

Verbal Remedies

Creative Writing by Medical Students

Selected and edited by Helen Lynch

In Memoriam

Dr Neil Hamilton

Director of the Medi-CAL Unit
Co-ordinator, Medical Humanities;
On-line Course Design for Medicine
University of Aberdeen

Dr Andrew McKie

Lecturer in Nursing (Mental Health)
Robert Gordon University Aberdeen
Co-ordinator, Medical Humanities;
the Arts and Humanities in Health and Social Care Contexts
University of Aberdeen

Medical Humanities – Welcome

It is well known that the practice of medicine requires both hard work and commitment. However, performed at its best, practising medicine also requires being seen to care. The skills required for effective medicine and caring are many and varied. Perhaps key amongst these are having excellent powers of observation, and the ability to reflect and give meaning to what is observed. Keen observation informs not only a diagnosis or knowledge of a patient's progress or deterioration, but also gives insights into the effects of the processes of healthcare and our actions as practitioners on others, be they patients or colleagues.

We are proud to include Medical Humanities as a core central component in our curriculum. It is part of that which defines both the University of Aberdeen medical programme and its graduates. We are therefore delighted and proud to welcome the annual conference of the Association of Medical Humanities to Aberdeen for the first time.

It is our belief that Medical Humanities affords our students the academic support and the opportunity to expand their understanding of the human condition. They can develop their understanding of the context in which their chosen profession has been and will be practised. Perhaps above all, it will further their powers of observation and reflection.

This small collection of work from some of our medical students was produced as a part of their medical humanities study. We believe the collection exemplifies their understanding, their ability to care and their skills of observation and reflection.

We provide the collection as a tangible part of our welcome to Aberdeen and this conference. We hope it provides an inspiring platform for your own observations and reflections during the next three days and beyond as you join us to consider medical humanities and the global context.

Dr Rona Patey

Head of Division of Medical and Dental Education
University of Aberdeen

Medical Humanities at the University of Aberdeen

Medical Humanities is a long standing and integral part of the curriculum at the University of Aberdeen. We aim to provide students with an alternative perspective on medicine – or healthcare, sickness and disability – which is not provided by mainstream medical teaching. This is achieved by studies in an extensive range of Humanities subjects including anthropology, economics, history, sociology, educational studies, divinity, art and music. We also offer languages, including French, German, Gaelic and Spanish, to prepare students for working in regions where these languages are spoken.

A dedicated team of co-ordinators drawn from different faculties ensures that the Medical Humanities block functions efficiently and harmoniously for the benefit of students and staff alike. We are always conscious that co-ordinators may already have heavy workloads and that their contribution is often leavened with, or perhaps spiced with, more than a pinch of goodwill. We are indebted to them.

Part of our purpose is to make students more rounded individuals. We encourage them to consider the nature of knowledge-making; to reflect on the processes of teaching and learning; to understand the experiences of medicine, health, sickness and disability from different perspectives including that of the patient, practitioner or family member.

Students are encouraged to work on their own initiative and Alternative Project options are available where students come to us with their ideas. Portfolios of artwork, Online Design, photographic and museum exhibits have been produced in recent years as well as the creative writing contained in this chapbook which stands as an example of a broader corpus of creative works. Much as we would like to, we cannot show you everything, but that many medical students are multitalented is beyond dispute.

Medical Humanities at the University of Aberdeen is continually evolving to meet the demands of an ever changing world and this year we have added three new courses to our already comprehensive block. It is no coincidence in the year that Aberdeen welcomes the Association of Medical Humanities that one of these, Global Humanities, is inspired by the theme of your conference.

Dr Alex Sutherland

History Department
School of Divinity, History and Philosophy
Co-ordinator Medical Humanities Block
University of Aberdeen

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“One has a greater sense of intellectual degradation after an interview with a doctor than from any human experience.”

So wrote Alice James, the nineteenth-century American diarist, who spent many years being treated for ‘hysteria’ before dying of breast cancer at the age of forty-three. Hopefully, the well-rounded and empathic medical practitioners of tomorrow, infused with the spirit of the Medical Humanities, will no longer engender this sensation in their patients. If all ill-treatment of other people stems from a failure of the imagination, then certainly Creative Writing ought to have a list of (beneficial) side-effects as long as that of your average prescription drug.

Learning a musical instrument is often justified these days on the grounds that it helps children to be better at maths, but no music teacher can proceed on this basis; similarly, writing has to be taught as an activity and a discipline in itself (not as a means to some other end which we recognise to be ‘useful’). It is precisely this which students often claim to find so liberating about the course at Aberdeen. They sometimes describe their medical studies as seeking to fill them up with knowledge and expertise, whereas they see Creative Writing as concerned to elicit what’s within them. They relish the emphasis on quality rather than quantity of words, and having the time and space to focus entirely on writing, without feeling there is anything ‘more important’ they should be doing.

It is interesting, as a non-medical observer, to notice how often the point in a poem or story at which emotions become intense (when, as medics, the students may have learned to disengage or shut down in order to be effective) is precisely that at which, as writers, they have to probe more fully. They quickly also discover that to communicate emotion to a reader, it is not simply necessary to ‘go there’, but that writing requires the ‘handling’ of emotion in a different sense than the one to which they are accustomed.

Self-expression is undoubtedly important, but, historically, this is a relatively recent paradigm for the art of writing, with fictional, poetic composition viewed for many centuries as a branch of Rhetoric – that is, of persuasive speech. This is still a helpful approach: can you convince a reader that the world is this way, or that these things happened to these people? A doctor may prescribe, diagnose, intervene, but a writer needs to establish a different kind of authority – to earn the reader’s consent, to generate belief through persuasion. Or perhaps the interaction between doctor and patient isn’t so different after all.

Teaching the Creative Writing for Medics course for the last two years has been enormously rewarding and genuinely illuminating. The students are a pleasure to teach – astute, committed, engaging people, with a cohesive group dynamic and great sense of humour. These qualities are evident in the short stories, poems, vignettes and sketches collected here, which I’ve selected to reflect the variety of subject matter, theme and treatment characteristic of their work.

Many of these pieces grew out of exercises begun in the seminar, and I have sometimes left a clue in the titles so that it’s possible to compare. On occasion, I’ve placed side by side very different accounts of a character originally created collectively. Can you spot these? Enjoy your reading.

Dr Helen Lynch, Lecturer in Early Modern Literature and Creative Writing,
University of Aberdeen

Wood

Louise Blythe Summers

He was chopping wood in the garden, splintering logs and stacking the pieces up against the shed. It wasn't winter yet, but it was coming, and there was a heavy swell of mist rising up from the burn that trickled behind the shed. He looked up at her as she walked down the moss-covered steps to where he was standing, letting his axe swing near his ankle. Her brown hair was pulled in a bun but messily, so that strands had fallen around her face. She was wearing one of his jumpers, a grey one. The sleeves were long on her, so her hands were hidden, curled up in the cuffs. She smiled at him, when she had managed the last step without falling.

'How did it go?' he asked.

'Fine. I think.' There was a pause, 'yeah, I think it went okay.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

She sat on one of the logs he hadn't hacked at yet, the ends of his sleeves twisting in her lap.

'Have you been here since I left?' She asked. She wasn't looking at him, but at the water twisting in the stream.

'Yeah,' he said, turning away, back to the withered tree stump he was using as a chopping block. 'If I finish this lot now, it'll last us till the end of January. We might not have to pay for heating then.'

He twisted his head to look at her, but she didn't look at him. He raised the axe above his head.

'So it was good?'

The axe came down, splitting the log in two. One half toppled off the block. He left it. The cut half faced up toward the overcast sky, weeping sap.

'I'm not sure if it was good.'

'You're not sure? You did go, didn't you?'

'Yes,' she sighed, 'I went, I promise. No sitting in the car park till it was over this time.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

There was a pause. He lifted his axe again. This time both halves stayed on the block and he looked over them before choosing the larger. He pushed it to the centre and swept the other to the ground.

'So good isn't the right word then?' He glanced over at her; she had taken her hair out and was twirling the ends between her fingers.

'I would say cathartic.'

'Really? Big word.' She turned this time and looked at his face, grinning. He was growing a beard. She still wasn't sure it suited his face, but he'd told her it'd help

keep him warm. He had the axe above his head again, but he was looking at her instead of the block, grinning too.

‘Massive word. All that education we were forced into must have meant something.’

‘For you maybe. I know it’s a big word. I don’t know what it means.’

‘It means I’ll go back next week.’

The axe thudded into the chopping block, and stayed there. He let go of the handle.

‘You will? So cathartic is good then? Like, it was good for you.’

‘Yeah. It was good for me, I guess. If that’s how you want to think about it.’

‘What should I think about it?’

‘I’m not really sure. I don’t know what to think, so I have no idea what you’re supposed to.’

‘Well,’ he paused, ‘no-one has told me I’m wrong so far.’

‘That doesn’t happen very often.’

‘I know. I can’t work out if it’s more or less worrying.’

She laughed. It sounded like a bark, a shout from far-away. He picked up the smallest pieces of wood and went to the shed to stack them against the others. He had worn a little mud track from the chopping block to the side of the shed and his boots had left footprints in the sticky ground.

‘Your mum phoned,’ he said.

‘She did?’

‘Yeah, I missed it, I was out here. She left a message though.’

‘Did she realise she was chatting to the answering machine this time?’

He snorted. ‘Not until your Dad shouted at her.’

‘Dad was there?’

‘Yeah, he left a bit of a message too.’

‘Anything good?’

‘Good as in good or good as in cathartic?’

‘Good as in you want to tell me.’

‘Then no. Probably not.’

There was a pause; he was staring at the wall of the shed. A woodlouse crawled from one crack to another.

‘Should I call her back?’ She sounded muffled. He turned back to look at her. She had one of her hands up to her mouth, stifling a yawn, and the shadows under her eyes were dark.

‘She was just checking you went today.’

‘To the appointment?’

‘To the appointment.’

‘I wasn’t supposed to visit or anything? I didn’t forget again, did I?’

‘Nope, you’re fine.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Sure.’

‘So should I call her back?’

‘Only if you want too.’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘No? Well, I guess I wouldn’t be either... Oh, she said you had to phone Scarlet.’

‘Why?’

‘I wasn’t sure. That was when your Dad started shouting.’

‘She shouldn’t have to ask.’

‘What?’

‘She shouldn’t have to tell me to phone Scarlet. She shouldn’t have to leave messages.’

‘She doesn’t know she’s leaving messages most of the time.’

‘That’s not the point, is it?’

‘She left them before.’

‘That’s not the point either.’

‘What is the point then?’

‘She just shouldn’t have to.’

‘Everyone leaves messages.’

‘She shouldn’t have to.’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

She met his eyes and he looked away first. His gaze followed the tiny splinters of wood splattered across the damp grass back up the steps to the house, where the kitchen light was on and the tomato plant she was growing was curling itself across the window.

‘I realised something while I was there,’ she said.

‘You did?’

‘Yeah. While I was sitting there, listening to all these wee old women talking about it.’

‘Were they all old?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘How old?’

‘Older than me.’

‘Well, yes. But how much older than you?’

‘I dunno, about fifty maybe, I didn’t really think about it.’

She was still twirling her hair, but she was looking at the ground now. He made his way back to the chopping block. He picked up the chunk leaking sap and pulled the axe free.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I interrupted.’

‘You did.’

‘What was your thing that you realised?’

She was silent for a bit. He dropped the axe down, but not hard enough and it was stuck in the lump of wood. He started to beat it against the chopping block, a bead of sweat landing on his torn jeans.

‘I realised...’ she swallowed. He heard it from where he was standing. ‘I realised I didn’t want to stop.’

‘Stop what?’

‘Stop... stop taking things. Going to appointments. I don’t want to stop. I don’t want... I don’t want to, you know.’

