Flash Fiction Competition 2013

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Columbus Says... by Max Scratchmann

That big sphere has been in the town hall foyer for as long as anyone can remember, but no-one knows what it's supposed to represent. The official plaque says that it's a primitive sculpture from the time of the Old Ones, of course, but other than that the professors are pretty hazy about its purpose.

There are theories - as there always are whenever anything's a mystery - and some people believe that it's a pagan symbol of worship, that the round fat ball represents fertility or pregnancy. Others say that it was an instrument of torture, that sacrificial victims were laid down in front of its path and ceremonially flattened as a homage to the gods. Me, I've always considered it to just be decorative, but, between you and I, its colours have always fascinated me, all those clear greens and blues. We don't see much of those tones in our world, we just don't have the pigments any more.

However, Columbus says that the globe represents us, that it's the surface of the planet that we live on, the world that the Old Ones inhabited before the atmosphere turned foul and drove them underground. Columbus says that out there, high above us, there's light and air and something called green grass. And that there is water in abundance, clear as crystal and sparkling blue to reflect a limitless space up above. He says that's called the sky.

Needless to say everyone laughs at Columbus. In fact, there's even been talk of having him certified, and rumours that the Force Captain keeps a Dissident's File on him and has contemplated sending him to the Abyss. But none of that daunts him.

Columbus says that our days our numbered. That one day, maybe not today or even tomorrow, the photon generators will grind to a slow and painful halt and that we will all gradually suffocate in the darkness. People don't like it when he talks like that, of course, and there's always more whispering
about the Abyss.

But Columbus goes on and on, asking merchants to finance his expedition to find the doors to the Old Ones' sealed shaft that he believes is hidden in the heart of the settlement. And, it's whispered, he already has more than a thousand credits saved towards the vessel that he's been planning, a subterranean ship with a huge drilling blade to cut through the layers of concrete and rock that protect our settlement.

And, sometimes, thorough the laughter, I sense a just hint of fear in the Elders eyes, an imperceptible hesitancy when the overhead lights flicker and they wonder, for just a split second, if there might be any truth to the madman's ravings.

I know it's all nonsense, of course, and that we'll go on forever. But when I look at that big solid ball on it its plinth I sometimes try and imagine the ocean and the sky.

It's out there, Columbus says.
Global Issues by Harry Loney

Ah wiz jist staunin there and 'er he came. Ah wiz like, aw God's sake man, but ken, too polite tae say anyhin'. Then he's like, oh man, massive mad map, eh? And ahm like map? He's like, aye, yon big map, ye can walk aroon' it.

An ahm pure like shakin' ma heid, ken? Whit a nobber. So ahm aw like naw, it's a globe, it's no a map, and then inside ma heid ahm like hurry up Lorna hen, she wiz takin ages in the loo. But he's like aye, it's a big map just wrapped aroon' itsel'. Ah jist smile and walk aff, ah've no got time fur this shite the night, there's big style drinkin' tae be done.

He bloody follows me.

Ye goin' oot the night, he asks, all casual like. So ahm like, aye, wi ma bird, she's just haen a piss the noo, no be lang. Yersel? But ah only ask that coz ah dinnae want him asking whare ahm goin'.

Naw, no really, he says. Then, whare ye goin'? And ahm like tae masel' ur ye kiddin' me? Ah dinny ken this polo-necked arsehole fae Adam, how come he's talkin' tae me? So ahm just like, ah dinny ken wherever you urny hopefully, and ah walk aff, proper big stride this time but ah canny go far coz if Lorna comes oot and ahm no there she'll hae a fit and start greetin and that wouldn' be the best start tae the night and ah'll no be getting laid at the end either.

So ah feel like a perv noo, stan'in' outside the girls' lavvy, but ah dinny care. Except he's jist starin at me, fae the globe, like ah kicked his old grandpa in the nuts. He shouts 'er, haw ye dinny hae tae be a twat aboot it, pal. Pal? That really does ma heid in, when folk say that tae me. Ah canny hold it in much langer.

So ahm like, ahm no yer pal, and ah dinny ken whit yer game is, comin' round here at night chattin' up random guys, but ahm no intae that ye wee queery, so piss aff ye squint-eyed turdface afore a pile yer heaid in. He jist looks at me, an' he's aw like whit ye oan aboot, Boabby?

Boabby! How come he kens ma name? That's proper put the shits up me. He's been stalking me like Jack the Ripper and ahm no really intae that.

So ah ask, how come ye ken ma name? Who sent ye? Ah said who sent ye so ah could sound like a spy and ah might have a gun. He didn' seem bothered.

Then at that, oot comes Lorna and just ignores me, and goes straight to the guy. Hiya Tam! Huv ye met Boabby? He's just here. Boabby, see it's ma brother, ah said he might meet us.

Bobby stares at me wi a snarly nose. Ahm definitely no getting laid the night.
Daniel could not get used to the continual hum of the air conditioning. *Off Earth* had considered the need for a realistic sleep environment and his room dimmed at night. However complaints of headaches and nausea in the residents had driven the company to improve the quality of breathable air and now the soft thrumming was a constant presence. His shift would begin in two hours, he knew this because at 3am every morning the walls of his room would glow honey yellow, it was supposed to give the impression of day light streaming in from a window. There were no windows in *Off Earth*. Daniel and all 30,000 members of his new abode had not seen a tree or animal, never mind sunshine for the last six months.

As he dressed he wondered not for the first time what had brought him here. He had been about to enter a promising post as a consultant physician in infectious disease when he had been approached. A simple email inviting him to visit with Sir Leslie Parry had intrigued him. He had heard of Parry, an immensely powerful and rich man. He could not imagine what such a man would want with him.

He still remembered how his mouth dried at their first conversation.

“I intend to leave the world behind and I want the best men and women to come with me.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me right the first time. This world is finished, we can’t save it and I want to survive. I think given the chance you would like that to.”

Daniel sat dumbfounded. The man was mad. Then he saw Parry smile.

“Come with me to visit *Off Earth*.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“No one has, its mine. It’s deep within the earth itself. Some people think the world will explode but I know that man will die out long before that. There is a disease coming and I know I can save people but only the best. Whoever survive have to be worth saving.”

“To regenerate the world?

Daniel gave a smirk at this crazy man. However Parry just frowned, he had heard this kind of answer before.

“Bloody hell no, so that we can leave the earth and find life somewhere else. We need to prepare, be ready to take over and leave when the time is right.”

He looked so earnest, Daniel thought the old man might be telling the truth.

“Give it a try, why don’t you I will make it worthwhile.”

Daniel looked at himself in the mirror as he straightened his tie. He wondered why he had thought about the conversation today; then realised it was only nerves. As he stepped out of his room he
spotted another man leaving his room, then another. They all walked slowly up the pristine corridor, all a little nervous; for today was *Off Earth* day.
James and Connor took a look at the world, and tried to find their place in it.

‘There,’ said James eventually, pointing at the globe – somewhere along the coastline of North America.

‘Where is that?’ Connor asked, matter-of-factly. ‘New York?’

‘Boston,’ James corrected.

‘What’s in Boston, then?’

James simply shrugged. ‘Family. My father studied classical music at Berklee, you know. Did I ever tell you he played for Rachmaninoff?’

‘You did,’ Connor replied, rolling his eyes.

