

The Manchester Anthology 2017

A COLLECTION OF NEW WRITING



The Manchester Anthology

2017

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Foreword
By Geoff Ryman

'It might be bleak out there, but it's often beautiful.'
– Sam Case, one of this Anthology's fiction editors.

Last semester an MA student asked a visiting publisher, 'You all keep saying that you want something fresh and unique, and then you publish what's familiar and like something else. Which is it?'

Ouch.

Teaching that term seemed to be about finding a balance between being familiar enough to readers (and yourself) and offering the public something unfamiliar, something uniquely yours.

Teachers of creative writing should feel guilt, continually – or at least grave prophylactic trepidation. We give feedback on other people's work, trying to divine who they might be as writers once they have arrived. We risk discouraging them; we risk flattering them; we have to make clear that our feedback is based on our own private aesthetic, which is not absolute – there is no one right aesthetic. They must develop their own aesthetic for themselves.

That aesthetic comes from their reading and their response to it. What they like and why, what bothers them and why. Critiquing of each others' work during the course helps to develop that aesthetic. A clear idea of what you think is 'good' helps develop craft, rules of thumb, editing, and an ability to spot plot holes.

But learning how to imagine, to recreate life through someone else's eyes, to have a personal view of life and to shape all that into a story – that is

something individual. It happens in quiet, solitude, privacy.

We have to help writers find that privacy and trust it. That quiet moment of the self when nothing else matters – not readers, not their Moms, not critics, or the workshop, not the tutor, not publishers, agents or how to get one, best seller lists, not Goodreads or Amazon star ratings. None of it. In the end the source of what is different is the private self.

It is dismaying that creative writing workshops might be destroying that privacy, encouraging people to write like anyone other than themselves.

Look at that question the student asked. The publisher's answer was so complex that I can't remember it.

What I see looking over these stories is a striving to appeal while finding something unique for themselves.

The students are bouncing off genres like the detective novel, fantasy fiction, and YA fantasy.

Here be fictions that combine a touch of *Gone Girl* with something more Gothic, with suspicions of the supernatural. Here be stories such as the one narrated like *The Lovely Bones* by someone who has died, but in order to tell a realistic life story.

Here be tales of adventure set in Panama, historical fiction set in the battle of Damietta in 1219, a disturbing fantasy with a moral and another about a miraculous birth in an alt history Turkey. For me an excerpt that unites many of these themes is the dystopian tale about refugees surviving in families after a social catastrophe – dark, violent and compelling.

I asked the student fiction editors what they felt were the trends they noticed while going through the prose fiction.

Phil Olsen noticed that several stories dealt with images of hospitals, surgery or blood.

Phil writes, 'Sexuality, second-guessing and rejection are explored and exposed in a few of the novel extracts'.

Jealousy and rivalry run through a night out, while up in Edinburgh, an unconventional pair find themselves constantly looking over their shoulders.

A male protagonist has traded cruising on The Common for civilised dinner parties, but he can't quite escape its pull. Urban decay formed the backdrop or setting for a number of the fiction pieces. Characters sit between the scrapyard and the cemetery, by the Biffa bins. A pub for illicit meetings is a mishmash of refurbishment residue, and there is a layer of smog still hanging in the air that could choke you if you breathe in too deeply.

Sam Case also noticed strands of violence. And a strand in the stories about family. 'This is where the hope is, it seems,' she writes. A protagonist remembers his grandfather, who teaches him that 'pain is only passing.' His father's love for them both is obvious, however unable he is to express it in words.

'The fierce love of another character for her teenage son keeps her fighting for survival. A refugee family is exhausted, but together.

Someone else is taken on walks by her father as a child. He teaches her that wild animals deserve their freedom, a freedom that she seeks herself as an adult.'

The situation with poets could not be more different. Poets avoid the lure of mass-market success. Poetry is acknowledged to be shared privacy – even when made public in live performance.

One poem seems to be about how to exist after a life has been ruined, and the ability to create a home out of simple and universal comforts. Another poet focuses on the occupation of a space left by someone who has possibly died. Perhaps grief is as private as it gets.

Three of our storytellers also write poetry. They capture private moments,

with motherhood being a common theme; one calls a mother a Sledgehammer, while another makes a hero of a mother figure.

The third writes as a mother to her daughter in a poem about reading poetry.

One poet celebrates laddishness and its comeuppances, even though it circles back around to Mum, while another takes a moment in the life of someone with his name but describes how it might be filmed, made public.

Teaching creative writing sometimes makes me feel like I'm sending people off to a future in which nobody speaks their language; one that really needs them to work in bars, in call centres or as receptionists in hair salons. Only their wits and determination will see them through.

For the time being at least, they evidently have each other. Literature is a social process that defines and then produces beauty in words.

This here in your hand is pretty good example of that process in action.

Memories of the sun

Age 14

My father pulls the rake through the leaves. 'It's all mud. Nothing but mud underneath.'

'All this came down from the garden?' My voice comes out louder than his, breaking as I speak. It sounds wrong, too awkward for the wet autumn morning and the cinematic sun. I feel like the actor who forgot to learn his lines. We stand where the grass ends at a knee-high ledge. Stained streaks of muddy water have left trails over the small wall down to the patio. It's hard to see the concrete beneath the mud and leaves.

My father doesn't answer me. His eyes scan the garden with disappointment, as if it should come alive to accept his blame. He hands me the rake and begins to climb the patio wall, his massive hands pushing against puddled water and golden leaves. I watch his body strain. He grunts and I see his breath fill the air. I move closer. His face is wrinkled in pain. Standing back up with a wince, he takes the rake from me.

I follow the back and forth of the rake's teeth as it parts the mud, collecting the odd leaf. 'What's it like getting old?' I ask.

My father pauses to look at me. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, do you feel more tired?' It takes him a moment to reply. There is more silence between us. I imagine a cold valley, full of chimney smoke so thick it is churned by the wind, like currents unsurfaced by a storm. In my mind, we both listen to the valley breathe, and we both watch yellow lights pulse beneath the smog.

'Everything hurts more, I suppose.' My father stops, and I almost mistake him for falling into silence again. He locks his gaze with mine, and I see his expression morph into one I do not recognize. I see a weakness in him, for the first time in my life. 'It's not about feeling tired. It's about feeling beaten.'

Age 10

My grandfather speaks to me, holding my hand in his. He kneels to look at my hand, his wide blue eyes ready to spill over his tortoiseshell glasses. The bulbous drop of blood hovers at the rim of my nail. It is inspected from

every angle, every viewpoint possible, before it is softly wiped away.

‘See? The pain is only passing.’ My grandfather folds the stained napkin and tucks it into his shirt pocket. His soft Dutch accent calms me. ‘Once the appearance of pain is removed, or improved, it is easily forgotten. That is the way God designed us, you understand?’ He raises an eyebrow at me, before smiling and holding me tight to his chest. I can smell coffee and a hidden, sickly sweetness on his clothes. ‘To dwell on pain in the mind is to give it new life. The imagination plays tricks, sometimes.’

I do not fully understand what he means, but I nod anyway. He smiles again, his cheeks wrinkling up beneath the bottom of his glasses. The garden around us is full of beautiful flowers, each one being carefully tended to by my grandmother. I watch her bob down gracefully to water the soil, or remove a dead leaf here and there. It is done as one fluid, delicate process.

My grandfather notices me becoming distracted and tries to reclaim my attention. ‘You remember the story your father tells you, about my ear in the war? About the bullet that made me deaf?’ I nod repeatedly. It is a story I have heard many times, and one I am always eager to hear again. ‘Well, that is a good example of what I am talking about. Sometimes, if I am thinking about my ear too much, I hear nothing, nothing but ringing.’ He pauses for effect, holding a hand to his bad ear and looking around in mock confusion. ‘But when I do not focus on it, I hear much more. Sometimes I will even completely forget that it is not right.’ My grandfather stares off into the flowers for a few seconds. He chews his lip and turns back to me, placing his hands on my small shoulders. ‘That is a real man. A man who can accept not just physical pain, but mental pain as well. A man who can take control of his thoughts.’ He grins, and waits for my reply.

‘I don’t understand,’ I say quietly.

My grandmother, without taking her eyes off the flowers, interrupts my grandfather before he can explain further. ‘Leave the boy alone Coenraet, he’s too young for your silliness.’

My grandfather pretends to be shocked, before laughing mischievously and ushering me towards her. ‘Go on now, go help your grandmother with the flowers. You will understand when you are older, okay?’ I feel his palm against my back, guiding me to my grandmother.

I watch him head inside as my grandmother begins to talk. ‘Now, what you must always remember about snapdragons is...’

Age 17

‘And this is the diagnosis they have given?’ my father asks. My grandfather says something I do not hear. I am ahead of them both, exploring the maze of rhododendron hollows that separate the woods from the path. Gnarled trunks of trees splay roots beneath the gravel track. My feet catch on them, and I am embarrassed to be seen falling by my father and grandfather. The gravel leaves diamond prints on my hands. As I get to my feet, I see my grandfather place his hand on my father’s shoulder.

‘... not so much about time, but what to do with it.’ They get closer and louder, and I see my grandfather’s eyes light up like he has only just remembered that I am here. ‘Aren’t you too old to be falling over like a boy?’ he jokes. A smile pushes up his thin cheeks. My father considers me. I feel my father’s silence, the swelling of something molten and mad multiplying beneath his pallid blue eyes. My grandfather turns to him, his smile growing. ‘We will continue, yes? It is getting dark fast now.’ We carry on walking.

I trail behind my father and grandfather now. They walk in silence, my father’s head hung and his hands stuck in his pockets like a sullen child. My grandfather cranes his neck, looking up at the fading light and the parted clouds. Some birds flutter in the woods. I hear lambs bleating for their mothers in the field through the trees. ‘Why do you think they do that?’ I ask.

‘There’s a lot of creatures that come out at night. Some like lamb,’ my father replies, without looking at me. Gravel crunches beneath his heavy steps.

‘I don’t mean the sheep. I mean the clouds. Why do they part above the track?’ There is silence. I feel like when I speak, all my father hears is the quiet echo of my voice, trickling from some removed part of the valley. Even then, when he does hear me, I feel that he casts it aside as just the wind whipping through Solomon’s Tower, or the birds chattering by the pools at Ingersley Vale. As if I am just another natural occurrence, bothering the unnatural. I remember walking beneath the aqueduct with him as a young boy, sending echoes to milky stalactites that lined the bridge’s curve. The traffic lights at the roadside splashed their glow upon the walls: green, yellow, red.

‘Perhaps God is showing us a path, by giving the stars room to light our

way,' my grandfather says.

'I read a book once that said they are the beams that hold up the sky. But our eyes can't see them. We only know they are there because of the clouds,' I say.

'That is an interesting idea. We only notice an absence, because of what surrounds it,' my grandfather replies. I do not know what to say. My father looks up at the sky. I watch him think. For one moment, he seems content.

'It's pressure,' he finally says.

My grandfather tilts his head towards my father. 'Mm?'

'That's why the clouds part the way they do. The air pressure,' my father says, his gaze returning to the ground.

My grandfather nods softly. His eyes dim, and I see his face age. 'Ah. Yes. Air pressure.'

Age 12

We drive slowly up Lidget's Lane. Sparse groupings of thin silver birch trees line the roadside, and huge slabs of gritstone cliffs flicker behind them. The road is narrow, widened only at irregular intervals by a muddy layby or an under-used quarry entrance. I watch my father's hands turn the wheel. We do not speak. Above us, through the roof of trees reaching out to one another, birds of prey loop and cycle.

We pass the old mining tower that overlooks the valley and continue to climb. The trees peter out to stumps, before retreating to shrubbery. Wide, sloped fields speckled with cows and sheep unravel beneath us. A dozen cars are already parked at the beauty spot when we reach the peak. Men lean on the fence with elbows, binoculars pressed to their eyes.

'Looks like a few people had the same idea.' My father smiles. We park and get out. In the distance, Manchester Airport's control tower waxes and wanes in the heat haze. My father checks his watch. He is restless. 'Should be landing at about 4.30.' We follow a walking trail from the car park up to the ridge. The sun cuts down upon us, warming the chill wind catching my calves. My father switches onto a slanted animal track that coils around the lip of one of the larger quarries. He sits, and I sit beside him. He checks his watch again; it is 4.20. The valley lies cradled between us and the hill opposite. Cottages and council estates skirt one another, spliced with schools, parks and greens. The canal worms a central line deep into Middlewood,

before emerging at the other end. I trace the roads we took from our house.

'So, are you excited?' my father asks.

'What's so special about this plane?' I reply. Small, hopping insects crawl from the quarry rock and prickle my legs. I try to hide my discomfort.

'Your grandfather worked on this plane. And this is the last time it'll ever fly. After today, there'll be no more Concordes in the sky.' My father points towards the airport. A silver, dart-like aircraft had come into view. The plane's nose looks pinched. I watch it glide with the curve of the sun's crescent. The sky holds the plane, the contrail's white tail acting like the strings of a marionette. It dances, flashing in the sun's glare, before beginning the steady descent to earth. We watch it fall.

'It's fast,' I say.

'One of the fastest.'

'Why can't it fly anymore?' I ask. My father rummages through the small bag he has brought with us. He pulls out a pair of binoculars, untangles the cords, and places them to his eyes. He continues to watch the plane. 'Dad, why can't it fly anymore?' I ask again.

My father doesn't respond. I am ready to leave the question. Instead, my father puts the binoculars down and sighs. 'It can't be around forever...' He pauses, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. 'It doesn't matter,' he ends quietly.

I stare at him. My father's eyes wince at the sun as he tries to take another look at the plane. He fumbles for the binoculars. I squint at the horizon. The plane coasts into the airport, disappearing among a hundred others. 'Are you sad?' I ask. There is silence.

'No. I'm not sad.' My father holds the binoculars tight to his eyes. 'I'm not sad.'

Here's How It Is

Synopsis

Hector is fourteen years old and an aspiring journalist. His only friends are Christie, a homeless ex-detective, and Christie's quirky group of homeless friends who accept Hector for the eccentric outcast that he is. After a supposed double suicide at his school, Hector decides that this is his opportunity to solve the case and write the most important article of his career. At first, Charlotte — a fellow pupil and the daughter of one of the victims — rejects Hector's offer to help, but after the papers turn on her father, one victim of the double suicide, she turns to Hector and Christie for friendship and answers. Together the group of misfits try to solve the mystery, pressed for time and low on resources, their quirks become qualities.

Chapter One: Hector

Hector was a disappointment in the eyes of his parents.

However, Hector decided that was fine by him because they were a disappointment in his eyes too.

Hector was fourteen years old, skinny and smart and he had realised from pretty much day one that he clashed with Tom and Angela on almost every level, in almost every possible way. They were the type of people who would 'eject memory pen safely' and complain all evening if someone had laughed too loudly on a bus earlier that week. You get the picture, they were boring and wished Hector could be boring too. They ran out of questions after 'how was school?' and 'would you like some more peas?' and Hector didn't bother to tell them about his projects anymore because they only ever frowned and let out an apprehensive 'hmm' sort of noise. Hector guessed that this was because his home written, home printed newspaper *Here's How It Is* was known to cause scandal at his school, and it was known, or at least heavily suspected based on its track record, that it would cause scandal again.

And probably again after that.

But really, if Mr Clarke had agreed to the interview regarding the mysterious deaths of all twenty of the Biology lab's pet snails in the first place, then Hector wouldn't have had to turn up to his house on a Saturday

morning to ask some quick questions, just as Mrs Hendrickson was leaving with dishevelled hair and sunglasses on in November.

Anyway, as Hector walked up to the school gate, excited for his third day as a Year Nine, he came face to face with a row of frowning adults, comprising of three teachers and two police officers ushering everyone away.

As usual, he was the only pupil who seemed to question *why*. This never happened. Never, in the history of St Charles Catholic High School had there been any more than zero police cars outside and never before had there been a refusal to teach the one thousand two hundred and seventeen, mainly disinterested, teenagers.

Reeling from the shock that the record of zero police cars had been broken, Hector reached into his coat pocket for his phone and typed in the school's name, hoping that news had travelled fast enough to reach his beloved local news app. And there, with the never before seen headline of 'Breaking News' was the announcement of two deaths, discovered only forty-five minutes ago, in none other than the Biology lab. No names, no age, no gender, no details at all, apart from word 'suicide' written in bold as he scrolled down the news feed. The word made Hector's heart skip so many beats, he nearly made the death toll reel over to three, and as he returned the phone to his pocket he felt a surge of overwhelming obligation to take this matter into his own hands. He quickly conferred with his secretary, himself, whether this could be a story they could pursue as soon as possible, and he received almost instantaneous confirmation from himself that this was something he could most certainly get on board with.

Hector waited around the corner until the rowdiest group of his uniformed peers arrived, right on time, twelve minutes late for the first class. By then, the barricade of teachers and police officers only comprised of one of each, so when the group began to cheer and ask an earthquake of questions, Hector took advantage of his small frame by choosing his moment correctly and walking, quite effortlessly past the school gate and into the school corridor. The English Block. It linked to the Science Block at a right angle at the bottom and didn't seem to be designated to a guard. Even a glimpse at the crime scene would give him the edge he needed to write a story so eye catching, shopkeepers would burn every *Chronicle* and copy of *The Times* to make room for his newspaper. He marched past the empty classrooms and swiftly turned right at the bottom towards the

science lab and in the distance Hector could see two police officers leaning against the wall as if they needed several strong cups of coffee. *A double suicide?* Hector thought. It didn't add up. But then again, he was never good at maths, and apparently that stuff added up too. And so he concluded that this situation, as completely catastrophic as it may seem, must eventually have an equals sign at the end of it and he was going to be there to check it against his own mark scheme.

Suicide wasn't something Hector had considered, personally. He was of the opinion that you can live or you can die, but since you're going to die at some point anyway, you might as well live right up until you do. Even if living was just sitting and breathing or walking around you might as well do it because it's probably better than not. And suicide in the science lab seemed particularly odd to Hector. A bit public, a bit gruesome and to be honest, a bit inconvenient for all the teenagers who had now lost a valuable day of education at St Charles Catholic High School.

Hector walked with purpose past the police officers and into the science lab full of busy official looking people, all wearing white protective gear and goggles, apart from two particularly official looking people frowning as official people do in dark coats and dark times. The two figures with the most protective gear were the two shapes zipped into body bags on the laminate floor and Hector gulped, got out his notebook, and got ready to be professional.

'Hey! What do you think you're doing?'

'Writing the date and time,' said Hector, writing the date and time.

'Get out! What are you? A student? Get out!' The most official person in the room marched towards him with so much anger that her rapidly encroaching presence managed to push Hector towards the door without her having to touch him at all. 'Simpson! Hurst! Did you let this boy onto the crime scene? What is wrong with you?!

The police officers who had been staring intently at the floor outside suddenly straightened up to gape at the official looking woman, who pointed to Hector, who looked blankly at them all.

'No, no, of course not, we were—'

'Not paying attention, clearly.' She sighed. 'There has been a murder for God's sake, can you two get your arses into gear for five minutes and—'

'Murder?' said Hector, 'the article said suicide.'

The woman looked at Hector.

'Suicide, yes, wait — how did you know?'

'The internet.'

'My fucking lord, this is a crime scene! This is a serious, *serious* crime scene! Can we all start appreciating that? Get *out!*' She started doing that thing again where she made Hector want to get out of her way, and he noticed the police officers backing off a little too, as she yelled, 'Google it, tweet about it, make a Facebook status about it, but get out!' so Hector took the hint and headed down a different corridor.

'Goodbye! Good luck with the investigation!' he called, not quite knowing the etiquette of the situation. He heard the woman scold the two incompetent members of the police force and Hector at least knew not to offer to patrol the corridor for them, as it seemed that she had wanted him to leave rather post-haste. Hector headed instead for the Principal's Office. He had been able to make a few valuable deductions from his brief time inside the lab — one being that Mr Elsey, a science teacher he had known and very much liked, had been one of the truly unfortunate suicides. Hector had noticed his glasses, his trademark thick black rims with the prescription of plus five in both eyes, cracked and left on the table with white chalk marking their outline on the oak surface. The sight of them had struck him as he had been pushed back out to the corridor, and Hector wondered if Mr Elsey's daughter had come to school that morning, and if she'd stayed. Hector had never spoken to Charlotte before. He had only been associated with her briefly as they had nearly been partners in Mr Elsey's chemistry class, before she promptly swapped with Brian Cunningham — the boy who couldn't seem to speak without spitting and so had never spoken to him either.

Hector arrived outside Principal Gibbons' office, and placed himself against the right wall beside the door, ready for it to swing open at the news that a pupil had intruded on the scene of the crime. After a slow thirty seconds, Principal Gibbons ran out of the door, desperately apologising behind him to the leather sofa Hector assumed Charlotte Elsey would be sitting on.

Hector took his opportunity to catch the door before it shut and let it close behind him, and as he entered, Charlotte didn't look up from the beige carpet or say a word as he approached the leather sofa with the confidence of a true professional.

'Hi Charlotte. Are you free for an interview?'

'What?' Charlotte looked up at Hector and shook her head as if he had

woken her up in the middle of the night. 'Who are you?'

'Hector.'

She blinked at him and frowned. 'What?'

Hector sighed, he always tried to speak clearly, and yet everyone seemed to be asking him to repeat himself.

'Are you free for an interview?'

The girl stared him down for a second, with an expression Hector could only link to that of disgust, as if someone had started clipping their toenails on a bus. 'Oh my God, the least you could do is say that you're fucking *sorry* or something. That's what everyone else seems to be saying and you're here asking me for an *interview*?'

'But I'm not sorry. I didn't do anything.'

Her mouth swung open as if some of her words had fallen out, and then Charlotte sat back and crossed her legs, as if ready to be interviewed. 'Can I go off the record?'

'You can.'

Charlotte leaned in and said, with a glare that would have made any other fourteen-year-old boy flinch; 'Fuck off.' And with that, Hector shrugged and left the Principal's Office. And even as a police officer shouted at him to come back, he kept on walking. He had been asked to leave, or some variation on the sentiment, quite enough in the past fifteen minutes and he didn't have time for mixed messages. Anyway, Hector had somewhere to be.

Before I go on

Before I go on, let me just say that my name is Dashir, Her Dashir, if you want to be grand about it, or simply, "Hettra" if you don't. When you become as infamous as me you accrue a lot of names and before long none of them seem to fit you very well. Add to this the complexity of the Naming Laws that were in place at the time - but I am getting ahead - or rather behind - of myself. That world is gone. Dashir is fine.

I came into this world on a muggy summer evening. It happened in a hospital, which may not surprise you, but where I come from not everyone can afford such luxury. For most of us the floor of the Wolwa's house is good enough, but for me a special case was made. My birth was not going to be easy and I think my mother knew it.

There was no hospital in my village, so we had to make the semi-perilous journey down from the hills, in the dead of night, to the one in Sanliurfa. Few in the village could drive, we were an old-fashioned sort, but Senbi had a truck. He drove like a wild man. The only route into town was along a dirt track that undulated like a camel's back. You can barely hear yourself talk on a road like that, for the growl of the gravel.

Practically the entire village squashed into the pickup. Senbi, my folks; even the Wolwa came. We must have looked such a sight as we came crashing through the doors of the reception: two adult men with hair braided to their waists (not to mention painted eyes like geishas), the Wolwa with her various herbal accoutrements and of course my mother; purple and swearing in Kurdish, Turkish and Katan all at once.

