hug my children' & the certainty of this notion-as-fact
offends my anovulating womb. I wake & meditate,
glue my gaze on the naked maple, enter a trance state

& then muddle through the afternoon feeling leafless,
lifeless. I wake & wonder why it is called 'a wake'
when they are anything but. I wake & check my neck

for a pulse – just in case. I wake slatternly, ingest bitter meds,
clock the anti-psychotic box says 'contains lactose & sunset
yellow'. I wake & feel guilty that I refused to let death come

to the dying. I wake in extremis, send a text:
*Ah my darling, self-harming is me trying
to STAY, not leave xxx.* I wake again

with agonising brainpain. I wake poemless & it is a relief
not having anything pressing to create. I wake with you
inside of me. I wake with an aspiration to be nothing

more than your everything. I wake fatigued, feet tacky
after a somnambulist pilgrimage. I wake poemful:
I haemorrhage language, vomit sonics & meter,

study syrupy metaphor-spatter on rented walls,
in a duvet saturated with allegory. I wake cemented
between your fifth & sixth ribs. I wake in this infinite

present, having no fixed task but to ensure
my own continuation, busy going nowhere
other than insane. I wake & do not care

to see, only to be seen. I wake beyond good & evil, remember
shame is inventive. I wake & the sky runs up & kisses me.
I wake with a shadily obtained fentanyl lollipop stuck

to my face. I wake & decide to waste my future
hoping for a better past. I wake & understand love
as doing, love as the same thing, love as over

& over again, love as expecting, love as different
result. I wake aware that this may be my last day
on Earth; I wake powerful, in control, knowing

I could make it so. I wake & it is a mistake
to conform to your humane unbreaking of me. I wake unserious,
in this lock-jawed dawn, & know exactly what I'm living for.

lorca was my grandma's favourite poet, Oli Isaac

1.

lorca was my grandma's favourite poet
sat dog-eared on bookshelves watching me grow up
eavesdropped on my grandma's rosary prayers

2.

he wrote that his work loved the rim of a wound a healing
that never closes
i wonder if my grandma knew that in the deal she struck to stay alive
a dementia that unravelled her body stuck in an echo of past
lives a ghostly wound that hadn't yet agreed to scab my grandma
trapped in a place where
belonging refuses to be felt

3.

lorca's first breath was the soil of catholic farmers
the last sound he heard a fascist firing squad
and i wonder how much of lorca my
grandma loved whether she knew about
the men *he* loved
the words he wrote for coarse
warm bodies bathed in a spanish
sun with red red blood

whether she loved him
anyway or despite
of or

if it didn't even matter

4.

lorca spoke verse with god before bullets struck
his ancient body down his future was thrown into an
unmarked grave never found

i wonder if my grandma still has dementia in heaven
 wandering down heaven's aisles complaining it's too bright
 asking christ if papa was back from work yet
 nodding while john chats even though her hearing aids
 aren't in
 checking if the apostles had teeth she
 would approve of asking mary when
 she will find a nice catholic boy

5.

when st peter asks her age at the gates
she tells him i am being pulled through every moment all at once
the plaque in my brain means life flashed before my eyes so
often it all becomes now becomes boring
breaks the dam in my
brain glues together
every dream every
nightmare
strips away the
dates and names
roots pulled up
a life on re-run
st peter writes down 92

1982 - 2002, Richard Goodson

i turned thirteen in nineteen eighty two
disgusted & scared by what my body
craved dick depravity death (loved the d's)

i prayed to God but God held out no hope
i rang churches from callboxes no hope
bought porn mags in brown paper bags no hope

oranges & lemons warned the bells of
St. Clements St. Mary's St. Bart's Aids wards
a-tissue *a-tissue* *we'll all fall down*

shame banks on penitence or punishment
shame banks on a chopper *here comes the* or
what is it? chopped liver? shame makes a crock-

ery of my blood imperceptible
hairline cracks in the perfect porcelain
two teas? T-cells? milk? sugar? stiff upper

lip it secret keep afloat keep it shtum
keep it secret lip afloat keep it shtum
keep it secret keep afloat lip it shtum

shame convinces me I'm h.i.v. poz
even when I haven't yet touched a dick
because that's shame's logic it craves poz

My Wife Was Not Winter, Ivy Raff

My wife was not winter, that Long Island girl whose honeypot hair spun gold through the Russia of me. I never knew I was tundra til we rode the Staten Island Ferry. We weren't like these kids now, cameras in pockets. She peered at me with low eyes when she saw I schlepped my Canon from Queens. The strap burned angry red snakes about my neck.

The day we married she begged me to shave.
June 8, 1980 – the last time a razor touched my neck. She begged every year on our anniversary,
Shave again. Let me see how handsome you are.
She stopped after the diagnosis, as if my tremors' hands strangled her desires. My son comes with clippers, carpets silver spikes around the sink. My daughter oversalts the omelets. She knows the disease blots my tongue, cottons my throat.

Rabbi says the Jewish soul is salt.

When I was a boy my sister wore a cast to her wedding, corsage-strapped plaster.

My mother had shoved her down the stairs – something about a neckline. My sister's bones cracked on metal treads and I did nothing to stop it. I froze at the top like a tin soldier. Thank god my wife and my daughter only bicker about salt and we live on one story.

The photo of my wife I snapped on the Ferry lives on our mantle. Flying cape of curls, shirt tucked in slim chinos. Eyes crinkle against the wind like they do all the time now, even in the airless air of our one story.

Cameras were refuge by the time I met Sophie. I'd lie

awake at night, imagine my paintbrushes' birch and horsehair turning dust in the landfills on Staten Island. Each morning cold crystals stuck in my throat.

On our first date Sophie chirped, Let's ride the Ferry! I never told her all I'd thrown away.

recognizable, Ivy Raff

you scare us with warnings: *we won't bury you
in our cemetery - you won't return to HaShem* - if
piercings corrupt the body. or a still-worse shonder: cremation like a
goy, our learned bones stuffed with shema yisrael scrolls now ash
indistinguishable from common dirt. but who am i

to claim this crushable self i refuse
to cram in hierarchies of continents, species, race? who am i. who were
the children
in ovens at auschwitz, dachau. the children
of Gaza's bombed-out apartments, if not recognizable

to HaShem, whose name is simply The Name. HaShem ties face and
name to each bone fragment and who are you to tell me who is
unrecognizable to g!d?

Lunchtime on Free School Meals, Fae Wolfe

The day I learnt free school meals meant *meals not made by your mother*, I sat with Melissa, our navy legs pushed together. I had claimed my paper bag from the counter. Melissa's lunchbox was a pastel family of Care Bears, content under an umbrella. It clicked open. Mine, the colour of dead leaves, rustling too loud under my hands. She took out a rectangular container, the insides blushed like an out-of-place sundae. I asked, *what are those?!* In a pace that made her pull them close, teasing the lid. *It's ice-cream-scooped watermelon*, a single sphere approaching her mouth, *my mum made them*. As she chewed, an image pivoted between us. The metal scoop, warmed by a hand. A long blade, sharp. Held with love. The Mother, smiling. The Mother, placing sweet circles of love inside a box. I shoved my hand into the dark, pulled a pale sandwich to the surface. *I hate cheese and marmite!* I said. It was all I could say.

Miss Gaia Theory, Tom Nutting

Storm-gowned, seamed with sequinned rivers
– bitch, she's a sowing queen! – Miss Gaia
sashays through the banjee-scene, heavy
drag frayed with ash. Smokey eyes, cracked
branches of mascara beneath a crown
of dusted plastic. Girl, she's done resting
on pretty; gagged with the nerve of the crowd
throwing shade all over that body-ody-ody.
She reads them to filth: y'all hogged my blue
fabrics, trees for days & Malibu sunsets too. Your
uniform of ill-fitting busted capitalism & greenwashed
optimism won't hide you from mother's realness!
She beats her face: black oil lips, cheeks dusted
with glitter. Henny, she werks the stage – boots
heel-shatter glaciers & her hips shift tectonics.
Diva, she flips her fan, serving hurricane,
fierce, fishy, eleganza extravaganzaaaa!
Yas queen, she spills the sea: eat it, hunty,
sickening! She. Owns. Everything.
She's cooking. Burning the house down.
Rainforests snatched. Cities on fire. Slaaaay!
It's a kiki – death drop! – & you're
not invited. Bye, girl, bye.

green strawberries, Mary Mullholland

She comes to supper, and we sit
over untouched plates of fish.
Lately I've found her offhand,
want to understand what's gone wrong.
How delicate the balance can be
even with a good friend.
She looks down with pursed lips.
I light a candle. Some things are difficult
to name and I wait in silence until
she starts talking about openness, then
lists grudges stored over years:
how I always set out to belittle her,
refuse to own my successes in order
to put her down. She rearranges
the cutlery, takes off her glasses,
and under raised brows fixes her eyes
on me. I am a bad person. I must refrain
from psycho-speak about life being a mirror,
that we see ourselves in the other,
but where can we go from here?
I clear the cod and bring out pudding.
The strawberries are a bowl of hearts.
I watch as she cut all hers in half.

Hospice, Michael Socrates Georgiou

I remember watching "Last train from Gun Hill" with dad.
A Kirk Douglas Western, a revenge classic.
It only took dad dying for us to be together,
Doing things like this, we never really did that before.

I remember dad drinking a vodka orange in his hospice bed,
And we would have half conversations
Before he would fall asleep
From pain and morphine, utterly confused.

I remember taking dad outside in his wheelchair
So he could have "his medicine".
A cigarette later I cart him back,
Struggling to lift him onto his bed.

I remember times when so out of reality,
He would make the gesture of smoking,
Two swollen yellow fingers moving to and from
His mouth. A cruel but comforting habit.

I remember the old boy next door set the fire alarm off,
while having a smoke in the shower room.
No privacy anywhere,
Just quiet rage against the loss of dignity.

I remember the cancer patient
Who did not want to die,
Did not want to free herself
And her family from pain.

Her husband said to me with deadlight eyes,
"We said it's ok to go, but she said
No, I want to live"

I remember that there were no miracles,
Except in the kindness of nurses
At every turn, holding first the hand of the patient,
And then the hand of the mourner.
Strange but not a stranger anymore,
Embodying a constant kindness,
Softly welcoming death,
A relentless love

Smaller Heavens, Dawn Mcguire

We were by the bleachers at the Big Game,
knees bruised by gravel, backs cracking like wishbones,
hands caked in chalk, the band's horns
blaring a migraine into the sky.

We were girl-voltage, we were fire hazard,
we were the sweat behind the glam.

Breasts damp under polyester, ankles taped
for Our Lady of the Dismount.
Tic-Tacs passed down the line like communion wafers.

It was always like that—a liturgy of bruises, a prayer
for a sticky landing, before we hurled our bodies
towards a smaller heaven.

The crowd was thunder with teeth.
It wasn't love, but it was what we loved—
being watched by something
huge, and hungry.

We built the Pony Mount and whispered the count,
with the Captain, her smile a vise, makeup like war paint,
French twist tight as a fist.

And when the flyer—Sophie, or maybe Charlene—
rose in her impossible arc of girl-air,
we were a cathedral of muscle. We were faith.

She came down hard. We all did.
I cracked my tooth. Eloise twisted her ankle.
They blamed her anyway. Said she hesitated,
said her timing was off. She didn't talk back,
just limped to the bench for an ice pack.

(Out of the frame, the rangy majorette—
spangles flashing like fish scales, boots white as toothpaste,
baton torching the air like she stole fire—
She almost looks back, then doesn't.
Proud. Like us. But not us)

Lesbian Line Closing Date (1999), Amy L. King

they think I can't hear them on their tea breaks
whispering into chipped mugs that my days
are numbered - something about funding - *one call
a night if we're lucky* - even our regulars have
found
new ears to chew on - but I know every one of them
better than their mums or boyfriends - I invited
their loneliness to crawl through my wires and
judged nothing: questions on scissoring, the
unrequited
office crush, stale marriages they swore they'd end
once the kids were grown - I just wanted a big send
off! - lesbians queuing up to weep their thanks
into my receiver, a ceremonious burning
of the call logs in the carpark - I blame the internet -
gobs of dykes in cyber space 'connecting'
- I'm telling you now, it'll all end in tears -
nothing can replace hot breath on the
glass
of a battered old phone box - punching in a number
memorised over months - the click, crackle, *hello*
of a stranger's voice slipping into the silence like
light below a bolted door- the rush
of telling a secret you've been
keeping your whole life

How Not to Bath a Cat, Lauren Colley

The unprecedented event that led to much unpleasantness
involved an excess of glitter glue
and a cat sprawled belly up, pawing the air unknowing
until it was too late.

I try damage limitation, a comb then brush,
a wet wipe, a sponge, but my cat still glints like a disco ball,
licking then retching, licking, repeating
and embarrassed for us both
I prepare for the worst.

With a youtube guide and my apparatus ready
I tug stray sequins from his sticky whiskers
and with one deft scoop make for the sink.

Oh the wrath of him.

The legs splayed at all angles like a broken umbrella
crammed into a bin. How little there is of a sodden cat -
all angles and knuckles - a handbag of lego -
only sinewed, rigid, with a tail of thinned rope.

A scrabble ensues - for taps, towels, tea cups, the windowsill
from which a pot plant tips and the paws become claws -
soil, soap, blood, glue, suds,
writhing, hissing, hating -
Before a sudden stillness,
the eye of a storm.

Then it begins -
a rumble low and deep,
a sound more cavernous and dark
than a cat should contain
like a rolling boulder or a coming tide,
a buffalo herd or a millstone grinding -
the sound of a creature preparing for violence.

He makes his break with a raking of flesh,
a livid, squirrel-thin skitter streaking the stairs
to squat in the shape of a Hovis tin loaf
in the one dusty nook no hands will reach.
In the day that follows I return over and over
with a torch and cooked chicken, tuna and treats
proffering my peace around the back of the boiler
but he turns away, truculent, composed,
and almost dignified, I suppose,
were he not tufty and glowering
and glittering all over.

Flapping Along the Bottom of the Sky, Paul McMahon

I hear the thumping sound of swan's wings
as the bulbous body of the huge white bird
lifts from the surface of the water and its feet
run along the mirror image of itself flapping
along the bottom of the sky – but what I heard

was a woman thumping the dust from roses
woven round the lily-white legs of a goddess
stretched across the field of her Persian rug
that she'd hung on a blue washing line strung
between a white stone wall and the garden shed

but then I look again, at the paddle-shaped stick
she's holding like an extension of her arm
and her long white summer dress billowing
out both sides from her swollen pregnant belly
and her long white throat craning to the sky,

and realise I was right first time, *I was hearing*
the thumping sound of swan's wings
lifting a huge white bird from the surface
and into the mirror-image of itself
flapping along the bottom of the sky.

Warm weasels @ Amar elHusn, John Gallas

got a skellyton trike w boneshake rims
n a seatpole that stik in yer ars
sis pull us long w a handlebar rope
on account of I hav cockt legs

bomb comedown in Samaans chickpea medder
we trips all out for a looksee togedder

whoa says sis you cd get all Amar in that damn hole
Momoons olivetrees tearin they hair w fingernale flames
TitchAli pickin muleguts up in a bucket

who droppit say someone why noboddy know

immejit I need a upset piss
carryme carryme bhind that oketree sis
doa reel splasha then whoa
rt by me I see

3 lil Weasels upstandin togedder
facin the exploded medder
lil white chests all puff rite attit
lil shuteyes

cute or wot
lil paddypaws out front
they warmin
warmin @ the bombfire

bigshit eagle land in the oketree he sniff meatcook
lil critters skamper
n I shoutin sis sis sis look look look
but they gone

everbody start backhome to Amar
sis says you shouldeave arst them Weasels
what storybook they all come from
we cda gon wivvem n stayed n never comeback here

olivetrees screamin n tearin theyselves to last black bone

wish ididve arst
we cda bin tapdancin in spongecake
n bigpink weaselhats
stead o this godawfool mess manstory make

Disassembling Their Conservatory, Eliza Mood

Five days of storm are forecast for the
undoing and ma's phone voice is
breaking up,
saying she is losing things and only *you* know;
we are to debone this room snapped up
on the net, to free breath immured in this
space,
its dimensions cut from air, lung of other's lives;
but she, the seller, is loath to let go the
volume of sunlight gone to growing
her sons,
setting free disjointed echoes of their laughter;
my man, no demolisher, measures the job
by eye, this absurd dismembering of a
history
double-quick, broods over screws, countersunk;
rain-stung, we torque the ratchet wrench
by turns, while ma grasps at vanishing
words
and the woman brings soup salted with tears;
he and I turn rusty screws with burnt out
drill bits, reverse-twist quarrel or heart-
to-heart,
unclasping panes reflecting uncountable hours;

wind squalls at lifted glass till shafts alone
support the roof, while ma struggles for a
footing
and I brace to steady a ladder seized by gale;

my man spiders over rafters and I call to
guide ma to where I hid a rainy-day
medicinal drop
while, unpiecing the jigsaw, my man unmantles

and hands down triangles of roof-glazing that
once saw children stretch to touch sky or moon,
until frame alone stands, ladder near resting on air;

when stanchions bow and purlins collapse, the
detonation tolls an ending, the seller's boys
soon to fly
while my ma holds tight, making and unmaking me.

The Heart of Halliwell, Ashia Merza

A wild turn off the Devil's Highway reveals the body of the myriapod. The third leg, the holy green dome, set back on the far right. Fifth, the glass supplier, where my neighbour got me a splashback of Mum's egg curry, falooda and Bombay duck, which scented me forever like the breath in the first vape shop we pass. Mum gave me a puff of bidi when I was seven to pave my non-smoking path. What would she think of the powerless supercars facing Prospect Street? I never imagine Mum sitting in my car with me. We always took the bus or walked. Once we got a taxi – it was like the limo my kids rode in on their last day of primary school.

I like to think she'd have bought me a desk from Cash in a Flash opposite K2 chippy. We'd nip into Farmfoods because they sell Raspberry Ruffles like the WRVS shop at the hospital. We'd walk through the fairground smell of sugar at the Cube roundabout, envious of the buzzed Turkish clients who pay a quarter for a cut *with* massage. We'd look through the window of the Indian jewellers. Mika Couture. Buy a sweet treat from the bakery—never an unhygienic takeaway. She'd smile at the residents sitting outside their terraces in sun chairs, watching the fluttering crime scene tape. Not their usual channel: the queue outside the pasty shop. She'd tell me her dad had a gun shop like the two we passed and steer me away from the five-pub punters who painted the white lines after a bet thrown out by Bill and Fred.

We'd admire the blossoming twin trees arching the red church door, never knowing her granddaughter would tap and pirouette through them. She'd buy me a pink Chupa Chup lolly whilst we waited at the chemist. I'd tell her my brother's friend is now my husband. She'd let me browse the toys in the Green Shop window, her face reflecting my three children.

The hair and beauty salons are prettier further up the road. She never set foot in one. Didn't need to. I'll buy her first bouquet from the florist a few legs up from the funeral directors. I'll meet her at the bus stop under the hanging basket and take her to my new home. Across the intersecting antennae. To a place where we can walk beneath trees filled with wildflowers and birdsong. We'll sit on a bench and hum *Chand Mera Dil* as the moon rises in my chest.

Post-Coital, Tash Walker

I lay on
the floor

hands half
inside me

body chest
weight—heaves

Testo Junkie
The Apparitional
Lesbian Queering
Psychotherapy

all stare back

at me

I've made myself come
every
day this
week

dream

bed

shower

now

left
cheek

synthetic carpet

to this

Two weeks ago: naked in the

mirror my tears
pulled
my eyes
down my
face

did you miss me?

I couldn't bear this
body curves & a
softness another year
older paranoia
a wave of new dysphoria?

Paul B Preciado says *lean in*
it is your superpower

someone thought I bound my chest

no I said

& jumped
from one cage

to the next

Short Fiction Longlist

Muddy, Sheila Bwakya

Gabriel, Pauline Hughes

Provident, Ash Stokes

Company, Holly Catton

Instant Coffee, Sam Wait

The End of Our Tether, Dave Pescod

Tan and Brown, MJ Lehr

Burned, Jo Bardsley

Someone with Something to Say, Lucy Grace

Conkers, Jane Batkin

Uncle Dave was a Raconteur, Robyn Jefferson

In the Drink, Chris Williams

Two Late Millennial Men Go Skiing, Harry Dobbs

All of Them, Chris Neilan

Curiosity's Cat, Danielle Smith

Callback, Anne Frost

The Woman Who Turned into a Jellyfish, Rozie Kelly

Vauxhall, Christian Anthony

The Bog Lap, Luis Sit

Millimetres, Charlotte Sinclair

The Caregiver, Sam Naylor

Since the Fish Started Screaming, Sam Dawson

The Abbey Lawn, Georgia Boon

Life Drawing, Mary Byrne

Muddy, Sheila Bwakya

'Right, I'm off.'

I look up from where I've just been toeing my shoes off at the front door. Clara is beside me, keys jangling as she ties her trainer laces. She's wearing black leggings, a black hoodie. As expected, her face is simply done up: eyes, brows and lips. Clara's the only person I know who wears makeup to workout. I lean against the door frame and readjust the paper takeaway bag in my hands. When she reaches for the cycling helmet beside her feet, my eyes narrow slightly.

'Are you going up to Heighton again?'

She tightens the helmet strap beneath her chin. 'Again?'

'There's closer running trails.'

'So? What's wrong with going to Heighton?'

'I don't think Mum and Dad want us going up there. Not whilst the search teams are still out.'

'Mum and Dad don't want us going *anywhere*. And they're not searching Heighton; the teams have no reason to go that far.'

No, they don't and I hope it stays that way. It's the only meaningful place that hasn't been combed over, searched and forensically analysed.

Being a smaller woodland, the Council puts in little effort to maintain Heighton Hall. Passing through the Big Gate entrance is like entering a tent; the grey beech trunks are the poles, the oval-shaped leaves form the body. Some sunlight filters in, speckling the ground in glowing dots. But the further in you go, the closer to the manor, the more it engulfs you. Locals know their way around; everyone else has to rely on the faded tree markings.

In all honesty, it's a pretty rubbish running location: the uncut grass reaches up to scratch at your knees; tree roots cut across the leaf-hidden trails. On a drier day like today, you'd get out with a few nettle stings, some grass stains. Still, the weather can be temperamental and rain clouds often darken April skies around here. Then, the grass clings to your thighs and water drops from wind-rustled leaves onto you. Murky pools appear in dips you didn't know existed. And the roots finally trip you.

But I get why Clara wants to go. It's not as if I haven't wanted to head up to Heighton, to smell the nuttiness of the trees and the press of twigs beneath my feet. I haven't had it in me, though; Heighton was our family's place but it was especially *their* place. I can see them, Clara and Rae, carving pictures into trees with rocks, trying to swing on the lower branches; popping out from behind blackthorns to scare me and whining as I pulled them away from the manor. I haven't been since Rae went missing. Clara goes almost every day.

'I just want to walk around. The extra mile takes my mind off of things,' Clara turns to me with a slight grin, nodding towards the paper bag. 'You could do with that, you know.'

I kiss my teeth but there's no bite behind it. I open the bag and hold it out for her.

'Got us something. Passed through on my way home.'

'Shouldn't drink before my run.'

She reaches in anyway, gently dislodging one of two paper cups from the cardboard holders. The cup and its straw are white, the ice cubes within clacking together. She wraps her glossy red lips around

the straw. I watch as the corners of her mouth straighten, her eyes going blank. She swallows.

'I've been thinking about her,' I say, my voice quiet.

'Strawberry was always Rae's favourite.' Clara says simply.

Clara's eyes linger on the cup, unblinking. Then, she takes another sip and hands it to me, moving towards the door. There's a picture on the wall she'd been standing in front of, a framed photo of three smiling girls in front of their parents. A clear blue sky greets Clara as she opens the door.

'I'll be back later,' she says.

'Stay away from the manor trail,' I call but the door's already closed.

I look back towards the photo on the wall. We were different then, younger and happier. All still here. Mum and Dad and their daughters: Clara, Rae and me.

The straw is in a clear Ziplock bag. I hand it over to the young police officer. 'Call me Josh,' he had said when he first pulled me aside during

one of the initial searches. So I do. 'Mel? Can I call you Mel?' he added.

I told him I prefer Melanie.

Josh holds the bag firmly in both his hands like you would hold a book. His eyes even roam over it the same way, left to right in a smooth motion. I wonder if he's trained to find stories in simple objects. But what could a lipstick-stained paper straw tell you anyway? That the drinker is eco-conscious and enjoys make-up?

'Thank you for this,' Josh says.

I nod slightly. 'Have you found anything new?'

Josh turns the Ziplock over. And then he does it again, and again. I sniff and look out of the passenger window. The early evening sky is so bright that floaters flash in my vision. I blink and look at his dust-free dashboard.

Today, he's dressed in plain clothes to match the decoy car we're sitting in. It's a pretty normal car, if a bit pricey, but it's too clean, just like our Family Liaison Officer's smile is too gentle.

Josh rests the Ziplock in his lap and I feel his gaze on me. I wait a beat before meeting it.

'We found Rae's keys, her purse,' he takes a breath as he tilts his head this way and that. 'Her lip balm and her tablet and go-to jacket, toothbrush, toiletries...'

'None of us think she's a runaway. We told you that.' Josh looks slightly to the left, thinking so I rush to add, 'Yeah, I know that Clara said something about running away. I don't know why you're all so hung up on that. Surely that's a good thing. It means she has hope that Rae is coming back.'

It's his turn to nod now. 'Got anything new for me?'

'How long will it take to get the DNA results back?'

He doesn't blink as he meets my gaze head-on again. I'm the first to look away.

'No, nothing new,' I murmur.

Josh drums his fingers on the steering wheel but he only uses three fingers and the rhythm is uneven. Tap-tap...tap. Tap-tap...tap. Over and over.

'She keeps referring to her in the past tense. Not once or twice but all the time,' I press around my wrist joints, cracking them. 'But I

heard that doesn't actually mean anything.'

'Yeah, that can be true,' Josh says but there's a forced lilt in his voice. I get the impression that he's placating me. 'Have you given the CCTV footage some more thought? Do you think it's Clara?'

It could be anyone. A lot of girls wear their hair long these days and ponytails are a basic style. And what kid isn't wearing a Palmersdale High uniform? It's the biggest sixth form in town. But not all girls walk in such a way that their hair swishes like a horse's tail. And not all girls roll the waist of their skirt so much that it ends up sticking out. I've seen that horse tail sneaking snacks into her room at midnight.

I look towards the dashboard again.

Josh sighs. 'The DNA results will be back soon. I'll call you.'

'What...what would you have done if I didn't give you this?' I gesture toward the Ziplock.

'I'd have got it myself. Eventually. Followed her around, waited until she threw something in a public bin. Ideally, she'd have given it up before that but—' he shrugs, makes an expression of nonchalance. 'You've done the right thing, Melanie—'

'By selling out my sister?'