James sniffed. ‘What about you?’ he asked, nodding at the globe.

Connor walked around to the other side of it, and reached out to point at Australia. ‘Here, I suppose. Perth.’

‘Why Australia?’ James asked.

‘It’s as close to an antipodes as I’ll get, if you’re in Boston.’

James sighed. ‘You don’t have to be on the complete other side of the world,’ he said gently.

‘Don’t I?’ Connor bit back, almost growling. ‘Come on already, let’s divide up the rest.’

‘Connor...’

‘I need Ireland, obviously. You won’t be missing much, it’s just hills, cliffs and sheep mostly.’

You might as well take the rest of North America. I don’t have any attachment there.’

‘This is ridiculous.’

‘I’m having Paris,’ Connor carried on. ‘You’d love it. There’s this bookshop called Shakespeare and Company with all these crooked shelves and low ceilings. It’s mine now, though.’

James shook his head, irritated. ‘Fine. Shall we do this? I’ll have Alaska. Don’t worry, you won’t stumble upon me there by accident – you can only fly or sail there.’
Connor looked up from France, curious. ‘Why?’

‘There are no roads to the capital city. You travel to Juneau, and your first sight of it will either be from sea, or from above.’

For a moment Connor looked like he might fight for Alaska, but he backed down. ‘Fine, have it. Do you want the North Pole, or the South Pole?’

‘Connor, I’m never going to either.’

‘I don’t care where you go, James. I just don’t want our paths to cross, that’s all. That’s why we’re doing this.’

James closed his eyes, and took a breath. ‘Did I really hurt you that much?’

Connor put his hand on China, and pushed. The globe span so fast it almost fell over. ‘Fuck you for even asking that, James.’ As the world span, he grabbed a marker pen from a table nearby.

When he realised what was about to happen, James held out a hand. ‘Don’t,’ he said, as if it would actually hold Connor back. As if he had any effect on his friend anymore.

Connor held the nib to the globe, and a line was drawn across the world. ‘That’s yours,’ he said, pointing at one jagged half. ‘The rest’s mine.’

As Connor walked away, a librarian called out in horror. ‘Young man, what have you done? Don’t you realise that globe is library property?’

‘I’ll pay for any damage,’ James replied, feeling that he already had.
Only One Careful Owner by David McVey

The prospective buyer felt that he’d already seen enough of the showroom. It was a bright, modern building with glass walls and ceilings; the display areas were laid out according to a cunning design that played with light and space. Whatever price you end up paying, he thought, you’ll be paying for this place.

In each display space there was a replica of a planet, too small for any life to be visible. The salesman, oily and persuasive, sang the praises of each one, but to the buyer they all seemed too big or too small. Some had the wrong proportion of oceans or aesthetically unpleasing continental outlines.

The salesman showed him into another display space. A model of a blue-green planet hung before them. It felt warm in this room and there was a whiff of smoke from somewhere. The salesman handed him a brochure to skim through. He turned to the salesman and said, ‘This is a used planet, then?’

‘Yes, it’s a trade-in,’ said the salesman. ‘The first owner didn’t like the way it turned out.’

‘Why? What’s wrong with it?’

‘Oh, very little. Nothing, nothing at all, really. The structure, the geology and hydrology, they’re all sound. It’s very fertile, for one thing. Most of it. And its ecosystems are flourishing, er, up to a point.’ An evasiveness had crept in, a holding back rather than the usual pouring forth of sales talk.

‘Tell me what the problems are, then,’ said the prospective buyer. The time had come for directness.

‘Oh, there aren’t any problems. Not really. It was just the dominant species,’ said the salesman, ‘Turned out to be naughty boys and girls. Bit of pollution and that sort of thing. Climate’s gone a little wonky…’ The salesman grew to be aware that his tone had changed and tried to shift back to being upbeat. ‘Of course, any little irregularities are reflected in the price.’

The prospective buyer paused and stroked his chin. This example wasn’t quite what he’d been looking for, but a used planet certainly had its attractions, not least in saving money on the initial purchase. Yet with this one there seemed just too much baggage, too much history. If there was
pollution and climate change to sort out, the required refurb work would probably be forbiddingly expensive.

He looked at the slow-revolving blue-green replica again and hardened his heart.

He turned to the salesman and asked, ‘Have you got the same thing in red?’
I returned to the McDade six months ago for the grand opening of the refurbished exhibition gallery.

I asked then about the globe, whether they still had it, perhaps in storage? No one knew. Everyone was high on champagne.

I explored the new space, looking for him in corners, but he wasn't there.

I wrote a letter of thanks expressing positive comments about the upgrade. I enquired again about the fate of that pinned earth, immobile despite its metal axis.

* 

Back then, I thought it odd that he didn't invite me to a local pub or choose one of those glossy new wine bars in town; the wine served in chunky carafes straight from France.

“I'll see you outside the McDade, shall I?”

He was decisive. I liked that about him.

I chose a black suit and tie and felt ill-at-ease beside his informal attire; his face, framed by the white polo neck, left my mouth dry.

He had recently returned from Greece having spent the summer on a dig in Naxos, the last before his finals.

Contemplating that scatter of islands, I must have searched my mind for a snippet of mythology, might have confessed how I copied Byron, badly, yet my memory of that time is wondering why his face seemed so pale. The daily glare of the Greek sun ought to have left its trace.

His thoughts poured freely, without effort; all I remember is imagining whether his hidden skin was burnished; if the fur on his arms had lightened.

I thrust my hands into my pockets, mirroring him. The tie at my throat seemed to constrict so I avoided his earnest gaze; to release the wobble in my voice would betray me.

He turned his attention toward me, a searchlight seeking out life.

“Do you suppose that by suspending the sculpture from the ceiling, it would have more impact on the viewer?”

“Yes.”

That was all I could say. Failure danced in my guts. He was kind; benign.

He got a first.

The last time I saw him was in the heady days of graduation week, our studies complete and our
plans in flux.

“How are you?” he chimed, bright with beer and success.

I grinned, puppet like, and made a wooden comment of no consequence.

* 

Perhaps the McDade should re-instate the globe. I like the idea of infatuated youths considering their limits, pondering over thoughts of a grand future.

This winter they host another event which I shall attend. I will wear a black suit and tie and I shall part my hair in that old style.

Should he be there, I must not be shy. I will unravel those long slept desires and reveal all of how I once loved him.

I received a response from the McDade, courteous and grateful, to my letter. They are sad to report that the globe is no more; a crack in Antarctica had spread ever upwards, rendering it unsafe.
Travel plans by Craig Anderson

From my desk in the foyer, I could see and hear the rain hammering down from the grey sky against the floor-to-ceiling windows at the front of the archive building. Every time someone came in the door, the wind would blow all my paperwork around. Fortunately, on that particular day, visitors were few, and the current exhibition in the area to my left – Scots Around the World, with its centrepiece of a person-high globe – had been idle all morning, only a few staff coming back and forth.

Turning round to look back into the open-plan office area behind me, to see if anything was going on there, I saw Steve, one of the archivists, brush away his sandwich crumbs from his desk, and stand up to walk out into the foyer. As he passed me, he nodded at me. Sometimes he would stop and chat, but this time, he caught sight of Jane, who works with medieval manuscripts, standing looking at the globe with her arms crossed. The two of them must have been together a few years by now. Steve smiled as he walked over to her, and kissed her on the back of the head.