The axe slipped out of the log and nearly into his foot. He dropped it and slid over to her, slipping on the mud. He knelt in front of her, his knees sinking into the wet grass. One was bare, the other barely covered in denim. He dug for her hands in her sleeves. They were cold when he found them and she was smiling at him, but her lips were pressed together tightly.

‘I’d thought that’s how you’d always felt,’ he said softly, so she had to bend her head to him to hear.

‘Not always.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You should never feel like that. It’s not healthy.’

‘I’m not healthy.’

‘I know that. Why do you think I’m here? It’s well sexy.’

She laughed, she couldn’t help herself, it was faint and gentle, the tiniest exhale of breath. He grinned, leant forwards to kiss her. ‘I don’t want you to either.’

‘To what?’

‘To ever feel like that, to ever stop.’

‘Good. I’d be worried if you did.’

She released one of her hands from his and twirled a strand of hair. It came away in her fingers, followed by others, and she let them fall but didn’t see them land. He watched her face. She watched his.

‘You still think I’m sexy?’ she said.

‘Course, Nothing Compares to You is a great song.’

‘Prick.’ She was smiling. She stood up, dragged him with her, hugged him and let him go, pulling her hands back into her sleeves, the neck of the jumper snagging on her collarbone. It was white and trying to escape from the fabric.

‘I’m going to make tea.’

‘Okay.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Never?’

‘Never.’

‘Okay,’ she kissed him on the cheek and turned back towards the house. ‘I love you,’ she called over her shoulder.

‘I love you too.’

He picked up the axe, and drove it into the chopping block but no wood was sitting there. He turned and sat down beside it. He rubbed a hand through his beard, across his face, pressed his fingers to his eyelids. The wood he had got stuck on his axe before was lying open at his feet. The wood was damp and flaky. Rotten. He kicked it away and watched it roll into the stream.

Poems

Poems

Louise Blythe Summers

The guttering of fingers
claws, and I am God
if I touch the right tendon
and mouths agape, aghast, ajar
lips curled, coiled, contorted.
I dare you, go on, measure
the swell of my tongue.
Two-face was terrifying,
if I get close enough
we can take pictures
to never show our friends.

I've stopped cutting onions,
but here I have protection
and a bigger saw.

I can confidently tell you
from this brain in a bucket
that smashing into a brick wall
isn't healthy.

Miscarriages and mistakes,
chronological, in jars and who
is judging who? Empathy is
next, maybe they'll tell me then.
'What is humanity anyway?'
Someone laughs, and after all
a shrivelled cock is so much more fun
here than it ever was
in your bedroom, with the posters
of the inside of a heart,
without the arrows for
dopamine or norepinephrine.

I've seen bodies before Mother.
Hasn't everyone?
Someone weak is fainting
and I didn't know that fat
really is the colour of
the buttercup game or that blood
is thick, gloopy and congealed.
I can wash out a PE
but I can't buy treacle.
But
Then

When I sat in wicker with
my feet underneath me
biscuit crumbs and laughter
screeching and far too high
I thought your body
wasn't a body at all
and I was just waiting
for you to breathe.

Breathing

When I imagine
I imagine the most scared I'll ever be is
when I'll...
when I'll stop...
 exhale and...
But then
What would I know?
I've only ever willed you
to start.

I've never stopped myself.

Wide Tarmac Road

Luis Loureiro

Right before the gates to Yosemite Park came into view in the quaint sequoia forest, amid a sea of ferns, a discrete hamlet sided the road. A quick drive-by would have many mistake it for a single structure, a petrol station or something of the sort, but the motel to the left, and the diner to the right, hid a couple of narrow lanes extending to the shrubbery, where a few wooden houses specked the green.

The motel imposed itself like a vile presence over the minute settlement. It was a concrete building, the cement only poorly disguised under a thin coat of green paint which had long started peeling, flaking on the dead dry twigs and leaves below like a summertime snowfall. Between the main building and the road, a tank (the management's claim to a swimming pool in the prospectus) broke the monotony of the land, even if the water had stagnated to a dull slimy tone, a poor reflection of the verdant canopies above. The parking lot to the right of the building was nearly empty that late afternoon, except for a solitary Dodge SUV. A family had stumbled out of the tall car and hurriedly scurried to the reception, fearful of the blistering sun. The sequoias, lean and straight, were poor protection from the light that insisted upon baking the motel for as long as the day lasted.

After they had been handed the keys to their double bedroom, they left for the diner, for a suitably early dinner. The mother and the son, a boy on the brink of adulthood, walked ahead, anxious to come to the shelter of the porch. She had chosen to wear a wide brimmed hat she had got on a trip to Australia last year, the kangaroo leather flaps falling limply on her shoulders. The boy opted for a more stoic approach and just quickened his pace, eventually getting to the wooden steps first.

The father lingered behind, a single figure against the tarmac and green, oblivious to the others. The mother, looking over her shoulder and moving the hat brim out of the way, eyed him and thought he must be sulking over the motel's extortionate prices – one hundred and fifty dollars for a night. He moved about unhurriedly, running his hand along a fern leaf, and the sun did not bother him. By the time he looked up from the vegetation, the rest of the family had gone into the diner.

An overwhelming smell of boiling oil filled the diner, and might well be fully entrenched in the cheap leather upholstery, after decades of fried burgers and burnt hash browns. Although the diner only occupied the far half of the building, the smell was fully present in every corner, including the convenience store where a flannel-shirted local man agonised over his choice of cereal.

The boy rushed to the news-stand, only to be bitterly disappointed. All the newspapers laid out on the shelves were actually the same previous day's edition of *The Republican Gazette*. He looked to the upper shelves, where the magazines

were on display, but found issues of *NRA Weekly* and *Yosemite Conservancy* to be less than appealing. He followed his mother to the diner, just as the only other shopper in the store opted for a family-sized box of Golden Grahams.

They chose a booth not too far from the counter, and the mother immediately regretted it. With each piece of raw food tossed onto the griddle, hidden behind the enamel countertop, a column of smoke rose and dispersed in their general direction, and she felt the food's grease travel in the air onto her skin. Her face contorted in unabashed disgust, and her throat shut as if to prevent her being sick. She kept her hat on, feeling that would keep her hair from getting oily with the diner's fumes.

The father joined the rest of the family, sitting across the table from them, and immediately devoted his attention to the menu, so that his face was hidden behind the laminated cardboard. Meanwhile, the boy stared at the waitress behind the counter, hoping his look of expectation would have her dash to the table, take their orders, and end the meal mercifully quickly. She noticed the youth's wide-eyed stare, and rushed over.

She was wearing a turquoise shirt and skirt, and a white apron, stained yellow with splatters of oil and grease. Hurriedly, she came to the table, notepad and pen in hand, and stared at the father in silence, waiting for him to notice her. The mother receded towards the nook of the booth, away from the waitress. Seeing the sheen on the waitress's skin, and feeling the fatty scent intensify since her coming over, she could not help wondering where the grease ended and the sweat began.

They ordered their food, two cheeseburgers and a turkey steak, and the waitress noted the orders, scribbling with such indifference that her wide pen strokes could not possibly be writing legibly. She gathered the menus in her hand and disappeared, her uneven gait suggesting she might well have one leg shorter than the other.

With her departure, the silence had grown deeper, uncomfortable as if threatening to rip their well-mannered truce. So the father talked about Vegas, Vegas, Vegas, a whole speech about the lights and the slot machines. But what he really wanted was some sequoia-gazing, the boy knew. Not just any sequoia, but the particularly tall ones, deep into the park, an hour's detour from the road to Nevada. And rocks, too. His father loved rocks, and no rock in the state could satisfy him as much as El Capitan would, a granite monolith, mile-high, mile-deep, mile-wide. Tomorrow would be a long drive, a slow drive, with monotony biting on the boy with its trees and stones.

He wanted to rush their way to Vegas. In fact, his wishes went a bit further. He would go beyond The Strip, the lightbulb standing alone in the Mohave night, and take the road East. He did not have a pioneer bone in him, and the West repelled him, compelled him to the shores of the East. The idea of turning back, to San Francisco, disheartened him so much that he grew restless and felt his hand shake, but somehow that slow movement across the state, all energy invested in shrub-gazing, seemed even worse. The road was never as beautiful as when you rushed down it.

Home lay further East, beyond a wide ocean. Even now, lost in some red-neck hinterland, he had an unshakeable feeling that if he drove East in a straight line, and somehow hovered over water in the same direction, he would arrive home to fall neatly on the doorstep. Europe had a calling he could not ignore, booming across thousands of miles to remind him where he had come from, persistent as if he had entered a binding troth with it.

Mother and Father were less bothered by this calling, if they felt it at all. Mother detested America, from its vastness to its simpler aesthetics. But she was an importer. She imported books, clothes, appliances from abroad, so that she might as well be living in Europe (the American electrical sockets fitted with adapters denounced the charade). And every Friday when the International Mums convened, she would join them in overt criticism, a catharsis of pent-up frustration at feeling so marginalised. They exchanged xenophobic remarks, united in their disgust towards America and Americans, and bonded fiercely over imperial hangovers. In her distaste towards the natives, Mother often clashed with Father, who had orchestrated the big move. He loved America, and refused to acknowledge anything that highlighted how foreign he was to that country. His dreams were filled with green cards, with pledges to the stars and stripes, an echo of the Star Spangled Banner in the background, the boy was sure.

And he, torn away from home in the heat of adolescence, fell in an awkward middle ground that felt too unsteady to walk upon, and too mushy to sink in. The realisation that he was a hybrid, a species where loathing and loving co-existed, one half long in the making, and the other he could no longer resist. Europe had lost its reality to him, and America no longer held the gleam of possibility.

The road was kind to him. He did not have to be a partisan there. The road was a journey, a project in course, as uncertain as he was. He did not want to get to Vegas. The conversation went on, the father's relentless praise of Vegas now almost as unpleasant as their visit to that place was sure to be, an outpost at world's end. On occasion the father paused, hoping those short intervals would prompt his two companions to talk. But the sound of sizzling food, and country music playing in the background, dampened the awkwardness of the silence just enough that it did not compel them to talk. So the father went on, now talking about the Grand Canyon, just a stone's throw away from the Hoover Dam. The mother had become transfixed by another family, the only other patrons of the establishment, sitting in a booth a dozen yards away. The two children, teenage boys with Down's syndrome, talked to their parents, slowly, but surely. Eventually the food came and, gaze turned to the plate and mouth filled, the father accepted the inevitability of silence.

The next morning the sun rose over Yosemite with a red tone that bled, unstoppable, over the canopies. Lulled by a warm desert wind that swept the wilderness from west to east, the trees bent gently, like overgrown blades of grass. As the father, precariously covered by a dressing gown, stepped out onto the motel's balcony, the quietude of the morning hit him with a surprise. The birds still chirped in the distance, adding life to the low drone of the road, present even when no cars ran on the asphalt.

His son had left the room. This he knew after seeing the abandoned queen-size bed the boy had taken for himself. This puzzled the father. His son detested the countryside, or so he thought, judging from the boy's silence whenever he talked about the wondrous Wild West. Maybe he had gone to the diner to get breakfast. They had had dinner very early the day before, after all.

Taking the stairs down from the first floor landing, he looked around to get a view of the settlement from above. There were fewer houses than he thought he had seen the day before, from the road. A single building stood out from the others, a small, white church with a wooden steeple meekly trying to compete with the trees for a share of the skyline. Apart from the motel, and the diner, that was it. It seemed no one stayed long enough to justify building anything else.

Coming to the motel's driveway, he could now see the parking lot at the side of the building, and its emptiness made him stop in his tracks. The Dodge was gone, leaving the stretch of asphalt desolately flat, the mesh of white lines the only break in its dullness. The gravel on the driveway had been churned into complete disarray, a hint of two tyre tracks visible after it had been raked into order by the motel's sole employee the night before.