My mother, gods rest her, and I were in there for sixteen hours. There were complications. In the end, it came down to a scalpel, half-moon incision, blood, you get the picture. Once the ordeal was over she had spent her strength. She smiled at me once and fell unconscious. That was all she knew of me, and all I know of her.

As they pulled me out, the nurse screamed. I was a mess. My right arm had come out shrivelled and black as if it had been burnt in the womb. Despite the gruesome scarring, the offending limb seemed perfectly healthy. It could grip, and beneath the slabs of scolded flesh there was clean skin and flowing blood. In all their years in the medical profession, no one had seen anything like it. They ran some tests. Smacked me on the back, checked my pulse, though I was clearly conscious. I bore their tortures in perfect

silence, my eyes searching the room with an inquisitiveness that was uncanny in a child so fresh. I was strong, a little too strong, my heart rate was even slightly faster than expected. I was cursed they said, and perhaps I am. You see, the problem was that I didn't come into this world alone. Some people are born spotless, innocent, unfettered, but not me; I came into the world with baggage. Several thousand years' worth.

My father took me out to the expectant tribe in the waiting room. By now the nurse had bandaged my arm and deemed me safe for viewing by the public. Senbi stroked his moustache and made some small sign of aversion. The Wolwa provided all the usual ceremony – I was anointed, I was named. I was blessed in the name of the Five. She laid me on a cream-coloured chair, washed me with water from the village well and painted my forehead with red earth. Then she started chanting, that woman with mistletoe in her hair, calling on gods no one had heard of in a weird local language hardly anyone spoke. We must have looked like devil worshippers. But they couldn't exactly ask us to leave.

Then someone decided to do something. A handsome man with a self-important walk – some local governor no doubt – approached us. He meant to move us; you could tell by the way he moved, but as he opened his mouth to speak his words were drowned out by a scream. I had found my voice. The lights flickered and then went out.

For a second everyone fell quiet as if caught in a moment of grief. There was a crash as someone fell in the darkness, before the backup generator clicked into life and the lights snapped back on. The man who had approached us was not where he had been, he had somehow collapsed against the coffee table which was several feet from us.

Then it all went wild. Warning cries pulsed along the ward, sending the nurses scurrying like startled rabbits. Paramedics in little mating-pairs were hurrying into the hospital, without their patients. Either they had forgotten them, or something terrible was going on. The phones were rattling. The receptionist looked like she could do with an extra few arms, as harsh orders came across the Tannoy:

'Doctor Aksoy to radiology!'

'Doctor Sadik to the children's ward!'

'Doctor Aksoy to radiology, hizli!'

At first, they thought it was just the lights that had flickered, but in that moment when I found my voice, all the electrics in the hospital had short-

ed out – lights, fridge-freezers, microwave ovens and of course life support. Twelve people died. Thirteen, including the afore-mentioned mother. Thirteen people in exchange for one. Unlucky, right? They didn't die *for* me, simply *because* of me. And maybe everything else I have done has been an attempt to atone for that.

My father strode into the room where my mother lay, and crumpled onto her, with me in his arms. Had I been someone else's child he might have discarded me completely. Was that when he realised she was dead, when he saw her lying there, face like glass? The nurses dashed in, pushed my "family" to the back of the room and started fussing over my mother. Checking her pulse, mopping her brow, starting compressions. Had *they* only just realised she had died? Maybe in the wake of the twelve other deaths they decided to make doubly sure my mother wasn't one of them.

They kept me in overnight. Official documentation still had to be signed. With everything else going on it was unlikely to be done soon. Once the Wolwa had performed the last rites over my mother's corpse, Senbi drove her back to the village. He would return in the morning to collect us. Father and I slept in a blue plastic chair beside my mother's bed. The nurses had brought a cot in for me, but I guess I was the only bit of her he had left and so he daren't let me go.

By nine o'clock the next morning the hospital lobby was a-babble with local reporters fighting for their slice of prime-time grief. The event was a blip in the national news but an intense one for those who had survived it. Lights were clicked into place, mikes were tested, booms swung into shot like giant cotton balls pretending to dab at tear-struck cheeks. Under it all was the soft hubbub of people weeping and the angry shrieks of hospital staff, battling to treat their surviving patients. My father was interviewed. At first, they were respectful but gradually, as the competition heated up they grew more aggressive.

'What time would you say this happened?'

'How would you rate the care in the hospital?'

'Do you think more could have been done to prevent—?'

No one asked him about his deformed child who had screamed at the precise second the systems went down. No one had noticed. Who would have? In those days, that sort of thing was still unusual. Eventually, the reporters seemed to get bored with us – either because my father was too sullen to give them the gossip they needed, or because he told them my

mother had died in childbirth, not because she had been on life support. Or perhaps they saw his waist-length braid and decided there were Muslims, or Christians or metropolitan atheists whose need was greater.

Senbi was waiting in the car-park, perched on the bonnet of his truck. A thin cigarette hung from his moustachioed lip – he looked like a sparrow with a worm. Clocking my father, he made a bird sound; a short whistle of two ascending notes. He hopped off his car and threw his stubby arms around the both of us. It must have looked absurd, for my father was tall and rakish, and could have kissed Senbi's bald spot.

"Ishta" my father said; the Katan equivalent of *C'est la vie* or *shit happens*. As if this excused everything, the grocer released him and led him back to the truck.

The village was a-buzz when we returned. They had heard the news. Everyone had been gathered around the radio in Baita's coffee shop. They watched as the truck staggered up the road. Senbi parked in front of his shop and walked us to our little house a few doors down. Squarish and plastered white. The coffee shop crowd pursued us, hurling words of condolence, pats on the back while simultaneously craning for a chance to ogle the new baby. Baita offered chai and cake free of charge, but my father pressed on. The people of 'Urfa might not notice a cursed child but a Katan would.

In his good-natured way, Senbi fought back the crowd with one hand, waving away their offers of gifts and tea at their houses, while with the other, he reached around my father and unlatched the gate for him.

'Let him be' said the Baalim's voice from somewhere in the crowd. It was a deep voice, considered but never loud.

The people made way for the priest-king who allowed himself entry through the gate before shutting it on the village. He was not a large man but he carried himself with the quiet assuredness of one who had inherited office. Once he had made it to the safety of the tiny yard, he stood to one side, doffed his conical hat and stood in silence.

My father fumbled with his keys at the door until Senbi took them off him and let him in. Inside it was dark and cave-like after the starched lights of the infirmary. My father brushed his head against the woven knot of straw above the door and thought of my mother. He looked around the room; the fat, square tv, the rust on the oven door he hadn't quite got around to painting over, the bare lightbulb hanging over the sofa. I looked

around the room too. My first home that was not my mother.

'If there's anything you need...' Senbi started, but my father made an ancient gesture of picking something up and casting it aside.

'That's fine, thank you, Senbi.'

The grocer bowed and turned to the Baalim who stood just outside the door – he would not enter unless invited – and the two men left.

Father stood there for a few minutes in the mildewy smell of the house, watching dust motes play in the beam of light coming through the kitchen window. A knock announced the coming of Baita who left us a tray of chai and a slice of chocolate cake. As my father rattled in his pockets for loose change, Baita cast it aside in the same way he had done with the grocer.

'A'cha.' She said and left.

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The Fever Coast

The story so far...

In chapter one, Marie Roleau, a French nurse, killed her abusive husband, Dr Gustave Roleau. She fled Paris within hours of the murder because she feared the gendarmerie wouldn't believe she acted in self-defence.

Marie runs away with her lover, Gabriel Bertrand, a doctor stationed to a small hospital in Panama. A year later Marie tells Gabriel the truth: that she killed Gustave. Gabriel struggles with the revelation and spends the week on a drinking bender. Not only is their relationship fraught but Marie's safety depends on Gabriel keeping her secret.

The following scene begins when a patient in a critical condition is brought into the small surgery in the jungle. With Gabriel inebriated, Marie must work with a nun to save a man's life in her quest for redemption.

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Dr Gabriel Bertrand sat in the chair, his chest slumped across the table. Already drunk, his fingers crawled towards the bottle and the rum splashed on the table as he poured another glass.

Marie stood at the door and watched through the fly screen. She didn't bother entering the small thatched-roofed cabin made of wooden planks because she knew what must be done and Gabriel was in no fit state to operate and so, she ran across to the storehouse to get supplies.

The storehouse was set back into the jungle, shaded by the leaves so that the sun's direct glare never reached it. Inside, she looked through boxes and crates in search of chloroform. There wasn't any, so she cursed and left empty handed. There was a bottle in the operating theatre, with only a tiny amount of the liquid inside but she hoped it might be enough.

Red dust kicked up behind her as she ran back through the grounds of the small hospital past the water pump, and then along the side of the ward and into the brick built operating theatre. The hospital's cook, Lete, stood sobbing by the door. Her husband, Agwe, had been digging on the canal when a landslide had pushed a piece of metal through his lower leg. The men who had brought him to the hospital had gone back to the dig, but they had first managed to cut the metal so that just a shard remained

through his shattered tibia and fractured fibula. They had tried to pull it out but it was stuck.

'There's no more,' Marie said. Whatever's left in that bottle we'll have to make do with.'

Two nuns, Sister Aceline and Sister Audrey, struggled to hold Agwe down onto the operating table. 'Where's Dr Bertrand?' Audrey asked.

'Drunk.'

'But it's only midday.'

'I'm afraid so.'

'I'll go and get him. He'll soon sober up.'

Marie grabbed the old woman's thin wrist. 'No. The state he's in, he's no use to anyone.'

'But Agwe needs surgery now.'

'I'll do it,' Marie said.

'You? You can't operate, you're not a doctor.'

'Will you then?'

The old woman hesitated. 'But I'm just a nurse, I wouldn't dare—'

'Together though, we know what to do,' Marie said.

'Well...'

'How many operations like this have we assisted on?'

'Countless, but—'

'We know every step.'

'But, but I don't think I could do that bit.'

Marie nodded. She understood how the old woman felt. As Agwe's face scrunched up again Marie knew she couldn't leave him to die. With the two nuns, Marie had assisted Gabriel in the small jungle hospital for the year she had been there, and with each life she helped to save the closer she felt to redemption. 'I'll do it, I'll amputate,' Marie said.

Agwe's eyes grew wide. He sat up and when the nuns tried to lay him back down he pushed them away. Sister Aceline slipped on the blood on the floor and knocked a tray off a side table with her cornette. Scalpels, saws and knives clattered onto the floor. The glass bottle shattered. The last dregs of chloroform mingled into a pool of blood, and its sweet smell was stronger than the stench of sweat, urine and vomit already filling the room. There was no way to anaesthetise Agwe now.

'Move her out of the way,' Marie ordered, then she leaned down to Agwe. 'Listen, if we do nothing, you'll die. Do you understand? Let me

save you.'

He bared his teeth as he dealt with the pain. 'Alright,' he said, 'do it.'

After pulling Aceline out of the way and checking the young woman was okay, Audrey rejoined Marie at the table.

The tourniquet had loosened around Agwe's thigh and dark pulsatile blood was pumping from the wound. Marie pulled the cord tight, causing the muscle to bulge, stemming the flow.

'He needs something to bite on,' Marie said.

The old woman found a stick and pushed it between his teeth as Marie looked for the scalpel. She found it on the floor with the other surgical instruments Aceline had knocked over. Flies scattered into the air but the ants were less intimidated and continued to crawl over the instruments as she picked them up and placed them on the tray.

Marie cleaned the scalpel against one of her rolled up sleeves. Then she held the sharp tip of the blade a couple of inches below his knee. She hesitated. His dark skin was warm and oily. She pushed the blade into the flesh and began to cut.

Agwe let out a muffled scream.

'We shouldn't be doing this alone,' Audrey said. 'We're just women.'

Marie raised her eyebrows and looked at her. 'Would you rather he died?'

Audrey gave her the bow-framed amputation saw.

The handle was shaped like the grip of a pistol and it reminded Marie of holding the gun to her husband's stomach when she'd killed him. Sweat ran down her brow and trickled down her nose. The sodden strands of hair, which had fallen from her fishtail braid, clung to her flushed cheeks. Yet again the power over life was in her hands. It felt overwhelming.

Audrey held a couple of crow's beaks at the ready. 'If you're doing this, you must be quick.'

If Marie could save Agwe's life then she hoped she would feel redemption for being a murderer. She lined the serrated edge of the saw along the incision then plunged it in.

In the Wasteland

My son sleeps at my feet now, and he shivers and twitches in his dreams. Before we came here, he only ever looked at peace in his sleep, but now even that leisure time has been taken from him. It is too cold to be comfortable even though I lay all my layers upon him. And he has no time to settle, between raiders and thieves that approach us.

My boy is now in his fourteenth year, but to me he is still the baby I held in my arms on that first day. He looks very little like me, but for his head of dark, unkempt curls; his resemblance to his father sometimes makes me fear him. Still, he is a beautiful boy, and I say that not only as a mother. His skin is slightly lighter than mine, the colour of a hazelnut, and he bears a strong, defined jaw and cheekbones. His features could have been sculpted by one of the great architects who built the old cities. His eyes, when he looks at you, could drown you: they pull you in so. As a child, he captivated many with this beauty and this made my mistress truly hate him.

She would not beat him in front of his father — but I caught her at it. She stopped as soon as she saw me, of course; she was playing a very careful game. For a while, she even fooled me into feeling sorry for her. After all, I had borne her man a son that even her relatives were in awe of. It must have been torture for her.

Even when my boy's temper flares — and it often does, who can blame him? — he is stunning. His entire being exudes passion and fire that I am certain will one day turn the greatest establishments to ash. He will be a force to be reckoned with, I make no mistake.

But for now, he sleeps, fitfully. The sky is nigh black and I can only make out the outline of his features. The stench of sewage and waste surrounds us — would make me retch if it weren't so familiar — and there is a layer of smog still hanging in the air that could choke me if I were to breathe in too deeply. My arms are bare and the hair upon them is raised like the spikes of a porcupine but I dare not remove my shawl from him. For as long as we may stay here, he must rest. My strength is of no use to us: his must grow.

When I first found I was pregnant with my boy, I hated him. I never thought I would learn to love him. Unlike most babies, he did not begin as

an act of love. He began with an order.

‘Hagar, come here.’ My mistress’s voice came, cold and clear.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ I said as I entered. She was sat, one leg over the other, in her matching pinstriped waistcoat and pant-suit and high heels. Her sleek, brown hair was pinned meticulously so that it framed her face as though it were a literal piece of art. Her lips, as always, were rouged but not so much as to look ‘showy’ or ‘trashy’ — as she called it — and her expression, as always, blank. She was, and still is, the epitome of elegance. I might have idolised her, had she been kind.

‘I have a task for you to carry out, before I get back from my calls today.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ I said. ‘What must I do?’

‘At this moment, nothing. Your task is to be carried out in my absence this afternoon. And you are to begin it on my husband’s notice.’ Here she paused a moment, and gave me a sideways glance; I realised she was making sure that I had acknowledged the word ‘notice.’ Not instruction. Notice.

‘I understand.’

‘Whilst I am away, my husband will approach you and attempt to seduce you.’

My mouth dropped. At first, I expected she would ask me to murder him. My sister had sent me letters about her own time as a hierodule, before I was taken; she had never been asked to murder personally, but it was spoken of. And there were, of course, reported cases of hierodules who had been tried and hung for murder, who had used the defence that their master or mistress had made them; our words are not worth a lot in court.

‘It is important,’ she continued, ‘that you are entirely submissive to this. By which I mean, you will make no personal advances, but you will allow him to do whatever he chooses to.’

I stammered: ‘Mistress, I—’

‘You are not to speak to him about this incident, before or after. You will not speak at all, is that clear?’

‘I—yes, Mistress.’

I will not speak of what happened when he came to me. He was not cruel. He did not beat me as I thought he might. But I dare not say anymore. Her instructions were clear: I must never speak of it.

I knew I was pregnant before I even took the test. I thought she would

be pleased. She was not.

‘Whore!’ she bellowed, striking me across the face.

I held my sore cheek and tried to fight back the brimming tears in my eyes.

‘That’s right! Weep! Weep all you want, harlot, for it is all you deserve!’

I let the sobs out then — she would beat me either way — and I tried to speak. ‘I—’

‘What? You what? You are nobody! You have no “I”!’

Courage struck me; I cried out ‘I only did what you asked of me!’

‘I asked you to fuck my husband! You were never asked to enjoy it!’

I was stunned. I could not argue my case: it is commonly accepted that a woman cannot conceive without pleasure. I did not think I had enjoyed it, but I must have been mistaken.

The tasks she gave me became heavier. She would demand that I did everything by hand — her laundry, the dishes, the ornaments — despite more efficient means being available. I was not allowed mops for the floors — I had to get on my hands and knees. Once, though I cannot prove it, I am certain she intentionally spilt wine upon the carpet purely so she could beat me for the mess. Every task had to be repeated thrice and even that was not adequate.

I was placed on a strict diet, and if she thought I had eaten something outside of it — though I would never have dared — she would stick her own hands down my throat until I vomited; after washing her hands she would whip me for sullyng her fingers. Once, she even cut the inside of my throat with her long fingernails — the whippings were the worst on that occasion. The lashes upon my back oozed blood for days.

*

At last, the straws that broke my back. Items began to vanish — silverware, books, clothing — and she was certain it was me. One morning, the door of my chambers was flung open.

‘Whore! Thief! What have you done with them?’ Her voice shook the walls so that I am surprised nothing shattered.

‘Ma’am, I don’t—’

‘Liar!’ She grabbed my wrist and flung me across the room; I clutched

my swollen belly with one hand and grabbed the edge of my bedside table with the other, to steady myself. 'It is not enough for you to steal my right to bear my husband's child; you seek to steal my possessions too!'

She became obsessed. Every night she would whip me. She would add twenty lashes for every night her belongings failed to appear.

I knew I had to find them. I could not face unemployment — my child would be doomed if I could not feed him. And I did find them. In my mistress's chambers. In her bedside drawer.

I tried to think she was simply forgetful — had forgotten she had put them there — and she would thank me for finding them. But as I lifted one silver necklace from the drawer, I heard her bedroom door creak open.

'I knew you were a lying little cunt.' She was not yelling which made it more terrifying.

I turned. 'Ma'am, I was just cleaning and I—'

She picked up a paper weight from the desk outside the bedroom door and flung it towards me — I scarcely ducked out of the way and heard it smash against the wall.

'You disgusting, thieving, grovelling little slut!' She ran towards me, fists waving. She grabbed my hair and flung me over. As I began to raise my head again, she struck me multiple times on each side of my face. Grabbing my hair, she banged my head against the dresser until my forehead bled and as I collapsed, she began to kick me with her heavy boots. I could feel blood rushing to the surface, turning my skin black. She reached my abdomen — I grabbed it tight in horror.

'Please!' I shrieked through my laboured gasps.

She paused, her boot midway to my torso, before putting her feet together. She grabbed my hair and pulled me out of the door. Before slamming the door, she spat on me: 'You are blessed to carry my husband's seed.'

I packed my bags. I no longer cared for money. My mistress was either mad, or evil. My child would not be born alive if I stayed here. I left that night. I was back within two days. I didn't even escape the suburb. He found me at the border.

'Hierodule, please, stop!' I was raised a slave — I stopped against my will. 'Please, do not run. Do not take my child from me.'

'If I stay, your wife will surely kill your child!' I replied, as defiantly as my

servant blood would allow me.

'She will not!' He was not aggressive, so much as assuring. 'She has a temper, but she will change. She will not allow me to lose my only hope for a child.'

I looked in his eyes: he was not trying to manipulate me, but he was begging me. He was desperate to raise his child. And just then, I truly pitied both him and my mistress.

I returned, and as he promised, my mistress had changed. She was not kind, but was careful. She saw to it that I would have the best physicians. And my tasks were less laboured. She would still beat me, but it was never as bad as in the past.

My son was born — I was not allowed to name him — but I never used the name his father gave him. For no matter whose seed he grew from, he is mine and only mine. That was made clear when my mistress discovered that she could, in fact, conceive. Her husband ceased to so much as look at me, or my boy. I loathe him most of all for this. Illegitimate children are seen as unclean — but no one forsakes my son.

I still pitied her for some time though; her son was never as beautiful. I even heard her mother-in-law say it: 'It is a pity, the whore's boy is truly the prince of the pair.' That is when she started her beating of my boy — and all I could do was nurse his ailments. It was the week before her own baby's christening that she finally snapped.

Her husband had it all arranged: a great feast, all the family there — of course I was not welcome but my boy had a seat at the head table. Alas, he did not want one. He did not want to be part of something I was excluded from, and he wanted no part in celebrating his brother in a way he had never been celebrated. His temper flared in a way I had not seen it in our chambers that night. He kicked the furniture, tipped the desk and drawers about the room. I begged him to calm himself.

'It is a disgrace! This child is no better than I! His bitch is no better than you—'

'Darling, please!'

He began to pull the drawers from the dresser one by one, repeating the words 'It's not fair,' louder each time. And I peered at the door, just a creak open, and saw the tip of my mistress's boot on the floor.

We were sent away the next day. My mistress's husband offered me money but I was bitter and so too foolish to take it. He said he would

provide for us in future, but he made no objection when I called him a liar. We left. Penniless. Lost.

I am afraid, but not for myself. My boy must survive and that is my sole responsibility. And when he has reached his full strength, he may leave me to die — I will only slow him down. He must live. He is a beautiful boy. He sleeps at my feet. He survives each raid without fail, even when he is awoken without warning.

I do not seek revenge upon those that wronged me. But my son does deserve his justice.

And he is, as I said, a force to be reckoned with.

Moth (short story excerpt)

Martha wakes up with a pain in her temples and knows it is beginning. She reaches up and touches her forehead, and finds a small lump above each eyebrow. Hard and sore, like pimples. It makes her eyelids feel strange, almost stretched. Like she doesn't have enough skin. She brings her hand back down and looks around the small bedroom. Morning sunlight, winter pale, leaks between the blinds. It makes bars across the opposite wall. Steven snores and grunts next to her, laid out on his back, taking up most of the bed. Everything seems to be as it usually is.

Her mouth tastes sour. She was sick in the night. She remembers staggering down the hallway to the bathroom, still half asleep. Clutching at the cool plastic of the toilet seat as she'd hung her head down, trying to vomit as quietly as possible. Maybe it isn't working, she had thought. Maybe her body couldn't handle it. She'd spent the rest of the night dipping in and out of dreams. Strange insects flitting about her head, crawling all over her skin.

Steven ignores her this morning, which is a blessing. Sometime in the last year he has stopped trying to have sex with her almost entirely. Occasionally, he smells like perfume when he comes to bed, all mixed in with the reek of beer and his own sweat. He didn't this time, though he came to bed late. Especially late. Martha had even thought about calling him, then decided against it. He'd only be irritated if she nagged, either that or he wouldn't pick up the phone at all. When he did come home, around four, he'd jolted her awake, stumbling over shoes in the doorway. He'd climbed straight onto the duvet and fallen asleep. Martha had gotten up and pulled off his shoes before she'd gotten back into bed. There was no sense in getting the bed dirty.

Steven barely looks at her. His hair is a mess, dark curls going in all directions, but Martha isn't going to tell him. His eyes are bloodshot slits in his head as he chews down the egg she fries him, gulps down a mug of black coffee, then motions for another. She takes his mug and pours him one.

'Where's the milk?' Steven mutters.

'We're all out. We're getting the delivery in tomorrow, though,' Martha says. She clears her throat, which feels clogged. Lately her own voice startles her, an alien sound, too loud in the silent flat.