"I've told you before not to do that when we're at work, Steve," she said, without turning round. She sounded a little irritable.

"I know. I'm sorry. You know, when I look at that globe, it always makes me think about getting away from this place and just going away somewhere."

She had her back to me, but I imagined that she rolled her eyes at that. She often did when she thought that Steve was getting carried away on one of his "flights of fancy". "It doesn't make me think of anything, except that we have work to do."

"We could do it, you know. I wasn't cut out for this kind of work."

"You couldn't. It's all just dreams, no practical plan. It's just -" she paused, looking for the right word "- childish." She turned away and strode off without looking back.

At her last word, Steve stood dead still for a moment, and then walked back towards my desk looking thoughtful. "Back to work is it then, Steve?" I asked him, trying to smile as if I hadn't been overhearing the conversation.

He stopped and looked at me with a puzzled expression as if he hadn't understood and didn't know who I was or where he was. Then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his eyes and smiled. "No," he said. "I'm taking some time off. I don't know when I'll be back." Then he turned away and walked out of the building, not breaking his stride when he dropped his staff card in the bin by the door, almost casually. Outside, the clouds were breaking, and the sun was coming out.
Love her, Kill her by Jenna Millar

The Earth: 510,900,000 square kilometres of surface; 361,000,000 square kilometres of sea; 149,000,000 square kilometres of land. That’s 149,000,000 square kilometers of land that she could be. Where? I do not know. However, I do know I will find her and when I do…I will kill her!

Susan Johnson is not someone to be messed with: innocent by name, guilty by nature. She seems like the classic 50’s housewife, maybe a little sassier, but she is definitely no typical housewife. She is a devil, but the most beautiful devil I have ever seen. Her porcelain face is caressed by bright, red curls and as red as her hair is her cherry lips, and might I add her kissable, cherry lips. Susan has sharp, green eyes like a snake, a poisonous snake. I think I might love her, but I have to kill her whether I like it or not.

“Phillip, are you there?” K sounded worried as he shouted in my ear.

“Yes, yes sir. Have you located her yet?”

“We have found her in Zakynthos. It is a small island of the coast of Greece. She thinks nobody will find her there, but she is very, very wrong,” he laughed loudly, startling me. He reminded me of an evil mastermind, forgetting that we, in fact, are the good guys.

We conferred a while about my mission before I hung up the telephone. I then prepared myself for my flight. Being in the C.I.A, I have been on an aeroplane many times, but I still get a thrill flying through the clouds, feeling the rush.

10 and a half long hours later I arrived in Greece. I then had to take a boat to the island. I felt a drip of cold sweat fall down my cheek. I usually don’t get nervous or sick while working on a case. It may sound like a cliché but it was as if I was love sick. Understandable because I’m sure anyone would feel sick if they had to kill the woman they love.

Zakynthos is a small island; I could walk around the perimeter in a few hours. So it was obvious I would find Susan. The real question is: did I really want to find her?

I did my duty and located Susan. Watching her from a far I got an ache in my heart. I felt as if I was having a heart attack. If I killed her a part of me would die too. Was it worth it? Could I do it?

Sand seeped into my black leather shoes as I walked on the beach to get closer. Susan glowed under the hot sun in her two piece bikini: red hair, red lips and soon to have red blood dripping from her head. Legs apart, one eye closed, arms out reached: I prepared myself. The hot sun beat on me like my heart. I rested my finger on the trigger looking at my lover.

BANG! My heart stopped…hers continued.
I remember when we were young and he said he wanted the whole bright world. We knew it was impossible, but he wanted it anyway and I thought I understood. He said he wished never to be still and he wished to see it all. He said he wanted everything with it, the whole of experience, and didn’t we all deserve just that? Isn’t that the point of being here, if ever there is a point? He made sense then, as only the young can do.

We were together maybe a year and I loved him, like he was part of me. His name was Kit and I should’ve known I was just a notch on his bedpost, just one more experience to be chalked up and ticked off. But the thing is, it was different for me. I wasn’t like him. I wasn’t looking for much and was just happy to be living, so long as Kit was there with me. And Kit loved me, he did, and I thought love could change him. When he left, the colour fell out of my world.

We’d met at a party. He was trying different drinks, looking for new tastes, not necessarily things he liked, just new. We got to talking and Kit said I was pretty. No one had ever said I was pretty before. He said he liked my suit and my tie and he kissed me, and I let myself be kissed, and we were two men in the middle of a dull party and we were kissing. It was 1972 and back then men didn’t kiss where they could be seen.

After that we moved in together, a one bedroom apartment up on Queen’s Street. Kit thought it was funny, the name of the street, like we were the world’s joke and he didn’t care. I was giddy with his attention and his ‘every day something new’ and his open surprise at all things; I thought he was the one. And then he said how he wanted the world and everything in it. I said I wanted it too, and I thought we could have it together. But that wasn’t what he meant.

He is old now. We both are. Really old. Back in 1972, I thought he was the one; some days I think so still. He walks with a stick now and he talks to himself in words that are all spit and the misshape of sounds. I see him sometimes, sitting on a bench in the park. Never in the sun. He sits in the rain or the wind and the park is empty around him. I sit with him, for old time’s sake. And I take his hand in mine, stroking it like it is a small sick pet. And I tell him stories about places that are far away and he nods and he smiles. And it’s like I’m gifting him pieces of the world that he wanted once so badly.
Isolated Together by Fergus Reid

“I’m sorry, Alex,” I’d say, “I’ve got some bad news for you.”

No, that doesn’t work. All I’m doing there is building up tension.

“Alex...” I’d stare at the ground, “you’ve got cancer.”

That’s even worse; it’d hit him like a bullet. Take a deep breath. This isn’t about you, it’s about him. It’s the biggest news he’ll ever hear in his life, you’re just the messenger. Stop being so selfish. You’re always like this, he’s sitting there, wondering, worrying, panicking.

“Doctor...” he mumbled, “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” my eyes snapped to his, “I’m fine, it’s just-”

“It’s just what?”

“You’ve got cancer, okay! It’s boring into you, tearing you apart. You’ll be dead within the month. There! Happy now?” Stand up. Start to cry. Leave the room.

Yes, he’s sitting there. Maybe he’s shocked, I don’t know. I’m the one that’s left the room, walking down the barren, lifeless corridors. I turn the corner and two nurses hurry past me with a stretcher, a dishevelled figure reaches towards me with a withered hand. Walk, turn, walk, turn, I’m at reception.

Jill looks up from her desk, opens her mouth, then watches me pass her by. Out of the hospital. Except I can’t leave.

I stand there in front of the door. I have two options: I can stay here, I can go and see what’s happened to the poor boy. He’ll be with another doctor by now, I’ll be speaking to John instead. Telling him how I couldn’t sit there and watch a stranger cry. I’ve got a heart, you can’t sack a doctor for that John. I’d used that heart to leave him to an empty room.

The other option: I leave the hospital and I go to the park, I go for a drive, I go home.

“You look terrible,” Steven would say, “bad day at work?”

“Worst day of my life, Steven. I had to tell somebody else he had cancer.”

I stand in front of the door, my heart rising and falling slowly within me. I give a robotic turn and stride back past reception. Walk, walk, turn left, turn left, walk. ‘In event of emergency,’ the fire alarm says, ‘break glass’. So I do as I’m told.

