



Flash Fiction Competition 2014

Image 4 adult entries

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Green Eyes Of The Devil by Paul McDonald

When the devil arrives he arrives unannounced. I spoke with the witch doctor to arrange a meeting. My meeting was granted. 'All in fair time' says the witch doctor. I left without saying a word. The coal fire was blazing away but there was a sharp chill down my spine. As I was exhaling the icy air I turn to the shadows for comfort but the shadows held none. The shadows only conceal the devil. He steps out from the corner of the room and faces me. The fire flickers furiously. His eyes are green, revealing hell at the edges. I feel that should I stare for too long hell might take a shine to might and desire my company. For the first time in my life I'm in the company of evil personified. He's tall, thin and hideous beyond belief. He wears a full black suit, his face is long and sharp but pale like a corpse. I feel wickedness like I've never encountered in my life. Without a word, he urges me to speak. 'I asked for your company tonight and I'm glad you've arrived'. I say politely. 'You require my presence to bargain'. he says. A statement rather than a question. His voice is intensely deep and powerful. I've made a mistake calling him here. I fight the urge but turn to him and say 'you don't look how I imagined'. 'That is because I cannot be imagined. I walk the earth amongst you unnoticed. Evil is but a human term. There is no evil, only the desire to act upon ones will. Allow me to show you'. He reaches out and places his hand on my shoulder. I blink and I'm staring directly at myself. 'Do you see'? His voice comes out my mouth and I notice that we've swapped bodies. No sooner has he taken his hand from my shoulder when I've returned to normal. 'If I so desire then your body is my home'. He says chillingly. 'I'm nearing the end of my life and I don't want to go to hell'. I say pleadingly. 'The fact you have showed up to meet me shows me you might be willing to come to some sort of arrangement?' He draws me a look colder than death and sets out laughing amusingly. 'How can I possibly bargain with someone who has nothing I desire? My reason for arriving tonight is to bring you back with me.' As his words sink in, he moves like lightening drawing a razor across my throat unleashing an ocean of blood. As I collapse to the floor he crouches down looking straight into my eyes and says 'To see me is to see death. To feel me is to feel death. To travel with me is to know death'. My eyes grow heavy. The end is here.

Desperation by Eve Perelman

Sheltered and protected by an establishment called the Law, I am a man who hides. Pursued by demons; living in a Greenhouse.

The world watches me, chases me through nightmares of endless roads across docile landscapes. How has the world changed since my young eyes grew old. Have the eyes of the world always been upon me? They peer into my soul and I am unable to hide. Embarrassed by my actions, I fear them. I have seen their faces, but I do not know their names- yet they know mine.

These nightmares haunt me even in mornings when I awake. I feel strangers watching me; Big Brother where art thou? I am an insignificant being yet here they are, in their hate and agitation, chasing me through life. What have I done to you? You who watch over everyone and pass judgment: Have I failed your tests? These tests that have been thrust upon me, with no will to end. It has been so long since I have last slept without aids. The side effects of medication somehow outweigh them. Yet without them I cannot close my eyes. Dark shadows begin to form shape. They lay with me and wait, whispering incoherent words only my mind is able to comprehend. As much as I wish to shut them out I cannot. They creep closer, stroking my limbs until I am unable to feel my own body. They take over.

How soothing their voices are to reassure me that red skies are daybreak and that the glass walls I live in are shatterproof. Yet they do nothing to comfort the heat that lingers around me and suffocates. It takes my breath and mocks me. A glowing eye in sky brings me to my knees. How can I fight such power? One I cannot look directly at, cannot reach, yet can easily strip and break me down.

I am protected by those out to get me. Unable to escape from electric eyes. Empty faces are clerks in this bureaucratic world; they are blind. They cannot help me. Perhaps like me they are lost. Asleep without dreaming. Awake without living.

It is not too late for me. I have been corrupted and awakened to my demons, but I am close to escaping the judgments of the establishment. The only hiding place yet to be discovered. My new hiding place: Inside the eye.

SPECIAL COMMENDATION

'THE DEVIL'S MAYBE GOT ME IN HIS EYE' by D.R.D. BRUTON

Mama helps out at the church. She cleans up most days, dusting and sweeping. And on Sunday, early as sunrises or birdsong, she lays out the prayer books for morning service. I go with her sometimes and it's beautiful and quiet in the empty church and we talk in whispers as if we might be trespassing and mama makes me sit at the front till she's done.

When mama's out back talking with the minister, well, it's like there's just me and God there in the church. I can feel his eyes on me and I fidget uncomfortable in the seat and I put my hands into prayer shapes and I say the Lord's prayer under my breath.

After church I go with the other kids from the village. They think I'm stupid cos I talk with all my words broken on account of the hare-lip. They get me to say stuff, just so they can hear the word turned to mash in my mouth. 'Bugger' they tell me to say and 'shit', and worse than that. And the girls have to kiss me for a dare cos my kisses are misshaped too. And once, Big Col put a live frog down the front of my shorts and he dared anyone to fetch that frog back again.