The father sighed in disbelief and, after a brief hesitation, sprinted to the road, his fifth decade weighing on his run. He came to the broad black tarmac stripe expecting to see the car just a few yards down the road. The boy had never done anything of this sort, so surely he would realise how foolish his attempted escape was.

But the road was as empty as it had been for miles before they had arrived at that secluded hamlet. For an eternity ahead, for an eternity back it stretched, a lifeline for those the boy had left behind. As for the youth himself, and the car, they were nowhere to be seen.

The father sat by the roadside, defeated, as the sun continued its journey across the sky to start bathing him in harsh heat. How would he tell his wife the boy had taken the car? He heard a faint buzz in the distance, and lifted his head to stare at the road's end, at the horizon.

A car, or a gust of wind? In such a place, it was difficult to tell.

Something for the Weekend

Urim Kortoci

Always hated haircuts. A bit of a Samson complex, I guess. “Yes my friend” says the cheerful barber “How do you want me cut your hair?” And though haircutting is something I’ve had to undergo over and over again, I never know what to say.

“Erm, nothing special.”

The barber waits for more instruction and clever words but my hair-salon vocabulary is not that well-developed.

“Erm, a little shorter,” I tell him, and wait for him to get on with it.

“O.K.” he says, stressing the ‘K’; he obviously expects a bit more from my side. “How much shorter? An inch shorter? Two inches shorter? A razor cut or a scissor cut? How do you want them at the back? Straight? Natural? Taped in? You’re continental, aren’t you? Two centimetres?”

I tell him to cut it two centimetres or inches shorter, and natural at the back. Nothing special. As I said, a trim. Scissors perhaps, better. Don’t know about razors – they give me the creeps.

This man is tall, dark-haired. He calls a girl, a fairly pretty girl of eighteen or nineteen, to wash my hair.

“I don’t, erm, don’t think...”

“I beg your pardon?” asks the barber, while looking at the young girl as if I’ve said the weirdest, most out-of-place thing in the world. The girl makes a sign for me to approach. Is she his daughter? Pretty.

She shampoos my hair violently. This is going to cost me a fortune. I feel kidnapped and violated.

“I know you,” says the barber suddenly. ‘I remember when you started living in that building.’ He raises his voice when he talks to me, thinking maybe that he can make himself better understood. “When you first arrived, with the luggage and everything – I remember well. You happy in that building? Is it good, to live there, yeah? England, good?” He spells out every word, almost *pidgin* style.

“Erm, yeah, it’s good. But, er, I’ve been living there for a while, longer than two years, for sure. A lot long... longer.”

“No, no, I remember well, mate. Two years ago it was. Des came out to greet you and everything, the caretaker. Everyone knows Des around here. He’s ancient that fella isn’t he? Old. He’s about eighty something. Still working, going strong.”

What is the point of convincing him that I’ve been living in that building for almost six years now. I let it go. Yes, Des. Still working at his age...

“Yes mate, an example,” he says. “Not like those fucking benefit scroungers. Fucking ripping us off, those lazy bastards. Having a great time with MY FUCKING MONEY. Fuck them off I say, get them out of this country. Country is going to be speaking Polish in a bit, mate, I’m telling you – Polish coffee shop, Polish

Delicatessen, Polish this, Polish that..." He looks at my reflection in the mirror, as barbers do. "Oh I don't mean just the foreigners and stuff, I mean the English ones too – all those who spend all their lives on the dole. They should be made illegal, mate. This country is going through hard times mate, coz of them. Nice foreigners like yourself – educated, polite, HARDWORKING – are welcome. But the others. I mean, this is only a small island, how much can it freaking take?"

He stops for a moment, snaps his scissors in the air. He forgot the pidgin English for a minute there.

"What do you do?" he asks.

"Barman. In a pub."

"Ah. Well done. Which pub?"

"In Leicester Square."

"Oh cool. Loads of girls, I bet," he says, lowering his tone and smiling "What's it called, what's the pub's name? I might know..."

I have seen a pub somewhere called *The Artful Dodger*. Must've been either passing by train or bus, as I only caught a glimpse of it... I was chemically attracted by this name..."The Cock and Bull."

The barber laughs. "The Cock and The Bull, ahaha. Are you sure, mate? Haha, that's rich..."

I keep a straight face. "Yes, that's the name."

His laugh dies down a little. "No, because, the reason I laugh, is, er, don't know how to explain it to you. *The Cock and The Bull* is an English expression, a phrase, you know; and it means, er, a 'LOAD OF BOLLOCKS' like, haha, bullshit... It's a manner of speech, you understand?"

"That's what is called."

The barber throws me a look through the old mirror, as barbers do; my expression is still the same, sleepy.

"Oh, O.K. Good-good. Well done," he says. "Hard work?"

"Very hard."

"Oh, good, very well. You Portuguese, aren't you?"

"No, Albanian."

"Really? Alb... Oh. Hmm. Interesting. Hmm. One day I saw you – about eight months ago or so – really mashed up. Remember? Black eye, bleeding nose and everything, cuts... What happened that day, mate?"

"Must've been someone else. I haven't had a fight in years. I don't think I ever got a black eye. I gave someone a black eye once..."

"Ah, funny, nice one. But it was definitely you that day, I remember well. I was thinking to myself, poor fella, arrived in this country not long ago, and look what sort of welcome he gets."

"Are you sure it was me?" I ask.

"Oh yes, mate, definitely. Without a doubt."

Would be pointless to insist; he has made his mind up. First I thought his sense of time was fucked up, but now I see he has a serious visual problem too; and he is completely unaware of it.

“Where did you say you’re from?”

He gives a bloody good haircut though, I’ll give him that. “Albania”.

“Hmm, strange. I thought you were Portuguese, for some reason. Strange how London has become this, this city full of... major city full of... people. Different people. Once upon a time, it was different, you know.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes sir. Oh yeah. You knew where you stood, like... I mean, what do we know about Albania? Count Dracula, that’s all.”

That’s Romanian ya twat, I want to say, but I don’t. Not feeling very assertive today. Or maybe I just can’t be bothered. *Just cut my hair and shut your mouth*.

“This country has given shelter to a lot of people,” he says. “All they needed to do is say the magic word: ASYLUM. *I need help*, that’s all they needed to say. And this country gave them roof over their heads, food and everything. We over here got nothing for free, mate, we had to work our bollocks off for everything... Fucking liberty. Nothing to do with nice hardworking people like yourself, of course,” he adds, after checking me out through the mirror. “I’m talking about all those who claim housing benefit, who are on New Deal and stuff – those who dodge the taxes, that’s who I’m talking about...”

I turn towards the girl, she gives me a good smile, but the barber gently turns my head at a different angle. Noise coming from outside interrupts him. Some young kids, ugly and overweight, mostly black and Asian, are yelling curses and throwing chips at each other.

“These fucking young bl... KIDS. These are not school kids. These are criminals. It is like a fucking zoo, mate, believe me. I mean, look at them. They’re barely fourteen, they don’t even look like kids. They come from that school over there, meant to be a good school and all... This place is becoming mad, mate,” he adds, illustrating it with a gesture. “A complete *nuthouse*.” He looks at me for a moment, and asks: “You know what a ‘nuthouse’ is? Is not a house made of nuts or anything, hahaha. It’s a Madhouse, a house for crazy people...” He gestures the craziness of people by putting his finger to his temple – through the mirror, always.

I nod in agreement. I am grateful.

Finally, he cleans me up, takes the other mirror and shows me the back of my head.

“Great, thanks,” I say, clearing my throat a little.

I get up, pay him, and leave him a tip as well – out of embarrassment more than anything.

“Top fella, cheers,” he says, then “listen, I meant to ask you something: is it true that Norman Wisdom is like a god in your country? Ha ha ha, Norman fucking Wisdom. How did that happen, mate? Ha ha ha. *Norman fucking Wisdom*.”

He got this right, at least. Next time I’m going to the Turkish barber. You risk a horrible haircut in there, risk looking like an old Mongolian fighter when you come out, but at least you don’t have to listen to all this shit. And it costs less...

Sam

Olivia Villegas

I was encircled. Their eyes burning into me from every angle, or so it felt. She was gazing at me like an expectant puppy, luring me in. Her fair hair was loose and concealed partially under a woollen hat, little wisps escaping at the front, teasing me to tuck them back in place. A shadow cast over her eyes, masking the smudge of mascara below her lower lid and the fervent glow of lipstick on her lips. *Her lips.* I glanced away. The blackness of the forest loomed over us, yet I had never felt so enclosed. At least she wouldn't have been able to witness the flush of pink creeping across my cheeks, or the intent in my eyes. An ethereal haze had fallen over the group. There was no sound then. Only the smell. Of fear and of panic, and a bonfire sparking in the distance. The spotlight was on me – it was the million pound question in who wants to be a millionaire, but I had no friends to phone. I could see the group, mouths moving in slow motion, but I had no idea what they were saying. A pack of wolves snarling at their prey. A cluster of ripped faded jeans and cheap cotton polos, jostling and hustling at each others' sides, waiting for their leader's command.

By now I think they had started to clap, machine-washed white sneakers thudding against the leaves and echoing into the oaks above. Reverberating through my legs, chest, brain. Getting faster and faster and faster. A horrified look from one friend to another, then to his shoes, as a dollop of earth landed on the tongue, marking the canvas. He laughed it off, but I knew they would be in the wash again before long. His black beady eyes caught mine, his grin moulding into a firm hard line on his face, as if I'd caught him in some unforgivable act. Fuck sake, it was just a shoe. I looked down at the ground, the only place I felt comfortable looking. Where no one was trying to search my soul, or send me demonic looks or taunt me with their long, vanilla hair. *I could smell it.*

A bony elbow into my side, and I was brought back from my thoughts and back to the circle. How I wished I could be anywhere but here. Even being back mopping sticky floors and plunging chunks of vomit down the sinks in Origin was more appealing than being here. Even if the pay was shit and the drunken people made me so mad that I could cry sometimes. And everyone just treated me like a piece of gum on the ground, treading over it to get to where they wanted, picking at it when they were bored. That beat being here any day.

I could suddenly feel it in my hand again, dissolving into a pool of sweat. A constant, unwanted reminder of why I was really here. So tiny it was that I couldn't comprehend it doing any damage. It wouldn't, would it? I wasn't sure, but I couldn't put it off any longer, and before I could stop myself I had flicked it into my mouth and chased it down with a swig of lager. A large gulp of regret and that was it. Nothing left apart from the metallic taste of Tennents in my throat.

And I felt nothing at first. Five minutes they said it might take.

It seemed to impress them anyway. The group erupted. An uproar that sent all my nerve endings on edge and I could feel prickles on my scalp where my hair touched the netting of my Chicago Bulls skip cap.

‘Top loon,’ someone bellowed at me, shoving my head into his armpit and grating his knuckles against my scalp, in what I can only imagine was meant to be a friendly gesture. ‘Ken fit? Ye’ll be aff it in nae time, pal.’

I gave him a feeble attempt at a smile. It was Wheezer after all, nicknamed appropriately after the noises he made whenever he exerted himself, or didn’t leave enough room to breathe whilst he shovelled McCoys into his mouth. I reciprocated the gesture with a polite pat on his cushioned back that was covered in a layer of fat that shook whenever he moved. And besides, they had told me that she might like me if I did it. Rosie Dawson – five years younger than me, but even at seventeen she knew all the cool older guys to hang out with and was always putting cool pictures on her facebook. And she had so many friends. Yeah, she had *so* many friends. I didn’t really have anything to offer her actually. I got good grades, I guess, and I could cook better than Dad ever could, my Mum had told me once. But I wasn’t like all those other guys. The ones with zigzags shaved into their heads and eagles tattooed onto their skinny frames. I was just Sam. I still lived at home with my Mum and my little brother Angus. I had never really had a girlfriend, unless you counted Suzie Sanders, but that was when we were twelve and it had only lasted two days. And I didn’t even get to kiss her. In fact I’ve never kissed anyone, but my friends don’t know that.