One hour later I’m standing there, in John's office.

“What is it, Alice?” he sighs, “Can’t you see I'm busy?”

“I thought you’d want to talk to me.”

“I’ll want to talk to everyone. Once this chaos has died down. Every one of the patients, every one of the staff. Hell, I’ll probably have to talk to the visiting relatives. Or...” he paused, a suspicious glare flickering across his face, “Is there something special about you?”

“No,” I gulped, hoping he’d mistake my nerves for generalised discomfort, “Nothing at all.”
Maps of the Old Places by Eva Stalker

‘This is what it looked like, once,’ Smith says to me. ‘My father swears it did.’
We are standing in the reception area of his father’s company, watching the globe revolve in the middle of the floor. There are countless little fragments of land, crumbs of it, and vast rough-hewn continents. And, at the top and the bottom, masses of white terrain that aren’t yellow, green or blue like the rest.
‘What did we do with it all?’ I ask him.
‘I don’t know that they did very much with most of it,’ he says. He smiles and puts his hands in his pockets. ‘Or, rather,’ he says, ‘there were lots of deserts, long low plains. A lot of it was waste.’
I walk around it as it turns. Smith just lets me take it all in, stands there pleasantly while I wander over to a corner where another globe stands. This one is of our real world, shining and blue. Just like the image on the company logo. Beautiful in its own way: a world of small kingdoms. But now I see it’s a world of mountaintops. Mountaintops and missiles.
‘My father still has maps of the old places, you know,’ Smith says. ‘He keep things like that in the Institute. I can show you them if you like.’ He’s more restless now that I’ve had a good look. He’s eager to move on.
‘I don’t know,’ I say to him. ‘I know we’re different now, but it’s funny seeing it.’
‘I’ve known it all since I was a boy,’ he says. A silence grows between us. I remember I need to be careful about what I say. Too easy to forget. Smith is too much like a child.
The clouds change above us in the atrium and sunlight bleaches the room. I follow Smith as he leads us past the entry desk and over to the stairs.
‘My favourite is a place that was full of boats anyway,’ he says. ‘It was one of the first to flood - it was so flat, you see. It was one of the first cities to go.’
‘Full of little boats,’ I say.
‘Yes,’ says Smith. ‘And pretty little houses and canals.’ He grins at me.
‘I’m sure it worked out fine for them,’ he says. ‘I’m sure they all just rose up and sailed away,’ he shouts. ‘I’m sure it was no problem at all.’
Far Away and Somewhere Else by Shelley Day Sclater

He carved a house out of a giant bar of soap and lived there happily until the rains came and washed it all away. Never did a cleaner man lament the dissolution of a home. Never did a more hopeful man set sail for the faraway shores of somewhere else. He found queues, dammit. He had to wait. His life was one long wait. Most days he spent leaning against the big flat window of the Starbucks on Buchanan Street.

A sorry sight, some say, shaking their heads. How come They get like that? Now you just tell me how it is they let themselves get that way.

Some smile weakly – such a Waste - as they pass through the swinging door and out onto the busy street, already sipping from their cardboard cups with plastic lids, seemingly in a hurry; he’d never understood that need to be in such a hurry. His head moves along with them, his eyes track their feet, see all manner of feet hit hit hitting the pavement in rhythm, with purpose, intent, deliberation. They pass him, and he knows the precise spot where their steps will start to slow, the hurry gone. And like they’re recovering from being winded, their shoulders rise and drop, big new breaths audible then dissolving. They’re back in their lives.

Mostly though he’s invisible, as transparent as the sneering Starbucks’ glass that doesn’t even throw his reflection back. People on the other side are different. Look at them on the inside drinking lattes chatting smiling tapping away on laptops frowning into mobiles eating cupcakes hugging. But for the glass, he’d be rubbing shoulders with that one there with the tousled hair.

Oh, it was cold that winter. Yes yes, you’d known it colder, but this was different. This was cold that made your bones spikey as though already stripped of flesh. The sleeping bag was useless, worse than. You’d even piss yourself on purpose for the warmth of it, for the stinking comforting wet warmth of it.

Did you survive that winter? Something did, you’re not sure what. When someone shook you by the shoulder and asked your name, you genuinely forgot questions of that sort required answers.

Anyway you didn’t know the answer. You thought they were offering you a dog and you shook your head then closed your eyes.

Early morning thick winter morning on Buchanan Street, barely light, puddles iced, cracking with the wheels of wagons coming to unload, engines left running, diesel fumes. Off the back of a low-loader, the world arrives in a large cardboard box: ‘Main Bulk,’ ‘Fragile,’ and ‘This Way Up,’ in great big red letters all over the sides. Ah, but some fucker’s ignored the instructions, some clever fucker’s left the world upside down.
Another Earth by Jennifer Watson

The first thing you heard was the clock. A deafening, inexorable blow that reverberated across the dull tiled floor every second, a disturbance of the peace to which the everyday had somehow become accustomed. And no one ever seemed to give it any mind; no one ever seemed to notice.

Two figures entered, polished shoes hitting the floor with a confident stride, adding to the unheard noise which naturally evaded the young woman browsing shelves to the left of the lobby.

The first figure span on his heels as he passed her by, walking backward as his eyes lingered on her frame for a moment before he continued toward his destination. Hers, of course, did not leave their original object of interest.

“Unbelievable”, the second figure muttered as he hurried along, coming to an eventual halt beside his companion.

“And here she is”, said companion announced, hands gesturing to the globe before him as if he had somehow conjured it from thin air, “here’s the lady in question”.

“Yes”, the second figure countered, “I have seen it before. It’s fairly well known.”

“Well, to us, yes” he replied easily, walking around the circumference of the globe with a learned familiarity, his eyes lingering over the dispersed continents with a suggestion of awe at odds with his cavalier manner, “but what about in a hundred years? Two hundred? Three? Then it won’t be quite as well known, just a footnote in the history books”.

“You can’t really believe that”, his friend responded, the incredulity of his voice fashioning his words into a statement rather than a question.

“Oh I can”.

“No”, he reaffirmed, “you can’t. I mean, you really think nothing has been learnt from this?” His hands extended toward the planet before them in exasperation, the grey tweed of his suit sleeves rising up his arms as he pointed directly before him, to what was unquestionably there. “It’s where we began. We’ve named monuments after it, we teach it in schools, they’ve even commissioned a new part of the syllabus which will deal exclusively with the causatives of the crisis, what actually triggered the need for relocation”.

The first figure smiled wryly. “And what will that be called?”, he asked with mock bewilderment, “Class 101: How not to fuck up your planet beyond viable repair”.

“I’m serious”.

“I know”.

“It won’t be forgotten. We’ve built a great bloody model of it in the middle of a public library haven’t we?” The second figure looked toward the globe, as if challenging it to magically disappear from view.

“Bad example I’m afraid”, came the response, “I mean, how many things stored in libraries do you
think we’ve forgotten about? How many histories are cloaked in the dust of time passed?”

“This won’t be”.

“Perhaps, perhaps not”, the first figure acceded, “but if you want my opinion, someday soon this planet will just be another earth, another crisis of causatives”.

Regardless, the second figure thought, an hourglass had been turned.
Stan and Eddie are bored. They’ve been hanging around this place for hours it seems. They are lifelong friends as they grew up in the same neighbourhood, but lately they’ve not been seeing eye-to-eye. Over a woman called Lottie. They were at that age. She truly was a wondrous creature.