Mary said it was a crying shame to do that to me. She stepped forward, pulled at the elastic of my shorts and slipped her hand easy inside. She was close enough I could smell the lemon soap on her skin and I could see the tiny hairs soft on her cheek and the splinters of amber in her blue eyes. She was concentrating, and the pink kitten-tip of her tongue was between her lips. Mary was close enough I could have kissed her and I wanted to and I nearly did.

She was fiddling with me more than the frog at first and I think that was the point and the boys were all laughing, and the girls screwed up their noses like there was a bad smell in the air, or their mouths were open like they might be catching flies. Then Mary pulled the frog out and just before she did she looked me straight in the eye and she said she was sorry for what they'd done.

Later that day, mama was putting the prayer books away and I was by myself in the dark behind the organ and I had one hand down the front of my shorts, fiddling and remembering what it was like when it was Mary's hand that was down there. Mama caught me and she slapped me about the head and she said I was about the Devil's business and she called on the minister to come say prayers over me.

And I reckon mama might be right about the Devil having me in his eye, cos it aint anywhere near as uncomfortable as having God's eye on me and that's the truth.

The Painting by Max Scratchmann

He had found the old painting whilst going through his mother's things in the misty, hard-to-remember days after the funeral, a crude and bloodshot eye on a background of flaking red gouache. And there was something oddly familiar about its stark and – well – intimidating simplicity. But what...

Idly he turned it over, and there, in his mother's neat hand, was the inscription, "Alan, age 9, 1967". Which was when it came back. The school art competition and his disappointment when the judges had passed him over in favour of Kirsty Sim's bland bowl of fruit with its neatly boring brushstrokes and twee Woolworth's frame. He hadn't even been given a favourable mention for his painting. Had he gone home in tears? He thought he had.

And Mum had been in the kitchen cooking some vile-smelling pot of mince and gravy browning for his dad's tea, and she'd patted and there-thered him and given him a caramel wafer. Then put the painting up on the kitchen wall – at a time and a place when parents didn't affix their kids' art to the refrigerator door. Hell, his old lady didn't even have a fridge in those days, when meat came in fresh from the co-op and the milk stood in the kitchen press to keep cool.

And he's been so proud of that painting, up there in the scullery, the red all bright and shiny then, not cracked like today. And Mum had asked him what it was called, and he'd *had* a title, but he couldn't remember it. Probably some awful pun out of the Dandy about eyeballs. Evil-Eye McPherson or some such thing. He was always trying to make up his own characters for the Dandy in those days. Always drawing.

But the painting hadn't lasted long. Dad had seen it when he came in and immediately demanded to know what it was doing there. Alan painted it at the school, is it not bonny, Mum had said, standing between them. Aye, and what's it called, Dad said, looking at it kind of droll, but when Alan told him he just went red in the face and ripped the picture off the press door and threw it on the floor. Alan

thought it had gone in the bucket but Mum must have saved it.

And he'd heard them from the other room, Dad's voice ugly and her trying to placate him. Never crying, she never gave him that, even though she always made up some story to explain the bruises.

That was when he remembered the title of his painting. That painting of the eye and the little stooped figure below. It wasn't out of the Dandy, it was from something the minister had said at Sunday school. That's why he'd painted the picture, to make it happen.

God sees you, that's what it was called. But it was a lie, God didn't see and he didn't care.

That was why Alan had given up painting.

The Eye by Andrew Gordon

The eye is painted upon a red canvas. Picture the horror of this eye that never shuts and imagine the torture of having to witness it all, without pause, powerless to avert your gaze or even blink for respite!

-Say what? Julia chirped.

Shut up Julia, I'm not finished. He said.

A ripple of laughter bubbled up from the group of kids sitting on the floor.

Picture it, the terrible punishment, and what's worse - it's presented as a reward! Everything measured and calculated, designed to the max to excite and stimulate desire and emotion. It's a cruel bluff of sincerity, a false appeal to humanity. And we can only wonder why. It is left to our imagination what or whom stands to gain.

He paused, distracted. In front of him, Tom had zipped open Megan's bag and with a wild grin was carefully pulling from it her pencil case. The gang behind him squirmed about, hands clapped to mouth in silent fits of laughter. Tom winked and stuck his tongue out triumphantly. Ted noticed a few of his classmates were staring at him intently however, and his eyes jumped back to his iPhone. He scrolled down:

If you think it was bad before, you don't understand how much worse it can get.

He paused for effect.

The host assigned by the museum was rolling her eyes and Ms. Gibbs rummaged through her purse. Everyone knew this was how she texted on the sly. He braced and continued:

Notice the haggard desperation, the trickery of the angle. It would first appear that the lines intersecting the pupil originate in the eye, tending outwards, like lines of sight, depicting perhaps the direction of its gaze. But look closely and you will see these lines come from something else, from the outside. These lines mark the trajectory of a scalpel. The eye sees without understanding, it does not feel the blade. It does not feel the damage. This is the genius of the modern world and its bastard artist-children!

The teacher was closing her bag and the word "bastard" pricked her ears. She frowned. Ted, well into his stride now, did not pause.

The only art form they have perfected is that ability to administer anaesthetics to the people. They have numbed our senses, defeated our guard, bettered our judgment, and now they are performing phantom surgeries with unknown consequences upon our brains. All of this for the ease with which they use and abuse our naked eyes, and for what? I think th--

Ms. Gibbs stood over him now with a firm hand on his shoulder.