Steven doesn't reply. He finishes the dregs of his coffee, then gets up from the table and leaves the kitchen. Martha scoops up his plate and stands at the sink, running water and listening to him moving around the flat, looking for his keys. His daily hunt. They're in the bathroom, maybe, or somewhere on the hallway floor. One particularly unpleasant morning she had eventually found them in the freezer, nestled under a bag of oven chips. This is a lucky day, though, and after a few moments she hears the jangle of them being discovered. Then shortly after that, the flat door clicking closed. Martha turns off the tap, and crouches down, opening the cupboard under the sink. She pulls out the heavy box of powder detergent. She digs her hands around in the white crystals, until she feels the hard plastic of the pill bottle.

She pushes the detergent back and unscrews the bottle, tipping out a small white pill. She puts it onto her tongue and swallows, wincing, but not needing any water. She peers down into the bottle's open neck. There's roughly half the pills left.

Not long to go, not now.

The first anybody heard of it was the Dogman. This was four years ago, around the time Martha stopped leaving the flat. When the pictures first started appearing online, it was just a man in Germany who had sprouted hair all over his body. Coarse, grey hair. At that point, people were largely sympathetic, coming forward with their own stories of hormone imbalances.

Then one day his teeth started falling out. Long canines grew in their place, hooking onto his chin, too big to stay in his mouth. His nails were next, lifting and dropping off, pushed away by claws. Journalists began to gather, clamouring to interview him. People bid thousands for his discarded teeth on Ebay, put up by his family. Soon his eyes yellowed, and shrank in his head. His jaw strained outwards, growing thinner, until he had a snout. His lips and gums turned black.

The media made its own stories, as it always does. A consequence of global warming, the result of too many additives in our food. A sign of the world ending. Many saw it as a political statement. Facebook pages and petitions sprang up like mushrooms, supporting the Dogman, his rebellion against society, his fight against modern beauty standards. Oprah invited him on to her show, which he accepted. Apparently, the Dogman had

always liked Oprah.

Martha remembers the way he panted inside the grey box of her TV screen, all those years ago. He really couldn't stop panting. She supposed it was hot, a suit over all that fur, all those lights and eyes fixed on him. His vocal cords were just starting to mutate. As a result, he communicated mainly through a series of yelps and grunts. Despite this, despite him licking Oprah's hand as she rubbed it under his chin, he still seemed more man than dog. At least, he did that afternoon. He walked upright, he sat up on the sofa like everyone else. He barked out laughs at all the appropriate times, whenever another guest cracked a joke. The audience seemed to adore him. There was a whole ten-minute segment of people bringing him treats, biscuits and chew toys. One old lady had knitted him a hat.

His mother, a plump, red-cheeked woman, sat beside him. She held onto his hand for the whole show, his paw hand.

'No, we are not ashamed,' she said, in thickly accented English. 'This is who he chooses to be. And now he will be my baby forever, so I'm quite happy with that.' The crowd cheered.

'Fucking freak,' Steven had said from behind her. Martha said nothing. She watched as the mother, grainy and technicoloured on their second-hand television, kissed the top of the Dogman's head. The Dogman licked her face, the crowd still applauding. Martha even felt herself welling up a bit, which made her feel silly. But then, she'd always liked dogs.

When she was small she had loved dirt. Rolling in it, digging holes in it. Even eating dirt, though her grandma had grabbed her wrist and yelled at her when she'd been caught. She drove her grandma crazy in general, constantly tearing her clothes. Soaking her jeans up past the knee, wading through the swamp puddles that gathered round their house. Her father just laughed at her. He was always laughing.

He had taken her on walks from since she could remember. Hikes that were too long for her, he'd end up having to carry her half the way. Martha loved it, watching the forest go past at a giant's height. The endless expanse of his back. They would always stop under a tree, the same one every time. Gnarled and huge, it made a great fan of branches over their head. Her father would produce a can of soda, warm from his pocket. He'd point to things and tell her about them, different bugs and flowers. Which bird-song belonged to which bird. They took turns drinking the soda, slurping

amicably.

The day of the hawk moth was swelteringly hot. Her father's shirt kept sticking to both of them. He had to put her down, panting and wiping at his head. Martha was especially looking forward to their break. When they reached their tree her father froze, putting a hand out in front of her.

'Look at that, Marty,' he said. He pointed to the root they usually sat on. There was something brown perched on it, perfectly still, the size of Martha's hand.

'That's an ugly bird,' Martha said.

'It's a not a bird, silly. It's a moth,' her father said. He tiptoed over, crouching down. 'Come see.'

He nudged it onto his hand, then gently lowered it towards Martha's outstretched arm. Its wings flickered, and for a split second Martha thought it would fly away. But then it stepped forward slowly, one leg at a time, wobbling like a drunk.

'It's too hot out here. She's probably thirsty, poor girl,' her father said. He stroked a finger over the soft fur of its back, where its huge wings grew from, papery and lined as autumn leaves. Tiger stripes of brown and white ran down its whole body.

'She's beautiful, isn't she?' her father said. Martha agreed, dipping her face down close to it. She stared into its black dome eyes. She had never seen anything like it. It looked like something that lived in a story book, the kind her grandma liked, with old illustrations.

She remembers how delicate the moth had felt, those six legs balanced on her. The way its feeler crept out as her father held forward a drop of soda on his finger. She wanted to take it home with her, keep it in a tank to show her friends. She'd share all her soda with it, she'd told him.

'You can't keep her in a tank, Marty,' her father said. 'Moths are wild. They're made to fly.'

Martha had nodded. She watched the moth's wings flicker, over and over, like a heartbeat.

Soon after the Dogman, others began to change. The world watched as a man in France seemed to display symptoms of becoming a rabbit. His wife and six children despaired as his cheeks fattened, his ears sagged and drooped down past his neck. Apparently, his wife began building him a hutch inside their bedroom, the children given the task of shredding up

newspaper after newspaper.

Many people lied, too. It was easy; you can get away with just about anything when you have Photoshop, or a reasonable amount of cash. A Japanese teenager and her father ended up in court, all over national news. It was initially believed she was becoming a cat. She was a beautiful girl, Martha remembers, with dark eyes, a pale heart-shaped face. The black cat ears, the way they peeked between her sweeping curtains of hair, only added to her overall look. The tail had been almost impossibly cute. Japan, at first, fawned over her. Action figures sold out in toy stores. An anime was made of her, which thousands of fans cosplayed. Then one day, they were exposed. It was some kind of plastic surgery. Her father had paid for ears to be implanted into his fifteen-year-old daughter's head, a tail inserted into the small of her back. There was further uproar when it was discovered that the ears and tail had been cut off an unfortunate panther, from a bribed Japanese zoo. Animal welfare charities marched their marches.

Things reached a sick kind of fever pitch when people learned about the Dolphin Lady. The papers printed excerpts from her blog, which she'd kept daily, religiously until the last day of her life. Pages of blue text, unbroken walls of it. She wrote how she could feel herself changing, just like the others, her skin was growing tighter and tighter. Her voice broke into whistles and squeaks. Her legs ached strangely, then grew numb, like they didn't belong to her. The sea, just at the end of her road, sang to her. The waves called her name. She was reported missing, then found two days later. The rescue team found no signs of any changes, dolphin or otherwise. She was just a dead woman, pale and bloated by salt water.

Marguerite (excerpt from Chapter VII)

Damietta, 5th February 1219

'I'm sick of this tent,' Vincent exclaimed.

'Are you alright?' Louis asked.

'I don't want to die like this.'

'Don't give up Vincent. There is talk that Frederick will be here soon.'

'Have you seen the state of me?' Vincent asked as he tried to get up. He looked emaciated, a pale yellow colour, scratching his thin legs incessantly. A few sores had broken out, and every part of his body seemed to ache as he tried to move.

'Here, I found an apple core.' Louis handed it to him as he put his tunic on and grabbed hold of his dagger.

'Where are you going?'

'Scouting mission with the Venetians to the Southern towers. Get some rest.'

'That's all I do these days.'

'Gather your strength, my friend. I'll be back before you know it.'

'Don't trust those Venetians. They only care about coin.'

As Louis left the tent, he knew all too well the constant hunger in the pit of his stomach, and his bones ached too, especially his right knee as it occasionally gave way and it felt as though it would break in two.

'You look like you've seen a ghost.' Paolo Aguirre, the Venetian soldier, said as soon as he saw Louis. He was a short and stubby man with an unkempt beard and a few missing teeth.

'I'm ready,' Louis replied abruptly.

It was Vitry's plan to send the scouts on a boat towards the fortress in the narrow window of dawn and cover of darkness. Their previous attacks across the three lines of battlements had failed so far. It seemed that whichever way the eyes of Damietta and Al-Kamil forces were upon them. Both men made haste across the desert onto the river, with barely any clothes on for the sake of speed and stealth, and jumped onto a small boat.

As they approached the fortress, Paolo Aguirre gestured to his companion to lay low as Louis shivered in the cold desert morning.

'That smell!' Louis grimaced.

'Can you see anything in that tower?' Paolo asked.

'I can't see anything.'

'Exactly. This could be our way in.'

'You think it's undefended?'

'We could throw a scaling ladder.'

'It may give us away. Perhaps we should head back and inform Brienne.'

Paolo nodded, this was too good an opportunity to miss. They rowed back as quickly as they could and by the time they reached the encampment, Louis was breathless and a cold sweat dripped from his body. His voice cracked as he asked the soldier standing by Brienne's tent for water. But the soldier was caught off guard and threw Louis on the ground, pushing his spear towards his chest.

'Don't. We're scouts.' Paolo shouted as he grabbed the soldier.

A few more men turned up, as they feared an attack and confusion arose quickly. Then Count de Brienne himself came out of the tent.

'What's all this? What's going on?' Brienne demanded. Two men were holding Louis down, and three more were pointing spears at an angry Paolo.

'We're the southern scouts, Sir,' Louis shouted.

'Halt,' Brienne commanded.

The soldiers stood up, wiping the blood and sweat from their faces.

'You have news?' Brienne asked, expectantly.

'Yes, Sir,' Louis replied.

'One of the Southern towers is undefended,' Paolo replied.

Brienne paused.

'Is this a trick? Some sort of trap?'

'It didn't look that way, Sir,' Louis replied.

'How can you tell?'

'There was a rather pungent smell.'

'What do you mean?'

'Dead bodies, Sir,' Louis replied. 'You never forget that smell, it just stays with you.'

'You're certain there were no guards?' Brienne asked once more.

Both men replied in unison. 'No one.'

'Very well. I want you to assemble a group of ten men to follow you. Go to Vitry; tell him what's happened so that he can get the men ready for battle. I'll send you a messenger with more instructions.'

'Yes, Sir.'

‘And men, thank you, you may have given us Damietta.’
Brienne called on his servants to wake up the Grand Masters and leaders of the different orders. This needed to be a coordinated attack. Vitry hand-picked a few men to join Louis and Paolo.

‘We need a distraction. Grand Master Hermann, you’ll head to the east while you, Pierre de Montaigne, you’re leading your Templars to the northern towers.’

‘What about us?’ Guérin Pierre’s cousin and leader of the Hospitallers asked.

‘You’ll hold back with me. Once we have word that the walls have been breached, we’ll sail forward. I want archers, foot soldiers, and knights at the ready.’

‘What about Cardinal Pelagius? Shall I get him?’ Vitry asked.

‘No, leave him be. We need men, not priests. I’ll inform him of our plan. Now go and give me Damietta.’ Brienne ordered.

*

The men walked up the scaling ladder and reached the top of the southern tower without resistance. The messenger ran back towards the archers, who in turn sent a single burning arrow high in the sky.

‘Attack!’ Brienne shouted.

The quiet murmurs of the morning turned into a collective roar of men as they boarded the ships onto the fortress surrounded by water. Louis had been amongst the first to reach the tower. He moved swiftly, holding his dagger, expecting to see an enemy soldier at any time, but the entire wing of the southern tower was deserted. Instead, the familiar foul smell hit him and he retched a couple of times.

‘What is that stench?’ One of the soldiers asked as another one vomited beside him.

‘Dead bodies... everywhere,’ Louis replied pointing at the streets below them, where dozens of bodies lay wasting and the smell of the decaying flesh filled the air around them.

‘Dear Lord.’

Nothing had prepared those men for what they saw that day. Hundreds of people had died during the siege through famine and thirst in the long months of stalemate. And those that had survived haunted the streets like

dead men walking, their bodies cachectic, covered in dirt and sores as maggots festered on wounds. An old man stumbled towards them.

‘What’s he doing? Halt!’ A Frisian soldier ordered, pointing his blade forward a few times.

‘He can’t understand you,’ another Frisian soldier replied, ‘Just kill him.’

‘No, don’t. He’s dead already, look.’ Louis replied.

‘Men, keep moving!’ One of the knights instructed as he saw the men hesitate. But some of the enemy soldiers had been alerted to their presence, and a few arrows flew past them.

‘Soldiers, over there now!’ The knight shouted, pointing at the enemy archers across one of the other walls. Seconds later an arrow pierced his left thigh, and he fell to the ground. And so did the soldier next to him as an arrow cut through his throat and blood gushed everywhere. Louis stopped a Saracen soldier climbing the steps towards the wall as he kicked him and then pushed his dagger deep into his chest. As more men climbed the wall, the sound of blades and swords rose against the whispering sound of the arrows. Some lost their swords and armoury and resorted to punching and kicking. Severed arms and body parts lay amongst the blood of both Crusaders and Saracens.

Louis ran down the steps too fast as his right leg gave way once again and he slipped amongst the pools of blood and bile. The Frisian soldier behind him grunted and then jumped past Louis onto a Saracen archer. Louis pushed another enemy soldier down the twenty-foot drop wall as it twisted and contorted until it finally stopped altogether.

A few soldiers walked past him onto the narrow streets of the town, kicking baskets and stalls as they pushed their spears through anything that looked vaguely like a hiding place. Louis wiped the blood away but then started retching again as the sickly sweet metallic smell hit him again. Some of the bodies appeared to have been there for weeks. He then turned as he felt a light touch over his shoulder and saw a woman, more dead than alive, whose dark brown eyes were devoid of all expression. But she too fell to the ground as another soldier pulled her head back and slit her throat.

‘Why did you do that?’ Louis screamed.

‘She’s a Saracen, isn’t she?’ The soldier spat out.

Louis looked around, suddenly aware of the hum of groaning around him a distressing and uncomfortable pitch, of the men, women, and children of Damietta. The months of siege had seen them succumb to famine and dis-

ease. Now the few that were left stumbled towards the blades and arrows, too weak to scream as they took their last breath.

‘Don’t. These are no soldiers.’ Louis shouted in vain, as the Crusaders threw punches, daggers, and arrows, taking no prisoners as the ghosts of Damietta walked towards them. ‘They’re just begging us...Please have mercy.’

As the men breached the walls of the undefended southern tower, the other armies attacked the northern entrance, sending archers and foot soldiers off the boats. And by the time the sun was high in the sky, the Crusaders had conquered Damietta. The few surviving Saracen soldiers laid down their swords and were rounded up at the eastern gate near the main market. Cries of jubilation and victory were overheard all over the port city, as soldiers started to ransack it for every bit of silk, gold, and silver they could find. Louis headed into what looked like an old bazaar. He knelt sobbing next to the body of a dead woman and child.

‘Louis.’ A man said stood behind him. It was Vincent, who had joined in the last wave of attack through the northern gate.

‘Vincent... this boy, he’s probably no more than two or three. Same age as Henri when I left.’

‘Don’t.’

‘What if it had been them? Abandoned and thrown into a ditch to die?’

‘It’s better not to think.’

‘How can we celebrate on a day like this?’

‘We’ve survived, that’s all. It could have been us. It could still be us tomorrow.’

‘What is the point of all this death? Look around you; women, children and old men, merchants most of them.’

‘I know. But you must pull yourself together now, Louis. Someone might think you speak like a traitor.’

‘This isn’t right.’

Vincent held Louis as he tried to fight his tears.

‘I’m so tired, Vincent. I’ve had enough of death.’

‘They’ll send us home after this, you’ll see. Damn, they have to. We’ve done all they asked us to do.’

Louis sat up, wiping his tears and snot.

‘It’s good to see you, Vincent.’

‘It seems I wasn’t ready to die yet, my friend. Come on let’s walk.’

They reached the market by a dried well where Guillaume de Vitry was gathering all the children of Damietta in front of Cardinal Pelagius.

‘Damn, what he’s is up to now?’ Vincent whispered.

The few surviving mothers screamed and bit and spat at the soldiers guarding them but to no avail. They were witnesses to a ritual they could not understand.

‘As Papal Legate, I bless this water and baptise these children into the Christian faith. May they receive our Lord with open hearts and find salvation.’

The crowds cheered whilst in the distance Al-Kamil retreated south down the Nile to wait for his brother’s reinforcements.

‘We need to escape this hell,’ Louis whispered as they watched the scenes unfolding before their eyes.

‘We can’t desert you know they’ll kill us. Then all of this would have been for nothing.’

‘I found a better way. I’m working on the details. But we need to go home.’

‘Say the word.’

‘I’ll tell you as soon as it’s safe.’

*

The Order of Lies (adapted excerpt)

An adapted excerpt from *The Order of Lies*, a novel of seven parallel stories exploring the impact of the Yugoslav Wars on ordinary lives. Jerko is a trainee Jesuit priest who teaches at a Catholic school in Edinburgh in the mid-1990s. He has sought out a refuge where he can drink without unwanted attention, in a gay bar.

~

They sat together at the club on their barstools, her fiddling with the open buttons of his collar, him tracing the small of her back.

‘Did you never have a wife, Jerko?’ Her voice was like silver bullets dropping out of a handgun, rolling across the floor.

‘No. Never married.’ He eyed the whisky bottles behind the bar. He told her how he had run over the hills to escape the army in Croatia; risked his life to find another existence.

Esmerelda understood. She had left being a he back in a village south of Edinburgh; slept in a friend’s shed, found a job, then a room. ‘This is my family now,’ she said, raising her glass to the barman.

‘Don’t you go back sometimes?’ Jerko asked.

‘Not once, not ever.’

Jerko held her close and kissed her bubblegum hair.

*

He found himself at the window of the Blue Sky Café. She stood by a table taking an order, a red apron over her bare, tanned legs. She fiddled with her hair and laughed at whatever joke the two men told her.

Jerko felt at his neck and cringed. He couldn’t go in. But then she looked up and saw him. She ran to the front, skipped in those high-up sandals, on fragile ankles. The door chimed out as she flung it open and her face flushed pink. ‘Jerko! Hi, come in! What are you standing out here for?’

‘I. I. Hello Esmerelda.’

He followed her to a table near the back, and a silence swept over the café. He felt stares and glares burn his back, then heard a whisper lash across the room. “Priest.” But there was nothing in the rules to stop him being here; it was part of the community, same as any other place.

Esmerelda sat down opposite him. The hush had lifted and returned to a normal babble. ‘What can I get you then?’

‘You’re going to sit with me? Aren’t you working?’

‘I’ll take my break. Why not?’

While she was fetching his coffee, Jerko looked around. Watercolours, oil paintings and drawings bustled together on the walls in elegant mismatch. One sketch stood out: a portrait of a boy with freckles and messy hair.

She slipped back in opposite him. ‘You’ve seen it, I see. Well, what do you think?’

‘Of what?’ He noticed she had unpinned her hair and it tumbled across her shoulders.

‘Never mind.’

He looked back at the sketch and then at her. She laughed. ‘Do you see it?’

‘No. But, maybe. Is that you?’

‘Aha!’ she said. ‘Now you’re getting it.’

‘Is it?’

‘It was.’

He stared at the boy and then at her. Same eyes. Same innocence. Same beauty.

‘How old were you?’

‘Twelve.’

‘Who did it?’

‘Did what?’

‘Drew it.’

She blinked and sat still for an instant. ‘It’s a self-portrait.’

‘No way – you did that when you were twelve?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why the hell are you selling it? It’s amazing, you should keep it.’

She swirled her finger round the rim of her cup. He walked across to look more closely at the sketch and read the details underneath:

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

E. Honey

£39

‘Honey?’ He sat back down. ‘Your surname is Honey?’

‘It is now.’

'What was it before?'
'It doesn't matter, because it's Honey now.'
'But what happens to who you were before, that boy in the picture?'
'It stopped when he left and Esme was born.'
'But you've carried that through; you as a boy.'
'I can't change that that's who I was. But I can let go of it.'
'It's on full display here for anyone to see.' He leaned forward and stirred his coffee. He tried to smile; he had no reason to feel like this.
'I'm not in hiding or in denial. People here accept me as I am.'
Jerko nodded and took out his tobacco.
'You know, you should be smoking menthol. Much better for you.'
'Leave me alone. I like what I like.'
'Fine.' And she lit up a Marlboro Menthol before he'd finished rolling. It smelled like medicine. He watched her long fingers hanging limp with the cigarette taut between them. Her full lips with the mole at the corner curled round it and left a tiny dab of pink on the edge. She closed her thick, black eyelashes for a moment before she released the smoke, blew it in a single straight line at a point behind his ear. Then she laughed. 'You need to stop staring at me so much in that outfit, Father. People will start to talk, you know!'
She was right. She was joking but she was right. He felt himself too hot now and he tugged at his collar.
'I'm just messing with you, relax. No one cares around here.'
'I should be getting on.'
'You'll finish your coffee and your ciggie, and when you're finished you'll ask me out to dinner.'
'I'm a celibate man.'
'Dinner. Did I say sex?'
Then her toes were under his trouser leg at his ankle. Then they worked up under the table and he sat forward and said, 'Pick you up at seven?'
'I'll be here,' she said.
On the way out he realised two things: one, she hadn't charged him; and two, her name was on the painting of haystacks at the door.

*

'You came.' She stepped out to the trill of the door chimes, took his arm

and they walked down the hill towards Leith.

'Esmerelda,' was all he could say. He wanted to say how he had missed her for those few hours, while he taught second year then fourth. That when he explained to Sister Patricia he wouldn't need dinner tonight, he wanted to say her name, repeat it over and over, 'Esmerelda.'

They walked for a while without saying more. He hadn't booked anywhere and she didn't ask where they were going. Their legs found a rhythm where they saw no one and never paused for crossing a road, never needed to say "excuse me" to anyone.

The light had only just started to fade in the city; the days were creeping out towards the summer.

They walked.

Eventually they reached the docks. The sea lapped at the harbour wall. Still they didn't speak.

Esmerelda unhooked her fingers from his arm and stood alone, looked out to sea.

Jerko felt for words. 'Esmerelda,' he said, and she smiled, didn't look at him.

He stepped forward and held out his hand. She took it. They stared out to sea. And sparks flicked through his body, ignited by her hand.

A foghorn sounded in the distance. She turned, dropped his hand. 'C'mon,' she said, 'I'll race ye.' And they ran across the seafront, her in her heels, to Harry Ramsden's fish and chips restaurant out on the pier. Breathless they gazed in at the families dining in bright lights, Cliff Richard on the speakers.

'It's too commercial here, too Mickey Mouse,' he said. 'We can do better.' A curl fell down over her face, and he swept it back, didn't think; then she caught his eye through his fingers and he had to step back a pace.

The Starbank sat opposite the seafront. Quiet and unassuming, an old man's pub. Jerko felt at his neck, checked his open collar. She traced it with her fingertips. 'We're both fine here,' she said. She inched down her skirt hem.