The receptionist was taking people’s details at the mahogany desk. It wouldn’t be long until Stan and Eddie’s turn. They turned to look again at the model of Earth. Where would they go they thought? They spun the model around, ignoring the tutting of the receptionist at the desk. Stan had always wanted to go to America. It offered endless possibilities. However, Eddie was drawn to Europe. The thought of discovering different countries and meeting various nationalities was appealing. The company were keen for them to go together but it was a difficult choice. They had been friends since childhood and had done everything together but they couldn’t decide where to go. Also, there was the problem of Lottie. Perhaps someone else would catch her eye when they were gone.

They both stood there in the waiting room, staring at the model. Neither of them wanted to make a decision. The other people gathering in the room were watching them intently. Where would they choose? It was such a dilemma and Stan and Eddie didn’t like dilemmas. They just liked their simple life at home, growing up, going to school, finding jobs and then the girl of (both) their dreams, Lottie.

By now, more and more people had arrived in the room and panic started to set in. They had to make a decision soon or the company wouldn’t be sending them anywhere. It was almost time to go. They stared at the model again. Stan looked at Eddie and Eddie looked at Stan. They were such close friends from childhood and had kept an eye on each other through school and university that they couldn’t bear to be separated. What if they never saw each other again? They were sure that in their new roles they wouldn’t have time to travel to each other’s location, they would be so busy settling in. They couldn’t bear this dilemma. The receptionist was calling their names over the public address system. It was time for them to check in. The two friends looked at each other again, willing one another to make the final decision. But you see, Stan and Eddie were not ordinary workers flying off to new countries. They were visitors from a distant world and were deciding what part of this intriguing green and blue planet to travel to. But they wouldn’t be alone. They would be joining the thousands of others who had gone on before them. The other passengers were now heading for departures to join the flight. But, in the end, Stan and Eddie decided to stay, continue fighting over Lottie and just have a nice cup of tea instead.
On my first day back at work I was cleaning the floor with a mop, zig-zagging down the corridor that led to the archives. The mop suddenly tugged away from me – one of the strips of cloth had snagged on a cracked floor tile. The crack ran through the grey tile horizontally, jagged and uneven like a bolt of lightning.

When I finished my shift for the night, I wrote a note for my boss, Mrs MacKinnon, to let her know about the broken tile. I nudged the piece of paper under the gap below her office door.

I forgot all about the cracked tile until I was cleaning the next night. There was an extra vibration through the mop handle as I swiped it from one wall to the other. I looked down at the crack: it was thicker than the day before – the thickness of a marker pen instead of a pencil point.

Across the next three nights, the crack widened further. Each night I’d question why it still hadn’t been repaired. Maybe they’d run out of replacement tiles? Maybe the maintenance man was on holiday?

On my walk home after the Friday shift, I counted cracks in the pavement: twenty-four. So many things needed fixing, I guessed.

Inside my flat, I navigated my way through bags of my son’s stuff piled up in the hall and headed into the kitchen. I picked the sole clean spoon out of the cutlery drawer and used it to eat the last of the food in my fridge across the weekend. I watched old films through the night and slept through the day.

I left the flat for work on Monday evening. The first thing I did when I got in the building was check the cracked tile. From the other end of the corridor I could see it hadn’t been fixed: the broken pieces were slightly upturned, as though something was pushing them up from below.

Just before 5pm on Tuesday, I went to Mrs MacKinnon’s office to catch her on her way out of work.

Excuse me... Sorry, I was just wondering if you’d gotten my note?

I haven’t got time to talk about this just now Judy. I have to get home.

It’s just... it’s dangerous.

Mrs MacKinnon sighed.

Okay, show me it.

It’s just down here, I said. Mrs MacKinnon’s heels clacked against the tiles as she walked behind me. We got to where the cracked tile was.

They fixed it, she said.

I knelt down. The broken pieces had been smoothed out and sealed together with cement.

They fixed it, I whispered. Tears fell from my face onto the tile. The fresh cement absorbed them.

Judy, I think you should have taken more time off after Adam’s passing. Go home tonight. Don’t come back until you’re better.

Better? I asked. I looked upwards – she was out of sight, but I could still hear the clack of her heels on the cold grey tiles.
I am Special. I am Important. I am Perfect.

As a child, the world was an innocent place and I was cherished by my family. Life had something special in store for me. I was going to do something important with my four score and ten. The country was at peace; war was something that used to happen. Only grandparents remembered the meaning of sacrifice.

At first school was great, everyone was small and teachers were supportive. Learning was easy. Soon the girls began to “change” and boys got bigger. I could no longer blend in and my own growth spurt which would restore parity never came. As the smallest in my year it felt like the end of the world. As a result, I was picked on. Work suffered. The teachers became angry and lost patience. I started to lose interest. The small sensitive boy with the world at his feet was shrinking into self imposed obscurity. Simultaneously, rumblings of war started to grow, the threat creeping towards my little corner of the world.

Then one day the Government men arrived. The van which accompanied them was unloaded. A large crate was taken inside. An hour later students were called to the Assembly Hall. We were asked to stand and a man walked up and down. He stopped in front of me. “You’re very special, we have something important that needs done and you’re perfect.” The hall now empty, I was led towards a large metal tube. I could see indentations on its side which were footholds leading to a hatch. “It’s cramped in there, you’ll need to stand. Look up, you’ll see a lever. We want you to pull down and hold it in place.” The hatch was a tight fit but I managed to wriggle through, twisting into a standing position. With no room to move once in place, I was barely able to look up but there was the lever. Holding my breath I contorted and reaching up with my right hand, grasped the handle. It was stiff but pulling with all my might I was able to force it towards me. A red light flashed next to my eye. I could see the word ARMED stencilled across it. “Well done, you can come out now”.

Later that afternoon, sitting in the headmaster’s office, the significance of what I’d done was explained. Declaration of war was imminent. It was important my country got the first strike in. The metal cylinder was the command pod of a missile which would destroy the Capital of our enemy, wiping out their Government and their ability to wage war. To avoid detection it needed to be armed just before striking its target. This required a human bombardier. Someone small enough to fulfil this important role. Someone willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the people of their country and who would always be remembered as a hero.

I am Special. I am Important. I am Perfect.

I will win the war.
“How long do you think it would take to install the system around the Granite City, Jeff?” They stood imagining the installation at a very small point on the entire ecosystem. “It is by no means a small project Brian, but I reckon it would take somewhere between five and eight years.”

Jeff had been studying engineering at Harvard when he first contemplated the idea. Others had him down as a ‘loose cannon’ – a psychon(a)ut with incomplete ideas which disregarded the consequences; but for Brian there was no one with more talent for innovation than Jeff and, after all, who could really know consequences? Jeff was finely tuned to a condition in which it became obvious to him – imperative even – where next to go. His colleagues at Harvard had once accredited him with ‘actively manifesting the untainted resonance of the creative will of the universe itself!’ Indeed, wherever Jeff went it appeared to be the case that things happened, remarkable things, brand new things. Jeff had the ability to change the world and Brian ... was convinced.