Josh stays silent.

I think about that night. I'd been up late, scrolling on my phone whilst sitting at the kitchen island. Clara had appeared in the back door. Her eyes had widened at the sight of me. I asked where she'd been and she told me— Laynes Park. I'd meant to tell her off; a young girl running at night alone—it was stupid, idiotic. Then, I saw her hands were shaking. It had been a rainy night; she was soaked through.

'For goodness sake, go warm up in the shower. Don't let mum see you getting in this late,' I'd said, watching as Clara made her way upstairs. 'And text Rae— she's not replying to me.'

I can't remember if she responded.

Josh pulls his lip out from between his teeth before clearing his throat

'We found her phone. Here.'

My brow furrows.

Josh continues, 'I found it. You mentioned this place one time in one of our early chats. So I decided to have a nosy and...'

He's looking straight ahead; I look, too.

Before us is a building, though protrusion might be a better word for it now. It's two or three storeys high and only the highest one is visible; ivy clings to the right side of the house, curtaining half of the windows. The others are cracked and broken. The brick that is visible is moss-stippled and crumbling in multiple areas. Diamond fencing keeps anyone from getting within two hundred yards of it. There's sign bordered by penny-brown rust but it's too far away to read. I don't need it; I know this place well.

'Just found it lying on the ground— waterlogged and absolutely filthy. Must have been raining when someone, we'll assume Rae, dropped it. We'll get it working soon enough,' Josh says. 'Heighton Hall Manor. Is this place significant? Does your family come here often?'

I'd gone upstairs to Clara's room afterwards. She was on the bed, brushing out her damp hair. The first thing I'd noticed were the clothes on the floor— the carpet floor.

'Clara,' I'd scolded and reached for them. The cold sensation of the wet polyester made me cringe. My hand was glistening with moisture, slimy mud and grass. She said she'd been to Laynes Park; the running trails there were clean and clear, gravel and not earth. On a rainy night, your shoes might get spattered, maybe your ankles, too. I held out the clothes, saw that mud was flecked up to the thighs of her leggings. The smell of nuts and grass reached me.

'Did you go up to Heighton—'

'No, Melanie, I'm not a complete idiot, alright? Why would I risk going all the way up there this late, *on my own?*' Clara had said so quickly it had me blinking. She swallowed and put down her hairbrush. She ran her fingers through the strands, over and over. '... You heard from Rae yet?'

'No—'

'Neither,' she slid from her bed and approached me, taking the wet clothes. 'Gonna wash these before Mum loses it. Got anything that needs washing?'

I feel a wet drop on my hand. Lifting my palms to my cheeks, I find that they are wet. I accept a tissue from Josh. By the time I'm done rubbing at my face, small tissue fragments are littered across my cheekbones and lower lashes.

Josh's voice is more gentle than I've ever heard it. 'Anything else for me?'

Why was she muddy?

'Just the straw,' I say.

I press the back of my head into the headrest and close my eyes.

Josh turns the Ziplock bag over and over in one hand. Tap-tap...tap.

Gabriel, Pauline Hughes

I hadn't seen her for some years but I'd thought about her from time to time. And my auntie. And the auntie's daughter, Jane. Yes well.

Auntie Joyce had found me through google and told me mother was dying and it would be a righteous to visit, that she longed to see me.

Well, I do some DJing here and there, so I was findable. We'd had a big bust-up. My lifestyle and stuff. She was like very religious and well, I'd been wild as a teenager and just couldn't wait to get out and get on with real life. Yeah, truth to tell, I owed her a lot of money. I used to come back up North to see her in my twenties but really to borrow cash because those years were crazy and everything went on living hard in London. Yeah, I've calmed down now, cool runnings. But there she'd be weeding her flower beds and we'd have a shepherds-pie in the sitting room, a Bible quote embroidery on every wall as if that was going to keep Satan away. I'd tell her I'd discovered yet another up-and-coming band and needed money to promote them and how it was make or break and she'd sigh and get me cash from her rainy-day savings.

Well, I guess she got her revenge. She didn't leave a penny to Gabriel, her little boy. And no prizes for guessing where it was going, yep, some charity that helped old donkeys! For fucks sake. And more for the church. (the Pastor already drives a 4 X 4 that'd hold a bungalow).

She used to read me Bible stories as bedtime reading, what! Now I ain't mocking the Bible, you never know if there might be something up there and hey there were some good stories. Always liked the one about Joseph in his coat of many colours. They made a musical of that one. She used to sew tapestries instead of watching TV, thought that came from the dark forces. Crazy woman. But it's not good to diss the dead. She did her best. I didn't want for nothing. She was happy I liked music and got me piano and guitar lessons. But the house was dumb. Just the wind and rain against the windows or the clack of her knitting needles in that silence I've been trying to fill ever since with excess. So yeah, I'm sorry I didn't get to say goodbye. Nearly made it once but woke up too hungover and there was that skinny brown girl next to me in bed. Whatever. Feel bad about it now.

I made it to the funeral though. Everyone from the church there

in black suits but not the African women who are living round here now. They were in matching patterned dresses and those fancy head ties. Seemed like they were really fond of my old mum. And there was a drum kit in the top corner. Wow. Musically things looking up! The coffin was open for people to pay their respects. I'd brought a wreath that spelt Mum, but it looked cheap on that shiny wood. Her face was still, maybe in peace. Why not? She was going to meet her Maker. I hope she wasn't in pain at the end. Once I found a flat-mate dead after an overdose. A look of fear, panic on his face.

They wanted me to say a few words. I tried to get out of it but the African women told me in no uncertain terms I had to get into the pulpit and honour her, after the Pastor finished preaching about her deep faith. I said how she'd taken me in as a baby, when I wasn't wanted - when she was already middle aged, had given me a life and done her best. And she'd been brave. I was a 'coloured' child and people had looked at her funny. I nearly teared up because I felt like saying I was sorry for not visiting and for living a life so different to what she'd wanted but I choked it back and kept it short. How much did these people know about me?

She would've been pleased to see all these beautiful African women singing the Ragged Cross around her coffin at the cemetery. Auntie Iris made me be the first to throw earth onto the coffin. There was a pretty girl opposite me with Iris, slim as a reed with long auburn hair. A relly of some kind? I'd been out of touch for so long. Of course Jane was there too. I stared at her till she looked away. She'd got lines on her face, grey in her brown hair. And put on a massive amount of weight.

There was food afterwards cooked by the African women. So no ham sandwiches and crisps, right, some really tasty chicken and rice. My oh my.

Auntie Iris came to tell me the house would be sold but asked if there were things I needed. She gave me a parcel rolled up in brown paper. 'At least take this,' she said.

Well maybe, if I get a council flat somewhere in the big smoke I'd need stuff. But how likely is that? I'm too old to be renting rooms or sharing in flats, truth be told. Guess I took too many wrong turns. Driven. That itch, wanting to make it in the music. I could'a been the resident DJ in a club in Haringey but I turned up the first night out of

my skull. Saying No. Is it that hard?

I was lost in my thoughts when Jane sat came over, asking me how I was. What was I doing with my life? As if she cared. As if. My mouth tight. 'Survivin',' I said.

'Still in the music business?'

'Yo.'

She had no right to blame me for not coming back to see the old lady. If she did.

'And you? What you up to?' I asked.

'Still in reception at the hospital. Hoping to retire in five years.'

'Oh yeah?' I fumbled in my pockets for my cigarettes and got up from my seat to go outside.

She looked up at me, eyes soft. 'Now that Betty's passed you don't have to call her Mum anymore, do you Gabriel?'

I took a cigarette out and tapped it on the back of my hand. I kind of froze in my tracks, taking the measure of what she'd just said. What the fuck did she expect me to say? I could taste the bitterness but I didn't want to say something cruel, here at Mum's funeral. 'Bit

late for that ain't it Jane?' I went outside. The wind blew the smoke into my face and the leaves and rubbish across the pavements. The phone vibrated in my pocket. I didn't recognise the number at first, but you give out contact details to a lot of people in my business. 'Yo,' I said. It was that skinny brown girl. Saffi, short for Sapphire. She had news for me she said. 'What kind of news?' I answered. What was this about? She needed to tell me face to face. Holy shit. I couldn't stop thinking about it as I went round the hall thanking everyone but excusing myself as I had to get my train.

'You're not staying the night at home?' asked Auntie Iris. 'There might be things you'd like to keep. As well as the tapestry I parcelled up for you.'

'Nah. You're good.'

An old African woman stopped me at the door. 'May God pour blessings down on you,' she said. 'The loss of a mother is a trial. I will pray for you.'

She looked so earnest and sincere I even felt guilty. I'm going soft.

I unrolled the tapestry in the taxi to the station. The prodigal son. I knew straight away. Maybe Mum had a sense of humour or maybe she wanted me to know that whatever I did she forgave me - well she had to, didn't she, being a Christian an' all.

Saffi met me at the weekend. We went for a walk on the South Bank and crossed over Charing Cross bridge, watching an Uber boat slice through the brown water.

'I'm pregnant,' she said.

The world stood still. I mumbled through a half-closed mouth when I asked her if she was sure.

She rolled her pretty lager-coloured eyes. 'Not sure I'll keep it,' she said. 'My situation... it's nowhere you'd want to keep a baby in.'

I thought of Mum, what kind of conversations she might have had with her niece Jane, shocked by the calculations to get rid of me. And for whatever reason, Mum prevailed. And Jane got on with her life without me. Though my life had been chaotic I was still here and I could do things differently, better. And now this one.

'Please,' I said to Saffi. 'Let's think about this.' And told her about Mum and her pregnant niece. And I made certain promises. Maybe those African ladies could pray for me to keep them.

Provident, Ashley Stokes

Every payday, after flapping our letterbox, Dressed-For-Winter would bash against our window like a wasp around a pint, with his beanie eclipsing the dawn and his petrol breath fogging the glass. We'd see him coming before the knock, because his head always marked a bowling pin shadow on the carpet. By all measures, a right sight. Over the years we'd blocked him out with a ragged net curtain, a fort of bills built on Great Universal foundations, and decapitated footie trophies. We hadn't answered in four weeks, but the sod still lingered, knocking like we owed him money.

Technically, we did.

But that's beside the point.

If we ant answered the door, then you ant knocked properly, simple as. And properly was anything rhythmic, like Frank Superking's *Spanish Flea* thumps, or any of Dizzy's boom-bap knocks that he'd come up with after burning us a new CD. So when the limpfisted lump stuck around like gum under a table, we'd just ignore him, mute the telly, and hush our mush. Sometimes, we'd stick a finger up. Andrew stroked my hair last night. Andrew is also dead.

Two months ago, we were leaving an underground bar together and I was wearing these ridiculously thin stilettos. They'd seemed like a good, even sexy, idea at the beginning of the night, but on those metal steps at the end they were rendering me useless. Of course, they weren't the only problem. I was also drunk. Massively so. Because of this, when I look back on that night

Depending on how much we owed him, I think.

Dressed-For-Winter was, obviously, the debt collector. We'd given him a few pseudonyms over the years. He was Provi Man for the winter of '02, and Plumber's Knuckles by spring. He probably had a real name. None of us cared to ask. All that 'keep your enemies close' was for Larry Hagman to chew over on the telly. We'd been robbed too many times for that shite to be worthy advice. And worst of all, robbed by Knocking Hell, in the summer of '03.

The bailiffs need peaceful entry to take your stuff. Mum had shown me the letter so often that I knew about enforcement, repayment, and escalation before I knew about Biff, Chip, and Kipper. She made sure us boys understood. The middle lot were fine, had their heads nudded-and-bolted down. And kids under twelve weren't able to permit peaceful entry, so that was me sorted. But everything went in one ear and out the other with Tyler, who'd, more than once, queued for his Giro at the chippy.

Knocking Hell sent the bailiffs on a Monday morning in August. That weekend Mum was staying at one of her fellas, and the middle lot were drinking VKs at Dizzy's weekly rave, which meant Tyler had to

look after me. He just had his own pissup instead. Typical, really. I helped him by unpacking the cans into the fridge, buffing the CDs with my pyjamas, and climbing behind the sofa to hunt for change in case the emergency leccy went out. Which it did.

My brother was three nights, thirty-six cans, and countless spliffs deep when the bailiffs knocked on our door at 7:59am. I plodded over the threadbare carpet, rubbing my eyes, fingernails black from rummaging for coins. My soles were probably black too, after dancing around the house all weekend like I'd found a tenner. At the door I stretched to peek through the letterbox. I parted the bristles, squinted, then lowered the brass eyelid. The closest I've ever been to a man's crotch. Sure I'd have nightmares of what I'd just seen, I tiptoed to my brother, who, surrounded by a maze of lager cans, was melting on the sofa to the soothing melodies of The Prodigy.

"It's the bailiffs," I whispered.

He opened one eye, then closed it. "You get it."

"I can't."

Eye open, eye closed. "Why's that?"

"I'm seven."

He darted air from his nose, squeezed his temples, then heaved his eyelids open. Still slumped, his hand wandered down to the cans, fingers grasping like Pacman. He sat upright to slosh each one, separating them into two piles. Steadying a can between his knees, he poured the dregs from the strays in, then discarded the rest and giggled like Disco Pete, with a little whistle sounding from where his incisors shoulda been. He swigged his lukewarm mix, then rose with Mrs Artois in his palm, and waltzed her into the hallway.

The door clattered against the Elvis poster on the wall. Tyler held his mistress high, and waved the two burly blokes in. I tugged on his sleeve and shook my head and held my palms to the ceiling. He just shrugged, swigged, and ripped out a horrible fart. *Firestarter* fizzled into static embers as the men took the speakers and the telly. I watched them go with my shirt over my nose and my fingers stuck up. As the van pulled away, I stretched to the letterbox, shouting, "Suck your mum!" just like my brothers had taught me. It felt right, but it dint make em turn around.

Mum's face went gobstopper red when she got back. She

slipped him sober, screaming, "How am I gonna watch *Dallas* now?" while feeding him the dust from the telly stand. Luckily, Dizzy knew someone getting rid of a telly, so she only missed a few episodes. She had her feet up and cuppa in hand by the weekend. Can't blame her. These were the natural disasters for the Crest, and you'd go mad if you dint forgive and forget. Sometimes.

This was just life, to us. We'd spend winters sharing bowls of Albas oil, and summers out on the street, leant against our garden fence that looked like it'd had its teeth knocked out. My brothers, pockmarked with blistering sunburn, would rifle footballs at Provident cars all day while my mum would twirl around to the stuttering of scratched Elvis CDs. I'd sit on whoever's shoulders I could climb on just to stare at the cityscape from our hill. Mills and factories and market halls would stare back, buildings that I now know to be UNESCO World Heritage Sites, but back then, none of us had a clue. The world ended where the "Welcome to Crest Hill" sign used to be, before Dizzy dug it up at midnight to scrap it the next morning.

I didn't adventure further until I was old enough to go town by myself. I'd tart up in my mum's mirror, hair gelled stiff and buried in

my brother's hand-me-downs, then pop downstairs to stuff my feet into my Nike Shox that flapped when I walked. I'd wander to the new shopping centre, pocket summat from Topman or JD, then scurry home. All this just to impress Beth Naylor whose bedroom walls were graffitied like mine, and whose brother also fell asleep to *The Fat of The Land*. Hormones are cheaper than lager, but they get you just as drunk.

Back then, getting your 'willy wet' was life's only goal, or so my brothers taught me. Did everything I could to get there, and you know what? Ain't all that. I think all we want is to want and be wanted, to be honest. Least that's the conclusion I came to, stuck to Beth's older sister on the top bunk, *Breathe* rattling the loose bolts beside our heads and the air thick with sweat and sweet dreams. I dint sleep for the guilt that night, and spent the rest of it thinking there had to be more to life.

A few years later, at eighteen, I left my city for the first time. Somehow, the murky wasteland between chance and choice took me to university. Don't ask me how. I ant got a clue either. But I spent those years stumbling around like I'd lost my wallet, and after

countless nights drunk as a traffic light, trying to force friendships with people whose only knowledge of debt was a mortgage, I eventually moved back home. I couldn't be dealing with lads called Ronan, or anyone that has two parents. It's just not right.

So I'm back on the Crest, down the road from where I was conceived in the back of a yellow taxi some thirty years ago. Mum was a looker back then, she says, and maybe that made the wanting stronger. She defends her past by saying anyone who looked like her in a cheesecloth blouse was doing the same, and that right now, their daughters will have their legs propped up, tags rattling on their ankles, doing just the same. Might be true, but I guess taxis are all Toyotas, these days, and that's not as romantic, is it? Think I'll take the title of 'Last Crest Hill Cars Baby' and stick it next to my degree certificate. Least one's worth summat.

I won't lie, the estate's changed a bit over the years. You don't see many lads just kicking about in the sun anymore, and course no one queues for their Giro. Won't see a yellow pages or a Great Universal either. Worst of all, our old house has been bought by some Right-To-Buyer who's installed CCTV and replaced the windows. Stuff changes, I

guess. Can't stop it. You'd have better luck getting Disco Pete to turn his Walkman down or Cowboy John to take his hat off.

Course there's proper sad news, too. Frank Superking's bedbound with lung cancer, and Dizzy got done for burglary. He'd been nicking stuff from the posh houses in Beechwood, and Shannon Naylor grassed on him after he tried it on, or summat. I try not to listen to gossip. Unlike my mum, I'm still scared of the past, scared of what's said about me. Took me long enough to shake the nightmares. Beth's threats of getting her brother involved had me on the ropes for about nine years, but I sleep alright now. I just can't listen to that record, as much as it is a soundtrack to my youth, and to the estate.

Some think I'm mad for coming back. I just tell em that the Crest might have a bad reputation, but that's all it is, empty as my brother's head. It's still got that unmistakeable charm, and there's just as much love, solidarity, and papercut wit here than there ever was. It just feels right, like when you know you've hit the crossbar before the ball's left your foot, or those first sips of a brew when the clocks go back. So I'm gonna stay, you get me? Because if that's not home, then I ant got a scooby what is.

I'd tell you more, but Dressed's just knocked on the window.

And no. He ant changed.

Company, Holly Catton

Andrew stroked my hair last night. Andrew is also dead.

Two months ago, we were leaving an underground bar together and I was wearing these ridiculously thin stilettos. They'd seemed like a good, even sexy, idea at the beginning of the night, but on those metal steps at the end they were rendering me useless. Of course, they weren't the only problem. I was also drunk. Massively so. Because of this, when I look back on that night, I see things not from my own perspective, but through the eyes of some external entity, peering down from street level at my former self.

Andrew had been dragging me along with him that whole time. I can see us now. Him with an arm hooked under my armpit and me blubbering and stumbling all over the place. He would've been talking to me the whole time, too, regardless of my capacity to reply. That's just what Andrew was like. Attentive, calm, light-hearted. He wouldn't have been stressing about sobering me up or complaining about having to haul me along, he would have simply known that things were going to work out. Well, *thought* they were.

It was a slap of wind to the face that sobered me up enough to give clarity to the end. So much clarity, in fact, that I can't help but think it must have been delivered with malicious intent. This is exactly the part of the night I'd be willing to forget, but no, that wind has to come along and rattle me. So, one moment I'm observing as a gargoyle perched atop the rafters and then, BAM! - I'm seeing things through my own eyes as hands come into view to claw hair out of my face.

It's in that moment, freshly awakened, that I put off kissing Andrew. He'd leaned towards me, bringing a hand up to cup my chin, but I'd swatted him off, desperately aware of the hairs plastered all over my lip-gloss. So, while I'd been burrowing around in my bag in search of a compact mirror, he'd stepped away.

"You know I wouldn't have cared." He'd said with a laugh.

"Well, *I* care," I'd replied, removing the final stray hair. "Anyway, I'm done now, you can come back."

When I'd looked up, he had been at the very edge of the pavement,

teetering, and as I'd parted my newly ready lips to usher him back for that kiss, he'd stepped out into the road and died.

I couldn't possibly relay what I'd done to pass the immediate days that followed. All I know is that I consumed an ocean of rum. The bottles still litter our apartment now, but I couldn't say for sure which ones are from those first few weeks, and which are from these last few. They clink together from time to time when I move through them on my way into the bathroom. Rum-based cocktails were what I'd been drinking that night. I guess I thought that if I drank enough of the stuff, I could suspend myself in some kind of alcohol-induced-purgatory and never have to move on. Hair of the dog and all that.

Days morphed into weeks and in them I became a hermit. My apartment provided the hardy shell whose spongy depths I cowered into. Friends came knocking, but I turned them away. Family was slightly harder to deter. Especially my mother, whose stubborn nature allowed her an unparalleled relentlessness that almost broke me down, but I stood my ground.

The only people I did unlock the door for were my delivery drivers. They brought me food, toiletries, and of course, alcohol. It was a low-risk interaction. Half the time they were so engrossed in their phones they never even took a minute to look up and see me. Even if they did, they would've probably just assumed that I was going through a routine breakup. All the clichés were there. My hair was unwashed, my eyes were raw, my nose was often running, and my clothes were obviously only being worn because nudity would've been indecent. My delivery drivers didn't care either way. They just kept handing me brown bags and racking up five-star reviews.

I had a washing machine and a dryer, so clothes also weren't an issue. Not that I was washing mine or even wearing a steady rotation of them. I lived in Andrew's wardrobe. Whenever I noticed the sweat, snot, and tears from my own body beginning to taint his clothes, I'd painstakingly handwash the affected areas and spray cologne on them to preserve his scent. Sometimes, though, I worried that I was still erasing him in this manner, removing his precious hair and skin cells. So, I stopped rotating his clothes after a little while, too. One set of loungewear was all I allowed myself.

Once six weeks had passed, I'd settled into a routine. I woke up at

whatever time my body wanted me to, lay in bed until some base urge compelled me to leave, met that urge (be it to eat, piss, or...you know), then went back to bed. If I couldn't sleep again, I'd drink and pass the time amongst Andrew's belongings. I watched movies and shows from time to time, to busy my eyes and ears while I ate. I rarely showered, never brushed my teeth, and often ended up drunk; I found it hard to fall back to sleep during the day.

Then, just as winter was beginning to force my delivery drivers into woolly hats, Andrew came back.

I'd been sat on the floor of our bedroom, sniffing his socks, when I heard a bang in the kitchen. Warmed up on rum, and possibly a little high from all the cologne-soaked socks, I'd gotten up to investigate. Everything had been just as I'd left it, expect for a singular mug which was rolling along the floor towards me. For a moment I'd just stared at it, listening to the hollow droll of ceramic on wood. It was only when I'd bent down to pick it up, that I'd realised it was Andrew's mug. Not only that, it was his *favourite* mug. The one he'd swiped from the meeting room of the tech firm he hoped to someday work for. The one he drank his coffee from every morning. The one he made me hot chocolate in whenever I got sick.

Overwhelmed with emotion, all I'd been able to do in that moment was to lift Andrew's mug up to my lips and kiss it. The kiss I'd wanted to give him all those weeks ago.

A few days later, I'd woken up in the middle of the night. Confused and barely cognitive, I'd wandered out of my bedroom into the living area, but something had seemed off. On the empty side of the coffee table, Andrew's side, sat his mug. It had moved again!

Barely believing my eyes, I'd rubbed them to iron out any kinks in my vision, but the mug had stayed put.

As I'd made my way over to pick it up, I'd paused. The cushion marking Andrew's seat on the sofa had two circles pressed into it and when I'd reached out a hand to feel them, they'd been warm.

That night, I fell asleep on those sunken circles.

Things stopped happening for a while after that. I woke up, lay there, got up, ate and used the bathroom, drank, and went back to sleep. My delivery drivers began to don scarves.

I knew Andrew hadn't left me. I could still feel him in the apartment. From time to time, I'd even tried speaking to him, hoping it might rouse him to make his presence known again. I'd avoided all the heavy topics, of course. There were no great speeches or eulogies. I just told him what I'd been up to. In other words, I either told him about the food I'd ordered or about the film or show I'd watched while I ate said food. Despite my best efforts, the sofa cushions stayed taut, and Andrew's mug stubbornly remained wherever I'd left it.

Then, three nights ago, Andrew touched me.

I'd been on the sofa, my face pressed firmly into a pillow, one arm dangling off the side. Before I'd managed to piece anything more about my circumstances together, a hand had brushed against my own. I'd reached out and called for Andrew, but he'd already moved away.

When I'd finally managed to push myself up and take a look around, I'd seen that a bottle of rum was standing on the floor by the sofa. On the rug under the coffee table, a small patch of golden-brown had formed. It all clarified itself for me then. I must have been drinking on the sofa, lost consciousness, and toppled the bottle of rum over in my sleep. Then Andrew, against his apparent inclination to keep a distance, must have run over and stood the bottle back up. As I'd been surveying the room, I'd realised that he'd also paused my show.

Two nights ago, Andrew sneezed.

At first, I'd thought it was a noise of my own making. Maybe all the cologne had hung heavy in the apartment and tickled my nostrils. That's when I'd remembered that I hadn't been spraying Andrew's cologne anymore in fear that I'd lose the true likeness of his scent. I wasn't ill. I knew that much. The only people I'd been interacting with were the delivery drivers, and they'd added gloves to their winter attire, so our interactions were becoming as sterile as ever. Then I came around to the idea that it must have been Andrew. He'd picked up the mug and the bottle of rum. He'd even touched my hand, however briefly. Why couldn't it have been him?

But that thought scratched and lingered like a hard piece of food wedged in the oesophagus. It stayed there the whole night, and all of yesterday, too. A cruel constant.

Then, last night, Andrew stroked my hair. It was as I'd been drifting off to sleep. I'd tried with all my might to open my eyes. To look at him. To be rid of that horrible sense of doubt and know that he was truly there, but I hadn't been able to. The rum had lined my eyelids with cement, and I was doomed the second I closed my eyes.

Today, for the first time in a long time, I'm not drinking.

It's been awful. I've got the hangover of all hangovers, but I'm fighting through. I have to be clear if I'm actually going to *see* Andrew, not just feel him.

To avoid a repeat of last night, I've also been having coffee. Tonnes of it. I'm six cups, and one tiramisu, deep. I plan to be awake when Andrew shows up.

It's almost 9 p.m. now. I'm curled up on the sofa with a book (I figured the TV would be too loud). I've got some kind of "vitality" smoothie with me too; I had it delivered to try and stave off the remaining aches and pains from the hangover. They've mellowed out surprisingly well considering how many weeks of drinking have contributed to them.

As I'm turning the plastic cup around to read the label, shuffling sounds scrape in from the bedroom.

Andrew.

I lean forward so that I'm looking directly through the open doorway. The room is dark. I can't see anything yet, but I dare not look away.

The shuffling comes in bursts. Shuffle, stop. Shuffle, stop. I lean further forward, gripping the edge of the sofa with my hands and feet. From under the bed, two pale things come into view. Hands. They're definitely hands. They grip the carpet and pull. Grip and pull, grip and pull. When the body they've been pulling comes into view, I have to stifle a whimper because, whoever that is, it's certainly not Andrew.