They entered the bar: Jerko, the ex-soldier, and Esme the elegant woman. They sat by the window and enjoyed courteous service from a young waitress in flat black shoes and a neckline up to her chin. Esme giggled

and played under the table with her toes. Jerko blushed and told her to stop, half-heartedly.

After the meal, Jerko ordered another beer. But when the waitress left them, Esme said she wanted to go.

‘OK, after this one you mean?’

‘Before it, maybe.’ Her mouth twisted at the side.

He paid at the bar and they left together as they had arrived.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, walking quickly and dropping his arm. She ran ahead in the dark and he followed her slowly. He waited by the close.

When she came back out her head was low and she didn’t take his arm.

She started to walk but he stood still. She turned. ‘Shall we go?’

‘Where to?’ said Jerko.

‘It’s not always like that,’ she said. ‘I just didn’t trust that pub. I shouldn’t drink as much in strange bars.’

‘It’s no one’s business which bathroom you use.’

‘I know but either choice could start a riot, and I can’t tell what they’re thinking. Better safe outside.’

‘That’s ridiculous. It’s no one’s business. I’d keep you safe.’

‘Some things aren’t worth a fight, my love.’

He took her hand and they walked.

She stopped when they reached a red door on Montgomery Street. She asked, ‘Will you come in with me?’ and he didn’t reply.

He followed her up the stone staircase, winding to a narrow landing and a door with no name plate. She stepped inside and he felt himself drawn in, chasing her touch. ‘I’ve never seen ceilings as high as this,’ he said.

‘Two sugars, am I right?’

He nodded.

They sat in the lounge: she on a rocking chair, he on the sofa. There were throws of all designs and colours over the seats and the table. By the window was an easel and canvas, covered by an orange sheet.

‘Those paintings in the café. How many of them are yours?’

‘Oh I don’t keep count much.’ She crossed her legs on the chair and held her cup to her lips with both hands.

‘They’re all yours, aren’t they?’

‘They are.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were an artist?’

‘You didn’t ask.’

‘I asked what you did for a living.’

‘It’s to live, not for a living. To pay bills I work at the café.’

‘You told me you left home at fourteen.’ The room was full of books, on the shelves, on the table, the floor, lying open some of them. Paintings were stacked against the wall, and brushes and oils and pencils were scattered everywhere. ‘Did you go to art school?’

‘No. I didn’t lie about anything – I left school long ago.’

They sat together in silence and Jerko replayed Esmerelda’s life story to himself. How could he have missed that she was an artist? He’d never asked her what she wanted out of life; just what she was running from, and how she coped now.

*

He woke before she did, in the warm sunlight poking through the shutters. Her bedsheets felt hot and his head calm. His artist temptress lay by his side, breathing healthy, living loving. Blonde, not like he had ever wanted before. Blonde, not like his taste. Blonde Esmerelda, emerald eyes closed now, eyelashes dark, soul light, thin, tall, lying down beside him, trusting him. Esmerelda. His.

He wrapped his arm round her, held her close; his vows and denial floated away. Her. She changed everything.

But only for now. Alarm sounded, blasts of noise, shards of last night fell away from his mind. ‘What time is it?’ Searching for socks and fragments of priesthood behaviour to cover his shameful deceit. ‘Shit! I have to go. Esme, help me here, will you?’

Sleep-blurred wonder, she gazed at him from the pillow of his dreams. ‘Leaving already? I knew you would.’

He hopped past her tying his shoe. ‘Esme, I told you, you know who I am. We can’t do this again.’

‘So I’ll see you in the club tonight then?’ She sat up and the covers fell down round her waist. He stared at her man-chest and still he wanted more. Her lips. More. They said, ‘Stay.’ And he did.

A Version of Love (novel excerpt)

Back inside everything seems easier. It's as if their motions have been laid out as a script—all they need do is follow it.

The room has filled up since they've been out. He makes the universal gesture for 'drink?'. She nods.

Her mind works through a series of possibilities, like trying a set of keys in a lock.

She could abandon him now and go back to her friends — an idea that she never seriously entertains. He's probably already paid for her drink, after all.

She could accept the one drink and make her excuses as soon as is decent.

She could keep accepting drinks, dance with him, her hands on his slim shoulders, a fuzzy heat growing between her thighs as she lets herself steal glances at the beautiful boy across the room.

She could get the taxi home with the girls, as promised. They have planned to have a sleepover, like when they were teenagers. Her pyjamas are wadded into her tiny cross-body bag.

She could go home with him.

She could sink to her knees before him in the alley behind the club and take him in her mouth as he lets his hands rest on her head, giving his blessing for a religion that she isn't yet sure she believes in.

He taps her on the elbow and hands her a glass of clear liquid over ice. He didn't ask her what she wanted. She smiles at him and takes her first sip, her tastebuds identifying only something strong and chemical.

She resolves, before she is too drunk to make a proper decision, that she's going to keep drinking, and she's going to fuck him. She doesn't really care how or where, but she needs to acknowledge it to herself, before her judgement blurs and she becomes too caught up in the question of whether it's really what she wants.

She says little, and focuses on making sure the words that do come out aren't slurred. He keeps talking, mostly about the police academy. He has asked her about herself, but when she explained that she has just graduated with a degree in international relations, he showed no further curiosity. As he talks, she nods and smiles and occasionally lets her hand fall against his

thigh. He doesn't seem realise that she's inviting him into a pact of staged subtlety, but meets her square in the eyes at every incident of contact. It surprises her how unimpressed he seems. For a while, he neither leans into nor away from her touch.

Then, with little precedence, he puts an arm around her shoulders as he continues to talk, not seeming to care that she couldn't possibly hear him above the noise of the music. A few minutes later, with equally little warning, he pulls her to him and crushes his mouth against hers.

She opens her lips as if obeying a cue, and feels his tongue make a sort of measured, inspecting progress around her mouth. There is little in the substance of it to arouse her, yet she still feels her body prepare to let him in. Deciding to fuck him has made her feel the kiss is part of a foregone conclusion.

He doesn't keep buying her drinks, and he doesn't even keep kissing her for too long. After he has laid out his terms for their embrace, he returns to talking about induction into the police force. She is sobering steadily, but does not let the ebbing warmth around her eyes force her to consider if she's made a mistake. She sees, over his shoulder, her friends swaying towards the exit and disappearing through the door.

They return a few moments later with expressions of pantomime horror, gesturing at her to join them. She flaps her hand at them, as if to say 'Go on!' behind his back, then allows the same hand to slide around his waist and draw him closer to her. Over his shoulder, she sees several eyebrows raised.

He frowns at her. 'You know, I'm not that kind of guy.' Her hand, which is sliding down towards his bum, stops abruptly. Before she can ask him what he means, he continues. 'And you don't seem like that kind of girl.'

A pause, filled only by the throb of the music. She feels a slow cascade of shame burning through her chest. She withdraws her hand, and he catches it with a smile. It's a different kind of smile to their talk outside, and the first moment that he seems good-looking.

'Let me walk you home,' he says, lacing his fingers into the captured hand.

She doesn't want to walk home, partly because she's wearing heels, and partly because she isn't sure what they'll talk about on the way. But she feels that suggesting that they get a cab instead would be to miss whatever point he's making. She doubts he'll want to sit with her on the night bus,

exchanging the banal observations of increasing sobriety and avoiding spearing McDonald's chips on her heels.

And of course, she has already drunk whatever it is that he gave her.

'Trust me. I'm police. I'd worry about you if you went off home by yourself.'

She laughs. He doesn't.

'Look, I'm not going to try anything. I'm not like that.'

That's the problem. She has a sense of what men who are 'like that' would and wouldn't do. 'I can get a cab.'

'Not a chance.' He snorts. 'Do you know how many women are raped by unlicensed minicab drivers?'

She makes to take a little step back, but his hand is pushing into the small of her back, keeping her close. There seems no response other than to nod, although she isn't sure which part she is nodding to. 'Let me just go to the loo quickly...'

He grins, and then leans in to kiss her lightly on the forehead, a motion that feels sharply intimate.

There is no quickly, of course. She stands in the queue for the single bathroom stall, watching as the girls around her, clearly strangers, move into slurring sisterliness as they wait. She sees one girl put a little white pill in her mouth, before noticing her gaze and offering out the palm of her hand. She shakes her head.

She stands before the mirror in the bathroom, looking deep into her own irises to see if they appear any different than usual, to understand from them what was in the drink he gave her.

But she sees only herself, sees nothing beyond the usual blankness. Her eyeliner has flaked off and is lying in the crease of reddened skin under her eyes. The swaying glow is wearing away, and she notices that her skin looks greyish in the light, beneath the red flush from the hot club. She is a little dizzy, and holds on to the sides of the basin to keep herself standing firm.

'Do you need to go into the cubicle, babe?'

She looks into the mirror at the girl standing behind her. She's tall, over six foot, with the too-long limbs of a drag queen. Her tiny dress is a slash of silver, covering only the essentials. She shakes her head, and the girl steps into the loo stall, her long body carving a swaying diagonal. 'Thanks darlinng...' the girl rasps out, stretching the second syllable with

a sensuous yet impersonal smile. She takes a last look at herself, trying not to notice how all the colour seems sucked out of her. She isn't stoned, she's pretty sure. If she was, she wouldn't be able to see every limp hank of hair, every acne scar on her forehead, with such cruel clarity.

She steps back, rocking forward onto the balls of her feet to see her outfit better, how the tight (too tight?) black top blends into the black polyester skirt which, she realises by contrast with the top, has started to go a little grey. She notices a part of her flesh — she isn't sure if there is a word for that particular section of self, the part between the waist and the buttocks — is bulging a little, like a joint of beef before the string has been snipped off. She wonders if she ought to take off her knickers, to smooth it out.

As she leaves the bathroom she nearly collides with the beautiful boy she saw earlier. He turns towards her and sweeps his eyes across her face, with an elegance that seems choreographed.

'Hi.'

She wonders if he's used to making the world turn on the sounds falling from his tongue. For a few moments her drunkenness seems to reinstate itself.

She takes a step towards him, tripping slightly on her heels. That little lurch brings the world back into clarity, and she imagines how she must look to him. This dull-faced, off-balance girl, her eyeliner smeared, her hair lank with the night's sweat. Swallowing some part of herself, she converts the little stagger into a wide arc which takes her back to where he stands, waiting.

It's 1am. The previously thin crowds on the dance floor have swelled into a living body. The music was cool five years ago, but to her ears sounds odd now, clunky and echoing. She watches him exchange a brief goodbye with the group he's nominally with, and they set off.

Before long she's limping a little, but he doesn't seem to notice. After ten minutes or so, she takes her shoes off and lets them dangle from her hands by the straps.

He frowns. 'There's lots of broken glass here.'

'I'm being careful.'

'You should put your shoes back on.'

She dawdles for a second, uncertain.
'Look, you're making me worry about you. Just put your shoes on.'
She does it.

His monologue about the police academy has stopped. Instead he tells her how beautiful she is. The way he says it makes her feel like he's talking about someone else. She isn't sure where the conversation can go, and so lapses into silence. He holds her hand.

The night is cloudy, the sky like oxidised iron, betraying only in patches a deepest blue and a scattering of stars.

'Look,' she says. 'There's the North Star.'

He follows the uncertain line of her finger. 'Oh yeah.'

'Or... I don't really know. Is it Mars?'

'Maybe.'

'Or it could be a satellite, I guess.'

He says nothing, but re-laces his fingers with hers. They fit together with the straightforwardness of a children's wooden puzzle.

He says goodnight to her at her mother's front door. He doesn't make any indication that he wants to come in and she's grateful for that. The chemo makes her mother sleep odd hours.

He asks for her number. She gives it to him.

She makes tea and toast and checks her phone. Nothing. It's 1:58am.

She switches it onto silent, and eats sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the jumble of pill boxes, plastic bags and detective novels covering the tabletop. Her mother left the TV on with the sound muted, which lends the characters onscreen a weariness. The fuzz of alcohol has worn away and in its place is a hollow, carved-out feeling.

A small part of her head, just behind her fringe, begins to ache.

She crosses to the kitchen cabinet to take down one of her father's old pint glasses and fills it with cold water. She washes the dirty dish in the sink, and throws away the packaging from the microwave meal that her mother must have had for dinner. She checks her phone again, and switches it back onto vibrate, before turning off the lights and making her way up the stairs. She does her best to avoid the creaking floorboard outside her mother's room.

She takes off the remaining smears of her makeup, puts on a pair of clean pyjamas, and gets into bed. She feels the same anticipation she did the day she had left for university and, perhaps perversely, the day her father left. There was even been a hollow, shameful note of it in the moment her mother told her about her diagnosis, although that quickly gave way to a metallic chill that she now carries daily at her core.

Her phone fusses on the bedside table. She counts to five, then glances at the screen.

it was great meeting you tonight x

Boardgame

We haven't got jobs. We haven't any money.

We don't work. We're all broke.

So we sit between the scrapyards and the cemetery, by the Biffa bins. The caged-in concrete square used by both of them to discard their detritus.

We were playing a game. Using the guts of dead electronics for pieces. Using a slate of broken headstone for a board. There are always new electric parts and there's always a new piece of headstone. They're broken, they don't work. So they end up here.

One of us thought we were playing for keeps. Disagreements arose. Opinions put forth were cast aside. Perspectives offered were declined.

Disagreements escalated to argument. Insults were traded. Scorn coming up from bile-organ, pouring out over tongue and through teeth and past lips.

Argument transcended into violence. Hair was pulled. Throats were held in retaliation. Fingers searched for eyes. Fingers intruded mouths. Fingers were bitten.

One of us wanted everything to stop. They held a gun to their head and pulled the trigger. Click. They pulled it again over and over, click click click.

No bullet emerged.

We told them the gun was broken. We took it and pulled the trigger, click. It doesn't work, we said. Aimed it at them and clicked the trigger. Held it to our own heads and clicked the trigger. They said there weren't any bullets. We took the magazine out and held it so they could see that there was.

We took out the bullets and added them to our game. The casings were gnarled and they wouldn't stand upright. They rolled in little semicircles.

We swept away tufts of hair. We wiped away blood.

The disagreement regarding our playing for keeps still unresolved, we resumed our violence. Fingers were bitten. Throats were forced closed. Eyes were clawed.

The board was picked up and shattered against an eyebrow. The playing pieces were trodden on and destroyed.

The game being ruined, the purpose of our violence became redundant. Keeps meant nothing now.

Hands were opened. Fingers were detangled from hair. Fingers slid from mouths.

There would be a new board tomorrow. There would be new pieces tomorrow.

Until then, there is nothing else to do. We haven't got reasons. We haven't any purpose.

The crushed electronics, the shards of headstone. The gun and the bullets. Us.

We don't work. We're all broken.

Cardiology (novel excerpt)

1

I see a man. He unfastens the door, lock by lock. His hands are slow with age, as are the bolts. There is nobody outside, he knows, but still he feels his heart beat within his old, wiry chest. He wonders if the blood in his veins has become as hard as the rest of him.

He opens the door silently, avoids the loud floorboard. In the yard, everything is the same – the plants, the chair, the broken branches. He fumbles in his pockets, takes out a package of food wrapped in a bleach-white dish-cloth. In the thin morning light, he eats his meat while doing the observations. A tree has been felled to the south west, about a hundred yards down the slope. But the weather has been good. The plot is empty. It makes little sense. He writes this in his notebook with the stub of a pencil no longer than his thumb. It shouldn't matter, might even give him a head start if they come from the West. Which they could, of course. They could come ashore at Lapataia – in small boats – and then east along Ruta 3. They could even come the long way round. The Chileans are collaborators nowadays, he thinks. He balances the pencil between two neat fingernails. With the tree gone, the difference would be seconds. Maybe a minute or two if they sent slow men who would struggle with the slope. And who is he nowadays to turn down minutes?

He takes a bite of the dried beef, curses his ill-fitting denture. The stuff still tastes like animal hide and shit, and it will be a good month before he can make a new batch. Under the blue November sky, he thinks about the spring that is coming, the provisions that he will have to lay away, the journey to the *estancia*. The air smells like sea. Southerly. Sea birds blow in to shore in a great ragged cloud. He wonders about pulling out the rest of his teeth and risking the dentist. He curses Doctor Morgan for leaving. Curses all of them. He wonders how old he really is. He wonders if it matters any more.

One bird straggles and peels away from the flock. It is thin and tired and its belly is white as ice. As it wheels down towards him, it makes a sound remarkably like the name of a girl. He blinks once, twice as it sits on the tin roof and blinks back at him.

'Elena', says the bird.

It says Elena because it is talking about me.

2

My father always said that death was nothing to fear, in the same voice he used to talk about the first day of school and one or two of his more grizzled associates, who appeared as though washed up by the sea. Sometimes they brought gifts for him; medication and tools and quiet things to talk about in the empty country behind the town. They brought little scraps of paper that Papá would stare at and eventually throw into the fire. Other times they arrived with their foreign clothes soaked through, and stayed long enough for even their souls to dry out. They slept in the attic like a bad dream. Scars on their arms and faces as though somebody had tried to cross parts of them out.

Papá puffed out his chest to talk about the big things; death and misbehaviour. This was mostly, in my case, cutting my own hair behind the TV while my mother was distracted – she watched *Pobre Diabla* up loud so she could pretend the people were her friends. He talked about the bad men too, who would come one day. About the checks and the best way to run: high and north. Always north. Most of the time, though, he slouched as if he was carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders. He looked at the world through pale blue eyes that hated everything except – sometimes – me.

As it happened, he was right about death. I died on a Tuesday. It was fine. Good, even. I felt the ground, the sky, the wide places of the Earth inside me. I felt the cold sea, the kitchen dinners, boys running their fingers through my hair back when that was still exciting. Patagonia, Madrid, Lola, my little Lola. Mark with his good intentions, dark hair, skin smell of soap and tea. Señor Bianco stacking erasers and apples and pencils onto the backs of my hands. Wrists up, *hija mía*. Wrists. A half-circle of metal. Rage, a neck thin and wizened like a tree-trunk. Was this how it would be now? Feeling and seeing at the same time, as though they were the same thing after all? I saw him in the garden, blinking at the bird. Alive after all these years. And just as quickly, I saw the quiet and cool of our bedroom. The thin grey light of autumn soaking through the curtains. Mark. Of course, Mark.

Seeing him there, I thought that there was something poetic about the way he slept, as though it explained everything else about him. He lay on his back, arms by his sides. He kept his dark hair long enough to be polite, but short enough that it was impossible for it to look mussed, even after

a night of broken sleep. I saw the light pooling where his head weighed into the pillow and I joined it, welling in and out of his mouth like the sea in a rockpool. I was the air he breathed in, I was the cool of dawn. I felt his dreams seep into me around the edges. How can you do anything but love a person whom you encompass? So yes, I saw Mark, handsome and straight and full of the promise of waking up. And I saw me, lying there beside him in the morning light.

It wasn't me anymore. I swam over the body that had once been mine; ran myself between the fingers, and in among the silent places between clothes and skin. The vastness of the body, the great expanses of flesh and fibre, like a new world. It smelt the way living things do when they stop living. The scent of blood slowing down, of flesh that still – just – smells of the powder and cleanliness of civilization. I wound through my hair like a dark forest. Big bad wolf, gingerbread house. Children in the oven. The smell of me. And then I heard Lola, crying in the next room.

I waited a moment, the same way I always did. If she stops, stay in bed. If not, you go. That's the rule. But she didn't stop and, when I tried to go, I found that I was less than I had imagined. Formless yet contained. Try as I might to drift or surge or float into Lola's room, I was tethered to Mark, and Mark was asleep. I bothered him all I could, thrummed against his chest wall and tried to fumble my way into his dream, the same way they had fumbled into me. Eventually he began to stir. He rolled over and said my name two, three times.

With the flat of his hand, he reached out as he always did. He wrapped his body around mine and pressed his chest into my back, brushing his hands across my breasts and pulling me close. My body, that is. He pushed his face deep into the nape of my neck, into the thicket of hair before pulling back with a start.

Adrenaline and sleep and the thin morning air, the smell of something sweet. His throat tightened, his hands trembled. He knew what to do, or at least, he thought he should know. He shook my shoulders and said my name, pressed his thumbs into my eyebrows, rubbed my breastbone. He shouted my name in horror, its syllables transformed into an exclamation of loss.

ABC, thought Mark. *The airway, the airway*. He pulled a pillow away and felt his heart beat faster as my head flopped back onto the mattress. He leant in close to the lips that were no longer anything to do with me

– waxy rather than dry, he noticed, and eerily lacking in that vital odour of breath and breathing and the life that you have consumed coming back out the same way. Cigarettes and coffee and cherry brandy. Lola screaming next door. He shifted his weight and knelt with his face low to mine, felt the movement in the mattress gradually slow and cease, the two of our bodies now both weighing down the left side of the bed. With his cheek there, poised an inch away from my lips, he waited and hoped to feel the drift of breath on his face. His hands trembled. With the tips of his fingers, he felt for a pulse. He dug in deep, spread his hand flat across my skin, and then dug deep once more, moving desperately from one place to the other.

He wondered what to do; should he go to the baby? Thoughts too quick to form even images crowded his mind. Lola bleeding, Lola on the floor. Lola dying, fevers and stiffness. He thumped my breastbone once, with all his strength, and held his breath for a second or two afterwards, half-convinced that it would work.

For a moment, I wondered whether it might. Wondered if I should care more, but, like everything else in this new place, the thought passed almost without leaving a trace, as though thoughts without the anchor of a body were quick to wash away.

The house phone was downstairs by the sofa, the mobiles lined up neatly beside it like a family. He put a hand over his free ear as he pressed the handset to his head, but still Lola's cries got in.

'Hello, emergency. Ambulance, fire or police?'

'Ambulance. My wife, she won't wake up. Quickly. Oh God.' Mark's voice shook. He heard the operator tense. The line clicked and rang once before another, firmer woman's voice began to extract the address, the details, the missing pulse and the absent breath.

'Do you know how to perform CPR?' the woman asked. 'Chest compressions?'

'Yes, I'm a doctor. It's just—'

'Go and start CPR. I'll stay on the line until help arrives.'

'Are they coming?' He felt his mind fill with floodwater, as though he was watching all the things he should do float downstream and, just as quickly, out of his mind.

'They're on their way, doctor. Go and start CPR.' Her voice was calm and tight.

It was too late, Mark knew that already. He dropped the phone into the

deep red sofa; deep red, we had thought, would mask all the stains. Red wine, blood, ice pops and crayons for when we maybe had a couple more kids and they started encouraging one another. From the handset, face down in the seat cushion where he had dropped it, he heard the woman sigh over the hubbub of other operators on other lines.

When he opened the front door, the cold air pinched at his legs. There was nobody on the street: not the milk float, nor the last dregs of drinkers that sometimes passed by at this time. A car alarm sounded in the distance. The pot plants quivered. Dawn was breaking somewhere in the distance, although breaking is a strange word for something so beautiful. He left the door ajar, the hall light on, sign enough that this was the place.

Tuesday 19th May, Kouloura, Corfu

The following work is an excerpt from a collection of literary travel essays.

Παραμονή του εορτασμού του Αγίου Νικολάου του Πέτρα
 Ο Πολιτιστικός Σύλλογος Gimarì σε συνεργασία με την εκκλησία
 Και τον πρόεδρο του τοπικού συμβουλίου του Gimarì, στο
 Μνημόσυνο αυτού του γεγονότος έχουν οργανώσει μια πομπή του
 Εικόνα του Αγίου Νικολάου από την εκκλησία του Αγίου Νικολάου
 στην Κουλούρα
 Στο Καλάμι, συνοδευόμενο από τη φιλαρμονική ένωση του
 Θηλινίου.
 Η πομπή θα ξεκινήσει στις 6.30 μ.μ.