“We’ll have to build the turbines, Brian, but after that it is the installation that will take the time... although, for a project of this magnitude five to eight years is a quick delivery, and the benefits will speak for themselves, Brian.” Jeff stood there piercing Brian with his gaze, anticipating his favourable response. “Yes, well, we have put a man on the moon after all Jeff!”, said Brian. “Clean air and regular sunshine during the hours of daylight will put us right on the map – it’s what the city’s been waiting for.”

The two looked on at the large model blue marble. It was as if Jeff was staring directly out of the sunlight itself as he imagined his vision becoming reality. He had seen each giant, steel, claw-like triangular prism rising up from the green grass, three in total at equilateral points around the city’s circumference extending skyward. Each would be a landmark in itself, an item of beauty on which people would marvel for eons to come.

“Today will be blue sky and high pressure in the city, but not too high, probably around 27 degrees Celsius”, Jeff mused at his wife’s excitement, her cheekily bouncing about as he had described the project to her. “This is so surreal”, she would say, her smile half hypnotic, her demeanour loosely ecstatic.

For Jeff, the colours were brighter; the things around him had their own individual significance, their own story to tell. Jeff’s eye was close to time, close enough to see its direction. After abandoning his preoccupation and idling, he was faced with an arising in which, individually, wherever he might be, there unfolded possibilities which would extend far beyond anything banal, anticipating the way ahead like the very tentacles of life itself. “The source”, he would say, “has many designs.”

Brian knew this was it for him; his stamp on the city, his great accomplishment, the prospect was enormous.
The Society for the Study of Earth by Vicky MacKenzie

George and Hector stood in the foyer of the Society for the Study of Earth. The day’s lectures had just finished and everyone was leaving, but Hector was pacing restlessly.

‘I’m just so excited!’ he told his friend. ‘I can’t believe I actually begin my journey to Earth tomorrow!’

George smiled patiently. ‘It’s a special day - for you and for all of us here at the Society. This trip’s been a long time in the planning: think of how many books and articles you must have read about Earth and her fascinating creatures. Now you’ll get to see it for yourself. It’s a real privilege. Many of us would love to be in your place.’

‘Oh, I know how lucky I am to be chosen. And everything’s ready, there are no more final preparations. But I can’t relax! I feel so jumpy, I wish I could concentrate on something, some final piece of research, but I’m all over the place.’

‘Let’s go and look at the globe one last time - there’s something wonderful about studying a map and travelling across it in your imagination.’

They crossed the wooden floor and stood beside the globe, their hands jammed into their pockets so they weren’t tempted to touch it. The globe was very old and protected by an invisible halo of inert gases.

‘Incredible - such a small planet and such a slim chance that life could develop there. Not like our lush solar system with thousands of inhabitable planets. Yet the diversity of life that developed on Earth was astounding. It makes us look a bit samey, don’t you think George?’

‘Hmm, maybe. Though you and I look pretty different. Hey, remember when that visiting speaker came to the Society and gave a talk on Homo Sapiens? We all thought he was crazy, claiming that the species that created libraries with millions of books’ worth of knowledge was the same species that destroyed it all. But later research showed he was almost spot-on: Homo Sapiens actually evolved into Homo Destructus. What strange creatures they must have been.’

‘Strange, and not a little dangerous - highly prone to violence. Do you have the zapper ready in case you meet any live ones?’

‘That’s hardly going to hap-‘

‘Yes, yes, I know it’s unlikely. As far as we can tell they all died in the massive nuclear war that came about because they got rid of their literary heritage and forgot history - I’ve been to the lectures too! But you just never know, some of them might have miraculously survived and adapted to the radiation. You can’t be too careful.’

‘Don’t worry so much - I’ve got the zapper and enough ammunition to neutralise ten billion of them if necessary. But our detectors haven’t picked up a whisper of life on Earth for over ten thousand years. There’s nothing to worry about.’
Listening Skills by Lynne Williams

I was taken aback by the incongruity of the situation. The sobbing and the location did not fit together. Boo-hooing in the Institute was not expected. Perhaps it was not allowed. I would to check the regulations once I had finished the inter institute loan request.

The young men enquiring at my desk looked uncomfortable too. I could see they were trying to ignore the noise. “Nice weather today”, the one wearing horn rimmed spectacles said. I agreed as I continued searching the microfiche for the periodical they had requested.

Once they had gone I got up to investigate the noise. After all a person in distress was surely more important than a document request?

I was shocked to find the source of the commotion. Peter Fanthorpe-Smith was one of our most respected newcomers. Always debonair, a high flyer in his white polo necked sweaters and neat slacks. I found myself quite attracted to him, but not in his present state.

He was alone staring at the model of the world which stood on its pedestal in the foyer. I remembered seeing him talking to the Chief Exec a few moments earlier.

“What on earth has happened Mr Fanthorpe-Smith?” I asked as he blew his nose loudly into a neatly ironed hanky.

“What has happened Margaret is that I have failed!” he replied.

“Surely not! You don’t look like a failure to me Peter.” I said trying to comfort him. I hoped he didn’t mind me using his first name.

“But I am,” he answered.

He continued to explain saying he had just finished presenting his project to the Chief Exec but that the Chief had not been impressed. The upshot of the meeting was that he had failed to get the funding he needed.

“Oh I am always trying but not succeeding” I replied “only this morning I failed to find a slide someone wanted for a presentation ... “ I stopped abruptly thinking maybe he wouldn’t be interested in my trivia. I returned to focus on his problems.

“What was your project about?” I asked. I had recently been on a staff training course and wanted to try out my listening skills.

“I don’t want to bore you with the detail Margaret,” he said “but basically it is about the shrinking world. I shall use the globe here to explain if you like.”

“But who would want to shrink the world?” I asked. “We need all the space there is!”
‘How was Bogota?’

They were standing in front of the model globe. Anderson could feel the slight chill of air-conditioning through his suit. Outside the muggy New York streets waited for him.

‘The arrangements were excellent as usual.’

‘And Señor Mendoza?’ Philips let the question hang in the cool air. He was close enough that Anderson caught a faint whiff of his cologne. He remembered the heat from the car bomb washing over him even from a safe distance. The plume of black smoke had stretched above the city streets like a crooked exclamation point confirming that Carlos Mendoza had ceased to exist.

‘Will no longer be a problem.’

‘And the authorities?’

‘Mendoza frequently criticised the drug lords so everyone assumes the Cartel did it. So far the press hasn’t made the connection to his campaign against foreign investment.’

‘Excellent,’ Philips turned to the younger man. ‘I believe there was some collateral damage?’

Anderson nodded.

‘Senor Mendoza’s wife and his daughter were also in the car.’ Ana Maria Mendoza had been just six years old. Her smiling, gap-toothed school picture had stared out at him from the front pages of the newspaper while he waited for his flight.

‘Unfortunate,’ Philips shrugged. ‘However, these things happen in our line of work.’ He smiled. ‘You’ve done well Jimmy. Your name is going to be heard by a lot of important people after this, you mark my words.’

‘It’s good to know that my work is appreciated.’

‘That’s the spirit Jimmy,’ Philips clapped him on the shoulder. ‘I have another assignment coming up if you’re interested.’

Anderson hesitated. He was exhausted after the Mendoza mission but perhaps keeping busy would be for the best under the circumstances.

‘What’s the job?’

‘Bit of a change from the last one,’ he rotated the globe. ‘How’s your Russian?’

‘Pretty good. I have a slight southern accent but not enough to make me stand out.’