Instant Coffee, Sam Wait

Your new boss waves a hand dismissively at the staff kitchen. We have rubbish coffee here, if you need it, she laughs. You stare at the Nescafé granules you've drunk your whole life, the brown liquid doused with milk and enough sugar to get you through a shift.

She leads you to a desk with two screens on it. You marvel to discover that **they're** both yours. She laughs, even though you don't think you've said anything funny. You get to work, writing articles on whatever she tells you to. Oh, the thrill of it - of being able to use your brain after years of using your hands, the rhythmic clickety-clack of the keyboard replacing the sound of the checkout counter going beep, beep, beep...

You watch the articles get published and revel in seeing your name beneath the headline. What they're about is less important. This is just the start of a long and blossoming career, the beginning of the rest of your life.

At the shop, you would dream of your words being splashed across the newspapers you took out of their wrappings on Sunday mornings. Pensioners would wander outside before the shutters were open, waiting patiently to be let in and hand you coins to devour them. The Mail was their favourite, you'd learned. Barely any Guardian's sold at all.

On a good day, someone would call you a bonnie lass. On a bad one, a stupid bitch. But that didn't matter. Not really. You were better than them anyway, with your youth and potential and government-funded university grant. You were made for bigger, brighter things. Here they were, stuck in their cyclical little lives, reading the same papers every Sunday while you waited for your real life to start.

You were going to get the qualifications they were never afforded - work hard never to see their faces again, never feel the skin of their

calloused hands touch yours as you topped up their electricity meter. You were better than all of it. One man mispronounced a word once, and you corrected him, didn't you? That showed him. You might be stuck in the same place, but that was just because they hadn't worked hard enough to get out of it. No. You were different. You were going to make something of yourself.

Now, you write as many articles as you can. Eat hurried bites of your sandwich in between deadlines, leaving crumbs on the keyboard. Consume more news when you open your phone - on the apps, when you're scrolling Instagram, it all sinks in. Ideas for your next piece flitter and crack in your mind like static. You tap your fingers on the speckled kitchen countertops as the kettle boils over. A business owner shouts at you down the phone for leaving a sensationalist review. Campaign groups ask you to cover their latest fundraiser. A woman is asking you to report on her daughter's disappearance (again). But it's old news, the editor says. It's old news. You pitch article ideas that keep getting rejected when they don't fit the publication - only your ideologies. And you don't have them here. Be impartial, remain calm, don't let anything get past your skin.

Clicks per page are dropping, and an email with the names of every journalist in the company is circulated every Monday to identify whose articles are performing the worst. Five weeks on the bottom of the list, and you're gone. Only the oldest hacks, the ones on permanent contracts, remain unphased by it.

The day your name is highlighted in red, you feel your bowels turn to water. Some staff shoot you pitied glances during the weekly team meeting. Others seem to smile, you think, their eyes twinkling with laughter. It's never long before the new ones start to fall, you hear someone say.

You frantically Google indeed.com on the way home and regain some semblance of control. Return to your moth-infested London houseshare full of strangers you met on the internet. The pay is enough to cover the bills, but little else. Threatening letters from the TV licence people keep landing on the doormat. Sarah tells you to stop using the shower so much because it's making the ceiling leak. One of your housemates saw a mouse under the stairs the other day, and you are trying not to think about it turning up again, its yellow eyes blinking at you in the dark as you try to sleep. It's as if it knows, you think, that you are very far from home.

When your name starts climbing the weekly leaderboard again, your shoulders drop for a while. You prove to everyone that you can do what you set out to do, breaking stories and writing up interviews. It becomes second nature over time, the thrill of finding a new story helping dull the downsides of this new life.

It's different from the store. No camaraderie, no banter, no boss that asks how your mum is. Your nan used to work at my school, you know, Steve would say. I never went to uni. Didn't see the point meself. Lisa says she wishes she'd have gone, but she had kids instead. I've reduced all the desserts that go off today. They're in the back - go get one before the locusts come in.

Often, you'd sneak out the back, cradling a coffee made in your designated mug, the scalding water burning your hands in a good way. Looking at the concrete car park, you could see the chimneys exhaling in the distance, behind the rickety metal steps leading up to council flats buzzing with cigarette smoke and secret conversations. You would think about all the life that was happening without you.

Here, where you worked so hard to be, it takes a while for anyone

to know your name. You try to make small talk, but only some entertain it, others hiding behind the blue light of their screen until the clock strikes 5. Those who speak to you talk about their holidays. The boss is going skiing again this year, in Bulgaria, with his extended family. It's an annual thing, and it gets quite boring, to be honest. Wish they'd pick somewhere else for a change. Venice with the fiancée in the New Year, though, that'll be better. Aren't you going anywhere this year?

You work harder and harder just to get by, but bills are going up and the landlord is raising the rent again. In line with inflation, of course - they take no pleasure in doing it. The red of your overdraft becomes a familiar friend, scrimping on work clothes in charity shops a necessity, and saying no to nights out with hard-earned friends commonplace.

Sometimes, you think back to when you bought fish and chips after a late shift where you'd put the shutters down, store key hanging from a ring in your belt loop. The deliciously salty food warmed you from the inside out alongside the heat emanating from the paper parcel. Your colleague - your friend - walked home with you that night. Sharing the chips with those useless wooden forks, you talked carelessly about nothing and everything, as the stars winked at you like a thousand potential futures.

You learned about your colleague's families, the white noise they needed to fall asleep and how they drank their tea. You had been family, for a time - a dysfunctional one with a common enemy: any customer that upset a colleague or tried to steal something. They started putting locks on the baby formula before you left, and moved the cheese from near the door because of the man that kept smuggling it out in his wax jacket.

Whenever you recall fond memories of your old job to your editor,

she stares at you unblinking, as if you are speaking in a foreign language. You recall the customer who would come in every morning and knew you by name, even without your name tag. They bought 20 scratch cards a week and would win about £5 back. It's just my hobby, love. I don't have grandkids, you see. No one to spend it on. The man who brought a bottle of brandy every Saturday would turn up like clockwork, so you'd leave a bottle on the side for him in preparation. All the while, the boss would be in the back, one eye on the security cameras while playing trivia games on Facebook. Whenever you entered, he'd shout a question at you he didn't know the answer to. And when you knew it, you were lauded, weren't you? For the clever girl that you are.

Well, thank god you'll never have to go back there again, she laughs. You look down at your scuffed shoes.

The End of Our Tether, Dave Pescod

I dodge round people on the pavement, making sure I keep Wacker in my sights. He larks around with his new mates Rahman and Kostovitch, before they disappear into Kosto's house. I stand outside, staring at the new front door with its blinking surveillance camera. Seagulls squawk and dive into waste bins. Our friendship must have been built out of sand. The tide just took it away. I cross the road, over the mismatched tarmac and slope back to the bungalow.

My parents sold our house in London a year ago, and moved to this boring seaside town, Mum's attempt to get away from it all. Dad's away most of the time, laying telecommunication cables under the sea, all over the world. He keeps stuff in the old shed in the yard, where I hang out playing video games. Wacker carved his name outside on the end wall, and I scratch away the marks he made with his new penknife. We used to yell our nicknames across the park, along the beach, declaring our friendship to the night sky and the universe. He was the first friend I made in this town, and it wasn't for the lack of trying. An only child like me, we got on well but most of all I miss walking his dog. I used to talk to Columbo when Wacker wasn't about, he always listened to me. His Gran named him after her favourite TV detective, with his scruffy coat and funny way of poking his nose into everything. When she died, Wacker got the dog. His loving eyes follow you everywhere, and peer at you as if they know what you're thinking. Columbo helped Wacker get over losing his Gran, and he was a good friend to me.

'Can we get a dog, Mum?' I kick off my shoes and slump at the kitchen table.

The windows are steamed up with a smell of burnt food.

'All those hairs on the sofa. I don't think so.'

She slides a plate of Spaghetti Bolognese between my

elbows. I find one of her hairs in the pasta, a long curly one. I pull it out, coated in tomato sauce.

‘Elbows, darling! Have you washed your hands?’ She issues instructions like an army sergeant, taking the role of boss in Dad’s absence.

‘Almost forgot the garlic bread. I’m afraid it’s burnt.’

I eat most of it, then push the plate away as Mum tries to make conversation.

‘I got an email from your Dad, he’s heading back from Kuala Lumpur on a new ship. I know you miss him, darling.’

I put my plate on the side and go to my room, searching the map on the computer where I place a marker at the bottom of Malaysia with a line leading from our house. Coloured lines criss-cross the world map, marking his trail across the ocean. He’s so far away and he never says when he’s coming back.

Half-term drags, and I play computer games in the shed, eating pizza while Mum does her receptionist job at the doctors. On Saturday morning she drives me into town and buys a kite. On the beach, she pulls it out of the bag like a conjurer struggling in the wind to push the plastic poles into the bright red fabric. Out of sympathy, I help her attach the line to the long blue tail. I hang on to the strings when she walks towards the sea holding the kite above her head. She is not fit or pretty, but my mother is strong in different ways. I feel the line tighten as she throws the diamond shape up into the sky, then it crashes into the sand. It seems pointless, and I’m embarrassed as my mother tries so hard to launch the kite again and again. I want the sand to eat me up, but then at the umpteenth attempt the red kite soars into the sky. I tug on the line as it catches the wind, amazed how the kite responds to my every move. Mum’s hair blows across her face as she jumps up and down yelling instructions at me. I start laughing, but I’m proud of her getting me the kite. I try to follow her directions as the kite gets smaller and smaller, and the tail draws patterns across the blue sky. The wind takes it higher and

the string tightens, as I enjoy the sensation of being in control and having contact with something special. The line stretches out across the sand, shooting up into the clouds, as the tail waves at me. The line goes slack. The string has run out, and there's nothing to pull on. My arms flail, as the end of the line bounces across the sand and I chase after it towards the sea, leaving heavy footprints as I sprint faster and faster, until I trip on a boulder. I collapse on the wet sand. Mum sits by me, and we watch the red diamond riding the wind, over the waves towards the horizon, where it vanishes.

Fish and chips always taste better in newspaper, with grease-stained headlines to read while I chew the chips soaked in vinegar and sprinkled with salt. I pour more ketchup over the haddock then bite into the crisp batter. Mum lights a cigarette and blows smoke across the kitchen table, deep in thought. We sit in silence, making the treat last until she ruffles my hair and puts the kettle on. The phone rings and we come to our senses.

'It's your friend, Mr. Wakeford.'

I take the handset to my bedroom, shut the door as the phone crackles like a long-distance call from another country.

'D'you want to take Columbo for a walk, Sparky?'

'I've got to do my homework.' I lie.

'You can copy mine.'

I leave a silence. 'Ok. When?'

'Half an hour? We can go down the park.'

'So, you're not Billy no mates after all.' Mum rummages through her handbag and gives me a cash. I mumble good-bye and leave.

Wacker and Columbo are playing by the park gate.

'No Rahman today?' I ask.

'We had a fight. He tried to nick my homework.'

Columbo jumps up at me wagging his tail. I kneel down and bury my head in his rough coat, teasing him. I look at Wacker. 'Let me know next time Rahman gives you trouble. I'll sort him out.'

‘How are you going to do that?’ he screws his face up.

‘I’ll set Columbo on him.’ We laugh and sprint across the park, letting the dog off the lead. He follows a scent, bounding across the grass, barking at an Alsatian, undaunted by its stature. He runs rings round the dog, then scampers off. We collapse under a tree and stare through the branches at the sky.

‘Still mates, Sparky?’ Wacker asks.

‘If you want.’

He whistles, and Columbo comes running from the other side of the park, tail wagging and licking Wacker’s face. I’m jealous that he has such a loyal friend, someone that comes straight to him when he calls. I throw a stick into the sky and Columbo fetches it. I throw another small branch as far as I can, and the dog brings it back in moments. I pat him, and secure his lead before we head out of the park towards the sweet shop.

‘How far d’you think he’d come, if you called him?’ I ask.

‘As far as you like.’ Wacker answers.

‘All the way across the world?’

‘The end of the street, maybe.’

‘You okay Whacker.’ I ask.

‘Sure. Fuck Rahman.’ He curses, and we do a high five.

‘Hold on to him tightly, until I call.’ Wacker pats Columbo then runs down the street to the sweet shop, a good hundred metres away. He holds up his arm waving, and I feel Columbo pulling at the leash, his claws scratching the pavement desperate to be with his master. When he starts barking, I let him go. He races down the pavement, ears pinned back, tongue hanging out. He’s possessed with the scent of Wacker. His legs stretch out, head down, and when a removal van pulls out of a siding it blocks his view. Columbo dodges the van, drifts across the street searching for his master.

He’s in the middle of the road when the Volvo hits him. There’s a skidding of tyres, then a dull thud, and a terrible yelping noise. A loud whining doesn’t last long, before the silence is haunting.

The driver inspects his paintwork, and kneels down to look closely at the bumper. I stare at Columbo laid out on the tarmac, like a cut out dog, flat and lifeless. A small crowd gathers, open mouthed, a woman in a track suit, a man with a bicycle and an old couple holding hands. Columbo's right eye gazes at me, frozen, like he knew it would happen. I go to stroke his soft fur, but my hand stops. I look away and smell burnt rubber. Wacker is kneeling by his dog now, crying. The driver tries to comfort him, fetches an old blanket from the boot to wrap Columbo in. I help him carefully lift the dog on to the back seat of the car.

'Where d'you live?' The man asks.

Wacker mumbles his address and the man holds the passenger door open.

'Is your friend coming?'

Wakeford stares at me, shrugs his shoulders and looks away. The man closes the door and walks round to the driver's side. I watch the car pull away slowly, driving down the long straight road, past the pub and the new houses alongside the river until it's gone.

Mum finds me crying in the bedroom and I tell her what happened. She tries to comfort me, and the next morning she tells me to join her in the kitchen. There's a bouquet of flowers and a label with a pen. I sit there for ages and all I can write is, 'Sorry, Wacker. Sparky.'

It's a detached house near the river with large gates. We walk there, as it's Saturday and Mum wants some exercise. We open the black gates and tread lightly on the gravel. The doorbell is in the centre of a carved piece of wood, and when Mum presses it, church bells chime inside the house. The door opens and Wacker's mother takes the flowers, but she doesn't invite us in. I can see him just behind her in the kitchen but he turns away. We walk back slowly in the drizzle, and I take deep breaths, upset that our friendship is over. As we round the corner of our street,

Mum looks up.

'Your Dad's van's here.'

I can see the red transit parked outside the bungalow, and I start to sprint down the street, running as fast as I can.

Tan and Brown, MJ Lehr

At midnight I'll be seventeen. There are cases of beer in the trunk of the car and some glass handles of vodka, and there are cigarettes for when after we're drunk. We're drinking already. The night blurs by outside the car windows. Peyton lives in the nice neighborhood a town or two over and his parents are gone to an all-night cocktail party. We later know these parties involve all the same things we want except for they have cocaine and filthiness and we do not know how to go about either just yet.

It is summer in the Midwest. Hyde is in a t-shirt and shorts and has a thin chain around his smooth, tan neck. Surrounding him is everyone else from my memories, all the young people who my life was made up of.

It's a big open room and we center around a granite countertop with the warm vodka in plastic red cups and the warm cans of beer. Hyde can't start drinking yet, so he and I aren't ready to talk, but then it turns ten o'clock and he pulls out a big plastic Ziplock with a landline in it, one with rubber buttons and a long antenna, and he dials into the station and blows into a plastic tube sticking out the bottom and it beeps and records his BAC as 0.0. Then he begins catching up. I watch him. His skin is so tan and brown ever since he's come back up from Florida. The music is going and the girls are loud and we're all loosened up within the big open kitchen of Peyton's house. I watch Hyde go and sit with Jessica for a while and I know that they are imagining each other without clothes on. I'm sure of it.

Outside in the driveway, the Midwest summer night is black and clear with its stars and moon, and the cigarettes burn on and our loud teenage voices go up above the tops of the dark trees, and when I hit the joint going around I cede all control to the night ahead. Inside, Jessica is beautiful and laid out on the couch and there is vomit all over her and all over the fine leather of the

couch. It has pooled on the tiled floor beneath her. Someone is trying to clean it up. The party stirs into confusion. There are people upstairs and downstairs and everyone is fooling around while I sit there numb and smiley.

I feel Hyde's grip on my shoulders and we're moving toward the door. I'm being guided away. His arm is around me once we're outside and then we're getting into someone's car, not either of ours, and his shorts are riding up his tan thighs as he sits behind the wheel and puts whoever's car we're in into reverse. Then we're driving away, past the big landscaped yards and the pairs of beaming headlights going the other direction.

We stumble into his house. His parents are gone also. We take their beer. We go down to the couch in his basement to lay out and proceed to do what we have no idea how to do, none at all, and what we never got the chance to figure out, but we work out some version of it nonetheless and the rush of blood to the temples and the veins and all over the body is enough to make me go insane and dream of it forever after.

Then we just sit there, in shame and silence and all sorts of internal rationale until we decide to see who can get the drunkest.

In the morning I'm seventeen. We wake up in our boxers to the footsteps upstairs and we look at each other feeling awful and dirty. We scramble to get dressed, and when the footsteps die I go out and get into whoever's car is in the driveway and I take it back to Peyton's. It's early, just after light, and the day is quiet and gray with a little rain. No music, just the sound of the windshield wipers against the glass. I have no good thoughts. There is a dark feeling churning around inside of me.

The cars are all still in the driveway and lining the street. Peyton's parents never made it home. We know now they probably got a fancy hotel room to fool around with another set of parents or something like that. The front door is open. My friends are

couch. It has pooled on the tiled floor beneath her. Someone is trying to clean it up. The party stirs into confusion. There are people upstairs and downstairs and everyone is fooling around while I sit there numb and smiley.

I feel Hyde's grip on my shoulders and we're moving toward the door. I'm being guided away. His arm is around me once we're outside and then we're getting into someone's car, not either of ours, and his shorts are riding up his tan thighs as he sits behind the wheel and puts whoever's car we're in into reverse. Then we're driving away, past the big landscaped yards and the pairs of beaming headlights going the other direction.

We stumble into his house. His parents are gone also. We take their beer. We go down to the couch in his basement to lay out and proceed to do what we have no idea how to do, none at all, and what we never got the chance to figure out, but we work out some version of it nonetheless and the rush of blood to the temples and the veins and all over the body is enough to make me go insane and dream of it forever after.

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friends are passed out everywhere, the couch and the floor and the bedrooms, and I sit down at the granite countertop. The alcohol is all gone. Hopefully everyone will get together to drink again tonight. It gives me a warm, peaceful feeling to think that we all might get things going again tonight.

Many years later and I'm far away from there. It is summer in the East, and the Eastern summer night is black and clear with its stars and moon, and the cigarettes burn along and our deep male voices cast out over the water. The pier is otherwise empty and the Atlantic is black and still. It's the time of night I now prefer. Nobody else is around and the city sits massive and quiet. I still can't figure out how to pronounce this guy's name. Despite his being American he's what everyone from before would've called a wetback or a spic. At some previous point in the night he and I must have read it in each other's eyes and ended up where we are now, alone on the pier.

I follow him over the uneven bricks of the wharf, down a few steps and up to a soapstone bar top where we drink ferociously as the bartender prepares for close. When we're asked to leave he pays in cash and I follow him back outside and over toward the Wharf Hotel, and on the way we dip our pinkies into the remainder of his eight-ball until I'm gritting my molars and feeling my heart double-dutch. We go into the hotel bar and I watch the muscles contract on his tan, stubbled neck every time he takes a drink.

He's a little older than me. His eyes are deep and brown. It's implied that I'll be following him up to his hotel room where we'll carry on getting yakked and give a try at what I never had the chance to learn how to do but dream about doing always. He arranges to pay the bartender and I excuse myself to the restroom of the hotel lobby. The steps of my sneakers are loud on the granite floors. I pass the restroom and exit through the revolving hotel door and I take off running into the familiar brick-

-and-concrete world that I've been hiding in for years. It's another shameful, frustrated dead-end.

And in the morning it's Tuesday and it doesn't matter how old I am anymore. I've locked myself in the office stall and am vomiting up little fistfuls of yellow bile, and when I'm done and looking at myself in the mirror there are beads of sweat rolling down from my hairline and into my bloodshot eyes. Once the sickness is worked out of my body, there is just a dark feeling churning around inside of me. I try not to think of that young American man here on business, of what could have been a real experience in my uneventful and imaginative life. Perhaps I'll slip away somewhere this evening and think about things over a drink. It gives me a warm, peaceful feeling to think about slipping away for a drink later.

Sometime down the line and I'm drinking instant coffee, sitting on the steps of Child of God's Church and watching the cars pass. I feel good, lean and healthy. Irish Paddy is sitting next to me. He's told me some version of this before. He tells me every time I see. It helps him to hear it out loud, I think.

"I came in with a buddy of mine," he says. "We was a wreck together. Maniacs. It'd be days later and we'd be in some blighted house rippin' the doors off their hinges and burnin' em up fer kindlin', that kind of a thing. But he stuck with it," he says. "Twenty years he stuck with it. You see the guy with a family and some money tucked away and a real life, and me, you look at him then you look at me, and it's a sad thing. Not anythin worth comparin' at all."

And it is around this time that I start to think about finding myself a woman, about how emotional and soft - how lovely - it all could be. I'll get to work on trying to shelf the past. I was going hard, after all. I just wasn't thinking straight. If I can just move on and stay clean, maybe I'll start to see a path roll out ahead of me. I need something to follow is all, something to look forward to.

Burned, Jo Bardsley

The horizon is burning. I can see it from the top of the monkey bars where I am sitting in the cool darkness. Our house is on the edge of town, past the oval, past the shops. Nothing in between us and the desert except a road and a drainage ditch where we find bits of broken wood left from when they built the houses. Our house was only built last year, someone wrote 1981 in the concrete floor of the car port. There are skinks in the ditch, and sometimes goannas and once there was a snake. When the last cyclone came through, the ditch overflowed with red, rushing water and us and the next door kids went swimming in it and both lots of parents got mad. We got hit. They got grounded. I'd rather be hit.

We sneak out to the monkey bars all the time. On Friday nights I can almost see the drive-in screen and I can hear the rumbles of the people talking. Screams come through clearly, though, I can even hear them in my bedroom. I like those screams, the ones that are just pretend.

Real screams are different. In pretend, people just make big, open mouthed noises, like grown up babies. But in real life, screams are words. And they're almost always bad words like *bitch* or *fuck* or a string of bad words like *get the fuck out of my face bitch*. Tonight there is no film on at the drive-in and our house is full of real screams. Rach and I are sitting on the monkey bars watching the horizon burn.

Do you reckon the fire gonna come this way? I ask *Nah*, says Rach. She licks her finger and holds it up, nail to the fire, belly of the finger towards us. *Wind's blowing away from town. We'll be right.*

What would happen if it came this way? Would we die?

Nah. We'd see it coming.

Inside the screaming ramps up until there is a big crash.

Maybe someone fell into the coffee table or something, because it all goes a bit quieter.

I'm scared, I say.

Rach glances at the house and back at me.

Of the fire, I say. We both know there is no point having any feelings about what is happening in the house.

You know, she says, *the bush needs the fire. The seeds can't grow unless they've been burned. It's what makes them pop open.*

So the fire is a good thing?

Yep.

I try to be comforted.

When we wake up, Mum is wearing sunglasses indoors. She is loading stubbies and snags into a blue cool box. I know the makings of a barbecue when I see one. Dad comes up behind her and slings his freckly arm around her neck. He pulls her head towards his mouth and kisses her forehead above the glasses. I think that they must be okay if they are kissing.

Come on kids, we're going to Python Pool, says Dad. *We need a break.* He loads us up into the brown Toyota and threatens to leave us behind if we don't stop arguing about who has to sit in the sun patch. I consider this. If I get left behind, I can go to Glen's house and his mum will let us make spiders, dunking ice cream into coke until the whole thing froths over the top. But Glen's dad is meaner than mine and I am a bit afraid of Glen's dad's dog. Plus there is a barbie. So I shut up and lay a towel over the burning leather seat and we rattle over the cattle grid and on to the dirt road out of town.

The dirt road is boring. We bounce around too much to read a comic. Glen's dad has a cassette player in his car, I wish we had one. We are too far out of Karatha to pick up music on the radio. We have a CB radio, with the triangle mouth piece and the curly lead. It's fun to listen to the mine guys and the truck guys

talking code, but it's Dad's day off, so the radio is off too. Dad starts to sing. It's one of Mum's favourites, by the Beach Boys. He turns in his seat to make sure we are singing too. He sings some of the bits in a high, silly voice.

Mum lights a cigarette. There is no point asking her to roll the windows down, she hates the sound of wind in open car windows. She doesn't sing.

Come on, love, says Dad, you know you're my little Douce Coup. Mum's mouth opens and closes but I don't hear anything. She rests her hand on the window sill. The cigarette smoke curls up until the air vent catches it and blows it back at us.

We drive between the towering red hills and lumps of spinafex grass. The horizon is a silvery blur in the hot desert sun. Last time it rained we drove this way and there were big puddles and the water came up either side of the Toyota like wings. Even though I know it hasn't rained for months, I keep hoping that the shining patches up there, way up there ahead on the road are puddles. They aren't.

Dad has one arm on the window sill, he is steering with a finger and thumb. The rear vision mirror shows his eyes as he looks at Mum's legs. I see his hand reach out and he puts it high on Mum's thigh. She takes a drag on her cigarette and blows the smoke at the roof.

And then the horizon goes weird. It's dark, and instead of staying way out there, it's coming closer. It's not until we are right up on it that I realise what has happened. We've driven to the place that was on fire last night.

Dad stops the car and we get out, moving slowly. The heat hits hard and fast. There isn't much smoke, just wisps from some of the blackened lumps of spinafex. The fire smell is dusty and old already. Rach walks ahead of me, her thongs flick a black line up her calves and throw out puffs of ash either side of her feet when they land. My own footsteps are crunchier than usual. I hadn't realised how much life there was between dirt and

pebbles until it all got burned away. What's left is brittle and hollow. I bend down to touch a burned rock and my fingers come away covered in thick, black soot.

Mum is still sitting in the car. She's sitting sideways in the open door of the car, heels on the metal frame, elbows on her knees, her cigarette dangling.

Look at this, Dad says. At first I think it's a stick, but it's the blackened body of a snake. Rach crunches over to poke at it. I glance back at Mum. Her face is pointing towards us but she isn't looking at us at all. I realise that her face hasn't moved all morning underneath those big, black glasses. She blows smoke out of her mouth and the sound is just as dry and dead as the burned up desert.

Rach has found something else to poke at. I take a few steps forward, feeling the soft flick of ash against the back of my legs. It is a black heap. Rach pulls at it and I see a clawed foot and a wing. It is a bird, a burned bird.