I wondered if I was starting to relax yet. I felt calm for a moment, but then I looked down and my hands were quivering. Stupid hands. My Dad had always told me I had hands like a little girl – small and soft, not a callus to be seen. Not proper man’s hands like his, he had said. I shoved them into the pockets of my jeans and made them into a fist. Mum told me to do that whenever I got angry, said it might relieve some of my stress. But I felt stressed now, and it wasn’t helping. I don’t think I felt relaxed after all. My thoughts turned back to that time with my Dad.

My left cheek had stung and I could feel it getting hotter. He had looked down at his reddened hand, and then back to me, grinning, but his eyes were saying something different. A pool had started to form in my eyes. I didn’t want it to, but the stream had reached my chin before I could turn my head to swipe it away.

‘Dinna be so wet, Sam, ah wis just huv’n a wee joke. Fit ’er you crying o’er, fur Christs sake, yer actin’ as if a’d battered yi or summit. Man up, boy.’

I hadn’t meant to cry.

He would probably be proud of me being here, now. He said that I spent too much time with Angus and that I really ought to be out doing *normal* things with people my age. I never knew why he was so intent on me being *normal* – I had always thought I was. But now the thought of him was making me tense up. I could feel the anger rising in me, tightening in my chest with its two hands around my throat. There was a sting in the palms of my clenched hands where my nails had broken the flesh.

Wheezer was back by my side. ‘Now mind, wee Sammy, to just relax and go

with it, ken? Nae use you bein aw panicky an' shit. Just be casual like me an' the boys, yeah?

'Yeah cool. Cool. Cool.' I stuttered.

It didn't matter how many times I said 'cool'. Things were definitely not cool right now. Things were boiling feverishly inside of me, a pot of simmering angst and confusion, and I was on the brink of bubbling over. I could vaguely make out the faces of the wolves, but they were no longer looking at me. They were looking at each other, laughing jovially, some dancing to the sound of their own voices. Some perched against the trees, whispering clandestine secrets to others. They were probably whispering about me. And Rosie. She was over there laughing with the guy with the beady eyes. He said something and she creased over, slapping his arm playfully, her hand lingering a little too long as it ran down his arm. I turned away and closed my eyes. My jaw was straining against itself, getting so tight it felt like I was trying to chew off my teeth. I tried to grip it with my hand but my teeth kept on grating together, creating that awkward chalk on whiteboard screech. And my chest. Someone was pounding on it with a bat, I was sure of it. It felt otherworldly, like my heart wasn't part of me anymore. The rate was incredible. Nauseating, actually. I could taste the bile crawling up my throat, hesitating as it reached the back of my tongue. *Not now, Sam.* But by now my lungs had joined the party too, and I found myself gasping for a breath, inhaling with all the strength I could muster. The odds were stacked against me, and as my body doubled over I expelled a milky green slime, in which lay the remnants of my little white pill. I collapsed to my knees. A droplet of sweat ran off my nose, followed by another, landing and making a little expanding dark blue spot on my jeans.

A mess. I was an embarrassing, fucking mess. I could hear one of the guys jeering in my direction. The silence of head turns, yet no one moved a muscle. That was probably the worst part. And I knew she was watching me, too.

I suddenly felt faint, and darkness consumed me.

Haiku

James Mitchell

Morning frost clings
to every blade of grass, crunches
under my foot

Seagull perches
a gargoyle on the roof
bawling at the wind

Letter to Someone

Cat Douglas

Words on a page penetrate deaf ears,
Transfer from one chamber to another in an attempt to stop the blockage.
A momentary gush and a welcome release,
But the ink seeps only to the fibres of the paper.

The words stop and it builds again.
Slow at first, gradually narrowing my thoughts,
Yet nothing seems to stop the words that run through my veins.

The letter must stop, I know this,
But how can it end, when the beating must also continue?
Will the vessels ever clear, ready for new blood to run through?

The silence pervades.
I sign off, ready for the inevitable return.

Misery's Scent

Reece Brice

She hated the way she looked. Hated it. Always had. The hatred was so great that it occasionally boiled over into anger, a hot caustic anger for both herself and the undulating contours of fate that had channeled her life to where it stood now. Hatred for her Mother whose ditsy inattentive ways had left her mutilated and loathsome. Hatred for her Father whose absence that day formed the next tier of blame. Hatred for herself, for the body she had been given. It was defective. Rotten. Not worthy to house a soul. Any soul. But that was only occasionally. Most of the time her life played along with only a quiet throbbing of self-loathing in the background, like music played through broken speakers.

Today was an angry day. The delicate cocoon, made of thousands of silk-like maxims like 'there are people far less fortunate than you' and 'these things are sent to test us', which normally kept the anger hidden, was engulfed by flames and thrown to the wind as ash. She hated them all. Each one of them. They were nothing but cowardly, inhuman monsters. Empty-eyed and dull-witted creatures, unable to match her in an argument, so simply took cheap shots and stood cackling in a crowd.

She looked up into the pale blue sky from the bench on which she sat. No clouds. Not a single one, just the endless blue shield of the sky and the sun. She hated the sun too. Summer was the worst. The heat of summer is unbearable, leaving you with no choice but to shed clothes and make yourself vulnerable. She wished she lived somewhere cold, somewhere she could stay warm and safe all year round. What she wished for most of all was an answer, a way out. She had heard of procedures, painful and expensive procedures, through her hours of online searching, but each one proved a dead end. Phrases like 'often ineffective' and 'variable results' would seize each pupating hope and squash it.

So, there she sat, in a neglected corner of the park on a sweltering July day, her schoolbag abandoned in the dust by her feet. It was hot, uncomfortably so, but a slight breeze moved the untidy trees that lined this part of the park. She closed her eyes and felt the warm wind on her face. She longed to be able to feel it on her stomach, her back, her chest. Just to feel it on her bare skin. She pushed the thought aside and listened to the rustling of the leaves in the breeze. She knew that if she were to go look amongst those trees and the matted grasses she would find evidence of youthful rebellion: beer cans, cigarette butts, condoms, perhaps even the remains of a joint. The detritus of adolescence. That was what went on in this corner of the park. It was one of those places, a dark corner where the light of society couldn't reach, where the frowned-upon, the unaccepted and the unsavory lurked. Someone had tried to cast light onto this feral land, to bring it back into the fold. A recently new climbing frame stood a few yards away, already almost completely covered in graffiti. Some well-meaning councillor had no doubt argued

for its installation, envisaging mothers and grandmothers sitting where she sat now, watching laughing children play. As it stood, the climbing frame looked forlorn and the park was deserted.

She sat for a long time with her eyes closed and breathed deeply. She let that warm air, air that had swept across the parched prairies and over the distant Mississippi, flow into her lungs, and held it prisoner before releasing it. She felt the wind make her blond hair dance slightly and she felt better. She opened her eyes, suddenly submerged in the feeling of being watched. Before her, sat on the withering and dusty lawn, was a dog. It was of no discernible breed, a mongrel, no taller than her knees, and it sat regally before her. Its fur was matted and filthy but a pattern was distinguishable beneath. No collar, it was clearly a stray, and she guessed it had once been black and white. She wondered if it had been born a stray or whether it had once had an owner and a home. She assumed it must have come out of the trees and the wastes beyond: an old abandoned cement works which had once been the cornerstone of the town's economy, crumbling cement, the skeletons of industry. Beyond that lay the woods. Miles of them until you reached the interstate and eventually the next town.

Its black eyes, two shining beetles set amongst the filth of its fur, looked directly at her and it did not move. She couldn't even see it breathe. It just sat and stared.

'Come to make fun of the freak too, have you?' she asked, slightly unnerved. 'Well you can make like the rest of them and go fuck yourself.'

The dog continued to stare unblinkingly.

'Go on. Get lost.' She made a sudden movement with her arms, hoping to scare the filthy mutt, but it sat perfectly still. She got to her feet and grabbed her bag from the floor. 'What do you want from me? Go on, scram!' The dog remained unmoved and in a last ditch attempt to scare it away she screamed and threw her bag in its direction. The dog's eyes never left her face, even though the bag landed just a foot short of its target.

Now she was scared. This wasn't normal. Normal dogs didn't behave like this. Could it be rabid? It wasn't foaming at the mouth and it was calm, too calm, not like the mad-eyed beasts of her imagination. She didn't know whether to leave her bag, to turn and run back towards town, or to stay and stare it out. If she ran, would it chase her down and maul her? Would anyone hear her screams from here? She could be left bleeding, her soft flesh punctured by its broken, stinking teeth until discovered by the teenagers responsible for the graffitied climbing frame and litter. She had to stay, had to stay and face it. She backed away and sat down again, never for a moment letting her eyes leave those of the dog. Suddenly, the dog took a few steps forward and, completely ignoring her bag, came to sit a few inches from her. She could hear her heart beating and feel her body tightening, preparing for an attack. She dared not tear her gaze from its eyes, the two glistening bugs that now held her prisoner.

'What do you want?' she whispered, terrified. The dog did not move. She knew it couldn't answer her, that she was being ridiculous. This was a dog, a very strange dog admittedly, but a dog nonetheless. It was insane. Years of hardship in the

rotting fringes of civilisation had broken it. It was mad and it was going to do what all mad dogs do and go for her neck. She held her breath, waiting to be savaged.

‘I want to take it from you,’ said the dog. No sound came from the dog but the air in her chest reverberated with every word. It was as if she were standing too close to a large speaker and her teeth vibrated in her skull, chattering gently. The dog was speaking through her, speaking through her with its eyes. She clenched her jaw and swallowed.

A long time passed as she considered what to do next. She wanted to ask it a question but she knew words were unnecessary. *What are you?* She addressed that thought directly to the dog’s eyes.

‘They had a name for me, the ones here before you, but I do not remember it. Neither do they now. They have forgotten much that they once knew, back before your kind arrived here.’ Once again her chest resonated and her teeth vibrated. Her whole body was an instrument and this dog was playing it.

She didn’t understand. None of this made any sense. Had she gone insane? Had the heat and her anger caused something deep inside her to buckle and break? She thought it must have. What other explanation was there?

‘What I am is unimportant. Whether you are mad or not is not for me to say. All that matters is that you have something I want and I can give you something you want. Something you want more than anything else in this world. Something you would kill for.’

Explanations no longer mattered. She felt as though this dog, this thing, had found a way past her skin and bone, past her warm and throbbing flesh and could see what was hidden. It had access to her deepest, most desperate burning want and was tugging at it. The breeze swept through the park again and sent strands of her hair flailing before her eyes. She did not blink, merely continued to stare into those gaping holes that were laying her bare. She noticed that the dog’s fur didn’t move at all with the wind. Not a single fetid hair moved and she felt sick. It felt wrong, unnatural. Her entire body felt it. Every cell that made her knew that this dog, whatever the thing was, was something else. Something other. That it did not belong.

Cold sweat prickled her back and her mouth filled with metallic-tasting saliva. Dark flowers began to blossom before her eyes and she felt the world slipping away from her, felt the blood rush from her face as if it too was terrified of this abomination and wanted to hide at the very core of her. Before she could surrender to unconsciousness the dog spoke again, this time much louder:

‘Stop and listen carefully.’ The reverberation in her chest was so great that it took her by surprise and she had to scream, had to expel the air from her lungs before they burst. The sickness was gone and she lay slumped breathless on the bench, her eyes once again fixed on those of the dog. ‘I know what you desire and I can give it to you. I can set you free. All you have to do is give me something in return.’

What do you want?

‘I can take it from you, leave you new and untouched. I can peel it away and

make you perfect. I can give you the life you deserve. Give you the body you deserve and all you have to do is get your own back on those who drove you here today. My price is your revenge.'

You want me to get revenge on them?

'Yes.'

How?