-Thank you Theodore, that was very interesting.

But... he whimpered, deflating, I'm not finished!

-Don't be selfish now, I'm sure somebody else would like to go next. Are there any volunteers?

She looked around at the class of children actively avoiding her eyes, and felt a strange cold joy at the unexpected sensation of power that seemed to wash delicately through her at that moment.

Unravelled by Jacqueline Koronka

Faraway, in another time lived Serge, the much lauded tailor to the Fairy King and Queen. He was of average appearance except for the unusual emerald colour of his piercing eyes and was known for his detail and dexterity in garment making. Everywhere he went, the fairy people would smile at him, bowing their heads in reverence.

Years before, Serge had arrived back from an overseas trip to source some fabric and announced that he had married a fairy called Pakpao. This name meant kite in her own language and he told everyone that this was apt as she was indeed like a kite that flew with the wind until he had managed to catch hold of her thread and gently pull her back to land and into his life. The ladies of the village had been anxious to make her acquaintance but Serge explained that Pakpao wanted to stay at home as she spoke a very different language to their own and so found it hard to communicate. He was, he had said, attempting to teach her the fairy language himself whilst she helped him to sew the beautiful gowns. The villagers soon gave up asking to meet her, distracted by the beautiful couture gowns he produced. Serge believed all to be well with his life but at night, as he slept, disturbing visions mixing fabric and thread would often appear;

One night in the familiarity of his stock room, he dreamed that he was surrounded by bolts of vibrant fabric, lying in small, neatly stacked pyramids. The sumptuous patterns and block work on display caused him to move closer to touch the texture. His fingers ravished the fibres and he caressed the surface patterns in a myriad of wondrous pigments; mesmerising maroons, gleaming gold and sapphire blues as iridescent as the most tropical ocean. He felt an overwhelming pride in owning all this beautiful material when suddenly he spied an irregularity in one of the patterns and crept closer. A thread, pale, plain and most definitely out of place, lay quietly abandoned on top of a geometric shape and he reached to pick it off but, to his annoyance, it stayed in place. He pulled harder but the thread linked itself further into the cloth and with every tug, the increasingly long, sliver continued to unravel until the entire fabric lay at his feet, in a tangled unusable heap.

He awoke to the sharp shear of winking metal and at once recognised the lethally glinting blades of the dressmaking scissors flashing above him. He felt the snipping and clipping at his body and as Pakpao lowered her head towards him, he saw her closed mouth contorting her face until the invisible thread he had used to stitch her mute loosened. She let out a high pitched impious squeal of satisfaction and the threads disintegrated. The strands of their relationship now bloodied by his cruelty unrolled and she flew off; an anchorless kite liberated by the wind.

On the cards by Ruth Aylett

'Buxton 23.15 ***delayed*** 23.45' the overhead board said as he rushed onto the platform after the mad dash from the cinema. Once he'd have leapt up the stairs like an antelope, but now he was breathing heavily, and sweat prickled on his back.

Fuck, he thought. Maybe the bus? But the late buses would be heaving, and on the top deck he might meet some of his Youth Club clients full of under-age alcohol and ready to throw up.

Hmm, an empty platform, did that mean...hang on, there was one other person, over by the closed waiting room. Small, hood up, guitar case slung over a shoulder.

"Hi" he said, going up. Ah, young woman, though a bit skinny and rat-like with a peculiar purple shade of lipstick and far too much mascara.

"Was there an announcement about the Buxton train? Not cancelled is it?"

"Nah", she said. "Leastways they said signal works and to wait. Last one, innit? Can't cancel that." She turned away, her nostril ring catching the station lights, and stared across the track as if there was something very interesting on the opposite platform.

"You been doing a gig then?" he asked. People always liked to talk about themselves, didn't they?

"Yeah," she said, still gazing over the tracks.

"What type of stuff do you play?"

"Emo".

"Right. Good stuff."

"You've heard of it?" Now she did look at him.

"I do community youth stuff, some of the kids are into it." God, that made him sound old.

"Where d'you do that then?"

"Levenshulme – but I live down the line in Stockport."

"I'm in Stockport too."

"Cool! Hey - fancy coming out for a drink one night?"

Worth a try, surely.

She looked him up and down critically. Then fumbled in her pocket.

"Might give it a go. Give's a mo, I do this kind of thing with the tarot."

"The what?"

"Cards, tarot cards. When there's a question I'm not sure about."

She tapped the cards out of their box and fanned them out in her two hands.

"Here. Take one."

He pulled at the edges, and two cards slid out.

"Oops. This is the one came out first." He held it out to her. A king, holding an ornate goblet in his hands. His throne stood on a beach covered with shells.

"Hmm. Might be a yes. Kind of romantic."

In turn he fumbled in his pocket.

"Ta-rah", he said. "I even have a shell just like the ones in the picture. He held out the last memory of that disastrous trip to Crosby when he'd still been with Helen.

"Show me the other card", she said.

"But that was an accident."

"Nah, nothing's an accident with the tarot."

He held the second card out. A demon with a red face and slitted green eyes. .