Mum is out of the car now. She moves carefully, but still ash puffs up from her footfalls. Her toes are grey. She steps out into the road and raises one hand to shade her eyes. She is looking south. Perth is that way, but it takes four days to get there.

Come on, says Dad, *that barbie isn't going to cook itself. Let's get moving.*

Rach starts walking towards the car. I go back round to the sun side. I'm careful when I pick up the seatbelt, the metal has been in the sun. It will burn me if I touch it. I want to know if Rach has noticed where Mum is looking, if she's noticed that Mum's face hasn't moved, but Rach has her face turned away from me as well.

Mum is still standing, looking down that long, empty road. For a second, I think she will run, she will stretch her long legs out and pound down the road, flicking up dirt and ash. But where would she go? There aren't even any trees out here. There are just the red mountains and the burned up scrub.

I look down at the bumps of burned spinafex grass beside the car, trying to see if there are any seeds that have popped open, perhaps they are already sprouting something new. No. Everything is dry and dead. Nothing could grow here, no matter what Rach says.

Come on, love, Dad says, get in the car. I can't see his face, but his voice sounds high and thin. I wonder what he would do if she did take off running.

A sudden quick wind chucks a handful of dirt against the car. We hear it patter. It must sting Mum's legs because she throws herself into the car and slams the door hard enough to shake us. Dad starts the motor and we carry on driving through the burned up desert.

Someone with Something to Say, Lucy Grace

Although I cannot remember the details of last night, I am thrilled at your choice of me. My clothes smell of crushed grass and diesel generator fumes cling to my hair. There is a blue spider on my wrist and it crawls as though under my skin, an arachnoid tattoo. Was I drunk? Flapping canvas, the pain of a needle. I rub the spider with my fingers but it remains, balanced on my tightrope veins.

‘Lie with me.’

Your breath is last night’s stale ale, soured and wet.

Afterwards I rise carefully from the edge of your pit, barely disturbing the air in the stinking caravan. You roll away, pretty boy quiff broken against the pillow, skinny limbs splayed, a pleasing murder victim. Inked pictures of your life slide around beneath the thin sheen of sweat on your skin.

You are beautiful.

On the dirty floor I find my sister’s new knee length skirt and good blouse and I dress hurriedly, regardless of the torn lining and missing button. I can mend it secretly, at home. I step over black puddles of your sticky clothes, staining, and leave you lying in your trailer.

Later, pouring milk into my father’s morning coffee, shoes still dew wet, I pull down my left sleeve for secrecy.

‘Stayed late in the library,’ I say. ‘Pressing deadlines,’ I add.
He does not look up.
He can smell me.

The following day you search for me but I am not amongst the orange girls with stiff plasticked hair. I walk past the field and you pull me in, pour me vodka, take me to bed. When you are outside in the light your tattoos recede, nocturnal beasties sliding up your shirtsleeves, but when we are alone they come alive to nudge and rub against my clean, pale skin. I notice a spider-shaped absence on your forearm, a crater of nothing, crowded by tattoo creatures overlooking the edge. I haven't seen this space before, but then there is much of you I have not yet seen. My own inked wrist has not scabbed and I rub it; how did I get a tattoo? I feel too stupid to ask. I am interested in myself, being marked – my father always said it would hinder my employment chances - but you have a job, don't you?

I wake struggling to breathe. Your arm is heavy across my throat. As I drag it away my fingers catch on cold snakes coiled around my breasts, their opened mouths proffering fangs: poised above my nipples they are ready to strike. My head reels at the sight of you, lying face down. I admire the clean reptilian bumps along your long spine and imagine running my tongue over them. I leave before you wake.

My father places two fried eggs in front of me, greasily swimming on the sea-blue plate. With one hand I fasten my shirt button tightly against my neck, to prevent escape, and realise that I have never seen your spine-skin clear of its tattooed snakes.

'Your mother and I, well...we're just a little worried about you, Alice.'

I am aware my father is speaking but I am having a hard time with the viscous strands of egg stretching from my fork tines. I swallow down sour vomit.

'You've always been a grade A student, always been keen to finish college and get a job, but just lately...you seem to be, kind of...uh, different.'

I look hard at my father. He knows fuck all about me.

‘Your mother and I aren’t meaning to pry, Alice, but it’s fair to say that we are a little worried.’

Now he is sweating. Balls of liquid pop out on his forehead like pimples.

‘Your clothes are changing, your attitude is changing, your habits are changing – I mean, look at you – the sun is shining and you’re hiding every inch of your skin. We’ve hardly seen you this summer, not since you started hanging around that boy from the circus. You’re not, you know...harming yourself, are you?’

‘Finished?’

I push back my chair and leave the kitchen. The eggs and my father watch me go.

I meet you at your trailer for a morning drink. You seem cleaner, somehow. An air of grime usually accompanies you but today I smell soap and your hair smoothed. I, on the other hand, am wearing clothes from several days ago, including underwear. I can smell the sticking smell of my own animal body and it pleases me. Let me be, I think, let me be who I really am.

After fierce afternoon sex I lie with my head at your feet. You are asleep. I am kept company by a koi carp - marvellously coloured, it swims around your calf and I watch it circle away through turquoise weeds. Bright scales catch under my fingernails as it swims down my inner thigh in shades of periwinkle and orange, twisting tightly. I stand up in front of your mirror. My whole left buttock is bruised navy and green, stained with pondweed growing from the back of my knee. The carp mocks me with its single fishy eye. I feel afraid to touch it – maybe it has teeth – and I reach for my clothes. Aware that it might not like the dark I leave my black tights on the carpet like empty snakes and skip down the shallow steps in bare legs. Summer is ending. Hunched over the bar I am tearing open sugar packets with broken fingernails. My teeth have stripped the skin from my finger ends, and occasionally I suck the blood oozing from the edges. I wait for you. You are late.

‘At last. Where the hell have you been?’

‘Easy, tiger, I’m only five minutes late.’

My aggression for him is new. I watch him run a clean, short fingernail around his white collar before he sweeps away the sugar pyramids with a napkin.

‘Hey, don’t.’

A few white grains remain, and as he leans forward to blow them tidily away I inhale his clean hair smell and wrinkle my nose.

‘So, I ask, do you want a drink now you’re finally here?’

‘Well, I have work later, you know, I don’t want to drink in the daytime...’

I stare at him incredulously.

‘Since when did you join AA?’ I asked. ‘You work in a tent, for fuck’s sake.’

‘Yeah, Alice, well, that’s kind of why I’m late. I’ve been for a job interview, and, well, I got it!’

‘Con-grat-ul-a-tions,’ I drawl, pulling out each syllable like a broken finger joint. ‘Well. Done. You.’

‘So - aren’t you going to ask me what it is?’

‘What is it?’

As I ask, I feel my scalp prickle and a sharp pain spread from my temple to browbone.

‘It’s at the bank – you know, the bank on the square?’

‘The bank? Here? My father’s bank? The fucking bank?’

The pain on my forehead grows sharper and I press my fingers into my eyes, sending everything black. I am reversed, a petulant child.

‘But I wanted that! After college. You’re not the sort to settle for a shitty desk. Why didn’t you tell me you were looking for a job? In fact, why didn’t my own fucking father tell me?’

‘Uh, Alice, it’s counter staff, you know, up front. Public.’

‘Yeah? And? Fuck, man!’

‘Well, you’ve got to look...you know. Presentable.’

‘No, I don’t think I DO know, Matt. Explain it to me.’

I speak dangerously. People nearby exchange glances.

‘Ah, come on, Alice, you know. It’s the... well, it’s your tattoos, I suppose.’

‘MY tattoos? What’s that got to do with anything? Hell, you’ve tattoos! You’ve tattoos everywhere! I know: I see them when we’re fucking!’

A woman at the side of us coughs and pulls her drink closer.

‘It’s one thing having one or two, Alice, but you’ve got them all over now. Where people can see them. And that’s probably okay, you know, for most jobs, but your ink? It’s just too visible for some folk to see past. It kind of tells people about you without you saying anything.’

I look at the boy next to me. Gone are the black clothes, filmy sweat, greasy hair, the circus of pricked creatures playing and rolling across your skin. Your tattoos are gone – where are your tattoos gone? You are healthy and clean, well-fed and rested: a perfect son-in-law. I shake my head. You look like someone with something to say.

‘Uh, there is something I wanted to say, Alice—’

But your attention is taken by another girl. I watch as she lightly passes us in soft peachy ballet flats. Her swinging hair gives the impression of a foal. She is all legs and ponytail.

‘Hi, Matthew!’

She smiles and waves.

‘Matthew?’ I spit, talking to the side of your head as you watch her perfect behind in her perfect jeans. ‘Who the fuck is Matthew? Your name is Matt – nobody calls you Matthew!’

‘Annabelle does,’ you reply quietly.

I cannot speak. I suddenly realise what it is that you wanted to say and I reel. Unwilling to hear your words I stumble from the bar and head to the bathrooms.

Hot tears sting and I bunch my fists to screw at my eyes. I look at myself in the spotted mirror. Amidst the specks and lipstick

smears on the glass I notice marks on my cheeks. The roots of my hair are greasy and my pupils tiny. Christ, what happened to me? A bluish vein on my neck appears to slide around and move, as if seeking the light, but when I clutch at the neck of my jacket it disappears. I rub at the dirt on my cheeks but it won't even smudge – what is that stuff? It looks black-bluish too, but not like a bruise, more defined: a tiny petal or baby's fingernail. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand; snot slimes across my face, and then I realise. The tears on my cheek are outlined and burn into my skin, branding this version of me. Frantically I scrub at them with my fingers, scratching bloody lines but it makes no difference: the inked tears stay. And there in the blue light from the painted bulb - coloured that way so that addicts can't see their veins and use the place as a shooting gallery - all the creatures come out to play, roaring and rolling over my skin, filling the spaces and covering the old me with painted scales until I am almost rubbed out. I bite my lip and know that I do not have long.

Back in the bar, Matt has gone. At a neighbouring table a boy is opening a book. He is blond - clean and new. Easy. Necessary. I walk over, swinging my hips in just the right way, smiling a lazy smile and pulling up a chair.

'Hey.'

The boy looks up. His eyes widen and I see a flash of his desire as I cross my bare legs.

'Want to drink? I always drink before I smoke.'

To clinch the deal I pull a joint out of my tobacco packet. The threesome of sex, alcohol and drugs is too much for this new boy to resist – I can already hear him describing me to his friends.

'Uh, yeah, sure,' he replies.

He doesn't feel cool enough to date someone like me. He is confused and begins to stutter.

'Uh, would you like to sit here? You can sit here. I haven't

seen you here before. Are you from here? From the college, I mean, not from the bar...'

I look at the boy – he'll sleep with me.

'No, I'm with the circus, I reply. An acrobat, sequins, tattoos. Wanna see?'

He nods, willing.

'Get your coat then, boy,' I say, picking up my bag before it is too late. 'I know somewhere we can go.'

Conkers, Jane Batkin

The boy half crouched at the edge of the clearing, where the brown, claggy earth met the rocks. He had been there all morning, watching them, his grey tee shirt jutting out like a dead tooth against the black shadows, his face pale.

Clay hadn't told anyone about him yet.

He thought he had come from the caravan park across the woods. 'Scraps', his father called them, saying they didn't belong there, or anywhere. The boy looked like a scrap of something alright, half-formed and stick thin.

'Hold still,' Dyl said to Charlie; his voice snapping the boy's head up. Charlie murmured something as he held the string and let his conker dangle on the end. Clay watched it quiver like a live thing.

'Fuckssake, *hold still*,' Dyl snarled because the conker looked as though it was trying to get away. Charlie frowned as he willed it to stop moving and when he glanced at Clay, Clay signaled to him by pulling in a big gulp of air. You didn't breathe if you wanted to keep your conker still. And when Dyl played, you'd better keep it still.

Charlie inhaled and the conker stopped quivering.

All eyes were on the game. A flicker of wind came upon the boys and Dyl's eyes narrowed as he leaned in. The string didn't move.

The moment stretched out forever and Clay heard his heart pounding in his ears. He wondered if the boy was still there, watching them with black hollow eyes and a face like a ghost.

The breeze stopped, and the boys stood frozen like cut outs.

Then...

Dyl's conker sliced through the air with a blur with a terrific *crack*. The silence was shattered, first by the impact, and second

by the ear-piercing scream that followed.

'You hit me, you hit me!' Charlie squealed, dropping the string and wagging his fingers in the air. He hopped from foot to foot, until Dyl seized his hand and held it steady and all the boys leaned in. The skin across his knuckles was an angry red.

'That'll teach you,' Dyl laughed, and the other boys hesitated for a second, staring at the welt on Charlie's hand and his tear-streaked face. One of them laughed uncertainly and then the others joined in, like a pack of hyenas. It was safer to laugh than not. Clay caught Charlie's eye and gave a slight shake of his head and Charlie bit his lip and stopped his tears.

'Who's next?' Dyl asked, swinging his conker back and forth in the thick air. No one made eye contact with him. 'Losers,' he muttered and broke the circle, still swinging as he walked away.

They stepped aside and crowded back in to marvel over Charlie's hand.

'Is it broke?'

'Wiggle your fingers.'

'I heard the bones crack.'

'He done it on purpose.'

Clay watched Dyl walk over the chalky ground towards the edge of the reservoir, his trainers scuffing up dirt. He didn't look back, he never did. Tomorrow it would be someone else's conker and hand. Clay turned to the outcrop of rocks. The scraps boy had gone.

Dinner was the same as the night before. His dad dished up and sat down; the light bounced off his bald head and made it shine.

'What you get up to today?' he asked, taking a gulp of tea.

'Went down the reservoir with the lads,' Clay replied.

'Be careful down there.'

Clay rolled his eyes as he cut his sausage into pieces.

'Some of the kids use that place for drugs,' his dad remarked.

'There's no other place to hang out round here,' Clay muttered.

‘What about the park?’

‘That’s for babies.’

His dad looked at him for a moment, a forkful of beans halfway to his mouth. It was like he was trying to think of something to say.

The beans shimmered in the air, sauce dripping onto the plate.

‘We like playing conkers,’ Clay said.

His dad pushed the beans into his mouth. ‘Two weeks till school,’ he mumbled with his mouth full. ‘Then you’ll have a routine.’

His dad couldn’t wait for school; it would mean Clay was finally out of his hair.

‘Till then, stay away from the reservoir, I don’t want you coming across those people.’

Clay thought of the boy in the crag of rocks.

‘They should be moved on.’ His dad bit into a piece of over-cooked sausage and began chewing, his jaw moving back and forth.

Clay said nothing. He felt the space between them stretch out, and he thought that if his mum was here, she would have filled it with something, and they wouldn’t have been eating sausages again.

Tuesday was hotter. It felt like summer was never going to end. When Clay thought about school there was a gnawing knot in his belly, because he wasn’t going to the local comp with the others. His new school was a bus ride away. He smeared toast with peanut butter and wished he could talk to his dad about it, but there wasn’t much chance of that.

Clay wiped his mouth on his sleeve and moved to the sink to slosh water over his plate and dropped it onto the draining board where it clattered loudly. Music came pumping through the wall, drum and bass. He bet the teenage boy who lived there didn’t have to wash up.

‘Fuckssake’, Clay said loudly and then said it again, liking the way the word bounced around the empty walls. The boy next door turned his music up.

Dyl was in a vicious mood. He came across the dirt scowling and the game was brutal. Three boys got hurt; one had his knuckles split open. Everyone knew that Dyl froze his conker, but no one said anything.

‘Bunch of losers,’ he snarled and spat at the ground. He looked like he had been crying; his face was red and blotchy. But when Dyl glanced at him, Clay’s gaze slid down to where the spit fizzed in the dirt.

He was glad that Dyl wouldn’t be going to his new school. The sense of relief that he wouldn’t have to share space with this boy was suddenly overwhelming. Then, just when it seemed the game was done, someone said

‘There’s a kid.’

Clay felt his stomach twist. He glanced up and saw the boys pointing to the rocks. Dyl’s eyes narrowed.

‘There’s no one there.’

‘He’s hid.’ It was Charlie, stupid Charlie who had cried the day before over his battered fingers. Clay willed him to shut up, but Charlie wasn’t looking at him and now Dyl was interested.

‘It’s no one, it’s just a scrap,’ Clay said dismissively.

‘A scrap?’

Clay shrugged, wishing he’d said nothing.

The other boys were jittery, shuffling about, jostling each other. This time they all made eye contact with Dyl.

‘Get him,’ he said, and they bounded away.

They were all cowards, Clay thought, as he watched them go.

The boy scrambled away, his face a flash of fear, and Clay thought he was going to make it, right up until he fell, and then

they were on him. They held him fast and brought him across the wasteland. He was skinny and small, and his tee shirt hung off him like a dress.

Clay looked at the boy's blank expression. He was trying to hide his fear.

'He's a scrap alright,' Dyl laughed and pushed him. 'You from the caravans, ain't ya?' he taunted.

The boy said nothing, just jutted out his jaw.

'Dirty little thing, what you doin' here? You're not allowed out here.' Dyl's voice had a hard edge to it.

The boy glanced at Clay, then back at Dyl. His eyes flashed with defiance.

'I can go where I want,' he said.

The others froze, their eyes darting between the stranger and their leader.

'No, you can't,' Dyl's voice was ice. 'You need to get back to your caravan before you get hurt'.

'Who's gonna make me,' the boy replied, and everything went quiet.

Clay held his breath, and all the boys did the same. All except Dyl, who was breathing rapidly, his teeth gritted together. Clay saw his fists bunch up, he was going to pummel the kid, and Clay shook his head at the boy to stop him talking, but the boy didn't see.

'Didn't you hear about what one of them did?' Charlie blurted. Dyl froze, his fist drawn back, ready to fly. There was something in his eyes, Clay thought, that wanted Charlie not to say it.

'What happened?' someone squeaked.

'One of them did something to a girl in the park.'

'Dirty bastard.'

'Let's beat him up'.

'Hit him, Dyl.'

The boys were united in their thirst for blood. Their eyes

danced between Dyl and the scrap, who was too small to make this a fair fight. One of them pushed him, another landed a kick on his shin, and he hopped about, his face taut with pain.

Dyl seemed to contemplate his next move. He flexed his fingers and Clay wondered if even he realized how unfair this was.

Clay felt a trickle of sweat down the back of his tee shirt. He exhaled slowly.

‘Let him play,’ he said.

Everyone turned to stare at him.

‘What,’ Charlie said.

‘Let him play Dyl. One game.’

‘C’mon, we know Dyl will win,’ Charlie complained loudly, and Clay wanted to slap him. He shot him a dark look and Charlie was silent.

Dyl cocked his head, first at Clay and then at the kid. And then he smiled, and his eyes looked dead.

‘One game. If he wins, he gets to walk away,’ Dyl announced.

‘And if he doesn’t?’

Dyl shrugged as if he didn’t care. But they all knew.

The conkers hung in the air. The breeze had dropped away and left a stagnant weight to the afternoon. The boys stood like statues, waiting for the final act. Clay knew that if the kid made a run for it, they would be on him.

‘Hold still,’ said Dyl, who would go first. His conker shone like a stone on the end of its rope.

Scraps held the other, the one that Clay had loaned him from his pocket, until it stopped swaying. His hands were still, even though his fingernails were chewed down to the quick. He placed his free hand on his tee shirt, over his heart. His dark eyes flickered over to Clay. Clay looked down.

Dyl lifted his conker backwards. His eyes were almost closed and, in the moment that passed, Clay wondered if his

blotchy face had something to do with the story about the girl in the park and what he might have done. He closed his eyes.

And heard it.

Thwack! The boys all gasped and Clay squinted. His loaned conker held fast.

They both steadied them a second time and Dyl lifted his conker back until the string was taut. His cheeks were scarlet, and he was scowling.

Thwack.

The conker had cracked slightly where the rope dug in. But still it held. Scraps cradled his fingers for just a moment, where Dyl's conker had made contact. The pain would be extraordinary.

The third time, Clay kept his eyes open, unable to look away. It didn't break.

The gang gasped audibly and Dyl's eyes widened. He knew it then. Without taking Clay's conker from the kid, he knew. He glanced at Clay, with a look of disbelief, rather than fury. Clay held his gaze steadily, his heart hammering.

A flick of breeze lifted his tee shirt at the back, and he remembered to breathe.

The scraps kid was grinning, his fingers wrapped around the frozen core of that conker. They would both need to be ready to run, Clay realised.

Dyl showed no recognition of what Clay had done. He simply held his conker steady as Scraps readied himself to strike.

And they waited.

Uncle Dave was a raconteur,

Robyn Jefferson

The pigeon had a broken wing.

I don't remember now if the genesis of the injury had originally been part of Uncle Dave's telling. So let's say the story started there; the pigeon hopping in the yard, broken wing held stiffly out from its little grey body.

My Uncle Dave was a raconteur. I didn't know him well, because I was a child and he was never friendly to children. He wasn't particularly friendly to anyone. Irascible and recalcitrant, always, except for when he was telling a story, and then his voice rose and his face opened up, hands spreading wide and wild as if to encompass the room, all of us, the world. His real gift was for humour – the dryness that made him so unapproachable almost all of the time reconfiguring itself then into a poker face and acerbic wit that could level an audience faster than machine gun fire. Tears streaming, arms clutched to stomachs, helpless cries alternating: *stop, please, or no, go on.*

The pigeon had a broken wing, he said. He'd wanted to do it a kindness, to put it out of its misery. He'd always been fonder of animals than people – this wasn't a part of the story as he'd told it, but something I remembered well. Back then he had a Dalmatian named Jack and when the rest of the family gathered he would often take part only at a distance, walking upright across faraway fields with the old half-blind dog loping along at his side. One time the dog had wandered into an electric fence and Uncle Dave had fallen down a hill and into a bramble patch trying to rescue him; another story that had had us all roaring, although not the one I'm telling now.

The pigeon had a broken wing and he'd wanted to put it out of its misery, so he'd gone inside to get his gun. He'd always had

guns, according to my mother; once, she said, there'd been some kind of national amnesty, where anyone with guns could give them up to the police and not get into trouble, and Uncle Dave had had so many that practically an entire SAS unit had rolled up to collect them. This too is a funny story; she laughs when she tells it.

Evidently he'd not renounced all of his guns, though, because when he'd seen the bird it was years later and there'd been one to hand.

Only when it had come right down to it his nerve had failed him. He was a physical storyteller and here he'd mime the way he'd aimed the weapon at the pigeon: his right arm up and extended in front of him with his fingers tight on the imaginary grip, his head turned away with his left arm across his face to hide his eyes. By this point, people would already be laughing. In anticipation of what came next, perhaps, or because of his slapstick mannerisms. He was funny in the way that John Cleese was funny, playing Basil Fawlty; a tall, scarecrow man, tightly restrained, until up and out his limbs would fly in spasmodic sweeps and jerks. Comedy, like horror, is tension drawn out past breaking point, the release when it finally snaps. What belongs to one can belong easily to the other; perhaps it's only a matter of perspective. For example – I laugh when my mother tells me the story about the panicked police squadron crowding into the house to disarm my Uncle Dave, and then later, when I weigh the elements of the story – a national amnesty, newly illegal guns, myself so young that I have no memory of it – it occurs to me to think, oh, of course, Dunblane.

He'd wanted to put the bird out of its misery, but he couldn't meet its gaze when he aimed the gun. It was early in the morning, he was hungover – all of my father's siblings had problems with drink. He'd covered his eyes and pulled the trigger. The punchline of the story was this, his voice suddenly loud, his arm falling away from his face to reveal his ever-present poker face: he'd only gone and shot the fucking thing's beak off. Invariably, we all

fell about.

Your Uncle Dave never liked me, my mum said last week, and it was a shame, because I had a lot of time for him. More sinned against than sinning, he was. Well, I replied, he didn't seem to like anyone much. My mum agreed. Well, she repeated. Well – and then lapsed into silence, her eyes on the past. When she spoke again it was to say that it was Janet's fault, Janet that had taken him away from the pub where he'd been landlord, where he'd had good friends. Marion had been his wife and she'd caught Dave and Janet at it, see, sneaking around. She'd kicked him out, said Well, if that's really what you want, to stare into Janet's wine-soaked eyes for the rest of your life, go right ahead, don't let me stop you. And he had. Marion had kept the kids, and he'd gone off with Janet. Years later, when Janet had finally had enough of him, he'd moved into the caravan at the bottom of her garden, and that's where he'd stayed. Then he'd become Uncle Dave as I remember him, self-contained and alone with his old dog, quiet until he had a story to tell.

After the gunshot, Uncle Dave would wait out the laughter, anticipating the inevitable question: what happened next, what did you do? He was a master of the long pause. He spent so much of his life in silence that it had become his to command and control, leashed perpetually at his side like an obedient pet. When he chose to break it, he could make anyone laugh. I dropped a paving stone on it. It was that second punchline that would finish everyone off, every time. All in the delivery, so matter-of-fact. His eyes so dark they looked flat until he knew he had everyone exactly where he wanted them, and then, oh, how they'd twinkle.

My mum tells me that Janet had thought he might hurt her, when she threw him out on his ear. I drove over there in my car, my mum says. I didn't do anything, mind, I just sat at the wheel and kept an eye on things. But it was enough for him. He thought I was meddling. Repeats, he never liked me much, although

mostly that was on your dad's behalf. And when she tells me this I think: this is not a funny story. Janet thought he might hurt her; well, of course, he always had guns. All of it is new information to me. I square it away with the faint presence from my childhood, the quiet man, the raconteur. What else do I know? He'd been a sickly child; something to do with his organs. All of my father's siblings were funny. They'd had to be, perhaps. Their mother an alcoholic and their father a paedophile. Once my Uncle Dave had used dynamite to blow up concrete for a swimming pool and when it went off with a great big *whump* all the concrete had flown up in the air and then landed with comical neatness right back inside the hole he'd been trying to make. A pigeon with a broken wing and no beak, crushed to death by a paving stone.

Comedy and horror, kindness and cruelty. A two-sided coin, tossed high, never landing. Uncle Dave died last week, senile in a nursing home. My mother is sad when she hears about it. I always thought, she tells me, he was more sinned against than sinning.

In The Drink, Chris Williams

Jack had lost his job at Sports Direct for swearing at a teenager who'd thrown a burger bun at him and the last three months had been hard, with Chloe threatening to walk out and the landlord threatening to evict them. But now he was back on track. With the lido security job he'd really lucked out, his tiny white lie about being able to swim undetected.

He sat at the deserted poolside, gazing through a wall of safety glass at a sea that glistened pink and orange under the dying sky. Nestled between the foot of the cliff and the sea, the new lido had been billed as a community asset, although the community it served was pretty exclusive, given the prices.

He pushed these thoughts away and tried to chill. What would really help was a single malt, peaty and rich. He imagined the golden liquid caressing his palate as he toasted the sunset.