'However you see fit, but like everything in life the more effort you put in the better the results will be.' She furrowed her brow in confusion and the dog continued. 'These people have made you miserable. They have taken something sensitive and tragic and used it for their own amusement, to make themselves feel bigger and better than you. They have rubbed salt into a wound, your wound. A wound not of your own making. Are you to blame for what happened? No. You were a child. You are blameless. How dare they use it against you? They have used your own imperfection as a weapon and kept you shaking and pitiful, forever fearing another blow. They deserve to be punished, don't you agree?'

Yes but how? She was crying now, her body aching with each word, but her eyes still belonged to the dog.

'Oh, I don't know. There are many ways. But some punishments are more fitting, more deserved than others. You could humiliate them in front of the entire school, the entire town, but humiliation fades with time and eventually they would laugh it off. Your scars don't fade with time, do they? You can't laugh them off, can you?'

No.

'Well then, give them something that won't fade. Something to make them feel, truly feel how it has been for you all of these years. Let them cry themselves to sleep every night. Let them dread summer. Dread anyone getting too close to see. Dread their own prom. Let them suffer the way you have suffered.'

Another thought crept quietly into her head. How did she know that what was being offered was actually possible? Would the dog with black eyes and matted fur keep its side of the bargain?

'You want proof?' said the dog, as if to strangle the thought sprouting in her mind. Slowly she became aware of a slight tingling sensation. It started in the small of her back and slowly spread around her body, stopping at the limits of her disfigurement. The tingling grew more intense and started to burn. Scared, she tore at the high collar of her shirt and exposed the melted flesh beneath. The pain was unbelievable and she wanted to scream but as she watched the monstrous scarring that had dominated her life began to retreat. In its place stretched smooth white skin, unblemished and beautiful. With trembling fingers she touched it and began to laugh at its softness. She looked at the dog, its gaze unchanged, in disbelief and was about to cry out in happiness when she felt it change. Her new skin had vanished and the sickening scar had returned, red and unyielding.

'My price is your revenge,' repeated the dog and she nodded vacantly, her fingers still pressed to her chest. 'Some punishments are more deserved than others. Remember that.'

With those words the dog got to its feet and walked off into the trees that lined the park without a backwards glance. The girl remained staring at the trees for a long time afterwards, her fingers still pressed to her chest.

‘Want me to put those on the tab for you, Paulie?’ asked the large woman behind the counter. A badge pinned to her unflattering jumper read ‘happy to help’ and her over-exuberant smile proved this to be true.

‘Yes please, ma’am.’

‘How’s your Mom keeping? And your old man? Everything a-O.K over at the Stewart place?’ She packed the few groceries into a sturdy brown paper bag and passed them down to the freckle-cheeked young man.

‘Yes, ma’am. Everything’s just fine, thank you,’ he said, taking the bag in the crook of his good arm. Questions about home made Paulie nervous and he turned towards the door, his bad arm instinctively pulling down his faded t-shirt to hide the fading thunderclouds on the pale, celtic sky of his skin.

‘Oh, you don’t want to be forgetting this,’ she said, placing this week’s local paper into the open bag. ‘I know how your Mom likes to keep up to date.’ The front-page looked him straight in the face as he carried the bag out of the store and into the street: something about a fatal house fire in a nearby town. Five Killed in Teenage Fire Tragedy.

Outside he stood squinting for a moment, unable, due to the bag, to shield his eyes from the summer sun. It was hot, hotter than yesterday, and he dug his heel into the sidewalk. Sometimes, when it got very hot, you could leave a footprint there or even fry an egg on it (something he had often heard about but had never seen attempted). His heel left a crescent moon in the black asphalt and he smiled at it satisfied. His bike and trailer stood propped against the store window and he carefully deposited the bag in the trailer and took the right handlebar in his good hand.

He was about to start the short journey home when he stopped, feeling he was being watched. The empty lot opposite was overgrown with weeds and saplings, the vanguard of invading wilderness that had come to reclaim what it had lost. He cast his eyes in that direction, sure that he was being watched from the derelict square of land. After a while his eyes became accustomed to the collage of opportunistic greenery and dull greys of crumbling concrete and he saw a dog. A dog with black eyes. Black eyes like glistening beetles.

The Unfriendly Ghost

Alex Fraser

This film is great. Why aren't Stu and his friend laughing? Oh well, so long as Casper is OK in the end that's all I care about, I'm so glad Mam brought me and my brother to see this. But the old people in front of us keep turning round and distracting me. Why are they doing that? Another funny part makes me burst out laughing and kick the chair in front of me, but that was only an accident so why does the old person look so cross? I see them whisper something to Mam but I can't hear. Casper is talking again and I need to listen carefully. Again I laugh, this time probably a little too loudly as Stu elbows me and gives me a funny look. He's so weird sometimes.

"Right, I've had enough," Mam says as she grabs my arm, yanking me out of the popcorn covered seat, and leads me down to the door. The sticky floor clings to my trainers like glue, but not enough to slow me from the exit doors.

"Where are we going? Why are we going?" my questions get no reply. All my thoughts are of why I won't get to see the end of the film. This isn't fair

Finally we're outside, my eyes sting in the bright sunlight.

"We'll wait out here until you've learnt to behave yourself." She looks angry now, making the type of face she has when me and my brother fight or when she's *stressed at work*.

"But what have I done? Please can we go back to see the end?" Try as I might we stay outside the cinema doors, no amount of begging seems to work. Why is she doing this? Was I being bad? I ask again, "what did I do?" This time the corners of my eyes and inside of my nose begin to sting.

"You were being far too loud. Everyone else in the cinema was looking at us. I'm sorry, Alex, but I asked you a hundred times to be quiet. So we'll just wait here for your brother until it's finished."

"No, please no, I have to see the end, *please*."

She ignores me. Did she ask me to be quiet? I don't remember it so this must be all her fault for not getting my attention. This is horrible. The tears in my eyes are starting to build up. I can't cry, I tell myself, but it's too late. The cinema in front of me is now only a shimmering blur and I can hear boys and girls in the queue asking their parents why I'm upset. One of the older boys points and laughs. I beg again, can we please go and see the end, and again and again. We stay where we are.

Stu eventually wanders out with his friend, both with smirks on their faces.

"How did it end?" I say choking back the tears. Mam is dragging me to the car.

It's Complicated

Helena Rankin

His hand trembles as it reaches for the razor, brushing a precarious tube of toothpaste into the sink. The hand makes a familiar detour to grip a half-empty brown glass bottle instead. As he takes a sip there's a shrill, indignant shout from downstairs: something about the dog and Megan's breakfast.

Tom takes another long mouthful from the bottle, this time swallowing a couple of green and yellow capsules and sighing out a slow breath as his shaking hands steady, and he fortifies himself for the onslaught of four young, boisterous children and a destructive German shepherd. More shouts from the kitchen pierce his morning routine, three different voices clamouring to be heard over one another. Tom glares at himself in the mirror, cursing being lumbered with so many distractions on his last few days off work. There's a heavy thump and a sharp yap from below.

"Cut it out," he bellows.

If anything, the ruckus gets louder. With a short sigh, Tom wonders what the next minor catastrophe will be.

Halfway through shaving (razor in one hand, bottle in the other) his mobile phone rings in his trouser pocket. The bottle thuds down onto the edge of the sink. It's work; they need him to cover someone's shift. Yes, today. No, there isn't anyone else available.

"It's my day off, John," Tom says, wishing he had never taken the office job from hell. "Fine, but you owe me one. I've got the kids today so I'll be late, bye." The tremors return as he ends the call and then double checks that his jittery fingers have made their mark before muttering, "Not like I should drive in this state." Tom swaps the phone for the bottle.

There are more shouts from downstairs and then the slam of the backdoor which rattles his mirror; the dog's been sick. Great. Tom takes one more drink to steel his nerves and quash his annoyance. Then he finishes up in the bathroom, uncurling his treacherous fingers from their tight, desperate grip on the bottle, to leave it on the edge of the sink for later. He changes in his adjoining bedroom, stuffing a worn yellow tie into his jacket pocket as he starts down the stairs, taking them two at a time. He reaches the bottom step and springs forward with a yelp as his foot lands on something prickly and sharp. Looking down, he sees a pink hairbrush, discarded no doubt by one of his children, and sends it skittering under the overloaded shoe rack by the door with a single swipe of his scuffed black shoe.

The absence of bickering surprises Tom as he enters the 'Declared Disaster Zone', known to those without four children as The Kitchen, as does the lack of sharp claws scabbling across the wood-effect laminate flooring. Through the narrow window, over the dirty plastic dishes stacked next to the sink, the swish of long grasses and bushes catches Tom's eye; a bushy brown tail bats them aside and

a broad chest steamrolls its way through, leaving a trail of trampled grass and fallen young leaves.

Tom wrinkles his nose and surveys the room, noticing a spreading greyish-green puddle on the floor in front of the sink, its vile stench of bile and milk making his eyes water.

“Damn it, Doug. As if I wasn’t late enough already,” he says. “At least it’s not on the carpet this time.” Tom glances at the oven clock but it only tells him the same thing it does every morning. “Kids, where are you?” he yells, grabbing a mostly brown banana from the battered wicker fruit bowl next to the fridge.

There’s a muffled giggle from the doorway behind him. Spinning around, Tom comes face-to-face with his offspring in the hall. Megan, the eldest by eight years, is perched on the pine telephone table staring earnestly at her phone. Rory and Tania, the eight year old twin monsters, are grinning from ear to ear and clutching their schoolbags. Tania has a hand clasped over Ellie’s mouth along with a handful of her long red hair. Tom’s eyes widen as he takes in their school uniforms – neatly ironed, lacking in mud splatters or cereal and, perhaps most surprisingly, being worn appropriately. Tom glances at Megan and smiles, but she’s still focused on her phone.

“Ready for school?” Tom asks round a mouthful of banana. They all nod although Ellie’s is more because she’s giggling and wriggling in Tania’s grip. “Good. Megan, please could you clean up the dog sick? It doesn’t have to be perfect, but I think you’ll want to come back to a house smelling of half-digested dog food and golden nuggets even less than I do. Rory, put out fresh water on the patio for Doug. Tania, get Ellie’s stuff together, please.”

Rory, who is still grinning broadly, dashes towards the backdoor. Tom can hear the splash of water against the tiles behind the utility room sink as he turns the tap on full as usual. Tania is already gathering school things in the hallway for herself and Ellie. Tom looks up at his daughter still sitting on the table and smiles.

“Thank you for getting them ready,” he says. Megan stares at him, then gives a short, mute nod and hops off the table and follows Rory into the utility room.

Finishing the last of the banana and tossing the skin across the kitchen into the sink, Tom gathers the previous day’s newspaper and some unfinished paperwork from the small, square kitchen table, pressed against the wall next to the kitchen door, and stuffs them into a beaten old shoulder bag hanging from the back of the only chair. He rummages through the front pocket until he feels cold metal against his skin. He pulls out a small hip flask and wobbles it, feeling the fluid slosh heavily against its confines. *Emergencies only*, he reminds himself. *No need to turn into your father*. His hand wavers as he places the flask back and, before he takes a sip, the faded red scars on his wrist catch his attention for a moment. *Maybe a tattoo would cover up the biggest mistake of my life*, he thinks, before a small, smooth hand with fluorescent orange nail polish covers them and drags him towards the front door.

Tom watches with a familiar dull ache in his chest as Megan, Rory, Tania and Ellie walk through the school gates. He has resisted the urge to walk them all the way in but now his mutinous feet are getting restless. Instead, he pulls out his

phone from a tangle of earphone cable and keys in his trouser pocket and leans against the brick wall he stands beside. Tom logs into Facebook and the ache in his chest clenches, like a vice, at the purely blue bar at the top. Not a single notification. Not even an invitation from his mum to a church choir concert on the other side of the country tomorrow. Of his six-hundred-and-thirty-seven “friends” not one of them had liked his last post – maybe he should give up the self-promotion and just resign himself to being a part-time, self-employed, under-eighties disco DJ instead of being subjected to the ritual humiliation of public dismissal and commercial disdain.