‘Perfect.’ He reached into his inside pocket and handed over a small black box. It looked just like a regular Smartphone.

‘You can download more information via this once you leave here.’

‘Any other special instructions?’

‘You’ll need to pay a quick visit to the Lab before you go.’
‘The Lab? What for?’

‘This job needs to be a little less ...public shall we say, than your last one. The political situation is more delicate. We need this to look like natural causes. From what I gather the eggheads downstairs have concocted something using polonium to do the trick.’

‘Polonium?’

‘It’s a radioactive isotope. The effects won’t be immediate but they should be fatal in the long run. You’ll be completely safe of course.’

‘I see. Well, I’d best be get down there and make a start.’ He made as if to leave.


‘Mendoza’s family – I trust you aren’t being troubled by any pangs of conscience.’

He thought again of the photographs and shook his head. Conscience was a luxury.

‘Strictly business, Mr Philips.’
Hidden in plain view by Johannes Heinonen

Mr Harris studied the spot on the globe and turned to Mr Francis.
“An interesting proposition, Mr Francis. You have a brilliant theoretical mind, to be sure. But of limited practical consideration, I am afraid. What you suggest is, practically speaking, nonsense.”
“Well, you know, Mr Harris, I don’t really think so, with respect to your expertise of course. It is entirely possible that an ancient civilisation could have existed on the island, in isolation, without anyone from the outside ever noting its presence.”
“In theory, yes; in practice, no.”
“Why not?”
“Because the impact of humans on their environment is always visible, and no human population is satisfied to remain where it is; it always seeks to expand, to reach new horizons, to discover the undiscovered. Either they would have discovered another population, or they themselves would have been discovered by others.”
“But what if they couldn’t? I mean, what if they were so cut off from everything else and did not have the knowhow to build boats or ships or any other means to get there?”
“Then how would they have got there in the first place?”
“Perhaps their ancestors knew how to cross the sea, but that knowledge was lost over time. Perhaps their culture degraded their technological advancement and didn’t advance it? Or maybe the sea brought some terrible fear in them which made them never want to leave their island.”
“So why would others not have discovered them?”
“Evidence suggests that this area would have been prone to hurricanes and violent storms; perhaps no-one ever made it across.”
Mr Harris shook his head.
“Perhaps...perhaps...I hear interesting theories, but no evidence.”
“There is evidence, Mr Harris. An ancient manuscript which we have been unable to decipher.” He carefully rolled the parchment in his hand. “But see here; a drawing of a man, dressed in some kind of seal skin and feathers of a bird; and look – this mark on his forearm: a symbol we have never seen in any tribe or any drawing.”
“Interesting, no doubt. But not enough evidence.”
“Sir, if you will fund my expedition to the island, I am sure I can bring you more. I know there will be more.”
“You ask for faith in you and this little story of yours. I say no. Good-day, Mr Francis.”
Mr Francis watched the older man leave, and shook his head sorrowfully.
“All great discoveries require a leap into the unknown; if I hadn’t taken one, I would not be here,” he said quietly, his fingers massaging the strange symbol on his forearm, beneath his sleeve.
The crowd had thinned out somewhat since the function began, but several small groups of men and women remained, drinking wine and holding polite conversation. On the far side of the room, overlooking a large globe, stood an anthropologist and a poet. The two men had been chatting away for several minutes, finding one another’s company to be easy and amiable. As their introductions began to wind down, they shifted the focus of their conversation.

“So, your poetry. Are you working on anything right now?”

“I am indeed. I want to write something on the theme of death, so I’ve been exploring that quite a bit. Cheery, I know, but the mind wanders where it will, so that’s that as far as I’m concerned.”

“Cheery indeed! What started that train of thought off then?”

“Death in the family – extended family, anyway, so nothing major, but it just got me thinking about mortality in general.”

“Happens to us all in the end, I suppose. Very much worth thinking about. Plays a rather large part in my field too, of course.”

“Naturally. One day there’ll be no human race left to study.”

“Indeed, but that’s a different kind of death. Post-humanism, evolution, all that. Not quite the apocalypse.”

“Yet it’s the apocalypse we like to imagine. Almost like a metaphor for the end of our time.”

“You raise an interesting point, actually.”

“There’s great poetry to be found within that image. Picture it…”

*

A lifeless desert landscape, dimly lit by a dying sun. Humid, suffocating. The last surviving human being drops to his knees, and begins to crawl across the sands. He has no idea he's the last of his kind. His whole life has been one long struggle against an inevitable end, and it's catching up.

Think of all the trial. All the war, the conflict. The suffering felt by a thousand generations.

Think of all the joy. The triumph, the victory. Those moments of seeming invulnerability, defiance against all odds.

Think of all the beauty. The passion, the love. Every tender moment shared between companions.
Every bitter fight waged by rivals.

Every nightmare, every dream. Every hope and every aspiration.

The culmination of everything and everyone rides on his shoulders, and still he feels alone.

As his life starts to fade, he draws one last breath for humanity. It warms him inside, soothes his pain, and comforts his soul.

He holds on to it for as long as he can, until, at last, he breathes out...

Elsewhere, other species carry out their primal existences. The Earth continues to turn. Planets continue to orbit their suns. The great vastness and emptiness of space remains much the same.

Only now, if possible, the universe is more hollow than it has been for a very long time.

*

“You remind me of Shakespeare's Hamlet, you do. What then?” said the anthropologist to the poet.

“'The rest is silence.'”
HEAVY ODDS by Matthew Robertson

The demon dream again. A twenty kiloton man made sun explodes burning away the night. Nuclear heat turning everything precious into dust accompanied by chorus of screams from loved ones and just before the moment of my own obliteration I wake up drenched in sweat. Those wet broken sleep moments have occurred less as I have grown older. Like any good son, I blame my dad for the nightmare.

Pop was a respected lecturer at a university. When my mum was busy with her own teaching work I had to go with him and spend the day on the floor of his office. I would doodle away on to reams of paper, play with my toys and steal the cookies hidden in the secretary's desk drawer. It was the late sixties the space race was in its death throws but my imagination and my ten year old hand kept it alive by placing my most played with possession a metal rocket into orbit around a giant man made earth. It sat in a Lagrangian point in the hallway between dad's office and the giant lecture theatre where he delivered sermons of Knowledge to students.

Most families do not have a top secret, secret. My dad's job involved more than the parting of knowledge to young eager minds, it involved the more serious education of informing generals and leaders. He was a educator of Armageddon theory, global war games. His imaginative mind was also the breeding ground for theoretical nightmares. He weighed up heavy odds. Who would live what would survive. The time it would take to rebuild and the fate of the human race. He never saw me one time he addressed these architects of global destruction. They appeared on mass one day at the university, men in perfect military uniform. In the lecture theatre they sat like a congregation, looking up at my dad speaking from the podium. With a cookie in my hand I listened to the giant in my life deliver a tale of how the world would melt in the same voice he read bed time stories to me, and my furtive mind transcribed the horror. From that moment on I had the nightmare.