"Nothing's an accident with the tarot," she said, taking it. "That's Entrapment. Think I'll pass. Keep your shell."

She walked off down the platform leaving him standing there.

INTO THE BLACKNESS by SHIRLEY MUIR

The acrid smell of antiseptic pervades her nostrils. It is night; her body trembles, but not because she is cold. A horrible, blood-red nightmare assaults her mind and terrifies her even though she has been startled awake. Creatures were climbing up wires into her eye, through her pupil and into the blackness. They are in there now. Their ropes are scratching the skin of her cheek. She tries to claw them off but her arm won't move.

In her dream, large nails were hammered into her face to anchor the wire ties. She felt the taut cables scraping against her lower eyelid, bruising the delicate skin, dislodging eyelashes. If only she could loosen the ties and drag them away from her face. Her eye throbs and hot tears flow.

Briefly she opens her eyes then squeezes them shut against the glaring lights. Only a croak emerges as she tries to speak because her throat is parched. Squeaky shoes on a polished floor bustle towards her. She tastes liquid being dripped through her dry lips, soothing like an iced lolly.

Her sight is precious and that's why her mother insisted she must have her squint treated. She hates it when boys call her *Foureyes!* because she wears pink glasses fixed around her head with elastic.

Every aspect of the recurring dream is crystal clear. Her mother comes each time and squeezes her hand. 'Mummy's here, darling,' she says.

She's unable to make out the face but she expected things to be blurry for a bit. The doctor said she would have straight eyes when she woke up, and she looked forward to it. But still she's quaking with fear.

'Mummy, something bad has happened. The doctors have made a mistake...there are things climbing into my eye and I can't stop them...my arms won't move...I'm paralysed!'

Her mother blots her tears away. The familiar scent of mother's handkerchief is comforting. 'You're fine, darling; please don't cry or your stitches won't heal. Your eyes are beautifully straight but you mustn't rub them.'

Her mother brings her a gift and she can feel it being slipped onto her small finger; a tiny diamond glints in the sunlight. But she can't raise her arm to admire it.

'The doctor has wound bandages on your arms so they won't bend. He doesn't want you to scratch your eyes accidentally.'

Forty years on she visits an optician for a routine eye test. He asks her, 'How old were you when your squint was corrected, Mrs Brandon? They did a very good job.'

Nowadays she receives compliments about her eyes. A shop assistant, while giving her change, had recently commented on their extraordinary green tone.

'I was eight,' she tells the optician, with a tremor in her voice.

She keeps the tiny cheap ring in her jewel box in an attempt to ward off the recurring nightmare.

But her trauma as a small child in a hospital bed relentlessly invades her adult sleep.

Bump on the Train by Sarah Buchanan

Green eyes wide open but kept shut. She burrowed her head sideways between the seat and the carriage window, like trying to cuddle into a stone pillow. Stretch-marked knees held tight together, frowning she remembered her red jacket, too big for her, strewn on the stairs. Whoosh of air and a flump in the seat across. A slow, rhythmic bump started.

She slit her left eye. Green jumpsuit with red letters, he chuckled the Daily Star, slid two beers on the table. An automatic look, his left hand holding a mobile. He slithered fingers through that wavy hair.

“Three types of drivers, ones who get out the way as soon as they hear the siren. Ones who bottle it, wobble all over the road, then get out the way...and..... I hate to say it....the ones who stay in front....yeah deliberately. Think the sirens on for fun. Risking lives, I had to take evasive action.”

The window rumbled against her head, she pretended Phil’s grey eyes describing the details to her across the table. Laughing as driver number two, holding her hand up, open mouthed at the third, a little tut. The real recipient simpered as he concentrated talking with a half smile. Gaze transfixed towards the mouthpiece.

Phil had never been attractive in the traditional sense. Small eye- sockets, craggy nose, wide face. He had not looked at her twice.

Stampede hammering in her hunter’s heart, her mouth began to water.

She did not feel ready. After such a long time, the careful preparations, the what-ifs and then I said, the killer lines.

No make- up or stylish get- up, shadow of dark roots. No red lipstick. Should be able to get away with it or remind, make his flesh goose pimpled, jump away like a startled deer. She had not imagined small scale suffering.

Just after, a favourite daydream, him kidnapped by thugs. The men would rip out his nails. Off, one by one. A few weeks, researching books for a poison that was undetectable to touch, disappeared after it was ingested. A year later, phoning London road pretending to research her PHD, a chapter requiring some basic knowledge on how surveillance cameras work. Using her grandfather’s memory, first afternoon bent over old newspaper cut outs with a retiring DS. After a few months, a young PC asking innocent, salient questions about people who use the Darknet.

Another few months decoding the Darknet torrents, obtaining a false passport and gun. Weapon and escape route. Two-for-one bargain.

She feigned a yawn. Held up her arms in a luxurious, feline arch and whispered pointing.

“Hey, can I have a read?”

He looked fully at her and for a second screwed his eyes up. Phil went back to his audience and ushered yes, swishing his hand at her like he was trying to bat a fly away.

She smiled, spinning a strand of red hair round her finger as the train sped on.