Tom forces himself to think of something to post – something new and original, something witty or wise – but all he can think to say is:

“Woke up. Fed the dog. Fed the kids.”

For good measure he adds a couple of photos of Megan and Tania doing each other's hair the day before with the spiky pink hairbrush that is now lathered in dust and whatever else lives under the shoe rack. Nothing happens immediately and he puts his phone away again. Joyful screams of children in the playground remind him of the empty house he will occupy in two days' time. His restless feet turn him away and down the street with the flow of traffic as it streams towards the centre of town.

Off to work. If only it were that simple. His hands are shaking again and the pull of the smooth, warm cognac in his hip flask so strong. He really should go to work. At least this job pays him. He has four kids – soon there'll be maintenance payments to keep them in the manner to which they have become accustomed – a dog, insistent on chewing through every chair leg and shoe in his house, a mortgage and an alcohol habit. An expensive alcohol habit, at that.

Tom stops and tugs the phone out of his pocket to check for any notifications he might have missed while covering the last hundred or so metres. Nothing, again. Scrolling down his Facebook wall, Tom notices a few recent posts from his soon-to-be ex-wife about holiday plans with the kids. It feels like he's being stabbed in the chest; neither she nor the kids had even mentioned going away. Megan had even liked the post. His mind is flooded by red-hot, agonising thoughts and the only escape is to rifle through his bag, find the cool, calm metal of his flask and gulp down the liquid. In between sips, Tom taps his phone screen and posts:

“Kids at school. Work is a terrible idea, but I'll be needing the money soon.”

Both the phone and the hip flask find their way into a trouser pocket, crushed within Tom's fists. He flips the collar of his jacket up against his chin and trudges forward. He'll get a buzz later probably, when his mum remembers that her son's been going through a bit of a rough patch of late. That was the real reason he got an account in the first place; to let people know that thirty-seven year-old Tom Welsh of Ilford is still kicking. Still a father. Still coping. Even if he's not.

The DJ

Chris McDonald

It was two in the morning and my head was pulsing from the bass, but I didn't care. All around me was a sea of people, soaked in sweat and bouncing to the sound of drum and bass. But I wasn't one of them; I was on high, surrounded by my mixing decks, a metaphorical king, the ruler of the dance floor, playing songs for my loyal subjects so they could dance and frolic in the courtyard below me, while I sat alone in my counting house.

And boy was I alone. I had been there five hours already and the only person who had talked to me was some brunette claiming it was her birthday, so that I would play her favourite song. Which, I might add, was terrible, the latest drivel from One Direction, and as usual it was full of their characteristically catchy lyrics about teen melodrama. Something which I knew would stay with me, even though the things sung about had long since ceased to matter to me.

But I didn't care. I had never been much of a fan of people, always seemed to prefer the company of my dog. We just got on better, you see, because with him I knew where I stood. As long as he got a walk and some food, he was happy. Something I could not say was true for my girlfriend, or my six kids for that matter – but that's another story, I thought, groaning to myself.

Turning my attention back to the mixing deck, I started to set up the transition to the next song, when suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder. Looking round I saw some douche bag in a muscle T had climbed up on the podium with me. Turning round fully to face him, I began telling him to get down, when he cut me off and started shoving a CD in my face. It was a demo disk, from what I could make out, burned on a Tesco's value CDR with the words 'Paradoxical Embolism' written in dodge red pen on it. I took this to be the name of his band and, from what I could hear over the bass, I made out that he wanted me to play some of their songs.

Pushing the disk back to him, I tried to explain that we didn't do that here. He wasn't having any of this, and began pushing the disk back to me, which is when things began to get nasty. When I rejected it again, he started trying to put it in the CD player himself. But *I* was having none of this, because it was an expensive CD player and, frankly, I just don't like people touching my stuff.

I counter his arm before he can touch the player. The disk falls to the floor and bounces off into the feet of the crowd. Turning round to me with an angry look on his face, he pushes my shoulders, knocking me back against the railing of my podium. Starting to get angry too, I push him, figuring I can take this punk - something which I'm going to be honest is a mistake. For in response he smacks me across the face with his hand, just catching my cheek bone with his ring.

This causes me to go flying, hitting the table and sprawling over the decks. As my arms try to save me, I accidentally knock one of the switches and the next thing I know, the volume goes through the roof, before suddenly cutting out completely,

as the speakers all over the club begin to smoke. Managing to stand up, I start dabbing at my now bleeding nose, just as everyone in the club turns to look at me.

They're angry, I can see that. They've come here to dance, but with no music what's the point? The first of them shouts out, soon followed by another and another. Until almost in unison, the people begin to boo me. This is punctuated by bottles being thrown, most of which miss, but, unluckily for me, a blue Wicked bottle manages to crack my temple.

Staggering, I collapse to the floor of my podium and watch through blood-covered eyes as my kingdom collapses. For, moving in, the bouncers inadvertently escalate the situation, into what can be only be described as a riot. However, as I lie there bleeding, I see the one who's caused it all escape out the fire exit. Calling out, I try to draw someone's attention to this, but my mind gives up and fades to black.

Boxing Day

Rebecca Chroston

Not all bad dreams are nightmares: some are worse. Nightmares are barely more than illusions of the subconscious, tales invented by the uncontrolled imagination. My recurrent dreams are more than that, an insistent reminder of my past. Every night I relive it, the screaming, the panic spreading like some virus, the churning fear.

Writing feels liberating. It can free us from the world that confines us, fashions a new one. The only problem is that in order for me to create the words on my screen, my fingers first have to type letters on the keyboard, setting up tiny seismic vibrations.

My mind trembles again.

The ground trembled and the sea writhed as shock waves sped along the oceanic currents and streams, changing their course, their destination. People screamed as others stood shocked and silent. The intuitive ran; dogs certainly ran.

Just run.

Strangely I found myself sitting in the back of a canopied pick-up truck, or songthaew, which served as transport in the little community. I don't remember running from the beach to the songthaew but there I sat in complete shock, uncomprehending, numb and dumb. In retrospect I marvel at my quick thinking, my common sense. I was smart enough to let my feet lead me. They had led me to jump into the back of the songthaew.

Back there, where I had been seconds before, I saw the beach huts swallowed up, knocked down like a pile of pick-up-sticks. Flattened. Destroyed. The water wall still advanced, merciless. Beyond the rubble and wood were the faint outlines of tourists and locals alike being engulfed...screaming for help...pleading...drowning. Dying.

Yet my father was beside me, desperately trying to tear the strap off his camera bag in an attempt to bind our arms together, just in case...Thankfully, parents are prohibited from really knowing the thoughts of their children, they cannot understand the magic within their skulls or the terror they can feel. My awareness of what was happening was corrupted. I noticed how the sun shone off the metal sides of the pick-up truck. Beyond the danger, just as normal, I noticed how the towering palm trees swayed gently to the rhythm of the faint breeze, and how the parched grass was shrivelling in the overwhelming heat. But I could not grasp just how many people there were, all fleeing the sea; all those people who sold trinkets and vegetables at Saturday markets, who fished the sea from brightly painted wooden craft, who lived in cramped beach shacks, who had come to this far place in search of dreams. The people ran, and they filled the dirt-track road with their shrieks and fears.

The people behind us were not running. For them hope was lost.

As the water crashed around their heads and smashed their bodies they neither cried nor screamed. Reality caught up with them. They didn't make a sound, but the realisation in their eyes showed they knew time was finished. I have to find the right words. Poorly chosen words will not do them justice.

*The lucky would resurface, and the unlucky had already taken their last breath.
Now, it would be my turn.*

The sea caught up with me, jaws open, and I was finally able to see its heart. The salt water burned my tongue before hurtling down my throat to saturate my lungs.

I was losing. But I had not lost, not yet.

Looking back now I know it changed my life, for better or for worse perhaps; I do not know, but in that moment everything changed. The sky became less bright and the world became dull. I thought my ability to laugh, and love and live had perished.

When I was finally safe my legs collapsed, giving way under the weight and pressure of the shock. I was too scared to scream, too horrified to cry and was shaking uncontrollably, which made it impossible to speak. Beside me sat an elderly Thai woman who clutched prayer beads and whispered to the gods, while the western family opposite sat in a circle embracing each other. On my other side sat a young local woman and a baby, not her own but picked up from a table top in the chaos. The baby was swaddled in dirty sheets and he screamed and screamed.

I felt parted from my body, looking down on the event, not part of it; I didn't think of anything. It was the first time I had no thoughts.

I find that writing heals the hidden pains, the hurt that once seemed irreducible. However, looking back at my account, I realise I haven't once used the word. I find it difficult to say tsunami.

You see, it's better to write it down rather than talking face to face because you so often don't get the reaction you want. I cannot see your reactions. I won't have to see the pity which I've become so good at identifying; I can tell the difference between shock and pity. I can deal with the shock. So if your eyes well up or if you would like to reach out and touch my shoulder to comfort me, then at least I don't need to know. I am protected from you by the distance between reader and writer: though I will never meet you, I have shared this with you.

All you need to know is I am not a victim; I am a survivor.

Haiku

Regrets

Rebecca Chroston

Footsteps imprinted
On saturated wood
A sole and five toes

Perfect droplets of
Diluted blood on the walls,
Floor and across his face

She looked so peaceful,
Drifting hair concealed her
From red stained water

Cougar

Rebecca Chroston

Cougar is my favourite. Emily's got longer hair, but I like the funny circles on Cougar: he looks like a leopard. He was hit by a car three years ago, it was very sad. He lost a leg and had to eat funny mush for a while instead of normal food. I used to give him my left over gravy because he looked so sad, but don't tell Mum.

Even though he's only got three legs now he still manages to climb the wall at the bottom of the garden. During the day Cougar goes away over the wall and sometimes doesn't come back until it's dark. Mum says he goes to play with his friends, just like I do.

Emily's different: she's very lazy. All she seems to do is lie on Mum's bed and sleep all day. Maybe Cougar's friends don't like her and that's why she stays.

Cougar can be grumpy though. Mum says it's because he's a boy, which makes sense: Dad's *always* grumpy. But Cougar likes me, I'm his favourite. I feed him, cuddle him at night and when people laugh at the way he walks I tell them off. It's not his fault!

But now Cougar spends all his time sleeping. He never goes to play with his friends anymore and he won't eat his food either. Mum says he's an old man and is sore. I do hope he gets better.

Today my dad is taking Cougar away from me. I asked why he couldn't take Emily instead – Cougar's my favourite – but Dad said he *had* to take Cougar. Mum told me that Cougar will be happier and won't be in pain anymore, which is good. I don't like Cougar being sore all the time. I was also told that I will never see Cougar again and that I have to say goodbye.

It's not fair.

Just thinking about it is making me cry, and I hate to cry. Crying is for babies.

I wish Cougar could stay. But it's okay... I have a plan. It's my birthday next month, so when I blow out the candles I think I'll wish for Cougar back.

Wishes always come true.

Gabriel's Message

Olivia France

Christmas morning. Another year has gone by already and here we are, once again sitting in St. Andrew's church, Bredfield, shivering, with icicles forming under our noses, waiting for the Christmas Day service to begin. It is probably the one time a year that the church is ever full – we even have to provide extra seating, which gets the warden very excited. She starts arranging the chairs with a beaming grin but instantly becomes a fuming bull if anyone so much as looks at a chair intending to rearrange it. It is only a small church, typically English. Its flint and stone facade looks as if it were constructed during medieval times and has never altered. Today warm and soft rays of light float through the coloured windows, casting rainbows on oblivious children and adults. It really is a true symbol of our past and one that I hope remains for many years to come. The surrounding graveyard is sparsely dotted with snow-sprinkled headstones – mostly from decades past but, upsettingly, with increasing numbers of recent dates, making the full house this morning all the more fantastical.