It begins. The bells are set free and start clanging their call for the processionists to gather at the tiny church of Saint Nikolas of Petras; protector of the harbour of Kouloura. The saint's icon is to be paraded on the eve of his name day but, in the distance, there is a deep rumbling; the ancient gods attempting to draw attention to themselves, envious perhaps of this reverent event? Or, is the disturbance coming from the disapproving, white capped Ceraunian Mountains of Albania that glower across the sea a stone's throw away? Massive; they are menacing.

The light becomes strange, even for Corfu; bright and sunny yet with a definite haze. Across the bay a shroud is now descending over the peaks; no longer can the streaks of snow be seen on their crowns. On our side a veil of gauze is being drawn across the theatre stage of Corfu; perhaps Nikolas wishes to keep his adoration a secret. More rumbles and grumbles, more haze, more sun. I am confused. Has the performance started?

The hillsides surrounding us boast the tall, dark, *Fingers of God*, the name given to the cypresses which exclaim against a background of green, gold and silver. Surely they will look after us, protect us with their kind touch. A light breeze caresses me and makes the water of the diminutive harbour lift to gently kiss the tethered boats whose vivid colours add

another dimension to the surreal scene. By now the mainland and its mountains are disappearing fast into a gloom, but we hang on to the sunlight on our side; just. Little girls dressed in long, pale grey cotton gowns are gathering; they carry baskets of rose petals. The 'Philharmonic Union of Thinalion' gather and strut in their red and gold jackets, humming and buzzing with glee as they tune their instruments. Sparse rain drops begin to patter from a patchy grey sky. A sunbeam sneaks through and illuminates God's house; maybe He is looking out for us after all.

A schooner sails by in the navy blue straits as a beguiling voice leads a prayer inside the sanctuary of the saint's icon. When I peer through the open door I can see the flickering light of candles, and the glow of an ornate chandelier dangling from the ceiling. The prayers have stopped and chanting begins. The beautiful intonations of the priest become a descant to the angry thumps from across the bay. So dramatic. So typically Greek. So definitely the Corfu of *The Tempest*.

I linger in the doorway of the church. Devotional paintings cross the walls. Incense burners, deep red velvet, crocheted white tablecloths, flowers. The priest holds a tall candle which highlights the black and cream floor tiles, edged with the ancient, angular Greek pattern that steps out boldly onto the worn stone steps – three of them. Outside, whitewashed walls are warmed by a hint of moss; magnificent wood and stonework surround the ornate green door which bears carvings of crosses, flowers and leaves; the domed roof is creamy white.

The fluttering of pennants on the tethered boats distracts me for a moment, and I turn to look to the mainland again where I witness the angry, dominant, white-hot fury of the ancient gods; and I believe in them.

The fury abates and I can see across the sea once more. The battle is back in the hands of God it seems, but retaliation commences almost instantly, and mothers glance worriedly at the scowling clouds that are preparing to gatecrash this orthodox occasion. A jagged bolt of lightening worthy of Zeus crosses the sky whilst the sacred chanting is swallowed by the base notes of a dreadful rumbling. I follow a big black dog that respectfully joins the congregation in order to shelter from the storm; nobody minds him. The priest turns and circles and the crowds increase. People move in and out of the tiny building making room for those who have not yet been able to enter to pay their respects.

My turn to move outside and I see we have lost Albania again and hun-

dreds of little white wavelets are hurrying towards us across the channel; refugees from the angry sky in the distance. Chanting stops. Prayers begin again followed by singing. The sky is winning but inside the house of God they carry on; unaware? or faithful that He will deliver?

Babies, dummies, dogs, push chairs, toddlers, children, teenagers, rose petals, cars, proud parents. The crowd swells as a speed boat dashes by in water turned turquoise when illuminated by lightning. Two elderly Greek men in windjammers stand and discuss the glowering vista out beyond the harbour. I hear the name *Pantokrator*. Maybe they are beseeching their mountain, *The Almighty*, to rouse itself and fight back in support of their saint.

I can't hear the singing now as the wind contributes its moans and the foliage of the trees add their spectacular rustling percussion to the valiant music of the philharmonic. Someone is dispatched to alert the priest that the world is tearing itself apart outside. My hair is whipped around my face. The trees are thrashing and depositing gifts of leaves in my lap as I sit under shelter. The sea is being pushed beyond its boundaries as lightning strikes again. Boats are rocking; salty froth covers the harbour wall as the ragged veins of light once again illuminate the darkening scene. Increased noise, movement; the roaring of the waves is urging the procession to form. More rain. I fear for the icon – how will Nikolas respond to a downpour?

Jaunty and encouraging little tunes are being played by the band from the shelter of the neighbouring taverna. The sky is laced with devil's fingers that reach down with menace in an attempt to smite the *Fingers of God* on the hillsides. Clouds grumble and moan. The rain is heavy and the tarpaulin roof above us collapses under the weight of the captured downpour and we are drenched. An elderly Greek lady is shrouded in a blue plastic bin liner.

We wait whilst a lonesome saxophonist begins to play a plaintive piece of jazz, the herald of the exodus as people give up and begin to leave. I drape my sarong around my shoulders – it's so unexpectedly cold now.

One of the priests, bareheaded and de-robed, storms out of the church and marches away despite the entreaties of a Greek man. One of the devout children has a toy rifle and begins to shoot everyone. A minibus arrives and the juvenile band members, plus instruments, plus several mothers and babies, get into this apparent tardis and are driven away to the unlikely strains of *Colonel Bogey*. The musicians don't give up easily.

It's time to leave, I think, as the second and more senior priest exits. The event has been cancelled but the old and new gods of Greece and the Balkans fight on. And on.

Balham

Balham is one man's journey through gay London at the end of the last millennium. Peter wants a relationship but spends his time cruising. He meets Sam on The Common and is disappointed to discover that Sam has a boyfriend. Peter despairs of ever getting wants but he and Sam become friends, and Sam introduces him to Christopher.

Peter and Christopher have an instant connection, and their relationship is wonderful until Peter's past becomes present and the world he thought he'd left behind threatens what he always wanted. As Peter's dreams collapse he discovers what he really needs.

In the following adapted extract Peter meets Sam's boyfriend, Stephen, for the first time.

The Dinner Party

'I can't wait to meet Stephen,' said Peter. He and Christopher were walking to Sam and Stephen's house for dinner.

'He's not that easy to get along with,' Christopher's tone changed, and he looked away. Peter had seen other people do this when they talked about Stephen. There was always something lurking in the background that never allowed Peter's suspicions to subside.

'I keep hearing that, but what exactly is so odd about him?'

'You know that feeling you get when you're on your own, and you think somebody's watching you?'

'I hate that feeling.'

'Well, that's what it feels like when you talk to Stephen, except you're having a conversation with him and he's looking straight at you.'

Peter grimaced, 'Then why are we having dinner with him?'

'Because he's Sam's boyfriend. We'll have fun, but make up your own mind. We're here.'

Peter had followed Christopher and only now did he realise where they were. Sam and Stephen lived at the end of the path that linked The Common to the real world. It was just a gap between two fences, only the length of a garden. Peter stared down the path; the end was pitch-black. It was so cold and clear that Peter wondered if the stars were visible on

The Common; away from the city streetlights that stole their majesty. Peter thought he saw movement; maybe a fox or even a man. He smiled to himself.

Christopher noticed. 'This whole evening is amusing you, isn't it?'

'No, I'm nervous.'

'What then?'

Peter knew better than to share anything about The Common with Christopher, 'I'm just happy!'

'Bollocks! Come on.'

Sam and Stephen's garden fence was the one that bordered the path. Peter walked up the steps to the front door between symmetrical stained glass windows.

'No, it's this way,' said Christopher heading down the side of the building.

There was just enough space for one person to squeeze between the fence and the house, indecently close to the windows. Peter tried not to snoop, but he had the feeling of being watched from within. This dank alley was not what he'd pictured from Sam's description of a ground floor Georgian conversion; this was the basement. PR wasn't just a job for Sam; it was a way of life. He was a disappointing film with a great trailer.

They dropped down some steps toward a door. The alley got damper and darker. The temperature wrote goose bumps on Peter's skin. A thin carpet of moss smoothed the angles between the wall and the ground; the path was slippery making the pebble-dash treacherous. Sam was at the door before Christopher knocked. They exchanged greetings and handed over bottles of wine. The flat was packed with immaculate clutter from consumer binges. Peter saw expensive objects peeking out here and there. He noticed a Philippe Starck lamp on the hall table. Stephen was shorter than Sam, probably about Peter's height; very thin with white skin, black hair and pale blue eyes; the palest eyes Peter has ever seen, almost transparent.

Sam introduced them.

Stephen extended a long, thin hand to greet Peter. 'We meet at last!' His voice was quiet and controlled.

Peter didn't know what to say. 'Yes – it's been a while coming, hasn't it?'

Stephen held Peter's hand a moment too long and looked at him a little too deeply. Peter started to understand the dark fog that infiltrated every description of Stephen. He felt uncomfortable in a quiet corner of his mind.

In contrast, Sam and Christopher were like two puppies at a park over-excited to see each other. They gossiped about Sam's latest collection of B-list celebrities like a living tabloid. Peter thought it was childish. They were absorbed in each other for the whole evening and didn't pay much attention to Peter or Stephen. Neither played the host or took care of Peter. They slowed a little for the meal but then started up again as soon as the plates were cleared. They didn't notice Stephen, but Peter did. He sat back from it all and was measured in what he drank. Peter kept feeling as though Stephen was watching him and when he looked up Stephen's eyes confirmed it. Was he flirting with him; in front of their boyfriends? Peter decided he'd got it wrong. He made an attempt to join Sam and Christopher's conversation but got nowhere. Sam and Christopher were sitting on a sofa facing each other. Sam's back was to Stephen who was sipping wine at the table, and Christopher's back was to Peter. Peter felt Stephen's stare again; this must just be his infamous demeanour. Peter decided to make an effort; he crossed the room to join Stephen at the table.

Stephen looked straight into him. 'Did Sam give you a tour?' His face moved a little, but not all the way into a smile.

'No, we just came straight in here to meet you.'

'Would you like to look around?'

'Yes please, I love poking around other people's houses.'

'Come on then.'

He took Peter to the bedroom first, Stephen stood on the far side of the bed, and Peter leant on the door frame. Away from Sam, Stephen was chatty and hospitable; Peter paid attention to what he was saying and asked the right questions. Even though he'd been invited in and found it hard to hear what Stephen was saying from across the room, Peter didn't go any further. When Stephen left the room his hand grazed Peter's leg; Peter ignored that too.

In the kitchen, Stephen offered gin and tonic while slicing a lime into two glasses.

'I probably shouldn't, but that smells good,' said Peter.

'Go on, keep me company.'

'OK, you've twisted my arm.'

'You put up such a good fight.' They both laughed.

Stephen didn't make drinks for Sam or Christopher. Peter wondered if he should ask them, but he didn't want to embarrass Stephen. This separa-

tion created a small, intimate bond. Old friends were enjoying themselves in the front room, and a new relationship was germinating in the kitchen; maybe this evening had been a good idea after all. Stephen handed him the fizzing gin. The bubbles exploded on his top lip as he brought the glass to his mouth, alternating juniper and lime.

‘Do you smoke?’ Stephen asked.

‘Now and then, especially when I’ve had a drink. I pride myself on never buying cigarettes; that way I can claim to be a non-smoker when it suits me.’

‘You just scavenge them off other people?’

Peter laughed. ‘That’s right. It’s much cheaper.’

‘Wanna scavenge one off me?’

‘Why not? But I thought Sam was horribly anti-smoking.’

‘He is. We’ll sneak into the garden.’

‘Won’t they be able to see us from the sitting room?’

‘No, it’s round the back. Come on.’

Stephen put his hand on Peter’s shoulder to guide him. They’d been away from the sitting room for ten minutes, but Christopher and Sam were still absorbed in their nonsense. Stephen opened the front door and the cold, damp night rushed in, as though it had been waiting for the chance. The surge of air made Peter realise how much he’d had to drink, but he took another sip of gin; what did it matter?

They stepped out into the narrow alley and around a corner.

‘I’m confused. Where’s the main road?’ Peter was lost in a maze of fence panels.

Stephen pointed behind him, ‘Over there.’

‘So where’s The Common?’

‘I’ll show you.’ Stephen opened a gate that Peter didn’t know was there. Behind it, a flight of stone steps led up to a lawn. On the far side of the grass, Peter recognised the tall brick wall that bordered The Common. Stephen climbed the steps and stood on a bench, pointing over the wall he demonstrated exactly where The Common was.

‘I had no idea you were right here,’ Peter felt a strange sense of completion, almost a homecoming. He was only here because he’d met Sam on The Common. Now, that he was with Christopher, he wanted nothing more to do with it, but The Common never seemed to let him go.

Peter stepped onto the bench next to Stephen and nearly fell; it was as

slippery as the path. Stephen grabbed his arm, and they laughed as Peter found his balance. Peter had never seen The Common from this angle. There was no moon so he couldn’t see anything to start with; a black hole in the middle of a giant city, but then he noticed London’s reflected glow in the sky and some of the brightest stars began to appear. The blackness on the ground became defined; it turned to imperceptibly different shades of charcoal, grey, navy blue, and black. The tree tops moved slightly to show where they were. The grass between them and the wood was the darkest void of all. They stared and stared as the dark kaleidoscope rotated. The revelation of something from nothing was so intangible that it vanished with a blink.

Stephen spoke, ‘Quite something isn’t it?’ Peter nodded. They watched in silence side by side.

Stephen sat down and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a silver lighter that caught what little light there was. He handed one to Peter who joined him and placed it between his lips while Stephen presented the flame. Peter took a long drag and felt the reliable rush of an occasional smoker erase the bittersweet taste of the gin. They remained silent, and the smoke hung in the air twisting like a murmur. Peter felt the cold mossy bench against his palm and then something warm. He looked down. It was Stephen’s hand. Stephen didn’t pull away; it wasn’t awkward or accidental. Peter looked up, and Stephen kissed him.

Peter instinctively kissed him back. Stephen’s free hand slid to the back of Peter’s head holding him in place before they separated to breathe. Peter looked up and saw not lust, desire or affection, but triumph. Peter dropped the cigarette. He didn’t know what to do.

‘I thought you were in love with Christopher.’ Stephen’s tone was now smug and superior. This wasn’t spontaneous; Stephen had snared Peter in a trap.

‘I... am.’ Peter slid away from Stephen to the other end of the bench.

‘Then why did you kiss *me*?’ These were not the words of one guilty party to another, but of an accuser. Stephen moved to kiss him again.

Peter stood up, ‘I have to go.’

Stephen laughed, sat back and took a slow drag from his cigarette.

This was why Stephen had invited them. Just like his boyfriend, Stephen wanted a piece of Peter’s relationship, and now he had it.

Lorem Ipsum (short story excerpt)

The stonemasons interrupted an otherwise endless run of terraced houses. A single-storey prefab with a corrugated roof, it was set further back than its neighbours. The front yard accommodated headstones for sale, arranged like a miniature cemetery, albeit with the rows much closer together to make full use of the space. A foreshortened graveyard for lifelong standing-room-only commuters, Darren thought. The stones were backlit by a neon sign left on at night. Tube lettering in blue read REST A WHILE LONGER MEMORIALS. Here, the epitaphs were mostly given over to promotional messages and sales information:

‘Blank for Your Own Message.’
‘Say What You Want About Him.’

A few were etched with ‘Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet,’ the Latin filler text Darren used at work to show clients how copy would sit in a given layout. In the studio it was a geeky in-joke, that *Dolorem ipsum* translated as ‘pain itself,’ and colleagues would hover a pencil point over it if they had a demanding client on the phone. A price list was carved into a tall scroll-shaped stone near the entrance: ‘£30 per word / £45 for long names / surcharge for speciality letters including hanging Gs and Ys / supplement for spellchecker service before it’s written in stone’.

Then he found it. A polished black granite heart with ‘Your Inbox’ etched in gold lettering. Darren looked down at the envelope in his hand and saw a crater had formed where his thumb was. He wondered if the twenty and the ten and the slip with his postcode and email scribbled on it were just as warped inside. He placed it at the base of the heart along with the marigolds he’d managed not to crush in his shoulder bag and stepped back. As far as mailing lists went, this was a pretty convoluted sign-up procedure.

The first email that came through was a limited-time offer for some stacking stereo separates. It was a discreet message in plain grey text. The collection point for the stereo was two roads away from Darren’s flat but he wasn’t after a new hi-fi, so he decided he’d let this one pass and make his thirty pounds back on something else. The guy in the Golden Fleece with

the mullet and the music-score forehead lines had implied that membership wasn’t guaranteed, so Darren was relieved to find his subscription fee hadn’t simply been pocketed, and relieved that it wasn’t blowing about with the leaves somewhere. He was on the list.

The Golden Fleece was not the kind of drinking establishment Darren spent much time in, with its sports vinyl banner wrapped around the front railings and its once ornate windows mostly replaced by panes of reinforced frosted glass. Half-gone wording used to distinguish a news room, smoke room and snug.

He’d had no reason to venture inside the Golden Fleece when he was with Aisha. She’d take him to all her bohemian haunts: the old laundrette that was now a gin bar, the old job centre that now served halloumi and kedgeree on clipboards, the old police station that now offered wine tasting and life drawing. Darren had decided that part of town was out of bounds to him now. Aisha would be there with some other guy. She’d be in any and all of those bars the exact moment he walked in.

The Golden Fleece’s interior was a mishmash of refurbishment residue. Buddy Holly LPs were tacked across one wall while another was all flock wallpaper and light fittings shaped like candles. A red baize pool table was shoved up against the kitchen hatch and a mountain bike, mid-repair, was lying on the karaoke stage.

‘Okay so what exactly do I get for signing up to this scheme?’

‘It’s not a scheme. It’s an exclusive mailing list. See this watch? I could never afford this watch.’

‘What then, you got a Groupon discount or something?’

‘Better than that. Got sent a combination code to a locker. Got sent a window of time in which to get myself down to said locker and make use of said combination code. Localised offers sent out to subscribers as and when they become available.’

‘So where was the locker?’

‘Swimming baths round the corner from me. That’s not important though—this particular offer’s finished. Point is, you’ll get all kinds of stuff popping up on your doorstep, or close enough.’

It didn’t take long for the next e-newsletter offer to come through. Another small, grey, single paragraph block of sans-serif text:

noreply@\$4ns\$3ri£.com

>LIMITED TIME OFFER<

RARE 1980 OLYMPICS POSTER / DAVID HOCKNEY LITHOGRAPH, SIGNED / HISTORIC TOWN MAP, UNFRAMED LOCATED AT 134 BARNFIELD RD, BACK BEDROOM PLAN-CHEST, 2ND DRAWER FROM BOTTOM VACANT WEDNESDAY 3.30 – 5PM, KEY TO KITCHEN DOOR LEFT BEHIND RECYCLING BOX ONE ITEM PER CUSTOMER / LEAVE PROPERTY AS YOU FOUND IT / RESPONSIBILITY IS YOUR OWN / ITEMS ON DISPLAY OR IN FREQUENT USE MUST NOT BE REMOVED OR DISTURBED. THESE ITEMS ARE NOT INCLUDED IN THIS LIMITED TIME OFFER. {DO NOT REPLY, DO NOT FORWARD, THIS IS A NON-TRANSFERRABLE OFFER BASED ON YOUR USER PREFERENCES.}

No reply. No apparent option to unsubscribe. Darren could ignore it though. He didn't need someone else's limited edition artist print just as he hadn't needed someone else's hi-fi. He was also fairly sure he didn't want to know the kind of person who did.

A text message came through from a number that wasn't in Darren's phone. *Fncy anothr pint? Tues?* It must have been from mullet guy. Darren didn't remember exchanging numbers. He also didn't remember mullet guy's name.

Darren entered the bar and saw the mullet guy standing at the bar—he was easy to recognise from behind. He turned around with two pints, one with its foam running down over his fingers, and pointed them towards the corner near the dartboard.

'So did you make it onto the list? Had anything through yet?'

'Yeah, I've had a couple of emails.'

'Anything grabbed your fancy? I got these trainers the other day. Stan Smith, limited edition. Not bad, huh?'

'Don't tell me, from the swimming baths round the corner from you?'

'Ha, good one. Seriously though, you should get onto these offers while they're going... You've seen the Hockney one, haven't you? You must've done.'

'Yes, I saw it. Pretty uncomfortable about it if I'm honest.'

'Been looking him up — his signed prints go for a fair old whack.'

'Yeah, he likes swimming pools too. So you live near Barnfield Road

then?'

'Not that near. I'm signed up with a couple of different email addresses though, so I get info on more than one postcode. Have transport, will travel. Subscription fee pays for itself.' Mullet guy looked down and tilted his foot to admire his new trainers again.

'When you first told me about these "special offers", I didn't expect them to be quite so... heavily discounted. I thought things might be slightly less... free.'

'Pretty sweet, huh?'

'Anyway, was there something you wanted to speak to me about?'

'Not especially. Why?'

'Well, the text. The meet me here again on Tuesday message.'

'Is it a crime to invite a friend out for a pint now, or something?'

'I don't even know your name.'

'Silvant. So you gonna go for the Hockney print then? I don't mind if you want to get in there first with that one...'

'You know, I don't think I am, Silvant. I was actually thinking of moving the key.'

'Don't do that, Daniel.'

'My name's Darren.'

'The important part of that sentence was "Don't do that." I recommend you do not mess around with the offers.'

'Fine, whatever, I'll just stay out of it.'

'I think you should consider taking one of them up. Make your subscription fee back, and then some.'

'To be honest, I think I'd be willing to let the thirty quid slide.'

'Know what the marigold is the symbol of, Darren? Desire for riches. That's what you had when you placed your envelope. That's what we all had. Nothing wrong with it either.'

'You didn't mention that it would involve breaking into people's fucking houses though, did you?'

'Well it doesn't. Not always. There's a whole bunch of variety in these offers — you'll see for yourself if you give it a chance.'

'You didn't tell me—'

'Nothing sells on small print. Besides, you didn't take that much arm twisting — you were straight down the funeral parlour. Just take up an offer, hey Darren? If not the Hockney, then something else, soon. The

mailing list likes to see its subscribers happy. They'll be a lot more comfortable once you've redeemed.'

'Ah, so that's it. They'll be comfortable once I'm complicit.'

'I'll see you soon, mate. And it's your round next time, eh?'

*

Just as he was deciding between getting up and going or staying and drinking the other pint, the barman came over and presented Darren with a cordless landline.

'It's your drinking buddy.' He left the phone and took the empty.

'Hello?' Darren was equal parts frustrated and relieved.

'Hey, Daniel, hear you've been trying to get hold of me.'

'It's *Darren*.'

'That's not the important part of the sentence. Hear you've been trying to get hold of me?'

'What happened to your phone? I just got a dead tone.'

'Oh yeah, I got a sweet upgrade. Just waiting for the number to switch over.'

'I need to unsubscribe. You've got to tell me how I get off the list.'

'We had this conversation, Daniel, we talked it all through already. It's easier just to ignore the offers you don't like the look of. Bet you ignore enough Groupons.'

Darren spoke through gritted teeth, 'Listen to me, Silvant, I *cannot* simply ignore a fucking email that encourages a fucking rape in a fucking park to its subscribers.'