Seeing Red by Marka Rifat

I weep. All the time. Without emotion. How much alcohol creates eyes as sorely crimson as these? How many cigarettes? How many nights of debauchery? What? I fear the worst and take action. A sceptical gaze scans my face as she fills the form: Drinker? – No. Really. Smoker? – Never. Debauchery is not on the list.

In the consulting room, language between expert and layperson becomes slippery. Gritty? I am distracted by thoughts of lurid crime paperbacks, and my momentary pause knocks several points off the tolerance meter. Dry? I agree, but without the requisite conviction or speed. The meter drops further. The grip on her ballpoint tightens.

I am asked, with thinly veiled exasperation, what I think is the cause of the problem. I fight back the urge to snarl, “Why ask me, you’re the expert!”.

“Um, blocked tear ducts?” I venture with a weak smile.

“No.”

In one word I am reprimanded for not knowing the entire anatomy of the eye and the detailed functions of its parts.

“Blocked tear *glands*.”

Her eyes direct me to a gruesome poster which, until now, my kindly peripheral vision had blocked out. An eye, bigger than my head, is depicted in grisly sections. It would take twenty minutes of nauseating study to find these apparently famous glands. I feel bile rise.

A urine-coloured dye, or perhaps it is urine, reserved for those ignorant of ocular physiognomy, is put in each eye. She blinds me repeatedly with a small torch. She digs her thumbnail deep into the tender flesh below my lower lid. I yelp and flinch. She doesn’t care.

“Blefftss and dry eye. Very common.”

“Really?”

The sun is my enemy, the wind is my enemy, heat is my enemy, cold is my enemy. In short, air is my enemy. I had no idea. Who would?

She does not look at me. I am beneath contempt.

“And that first word?”

A sighing hiss: “Blepharitis.”

A race horse? A Greek hero? The ophthalmologist has already left the room.

I trail after her: “But is it serious?”

She does not roll her eyes but fixes on me, unblinking, flaunting her perfectly lubricated cornea.

“Hygiene; hot flannels; baby shampoo. Morning and night.” Nanny knows best and jabs a photocopied sheet of paper at me.

“Can’t I buy a preparation? I’m very, ah, busy at night. And mornings can be difficult.”

“No.”

The staff watched the figure suddenly stalk off. Weirdo. What kind of a name was Jekyll? Said he was a doctor, clearly wasn’t. They wouldn’t see him again, they agreed. Their visual acuity gave them, fatally, no foresight at all.

Hunted by Michael McKean

I awaken from my uneasy slumber with a sudden jolt. Must have been a nightmare. As with most dreams, I can only remember fragments of it: there were packed trains, the people herded together like cattle about to be slaughtered; babies were crying, and then, oddly, I saw showers, *rooms full of showers*. This was followed by muffled screaming, at which point everything stopped, and I saw only blackness – as if the voices had been silenced forever.

As I scan my surroundings, I remember how rundown the place is. All the drawers are lying open with clothes hanging limply from their tops, and some scattered on the floor. The occupants must have left in a mad rush. When I first took shelter here, I tried to delude myself into believing that they had left in peaceful circumstances, but that was hardly likely, and I knew it. The bombs had been dropping for weeks, and anyone with a shred of common sense had evacuated the city.

Walking unsteadily over to the large smashed window on my far left, I look down on the battered street. A few bomb craters, a couple of collapsed tenement buildings. Thankfully mine is still standing. *For now*.

I hear the distant humming of aircraft, buzzing like wasps over the city. Most likely they are spy planes.

Looking for me.

Then comes the sound of marching soldiers, perhaps only a couple of streets away. They will capture me soon, I know it. Like a rabbit on the run, I will eventually be sniffed out by the prowling fox. Its evil eye can detect everything; mass surveillance is a great asset. It will finally catch my scent, and it won't stop for anything. Blowing up a munitions factory is a terrible crime after all. It may not have disrupted the administration's war effort, but my oh my will it cost them! Ammunition is expensive, as is the replacement of deceased workers (*God forgive me*).

And they will not settle for merely executing me, oh no; torture is much more their kind of thing. They are driven more by a straightforward desire for revenge than anything else. *How dare a commoner betray the war effort! How dare he defy our authority!* Such will be the despotic thoughts running through their heads.

The marching outside has gotten louder. I would flee, but my strength is depleted – I haven't eaten in days.

Withdrawing to the other side of the room, I lift up my tatty black diary and my almost-blunt pencil, in order to make one last entry:

May 10th:

'Still holed up in Warsaw ghetto district. I see no way out. Starving, dehydrated, weak – my end is inevitable. Though I may die, the dream which I have fought for shall not. No totalitarian government can suppress us forever. The will of the people shall prevail.'

Marching boots outside the tenement now. Four stories below, a door is ferociously kicked down. I pen my last ever words.

'They are coming!'

Trapped by Robyn Geddes

I never thought it would end this way. Silent whimpers escape from the cages beneath me- hopeless, helpless. I wish I could help them, but I lost the use of my legs days ago. I breathe a broken breath, gazing around the poorly-lit dungeon of a room.

The huge cages are the only visible objects. I can see the contents of the nearest cage, several bodies lie limply. So still... It's almost impossible to tell whether they're alive or not.