He slapped each ankle, to scare away his addictive self. His addictive self was not him, or so he'd learnt at the group. Don't beat yourself up, his sponsor Mandy would say. Take some deep breaths and concentrate on what's around you.

The lido was other-wordly: the water floodlit turquoise, the walls studded with soft yellow downlighters. The chalk cliffs glowed in the dusk as though light was imprisoned inside them. In the pool, something splashed. Jack sat up straight. Perhaps a seagull had dived in.

Another splash. He got to his feet and peered in.

The pool was empty, but ripples scarred the surface.

Mandy said she still had the odd craving, sent by her Higher Power to stop her from turning into a cocky old cow. Jack struggled with the Higher Power thing. You were born alone and died alone. There was nothing higher.

He got a coffee from the machine and sipped it quietly. At the top of the sky, a sliver of light held out against the darkness.

He'd spent the afternoon chasing Rosy around the beach on her podgy little legs, her head turning in excitement every few seconds to check he was still behind her. When she'd fallen, all it had taken to stop her screams was to pick her up and cuddle her.

If only everything in life was that simple.

From the pool came a loud splash.

Jack sprang to his feet, his cup smashing on the tiles. Had a seal got in? A dog? A man?

A woman's head and shoulders rose from the water.

'Out!' he shouted. 'Now!'

The woman had dark skin and short blonde hair and looked uncannily similar to an ex who'd died of an overdose several years ago. She smiled and dived back under.

Jack blew his whistle, cursing his inability to swim.

The woman leapt from the water, flew over the glass wall and disappeared into the sea with a splash.

The most unnerving thing was not that a woman had leapt three metres into the air and flown sideways. It was that instead of legs, she had a tail. A long, muscular, silvery fish's tail.

Jack found Chloe in the kitchen, feeding Rosy. He knelt down, lay his head on Chloe's shoulder and gazed at his daughter, lost in the warmth of her mother's breast.

'You OK?' Chloe ruffled his hair and kissed his nose. 'Weirdo.'

'Yeah.' Jack inhaled the scent of warm milk and baby shampoo.

'Freak.' He put his arms around Chloe, while Rosy gazed at him, wide-eyed.

If he could always be here with the people he loved, things would be OK. The outside world was the problem.

Usually, Jack had no difficulty sleeping, but this morning he lay staring at the ceiling. The hallucination had seemed so real. His low point had come a year ago when he'd pissed on the kitchen

floor after a twelve-hour whisky binge, thinking it was the toilet. Chloe had given him an ultimatum: sober up or get out.

When he went to work that evening, the sky was overcast and there was no pink and orange light show, no iridescent irreality. The hallucination had been a reminder that recovery was a journey, not a destination. Maybe this was his Higher Power, stopping him from becoming a cocky little wanker.

Relieved and a tiny bit disappointed, he got down to his job of attempting to stay alert in an environment whose main aim was relaxation.

At four-thirty AM, Jack was on his third espresso when the water rippled.

He put down his cup and wiped his eyes. The water rippled again.

Slowly, he got to his feet.

I renounce the illusion of control to my Higher Power.

People were darting around underwater, their bodies flashing blue in the floodlights.

He blew his whistle. 'Oy! You lot! Out!' His voice ricocheted against the cliffs.

The sound of splashing and laughter filled the pool as the head and shoulders of the blonde woman from yesterday emerged, alongside another woman and a man.

'Out!' shouted Jack. He blew his whistle again. 'Now!'

"Ello 'ello," said the man, who was bearded with long brown hair and looked weirdly similar to Jack's best mate who'd died falling off a balcony aged twenty-one. He dived down, and a tailfin flashed.

'Come and swim with us,' said a rounded woman with ginger ringlets, who was the spitting image of a friend who'd burnt to death when her squat had caught fire.

Jack sat on the ground, hugging his knees, eyes shut tight.

When he opened them again, the pool was empty.

He lay in bed, fantasising about the warm embrace of a single malt. Maybe his mum was right: once an addict, always an addict. If he left now, Chloe could still find Rosy a new dad before she became too attached.

The thought was like stepping backwards off a cliff.

The next night they were waiting for him. They put on a show, flying through the air and swimming in formation like dolphins. So what if he was hallucinating. It was all so beautiful.

‘You’re scared of us, aren’t you!’ The ginger woman laughed.

Her breathing was heavy, her face red with exertion.

He puffed out his chest. ‘Course not. You can’t exactly run after me, can you?’

‘Cheeky.’

‘Who are you anyway? Where do you live?’

She flung open her arms to encompass the air, the sea and the sky. ‘We can go anywhere we want. You have problems with rules and limits, don’t you.’

Jack felt his face flush. ‘No I don’t.’

‘We used to be like you,’ said the man. ‘Never feeling good enough. Always scared. Things don’t have to be that way.’

Chloe sat on the rug, singing a song about hot cross buns to Rosy, who lay on her lap, smiling and gazing at the ceiling.

He pressed his forehead against Chloe’s. Rosy’s eyes locked onto his and he drank her in until it was too much and his mind wandered to what she might be like as a teenager, how he’d protect her from predatory older men and how he’d cope with her starting to drink.

He picked up her teddy bear and made it dance but the thoughts wouldn’t leave him. He saw himself drunk, chasing Rosy and Chloe with a knife, then trying to apologise to Chloe

who told him to get out.

He locked himself in the bathroom and slapped his ankles until they burnt.

On the way to his shift, Jack bought a can of lager. He didn't want to drink it but needed to feel its dark weight in his hand, needed to know it was there. At work, he put it in the empty fridge beneath the coffee machine.

The mermaids didn't turn up until dawn and were slow and languid, as though drugged. Their bodies glowed golden under the rising sun.

'You're not like the rest of them,' whispered the man. 'You're special.'

Jack's mouth was dry. He knelt at the poolside and felt the blonde woman's hand on his forearm, warm and firm. 'Come with us,' she said.

'I... I can't swim.' Jack leant towards them.

'You will.' She reached up and eased his body into the pool.

He was held and he was warm, supported by the mermaids and the water. Their hands fluttered over his head, his lips, his feet, his groin. A mouth met his and everything became soft and muted. It was like being on his second drink, a never-ending calm that he wanted to drown in.

'Where have you been?' said Chloe, over the wailing. 'She won't stop. Should I call the doctor?'

'I was at work. Have you checked her temperature?'

'Her temperature's normal. Your shift ends at six. It's ten past eight.'

Rosy's face was red and cracked, her eyes watery slits. No wonder she was upset, given Chloe's stressy vibe. 'She'll be fine. Just chill.'

Chloe narrowed her eyes. 'Have you been drinking?'

'No!' he shouted.

Her lip was trembling. 'Don't lie to me, Jack.'

He sat on the bathroom floor with the door shut, hands over ears, but still the noise was deafening. He thought of the mermaids' silent touch, the warm blue water, the sea and the sky and the cold can of beer in the fridge.

When he left for work, Chloe and Rosy were asleep on the sofa and he tiptoed past, careful not to wake them. As he got on his bike and pedalled away, he breathed a sigh of relief.

At the lido, he took his can of beer from the fridge and sniffed it, rolled it across his sweaty brow, felt its smooth, slippery weight. He stuck a fingertip under the ring-pull and felt it digging into his skin.

He could just open the can and let it stand. The smell would remind him he didn't need it.

Just one sniff. Just one sip.

Skin itching, he pushed the can to the back of the fridge, then knocked back an espresso. Maybe they wouldn't come again. Perhaps yesterday was their way of saying goodbye.

He put another capsule in the machine but before the coffee had run through, he'd opened the fridge. And now his left hand was around the can, the tip of his right index caressing the ring-pull.

From behind him came a splash.

Jack opened the bin and hurled the can inside.

The sun was rising; a fiery yellow ball, hauling itself out of the sea. The blonde woman's eyes licked at his. 'What we did yesterday was just a taster. Come and live with us.'

They were so beautiful, so pure. They followed their instincts and did what was necessary. 'I can't swim. I don't have a tail.'

'You will.'

He attempted to tear his eyes from hers. 'I can't leave Rosy and Chloe.'

‘You will.’

‘You think you love them,’ said the man, ‘but you’re just dependent and you’ll end up hating them for it. Come with us and you’ll feel good forever.’

Jack thought of slammed doors and silences; his mum’s expressionless face lit by the TV as she sipped Australian red, his dad rubbing scratchcards with his lucky 50p. Was that his and Chloe’s future?

He slid into the water, gliding on the mermaids’ hands and lips as their bodies merged. He need never again feel the wrench of love for Chloe and Rosy, which always threatened to tip into its opposite. He need never again be unhappy.

Jack came to, floundering in the water, cold and alone, and the more he tried to stay afloat, the faster he sank. His lungs were filling and he was struggling to breathe, and he kept catching glimpses of yellow dawn before plunging back down.

Aware that he was drowning, he stopped struggling, and as his body quietened, his legs dropped and his feet met the tiles. He took a few shaky steps forward, found the edge of the pool and gripped it tight as day broke.

Two Late Millennial Men Go Skiing, Harry Dobbs

“Any chance you could look at the guttering today?” Dad asks, as Jamie comes down the stairs. “My back is still playing up.”

“I should have a moment,” Jamie says.

But then the Nintendo 64 arrives and, in his excitement, Jamie forgets all about the leaf-clogged guttering. He untangles the wires and forces them into the right inputs at the back of the downstairs TV. He’d forgotten how monstrous the controller is. It’s been years since he’s held one. The consoles he plays now are all so slick, so streamlined, whereas these old monsters feel clunky by comparison. Booting up Mario Kart 64 (the cartridge arrived separately a day earlier), he’s pulled in immediately. There’s time for a quick game. His bus to the airport is hours from now.

He selects ‘Grand Prix’, chooses the character Toad, and starts the Mushroom Cup. He wins three of its four races. Then he does the Flower Cup with Donkey Kong (how much heavier he is to handle!), uses Luigi for the Star Cup, and finally tries Bowser for the Special Cup. The Yoshi Valley course proves problematic. There’s no set route, and the squares denoting first to fourth place are replaced by question marks. Is Jamie powering ahead, or trailing behind? Ahead, it turns out, as he navigates Bowser away from the clifftop area and onto the safety of the grass-bordered racetrack. He crosses the finish line and watches the award ceremony at Princess Peach’s castle. An almost haunting feeling of nostalgia sets in as he watches these animations.

Dad pokes his head round the door.

“How’s the outside looking?”

Jamie keeps his eyes on the screen.

“I’ll take a look in a second. I’m about to finish this.”

“It’s almost twelve, just so you know.”

Jamie throws down the controller.

“Shit.”

He pushes past Dad, runs upstairs to start packing. Mum pops her head round the door as he’s piling gear into a suitcase.

“Remind me who you’re going with?”

“Mo. You’ve met him. From my year abroad.”

Jamie is making a point of not looking at his mother, hopes she takes the hint to give him some peace.

“Have I?”

“Yes, he’s been round here a couple of times. Pakistani guy.”

“I think I remember. Anyone else going?”

He throws some socks into his case.

“No. Just us.”

“Last-minute Lads’ Holiday.”

She lets out a little laugh, which hurts Jamie more than he’d care to admit.

“I suppose.”

Jamie can’t find his thermals, accepts he’ll need to buy more when he gets to the resort. Mum watches him fret for a bit, before asking:

“Do you ever hear from Susie these days?”

“Mum.” Jamie stops his manic activity for a second, shoots his mother a warning glance. “You know I don’t.”

“She was nice.”

And now Jamie remembers, once again, the arguments they had. For one, she didn’t like how he spent hours in his underwear each day playing videogames. She didn’t realise that videogames are art now. They’re immersive, story-driven, force you to make moral decisions. And playing games can decrease the risk of dementia. Jamie’s read articles about all these things. He won’t stop a hobby just because some girl thinks it’s stupid or childish. He won’t succumb to that kind of bullying. Because that’s what it is. Bullying. A form of psychological abuse.

He can still make it to the bus stop on time if he walks. But it won't be relaxing. He'll have to really pace it. He gets Dad to drive him, forgets to apologise for not sorting the gutter.

*

The chairlift glides over the rocky terrain. The only snow Jamie can see is man-made, and it's confined to the slopes, which, from above, appear perilously busy.

"Not a lot of snow, is there?" Mo observes.

"Mm," Jamie murmurs.

He's quietly furious that he's agreed to come. There were supposed to be five of them, but the others, all mutual friends, dropped out relatively late. One had a business trip crop up, another had a so-called family emergency, and the third got cold feet when the others dropped out. Leaving just Jamie and Mo.

"Climate change," Mo suddenly announces, like he's some kind of sage.

"It's just bad luck," Jamie responds.

"Bad luck there's climate change?"

"Bad luck there's no snow right now."

Mo scoffs.

"Why do you think there's no snow?"

"Leave it, mate. It is what it is."

Jamie notes the way Mo insists on having the last word on any issue. It's a dynamic that's becoming increasingly pronounced. In fact, Mo had the last word on everything for this holiday. He booked everything too. Jamie's been a passenger. It's making the friendship feel unequal.

While they're still on the lift, Mo takes his phone out of his pocket, looks at the screen, then puts it back again. All this involves removing his gloves and fumbling around under the constraints of the lift's safety rail.

"Something going on?"

"Nah, nothing. Just wondered if I had signal up here."

"Right."

They do the same few open runs repeatedly. The slopes are not fun with this many people, and Jamie finds himself frequently spooked into a standstill, as more adept skiers cut him up, almost knock him off-balance.

Later, the two of them stop for a late lunch at a slope-side cabin. There's a large outside seating area with rows of wooden benches, at the end of which stands a stage, where a DJ plays electronic music. People are starting to crowd round this stage, their ski jackets open, plastic cups of beer in hand, and they thud their boots on the wooden boards in vague time with the music.

"Looks fun," Mo says, and Jamie half-heartedly agrees.

After their soggy and expensive croque monsieurs, they buy a lager each and waddle outside, sweating heavily. They buy more drinks, sway to the dance anthems of Tiësto, David Guetta, Flo Rida, Pitbull. Nearly all the tunes are from the early 2010s. When they were teenagers.

Jamie catches the eye of a younger woman. Short, blonde, sky-blue eyes. Not dissimilar from Susie. Then Jamie notices one of her pupils is strange. It's leaking out into the iris, as though it's grown a tail. Bolstered by the alcohol, he offers her a drink and she says yes, but not particularly enthusiastically. Mo doesn't notice any of this; he's in his own world with the DJ, like he's unaware of the crowd, becoming one with the music instead. As if he's above it all. *You're above nothing mate*, Jamie thinks. *You still live with your parents, just like I do.*

Jamie soon realises this girl won't volunteer her name, not even after he's bought her a hideously overpriced Negroni. So, he asks her outright. Her answer:

"Chloe."

"Chloe," Jamie repeats. "Nice to meet you."

"And you."

She then asks:

"So, what do you do?"

Jamie finds the question rude, bordering on the

unacceptable, and is disappointed that someone so attractive would ask something so ugly. But he puts up with it. She holds the cards, likely knows it.

“I’m an office executive.”

She looks sceptical.

“What does that mean?”

Jamie thinks about what it means – ordering pens and envelopes, carrying boxes, organising events, answering the phone, typing letters, dealing with internet and phone providers – and then he answers:

“I wear a lot of hats.”

“Sounds interesting,” she says, her eyes wandering elsewhere.

“How about you?” Jamie asks, though he doesn’t really care.

“I’m doing a master’s in international relations.”

“Nice.”

She finishes her drink, thanks Jamie, says “see you around”, and drifts into the crowd.

The following day, it starts snowing lightly, and the boys head out for a pizza in the town centre. Mo checks his phone on the way there, seems frustrated by the patchy signal. The restaurant’s not that busy, but service is slow. The waiters are apathetic, though well-enough dressed, what with their open white shirts and black waistcoats. Jamie goes to the toilet after ordering drinks, and when he takes his seat again, Mo looks animated.

“I’ve just had an email. From the start-up I was telling you about.”

Jamie has only the vaguest memory of this conversation. What he does remember is that Mo has spent the last two years learning to code. It seemed a never-ending quest, and he had to buy two extensions to finish the course.

“Oh yeah?” he responds, scanning the menu. He decides on a Napolitana.

“I got the job.”

Jamie forces himself to look up.

“That’s sick.” His eyes drop again. “Big congrats, mate.”

On the walk back to their self-catering apartment, there’s silence between them. They start climbing the hill to their block, past the billboards advertising supermarkets, chalets, clothing outlets. A young woman is coming down the hill towards them. It’s Chloe, the girl from yesterday. As they pass her, Jamie tries to make eye contact, but she stares resolutely forward. A black hole opens inside his chest. He tries to ignore it, tries making more conversation with Mo.

“Remember that night in Seoul?” he asks. “The one when we pissed from our roof onto the street.”

Mo grimaces.

“Vaguely, yeah.”

“And that night we both threw up on the subway?”

Mo shakes his head slowly, says nothing.

“We were feral, weren’t we? Proper animals.”

“It was bad.”

“Do you ever think back to that year, to what our lives were like then?”

A slight pause.

“Sometimes.”

“Do you miss it?”

“No. It makes me feel a bit ashamed, if I’m honest.”

More silence.

*

Jamie gets home late on Saturday night. There’s a note on the kitchen counter:

“Leftover curry in fridge. Microwave for three mins.”

He does as he’s told. After, he sees the dishwasher’s on, so he can’t add his bowl and spoon. He drops them in the sink instead, then turns off the kitchen light. He stops for a second, turns on the light again. Then he goes back to the sink, squeezes

too much detergent onto a sponge, and washes his used things by hand, before drying them and putting them back where they belong.

In the morning, he joins his parents at breakfast. They seem surprised to see him. He's not normally up this early. Dad finishes a bite of toast, clears his throat.

"How was skiing?"

Jamie hesitates.

"It was alright."

"Did something happen?" Mum asks, suddenly interested.

"Well... the snow wasn't great."

"Ah."

She spoons Icelandic yoghurt onto organic muesli.

"And... I don't know... it just didn't click. It should have been more fun than it was. I can't put my finger on it."

"You're getting older, darling."

Jamie's instinct tells him to refute this. Age has nothing to do with it. Age is just a number. But he doesn't. He sighs, instead.

"That might be it."

"In any case," Dad cuts in, "it's good to have you back."

For some reason, Jamie feels a wave of emotion, finds himself on the verge of tears. He stands up, and before leaving the kitchen, says to his father:

"Is there anything you need a hand with today? Anything in the garden, like the guttering?"

Dad turns from the empty dishwasher, into which he's loading the breakfast things.

"Not that I can think of. I sorted the guttering while you were away."

He turns to his mother, who is still seated, finishing her mug of green tea.

"Ma, anything I can help with today?"

She makes a show of pondering the question, then shakes her head.

“But I’ll give you a shout if I need something.”

“Please do.”

With that he heads up to his room. On the way, he passes the open door to the living room, briefly peers in, and sees the Nintendo 64 sitting under the television. He climbs the stairs for a morning of reading the news and watching videos on themes that include football, exotic travel, self-improvement, and dating advice.

At about one o’clock, Mum will call him down for lunch.

In The Drink, Chris Williams

They're all here, waiting. And they're hot. It's not that big a room, really, certainly not big enough for all of them, but here they all are, crammed in, holding their drinks, holding their coats, shuffling their feet, talking awkwardly. The little girl who told you you couldn't play with her Sylvania Families is here three times. She's here aged four, from when you were sent to her house to play, here aged eleven, from that time in primary school when you were talking in class about the Spin Doctors, here aged twenty-odd and drunk, from some time you must have bumped into her that you don't remember. They don't seem too overwhelmed, the three versions of her, to be in close proximity to each other: they're fiddling with the hem of their skirt, holding a cup of cola whilst making a bored face, and talking to a guy from your film class, in age order. The guy from your film class is sipping from a bottle of Japanese beer, probably unaware that he's destined to become Nick Clegg's speechwriter. If you were here, you'd have an overwhelming urge to tell him this, to see his reaction ('No! Never! Seriously? Come on') but you're not here, not yet. The room is aware of that. That, and how warm it is.

Your brother's godmother opens a window. It's a rattly old sash window and it sticks as she shoves it, so she gets the guy who ran your soccer summer school to help (he's less hot than the others, in his shorts and socks). The window brings a welcome exhalation, hot air belched out into the wintery night, and people's glasses steam up. The girl who you felt up at a party when you were fifteen is chatting with the manager from the first pub you worked in. She flickers like a hologram, from the fourteen-year-old her to the eighteen-year-old who you'd sometimes see out drinking, and back. It's a good thing you're not here to see that fourteen-year-old who you pawed. The kid who punched you in the ear is here, swigging from a bottle of

lager that he's stolen from your PhD supervisor. Your PhD supervisor hasn't noticed—he's got his arm around the Spanish girl you loved, leaning her rosy-cheeked face half out the open window, fanning her, making her laugh in that way she had, that heart-igniting, soul-firing way that you knew so well for a month or three.

If you were here, you'd be overcome with jealousy at seeing that, his long denim-jacketed, award-winning-novelist arm snaking around her trim Andalucian midriff, your Uncle Mike looking over at them as he slurps a black velvet. You'd feel all that pain again, that sweet sweet anguish, just like you did in those Brighton parties when there'd be forty amateur DJs eyefucking her in the converted lounge of a Georgian houseshare. You'd be so lost in re-experiencing that that you wouldn't even see your ex-fiancé holding hands with her childhood boyfriend, or open-mouth-kissing some guy from Tinder, or holding the first dog you rescued together, squirming in her arms, or any of the other three hundred iterations of her that are here, overlapping like spectres half slipped out of time. You wouldn't see your golf instructor from when you were sixteen, showing his swing to your dad, or your primary school teacher leaning down to rub her ankles, next to the Korean woman who ran the language school in Chungcheongbukdo where you taught.

You're meant to be arriving soon. In fact, you were meant to be here already. There's a space for you near the kitchenette, there's a vegan cake. Someone's bought that cider you like. An Idlewild playlist is queued up.

The cool air has filtered around the room, people are pulling at their collars to let it brush their necks, people are wiping the sweat from their brows, laughing at themselves—guess I should've left me scarf at home! People are bonding, finding likeminds: the bassist you almost gigged with has found the bassist you worked the bar with at the Thomas Kemp; the poet

colleague with the narcissist complex is getting on famously with several producers who thought you were a gormless twat. And an awareness is forming—an awareness that, maybe, you're not coming.

Someone has floated the idea of leaving. Sneaking out. You're obviously not coming, so, what's the diff? In fact a group of your university friends have left already—it's just like you to be late, and they had to be up early anyway. Several people you briefly worked with have made their excuses. The rain's really coming down outside though—it's hurling down, machine gun monsooning, strobing over the streets like a spell. Don't go now, he'll be here any minute! A group of kids you used to drink with in parks are stuck in the entrance, waiting for the worst to pass, hugging their arms, but it just keeps getting worse, until it's rivering down the street, flooding the gutters, pigeons flapping in the tumult, neighbour cats poised alert-eyed on walltops, taxis gushing gunnels of it from their wheel arches. It's almost funny.

The room isn't so packed now. People have escaped. The remainers sit on the floor, watching the downpour with the pleasure of children. Some *are* children: there's your brother, aged seven, in his Christmas tracksuit, sitting next to your niece, his daughter, quietly unaware of each other. Let's play a game, your Canadian friend says to the Singaporean girl you made out with in Bangkok that time. What kind of game? she says, cocking a streamlined eyebrow. A memory game, he says. I say a memory of mine, and you have to say a memory of yours that goes with it. How do you mean goes with it? Whatever you interpret it to mean. Ready? Okay, fine. Okay... urmmmm... driving to Vancouver with my mom when I was a kid and stopping for snacks at this snow-covered convenience store, and then the car wouldn't start up again, and we had to wait in the convenience store until the tow truck came, and the guy there kind of hurrumphed when my mom asked him if I could use the bathroom and she called him an asshole under her breath and it

was the *first* time I ever heard her curse. Ooh! That's goooood. I know! Your turn. Okay, okay... um, um um um I cahn't think of one! Take your time, he says, and your grandma's serving sausages, chips and beans, and your girlfriend's former self is dancing. Dave's playing one of his own songs on acoustic like that time he serenaded you and your ex-fiancé in bed at the end of a house party, the girl who cried when you left the language school in Chungcheongbukdo is okay now, your mum's getting on with the Thai film star you interviewed, those girls you loved from a distance are various shades of distant, disappearing into the fringes, emptying themselves out, with your boss, a friend, someone who hurt you, a family member you let down, a semi-stranger you maybe kissed, a halfway friend you could have loved, and all the ghosts of your lulled and dumbfound past, and you're out there, climbing in the rain, out there you are, spinning in the storm, tumbling in the spume. They'll wait for you here, the ones who're left. They're quite happy, these misfits. They have rooms of misfits too, refuges in the midst of ice storms, downpours, gale force winds. They'll stay here, waiting, these ones. You'll be along, when the rain is done. You won't believe which ones are left.

Curiosity's Cat, Danielle Smith

The room was dark with warmth, a vague orange glow billowing out from both the kitchen and the lamps that ambled in their corners. Bodies sweated and heated, even with their coats already shrugged off at the door. There were swarms of people. The room was small enough to make their bodies feel doubled.

Maria was by her elbow, buried in with two drinks already. She had a plate in her hand stacked with the sticky wetness of cream cheese on crackers that looked brittle at best, pure concrete at worst. The slither of salmon was curled in on itself, shaking at the threat of being eaten. Though the light was dim, Cassie could see specks of old crumbs, leftovers from whatever Maria had been eating last night. There was a borderline when hunger trickled into disgust--that's what Cassie felt as the food was thrust towards her.

Maria's hand shook. Cassie smiled, obliging, and took a cracker.

"Do you think people are having fun?" Maria fretted, nervous eyes taking in the lull of bodies. Trying to be discreet, Cassie sniffed the cracker. The faint fishy smell mixed with the bitterness of the cream cheese made her stomach turn. There were flecks of green huddled beneath the grey salmon.

"I'm having fun," Cassie promised. Maria's smile, an uncertain flutter, tightened. "It's..."

Whatever she said was swallowed whole by Maria's tight eyebrows, by the whisper of something like a goodbye. She floated into her own party, another insect called home to the

swarm. Her slim neck and high shoulders suddenly seemed far less rare when swamped with women whose body followed the same aging crook. There were long dresses, fair skin, black hair dotted all around the room- it seemed as if each circle became its own body, joined together with the beating heart of cheap wine.

Cassie waited as time dragged itself on but Maria didn't appear again. She held the cracker between her fingers until she couldn't bear the sour scent anymore, then she stuffed it down into the pocket of her dress, unable to stand the idea of being caught throwing it away. The tacky cream cheese stuck to her fingers even after she had rubbed her hand twice on her dress.