'Alright, calm down there, my friend. You might want to lower your voice a tad in there, yeah?'

Darren took a massive swig from the second pint and then caught his breath and swapped the handset over to his ear nearest the wall. 'So you're cool with this latest offer are you? No different to your watch or your trainers, is it?'

'I didn't get that one, mate. Didn't know about it.'

'It's Rosberg Park, right behind the Golden Fleece—that must match one of your postcodes too, right?'

'Mustn't match my preferences then. Not my kind of offer.'

Darren stood up, 'It doesn't match *my* preferences! Seriously, what the fuck?! I didn't give any preferences — *You* didn't tell me about any fucking preferences!'

'Daniel, calm down. Secrecy was one of the rules if you recall.'

'Give them your postcode and your email address, you said. In an envelope with thirty quid. Leave it at the funeral parlour with a fucking marigold, you said. Where do my preferences come into that, huh? Where does a penchant for females on early morning jogs come into that?'

'I dunno. They must've just ticked you for everything if you didn't say what you were after.'

'You didn't *say* I had to say what I was after! And I'm not fucking after *any* of this.'

'I guess I forgot. They used to have an A5 slip with tick boxes, I think that's what I had. That was a long time ago though and the offers have broadened out since then. It's more opt-out than opt-in these days.'

'Yeah, well I'm opting out now, you hear me? I'm *un*subscribing and you're going to *get* me unsubscribed. Otherwise... Otherwise I'm going to the police about the park.'

'Don't do that, Daniel, I told them you'd be cool. Both our necks will be on the line if it turns out you're not cool.'

'Of course I'm not fucking cool.'

'Alright fine, I'll tell you how to unsubscribe. Have you got a pen? You're going to need a small posy of forget-me-nots.'

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What I found in my grave (novella excerpt)

Monday, 17 November

I woke up at three o'clock in the morning and cursed myself. I needed to sleep. I had work tomorrow, seminars, rehearsals, life. I was supposed to be up at six, and I would never get back to sleep now. I got up and rubbed my face. My to-do list was reciting itself in my mind.

There was no point in trying to fight my insomnia; it never worked. Since I was awake I dressed quickly, not bothering to take off my night-shirt but throwing a jumper over it. My rucksack was already packed with most of the essentials, but I added a few items before strapping it to my back. Yawning, I left my flat.

Paris was tired, like me, a haggard city with tears of rain streaking it. Grey walls and dark rooftops, cold November wind blowing through my clothes, empty streets because everyone was either partying or asleep. I strode down the road, my feet making damp sounds on the pavement. I wrapped my top tighter, shivering. The metro was closed, its neon sign too bright like a fake smile. I ignored it, and went down a cul-de-sac.

The wall blocking my way was easy to scale, and I climbed over it with the swiftness of habit. My feet and hands found the ragged edges and the gaps between the bricks by memory, despite it being too dark to see. I was used to this; I always preferred to explore by night. It was easier than to come out in front of the daylight Parisians covered in mud, blinking to protect my eyes from the sun.

I let myself drop down on the other side. I stumbled against an empty bottle and, under the cover of the wall, turned on my headlamp. There were some things I needed to see.

I spotted the cast iron manhole. A friend had shown me this entrance and taught me how to block the metal plate with a stick, so I could lever it open when I wanted to come in or out. I lifted it off carefully, without making a sound, and lowered myself inside. *Alice goes down the rabbit hole*, I thought playfully.

I walked as people drink – to forget myself. I walked for hours, but not in parks or in woods, not on the city streets. I wasn't a creature from the surface world.

The catacombs – the ktas for those in the know – form a network as

much made up of sewers and natural formations as actual catacombs with bones inside. Maps can be found if you look for them; some more out-of-date than others. Whole parts of the grid have been closed down. Some legends have it that people got lost down there and all their exits were then bricked up, and that in those forever sealed places bodies can still be found, softened by the water and the mud.

Specific places serve as dwellings for junkies or cataphiles – the web of men and women who treasure the place and keep it from collapsing. Some of the underground roads follow their siblings of the surface, and even bear the same names, on little metal plates. Piles of junk, traces of recent visits, hints and tokens can be found littering the tunnels.

I went past the Beach, where a graffiti mural in the shape of a wave covered two full walls. In that room there's often an on-going party, and the tourists linger there, frightened to venture further without a guide. It was too early today for tourists, and the room was empty. I continued on my way, past one of my favourite roads, the Pirates of the Cannabis lair. It followed Cabanis Road, and was decorated with skulls and cannabis leaves painted green on black backgrounds. This road had served as a battleground for a few cataphiles. A fresco had covered the place, before it was cleaned off the walls by other explorers, who favoured rock over artificial urban decorations.

In the great war of stone against graffiti, I placed myself as a child of stone. But I wasn't against some drawings, which could tell you down which alley you were walking, where it would lead. Some of the graffiti was amateur work badly designed, but there were also beautiful pictures, outlines faded by the water. These told the story of the place, how years ago men were already here, leaving traces like a foot leaves a shape in the mud. Each picture, each symbol was a tale – and they deserved to be preserved. I felt the only invasive graffiti were the territorial marks; these signatures saying that you were there yesterday even if you might not be there tomorrow, as if the catacombs cared.

Now one of their best pieces had been destroyed, the taggers had taken to writing "FC" in bold letters all over the place. It meant "Frotte Connard" or "Scrub, Dickhead". It was meant to be ugly, meant to insult. Although I disapproved, I tried not to involve myself in the conflict – it might increase in violence from now on, and I didn't want to be trapped on either side of the war.

I ambled to one of my favourite places, the Dinosaur room, filled with little

plastic dinosaurs – but when I walked inside I found the room was empty, the plastic figures stolen, the place nameless once more. I was disappointed, but I knew the catacombs changed quickly, and part of their beauty came from the fact that what delighted you today might be washed away tomorrow.

I passed libraries filled with moisture-eaten books and explored further. The Dragon room was still as I remembered it, with a beautiful carving of a monster in stone, and little Chinese lamps, and a green puppet shaped like a snake curled on the floor.

There were candles everywhere, still burning or long-dead. I lit a few more and left them to burn slowly in my absence. I stepped over bags of empty bottles, dustbins forgotten or abandoned.

Sometimes the ceilings were high and I could walk standing up. Sometimes they were low and I had to inch down, scuttle on all fours. Sometimes the road was nothing more than a burrow, a cat-flap as they are called, because they can't be crossed unless you crawl on your stomach, your bag tied to your ankle and dragging behind you.

Sometimes the walls were blocks of stone. Sometimes they were one smooth, continuous rock. Sometimes the ground was sand, sometimes gravel, sometimes mud half-covered in water. The cold stream was full of clay and it could go as high as my knees, my hips, my neck.

I had specific gear for going down, although I never carried much. I wore clothes which could cope with dirt, a survival bag with some maps and a flashlight, sometimes spare batteries, a bottle of water and an energy bar. I explored mostly for leisure, when my schedule allowed me to do so. Making sense of this impossible mix of roads and alleys, finding a clear-cut way through the labyrinth, was a thrill in itself.

In places the walls were painted and human life was near. When the walls became blank I knew I was lost, and very alone. I loved the feeling, fear mixed with solitude. I took out my maps and, confident I hadn't strayed far, continued on my way. Recently I had decided I would never be completely off-track – someone would always find me, or the tunnels would yield a drain, an opening from the sewers to the surface. I didn't allow myself to be scared of unknown routes.

I needed to find solitude in the catacombs, and it wasn't as easy as it seemed – through some paradox of human nature, nowhere was it so easy to meet people as underground. Their headlamps blinded you before you

heard their voice; they were made of light before becoming flesh. A strange solidarity was formed between the groups which met here, a familiarity set in by the clay which covered our trousers and the grime which dirtied our cheeks.

I wasn't a cataphile – I belonged too much to the surface world. But I wasn't a tourist either; someone who only went down once or twice in their lives, who didn't own their maps, who didn't understand the land. I helped with the kta-cleans and sometimes dressed up for the kta-Halloween, but I never lingered in the presence of other explorers. I liked being alone. I liked feeling the shadows around me.

Despite being marginal in this marginal society, I had the identity that went with the place. There weren't many cataphiles who used their real names: they used a *blase*. My own blase was Melody. None of the other cataphiles knew me as Alice. All good blase are also paired with a signature. An item or a drawing, something to leave behind – and it isn't unusual for cataphiles to pick up other people's symbols and take them back home, as a tribute.

My own tract consisted of sheets of music, which I'd sometimes written down by hand, sometimes printed. I scribbled them on pieces of paper, between the lines in children's schoolbooks. I pinned them against the walls, I spread them on the floor, I wrapped them in plastic and slid them between stones. It was a way of saying "I was here, and this is my name."

I was a melody – I buried scraps of sounds, silent songs waiting to be sung.

I took out one my sheets of music and rolled it into an empty wine bottle, with a cap I could screw back on. I closed it and put it afloat on a muddy stream, where it disappeared down the murky waters. I turned off my headlamp and, for a moment, savoured the scent of clay and dirt. The only noise was my breathing. I closed my eyes, and layers of darkness covered me like veils.

I prized the catacombs for their blackness. Pure blackness has its own texture. It's more than an absence of light: it's a presence. I could feel it weighing down on my shoulders, pressing against my back.

I turned the torch back on. I was a thin ray of light around which unfolded this vast space, earth and shadows and silence; I could only ever light the road in front of me. I was conscious of the mass behind, the black gathering which was always staring.

For me, the catacombs were a temple dedicated to two gods: the labyrinth and the darkness. The labyrinth always pushed me further, forced me to make the same mistakes until I'd overcome this duel between myself and the stone, until I was out again. The darkness encircled me, cajoled me, whispered her ghosts inside my ear. She was a second mother, the bearer of the hidden and the buried, the one men forget to thank – and it was a privilege to meet her.

It was a pleasure to be reunited with the underground, to listen to the sound of my steps in the murky waters. As I explored, I found a blase I'd never seen before. The signature was a small bottle of perfume the size of my thumb, a dab of clear liquid scented with alcohol and musk. I pocketed this small token.

At the time this meant nothing to me; the perfume was a piece of art, nothing more, and I didn't believe I was taking any risks by allowing its smell and its darkness into my home. I would realise it was more than that, of course – but I would realise it too late. It's when you hear pebbles pattering down the slope that you must run away from the landslide.

Facing the Music (excerpt)

33-year-old Kath is struggling to keep her London café afloat, and if the business fails she stands to lose both her savings and her dream career. On top of this, the unexpected reappearance of Caroline, a rival from Kath's university days, puts Kath's long-term friendship with bride-to-be Amanda in serious jeopardy. As the story traces back to Kath's undergraduate years, Caroline's rivalries with Kath and Amanda are exposed, as are the secrets that Kath and Amanda have kept from one another for more than a decade.

*

It was only 8.30pm when Kath and Amanda arrived at the Gryphon but the pub was already crowded with students making the most of happy hour drink offers, most of which involved horrible cocktails named after characters from *The Lord of the Rings*. 'Enter Sandman' blared out via the jukebox in the corner and two long-haired, dirty-looking boys in studded leather jackets were headbanging next to the speaker. In another corner a girl with a shaved head was making out with a girl in a cut out PVC dress. At odd moments the deafening noise of a guitarist sound-checking cut through the music and the general background din. Battle of the Bands was raucous, and Kath wondered if drinking snakebite and bouncing up and down to aggressive ska-metal covers was what she really needed tonight. But plans had already been made, and it seemed stupid to stay in and analyse every moment of that afternoon's rehearsal.

Her preoccupation was Tom's behaviour. Had he been flirting, or did he now just see her as one of the lads? It was probably the latter. Most male friendships she could think of involved trading insults. Ed and his best mate Khalid couldn't spend half an hour in one another's company without punching each other in the stomach and calling one another "a massive bender." Didn't mean they really fancied each other, did it? Although they did sometimes tell each other they loved one another when they were high. And then there was that time that Khalid had fallen asleep on Ed while they were all watching *Ghost*. Neither of them would talk about that. Perhaps the Khalid and Ed situation wasn't a useful comparison.

'Kath. Earth to Kath.' Amanda waved her hand in front of Kath's face. 'Sorry,' Kath blinked and shook her head.

‘Look at you, lost in space.’ Amanda handed Kath her pint.
 ‘I know. Sorry. Here in body only, this evening.’
 ‘Is this just how you’re gonna be on Thursdays, now?’
 ‘Probably.’ Kath looked down at her feet. She was annoyed with herself.
 That it showed.
 ‘Are you hating it? Working with him, I mean.’
 ‘No, not at all, I’m loving it.’ Kath paused. ‘Which means I’m hating it.’
 ‘Well, just think of it as fun whilst you line yourself up with someone else.’
 ‘Like who?’ Kath asked, gesturing at the room. She accidentally caught the eye of a short, overweight fifty-something man in an AC/DC t-shirt, who smiled at her. She looked back at Amanda. ‘You see what I mean.’
 ‘We can *definitely* do better than that,’ said Amanda. ‘So, what are we looking for?’
 Kath sighed. ‘Tall, broad, bearded, funny. Acts, plays the piano.’
 Amanda’s face fell. ‘What, like that guy you mean?’ she asked, nodding towards the door.
 Kath looked behind her. It was Tom. Hand in hand with a girl.
 ‘Oh God,’ she said, turning back towards Amanda.
 ‘Can’t ignore them, this place is *way* too small,’ Amanda waved at them and forced a smile.
 Kath realised she would have to turn back. As with a road traffic accident, she knew she wasn’t going to like what she saw, but the compulsion to do it remained. She needed to see this Caroline. Actually, she needed to talk to her as well. She needed to be completely convinced Caroline was perfect in order to quash the fantasies she’d been entertaining of her being unattractive or stupid or dull. Not totally unattractive or stupid or dull, she credited Tom with some taste, but she had imagined that she might be just a tiny bit – ugly. Maybe a slightly crooked nose, or bad teeth, or perhaps just terrible dress sense. Or beautiful, but a little slow on the uptake, someone who you could have a sly joke about whilst they were standing next to you without them even realising it. Or just boring. God, that would be great, if she had nothing of interest to say and just stood there whilst she and Tom chatted away for ten minutes.
 In the moment before she turned to face them, Kath uttered a silent prayer that Caroline might fall short of the mark in at least one of these ways. The second after, she uttered another prayer of forgiveness for being

a terrible person. The second after that she turned around. Caroline and Tom were now only a few feet away, ordering drinks just the other side of the bar.

Kath’s initial hopes were dashed. Caroline was beautiful. So beautiful Kath could barely take her eyes off her, despite the fact she was standing next to Tom. She had little black jewels of eyes set in a daintily chiseled face, and very dark, very straight, very perfect hair. She was laughing at something Tom said and the shampoo-ad toss of her head she gave showed off its lustre. The art student uniform of black polo neck and jeans she wore was modest, but you could see she had a nice figure, slender but not without curves. She was petite, perhaps only 5’2” or 5’3”. Kath suddenly felt gangly and shabby by comparison, like a teenage boy.

‘She’s beautiful,’ Kath murmured to Amanda.

‘Yeah, she is. That’s not what annoys me about her, but maybe I should add it to the list. Come on,’ Amanda nodded in their direction. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

Kath found herself walking alongside Amanda to where they were standing.

‘Hello, you two!’ Amanda said.

‘Hi!’ Caroline purred. She and Amanda pecked one another delicately on the cheek. Kath wondered whether *Debrett’s* had a section entitled “How to Avoid Startling the Poor,” because Amanda only opened with kisses if she was convinced the receiver would expect it. Caroline was obviously just as posh as Amanda. Another reason to dislike her. Tom didn’t seem mercenary, but Kath knew that struggling actors tended to need either large donations from Mum and Dad, or a spouse with money who could pay the bills whilst they waited tables and waited for a break. Kath could not afford to be that person, but maybe Caroline could.

‘Caroline, this is Kath,’ Tom said.

‘Oh, of course, Kath. Tom’s mentioned you,’ Caroline said. The muscles of her face moved into smile mode but it didn’t seem a genuine expression of pleasure. ‘He’s kindly offered to help you.’

‘He has,’ Kath glanced up at him. ‘Thank goodness.’ She resented the fact Caroline seemed to be putting her in her place already. She could have said “you’re working with Tom,” but “Tom’s kindly offered to help you” made her a lesser being within the conversation; someone the power couple had magnanimously thrown a lifeline.

'He is very good like that,' Caroline glanced at Tom with a look of nauseating admiration.

'It's no bother at all,' said Tom. 'I need to keep going with piano, otherwise I'll just lose it all.'

'Well you don't *have* to keep going with it, do you? I mean it's not where you're headed, career-wise,' said Caroline.

'True,' Tom nodded his head from side to side. 'I just like it, that's all.' He gave Kath a smile. As he did so, the fake smile slipped from Caroline's face.

'How's your project, Amanda?' Caroline asked.

'Yeah, great fun,' she said. 'Nice to finally be doing some set design.'

'Oh, that reminds me,' Caroline said. 'I meant to say to you – I spoke to Dad. If there's anything at all he can do, he knows *tonnes* of people, he'd be happy to connect you with someone. Tell me who you really like. He'd probably be able to get them.'

'Wow. Really?' Amanda's mouth fell open a little.

'Sure. Just let me know,' Caroline said, taking a sip of her cocktail.

'That's amazing. Thank you.'

'No problem,' Caroline gave a more genuine smile. 'Oh look, there's Charlotte,' she said, nudging Tom in the ribs. 'We should say hello.'

'Ok,' Tom agreed. 'Oh, while I'm here, would it be alright if we switched times next week, Kath? It's just I'm being taken out for the afternoon, Thursday.'

'I've a little birthday surprise planned for him,' Caroline said, taking Tom's hand and leaning into his shoulder.

This was too much. Kath wanted to be sick into her handbag. 'Absolutely,' she replied. 'When works for you?'

'Wednesday morning?'

'Sure.'

'Great. Look forward to it,' said Tom. 'I'll try and squeeze some more practice in before then. Do you think we've got enough rehearsal sessions booked in? I thought we might need a few extra nearer the big day.'

'I'm sure we'll—'

'I'm sorry, we've got to go,' Caroline cut in before Kath was able to finish. 'Good to see you both,' she said, turning and whisking Tom along by the arm like a mother with a misbehaving toddler.

'Nice to meet you,' Kath lied.

'See you next week Kath,' Tom called over his shoulder. Kath saw Caroline tug hard at his sleeve.

Amanda turned to Kath. 'Well, I seem to have done alright there, if it actually comes off.'

'Who's her dad?'

'Exec. Director of the National Theatre.'

'Woah,' said Kath, feeling even more irritated by this information.

'Yeah. That really is nice of her. Didn't think she'd actually ask him. I'll have to send her a list.'

'Not sure she likes me quite so much, does she?' said Kath.

'Oh my God, she hates you!' Amanda sounded delighted. She seemed to be congratulating Kath.

'Seems like it,' Kath nodded. 'But then I don't know how she is generally.'

'She's not usually as uptight as that! Did you see the way she was standing in front of him?'

'Yeah. She seems possessive. But attractive. So that's that I guess,' Kath shrugged her shoulders. She wished she could shrug off the weight of this encounter, but she couldn't. Her feet felt as though they were glued to the floor. She didn't think she could move from the spot where she was standing, let alone attempt to dance.

'Even so, I don't think that's going to work out, somehow,' said Amanda, glancing over at them. 'He's not himself with her.'

Kath wanted to disagree with Amanda and tell her that Caroline and Tom were obviously perfectly happy. That way she could shut down all these ridiculous hopes she had. But she couldn't. Amanda was right. Although Kath had only seen them together briefly, he seemed very different to his usual self. He had been tense, and guarded. Perhaps he had been expecting her to be hostile towards Caroline, but she hoped he knew her better than that. It was Caroline who didn't seem especially gracious. She didn't seem to be behaving the way you'd expect for a girlfriend who had been ditched and then taken back. She seemed to be calling all the shots.

'I think Daisy and Ed have arrived,' said Amanda. 'Shall we head over?'

Kath nodded. She needed a distraction. Luckily Ed and Daisy managed to provide one: they were by the stage throwing some extravagant shapes to Def Leppard. In spite of herself, Kath laughed. Over the next ten minutes she managed to jolly herself up and join in. She had almost forgotten

the fact Tom and Caroline were still in the room when Amanda nudged her. 'They didn't stay long, did they?' she said.

Kath turned. Caroline was leading Tom out the door.

Kerdh¹ (novel excerpt)

Nyn ges gŷn heb legas, na kei heb scovern²
2031, in the southernmost shadow of Hadrian's Wall.

Dan is still upright although he leans heavily on me as he walks. Mum is struggling more than ever, and my father takes most of her weight as slowly we reach the compound. Brengi has placed himself at the head of our small pack. His ears are pointed, and he stands at his full height. Alfie is walking in Dan's footsteps. His bulk keeps the chill of the wind from Dan's back, and he has taken both of our bags. I don't think we would have made it this far without his help. His company has made the trek bearable, and his willingness to carry Dan on his back for mile after mile has saved us hours, if not days, of rest stops.

'Wait at the gate,' my father calls as he leans my mother against the metal gatepost. She slips slowly down the post like a drop of rain might roll down a window. My father does not release her from his hold until she settles, becoming her own puddle of woman and clothing, on the floor.

'I will go ahead to the reception and see how things are,' he tells us without conferring. He doesn't wait for us to catch up, and when we reach my mother, he is already striding off into the darkness. Brengi follows at his heel.

Alfie puts the bags on the floor beside my mother, and I help Dan to sit comfortably on top of them. I expect Dan to flop down and go to sleep, but he sits bolt upright, his eyes following our father into the darkness. He is still watching, looking in the direction that our father is headed long after I have lost sight of him. I don't know if his eyes are just more able to see in the darkness than mine, or if he is simply holding on until our father's return.

I have a chocolate bar in my pocket that I have been keeping safe for Dan. It's the last one we have. I unwrap it and place it in his gloved hand.

'Eat up,' I tell him, enclosing his fingers around the bar. He eats as

¹Walk

²There is no down without an eye, nor hedge without ears. (Cornish saying)

though he has no interest. He doesn't look at the bar, or at me. He continues to watch in the direction my father has walked as he bites and chews, bites and chews. I remember a time when he refused to eat KitKats. He never liked wafer, or so he said. Now he wouldn't refuse anything I placed in front of him to eat. How quickly we have learned to adjust to our changed circumstances. I take a drink of water from my flask. It is not warm water. It was yesterday when we last lit a fire and maybe fifteen hours since we last boiled water above it. I tell myself it is warmer than the air. I tell myself it has kept some of its heat. I offer some to Dan, and he sips it. My mother refuses the offered drink, but Alfie takes a swig.

'It's still warm,' he tells me.

'Liar,' I say, taking it from him and replacing the lid. I sit beside Dan and wrap my arms around his shoulders. He rests his head against me, and I think he is allowing himself to fall into sleep. I don't move to check if he has closed his eyes. I don't want to disturb him.

My eyes must have closed. I may even have drifted into sleep beside Dan, or maybe not, but I am startled by the sound of an engine close by. I feel that I am being drowned by light. The floodlights above are raining light down upon me, and now when my eyes open they have to adjust to the headlights pointing directly at us. I pull Dan as close to me as I can until he is lying supine across my lap. He doesn't stir and even feels relaxed in my arms. He is so settled I almost wish he'd not wake up.