I squint my eyes as a stunning light fills the ginormous room. It's so bright... Too bright... Adjusting to the light, I catch a glimpse of a body being dragged from it's rusty cage. I can tell it won't be coming back. The light dies away almost instantly and the room is returned to it's usual unbearable darkness.

A few hours pass, maybe even a day, and I waken to the sight of the same outrageously bright light. Two sets of large eyes gaze through the metal bars of my cage and I feel my shattered body being dragged out carelessly.

It's too bright to see anything, but I appear to be moving. To where? Of that I'm not sure. I slip in and out of consciousness. Whilst awake, I hope for an end to the suffering.

Later, I find myself in a slightly dimmer room. Flasks and test tubes containing liquids of various colour and volume line the walls. There are labels attached, but are impossible to read. A shadowy figure blocks out some of the light. He is a tall man, about 6"5, and has a menacing look wiped across his battered face. His partner, a shorter man with glasses, lies slumped over a computer keyboard.

I catch only part of their conversation.

'John, this is the fourteenth one,' the short man says, 'We've already failed.' In response, John (I presume), pushes an empty flask onto the floor. I jump at the smash. That's when I realise. I am tied down to the table.

I look up at John again, a vein protrudes from his sweating forehead. He swears at his partner and swipes a syringe from his desk. I squeal and screech, but my screams do nothing, reach no-one. His colossal hand presses me against the cold metal of the table. I squeal again and close my eyes in terror. I feel no pain. How strange. My eyes flicker open, only to find the point inches away from my pupil. 'Open wide now,' John says sadistically. His finger pushes the plastic into the syringe, emptying the clear contents into my eye. It burns. It burns more than anything. My vision blurs. I can't go on anymore. In my last few moments, I overhear them talking. 'John! Fourteen is enough! How many more mice must we test! These eye drops are not safe for humans!' I hear John sigh. 'I'm shutting the research programme down!' I guess that's all I am in the end. A useless lab rat.

Seeing with Two Eyes by Aleks Kosowicz

So it all came down to this—this god-awful, visual equivalent of a blazing klaxon, its singular, hemorrhagic eye fixed on him for over a decade. Life as he knew it, with *her*, was coming to an end because of this print. To pin it on the usual suspect, *we've grown into different people*, would be wide of the mark to say the least. She was as red-headed predictably unpredictable as she'd ever been, take her or leave her; and he was beyond changing, his global idiosyncrasies etched deep black by thirty-five—right down to the blink. He knew better.

She'd framed and hung the colour plate she'd torn from a library book. His teeth ached at the sound of paper ripped from binding, ripped from public property. *It was our first shout-out-loud fight*. He hated everything about it, from the manner of its birth into their life (*her fault*) to its jarring palette. She'd hung it directly opposite his reading chair because it "fit the space." It made him feel like he didn't, claustrophobic. He didn't know who'd painted it, what it was supposed to be—he suspected she didn't either. But she loved it, and he loved her... then; and so it became emblematic of her anarchic beauty. Trouble being he wasn't fond of her anarchy either. He noticed the picture tilted slightly and reached out an index finger to tip the bottom corner level, deciding against it at the last.

He wondered what it was she loved about it. From the beginning, it was (and continued to be) a point of contention between them, defying discussion. There were things he loved about her, things that remained, would remain, planted in his heart. He loved her pointed nose, her capacity to forgive trespasses, her sarcastic sense of humour, her ability to relate to virtually anyone. Unfortunately, the traits with which he was less thrilled (her ability to *perpetrate* trespasses, for one) burrowed deeper, sowing an embittered brand of love.

He'd once heard it's the very things that attract us to a person which we ultimately come to loathe about them. Now standing before the fire of that All Knowing Eye, he knew thinking so only distracted from the Truth: *it's not the things about someone that attract only to repel, no simple reversal of fortune. Attraction is an entity that seizes us, a singular, hemorrhagic eye focusing so unwaveringly on another that it blinds us to the hard fact we never liked those things about them. That we were never right from the beginning. From the beginning*. He hated that print from the beginning. It was time to extricate himself. He responded to the print in kind, fixing his gaze on it with equal intensity. *I see you with two eyes*. Now he knew better.

He removed the picture from the wall, resigned, and discovered an immobile shadow against sun-bleached paint. "Kelly..." he called over his shoulder, "have you got a minute... or two?"

Beauty by Lorraine Callaghan

“Such clarity, such energy. I feel he is painting pathos,” said a stout, marble-in-the-mouth matron from the corner of the exhibition peering through half-moon spectacles and holding court with a group of nervous elderly ladies who smiled and nodded whilst fidgeting in front of paintings that didn't reach them.

The exhibition had got busier as the afternoon wore on; Gregor suspected that the sudden swell was due more to the weather than the popularity of J. McDowell, Edinburgh's latest celebrated artist. All the same, he enjoyed the rush. “The Rush and The Hush,” is how he described it. The excitement of a new exhibition, the public desperate to see it and picking their way with careful steps on the highly polished floors uttering ‘wows’ in whispers.