The village of Bredfield is, like the church, small, with the highlight being the voluntarily run village shop that adjoins the play area, enticing young faces and eager fingers with its splendid array of penny sweets. Many occasions have passed in which I stood, barely able to see over the counter, counting out a customer's change with unshakable concentration. This little store only sells home-grown produce and relies heavily on the loyalty of local residents.

But I digress from the service at hand. It is like my own showing of 'Groundhog Day'. The same hymns being sung with the ear-piercing descant wailing from the choir stalls, identical readings in the too familiar monotonous voices, and members of the congregation in their self-allocated pews which have become imprinted by their backsides.

Nonetheless, I love our cyclic gatherings. I sit, as usual, with my mother and sister awaiting the arrival of 'Quasimodo' – my father is regularly seen clutching the striped ropes that disappear to connect to the bells above, but I can assure you he hasn't developed a hunchback, although he would suit one rather well. My grandparents sit behind us with their bibles open and prepared for the first reading.

Lord be with me, it is almost time.

Every year I am asked to sing for the congregation before the sermon to soften them up before the onslaught from the vicar about their many sins over the past year and how they must repent their evil ways now or else face the consequences at the time of judgement. To the regular church-goers this is harmless repartee, but to the individuals who believe that attending this service is enough God-loving to last them until next year, it can feel rather accusatory.

The song chosen today is 'Gabriel's Message'. It has to be my favourite Christmas hymn. I have practiced and performed this song enough times to know

it by heart, down to the finest details of suggested tempo and dynamics. After each practice with the organist, my confidence has grown and I have begun to relax about the forthcoming performance. The piece is comfortably within my range and I know exactly when I can take a breath, so my willingness and excitement to stand in front of the audience has markedly increased. I am ready to do this but, not only that, I feel prepared to the extent that I aim to impress the congregation and make my family proud.

But, when the time comes, nerves start to invade my body and fear slinks into my mind. So I walk, fear-stricken, up the aisle to plant my unsteady feet below the altar at the front of the church, turning to be ruthlessly critiqued by the hundreds of music-hungry eyes.

The melancholy yet emotive melody, accompanied by the powerful undertones of the organ, resonates through the still and ethereal atmosphere that has descended. Standing here encapsulated by the music, I am lost in the beauty of this moment and forget about my onlookers. However, I am quickly and painfully torn from my safe and protective bubble, and wrenched back to reality as I hear the familiar cue for me to begin. My heart feels as if it will combust, it is beating so fast and hard. I feel sick. Why am I doing this? Why am I torturing myself? I try to swallow the thick, gelatinous gunge that has replaced normal saliva and take a deep breath, attempting to appear calm whilst inwardly I am flapping around like a screeching goose after a predator.

Despite my best efforts to do this glorious creation justice, amidst the slowly circulating smoke arising from the many candles that cast a soft glow on the audience, I ruin it. The smoke has made my mouth dry so I choke during the third verse causing me to cut a note short. My eyes dart around the faces before me, noticing several stained with tears and others whose eyes are firmly closed. This is a disaster. How could I be this awful after all my practising? I finish the song before smiling meekly, holding back tears and hurriedly shuffling back to the hard, cold wooden pew next to my mother. Once I have bundled myself in between my mum and sister, who is grinning like the Cheshire cat, a hand reaches across and clasps mine. I look up and my mother is smiling, but it doesn't reach her eyes. She squeezes my hand and looks away. I notice a tear tumble down her damask cheek. This is the last straw and sets me off. Our fingers remain interwoven as we both cry in silence.

The remainder of the service passes as fluidly as ever, with the congregation raising the roof with their evident love of Christmas hymns and carols. I sit, stand, kneel, sit, stand, and sit, paying little attention to the admiration and warmth from my family, whilst trying desperately to identify what went wrong. The organist had repeatedly assured me that I knew the piece inside out and would perform it expertly as usual, and all my rehearsals had gone just as I had hoped. Why then do I feel so disappointed? Why does everyone look overcome with emotion?

The service soon ends and I am abruptly greeted, by friends and acquaintances, and commended for my flawless performance. Several people ask whether I sing professionally and are shocked when I reply,

“No, but I wish with all my heart that I did.”

They reply to this with:

“Well, why don’t you?”

“You are certainly good enough.”

“Oh please do, you are too talented not to.”

I can see from their expressions that every word is genuine but I can’t help the overwhelming feeling that they are just being kind and saying what they think they should. The organist then seeks me out and compliments me on my quality of voice and unique, warm sound. I smile as best I can, without allowing tears to pool in my eyes and flow fast and unconstrained down my cheeks, and give him my thanks. It is clear from the feedback that my performance was perceived as exceptional but I remain feeling saddened. I love singing more than anything, but still I yearn to give a truly worthy performance. Is that too much to ask?

Well, I suppose there is always next year.

Poems

Joe Ryan

Crab Fishing

The slap of bacon
Wrapped around stone
Tightening of string
Lowering the bait
Before a hidden audience
The scurry of crabs
As they click their delight
Excitement
Under orange sky

Trust

The nervous look and awkward smile
Repeating over and over
What my mother had told me

I pushed my brother
Swore at my sister
And was bold in school

Forgive me father for I have sinned

What penance is worthy
Of a broken trust
And blemished soul

Some consolation to the boarding school brat
And diligent altar boy
Doing what he's told

Forgive me father, but what about you?

Imperial Leather

It's a constant that remains
As memory reverts,
To a simpler time
No malice, no hurt

Hour by hour
A life on repeat,
How powerful it can be
A reminder, a heartbeat

There's a person alive
If only on the inside,
A housemaid, a butcher,
Ghost on the outside

The first thing relatives pack,
With a spare in the drawer,
Placed in the bathroom
Next to the tap

At routine times of the day
Restoring dignity,
That shiny red wrapper
Moments of clarity

With a lather and rinse
Memories fade,
In turn destroying
Connections made

Year Out

Joe Ryan

Dan looks up from the sink full of dirty dishes and down the garden through the kitchen window. His eyes are drawn to the rusty old sign perched up against the side wall of the coal shed. He can feel that familiar sense of guilt and a pain he's become used to build up inside him.

"All I'm asking is that you think about it, Brian.... Brian, did you hear what I said?"

Brian is sitting on the floor by the fireplace, hunched over his open laptop, fixated on the screen. He's anxiously checking for any new updates with his university applications. He's due to start next month, whatever his father might say.

"Yes."

"Did you hear what I said?" his father repeats.

"Yes, I heard what you said."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

Dan turns to his son, his face etched with exhaustion from the last few weeks.

"It's just that, with everything that's happened."

"I know what happened, I don't need reminding," Brian quickly interrupts, pulling up his hood.

"I know. That's not what I mean. You know what I mean." He makes his way around the kitchen counter and places his hand on his son's shoulder.

Brian turns to his father and points to the screen of the laptop. "In case you've forgotten, this was the plan long before all this happened."

"I know, but it's just a year, son."

Dan, unsure of what else to say, returns to the dishes, checking the food under the grill as he passes. Brian closes his laptop, stokes the fire and sits on the rocking chair beside the window. Staring blankly down the garden his eyes are drawn to the rusty old sign. Even though the words on it are too far away to read, he knows exactly what it says. He's known for as long as he can remember: D. Murphy and Sons – Quality Butchers for over 100 years, the latter highlighted in red, signifying its importance. His mother had been nagging them for years to get rid of it. He knows it is something his Dad is very proud of, a business that he's built up, something that even Brian is proud of, not that he would admit it.

"It won't be just a year."

The growing tension is broken by the sound of the school bus screeching to a halt outside the front gate. A young girl disembarks and makes her way towards the house.

"That's Jill now."

Dan busily puts out the dinner, fish fingers, beans and chips for the third night this week.

“Will you set the table please?”

Brian begins to set the table, reminding himself that it’s for three now, not four.

“She won’t be finished school for another two years.”

“She’s too young Brian, you know that. It’s no business for her.”

“I’ll be back at the weekends.”

“No you won’t.”

Jill walks in the back door, head down, laden with books, her mascara smudged. This has been a regular occurrence since she started back in school over two weeks ago.

“Come here,” her father softly ushers her into his outstretched arms. He looks over at his son and they both know that their conversation can wait. Brian can feel himself well up as the sobs grow louder from over his shoulder.

He knows it won’t be just a year.

Childhood Memory

Hamish Duff

The car pulls up to my house just as I'm scribbling down answers to the last of my sums. No homework for me I think smugly, and I start to plan out the rest of my evening. TV, food, TV, bath, book, bed. I jab at my belt buckle for a while until it releases me then I slowly let myself out of the car and hop down to the ground. I turn and gather my workbooks into my bag. As I turn, a dim light from the cottage across the way catches my eye. I begin to ask, 'Is that Granny out of the hospit...'

'No, not quite,' my mother interjects and my mind races back to thoughts of my free evening.

I trundle towards the house, carelessly swinging my briefcase, congratulating myself for doing my homework in the car. Teachers always tell me "it's too messy", but I don't care because I don't have to read it. My mother hurriedly shepherds me in through the doorway. She always worries about me catching cold that lady.

I chuck my briefcase aside without another thought and kick off my shoes. Luxury awaits me. My sister, whom I've happily ignored up until this point, barges past me. I notice the house is quieter than usual. The TV isn't on....

I parade into the kitchen and that's when I'm brought back to the ground. Hard. My dad meets me with open arms that surround me entirely. This isn't normal, I think, as he collects my sister too and I notice his chest is heaving and there are tears on his cheeks.

The moment I realise is brutal and sudden. My dad starts speaking but my ears are closed, I feel empty to the pit of my tummy and salty tears dribble down my cheeks. I feel weak. I catch my Dad saying "... she went peacefully," and feel angry. As if that matters now! I push myself away from him and run to my room.

Invisible Scene

Helena Rankin

Greying trainers with red socks wrapped around pale, skinny, bruised legs edged into his vision from the left, contrasting with the mossy grass and the sawdust that peppered it yellow, like a churned-up football pitch. The sledgehammer ripped into the wet ground with a thud as it missed its target. The man let go of the thick handle and straightened, rolling his shoulders and arching his back with a crack. “You OK?” he asked, swiping his forehead with the back of his scratchy, gloved hand.

The worn trainers shuffled clumps of mud around, adding to the stains. He hefted the sledgehammer again, swinging it up and down again in one fluid movement to strike a wooden plank and drive the tube underneath further into the ground.

“Are you finished, or are you stuck?”

“No no,” was the response, with an unfortunate squeak. “I just wanted to take a break.”

“So how far have you got?”

“I’ve been at it all morning...” Another swing cut the reply short and sent a shrill echo reverberating around the houses.

“Where have you got to?”

The trainers kicked up more damp earth, showering the man’s mud-spattered boots. The head of the sledgehammer drove into the ground once more, the vibrations rocking the plank onto the ground.

“Stop that and answer me properly.”

The trainers stopped mid-kick, a shoulder-width apart, planted deep into the loose soil. The man stooped to pick up the plank, brushing mud from its damaged surface.

“Well, I managed the first couple alright, and the next few weren’t too bad I suppose...”

The trainers stayed rooted to the spot but new movement caught the man’s eye – young, wiry fingers picking at the pockets of black shorts. With a deep sigh he once more let his sledgehammer fall to the ground.

“But...”

“... But I couldn’t get any of the others.”

The man nodded, bent down and steadied the plank.

“I tried and tried, but, I don’t know, I just couldn’t get the answers they wanted.”

“How were these different to the first ones?”

“The numbers are all different.”

“But you’ve been practising them all summer, Matt, and you’ll get plenty more practice when you’re there. They don’t expect you to know everything beforehand; you’re not a sapper yet. What else? Pass me that post, please.”