If Maria was by her side again, Cassie told herself, she'd be mingling much better. She would tell jokes that made people laugh, murmur stories of interesting things that had happened in her life, be complimentary and sweet and kind and not too loud because otherwise she would become a bad joke, the girl without a name that had made the night about herself. She would balance it perfectly. She just needed to-

Princess brushed against her ankle, lost without her owner. When she didn't get attention right away, she dragged her impressive claws down Cassie's leg.

"Hey," she cautioned. Princess sat firmly by her ankle, which made her easy prey when Cassie swooped down to pick her up. Her beautiful coat was marred with crumbs and debris, the falling leftovers of a good time well spent. And then she noticed the bleeding spot: a red drop of wine.

She buried her nose in the cat's thick fur, smelling the meaty scent of flesh, a delicious change from the cloying threat of

salmon that had been clogging her throat.

Maybe Maria would finally appear. Her precious Princess had been stained! Alas, she had thoroughly dissolved into the night, which meant rescuing Princess was entirely down to Cassie.

The bathroom had harsh angles and bright white light. There was a pungent smell of something antibacterial that gave the room a sense of being all too clean (and the terrible knowing, perhaps, that it was only so clean because it had once been very dirty). The bath was ornate and beautiful, whimsically slanting upwards in a way that mimicked the shape of a sailing boat. The taps were a light gold, with fat twistlers on top, weighty beneath Cassie's hand.

Kneeling beside the bath, Cassie watched the steady stream of water, still holding the cat in her hand. Her fingers looped around the animal's thin chest, feeling the steady pulse of its heart beat. It was fast. She could imagine it- the vibrant red, fleshy as steak, the red-wine sweetness of the blood pumping through it. Her hunger twisted inside of her, lamenting that she'd skipped dinner. And breakfast. She hadn't had much of an appetite lately. Her mother would compliment her on dropping a dress size.

Water continued to spill against the edges of the bath. There was no bath in Cassie's apartment- her mother thought there was something spiritually healing about the shape of the bath, an approximation of the mother's womb (she said some graphic things about the water, too, and what that could represent, but Cassie was usually too focused on not throwing up to commit any of it to memory).

When it was just a few inches full, Cassie dipped her hand into the water to test how warm it was. Perfect. Princess made

another pitiful attempt to kick, but otherwise seemed utterly resigned to her own fate.

“Come on,” Cassie urged, dropping the cat into the bath. Her paws hit the water hard, but she simply wiggled her butt then settled. “Good girl,” she cooed, reaching out to pet her damp fur. She twisted the cat’s body slightly so her stain was being kissed by the water.

Turning around, Cassie found a towel. It took no longer than a minute. When she told the story to Maria later, she would be sure of that: it was just a minute. A handful of seconds that glued themselves together, back to back to back, their mouths aching from the taste of how fast they passed. She toweled off her hands. The seconds continued to sluggishly crawl past her.

There wasn’t a howl, nor a meow, nor any real sound of distress. By the time Cassie turned around, however, Princess was laying lifeless in the water. Her body floated near the top, her pink nose pointed towards nothing, her eyes still open. Cassie paused, staring. That was the part that took the longest, the part where she was the slowest to act. It was also the part of the story she would leave out when she talked to Maria (no, she wouldn’t leave it out, she would just colour it into something that tasted less brutal in her mouth).

“Oh,” Cassie said, quietly. Her hands were trembling slightly- and her stomach, previously rolling through the threat of salmon, was now roaring beneath her dress. “Oh my god,” she said as she stepped forward. One foot, then another. Cats played dead sometimes. Princess was just playing dead. Cassie would fish her out of the water and the cat would spring back to life, like a magic trick gone wrong.

Cassie knelt by the bath. She stared at the floating corpse, at the paws that refused to kick, at the eyes that were still seared open. She laid a hand over her own stomach, feeling the steady rumble of it. "Princess," Cassie called, feeling the scratchy emptiness of her throat, of her entire body. "This isn't funny."

Eventually, she reached into the bath. It was only when the water was soaking her fingers, dribbling its cold saliva down her wrists, that she realised that she should have fished her out much sooner.

Cassie felt a laugh rise in her throat and gather in her mouth as bile, thick and steady against her tongue. She shook the cat.

"Fuck," Cassie said, like the word was a spell that would make the cat spring to life. "Okay," she said, like the word itself was a plan she could put into motion.

The knock at the door made her entire body jump, boots and all. It was a little knock. Unrushed, softened by wine, a knock that was meant to not intimidate whoever was inside.

"Sorry," a candlelight flicker of a voice said. "You've been in there for quite a while." It was, funnily enough, the first time anyone at the party but Maria had talked to her.

Cassie froze. She passed the cat from one hand to the next, wondering how to get rid of its body. There was a small little window above the bath. If she stood in the water, she'd be able to send the cat's body hurtling towards the concrete below. Princess would be no more than a bloodstain on the pavement after the rats had eaten away at her. Maria would never know.

She twisted the cat in her hands. The knock came again, slightly

louder this time, the impatience ringing through the apartment.

The knock. The knock. The knock. Sorry. Sorry, the voice again, is anyone in there? Are you stuck? Are you sick? Are you ill? Are you hungry, Cassie? The voice was blue and sharp, fanged with intent. Cassie felt the prick of its teeth against her neck.

She was hungry. Her mouth was filled with drool, soaping down her chin. Her tongue lapped at her lips. The cat was still a heavy waste of fluff in her hands, all bone and meat and fur. The knock. The knock. It could be just the thump of Cassie's heart in her ears, drowning out anything rational. It seemed to grow louder and louder, demanding entrance, and Cassie needed to do something soon. If she was found with this evidence in her hands, Maria would never talk to her again.

Her mouth lowered to the cat's soft fur. It had been groomed recently, the scent of tacky strawberry shampoo still rampant. She felt her mouth open, her jaw splitting wide. It was not hunger-- or, if it was, it was hunger by another name, a new need splitting wide open inside of her. Her mouth opened. She felt each click of her jaw, each rumble and strain of muscle, the cold air hitting the sensitive nubs of her teeth.

The taste of meat, raw, was an odd one. It was vaguely milky, once you got past the taste of iron and copper. She used to hold coins on her tongue when she was hungry, a trick her mother taught her. It was just like that, except she had to chew and chew, feeling the gristle disappear between her teeth. She watched her hands, clean once, become coated in a thick layer of blood and fur. Soon enough, there was just bones, and the stains across her dress.

By the end of it, she was breathing heavily, soft little pants that

squeezed out of her body. The knocking had stopped- the only noise was the rushing of blood in her ears. She couldn't work out if it was her own or the cat's. She wished she could throw up- she wished she could feel any disgust.

She moved towards the sink. Bones dropped into the bowl. Her dress had been covered with blood. It slithered down her throat, pooling gently by her armpits. Soon enough, it would dry against her skin, becoming soft flakes that she'd scrape off with her thumb's fingernail. Like this, she couldn't go back into the party, and she felt the cool relief of knowing she wouldn't have to talk to anyone.

She needed to leave. The front door would be bustling with partygoers, coming in fashionably late or leaving before the late rush hour traffic began or otherwise leaving the building for a quick cigarette. Maria had a strict rule against people smoking inside, even if they went on the balcony or hung their head out of a window. No, Cassie needed to leave, and she needed to not be seen.

She did what any rational person would do: she tucked the bones into her pocket and scurried through the window, squeezing herself through the narrow gap and slithering out the other side, a pile of girl and blood.

Callback, Anne Frost

Sally imagined speaking her thoughts aloud. *If you could throw up a room it would look like this.* It could work, that line. A good concept. Funny in a gross way, the audience might groan at first but that's fine, a connection. It was a fair description, too. The waiting room was grubby, the dignity of an uneven sofa maintained only by two stained tartan throws, the carpet worn into comb-over patches. Stained coffee cups decorated every flat surface. It even smelled of vomit. Because of what was to come her thoughts bounced to the Saturday night pub sessions, after a gig when they all needed to wind down, soak out the adrenaline. She was a vodka drinker then, proper wine hadn't reached '80s London and she wasn't going to compete on beer with the men. They were all men, of course. That's what it was like and if you couldn't hack it you could find another job. Be a teacher like your mother wanted. Or a wife like your sister. Women's work. So she joined them. Slagging off each other's sets, pointing out where they'd lost a laugh, and afterwards staggering through Soho half blind with drunkenness, stopping in doorways to puke up a week's pay.

Happy days.

When Sally was younger she would have sat down and fuck the stains, but she knew more now, about fleas and germs and mortality, so even though her knees were aching from climbing the stairs, she stood, looking through the smeared window at another smeared window across the street. *Smeared windows, folks. A metaphor. For aging.* But you can't expect the audience to engage with philosophical stuff, not at the start of a routine.

As soon as she heard the tap of footsteps on bare steps she realised what she had been doing. *Fuck therapy, just think about something else. Distraction will save you a fortune.* The stale air twisted her stomach.

Breathy singing wafted up the stairwell, 'She'll be coming round the mountain...'

Making an entrance as ever. Like the old days when there was no MC and her partner would grab a backstage microphone to announce, in the exact cadences of the Queen's voice, *loyal subjects, it's time to welcome the true stars of the show, I command you to put your hands together forSally and Ali.*

A double act, two people but a single entity. One consciousness on a tiny stage, looking out at the audience, the first few rows just visible in the aura of spotlights, those further back mere shadowed outlines. There was such joy, such power at those times. Drawing the crowd carefully into a different, silly reality. The drug that is the roar of laughter. Also jeopardy. They had a plan, of course, but that would be churned up by the audience and adrenaline so that Sally would inevitably step off the preset path, relishing the danger of it, like jumping from a high cliff into water far below. And Ali would always respond, picking up the riff and expanding on it delighting in the audience's reaction to their adlibbing. That's why they were so good, that understanding, that oneness.

And because Ali was so inherently, so completely, fucking funny.

'Oh good,' said Ali in what was still her own voice, 'you're already here.'

*

Alison rubbed a tentative foot along the threadbare carpet. Nothing dubious emerged. There was a theatre somewhere in Essex where shuddering transparent creatures would burst from the dressing room floor at each step, but everyone had a dressing room story.

'Welcome to paradise,' said Sally.

Her face had changed, Alison thought of a balloon pumped up, distended.

She asked, 'am I terribly late?'

‘About forty years...’

‘..for God’s sake, Sally..’

‘.. but if you mean for the podcast it doesn’t look like the recording will start for a while. We could use the time to prepare, apparently Pete can be a nasty interviewer.’

The unreality of their meeting was disorientating, Alison instinctively reached out a hand to steady herself against the wall. There must be suitable words for a moment like this but nothing came to mind. Instead she thought of a book closing so that suddenly the beginning and end almost met. Or the technique, callback, that she and Ali had sometimes used where the final joke echoed something they had said earlier in the routine. Her splayed fingers rubbed against a poster and she leaned closer to unfuzz the words. It was for one of Pete’s Edinburgh shows, the only time he’d have had solo billing. 1986, dear God, they’d been at the Fringe that year too. Come to think of it she’d had a fumble with Pete, possibly more, in an alleyway off the Royal Mile that smelled of public toilets. Pete had definitely suggested a blow job would be appropriate but she couldn’t remember if she’d taken up the challenge. Probably she had, she considered it one of her talents in those days, a good blow job. It sometimes got them extra bookings. Whatever happened, Sally had been furious, accusing her of lacking dignity. Alison remembered countering that it was a surprising way to insult someone who wore a Margaret Thatcher wig each evening and their laughter calmed things down for a while.

‘Pete was always a prick,’ Alison said.

‘He’s bound to ask where we met,’ Sally was eyeing the wonky sofa warily. Alison could hear her therapist’s voice softly unpicking the situation. *She wants to look at you like that, but a piece of furniture is safer, isn’t it?*

‘Which version do you want to give?’ Alison asked.

‘The audition or the laundrette. The laundrette’s funnier.’
But neither were true.

*

Sally lowered herself carefully onto the thick sofa arm, which seemed to exhale at the effort of supporting her. She'd tried going solo after the Great Betrayal. *Who here has been dumped? How about by a friend, yes that's the worst isn't it?* The self pity routine she had called it. Poignant, revealing. But not funny. Even the vodka couldn't hide the not-funniness of her act. *Some people can be naturally hilarious but don't want to be comedians. I get that, they might be great in bed too but just don't fancy turning professional.* The audiences changed then. Before, when she was Sally and Ali, they were friends willing her on. Even the hecklers offered opportunity rather than critique. But afterwards they were the enemy, she would see it in the blank eyes of the front row, waiting for her to fail.

Her fellow comedians were quick to reinforce her poor assessment but not to help, apart from Pete who suggested she stopped moping and grew some. Then propositioned her. Which meant the last thing she had said to him was *fuck off you dribbling creep.*

And back to the interview.

'I'll tell the laundrette story,' she said.

'About me never having used a washing machine before?'

'That's the one.'

'Shouldn't we be honest in an interview about our comedy career.'

'No. We should be funny.'

The strange thing was that Sally could picture the laundrette. Ali with her clipped voice and air of confusion, waiting for her to explain how to use the coins, which buttons to press. Then the exchange about comedy theory, the construction of a joke. *Premise, set-up, punchline.* Maybe that conversation happened another time, or maybe it was all just one big false memory. She could definitely recall their final encounter, though. Ali, doing the fluttery eyelid thing that showed she was

uncomfortable, explaining she wanted to concentrate on her marriage.

Decades of feminism undone in a single sentence.

‘How is Bob?’ Sally asked.

Ali’s eyelids twitched, ‘I don’t think I can be funny anymore.’

‘But you act now,’ Sally heard her own voice snarl, ‘doesn’t that involve humour?’

‘Sometimes,’ Ali was examining the floor. ‘Sometimes an actress, sometimes humour. But it’s a script. Not me.’

Sally remembered this self-doubt, it had been endearing in a younger person. In those days all Ali needed was a push.

She said, ‘maybe that’s Pete’s angle, interview retired comics to show the world why they are no longer doing comedy.’

‘...the unfunny comedians podcast.’

‘..we’ll make you not-laugh ‘til you cry.’

‘..starring Pete Jones the self-styled feminist.’

‘who shagged his way around the circuit.’

‘..and stole our jokes.’

Sally watched Ali laughing and felt the judder of time travel.

The petite woman before her and the one she remembered entirely overlapped save for the slightest hint of crepe on Ali’s neck. But that was merely the ruckling of soft material that could surely be smoothed with the gentle stroke of a finger.

*

Alison rested her back against the window as a memory resurfaced. Alone in a dim, urine-soaked alleyway. *How did that make you feel, Alison?* Empty? Used? Abandoned?

‘I didn’t think you would do the interview,’ Sally was saying, ‘it was all so long-ago and..’

Why had she agreed? *Closure, Alison?*

Boredom.

She shrugged.

The silence stretched, not the companionable sort but the soundless panic of freezing on stage. Alison searched for the

right line for the occasion but found a wrong one.

‘How have you been?’

Sally’s eyebrows twitched but she replied anyway, ‘I’ve retired from teaching.’

Her voice was deeper now, the vowels flattened. Some sort of Midlands’ accent, Alison thought. She must have moved away from London.

‘I didn’t know you’d been a teacher,’ she said.

Sally shook her head quickly as if she was trying to dislodge something. ‘This riff isn’t going to work is it?’

Alison accepted defeat. ‘Fine,’ she said, ‘let’s talk about the bloody interview.’

They faced each other now as they used to when they were creating a routine, exchanging increasingly silly ideas until something, a word, an accent, made them both laugh so hard that they knew they had something. Alison watching through tears as Sally scribbled quickly on a notepad, catching the idea before it evaporated. But now Alison looked back on it the writing wasn’t the point, all they had ever wanted to do was make each other laugh.

‘Ok,’ said Sally in a tone that leapt across the decades, ‘ideas. We could name drop, talk about all our friends on the circuit.’

‘We didn’t have friends, they all hated us.’ The promoters explaining sorry but they already had a female act on the bill. The pack of so-called fellow comedians drunkenly ripping apart their set. Telling them they were too gentle, too tentative, that they needed to be aggressive, skewer their targets.

‘Because we were good,’ offered Sally.

‘Because we were women. Think about how they behaved, how we ended up behaving like them.’

‘So you did the most womanly thing possible, and ran away to get married?’

‘My little rebellion.’ The running away, not the marriage.

Alison rubbed at a dust mark on her sleeve her action only bonding the stain. ‘We were fragile and it was wrecking us.’

She watched Sally absorb the information, nod in an urgent way that Alison had forgotten but now recognised instantly. The gesture she would search for, the one that told Alison she had come up with a great idea.

Sally said, ‘Pete was the worst..’

‘..taking the piss because we admitted we were nervous..’

‘..but we always heard him being sick before a gig..’

‘..and he stole our material..’

‘..now he’s got his own fucking podcast..’

‘..and we are going to be interviewed by him...’

‘..but we can say anything we want.’

Even the truth.

A double act, a single entity, one consciousness.

Sally stood up from her sofa-arm perch, suddenly more aware of the woman beside her, the liver spots on her hands, worry lines creasing her temple. Alison caught the outline of her old partner in the face that looked down at her, welcomed the fluttering of excitement as she mirrored Sally’s movement so that they were standing side by side.

Then together they stepped forward to the cliff edge. Ready to jump.

The Woman Who Turned Into A Jellyfish, Rozie Kelly

It all started when Gillian asked me out for a coffee.

But you're drinking one now, I said.

She had a single gold band on her right ring finger. I didn't know what it meant. This is different, she said. You made it.

Her voice was a clear bell, making the soft tissue inside my skull vibrate slightly. I knew something had changed when I went home that night and discovered my skin was slippery.

She came in every day and ordered the same thing. An americano with a splash of cream. Her routine wasn't always the same – sometimes she'd sit in and read the paper, one of the serious ones. Other times she strode in with a line of sweat on her upper lip and swept the coffee from the counter before disappearing. It was a few weeks before she asked me if I liked to read. She said it like it was intimate, like I shouldn't let anyone else hear.

Yes, I whispered back to her.

I began to write her name on her coffee cup. We don't do that here, it's not Starbucks, and my manager did give me odd looks. But I could tell she liked it. She'd always spin the cup around with her thin fingers and look at it for a moment before she lifted it. Her name began to progress to small drawings. Flowers and leaves, a steaming mug, an open book.

I liked to think of her as I lay in the bath each night. There was a symmetry to it – she was the beginning of my day and she was the end. The veins in my thighs shimmered through the water. I wondered what her life might be like outside the confines of how

how I knew her. Did she have a husband? Children? I could see she had money by the texture of the fabrics she wore. She seemed serious. Like she mattered.

Where will we go? I asked her.

Well, there are lots of cafes around here, she replied. How about I meet you here from your shift and we can just take a walk?

The thought of not planning where we were going, and just walking into the street with her, at that moment seemed like the most impossible adventure. Perhaps we would walk underneath trees as the leaves fell above us. I was worried I would look strange alongside her, in my battered parka and my trainers flecked with coffee grounds. In the days leading up to our meeting I washed my hands incessantly. They felt cold, slimy to the touch. When I went to the bathroom all my clothes were stuck to me. There was a faint light to my cheeks, under my skin, pulsating.

At 4.48pm she arrived at the door. She looked exactly as she always did. There was a light rain falling. I did up my coat as I walked up to her. She blinked her eyes slowly, like a cat, and reached out and pulled the zipper up higher, right to my chin. I can't remember what we talked about, but I know we did walk under some trees, and that there was a light rain falling instead of leaves.

We took a cab back to her house. We didn't talk for the whole journey. She looked out the window and I watched her. I could see the raindrops on the glass, the light refracting through them and casting her face in gentle pinks and blues. She licked her lips, just a flicker. When we fucked she was serpentine. Lithe. Her legs wrapped around mine multiple times.

Afterwards I wandered around her house. A white townhouse, its heavy shoulders leaning forward over the iron railings. The front door slick black. Inside it looked like nothing had moved for years. Heavy furniture I couldn't lift. She had a library. I didn't recognise so many of the titles. Some were in French or Italian. They all looked old. Masculine. I thought perhaps I should feel ashamed for looking at her things, as I was, but something told me she'd like it.

In the kitchen I poured myself a cold glass of water and leant against the thick ceramic sink as I drank every drop. I could feel the movement of my throat as it drew the water down and I was satiated.

Things started to change when I saw her for the second time. When I came home I was so thirsty I felt like I couldn't breathe. I leaned my head under the tap in the kitchen and drank for what felt like hours. Dad came in and gave me a look.

Not again, he said.

I raised an eyebrow - I don't know what you mean.

In the mornings I got up before the light, when the sky was a purple stain. I stood in the shower so long that I began to be late. I opened my mouth under the stream of water. My boss was angry but I couldn't make myself care. My gaze had softened and the world began to get blurry. She didn't behave differently with me, when she came each day. I noticed she wore a thin gold wristwatch with no numbers on its face. It slid up and down her birdlike arm. It was a Wednesday when she asked me out for the second time, and she was wearing that watch and it was raining and the windows had steamed up.

Where will we go this time? I asked.

Why do you worry about it? she said, we'll just walk. I couldn't focus on her face.

She arrived at 5.00pm exactly that day. She was wearing the same coat, with a black silk scarf tight around her neck. I could see the tendons as she turned her head. We walked for a few steps before she hailed a cab. This time she led me into her living room and poured me a drink. I could hear water running somewhere close but I couldn't pinpoint it.

What kind of books do you like? she said.

I like books where the monster wins, I replied.

When I got home I noticed that the skin on my fingers looked slightly translucent. I felt weak, like my legs couldn't hold me up anymore. I lay in my bed underneath the window, watching the motes of dust in the air, moving my fingers through them to create whirlpools and currents. That night as I slept I could feel the bedsheets soaking in all the moisture from my skin. When I woke the window was open and it had been raining.

I looked at the clock and realised I was going to be late for work. I might even miss her, our daily ritual. When I tried to stand up my legs collapsed underneath me and I ended up on the floor. When I lifted the blankets I was greeted by a blue glow. I called in sick that day, heaved myself back onto my bed and slept a little more. Yelled to Dad to bring me a glass of water.

You really have to stop this business Lara, he said to me, as he placed it on the coaster on the bedside table. You'll lose your job with all this carrying on.

I was worried that she'd be angry that I'd missed her. I didn't have her phone number, or any means of contacting her if she stopped coming into the café. When I tried to remember the cab journeys to her townhouse my mind strained. All I could see was the soft curve of her cheek, her luminosity.

The next day I woke early and knew I couldn't move. Dad would

be annoyed. I waited until after 7am before I began to yell for him. I could hear him begin running the bath before he came to my door.

I knew this would happen, he muttered, as he came in. You've got to spend a bit more time on the important things – like your job – and stop mooning over girls.

Yeah yeah, I said. I know. Hurry up, I'm gonna be late for work.

I could feel my limbs drape over his arms as he lifted me and carried me to the bath. I heard him go down to the kitchen, the radio go on, the clatter of crockery. As the tub filled I felt the motion come back to my limbs, a twitching in my toes, a feeling of fullness.

When I saw her that morning she didn't look angry at all. She didn't behave like anything was different.

Tonight, she said. I'll meet you here.

That day I drew a picture of a beach on her coffee cup. Of waves lapping the shore, slow and deliberate in their erosion.

When I saw her for the third time, I never left. She met me at the door of the café and there was a hunger in her face I'd not seen before. Her grey eyes looked black. My head felt too heavy to hold up and it lolled against my chest as I stared at her shoes. Black boots, pointed, sharp.

When we entered her house I could hear the water running. Louder than ever. She carried me from the taxi as if I weighed nothing, ran the bath and laid me in it, using her fingertips to carefully peel my sodden clothes away from my skin. She looked me right in the eyes as she began to undress. First, the coat I always saw her in, the thin scarf. Then her slip dress, tights and underwear. For the first time I realised I could see her veins too, through the veil of her skin. She glowed, I glowed.

For the first few days we spent most of our time in her huge tub. We ordered food to be delivered and left on the doorstep, we listened to music, watched the rain against the window. We read to each other, our damp fingers making the pages ripple and crinkle. We marvelled at each other's innards, clearly visible under the water, which we kept topping up to keep warm. Worlds of flesh made coral. As we watched we could see the blood move, turning fainter and bluer by the day. We saw how our lungs pumped air into and out of us, but also how they shrivelled and shrank. We swam, in as much as we could, so close together in such a small body of water. We needed more.

Where will we go? I asked.

You always worry, she said.

We stood and she wrapped me in a towel. I could feel my body disintegrating and I knew she felt the same thing happening to her. She concentrated to lift first one foot, then another, from the tub. We slipped and slid down the stairs, falling into one another, our breath coming hard and fast in our shallow lungs. She led me through the kitchen and the urge to leap into the sink was almost unbearable.

She opened a door I'd not seen before and led me down some tiled steps. The sound of the water was getting louder and louder. There was a pressure behind my eyeballs, I could feel my vision going. I could barely hear her breath anymore. The water running was louder than ever. Still I could not see it. I thought of the steamed-up windows of the café, of her silhouette outside waiting for me. I thought of her fingers grasping cardboard cups, of steam and the screen of the till under my fingertips as I looked at her. She pulled me towards the sound of the water.

With the last of her human strength she lifted away the cover of a drain set in the centre of the floor. The sound of the water rang

out, a clear bell. A call to prayer. We both followed the noise, and slipped inside.

Vauxhall, Christian Anthony

At first he said he worked in the city. But that was just a line he used. He made up jobs, he told me later, and false names, so that men he'd slept with couldn't come looking. In truth he worked for a brewery chain, carrying out spot checks on pubs.

His first move was to compliment my jumper. I was pressed against the bar trying to get served. The barmen all wore leather shorts and some had rings through their nipples. Our hips brushed together in the swell of thirsty men.

I pulled my sleeves down over my fingers and felt his breath in my ear. He joked I made him feel scruffy. Stepping back to take him in, I saw messy blonde hair, a t-shirt with a motorcycle on it and feet that wouldn't stop shuffling.

Admittedly I'd not dressed for a Vauxhall gay bar. But after two bottles of wine and friends keen to call it a night, I'd found the courage to continue.

"Who you here with?" he asked. I met his eyes and caught in them a look I thought I recognised.

"A friend," I lied, pulling my sleeves a little tauter. "But he left. He met someone. They went back to his."

"That's a shame," he said, as if slowly circling a toe in sand.

"Who you here with?" I countered.

"Me? I'm on my own," he grinned. "What you drinking?" I held a

pause which he punctured with a wink.

“White wine.” He raised an eyebrow. As my body blocked his access to the bar, I thought he might manoeuvre a swap. But instead he held my shoulders and turned me round to face the optics. When he ordered, he threw his voice across me like a net. It was then I remembered where I’d seen that look before.

*

I was revising in the library at school. Opposite me was a blonde boy who spent most of his time in the art studios, despite being built like a sportsman. His surname was Hare so everyone called him Bunny. I knew of two girls who’d swapped from French to Art in the hope of becoming his muse.