Gregor was well known and had been part of the prestigious gallery now for many years. He had always painted and, after taking early retirement, had landed himself his dream job. Some of the trendy art crowd chose to look down their noses at the quiet security man in the corner. A mistake, for Gregor was quite the connoisseur and loved nothing more than talking art, preferring art lovers to art experts.

It was “Beauty,” a stunningly vibrant oil on canvas that was the crowd-pleaser today. Gregor watched as couples and loners stopped, stood back, and paused to take in the work in front of them. He saw how the painting ‘spoke’ to the many. How they were drawn to its subliminal message of loss, of wisdom and heartache. In hushed conversations couples leant into each other marvelling at the colours, anger in red, hope in greens and the blackness of despair drawing them into the artist's life.

The gang were already assembled by the time Gregor arrived at The Easel, a small bar frequented by grass root art and literary characters. Tonight would be a reflective night, tainted by the recent loss of their dear friend Albert Ennis. A remarkable man. He hadn't time to remove his jacket or lay down the brown package before a drink was in front of him and hands were held out inviting firm handshakes and male half-hugs.

The ‘Gals’ had been industrious having set up an easel at the end of the bar with a large bouquet of lilies and a photograph of Albert looking broody and beautiful.

Gregor unwrapped the package and placed the contents on the easel, Hush. There it was: the green, the rheumy white, crazy-paved with a man's life journey. The dark, thunderous brow and the triangle drawn from the darkness of his pupil. It spoke to them, reminding them of Albert. Intensity. His passion for finding beauty in all things.

Albert's painting had made it to the National Gallery. It was an honour bestowed upon him *not* by the art world but a dear friend.

Glasses were raised as The Easel welcomed him home.

WINNER**Red Eye Reduction by Phil Olsen**

Ashley had a long night ahead of her. Almost every guest in every photo had red eye. Shouldn't have sent Scott to cover the wedding. Eyes like hyenas popping out from the dark. Delete. A line of smiling faces on the steps might as well be a string of fairy lights viewed through the condensation of a night bus window. Delete. He's just not experienced enough.

But then how could she turn down the opportunity to shoot the Mayor? Not just the Mayor, but the Mayor on a zip-wire. Strapped to a Spice Girl. That's front page Village Globe material.

The bride and groom have sadly fared worse than most of the guests. Four flying saucers hover in front of their foreheads, beaming happy souls out from eye sockets. Can't just delete these ones though. They'll never smile those wedding day smiles again.

It's hardly Scott's fault they chose to tie the knot in a cave. What's wrong with churches? Great, the red eye reduction tool doesn't even recognise these as eyes. Here comes Ashley's long-standing friend - the chirpy paintbrush cartoon character who pops up in the corner of the screen. "It looks like you're trying to edit a photograph!" Nope, just trying to flog a dead horse. Thanks for asking though.

Zam and Ashley's own eyes were starting to go. She could feel the bloodshot branches creeping across with each blink. Scott will be sleeping now, oblivious to tomorrow's wrath. The bride and groom will be - okay possibly not sleeping yet, but - equally oblivious. Zoom in. Adjust brightness/contrast. Delete. "It looks like you're trying to exit without saving! Do you want to save changes before exiting?" Don't save. Delete.

This would not be the first time Ashley's undoing had been ably assisted by Scott. There was that all-too-convenient typo on the Wedding Fair pull-up banner, where he'd described her as 'ruining the show' instead of 'running the show' in her mini-bio image caption. His hands had shot up in a claim of innocence, but there's a whole row of keys separating 'I' from 'N'.

If Ashley could just make good on one photograph before bed, she might be able to get some shut eye. They're not going to pay a penny for these. At least the Mayor's office has a decent budget.

A text message from the Mayor's PA comes through. "Thx 4 2day. Cn't use pix tho. Trns out Spic Grl ws imposter. Sry." Oh brilliant. Perfect.

Zoom. Copy. Well then, Mr Bride-groom, looks like you're going to be seeing the world through the Mayor's eyes from now on. Do you take these porcine peepers? Paste. And to the blushing bride, do you take these looky-likey girl-group lashes? Copy. Paste. I now pronounce you Fake Spice.

Save over original? Save / Don't Save / Cancel. "Hi, it looks like you're trying to Force Quit! Are you sure you want to shut down?"

Tunnels by Mark Macmillan

We grow out of the walls. Day by day we expand, developing into the space that the four walls around us enclose. With every inch we grow closer to beginning our lives and detaching ourselves from our mother, if one can describe her as such. For that time whilst we are attached, we watch as thousands drift past, longingly perhaps. The agony of waiting is almost endless, our detachment is sudden. As is the feeling of disappointment when we realise our first dream in life.

Once we are free we drift through the endless tunnels. We become intimate with the forms of countless others for a moment, and then in another we become strangers again, with the potential that our skin should never touch again. There is no communication other than the feeling of touch as we move together through the tunnels.

Family is not understood, we hold no one dear to us. I have often wondered why we don't just start murdering each other, but then I remember the eye; our common obsession, our reason for existence. The walls whisper it always. At times stronger than others, during these times our caves shake then grow less crowded, the tension in the air eases. Sometimes momentarily we can forget the eye when the shakes come, but our preoccupation returns to us very quickly as the earthquake dies down and the caves fill up again.