Alfie nudges me, and I am suddenly alert. I must have been asleep, not just resting my eyes as I had thought. There are soldiers beside a small military vehicle. The headlights have dimmed a little. I think they have turned the engine off. Why can't I concentrate? I look at my watch, and it is two forty-seven. I can't believe that I have slept so long. My father has been gone for over three-quarters of an hour. Alfie is pulling himself up to standing; he must have been leaning against me because as he stands his warmth leaves my side, and I feel the chill replace him immediately. He stands in front of us, the heap of us, where we huddle together on the floor beneath the floodlight. He is between us and the vehicle. The soldiers are speaking English: heavily accented English, and there is a swagger in their words and stance. I think they are drunk.

'Come now ladies,' I hear one say. 'We can't take you into the camp. It is against regulations.'

They laugh together; I think there are more than four of them. There are

four outside of the vehicle, and at least the driver still inside.

'Hurry ladies,' another says. His voice is less jovial than the other. 'Regulations ladies. Regulations are more important than you feeling a little touch of cold. Really, this is nothing to where we all grew up.'

I watch as a group of girls step out of the vehicle. It must have been a tight squeeze inside the vehicle. It must be warm inside. The girls don't have coats. They are wearing heels and short dresses. I think they are my age, maybe.

'Run home,' the less jovial soldier says. 'We'll be back to collect you on Friday. Bring two more pretty ones.'

The girls begin to trickle towards us. I think it is as if we are not here. I am happy they take no interest in our presence and pass us by. I am happier as I see the soldiers return to the vehicle and climb inside. The driver revs up the engine. The vehicle turns quickly and pulls away. They head down the road that we came on, towards the town we walked from. But, just as I think they're going and relief settles over me like a thick blanket, the vehicle slams to a stop, and one of the soldiers jumps out and runs towards us. The girls either don't notice or don't care. Alfie is stuck to the spot where he stands. I know he fears these soldiers. I know he witnessed his brother beaten, and paralysed by Russian soldiers. I understand he wants to protect us. But, how can he? What can he do?

Another of the soldiers jumps from the vehicle and shouts out to the one running in our direction. 'Vino acum aici, sau vor fi consecinte.'³

I don't understand the words, but his tone sounds angry and threatening. I can see that Alfie is shaking, and his hand is balled up into a fist. What could he do? I know I should stand up beside him, but I pull Dan closer to my body and wrap myself as far around him as I can. My mother does nothing. She just stares ahead in the direction my father went.

'Va mai fi aici si vineri, indragostit nebun,'⁴ the second soldier shouts again and enters into the race towards us.

The first soldier just keeps coming, running at full pelt. Then past us, spraying stones from the ground as he passes us by, so close that if I were to stretch out my hand, I would touch him. He stops abruptly, digging his

³Come back here now, or there will be consequences.

⁴She'll still be here Friday, you lovesick fool.

feet violently into the uneven ground. He grabs the girl who is trailing behind the others. They are so near to us, maybe less than half a metre from where I am sat. I can see too clearly, in the white glow cast by the floodlight, as he pulls her towards him, spinning her around to face him and plants his face on hers. It is a sloppy kiss. A kiss she is not involved in. She does not pull away but neither does she reciprocate his passion. It is as though she is not there. It is as though we are not here. His hand lifts her skirt, and he grabs her buttock in his hand. I think she must be so cold with her skin on show. He pulls her towards his pelvis and holds her there while he squashes his face into hers. She barely moves. They are so close to me that I can smell the alcohol on his breath, and see the disgust on her face, as he pulls back from it. He takes a deep breath, wraps his fingers in her hair and kisses her again.

‘In pizda ma-tii, misca-te!’⁵ The second soldier has caught up and is pulling him away. He is dragging the girl with him. She falls to her knees in the scuffle, but he continues to pull her. I think she is crying, but she is silent. Alfie rocks on his feet so I grab hold of the fist he has balled up. He loosens it in my grip.

‘O iau inapoi,’⁶ the first soldier says looking at the second soldier pleadingly, all the while towing the girl along with him as she attempts to pull herself to standing.

‘O sa intre pe mana soldatilor rusi daca faci asta,’⁷ the second answers. His voice is commanding, and he takes the soldier’s arm in his hands, as a friend might do.

The first soldier lets go of the girl and leaves her kneeling on the ground. He storms away. Kicking at the stones. ‘Friday.’ He shouts to her over his shoulder, and sprints to the vehicle with the other soldier.

I am surprised that her friends, her group, the girls she got out of the vehicle with have not reacted to her situation. I understand why they did not intervene. I did not, but I do not know her. She did nothing herself, but, I assume, she must know him. I am surprised that they have not come back to help her from the floor. They have not come back for her. They are

⁵For fuck’s sake move it.

⁶I’m taking her back.

⁷She’ll be passed around the Russian officers if you do.

running into the camp, wobbling on their high heels. Their flimsy dresses are being blown almost from their bodies by the wind. They hold back their hair from their faces as they run through its swirling anger, but they do not come back to help her.

The vehicle and the soldiers are gone. Dan is still sleeping across my body. My mother is still silent and unmoved. The girl is sobbing. She is no longer silent, and Alfie is no longer standing in front of us, he is walking towards her, his hand outstretched. She takes it, and he pulls her to her feet.

‘Thank you,’ she bleats through her sobs as she turns and heads through the gates to the compound.

The Personal Account of Henry Wright

'You know where the door is.' Henry Wright was leaning back in his throne-like leather chair. He wore a herringbone suit and his dark hair was spotted with silver. Everything in his home spoke of privilege and a discerning eye, from the heavy built-in shelves lining the walls to the statuette of Plutus and the antique Grecian scales on his desk. Under Henry's fierce scrutiny trembled William Jefferies, his stockbroker and dogsbody.

William was clutching his tie as he often did in times of stress. 'Mr Wright, I swear I sent you the release form three weeks ago.'

'I pay you to manage my shares and in that simple task you have failed me. Now they're as worthless as you are.'

'Without your *signature*...'

'Don't embarrass yourself, Jefferies. We're through today.'

The thin man's shoulders slumped and he quietly left. Henry scowled at the *Financial Times* lying open before him. An article on the falling price of oil had been circled three times in red pen. As he pushed the paper aside, he saw a grey hair spoiling the polished surface of his desk. Disgusted, Henry slipped a business card underneath the offending strand and carried it carefully to the bin.

All afternoon the phone's shrill ring drilled into his head and his secretary seemed incapable of giving him a minute's peace. Finally, unable to decide between the benefits of investing in munitions versus infrastructure, he broke away from the figures to admire his whisky cabinet. The sculpted bottles were a pleasant sight; he paused over the Laphroaig and the Glenfiddich, the Macallan and the Yamazaki. Each one a gift paid in homage, a reminder of his success. A dozen small glasses lined the bottom shelf, polished and perfectly balanced for optimum breathing. A diluting pipette waited in its satin and rosewood case ready to serve. He smiled, knowing that very few people had as fine a collection as Henry Wright — he wasn't about to diminish it by opening a bottle.

The phone rang for the what seemed like the hundredth time but thankfully soon stopped and Henry turned his attention to the bonsai tree that stood on a shelf by the window. To a glass jug he added three drops of plant food and exactly 200 millilitres of water from the cooler. The tree was a thing of beauty; under his merciless control it had flourished, its twisted branches curving gracefully, the dark earth nutrient-rich and free from

pests. As the first drops of water hit the soil and the small pale rocks that were artfully framing the trunk, there was a knock on the door.

Henry spun around, his anger flaring. 'Not now Janine!' he roared, gesturing wildly and splattering the wall with water that dripped down to the plug socket. His elegant corner lamp began to flicker. 'For God's sake!' Henry cried and leant down to the plug. But as his hand connected with the switch a vicious jolt of electricity rushed up his arm and he fell backwards to the floor, the jug tumbling to a rest in the thick carpet.

A numb feeling throbbled in his arm; why did his secretary always have to choose the worst times to interrupt him? Henry rolled onto his front and pushed himself to his feet, snatching up the jug and slamming it onto his desk with a satisfying thump. With his back to the room he leant on his knuckles and tried to compose himself. As he forced his breathing to slow, he heard a faint scribbling sound. Turning with annoyance, he saw a dusty old man sitting, *uninvited*, in the good client chair. He wore a tatty brown suit and a briefcase squatted next to him on the floor. A large hardback book rested on his knees, in which he was writing intently. The man squinted up at him through small glasses, muttering under his breath, before resuming his work.

Henry recoiled. 'Who the hell are you?' he demanded.

Surprised, the man looked around the room and then shrugged and returned to his book. Henry marched across and stood towering over him. He smelt like a musty library.

'I said who *the hell* are you and what are you doing in my office?'

This time, the man looked up and met his gaze. 'Oh dear,' he said, eyes widening. 'Just a minute, take a seat, take a seat.' He continued writing.

Furious, Henry looked down and saw that the book was filled with flowing shorthand. But up close both it and the intruder seemed strangely washed out, like a bad watercolour. Henry hated watercolours. As he leant closer, he was appalled to see that the man was very slightly transparent. He stepped back in alarm and the little man smiled briefly up at him, nodding encouragingly. Little clouds of dust were flying up as his hand flashed across the page and a light sprinkling of particles settled against the smooth green chair. Henry rubbed his eyes but the dust was like the rest of him, not fully here or there. Just looking at it made his hands itch.

'This isn't right at all,' the man said, bewildered. He stopped writing and looked at Henry. 'I can't very well describe myself telling you about me

describing myself! I'd never reach the conclusion.'

Henry wrenched the book out of his hands, feeling its solid weight. The translucency must have just been a trick of light. He ignored the man's protests and returned to his chair. Henry hadn't used shorthand in a long time but he hadn't forgotten how to read it. *Tuesday 6th March, 3pm. Henry was in a foul mood; the oil price was down again so of course he'd berated poor Jefferies even though he knew the share release form would be in his in-tray. After mainly staring at the paper for a few hours, he took a break to admire his whiskies and prune the beautiful bonsai tree.* Henry slammed the book closed. 'You'd better tell me what your game is or I'm calling the police!' He tossed the book down amongst his papers.

'I was in the middle of a summary,' the man sighed, looking reproachfully up at the ceiling. 'There'll be so much paperwork at the Bureau...'

'Stop babbling man!'

'I shouldn't really be discussing this with a client but then again there's never usually the opportunity.' He frowned and seemed to reach a decision. 'My name is Deacon and I'm your scribe. Everyone has a scribe, but you're not supposed to see us. We just record events, general mood, that sort of thing. Everything we write goes in the records at the Bureau.'

As a financial advisor, privacy was one of the linchpins of Henry's business; this was an unacceptable breach. A grim smile spread across his face as he realised the truth. 'Industrial espionage,' he said, wiping the cover with his handkerchief and reading the title: *The Personal Account of Henry Wright*. 'I'm keeping this and I'm going to sue this Bureau. I bet Spencer hired you, didn't he? That snivelling middleman.'

'Don't work yourself up Henry, you know how you get and I don't think that plant could take much more pruning.'

'It's Mr Wright,' Henry snapped.

'OK Mr Wright, let's not overreact, we don't want another Christmas '95 do we?'

Henry's jaw dropped and he stuttered 'Have you been talking to Deirdre? Damn it, I didn't break that clock and no one can prove it!'

Deacon leant forwards, a look of concern on his face. 'The Editors are going to have to sort this out, I'm afraid. It's been interesting to finally meet you, but I'd better just take the account and be on my way.'

Henry narrowed his eyes. 'What do you mean, *Editors*?'

'You see, the broad strokes of your life are set, my job is to keep an eye

on you; make sure it all goes according to plan. I wouldn't dream of making an Edit.' Deacon lowered his voice as he spoke the last word and looked fearfully around the room.

'You mean you think you can manipulate me with this blasted thing?' Henry plucked his silver fountain pen from its holder and held it over a page. 'Shall we see if we can change my fortune?' His voice was full of scorn.

Deacon jumped to his feet. 'That's way above my level and it's only in very exceptional circumstances.' He bounded across the room with one ink stained finger held high like a reproachful teacher. Henry stared deep into the dusty fingernail and Deacon slowly lowered it.

'You really believe that, don't you?' Henry said, flicking through the book. 'Right. Now let's just cross out this bit about the oil shares,' he put a big line through a paragraph and then flipped to an even earlier page, 'and then we can add another zero to last year's major investment.'

'Don't do that!' Deacon lunged across the desk but Henry spun the chair away from him.

Enjoying the ridiculous man's discomfort, Henry found the right passage and added a digit. A strange haze shimmered across the room and Henry was shocked to see the whisky cabinet flicker and a grander version appear in its place. Feeling light-headed, he laughed and continued turning the pages of his life to find the most profitable points in his long career. He absent-mindedly brushed his nose with a fresh handkerchief, not noticing the red smear that was left on the cloth.

'There are too many variables,' Deacon panted, jogging from one side of the desk to the other, only for Henry to spin the other way again each time he got close.

'Aha!' Henry cried triumphantly. 'I don't think I'll bother with the Bluemont account, that was a huge waste of time.' Taking the edge of the page he folded it several times, preparing to rip it from the book. A slight headache began tingling in his temples.

'You can't make an Edit that big! It'll write you out!' Deacon cried, sweat running down his pallid forehead. 'Look, I'll ask if the Editors can sort out the whole clock business, you'd like that, wouldn't you?'

But Henry wasn't listening. He tore the page from the book and put it in his out-tray. This was providence, an opportunity ready to be seized; his face glowing, he considered all the times he'd bought high and sold low,

the investors he'd turned away and the companies he'd disregarded that had skyrocketed without him. It was going to be glorious: he'd never make a bad call again. He'd never have made a bad call in the first place.

'Too many variables,' Deacon said faintly, shaking his head, which only frustrated Henry, adding to the pounding ache behind his eyes.

'For God's sake, be happy man! Have a holiday, I'll take over this now.' Henry looked back at the book but, aghast, saw that his hands were becoming see-through. He reached for the pen but his fingers passed right through it and then the ledger collapsed to the desk, its pages crumpling against the wooden surface. A brief look of confusion passed across Henry's face as he softly slipped out of existence.

Deacon looked dejectedly down at the book. With a sigh, he crossed out the title before returning the torn page and the account to his briefcase. He was always sad to reach the end of a book. An unfinished story was bad enough but to leave one half-written was a travesty. The whisky cabinet began to fade away and the carpet shimmered becoming worn, cheaper, simpler. A comfy blue sofa replaced the good client chair and a small round table appeared in the corner. Deacon furtively looked around before carefully taking down the bonsai tree and putting it under his arm. A moment later the shelf disappeared and a series of photographs of a smiling family took its place.

Walking quickly out of the room, he bumped into a man with scruffy black hair who was looking puzzled. 'Deacon! What's going on? My client shouldn't be living here.'

'There's been an unexpected Change... One of mine just erased himself.'

The other man reached out a hand and patted Deacon on the shoulder. 'I'm sorry to hear that,' he said. 'He'll be with the Librarians soon.'

Deacon put his hands flat together. '*Ink to Page, through Life and Health, and at the Close, Their Soul to Shelf.*' He briefly opened and closed his palms like a book.

'*Soul to Shelf,*' the other man said, repeating the gesture.

Then Deacon left the house, taking with him the account of Henry Wright; a promising young man who had disappeared without a trace at the start of his career.

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit-

You smell like hundreds of Sundays
at 8 o'clock in the morning;
when my priest asked me to light
candles and incense, I'd hide
in the recess the dark corner would offer
while he started the morning prayer. This promise
of something heavy and righteous,
hung above our communal heads, glinting,
like the art-nouveau Jesus which swung
from the ceiling above the baptismal font.

And I can't quite explain
why now, when you kiss me,
I can feel church candle wax dripping down my
fingers. Or, when you offer me something more
than love, and you curl your fingers through my belt loops,
I smell the crushing weight of 8am and incense
wafting through the godlessness we built together.

Mancan Le Parole.

For GBB.

It's November
and we're ignoring the dust she left on the windowsill.
Outside, old pop bottles are sat half filled with water.
Inside, there's still pound coins hidden in the rolled up carpet.

It's December
and we're folding up the never-worn jumpers from her chifferobe.
We're picking at the chewing nuts bought months ago,
we're asking what we want of each other in the front bedroom.

It's January
and we're looking for her rings inside empty tissue boxes.
She didn't trust the nurses, wore her paranoia like a crown,
long live the Queen.

It's February
and we're drinking tap water from brown glasses in the pantry.
We're laughing about her accidental purple rinse
while we flatten Kellogg's boxes in on themselves.

It's March
and she hated flowers and handkerchiefs.
My hair is curly. I'm wearing a dress.
She said she liked me that way.

It's March, and I think it will be for a while now.

Picnic.

Fell asleep on grass-
empty bottle of bucks fizz,
a box of strawberries,

to then wake and talk
about Sweden, sexism
and bad practices,

hidden between sheets
of good, bright, bold history,
damasked in yellow.

Then it's

ice cream and pound coins,
the promise of a month left.
I wish you would stay.

I wish you would stay
with me and them and bucks fizz-
I'll give you berries

if it would change your
mind, but boxes of fruit won't
even convince you.

So

instead, I'll dream you
stay here, and count down minutes
in old strawberry tops-

I'll watch you beaming,
your mouth filled with red mush and
wet with cheap bucks fizz.

Don't Do It

You were gold mesh, sugar breath, once.
Now, you are chipped metal of hipflasked
Tesco prosecco, the kind you shake into a glass in Camberwell.

It was in the first line of the neat-rhymed poem
you sat me down for, cross legged on the pub floor,
handing me a double rum amidst the turbulent hum from indoors;

I want to kill myself, you said,
your face lit up by luminous scroll,
a note saved next to a shopping list,

your eyes empty, your hands full,
as I sat dumb and dull
as a punching bag.

You didn't flinch as you said it,
your tongue dripped tar or jelly
or heavy glue but the words slipped

quite simply off of you,
like you were made of coffin wood
already. But this was not you.

This Queen, bored of battles
between peasants and lions, was not you.
This lipsticked mistress leaving clues, was not you.

The jury behind your eyes were rows and rows
of not at all you, insisting they were, ready to burn
self-help books and snap mood diary spines,

and smash our half-full glasses
on our calendars of cancelled plans,
as if we didn't rip them up already.

I sat there and listened,
waiting for the sorry, the twist,
the *I love you*.

Maybe in a better bar,
my round, next in the crawl,
in the room full of arcade games

high pitched, pixelated tunes
stabbing my head every nano second as I stood,
watching you push 20p's into the open wound.

The Fisher King of Churchtown

The birds stayed out of Churchtown,
 if I had wings I'd leave too.
 But something here was calling
 me, a fall and rise of
Cá bhfuil tú?

He was close,
 I knew, from towering trees,
 tall, sucked thin, black bone
 branches leaning in,
 hands splayed, begging,
 life siphoned out from roots,
 a coaxing call, a whispered
 fall, and rise of
Cá bhfuil tú?

The yellowing fields of sugar beet
 stretched, wheezing a rasping plea,
 the gravestones pinned in
 patchwork, angled straight at me,
 but still I drove on through,
 heart beat beating the fall
 and rise, the ghosts travelling too,
 the ghosts of crow and owl
 croak-cooing the ghouling
Cá bhfuil tú?

The glass doors slowly parted,
 shaking like red sea,
 detecting skin, young and wrinkling,
 shrinking in the heat,
 with every step a weight is heaped,
 heaving, hunching me.
 One day I know I'll look like you,
 and for every inch I shrivelled up,
 I wondered,
Cá bhfuil tú?

I knelt down by your throneside,
 the nurse dressing you,
 a jumper made of hay
 and stiff as joints,
 here I was but
Cá bhfuil tú?

You smiled and said,
*'Who are you?
 A lovely girl',*
 your eyes a tomb,
 you asked out loud
 to no one,
 but the empty minds here
 in this room.

When I said Cathleen,
a lovely name, you mused,
words falling from your tongue,
the ones your mind held tight onto.
The mind lined with prayers,
a speech from 1902,
my name gone quick,
slipped like a handshake
and left with
Cá bhfuil tú?

I am a stranger here,
telling you, you are needed
elsewhere now.
I am the whispering call
repetitive as you,
the fall and rise and fall
again, of *Dad*,
Cá bhfuil tú?

Gazing at the Betta

There's only one thing living in this room
and it's you.

I think you're made of half-moons
gills like flickering blinds
a mind memories sift through
rained down
from a moving cloud.

I faked your whole world from the tap
spilled you glass walled in
to gaze at your school blazer blue.

You are small and shoe-like
standing looking at me
unthinking unblinking
sinking with ink and oil
your thoughts seaweed heavy
waiting
for someone to tap the glass.

Celebrate

It's your birthday
I should celebrate,
I should smile,
but every home-baked birthday cake
is a clock face grinning –
counting
down.

Mum's eyes gleam a desperate
thank you to God for another year we got through,
or to whoever organised you to sit beside me
here, the kitchen table a lit-up landmark while you fidget
and we're stuck, still, staring at you.

No. Another year you struggled through.
And we're here with hands poised to clap, well done
for surviving and making our year another held in breath of worry
which you use to blow out the candles Dad let me light.
It took me ages too, igniting sixteen torches altogether saluting you
like you're a soldier back one night from battle,
so we can soak you up, surround you,
so we can draw out your face from memory
when you stop coming home.

Another year you fuelled Dad's hand to reach for wine
and almost ask whether I feel damaged too
or tell me why I'm not bones and days off school like you
or why you couldn't walk today,
when all I could do was sit by you,
while my heart drummed, hard and heavy,
as if it had to beat enough for two.

My heart is old now, aged by you,
every wish I make on every home-baked
count down cake I want to give to you,
and when I stare down my candles blur to hundreds
instead of totting up to ten.
And I know the root of the fire can be traced right back
to you.

You blow out the candles,
and I clap,
but I can't
celebrate.

I never do.

Wallace Reid Hung Up On Me

it's difficult to think about how easy
it would be to become a matinee idol

these days it might involve little more
than staying home & chain smoking

short of scalping yourself it's a pretty
immediate form of alteration the idea

in general would be to make damn sure
nobody ever caught you in close-up

& kiss your lucky stars while you're at it kid
there's never an excuse not to practice

Hot Sweet Gothic

these days
we only
have the
fruit-bowl
for company

the night
we arrived
he had
the bowl
cleaned out

he liked
to think
we would
make ourselves
at home

'i'm sure
you'll make
yourselves
at home'
he said

& now
among
other things
i really miss
the apples

Sebastian

in anticipation he turned on all the lamps
& out went all the overhead lighting
this made his body both covert & lambent

like the balloons used to convey dispatches
over the heads of royalists besieging
paris in 1871 which were both covert

& lambent since the firelight of the camps
surrounding the city struck their white
ribbons as they passed by he was exactly

like that but with a glass of wine & extremely
limited knowledge of the siege of paris
in 1871 which was fine by him how odd he

thought nakedness is so odd

An Outside Life

When you get out of prison we'll adopt a shaggy dog.
We'll move into that old abandoned house outside of Salem,
the one with a wrap-around porch and the falling down fireplace.

It won't be like how you live now,
wearing too many layers,
resisting the weather.
You'll have me, for one,
and the fires we'll build together.

We'll use well water, old quilts from the attic,
cook stone soup on a potbelly stove. When you get hungry,
you won't have to wait in line because there'll be plenty.

We'll make slow meals, grandmother's recipes,
gather beets and yams from the garden, and spread out
picnic blankets on the yard in summer evenings,
lie down and listen to underground rivers and star streams.

The dog will run in and out, making the screen door bang.
We'll hang up giant wall art, and paint the bedroom gold.