It was not long before my parents noticed I was not sleeping. After I told them about my nuclear nightmare my dad hugged me, and told me everything I had heard was just a small possibility. That if it did happen then it deserved to happen, because mankind couldn’t see past their politics and differences. My mum slapped my dad's head in exasperation of his less than comforting response. I continued to go with my dad to the university, I had no choice really. With the knowledge gleaned from those frightened nights I would sit in the shadow of the large model earth and knew it was a fragile thing hanging on a whim, and wished my rocket was big enough to carry me away.
Briefly escaping the hubbub of the business district, the besuited man stood in the quiet of the museum, contemplating a huge monochrome globe. Another smartly dressed man, sporting a ‘Tour Guide’ label on his lapel, sidled up and joined him above the Americas.

- ‘One of our most popular exhibits, this...’ came the tour guide’s ice breaker.
- ‘Yes, it’s a nice globe’, the man politely offered.
- ‘Oh, it’s not a globe, Mr McCrae. It is the world.’
- ‘Wait, how do you know my name?’
- ‘Small world, Mr McCrae, small world... Much like the rings of a tree show us past trees inside, this is just a younger version of the world we’re standing on... Bored out from inside.’
- ‘Ha, impossible! Using what, a giant apple corer?!’
- ‘You might laugh, but take us, for example – Human cells entirely regenerate themselves every seven years. Not one part of the you that lives and breathes, came out of your mother.’
- ‘If this was the actual world from tens of thousands of years ago, wouldn’t the continents still all be joined up? Before the seismic shift of tectonic plates separated them all?’
- ‘Who said anything about tens of thousands of years ago? This is our world from 1953.’
- ‘1953? Right... It was this small just sixty years ago, was it?’
- ‘Everything’s relative, Mr McCrae. You judge your height by the heights of those around you, do you not? Or by the heights of doorways. If everything expanded together, how would you notice?’
- ‘But there are plenty of people alive today who were around in 1953. How could they exist in this world and on that globe.’
- ‘It’s not a globe, Mr McCrae, please stop calling it a globe. It is the world. Just not one you’re willing to recognise anymore. Black and white too dull for you, is it?’
- ‘Alright then, so when did my dad stop living on that world and move onto this much bigger one?’
- ‘Always getting bogged down in detail, aren’t we? “How was it dug out? How did we move from one world to another?” It wasn’t an overnight switch, if that’s what you’re wondering. Your father has lived on that world and every other world since. Several decades of worlds that we haven’t yet excavated, either because we don’t have the machinery or we simply lack the museum space to display them. One day we shall have the space though, Mr McCrae. And this one right here will be on a keyring in the gift shop.’
A third blazered man appeared and asked Mr McCrae if he was here for the 2pm talk. When he turned to explain that he’d already been filled in plenty by his colleague here, thank you very much; he found himself pointing at thin air. Then, squinting at the globe he spotted the original tour guide, in miniature, talking to someone who looked not unlike his dad.
'A beaut, isn't she.'

'Sorry?'

'Look at her there. Makes you proud. Serve and protect, king and country and all that.'

'Sorry?'

'That globe. She's a beauty.'

'Ah. Couldn't see it for looking at it.'

'Isn't that the way. She reminds me why I got into this job. Makes it all worthwhile. Of course, they've scaled her down a bit, you could say. Like to see them fit the real thing in here! No,' he added, squinting upwards, 'the ceiling's much too low for that.'

'Much too low, I should imagine.'

'Still, you can see it all on here. There's where my lot are stationed. Prime location. Might not look much to the untrained eye from this angle.' He leaned in confidingly. 'But the coast is just lovely this time of year. If you've ever the time...just lovely! In fact, we were talking just last month in the Cabinet about knocking through this border here into the south. A bit of extra leg room never goes amiss, does it? And of course, facing the south, you'll get the sun all day.'

'You don't think the natives would mind?'

'Oh, I shouldn't think so. Not for too long. But everyone is entitled to their opinion, you could say. Anyway, can't be backward about being forward. Our military boys are the best negotiators in the world!' he winked. But added hastily, 'Ah, now – you're not a negotiator yourself, are you?'

'No. A delegate.'

'Goodness! Because it would be my last intention in the world to offend! I'm sure every negotiator thinks himself the best in his field.'

'High pressure, I imagine.

'Need to have a soft spot for the sound of your own voice to get along in a job like that. I'd find the whole business much too slow, I can tell you.'

'Speaking of business,' the delegate tried, 'I must be getting back.'

'Yes, too slow for me. Once you've got a taste of the Cabinet life...'

The Cabinet man sized up the globe. He could almost see over the top of it, with his shoes on. A good start.

'If you'll excuse me. I might have just heard my phone –'
'A real beauty. And the programme hasn’t shaped up too badly for this afternoon either. I must say, I am glad they haven’t got us voting on an empty stomach. I had a vote not two weeks ago, not strictly Cabinet business, a mid-morning affair, God knows what they were thinking, subjecting us to that kind of thing without a good lunch in us –'

'Ah, yes! Lunch already? In that case, I really should visit the bathroom beforehand. Good meeting you.'

'The pleasure's all mine. I'll save you a seat at the luncheon table. We'll be doing each other a favour. You can count on a hearty helping of awful bores at these things.' He craned his neck. 'A real beauty.' And he could always change into the shoes with the bigger heel after lunch.
From Leicester with Love by Martin Cathcart Froden

Leicester was once a grubby city. One without a town planning office. A city built more by coincidence than coordination. But not anymore.

'You're early.'
'You're late.'
'I was reading all night.'
'What?'
'Didn't you get the Cuthbert Report to read?'
'I did. I've trundled through all of them, The Jamieson Commission, the Underwood Committee, I know them. So do you. But this one, I just couldn't. There's more to life than this you know.'
'You're telling me this? Who went to the Night Owl last week and who stayed home?'
'She said yes.'
'Who?'
'Mona.'
'The ginger girl in the canteen? She's agreed to go out with you?'
'Not quite.'
'How long have you been standing here?'
'Half an hour, maybe more.'
'Doing what?'
'Going over this, I've got a school class visiting later on...

The UK Property Classification, main classes:

- A1: shops
- A2: financial and professional services
- A3: restaurants and cafés
- A4: drinking establishments
- A5: hot food takeaways
- B1: businesses (offices, light industry)
- B2: general industrial
- B8: storage and distribution
- C1: hotels
- C2: residential institutions
- C3: dwellinghouses
- D1: non-residential institutions (schools, libraries, surgeries)
... Also I’ve been trying to work out where to escape to if her dad finds out.’

'Peru looks nice. Remote.'

'She’ll be looking like this soon.'

'Like Peru?'

'Like a globe.'

'I see. Congratulations! So now what?’

'We’ve been doing some thinking.’

'And what did you come up with?’

'Can we borrow your car?’

'Maybe. Where are you going?’

'How far is Gretna Green?’

'Far.’

'Are you free on Saturday?’

'I never knew. I just thought you liked the canteen square sausage.’

'I do.’

'But you like Mona more.’

'I do. This is the plan. Straight after work we need to go to an A1, for a suit. Then an A4, impromptu stag, inevitably ending up in an A5. Then we’ll each go to our C3s.’

'Our parent’s C3s you mean.’

'That’s about to change too. I hope. There have been hints of a raise you know.’

'For those who finish Cuthbert.’

'I will. It’s just this has been on my mind. Will you be my best man? You should get to know Mona she’s great. Really funny.’

'Of course I will. It’ll be fun, also my uncle owns a C1 up in Blackpool. You should go there after.’

'So Saturday it is. Don’t be late.’

'I’ll be early.’