The library’s hush was enhanced by the sound of turning pages, like brushes on a snare drum. I’d never been alone with Bunny before. He was late to the session and the seat across from me was the only option left. I noticed he wore no tie and the cuffs of his untucked shirt were mottled with inks.

He pulled out a sketchpad. After scratching at the page for a bit, he stopped to chew his pencil. When he yawned, his thick neck flexed. I suspected he’d been caught in the art studios and sent here on penance. If he had, it meant nothing to him. He’d brought no textbooks and my own stash seemed zealous by comparison.

Emboldened by his boredom, in a move which surprises me still, I wrote a note and pushed it towards him. ‘What are you doing?’ it said.

For painful seconds he hunched over the paper, like a plumber considering a blocked pipe. Then he scribbled a response. I tried

not to throw out my hands to grasp it, sliding them instead beneath my thighs. But rather than pushing back the note, he did something extraordinary. He folded the page over and over, so for a moment I thought he was constructing an origami flower. Then a paper aeroplane grounded in the crook of my elbow. Opening it, I read the words, 'I'm drawing but there's nothing to draw.'

Dashing off a reply, I felt my face flushing. 'Draw me if you want.' I imagined him sitting upright, his jaw hardening. Instead, he smirked and spun his pencil.

The thought of his eyes skimming my skin like sweat made my palms itch. Trying not to fidget, I focussed on the librarian, noticing that whenever she stamped a book and passed it to a child, she'd take a tissue from her sleeve and wipe her hands with it. I realised then that adults could be lonely too.

As the bell sounded, Bunny pulled the page from the pad and I saw another extraordinary thing. I wasn't alone in the picture. Our heads were sketched in profile with a wall of books roughed out between us. Bunny looked down at me and winked. He knew the feelings he'd stirred and like a dog he splashed in them before bounding away.

Two months later I was staring out of a kitchen window, waiting for a tap to run cold. A friend had been sick and I was fetching her water. Fairy lights glowed across a garden so dark, the marquee they adorned had vanished. As the jet rumbled into the sink, Bunny crossed the hallway with two other boys in search of beer. I recognised one of them. He'd been caught smoking marijuana in Year Ten, a crime so daring it lent him the allure of a Hollywood cowboy. I used to imagine him in black, having his way with me against a barn door.

The boys staggered towards the utility room and its crates of booze. They were sniggering and never saw me but I thought I heard my name. I edged the tap round to soften the flow. The cowboy said something about showers and the other boy mentioned knees.

“In his dreams,” Bunny said. There was a spurt of laughter. Cans were opened as I turned the tap on full, dousing the sink’s metal surface and the sleeves of my shirt. After that I waited a long time in the empty kitchen, listening to music hum the windowpane, the lyrics indecipherable across the dark garden.

I had my picture nonetheless. I still have it now.

*

I could have slept with this one though. I could have kissed him at the bar, or later as we danced, his hands sliding up under my jumper, or as we stood outside smoking. He imagined it would be as easy as laying a cloth on a table.

“Where you based?” he asked, rolling his cigarette between thumb and forefinger, its fire held downwards.

“In halls, near Waterloo.”

“Ah, what you studying?”

“English.”

“Right.” He ran his tongue along his top lip. “Boyfriend away is he?”

“There is no boyfriend.”

He feigned shock, his heel tapping the ground. "I can't believe that." The tablecloth billowed above me now.

"I'm not going to sleep with you, if that's what you think." A sudden wind pulled the cloth sideways.

He chuckled, his cigarette hovering inches from his mouth. "Who said anything about sleeping together? You're getting ahead of yourself, you are."

Across the terrace a man stood swaying, as if listening to music in his head. He was stood in front of another man who spoke slowly to him. They both held empty pint glasses. Eventually the second man stepped back from the first and stared at the floor. He nudged a cigarette butt with his foot. Then he wandered off in the direction of the fire doors, never looking back at the first man, who continued to sway.

"So tell me why you're single, your age," I asked. "I'm surprised. Handsome like you."

"This handsome man you don't want to sleep with."

"That's right," I smiled.

He crossed one foot over the other, some caution now. "I been single a while. I'm busy, you know? My job. I'm a busy boy."

"All those deals to close?"

"They can't say no. It's the suit." He ran his hand down my back and onto my arse, as if the joke had won it for him.

"I've told you," I said softly.

“Yeah, I know. You don’t want to sleep with me. That’s fine.”

“I really don’t. I mean, not tonight. Sorry.”

His feet finally stilled. “Wow. You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“But we can talk. If you want. Unless you want to find someone else.”

He peered at the sky, at an aeroplane blinking in the dark, and ran his fingers through his hair. In the glow from the patio heater, I noticed he was receding at the temples.

We spoke for over an hour, sat at the far end of the terrace, and smoked a whole packet of cigarettes. He told me of his recent divorce and the child he rarely saw. He admitted he still joked about fucking girls to men at work as they emptied drip trays or signed delivery forms. He said that in gay bars he felt like a teenager again but not always in a good way.

“I don’t talk much. They don’t usually ask all these questions.” He bumped his knee against mine and we both smirked. He told me then of an Irish Catholic father who slapped him when he learnt the truth, and I thought of a midwife slapping the soles of a new-born.

We lost each other later though. I went to the toilet and he never waited in the place he said he would. I think he’d had second thoughts by then about what we’d started. A cloth rubbing softly at the corner of a canvas, revealing a ghostly image. I kissed another man that night, an Italian in a gold t-shirt who lifted me in the air, spinning me drunkenly to the opening bars of ‘Heat Wave’ by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas.

I saw the blonde man again as I was leaving. He was stood on the corner, just past the taxis, with a ginger boy younger than me. His feet had started shuffling. I tried to catch his eye but was too far away. The ginger boy touched the motorbike on the man's T-shirt as my taxi built speed, passing them.

I had my picture nonetheless. I still have it now.

The Bog Lap, Lui Sit

Marina's armpits reeked despite her Rexona antiperspirant. She had forgotten how strong the West Australian sun was. Her last visit had been eight years ago and since then the sun had, impossibly, gained in strength. Her exposed forearms looked seared pink through her Polaroid sunglasses. The customers surrounding her in the alfresco café on the Cappuccino Strip looked dressed for beekeeping. Nothing was exposed, all traces of flesh hidden behind dark protective clothing. For a hot country, they wore a lot of black.

They.

Her lips twitched. She had been a *they*. Until her career ejected her out into the world, traveling across time zones, propelled into office after office until the whole world seemed to wear the same crumpled suit and sit around the same boardroom table. This satellite existence halted in London when years of transience was rewarded with promotion. Travel became actual holidays and an annual trip back to Australia until Carla died. After her sister's death, there did not seem any point returning so often. It felt circuitous, seeing the same people, visiting the usual places and having conversations rehashing a common past that slipped further away in the rear view with each visit. She realised over time that these conversations had become anecdotes, nothing more.

A blowfly landed on her hand, its Giger-esque body vibrating against her skin.

'Shoo!'

'Those blowies eh?' grinned an ancient, toothless fellow at the table next to her. 'They look mean but they don't do harm.'

'Speak for yourself,' Marina thought, waving for the bill.

The thrum of traffic passing on the street by her table was the soundtrack of her youth. She had sat in each and every café on the Strip, drinking coffee, or something stronger with friends, lovers, strangers. Parties had been planned on napkins. Love won and lost. The air around was thick with exhaust fumes and memories.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, despite the bright sun overhead. The noise grew louder, more strident. She rolled her eyes before the choked spitting of a revved-up engine preceded the sight of the souped-up Holden Torana. She grimaced, trying to ignore its peacock journey down the Strip but force of old habit made her look. The gleam of its blue panel reflected her silhouette, passing across her eyesight like a shark's shadow beneath a swimmer's waterlogged vision.

The driver looked her way. Black wraparound sunnies lent him a peevish look. He gunned the engine in one last mechanical fart before turning the corner. Marina sniffed. The car's petrol fumes lingered in the air, a pungent reminder of her adolescence. She checked her watch, waving to the waiter again. She was going to be late.

Nicole's face looked nothing like it had the last time Marina set eyes on her in person. She tried to hide her shock over how much her friend had aged. After they hugged, Marina was ushered into the four-bed brick and tile suburban house, so similar to the one she had grown up in.

'Sit down,' Nicole urged, 'make yourself at home.'

The tropical palm fabric covering the foam on the rattan sofa was worn through. She could feel the bones of the undercarriage poking against her butt.

'Can I help?' she called to the kitchen where Nicole was clattering glassware.

'No, I'm sweet,' came the reply followed by Nicole bearing a laden tray. Marina spotted Iced Vovos, Royals and her favourite -

Arrowroot biscuits. Her mouth watered even though she'd just had a massive bowl of spaghetti aglio for lunch.

'Milk, sugar?'

Marina nodded, watching her old high school friend hand her a teacup and saucer with both hands. It felt very formal.

'So,' Nicole sighed, resting back against the smaller sofa, 'how have you been?'

Marina took a sip of scalding tea.

'Fine,' she lied, her tongue aflame. She used to take Nicole's questions at face value. But over time it became apparent that Nicole was not really interested in her life overseas.

'Tell me how you've been?' she battered back.

Marina ate three Arrowroots during the latest break up story, two Iced Vovos through the insurance payout issue and drained her tea over the neighbour who would not trim the overhanging branches that dropped leaves on Nicole's side of the fence.

'More tea?' Nicole offered. 'Or wine?'

Marina paused. She'd driven, the white hire car was baking under the sun in Nicole's driveway.

'Just a small one,' she relented. She picked up another biscuit.

'What is Arrowroot anyway?' she wondered aloud, eating half the biscuit in one bite, accepting a chilled glass of white wine from Nicole. She took a sip, the crisp floral aroma cracking her reserve a sliver.

Wine in hand, rehashing of their mutual past unfurled with each sip. Old high school stories, teen mishaps, deaths, disease and divorces. *Why did they do it?* Marina always wondered afterwards. Why the same conversations over and over? Was it to find clues, find the reasons why their lives had turned out the way they had?

Marina belched, gagging at her sour wine breath, regretting

the second glass.

‘Oops, sorry.’

Nicole laughed.

‘Do you think you’ll move back?’ she asked.

‘What do you mean?’ Marina straightened. She knew full well what Nicole meant.

‘Back. Home.’

‘It’s not my home anymore Nic.’

‘Ah come on, course it is.’

Marina downed the rest of her wine and stood up.

‘I better get going.’

‘You ok to drive? You might be over the limit.’

The sound of keys in the front door made them turn. The man entering the house was stocky, not tall. A brown beard masked the lower part of his face, wraparound sunglasses, the upper.

‘Here’s Trouble!’ Nicole sprung from the sofa, fluffing her hair, enveloping him in a full body hug. Over her shoulder, he removed his glasses, revealing pale blue pupils.

‘Is that your car blocking the driveway?’ he asked.

‘Sorry,’ Marina mouthed, making towards the front door.

‘Matt, this is Marina, my bestie from high school,’ Nicole said.

‘Marina, you can’t drive.’

‘I’ll Uber.’

Marina edged her way around them, nodded at Matt and slipped out the door. Nicole followed.

‘He’s a bit funny about cars and parking,’ she shrugged. ‘Sorry’.

‘Lucky you,’ Marina thought. She did not mention she recognised him.

The evening breeze cooled her flushed face. He had parked his car obnoxiously close to her rental. She walked up to the blue, the gleam as prescient as ever despite the dusk light.

Her Uber app showed the driver hovering streets away. The

front windows of Nicole's brick house faced her in a blank stare.

There were no cars passing, no pedestrians, no indication that the row of houses had any inhabitants. The quiet had no movement, it felt like everything was holding its breath. She realised so was she. She traced an 'X' with her finger over the Torana's exterior, waiting for the wail of a car alarm.

Nothing.

The front door opening split the silence. Matt emerged, trailed by Nicole. Marina's hand dropped to her side, as if scorched.

'It's not coming is it?' Nicole stated. 'No worries, Matt will take you.'

'Um, I can wait,' stammered Marina, watching Matt duck into the Torana.

Nicole opened the passenger door.

'As if I would leave my old bestie stranded.'

Marina cursed Uber and got in. The Brut aftershave coming from Matt competed with another scent, animal and earthy that was overwhelmingly familiar. Clicking her seat belt, she realised she was sitting on a sheepskin seat cover. Her fingers stroked the wool strands, inhaling the scent of her past.

'We had these covers in our family car when I was little.'

In answer, Matt started the ignition, revving the engine to a guttural hum before revving again.

'Bloody hell,' Marina thought. 'Does he think it's a rocket?'

Without warning, the car reversed abruptly, jolting Marina's head against the head rest. The tyres squealed rubber, straightened before gunning down the street. Marina craned backwards to see Nicole waving from the driveway, her figure shrinking fast.

The air con flooding the front end of the car did not prevent her skirt sticking to her thighs. Reclining on the sheepskin, Marina watched the telephone lines loop past her gaze, their rhythm

broken by the occasional seagull perched aloft. Matt's driving had been smooth. Despite the engine's attempts to redefine the meaning of noise, the drive was uneventful.

'Esplanade yeah?'

She understood it was question but it sounded like a threat.

'Yes, thanks. Esplanade Hotel.'

'Nic said your sister died.'

Marina's throat stalled. She turned to look at him for the first time since getting in. His profile was ruined by the sunglasses.

'Yes. Eight years ago.'

'She was nice. Tragic.'

A few minutes past

'You knew my sister?'

'Yeah, did Nic not say?'

'Nic didn't tell me anything about you,' Marina thought. She shook her head.

'No.'

'We dated but it didn't work out.'

'Oh.' Her voice came out whisper soft, in contrast to the frenzy inside. Carla had dated *him*? She could not think of any reasonable thing to say so instead, stared out the window. The green fluted parasols above wire chairs and table made her realise they were on the Strip.

She watched him lean forward and turn on the music. *Un Bel Di* blared from the speakers, filling the space between them. Surprise stoppered her throat and then she heard laughing. Hers.

'Not Cold Chisel?' she grinned.

It was his turn to laugh. It was a nice laugh.

'Here.'

He opened the front windows all the way down.

The evening seabreeze cooled her face as they cruised the Strip, the noise of the song louder than the noise of the engine. On the Strip, she saw expressions of disgust, revulsion, annoyance intermingled with smiles and punctuations of *onyia*

mate!

'Carla loved it.'

'Doing bog laps?'

He laughed again.

'This song. Close your eyes.'

She did, blocking out all the stares.

Do you see it? He is coming!

I don't go down to meet him, not I.

I stay upon the edge of the hill

And I wait a long time

The engine noise, air conditioning, aftershave, petrol fumes, fading sun overhead coagulated inside of her. She felt unhinged and excited. Two things she had not felt in the longest time, if ever.

'Nearly there,' she heard him say.

The feeling started to fade. She thought about the beige walls of her hotel room and the chintz bedspread. The smell of the sea kept blowing through the open car window.

'No,' she heard herself say. 'Go round again.'

Millimetres, Charlotte Sinclair

Ana and Emma sit outside the cafe, at a table they've lifted, carefully, quietly, to position inside a bright segment of spring sunshine. Two napping babies in two prams are parked side-by-side beneath the awning next to the table. Blankets have been checked and re-tucked; it's cold in the shade.

The pair are NCT friends; intimates and comrades in the early, strung-out, spun-out, desolate, love-soaked weeks of first-time motherhood. They articulate this shared, altered state mostly via ironical WhatsApp messages sent between 1am and 5am. Jokes about phoning the orphanage, first thing. Jokes about double time shifts at the dairy farm. Jokes about losing their minds. Ha, ha. Born at the same hospital within hours of each other, Ana and Emma's daughters are six weeks old. Weird twins, Emma calls them. Twisted sisters, Ana says. The mothers' stitches have healed, but their bones are still adrift. They are familiar with the contours if not the limits of the new country they occupy. They are beginning to understand there are no limits.

At the table beside their matching Bugaboo prams, in this diminishing tranche of time in which they can attempt to be people with thoughts and interior lives before the next feed, Ana and Emma are trying to remember who they were before this kidnapping of brain and body. Without this narrow pattern of orbit or the bright new star at its centre. They can't. They live deep in the minutes, the hours. Their thoughts, freighted, surface slow. It's not important.

Now, they're talking immunisations; the eight-week-jab. Ana is dreading it. Barbaric, she says, to inflict pain on something so defenceless.

"Not as barbaric as diphtheria," says Emma, biting off the end of her croissant.

In her real life, Emma is an intensive care physio at St Mary's. It's her profession that's the source, Ana thinks, of Emma's ruthless lack of sentiment. Not ruthless, Ana corrects herself, watching her friend tip her face up to receive the sun. Emma is not callous. She is proportionate. Reasonable. Capable. Her milk supply is comically abundant. Her friend never steers her pram around others on the pavement; strangers always move out of Emma's way.

Ana frowns and smooths her hand over her tummy, a leftover gesture. She's rubbing nothing but guts.

She feels Emma's gaze. Her friend has a gift for detecting soft collapses invisible to the eye. "What else are you afraid of?" she asks.

"Oh," Ana replies, unnerved. "Everything." She means to be funny, but it's true. The world no longer makes sense to her. Its horrors. Its traps. The baby-murdering perils that lurk everywhere, that it's now her job to anticipate and avoid. She cannot believe how many endangered children make the news each day. She collects the stories like inky gems strung on the thin wire of her anxiety. Motherhood has exposed all of Ana's dark places. It's not pretty.

In the maternity ward, the nurse checking her newborn's hearing told her that childhood accidents are measured in millimetres not centimetres. Ana didn't get it. A few millimetres to the left and the baby loses an eye, the nurse said. Life or death. Harm or safety. The difference is a nothing of a nothing, he said. Ana had grimaced and lifted her daughter into her arms. Where did they find these people?

Now she gets it. Now she is coiled, primed, ready to defend. Vigilance is the price of love.

"Coffee table corners," she says. "Boiling kettles. Oven doors. Paedo babysitters. Seizures. Sepsis. Cot death. Rolling over and suffocating your baby in your sleep."

"The insomnia shit list," says Emma. "Sure, I'll play. How

about dropping the baby when they're all slippery from the bath? Or, those mothers that push their prams straight into traffic, when they're crossing the road? That's an absolute classic, surely."

Ana winces and sips her coffee. Her fingers smell of Sudocrem. She watches blossom scud the pavement. "Remember I said about the forensic tent, near the church yesterday? Someone found a baby in an M&S bag. Beside the bin. It was on the news."

"Oh, shit," says Emma. "Dead?"

Ana nods. The idea of it makes her queasy. She walks past that church half a dozen times every day. The café, where they're drinking coffee, is only three streets away. The proximity feels personal. The proximity feels damning. Reflexively, Ana touches the handle of her daughter's pram. "A boy," she says.

They are silent for a moment as a toddler wobbles by on a balance bike, chasing a pigeon.

"Your mind just goes to the worst," Emma says.

"The worst."

"The fact she left it at the church. Like, she was wanting redemption."

"Near the church," Ana says.

"Could've been trying to leave him on the steps? Got interrupted?"

"Couldn't been trying to leave him for the rubbish truck." Ana sips her coffee.

"Poor fucking woman, either way," Emma sighs. "Even if she's smothered him, out of rage. You know? Just, poor fucking woman."

"The rage," Ana nods. "The rage is real."

Emma drops her voice, as if the babies might be listening. "Last night when she was cluster feeding me to death? I did, like, this demonic whisper-roar. Right in her face. Goooo. Toooo. Sleeeeep." Emma dabs her finger into the cocoa powder on her

saucer and brings it to her mouth. "I guess it's normal."

Ana isn't sure. On the nights when the baby has been awake from 1am until 6am, feeding and fussing and refusing her Moses basket until finally, finally, she's been soothed to sleep only for a flailing arm or hiccup or trapped wind to wake her up, Ana, alone and adrenalized, has been known to tell her perfect infant daughter to shut the fucking fuck up. In these moments, this ferocious vampire whose savagery apparently lives so close to the surface, this stranger unrecognisable to Ana in daylight hours, begins to rock her daughter with a vigour not unlike violence and her baby stops crying to gaze up at her with large, dark eyes, full of surprise.

This is the thing that kills Ana: her daughter's impartial observation of the fiend summoned from the skin of her own mother. The evolutionary impulse that tells her infant to be quiet, pay attention, listen. Her survival instinct, perhaps. Daylight Ana would report that woman, she thinks as she takes a gulp of decaf latte. Daylight Ana is certainly afraid of her.

She can't explain any of it to Emma. Ana wants to remain good in her friend's eyes. She does not want to be an object of pity or concern. Anyway, she doesn't know Emma well enough, not really, not beyond this particular plane of experience. Or, rather, what she knows makes her reluctant. Despite working in intensive care, a place predicated on the understanding, the actuality, of things going horribly wrong, of worst case scenarios all day every day, Emma seems able to live with this knowledge of disaster as a separate entity. She is not invaded by it. She is immune to its proprietorial spread. Ana finds it extraordinary. She finds it incomprehensible. She understands that it is necessary to Emma's job, but it's more than that. Ana can't imagine what it would be like to have, pulling her spine straight, the conviction that everything is going to be alright. They've both been

swallowed whole by new motherhood, Ana thinks, but only one of them has been eaten.

“She must be from round here though, don’t you think?” Emma palms her breasts, checking their fullness. “She could live right there.” She gestures to the upper floors of the apartment block across the road. On the ground floor is a nursery. Toddler hand prints in green paint, cut into the shape of leaves, are Blu-tacked to the window. The same Blu-tack fixes bed sheets to the glass panes of the flats above. Curtains are expensive, Ana thinks.

“Bit stereotyping, isn’t it?” she says, frowning.

Emma looks at her; answers slowly. “She dropped the baby near the church.”

“Wealthy people aren’t religious?”

“I meant the congregation is local. She probably lives nearby.” She looks at Ana. “Are you alright?”

Ana closes her eyes. “Yep. Sorry.”

Emma reaches for her hand and squeezes it.

Ana thinks she understands that mother. She doesn’t. She can’t. She thinks she does. In the maternity ward, after a three-day labour that ended in an emergency c-section, Ana had been so tired she’d begun hallucinating. Lying in her hospital bed, she’d watched as the ghosts of every woman made a mother within those walls softly unspooled from the ceiling and hovered, fretful, over the plastic bassinets. Milk vapours, emanating care; free-floating, ambient exhaustion. The burden they carried was the same, she’d thought; the knowledge was the same. The babies knew it too. Through the night, their cries swelled and rose like the string section of an orchestra, each howl a refrain from the same symphony of need.

Ana rubs her face. She really needs to get some sleep.

The infants will awake soon, hungry for milk, for life. The women sense it even before they see movement from beneath the blankets. The prickling sensation in their breasts that tells them their time is up. That's it, isn't it? thinks Ana. This inarticulate understanding, this language of two, this separateness that is also dependence, this rage that is also love, this certainty that, no matter what, they're in this together.

The Caregiver, Sam Naylor

He watched as a sliver of fragile light shone through the narrow gap between the curtains. It came in waves; at times the light would glare with full intensity, before retreating, leaving nothing but the faintest trace of gold.

His alarm began to beep for the second time that morning.

Hugh sighed, reaching for the thing. The beeping stopped. He lay still, listening to the soft, minute sounds of his bedroom that seemed to shy away from clarity, as if they were ashamed of being heard. Tiny particles of dust were drifting through the light, glowing briefly, before fading into grey. A breeze pushed listlessly at the curtains.

“Morning, Dad” Hugh pushed the door open and entered his Father’s room. He went over to the bed. “It’s time to get up.”

Slowly, lethargically, almost mechanically, the old man’s eyelids blinked against the light. His gaze drifted across the pallid room, passing over photos, chairs and plastic lamp shades, before, at last, it found its way to Hugh.

“The fuck are *you* doing here, Isaiah?” He gave a brief, rasping laugh.

Hugh smiled. “No, Dad, it’s Hugh. Your son. Your youngest son.”

The old man only stared at him, as though there was something about those words that he couldn’t quite grasp.

Hugh sighed, and rose to his feet. He went to where his Father’s wheelchair sat, folded together, leaning against the bedroom wall. Its metal squealed as he pulled it open and locked it into shape; then, he took a pillow and placed it on the seat, flattening it, so that his Father could sit comfortably.

All the while, the old man watched him with clouded eyes. His lips were parted slightly as he uttered ragged breaths, each

one whistling through his throat and then collapsing into silence. For a moment, he opened his mouth as if about to speak, but his tongue faltered, and those wheezing breaths resumed. Hugh rolled the wheelchair towards him.

Breakfast was cornflakes with milk. Hugh was finished long before his Father, who ate with a thin, hesitant appetite. His fingers shook, and every time he took another spoonful, a few drops of milk would fall and splash across the table. Hugh offered to help, but the old man brushed his hand away, working through the cornflakes with a blind determination.

From where they sat, Hugh could see their garden. A tangled mess of overgrown bushes ran along its splintered wooden fence, their twisted branches encroaching on the lawn. A small maple tree was growing at the centre, and, as Hugh watched, a robin landed by its trunk. For some time, it pecked eagerly at the ground, scouring the dirt for any worm that it could find. Hugh wondered whether it had chicks to feed, and, if so, how many of them there were. It was late spring; by now, the chicks would surely have flown the nest, and would soon be ready to leave their parents' care. Or maybe the robin didn't have chicks. Perhaps it was free to hunt for itself, and flit between the gardens at its own, gentle leisure. He'd never know. The bird soon gave up and flew away, a flash of red against the green and brown of the tree.

"It's soggy"

Hugh looked back at his Father. The old man lowered his spoon into the bowl, coughed, and stared at Hugh.

"It's soggy"

"Alright" Hugh said. He got up and took their bowls, going over to the sink to wash them. As he did, he began to think about the day ahead. In half an hour's time he'd have to get his Father's pill box from the bathroom. There were twenty he needed today; Hugh had memorised how often each pill was supposed to be

taken, and in what amounts. It was also likely that the old man would relieve himself. He often did at some point in the morning, and Hugh would need to change his pads before starting work.

Most days, his Father was content to sit in front of the television and watch M*A*S*H for hours. He'd been through the entire box set many times but kept rewatching it; his memory of the show would fade and his passion would be extinguished, but then he'd start again, and that same old excitement would reignite, consuming his entire person. The old man's laughter, harsh and grating, would drift from the living room and into Hugh's office.

It was the very same laughter that he'd heard when he was young, on lazy afternoons once his Father had returned from work. He'd lounge on the sofa, reeking of sweat, and drink his way through bottle of Heineken as M*A*S*H, or some other show, was playing on the Telly. Hugh would sit beside him, laughing whenever he did, but his small, wavering voice would be swallowed, battered down, absorbed by the sound of that bellowing laugh. He remembered how he used to shrink into the cushions.

Lunch had come and gone. Hugh was working on a report when he heard his Father shout; immediately he leapt up from his desk and rushed into the living room.