We'll watch the light tango down the hall.
We'll laugh at the messes we make and remember
how to nap away late afternoons.

These days,
when you tell me about new friends in the library,
I hope you've forgotten our fights,
the money you saved up with fierce work,
and the third thing,
(you know what I mean).

It made me smile to read
about the fresh patch of plaster above your bed.
Things are changing, my love. This spring feels
like someone opening a window, all the horror dreams blow away.
We'll just look around and see what's left.
Today I planted some baby radishes.
Soon I know you'll meet me here.

Portal

Beneath the cold home world,
where it always snowed,
you swam, heaven shining off your skin;
your monster howl cracked the ice,
you burst through,
shatter.
a new hole in the roof.
I crept my ear closer to the wound.
Found ice pieces floating on,
heard, through the membrane,
belugas, humming to each other
pleasure moments from the their secret deep.
Exposed above, on the snow plain,
I wondered
would this be the portal that stayed open?
I listened, hoped your head would nudge the melting pieces,
drew short, uncertain breaths.
Finally, you breached.
A portal. Heaven.
Arctic. Artifice. Night to light.
There you were,
my precious nobody
With my hand to your face
we exhaled,
fresh contact.

Author's Note: These next pieces are excerpts from a longer verse novel that is still being written.

1. Shatter

Frances, born in 1980

My mother, a sledgehammer from a long line of sledgehammers,
before I could talk, moved us to the city and tried her best to forget our
tribe.

In the land we come from, everyone knows our women by the things
they've shattered.

swish. pound. crack. powder.

and sometimes *shatter, with a swift repair.*

No one fucks with a sledgehammer,
and if she's on your side it's the safest place to stand.

Sundays, public market day, I hear the grasp in her voice, asking the price
of tomatoes.

Three dollars a pound.

Then her face swings wide, that sledgehammer look.

Ah, for you, let's call this half-a-pound.

and I'll throw in some cucumbers.

the gaze that shatters.

oh, and some dates too.

I learned not to smirk our small victories, but to carry a stoic, sacred look.

"They owe it to us," said Sledgehammer's strut.

Later on, she swung too wild, too many things broke.
I held together until the pieces were too small to hold.
Anut was with me by then. We made a plan and bolted.

gap.

Now at sixty-five, I live on my farm, tend to the quiet.

Each new year I feel swish through my body,
they whisper messages about grown-ups:

there's no adult here.

unfold as you need to,

grow up or grow down or maybe sideways.

pay attention to what you pay attention to.

7. She Goes Where the Wind Blows

Autumn, 1999

When Anut left,
like God after the flood,
she communicated only in rainbows.
But she left traces of herself all around apartment X.

I collected lists:

teacup	stale sheets	no maid
tea stain	smell	sink full
stained residue	body residue	plastic plates
dew	body hum	partial meals
do girl	humming waves	tomato-cucumber
girlfriend	on sheets	hummus divine
friendly	stink of slow weeks	divide dishes
friend due	and Anut	dishy girl

I sought every place she could be, the walls, the windows of her favorite
shops,

the trees in the park she liked to climb,
scavenging her scraps until no bits of her were left.

Then I felt empty too, so I left...

Slipped in and out of moons,

lived as a stray cat, a badger, various rodents that scurry.

Crept through darkness as an underground, nocturnal animal.

Forgot my name and sex. And made gaps throughout the rest.

Big Gap.

Anut interrupts:

I tried to find you,
tried to explain the why, the way,
but my belly filled up with blue
then butterflies surrounded my head
and flew me away from you.

The Dying Season

Picking past the garden gate. My mother is a giant.
She tramples over nettles, not feeling

their red shock. Wasps hum, the late sun
bleeds into the hedges as she reaches up

and picks me one. O tiny secret,
a piece of night I squeeze between my fingers;

wild and sweet and full of blood. Beneath
my feet the world is sleeping

and trees loom overhead. Shedding skin,
the dying season. Grin my reddest grin.

My mother is a hunter
she strips the branches bare

Writing in the Garden

mug of mint tea
steaming
a fat green beetle
climbs
onto the page

armoured and spur legged

tilt my head back feel
the rain
stick to me

I smell burning leaves

a bonfire

a cloud of smoke
across the garden;

I am a little girl
pushing twigs
into the flames

and here are your eyes
twin moons
above a lighter

buried under coats
together
cackling at the ocean

Dollhouse

Green room, clean light. The screaming red
of the fire extinguisher, bound
to the wall. Here and there, personal touches;
a jug of plastic flowers, an assortment of shells.

The tissue box, tactfully placed
on my side of the table. One pulled free,
a ghost frozen mid-air and wailing;
or a single sheet of snow, too cold

to touch. I clamp my hands to the chair
and let my legs dangle. How big a chair feels,
when you feel small. I watch the rug,
swimming across the sea of the carpet;

pretty thing, faux-furred and lilac, shaped
like an animal pelt. I dream of a hunter.
He crouches between pastel trees, gun finger
clenched – paper birds flung from their branches –

poor plastic stag, shot down, head mounted.
Now he lives on my rented wall, where I play
pretend houses; I eat bowls of wax fruit
and I sleep in a matchbox bed.

Shroom

Through night-time smoke

I crouch, I crawl between thistles
I follow lighthouse beam
across black grass

and now I am in
their circle. My fingers find
their dainty nipples heads

snap each stem
I've earned them.
I split earths seams

and huddle
in the yellow of the car, secrets
clutched into my lap

I swing home
down a rope
of cat's eyes

Opening shot: the camera starts high,
city skyline in yellow autumn light.
We take it in, magnificent.
Then we zoom: the streets, the crowds, a single man

Moving Forward

Close up: I'm walking with intent,
head up, eyes front, earphones in.
I have movement, direction, purpose –
the entire city under my command.

This is the picture.
A true-life tale of an ordinary guy – no,
extraordinary, singular, perfect.

This is a movie starring James David Ward –
– and not that man behind closed curtains,
staring solemnly at a laptop screen for the seventh day in a row.

The Barbara Hepworth Blues

At the bottom of the garden, my mother and a woman
dressed like Barbara Hepworth argue over a sculpture of my birth,

if the bronze plinth should be horizontal or vertical,
the right shade of blue for the umbilical cord.

Hepworth adds a curl of hair with a toothbrush,
pats down its sides like a pony.

My mother sticks her chisel in, disappointed
in the arrangement of her legs, if she had her way

the sculpture would include a dancing fountain and hum
like a refrigerator, full of roses, a sundial and a coat of arms,

her snacks, soft drinks and wine. Instead the sculpture stands
in the April shadows of overgrown gorse, a bundle

of cold clay, one arm in the air like the chimney
of the defunct engine house where my father

worked in the summer of '85, where copper wires crawled in
beneath the sea – no messages.

But what about the father? Hepworth asks.
Oh, he wasn't involved, my mother says.

Hepworth rolls her eyes, the whites of her eyeballs
like a cliff face, the grey of her overalls

like a gun. She begins to sing:
Don't turn your back on me, baby.

Blues like the sulky one in a rainbow.
Blues like your favourite moon.

With so many conflicting opinions, a therapist
had warned the sculpture of my birth of this moment

and offered some advice: be lucid.
Talk to the older generations as if talking to the sea.

Keep a list of all their errors, like those lists
you'll keep of all the things you eat while falling in love:

roast beef, feta cheese, champagne bon bons,
french fries and wild grass.

Keep a list of the places where you'll no longer have to be a sculpture
or a birth: the sellotaped seats of a servees on Rue Sursock,

the backseat of a minibus across the Asian Minor,
the heart-shaped swimming pool of Le Club Militaire.

Even Hepworth cannot capture the light as it will fall
over your face on a Red Sea bottomless boat,

the fishes kissing its glass. The moon flirting with the sky,
only hinting at its evening plans.

Isn't blue a bit obvious? What about yellow?
my mother interrupts. The woman who once refused a pedicure

on her wedding day and said if she wanted her toenails
in a different colour she'd slam them in the car door.

Blues like the indoors with the outside coming at you with a chisel.
Blues like your favourite ocean.

Hepworth sighs and dusts down her overalls, abandons the sculpture,
walks up the garden path, retires for the day.

And in the evening distance, yellow gorse rattles against
the windows of a passing train.

Travelling with ashes

You will need: A certified copy of the death certificate. Speak to the airline
operator in advance to check policies for travelling with cremated human
ashes. To allow for screening, carry the remains in a non-metallic urn.

Expect to take it on as hand luggage. Expect to stand in line, unable to
consolidate the idea of the man in the urn with the man who once sucked
lime juice off his hangnails and explained the true beauty of the past
participle.

The man who bought a blender for your new apartment and sprayed
sangria up the walls.

The day the verb to swell became your swollen eyes, to break became your
broken plate, to ruin became your ruined cake.

Expect each word to refuse (refused, refusing?) to get in line.

Here they are: stiff and trying.

Owl & Fox

Owl wore heels with an extra inch. Fox ironed his tie. As they entered the restaurant, Owl was impressed by Fox's request for the window table. When Owl ordered butterfly chicken, Fox ordered the same.

A jug of water appeared on the table, full of ice and slices of lemon.

'What's your biggest fear?' Owl asked, with a smile.

Fox told a sad story from his childhood. Fox's voice was as rich as the earth. Owl watched his beautiful black lips, wet with dirt and imagined stuffing her feathers in them: silk and sawdust and something spherical in shape, a little foxlet, dribbling into the cracks.

Owl felt oversized for her nice yellow dress, felt oversized for the big beige room. Fox crossed his paws nervously. The cutlery just sat there. The concept of a spoon seemed ludicrous.

Fox was the size of a small wild dog.

Dear Daughter

Forgive me

I am using the coasters I bought for you in Greece as bookmarks in the poetry anthology you salvaged for me

(from the unwanted books table)

It seems thoughtless

I know

Where will you put your cup?

But

If you think about it

I am doing it for you also

So often we find ourselves opening the same page

Reading (falling in love with) the same poem

A day (or so) apart

I am just paving the way

Okay

I'll retrieve the coaster and tell you this

You'd love page 89

And the John Ashbery on 143

Someone has turned down the corner of page 91

Was it you? It's very good. I like it a lot too.

There's this one line

In 982 pages that reads

'I am putting makeup on an empty space'

(Anne Waldman) Page 408-411

It makes me think

We're

Like two paper birds in a watercolour sky

I let the Jackdaw in-

On account
Of its ink blue mask.
Staying far longer than
Was polite
It put another drink on tab.
Which being longer than all my years
Remained unpaid.

Below its flurry of grey feathers
A layer of skin clear as glass
I watched its heart beat slow slow fast
It told me it had family
Nearby by the name of Corvidae.
I'd never heard the name spoken
So
Considered it a lie.

But at least the entertainment was good.
The sky so broad
Offered ample room for deceit.
His knowledge was wide-ranging,
Like the hills and valleys he crooned of.
Flying the horizon's curve was quickest
By night.
Shooting vertically to the stratosphere
Was most rewarding at noon.

He wouldn't leave.
Leave, I asked.
Forget about the tab.
I already have, was his reply.

Again, he talked about the sky, and
Promised I could witness such perpendicular
Curiosities if I only played along.
Shuffling his words,
He formed an unseen cage
From which I could not escape.
I should have known
It was a mistake
To let the Jackdaw in

On account
Of its ink blue mask.

Origins

If I gave you the fifteenth day of September now
there'd be nothing to spare.
No mean time.
No me time.
And somewhere alone in Greenwich, or Grimsby,
or Liverpool, or Hull you'd
sit at the edge of a park, under the thinning leaves of
an ageless tree. Palms up, waiting for
lost days to arrive.
The nights would be whispers in branches.

There would be the scent of lemons.
Or is it limes?
Was it always the same?
I was born under the leaves of a laden lime tree
contained in a frame in a room painted placid blue.
It saturated my skin and travelled
as I, and you. Diffused, dissolved, dislocated.
Engrossed, enveloped, eagerly devoured.
It was the scent of citrus on you;
It drew me in, invited, or not.

I was born in coarse cotton sheets, worn through.
Stamped with letters
a still deeper hue of insipid blue.
Wrapped in a cellular blanket, held at arm's length.
It was the scent of citrus that brought me to you.
You can wait, or not.
On the bench, or the grass.
I can't give back the sparse time.
There's none going spare.
Only the citrus clings to air.

Pathos Gate

Today I crossed a border I didn't stay
Walked there and back inside the day
Walked through no man's land
I didn't stay Crossed the green line
twice inside the day
I didn't take out the Nikon
I did as the red sign told me
and hid it away I don't know why
Maybe it was the white border placed
just so it kept the writing in order
Kept me in order I did as I was told
when I crossed the border

November 23rd 2016

After hundreds of days spent in the city
noises I hardly noticed had attached
themselves to me; a rusted rattle of nursery rhyme
always just behind - like I'd fallen asleep with the t.v. on

I left the house to sift through it all and cut a path
down past the revolving yellow dredgers,
the Japanese and British models
set about excavating the ruins
of a cinema run from 1912

In the space left behind I saw the
unwashed station and over its shoulder
the clock tower. All the buildings, from here
to the waterfront, seemed to jockey
each other for a look through the keyhole

I went down to where the factories
are untied from the ground, floating without
apology to the glass towers, which leaned closer
as though guarding me against the sky

Haiku

Her pupils are wide
as she takes mum's hand, leading
her through the museum

waiting for my cash
the machine barks 'hurry up'
I drop my wallet

t.v. says they won
three to one, I sip my pint
basking in glory

the traffic light's red
tension has drawn in my cheeks
a street sign shouts 'stop!'

I see the class clown
on a saturday, kicking
a bottle to death

the little white ball
taps back and forth, pointlessly
back and forth back, forth

I go to kiss you
but it feels like we are watched
we kiss on the cheek

why's he on the floor?
sat there chewing on his keys?
why are you surprised?

Mark Keane's Extra Lesson

'You mean isn't, Mark. Not ain't - isn't'

Mrs Greenaway invokes Saint Philomena
as she tightens the slack of his phrase
Mark Keane, at ten, is thick skinned enough
to meet her brisk brand of nurture on the chin

He had a copper mohawk and swinging moods
and I'd bonded with him one assembly
over Homer Simpson the piss poor Dad; oh how
we doubled in laughter as they marched us
away to the headmaster's office,
tapping our hands on the walls of the corridors as we went

But I hesitate at the threshold
of the classroom, and watch as Mark Keane
gets his extra lesson; freckles emblazoned red.

Naming

Language is a tool to make us braver
naming the world with ritual warning
river, riparius, coast of the sea,
take care you ally with its bank always

My uncle died febrile in Chilean
woods the year I was born, got sick there and
couldn't get back, the long and short of death
for me trails off at the same point

My Dad was his brother, almost young too
he was happy and sad warm and spaced out
he'd squint at the distance then turn, shocked to
find he could still juggle and play guitar

Later on it bit me awake when the
dreams turned on me and I fell apart alright
that's why cliches were invented and drains
and correctional units...three bags full

But Mum I've pinned the time you named it there
on my wall, when those tears brought me back to
how you looked and the christmas cedar pine,
river, riparius, coast of the sea

Aaron Holtappel is a fiction writer currently working on his first novel; a detective thriller from the perspective of an estranged couple. Aaron's work explores themes of identity, memory, and how both affect our relationships with others. Aaron lives in Macclesfield. aaronholtappel@hotmail.co.uk

C.S. Vaughan is a poet and poetry reviewer based in Manchester and London. She received her BA from Goldsmiths, UOL in 2016 and is currently working on publishing her first collection of poems. She has previously featured work in *Shy Bairns*, *Parallel Magazine* and *The Manchester Review* along with articles on inkluded.com and othersyndicate.com. She will talk about Emily Dickinson at every given opportunity, so if you meet her in person please bring this up. @chloesvaughan chloesvaughanwrites@gmail.com

Cait O'Sullivan joined the Creative Writing MA fresh from completing her undergraduate degree at the University of Manchester in 2016. Cait recently directed her original play *Helping Hannah* which was performed this year at the Students Union Council Chambers, and she is currently working on writing her second play *The Ark* as well as her first novel. Following the completion of her MA, Cait has an internship at Granta Books; she looks forward to a career in the creative writing industry and can't wait to witness the bright futures of her classmates.

Ciaran Grace graduated from the University of Bristol in 2014 with a BA in Classical Studies. His first full-time job was as an archaeologist slugging mud from Folkstone to Bedale in an attempt to uncover Britain's past. His key interests are human origins and mythology. He enjoys exploring other cultures, in writing and in life, and likes stories full of adventure and occult rituals. He is currently working on a series of fantasy novels that straddle pre-history and the modern day, blending elements of fantasy, science fiction and historical writing. Check his Sick of the Fringe diagnoses here: thesickofthefringe.com/manchester-international-festival ciarangrace@gmail.com

David Gennard spent the majority of his childhood in space, and on various alien planets, fighting against the evil galactic empire. Somehow, he survived all that and followed his heart north to raise two young girls, while trying to find the time to be a filmmaker, photographer and writer. He is currently writing *The Fever Coast*, a novel about a woman's path to redemption in the wilds of Panama after killing her husband.

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Eilis Hall studied English Literature at the University of Manchester, achieving a 2:1 in 2016 before embarking on the Creative Writing MA. For her undergraduate degree she wrote a Creative Writing dissertation of retold, dystopian, Old Testament stories. She has been writing fiction and poetry since her teens, and had two non-fiction articles published in her university paper. Other than writing, her passions include teaching and fundraising for the organ donation charity, Live Life Give Life. She is currently working on a novel focused around the themes of grief, mental health and ultimately growing from our experiences.

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Hal Coase is a playwright and poet. His writing has been featured and performed at the Arcola Theatre, the Pleasance Theatre, the Ashmolean Museum and the North Wall Arts Centre. He is currently working on a stage adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway* for the National Youth Theatre.

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Hannah Bressler is a poet living in Seattle, Washington. She is interested in different language dialects, human migration, love stories, experimental models of gender, homeless populations, people in detention centres, and the way children experience the world. This year she is working on a verse novel and setting up a small press.

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Jade Roberts is a poet and short story writer currently based in Cardiff. Prior to embarking on the Creative Writing MA, Jade lived and studied in Aberystwyth where she was featured in the anthology *Seafret* and published in the magazine *Aberink*. She is currently working in a bookshop and writing a collection of poetry.

James D. Ward is a writer of plays, poetry, and prose, from the Midlands, UK. He has previously been published in *The New Luciad* and *Write to the Future*, and has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe. James is currently working on his first pamphlet.

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Jan Cabral-Jackson is a doctor living in the Lancashire Coast with her wife, a grumpy greyhound and a lazy cat. Her short story *Redemption* was published by Inwood Indiana Press and her piece *La Belle Epoque* is due to be published shortly. She's working on her novel *Marguerite* set in 13th Century Normandy. It follows Marguerite's choices as a mother and an outcast whilst her husband Louis is summoned to the Fifth Crusade and the siege of Damietta. The story is told by both points of view and their journey to survive and find each other again.

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J.C. Wilson is currently working on *The Order of Lies*, a novel of seven parallel stories exploring the impact of the Yugoslav Wars on ordinary lives. It follows characters, including a war criminal, a deserter and a refugee, across Europe from the early 1990s to present day, in their quests for peaceful existence. She studied Modern European Languages and gathered ideas for the novel while living and travelling abroad during the nineties and noughties. She now lives and works in her native Edinburgh, and has recently visited the Balkans to research the novel further.

Jessica Moor made her first foray into writing aged seven, winning a prize for a poem about pizza. She grew up in London, reading English at Homerton College, Cambridge, before working in the culture and charity sectors. She has written for various university and online publications. In 2010 she won first prize for the Arthur Cotterell one-act play competition for her play, *The Citizen*. Jessica is currently focused on feminist writing and issues surrounding violence against women. She is currently putting the finishing touches on her first novel, *A Version of Love*.
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Joseph J. Wood studied creative writing at Edge Hill University, before embarking on the MA at the Centre for New Writing. His work endeavours to be unconventional and uncompromising in its exploration and expression of the human condition.
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Lucy Wilkinson Yates is a doctor living in Manchester. She is currently editing *Cardiology*, a novel which draws on her experiences living and travelling in Spain and Patagonia. Her short fiction has previously been published by New Niu Press (Barcelona).
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Lynne Lowes is currently writing her second novel, the first is still awaiting publication, and a collection of short stories that are contemporary reinterpretations of classic poems. Lynne also writes academic pieces under the pseudonym L L Hughes (*Exploring Cormac McCarthy's Road; A Study of the Expression of Lawrence Durrell's 'Heraldic Universe'*) and was ghostwriter for two self published books. Lynne is interested in atmosphere, the ethereal, and other-worldly aspects of life, as well as the way in which we can unknowingly influence people.
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N.J. Stallard is a writer, editor and poet. Her writing has been published in *The Guardian*, *Vice*, *Tank*, *The Atlantic*, *AnOther*, *PN Review* and the experimental publication *Dark Habits* by HOME in Manchester. Based in Beirut, Istanbul and the UAE for nearly a decade, she is currently working on a collection of poetry and her first novel, a piece of speculative fiction drawn from her experiences in the Middle East.
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Paul Thomas has worked in healthcare in London, San Francisco, and New York. He is currently finishing a novel called *Balbam*.
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Phil Olsen writes flash fiction and short stories. He won the Northern Short Story Festival Flash Fiction Slam in 2017, Writing on the Wall's WoWFest 2016 Flash Fiction competition, and Book Week Scotland's 2014 Flash Fiction competition. Phil has blogged about short story courses and literary events for Comma Press and Manchester Literature Festival respectively. He is inspired by the absurdism of George Saunders, Miranda July and Adam Marek, and the brevity of Lydia Davis. Phil is currently working on a collection of short stories set in a strange yet familiar faded townscape.
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Rebecca Zahabi enjoys writing fiction, theatre and script, and likes experimenting with different genres and styles. She was long-listed for the Penguin WriteNow competition. She wrote and staged three plays in France as the director of a theatre association (L'Hippocampe Zébré), and did some travelling theatre between children's holiday camps. This year she's part of the Writers' Young Company at the Royal Exchange and CommonWord's "Identity" workshops. She is currently working on a novella.
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Sam Case writes short fiction and is currently working on her first novel, *Facing the Music*. It charts the friendships, loves and rivalries of a group of students who remain close into their thirties, until the secrets they have kept from one another threaten to destroy the bonds between them. When not writing fiction, she also works as a charity fundraiser.

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Shellie Jayne Kelly was born in Liverpool in 1974. She worked as a photographer whilst raising a family. Following the birth of her third child Shellie studied English and Education at Edge Hill University, and completed her first novel which was longlisted for the Mslexia Women's Novel Competition for previously unpublished novelists in 2013. This first taste of positive feedback encouraged her to further study the arts and pursue a career as a poet and novelist. She is currently working on a collection of poetry, and a novel of speculative fiction. Her work combines daily life with the fantastical.

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Toby Hall is a teaching assistant at a secondary school in Liverpool. He is currently working on a short story collection and continues to explore and develop his poetry. His line of work presents him with a wealth of idiosyncratic characters, although he tends to think that people are at their most interesting in the brief moments when they forget anyone's watching.

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Tom Patterson mainly writes speculative fiction that explores sci-fi and magical worlds. As well as working on a collection of short stories, he is currently also writing a historical novel with a dash of Derbyshire folklore. If writing doesn't work out, Tom plans on juggling his way into the circus. Diagnosis writer for *The Sick of The Fringe* during the 2017 Manchester International Festival:

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