I'm not sure when I learned this, maybe it is inherently inside us all, but the eye lies at the end of our tunnels. The bigger of us make it their quicker. When they do arrive, they wait for one of the ground shakes to occur, they enter the long tunnel, and they are sent to the eye.

What awaits them there I cannot be sure. Something synthetic in my form tells me paradise, my sense questions this. I cannot imagine how many have gone before me in these nameless, infinite walls, can their really be a paradise that mirrors this infinity.

As time moves along, I grow closer to the end, I can feel the air warming, and those around me move more quickly in oblivious excitement. I reach the end of our home, in so doing the start of the long tunnel. Together we wait for the ground to shake; the smallest movements send waves of excitement through us all. Then we start to feel the real thing, stronger than before. It sends hope through me as I enter the start of the long tunnel, on my journey to paradise.

An Eye for an Eye by Breeze George

There were two young girls on the front yard playing with mud clay. A dark morning with a misty gush of wind penetrating through the curled weak leaves that fled along with the autumn breeze. As they dug out the mud, a smooth surface appeared which reflected the crude sky. A disproportioned piece of a mirror. Eyes wide open, the girls were ecstatic to find this invaluable fragment that turned into their treasure. The shorter one of the two girls looked at herself into the mirror. Only her eye fitted into the frame of the fragment.

"Huh! Why is my eye, my cheek, my forehead all red...I know...It's a magic mirror that turns everything into red."

"Show me... (After a pause, the taller girl, looking at it scornfully)... But mine isn't! Are you making this up Teza? I don't see anything red, everything is just the way it is."

"Let's have another look ... (she looks and jumps out of her seated position towards Noheem). See, look, it's all red, I told you."

Teza looks towards Noheem for confirmation. But confusedly with her head up in the air to seek a logical explanation Noheem says to Teza.

"Maybe it's a mirror that reflects your deepest thought. Maybe a fear! Maybe your ambition! What do you think?"

In a soft hesitant voice Teza explains, "My...my... greatest... fear is the loss of a loved one Noheem. Did you know, in my old school we had rocket fire drills. We had to lie down on the floor when the sirens went off, or else running outside into the shelter was too risky for our lives. There were blasts every so often. Maybe the mirror is showing me the bloodshed. The innocents, my people and the others killed."

Completely surprised hearing this and as shivers ran through Noheem's spine, she wrapped her arms around Teza's shoulders, consoling her. Both girls stood up and Teza kept looking into the mirror. She repeatedly looked at her right eye. Her bloodshot eye starred helplessly into the mirror to find more meaning. Gradually, her nerves crept around her blazing green iris like a space nebula. Her skin too was blood red, as though she turned into a savage tribe. Noheem unwrapping her arms, hanging her face down says to Teza.

"You should stop looking at it. Throw it away, it's not magical. It's just a scrap we found."

"No Noheem! When I look into it I don't see just my loss, I see what everyone lost. It is not just my Mama's blood, it's everyone's. Now I look at my own eye, I understand an eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind. My world is blinded with blood, everything is red. They all fought to restore peace. But I have to fight with my own fear, so that no one else loses a loved one the way I did."

As it got colder, both girls return home and Teza kept hold of that fragment.

Big Red by JL Davies

Big Red always comes back.

Sometimes he leaves me for a while. Slipping into the darkness, waiting, biding his time. But he always returns, sometimes when I least expect it, when I think things are ticking along just fine. It'll be a flicker, some shape in the cracks in the plaster of the toilet wall and then he is back. A horrorface. A blinking eye. A shadow trapped in a scream.

Last time I saw Big Red was in June. Just after she went away for the last time. And this was definitely the last time. You can come back from staying at your friend Lynne's in Paisley. But you can't come back from Terminal Cancer. I thought then for a while that Big Red might be her. That maybe he was everyone we've ever lost. Sadness y'know. Maybe some sort of madness. But I've never known anyone else to see him. If everyone else saw him too, we'd all talk about him, wouldn't we?

As a kid I thought he was the devil for a time. That was after we first went up to the church with school. My parents weren't God people. Not like hers. Beebub I called him for a while after that, in my head. In secret, of course. But no. He is no devil.

Gave her a Christian funeral. Just the ceremony bit though, down at the crematorium. We weren't really into any of that. Never stepped into a church, except for other people's weddings. But we'd never talked about what she would have wanted, so I figured I'd cover all bases. Just in case. You never know for sure.

I've had her ashes in the boot of the car for a while now. I've not told anyone about that. It's not exactly the kind of thing you can tell folks, is it? I thought just after the funeral that I'd scatter her down by the sea. But then when I got there it was windy, and there were all these kiddies, and this old woman walking a dog and I stood for a while, but it didn't seem right. It just wasn't right. It was that night he came back. A blink in the gap between the curtains, a creaking in the eaves. Scared to put my feet on the floor I was, but he was everywhere. Even in the red of my eyelids.

I know that Big Red is near now. The ashes are what's unsettling him, I can feel it. But it's hard to know what to do. There's no coming back from a decision like that. And I'm just not ready for her to go. Not yet, anyway.