"What the fuck's it doing?!" The old man was rocking in his wheelchair. Hugh saw that the footage had broken, jumping through shots, and the characters were distorted by blurry squares that flickered across the screen.

"The disc is probably scratched. I'll clean it". Hugh went over to the DVD player.

"Well, why don't you hurry up then?"

Hugh froze.

He turned his head, slowly, towards his Father, and saw, in that moment, that the usual fog had lifted; the old man's eyes glared out from within their sockets, and his body had lost its

fragility; not a trembling muscle could be seen on him. The lids of those burning eyes were pulled back, exposing the veins that crawled across them in an unbroken labyrinth of crimson. They were fixed on Hugh, motionless, unblinking.

“And what are you looking at exactly?”

(Oh - nothing. I was just -

Nothing, hm? Nothing. Is that it?

No, I didn't mean -

DON'T FUCKING LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT!)

“Sorry” Hugh murmured. He whipped his head around and wiped at the disc with several quick flurries of his shirt. The air around him felt heavy. It pressed against his skin, and every intake of breath seemed to hang inside his throat, until he forced it down and into his aching lungs.

A news program had come on in the absence of M*A*S*H; now a woman was talking at the screen, whilst images of broken buildings, billowing smoke, flashed across the display behind her. People were stumbling through the ruins. Their clothes were smeared with grit, dirt, and even blood; many of them wore bandages, and stared, numbly, at the camera that was filming them.

“A Russian airstrike has hit a children’s hospital in Mariupol, killing four people and injuring at least sixteen...”

Hugh finished cleaning the disc and pushed it back into the DVD player. The machine whirred, and, soon enough, M*A*S*H was back on the TV, replacing the group of hollow-eyed refugees. Hugh sat there, completely still, as the episode continued to play.

Eventually, he rose to leave, and when he did, he took one last look at his Father; the fog had returned. The old man was watching the show with his usual fascination, as though it were the most important thing in the world, and nothing else was worth considering.

Once he was out of sight Hugh rushed upstairs and into the bathroom, then closed the door and locked it. He sat on the toilet and tried to relieve himself, but only managed a small trickle. He got up and flushed the toilet. There was barely any soap left in the container but he turned the tap on anyway and washed his hands until they were red, when he realised he was wasting water and turned the tap off.

He stood there for a while, unmoving, staring down at the sink. His hands clutched its granite rim, and his knees were trembling. He tried to focus on his breathing, feeling each rush of air sweep his lungs; his heart was beating frantically, sending waves of acid fear shooting through his chest.

(I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to!)

Hugh looked up. His reflection stared back at him from the bathroom mirror with wild, desperate eyes and a tightly clenched jaw. A few thin wrinkles were emerging on his face, his pale, drooping face, unmarked by any colour.

(I love you Daddy please please I love you -)

He raised a hand to his cheek and held it there, feeling the smooth, unbroken skin around his eye as he listened to the water that was dripping from the tap.

When Hugh came out of the bathroom he went downstairs and made dinner for his Father. It was early evening, and the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon. He gave the plate to his Father, and the old man smiled faintly, nibbling at the food as M*A*S*H played on and on. Hugh patted him weakly on the shoulder. He left him eating and went back to his office, where, for the remainder of the evening, he stared numbly at his computer.

“Bloody room smells funny,” the old man said.

“Does it?” Hugh sniffed the air, but noticed nothing strange. Regardless, he went over to the window and began to pull it

open. By the silver glow of the streetlamps, he could see a thin shower of rain that was falling through the night. In the end, he only left a tiny gap, so that a little air could get in, without making his Father cold.

“Are you going to be alright, Dad?”

The old man grunted. Already, he was lying still in his bed, chest rising and falling with every shallow breath. Hugh crossed the room and turned off the light, but before he could close the door he heard his Father speak.

“You’re a good lad, Hugh. A very good lad”

Hugh froze. For a while, he simply stood there, without responding. It was too dark to see his Father’s face; only a hint of light was piercing through the curtains, and with it, the sound of rain came drifting from the window. Hugh listened. Mingled with the rainfall, he heard his Father’s breathing, soft and rhythmic, almost smooth.

“Goodnight, Dad” He closed the bedroom door.

Sleep did not come for him that night. A mess of thoughts whirled throughout his brain, clearing away his exhaustion. Hugh tried to quiet them but they wouldn’t lie still; he groaned, and turned over in the bed.

It was no use. Hugh got up and went over to the window.

The street gleamed beneath the lamps. Their light rebounded off the painted hoods of cars and sparkled in the water that lay across the street, traces of the rain that had fallen just before. His window rattled as a gust blew against it, rushing away into the darkened sky.

Hugh stood there for some time as the night crawled on, watching the occasional car that drove along the street. A fox crept between the houses, rustling through the bins; it only found a few, meager scraps. As Hugh watched, a pair of teenage boys wandered down the street, whispering together in hushed, excited voices. Their laughter rang through the night, spilling

over itself in waves of easy joy, before it faded, leaving only silence.

Hugh watched them go, until they were out of sight. He sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. Somewhere, far above, a plane roared through the empty, starless sky, carrying its passengers beyond his world, to another, distant land.

Since the Fish Started Screaming,

Sam Dawson

His wife hates him for it and insists it's torture, but she was fine with it before, just like everyone else, so what does it matter now they scream?

Jon stands in the garage with the door open and packs his tackle box with hooks, lines and bait. His car is behind, on the driveway. He brings his box out and puts it in the trunk, along with his rod. He'll pick up some drink on the way.

The curtain in the upstairs window billows. The kid is peeking down at him from behind the veil. When he looks up, she scurries away, back to the darkness of her bedroom. Jon enters the house, thinking he hasn't spoken to her today, thinking maybe he'll say good morning-goodbye.

In the kitchen by the front door, his wife holds her mobile in one hand and a large glass of white wine in the other. She says hold on a sec to the person she's talking to, one of her girlfriends, and silently glowers.

Jon takes a moment to decide on a course of action. He steps into the kitchen, wrapping her small hand with his and trying to force the glass of wine down and onto the kitchen counter. There's a tremendous pressure between them, a rope pulled taut in a game of tug-of-war, but he relents, and she swings her arm away, and wine leaps out of the glass and splatters against the tiled floor, settling in a urine-coloured puddle.

The voice on the other end of the phone is asking what's happening. She raises the mobile to the side of her head and asks for one more second. When she does this, Jon can see a reddish-brown bruise on her arm in the shape of his handprint, from when he grabbed her in their argument the night before.

“I’m going fishing,” he tells her.

“Of course you are,” she replies.

*

He forgets speaking to the kid, leaves town in his car, and stops at the gas station on Route 11 to buy some whiskey. As he opens his wallet to fish for cash, the gas station attendant eyes him in this way that makes him feel judged. He wants to tell her to speak up if she’s got something to say. He wants to reach out and hit her. But Jon knows not to hit women.

Outside the gas station doors are some flowers for sale, lilies and wilting roses and tulips. Everything smells of pollen and petroleum. He imagines himself kicking out and beheading the flowers, leaving only thin green stems and piles of petals. But that’s no way to express himself, so he holds it in, makes himself hold everything in.

*

Not many go out on the lake since the fish started screaming. To Jon’s surprise, today there are two boats, his and another man’s. They float thirty feet apart, both within the shadow of the nearby island, avoiding the fury of the midday sun. The water is silent save for a gentle hushing as it rocks against the land mass’s shore.

If Jon had a son, he would take him fishing on days like these. He can’t relate to his daughter. The kid is made in the image of his wife. She’s quiet, withdrawn, brooding. Occasionally she’ll complain about something, make a big fuss, but she always shuts up in the end.

He swigs from the whiskey inside its brown paper bag and grunts.

That’s when his line tugs. There’s pulling and, without leaning forward or back, without getting excited, Jon reels it in. The stranger in the nearby boat stops fishing to watch. It’s not much of a battle. With a yank and a ripple, ripping through the surface comes a wailing trout, flopping about in the air like a flag

in the wind.

Jon winces at the fish's cry. It's intersex, a low moan like a man but high-pitched at its end, like a woman's scream. He grabs hold of the trout and unhooks it. One hand holds it against the floor of the boat, the other grabs his short metal club. He hits the fish once, twice, three times. The screams stop each time it gets hit but start up again the moment the club is back in the air. On the fourth hit, the screaming stops. The trout lies still.

He finds himself breathing heavily, as if he's just been running. He takes his cap off to wipe the sweat from his forehead. The stranger in the other boat whistles and calls out to say it's a nice catch. Jon smiles in thanks. He glances around the boat and realises he's left his cooler at home. It's not like he intended to cook his catch anyway. You simply have to kill them now, to stop all the noise.

The stranger rows closer. "Make some racket, don't they?" he says, and steadies his boat so it's six feet away.

"Less noise than back home, anyway," Jon replies. This isn't true but feels like the thing to say.

It makes the stranger laugh. "Fishing for a break from it all?" he asks.

"My wife was drinking this morning. Ten a.m."

The stranger prepares to cast his line. He bobs his head and remarks, "Something's gone wrong there."

Jon grunts in response. He doesn't like this comment. It feels like he was set up in some way, lured into sharing details of his life and then cast as the bad guy. The gas attendant tried to do similar with that chastising look in her eye. Jon glares at the stranger and wonders if it would be too rude to simply row away.

Instead, together, they fish.

The stranger whistles some of the time, an indistinct tune, or otherwise makes comments about the weather, about how peaceful it is out here on the lake. Jon agrees and tries to keep his eyes on the water. He can't help glancing every so often at

this other man. There's something about him he dislikes.

It's then Jon notices the stranger's duffle bag, at the back of his boat. There's a tiny Confederate flag stitched into it like a badge. Rare to see north of Mason-Dixon. There's another stitched emblem too. An eagle. Jon wonders if it's meant to be an American eagle but recognises it more as a Roman insignia. He looks at the stranger warily.

There's a ripple, and the stranger announces he's got something. Now it's Jon's turn to watch as the stranger begins reeling in his line. The stranger is excited, leaning forward as if ready to dive into the water and grab the fish himself. His battle takes a good three or four minutes, and as it wears on, the sound of the fish's scream begins to sound from below the surface, an echoed, distant wail as if coming from the far end of a tunnel.

At last, out of the water arrives a three-foot-long catfish. The barbels look like a majestic moustache, something you'd see at Chinese New Year on one of the golden, sparkling dragons. The falling water combines with the sun to create a tiny rainbow behind the creature's wide flailing body.

Its scream is louder than any fish Jon's ever heard. It sounds like a thousand different voices, all human, slowly and agonisingly perishing at once. The stranger is standing. He swings his rod, making the creature fly through the air toward his boat. Bizarrely, inelegantly, he holds onto his rod and keeps the fish on the hook, dangling, before grabbing his wooden mallet and striking the creature's head. It makes Jon think of a slaughterhouse, animal hanging, death delivered too slowly by clumsy, inexperienced hands.

It takes five hits with the mallet and, unlike the trout lying in Jon's boat, the catfish doesn't stop wailing until it draws its last. It makes a dull, loud squelching sound when the stranger drops it into his cooler.

"Thought it'd never shut up," the stranger says with a grin.

Jon begins to feel queasy. While the stranger is attending to

his catch, Jon picks up the trout's corpse and drops it into the water with a small plop. He winds his line in and begins to pack up. The stranger notices and asks if he's going already.

"Yeah," he replies.

"Alright. Well, nice meeting ya'."

Jon rows his boat around the island, stopping once he's past the bend and out of sight. He floats in the shadow, looking at the water's surface, and thinks of all the fish down there in the depths, each with their own voice, their own wail. He wonders how it is that the fish started screaming. He wonders if they've taken the voices somehow, taken them from humans who now travel through life without words. He wonders how long they've been screaming and why it's taken so long for them to be heard.

*

On the drive home, Jon stops at the same gas station on Route 11. He picks out a bouquet of tulips and brings them inside to the same attendant as before. She rings up the purchase, quirking an eyebrow as he takes out his wallet to pay.

Back in his car, Jon throws the bouquet onto the passenger seat, sits behind the wheel. He squints in the sun's glare, beaming hot through the windshield. He still wonders. Wonders what the cashier wanted to say with that look in her eye. Wonders why they don't all just come out and say it.

He's listening now.

Jon, in the car, in his own head, fingers gripped to the wheel, sincere, angry.

Tell him what the damn problem is.

Jon, thinking of his wife, of the kid, sincere, guilty.

Tell him the problem.

Jon, sighing deeply, sincere, ashamed.

The same way the fish do.

The same way they scream.

The Abbey Lawn, Georgia Boon

My daughter is lying on her stomach, the grass vivid around her. I am perched above, sitting at a picnic table, watching the stones of the abbey ruin thrust into the sky, the weight and wonder falling upwards until suddenly, it stops and vanishes. Half an arch remains, taller than the trees, taller than any building I can think of. My mind cannot help but complete the curve, tracing it through the air and back down into the ground. But we haven't come to imagine what was lost. We have come to admire the ruin.

I've told my daughter that we are here so she can get ideas for her first art project of secondary school. The topic is 'negative space.' But in truth I needed to get out. I haven't told her that he came back, that we needed to run to somewhere. This was the only place I could think of to bring her to, the old abbey near my grandmother's that I knew so well as a child.

'The aesthetic is perfect,' I told her as I locked the front door behind us.

The sun makes my daughter's pale skin bright. I can feel mine recoiling, shrivelling under its glare. She flips through the guidebook, sips diet coke from a glass bottle through a stripey pink and white straw. She looks up at me, her eyes new. They haven't opened and closed enough times to form creases yet.

'Do you think he's here, mum?'

For a moment I think she is asking about the 'he' we have escaped.

But when I ask 'who?' she says that according to the guidebook, beneath her belly are the bones of King Arthur.

I don't think he's here. He's an imaginary King, to begin with. Hard to bury someone who never existed. My grandmother used to say that the monks made the story up when their revenues

collapsed, after they'd been found kidnapping village girls for pagan rituals.

They were nearly ruined. But then the plague came, and they claimed King Arthur. Pilgrims paid to die here, so their bones could rest beside the remains of Merlin's protégé.

'What do you think?' I ask her.

'Sure, why not,' she shrugs. She taps the lawn with her fist.

'Hello down there.'

Hardly any other visitors are here. A woman using a mobility scooter and her daughter, both dressed in black, with scraped back hair and tattooed fingers, are sheltering from the sun under the thin awning at the serving hatch. I smile at them as we pass, following the route to the holy well.

I am realising that coming here might have been a miscalculation. He wouldn't have come to the house again. He'd looked scared when I pulled out my phone to call the police. But being here might give her more space to ask questions.

She walks with light, easy movements, a half skip. In an alcove above the well is a crumbled head, bent in compassion, looking down at her. The statue had its face stoved in by Henry the Eighth's men, idol hunting, reforming by smashing forms.

My daughter touches her fingers to the tiny spring, bowing her head reverently. I picture a long line of penitents standing behind her, waiting to let the water run redundantly over their sores and buboes, crying with the pain of faith.

'It feels...cool', she says, turning to me with a smile. 'Maybe it'll cure your allergy to washing up,' I say.

She wants to go into the crypt. I tell her it's not very nice down there, where the Abbot was found hanging after they discovered his altar.

'I'm not a baby. I promise it won't give me nightmares.'

She takes my hand and says 'It's just some creepy old monks.' That definitely doesn't help.

The crypt sucks the heat out into its white walls. A chariot is daubed above the altar in yellow and brown paint. Four fine horses snort at its helm.

'That's Helios. He carried the sun through the sky on this little chariot gizmo,' she says. And then moving her hands to the altar beneath the mural, the slab of stained alabaster. 'Look, there's still blood on it,' she says. 'It soaked in.'

The villagers took the masonry, every piece of it they could reach, to the town, and sold it for the walls of gatehouses, to be topped with soft sandstone lions. But they left this altar.

My daughter places her palms flat against the stone. I want to tell her not to.

'The girls weren't always virgins when they killed them.

Sometimes the monks couldn't wait,' she says.

The cool ring of air evaporates and I am hot, hotter than when we had been on the abbey lawn. My breath comes in snatches and my hair is sticking to my neck.

'Mum?'

I can't meet her eye. I say I'm too hot, that I need another cold drink.

Outside the cafe I hold the chilled water bottle against my cheek. The mother and daughter with the mobility scooter have gone now, but they have left two cigarette butts on top of the little ashtray in the bin. One of them still has a line of smoke coming from it. I think about picking it up and taking a drag.

'Why don't we go to the gift shop?' my daughter says. 'It's air conditioned.'

Inside, there are little velveteen hedgehogs with ribbons in their spines. And pots of marmalade. The central display is of a special kind of silver spoon that the monks used to make here. I imagine the metal pressed out of moulds in a factory and slid into plastic boxes.

My daughter picks up one of the spoons.

'What? They just have a bunch of monks whittling spoons in

a basement somewhere?' I don't tell her that whittling isn't for metal. Or about the factories.

There's a woman behind the counter. She has an elaborate perm and long, glittery purple fingernails.

My daughter picks through the basket of fridge magnets on the counter.

'Have you been down to the crypt?' says the woman. She's seen thousands of teenagers pass through here, electric with morbidity from the subterranean horror.

'It's quite nice down there really,' my daughter says. 'I liked that picture. Helios.' 'Ah no, it's Phaethon, Helios' son. You can tell from the horses,' says the woman.

'Helios has three pale horses, and one dark. Phaethon always has four white horses.' She slides a leaflet about the mural across to my daughter.

I wonder for a moment if the stories of what happened in the crypt are fabrications, like King Arthur's bones. The marks on the altar made with red wine, the monks trying to find new ways to get people to come.

On the way out, we see a monk coming towards us, carrying a tray. The order lives in the new building on the other side of the well now. He doesn't look at us. Maybe they have a rules about not speaking to teenage girls. Something is glittering on the tray.

My daughter attempts a surreptitious nod. 'Spoons,' she whispers.

There is a bundle of maybe sixty shining metal spoons tied with a green ribbon.

Metal-working tools are arranged neatly next to the shining sheaf.

'Guess he's one of the whittlers,' she says as she leads the way through an arched hedge and into the ornamental gardens.

The fish ponds are teeming with life. As she trails her hands

behind her, airplane arms along the edge of the water, the glinting forms follow, as if drawn by a magnet. Today she has not asked to know anything more than this.

Life Drawing, Mary Byrne

She'd dreamt of her husband again. His face, his shoulders. They were making love. His shoulders were the best part of him – beautifully formed, smooth skin, freckled.

She woke completely. Her husband stood at the foot of the bed, leaning over, trembling, sweat pouring like rain from his forehead onto the carpet. The doctor had explained it was the body's way of ridding itself of the alcohol. When someone reached this stage, it was almost hopeless.

She sat up. 'Are you alright?' An absurd question.

'I can't stop shaking.'

'Lie down and I'll bring you some tea.'

'How on earth is that going to help? I'm ill, for God's sake!' He was shouting.

She didn't retort. The episodes of aggression were becoming more frequent, though she found those easier than when he was calm. Then it was like listening to a child: the same subjects repeated in the same voice. The poison was destroying his brain too.

She left him some tea and toast, then went to work.

It was the first day of the college year. She skim-read the list of attendees for the ten o'clock class. A motley group, some old hands who were actually quite skilled now, some beginners, a few Sixth Formers from local schools sent so that their students could show basic knowledge of life drawing for art college applications.

In the studio, she gave the class the usual introductory warning.

'We must respect each other *and* the model. I know this group – she didn't yet – won't need that explained. The college doesn't tolerate any discourtesy.'

The students nodded. She smiled at Paul and Natalie who came every year. The Sixth Formers looked terrified.

The model was Ellie who knew instinctively the poses wanted and didn't need to have them constantly explained.

'We'll start with quick five-minute sketches of the standing figure. Use whatever medium you want. Try to get the whole figure in.' She put on her alarm.

Everyone started drawing, some tentatively, the old hands with more confident marks. The alarm went off.

'Students, please stand back, right back. Is anything obviously wrong? Have you got the head too big? The legs too short? Don't worry. These are common mistakes.'

Then she gave them the spiel about heads. 'We humans communicate mostly by looking at faces. Faces are so important that we tend to think they are bigger than they actually are.'

And so it went on. Everyone relaxed: the old hands felt at home, the newbies gave it their best. The Sixth Formers were surprisingly good.

The next class was more experienced and knew how to measure with a pencil.

'Don't take it for granted you know what you see,' she warned, then asked Ellie to lie flat on the floor with her head towards them. 'Measure.'

She skipped lunch as there was an appointment with her husband's GP.

She didn't know whether her husband had gone to work, but wasn't going to phone to find out. They both knew he would be dismissed soon. The only question was whether the firm would give him a medical pension. Alcoholism in itself didn't constitute a disability.

The GP seemed resigned. Or was it bored?

'What I want to know,' she said, 'is whether he can go into hospital again.'

The GP busied himself arranging papers. He seemed ill himself – pale, hair thinning, dark shadows under the eyes. She knew he wasn't supposed to answer questions about another patient, even a husband, without permission.

He sighed and looked up at her. 'You mean to dry out?'

'Yes.'

'Has he asked you to find out?'

'No, he doesn't know I'm here.'

'He's already had one go, Mrs Fraser, and he wasted that.'

'He kept going for a month.'

The doctor didn't reply.

'He'll be dead if he doesn't,' she said.

'It's out of my hands.' The doctor stared past her, as if God or some other superhuman power were there, whose hands her husband was in. 'We can't offer more than one opportunity in this area.'

'But that's ridiculous!'

'It's the way things are, I'm afraid.' He paused. 'In any case, it's your husband's *choice*, you know.'

'He's got an addiction, not a propensity for eating cakes,' she shot back.

The doctor slid the papers to one side and gave her his full attention. 'It's his *choice*,' he repeated. 'At some stage in getting drunk, you *choose* to continue.'

So that was his view and he wasn't going to relent. She stood up.

'Thank you for seeing me.'

'Any time,' he said limply.

She made it to the toilets and began to cry. Suddenly, there was an inevitability to everything.

When she reached home, he was in his study, staring at the computer screen. She didn't know whether he was working.

'How's it been today?' She couldn't see his face to find out how bad things were.

'OK.'

'Did you go to work?'

'They didn't need me.'

They probably didn't want him.

'I'm going to make chicken. Do you want any?'

He nodded.

'Will you eat it?'

Then he did turn towards her. 'You're not my mother!' he shouted, his dark eyes glittering.

'No, I'm bloody not!' she shouted back.

She gritted her teeth and went to the kitchen. There was no point in an argument; he wouldn't remember later. She thought again about leaving but that time was long past.

She took him a plate of chicken and boiled rice, but when she opened the study door, he was gone. She crept up to the bedroom. He lay flat on his back, still dressed, fast asleep, or was it unconscious? He snored loudly. An empty whisky bottle lay discarded on the floor.

She went round the house searching for more bottles – in pockets of unused coats, at the bottom of the spare wardrobe, under the tool box in the garage – but found none. What was the point in checking anyway? He'd just slip out to the local convenience shop and re-supply.

She slept in the spare bedroom, and dreamt about him again. It was bizarre to dream of a person's beautiful body when he was disintegrating in front of you. Perhaps she was going mad.

Next day, she had a life drawing class for the more advanced students. The model was Hughie, an elderly man who'd been a miner and still had a strong torso though now his figure tapered away to the skin and bone of his legs. He was ashamed of his feet and always wore his boots though he took them off at the

last minute. He wasn't supple and could only hold standing poses for a short time, but his body was a maze of interesting shapes and lines. Soon the class was hushed in concentration.

One of the students stayed behind afterwards, one who thought he knew better than her. 'I've nothing against Hughie,' he said, pausing, 'but can't we draw someone more attractive?'

'Everyone's body is beautiful in a different way,' she said. 'I've never seen anyone naked when I didn't think that.' She meant it – or had meant it until now. She'd had many arguments with her sister, a nurse, who had witnessed some horrible injuries and didn't agree. 'The true artist doesn't see things like other people,' she said.

The student frowned. 'Are you religious, Miss?'

'No, I don't think so.'

He was grimacing now.

'Besides,' she said, capitulating a little, 'it's the college's policy that you should draw a wide range of subjects.'

At home, her husband lay on the couch asleep, his head towards her. His face was yellowed with jaundice and his body bloated. The student would have balked at drawing him, but upstairs, she had page after page of the lithe young hero of her dreams.

Later, she heard the kitchen drawer slide open and the clink of cutlery. He would be making a snack. After yesterday's aggression, it was better to keep out of his way.

At night, she woke in the dark. A noise. She was never totally asleep anymore. More noise – a scraping sound from the bathroom. She jumped out of bed.

He lay on the vinyl floor. He was conscious, his dark eyes staring at her, pleading. There was a long gash on his forehead and blood ran down onto his cheek.

'What've you done?' she shrieked.

'I tripped. Hit my head on the washbasin.'

She grabbed a wad of cotton wool, soaked it, and wiped

the skin. The wound wasn't deep. She pulled out a clean towel. 'Hold it tight until the bleeding stops.'

Like a child, he obeyed. She remembered doing this for an actual child who'd tripped in the playground when she'd taught at a junior school. The same lowered, meek head.

'What should I do?' he said.

'Sit there for a minute. You'll still be in shock.'

They sat huddled together as if in a conspiracy until he felt able to stand. Then she took his arm as he slouched slowly to the bedroom where a table lamp shed a miserable yellow light. She helped him lie down, a clean towel over the pillow.

He smiled wanly. 'Thank you.' He was soon asleep.

Downstairs, she put on headphones and played the loudest music she could find: the '1812 Overture', Verdi's 'Dies Irae', the 'Ode to Joy'. This last was a bad choice. Their first proper date had been a performance of Beethoven's Ninth at the Festival Hall. Afterwards, they had walked along the Embankment, holding hands. She put the sound up until her ears hurt and she had to clench her teeth.

She realised she was crying, great teardrops falling onto her lap. Her workbag of drawing materials leant against the neighbouring chair as if to torment her further. All hope of doing any artwork of her own had disappeared aeons ago in the horror of everyday. She'd stopped answering calls from artist friends who wanted her to exhibit; she'd stopped answering calls, full stop. If anyone still phoned. Her reflection in the long dining room mirror stared back at her: older, tired, faded denim blouse, greying hair scraped back with a green band. 'Self Portrait of an Artist in Despair'. Like Egon Schiele or Kathe Kollwitz or any Expressionist artist she admired from World War One or the Depression.

The comparison made her laugh and she kicked the workbag which fell over. An old sketchbook, a stick of charcoal and a box of pastels spilled out like an invitation. It was absurd to

think of drawing in the present circumstances, but the circumstances weren't going to improve and hadn't improved for the artists she loved. She leant the book on her knee, and tentatively, grudgingly began to indicate a head, and then the old desire returned and with bold strokes of black, ultramarine and angry lemon yellow, she drew her face. Just as it was.