“They’re all different signs now too, though. At school they never really went into that kind of stuff much.” An eight foot long, rough wooden post entered the man’s vision as he wiped his forehead again. Holding the post was a smooth hand spattered with blue and red ink. “And I can never get the numbers they have.” The hand passed him the spirit level as well and then took it and the post back when offered.

“Show me,” the man said before swinging again, this time ending with a clatter as the plank splintered and bounced off a fence panel into the undergrowth just beyond the garden boundary. “Draw all the different ways the signs can be together and tell me how they would come out in a sum.” As he bent to pick up a fresh plank he watched a trainer score lines in the mud. “So the first one; two pluses give you?” The new plank screeched as it was driven against the metal tube.

“A plus. And two minuses also make a plus, right?”

“Right. So what does one of each make?” The plank was thudding against the ground with each pound from the sledgehammer before there was an answer.

“A plu– no, a minus. But what if there’s three signs?”

“Woah, one at a time, but yes, a minus. Spirit level, please. You’re not even sixteen yet, and you’ve decided what you want to do in life and what options you have to get there. It took me twenty-five years to work that one out.” The man looked round and smiled before checking the tube was still going in vertically. “You’ve got ink on your face, Matt.”

The man stood again, twisting and cracking his joints with a satisfied grimace. He dragged the post over and bashed it down with a mallet until the lip of the post holder was no longer visible.

“Why does that make a minus, though?”

“At least I don’t have mud smeared from ear to ear.” The post slotted in finally with a dull thump as the man grinned.

“And it gives you a minus because if, like, I took a biscuit and then you took another one it would be the same as just you taking two. Right?”

“Correct.” The man squinted down the line of new posts that he’d erected along the edge of the overgrown woods at the far end of the garden, pulling off one glove to scratch the vivid red midge bites which burned his forearms. “What if there were three signs: two minuses and a plus; or two pluses and a minus?”

“Two minuses would give you a plus so add a plus and it would stay the same, but with two pluses it would give you a minus.”

“Good lad,” the man said, looking at the array of tools scattered around him but not finding the one he wanted. “I know you’re anxious about this entrance exam, Matt, but Welbeck’s not the only college you can go to.” One callused hand rested on a spool of green garden wire, the other fumbling through his shirt pocket for his glasses and an oily pencil. “I’m sure there are other courses you could do at other colleges. And there are always other options if you change your mind or don’t manage it this year. That cadets’ adviser said infantry and then assault pioneer, right?” On one side of the muddy plank he scrawled an equation then slowly scratched the answer into the other and handed it to Matt. “Give this one a try now

and if you're still struggling I'll come in. Or shall we have a crack at it later?"

The boy nodded, his feet still as he stood watching the man pick the tools he would need next. "Later. I could do with some grub first."

"Good, so could I. Once you're done, grab the other hammer and the step ladder from the garage, Matt, and give me a hand, and then we can both go in for lunch."

Parents' Night

Joe Ryan

The boy needs discipline," I interject before the parents of my class clown begin to list off feeble excuses for their son's behaviour. "I've been teaching for nearly twenty five years and, believe me, I know a troublemaker when I see one."

I can see both of them becoming more rigid and uncomfortable. They seem shocked. This news can't be that surprising, I think. Perhaps they're sick and tired of hearing the same thing throughout the afternoon from different teachers. I'm definitely not the only one.

"He's very good at home though, helps out about the house and so far has had no bad reports from school," his mother replies defensively.

"This is the first we've heard of him getting in trouble," adds the father, naturally nodding his head in agreement. I can tell he hasn't a clue. They ask for examples. I hoped they would.

"Well, there was the English test I set last week in which he continuously disrupted the class." I particularly remember that day as I was horrifically hung-over, one of my best yet. I mean who goes to the toilet during an exam? He had plenty of time beforehand. "He also ruined the entire Geography class field trip earlier this term. I had to lend him my jumper after he fell into that puddle."

"He told us he was pushed by another boy."

"Mrs Hogg, he wandered off by himself, as usual, doing his own thing, ignoring my warnings and delayed our return home." I held back a smirk as I momentarily remembered the look on his face when he fell over. How I wish I'd been the one who pushed him in. Those were the days.

"Look, it's not your fault," I utter softly, trying to reassure them as I sense a tension developing in the room and also wanting to finish this up as soon as possible. "It's kids these days, you know, no discipline, no respect for anything or anyone, thinking they can do whatever they want, not like in our day. I'm sure he'll grow out of it."

Hopefully they'll buy that. Christ I can't wait until this is over. What more do they want? Am I supposed to be thankful that they got off work for this? He's their son, not mine. It's not my fault the little runt doesn't want to learn.

Looking at his parents I can see where he gets it from. I mean, after spending five minutes in their company I'm already annoyed. I can't tell if the mother is shocked or this is just how she looks. Her offensive, blank face is almost as comical as the overpowering scent of whatever cheap perfume her husband was told to get her for Christmas. He just nods along, chirping in every now and again like an ageing parrot, clasping his tattered briefcase under his arm, waiting for this to finish. I need to wrap this up.

"Hopefully it's just one of those things that he'll grow out of," I repeat. "If you

have any other questions or queries please feel free to contact the Principal.” Robert won’t thank me for that. I’ll have to buy him an extra round later on as we swap our stories from the day.

I usher them out and close the door with relief behind them. I wait until the sound of her ill-fitting high heels are but a distant echo and light up a cigarette. Thank God for that. I don’t get paid enough for this.

Haiku

Kaushiki Balachandiran

Colours flood the sky
as if a careless painter
flicked the paint.

Lightning sparkles through
dark clouds, blurred vision, thunderstorm
fit to pierce an eardrum.

Howling wind whips my hair.
Soft white waves, filling and effacing
footprints on the sand.

Well Fit

Olivia France

A small hall in the countryside, with vast, flat fields on all sides, is emitting low levels of light through three rectangular windows front and back, whilst the sun slowly sets behind.

The white, chipped and stained door, made from MDF, at the far end of the building stands slightly ajar. Energy saving ceiling lights are on full, but with four of them having blown weeks ago, the occupants are wide-eyed in the dim light. Fifteen yoga mats of differing colours lie unrolled around the room. Adults of fifty-five and older lie on their backs with their legs bent, feet still on the floor. A couple that lie next to each other at the end are considerably younger, the man being twenty-four and the woman twenty-two. At the other end of this derelict building stands the dark-haired trainer, young and muscular.

“Lift your hips, squeeze, release and lower.”

Gee gazes at the instructor whilst raising her hips off the sponge mat.

“Stop it,” Robert whispers.

“Stop what?”

“Staring.”

“I am *not* staring,” she replies, looking at him, taken aback.

“Oh yeah... so what do you call this then...?” He turns to face her and gapes, open mouthed, exaggerating her stunned look.

“Oh shut up,” she giggles at his ridiculous expression. “Am I not allowed to enjoy the view?”

“Of course you are, Gee. Especially when I’m such a fine specimen of physique and masculinity.” He raises his hips and squeezes his buttocks together whilst angling them towards her for appraisal.

She smiles at him and winks. “*Phoa*, get ‘em off.”

All the elderly participants turn in their direction casting pointed glances and tutting rhythmically. As Gee and Robert have disrupted the class again, the instructor calls to them from where he is standing, feet shoulder-width apart, hands behind his back, assessing his students.

“I would rather you didn’t, thank you. Now, roll onto your left side and place the red ball between your knees.” All members of the class do as instructed. The striking coach continues, “We are going to lift our upper foot to the ceiling, keeping our knees squeezing the ball. Try to keep your pelvis fixed, don’t let it rise with your leg.”

Sniggering as Robert loses his ball – “Come on dear, get your leg up” – Gee passes the ball to him and he looks disapprovingly at her. “Don’t give me that face.”

“What face?” he asks in hushed tones whilst replacing the ball between his knees.

“That face, the ‘stern parent’ face.”

Sighing, for he knows where this is headed: “I didn’t pull a face.”

“You did. You know that of all the things that annoy me, that one’s a sure winner.”

“Well I *am* sorry if my face offends you,” he says sarcastically, lifting his right foot to the ceiling.

Kicking the ball from between his knees, Gee pulls a face at the back of Robert’s head. “Ha!”

Sitting up and muttering so only she can hear: “For Christ’s sake, Gee.” He apologises to the instructor who hands him the red, deflated ball:

“Try to keep it under control... please.”

Not sure if the instructor means the ball or his girlfriend, Robert resumes his position on the violet, foam mat.

“Now turn over onto the other side and do the same exercise eight times.”

Robert rolls over onto his right side. Gee hasn’t moved but is staring at him as he gets into position. Remaining for a few moments, locked in what appears to be a tense showdown of staring, each waits for the other to back down.

“In your own time.” The trainer’s voice sounds strained and impatient, so Gee blinks, forfeits and rolls onto her right side.

“Don’t lift your hips.”

“I’m not lifting my hips.”

“Yes you are. I’m behind you so I can see pretty well... unless you have eyes in the back of your head?” She stops for a moment to suppress the slowly increasing desire to turn round and hit him, before continuing with the exercise, this time deliberately lifting her hips. “You’re still doing it. Lifting your hips.” She ignores him. “Why don’t you ask Mr Muscle to show you how it’s done? You obviously can’t do it properly.”

“And I suppose you are doing it perfectly, Mr I-Iron-My-Underpants,” she says, throwing a wounding insult back at him. “I’m *so* sorry if my Pilates technique isn’t up to your standards. Maybe I should just leave if it’s causing you so much distress.”

“That’s not fair. That’s not fair at all,” he whimpers in reply. “Just because I iron my underwear doesn’t mean you can use that against me. So what if I iron them? It’s not like I force you to watch or, God forbid, ask you to do it.”

He has turned the argument on its head, making out that Gee is being unreasonable about his domestic habits, when he was the one to ignite the fuse to start with. “Oh, Robert, just shut up and do your sit-ups.”

They all lie flat on their backs, placing the red ball to one side and commencing the ab-wrenching routine of abdominal curls.

“*Me?* I like *that*. That’s rich coming from you.”

“Excuse me?” She stops mid-motion and looks at him in disbelief.

“You heard me.”

“Yes, I heard you, but I wanted to see if you had the guts to say it again... to my face.” He continues exercising, not looking at her. “Well...?”

“Gee... just try to be quiet and do as you’re told. I know you find it hard, but please, for me... just try.” He focuses on the ceiling and breathes in time to his movements.

“Shall I just leave? Would that make this more enjoyable for you?” Pausing to look at him and waiting for a reply, her expression is a mixture of pain and anger. Still he remains silent.

Not quite believing that her boyfriend has managed to accuse her of being a loud, lazy, unfair and childish annoyance in the space of fifteen minutes, Gee gets up. Leaving her mat and ball on the floor, she grabs her keys and phone, forcing her feet into still laced-up ankle-boots, and storms towards the open door.

The class freezes, taken by surprise at the youngest member’s sudden decision. The instructor looks at Robert, an expression conveying his disappointment and frustration. Robert looks bewilderedly from the many blameful, staring eyes to the disappearing figure of his girlfriend, who is adding a sizeable dent to the already in need of repairing wall, behind the flimsy door, which trembles on its hinges after her explosive exit.

Finish Line

Joe Ryan

Jean was earlier than usual this morning. Her grandchildren have their school trip today so they were eager to get to school. Their mother works early on Tuesdays and Jean doesn't mind helping out. She could knock but the four steps leading up to Mary's semi-detached council house seemed to be getting steeper and steeper of late.

It wasn't long until Mary appeared at the door though, kitted from head to toe in their matching walking attire. She was still shouting instructions over her shoulder to her husband as she carefully made her way down the steps to greet Jean.

"Hello, Jean," she beamed, fixing her multi-coloured waterproof top. "Isn't it a lovely morning for it?"

"It is surely, Mary. Haven't we been blessed so far this year?"

"We have, thank God."

"How are you finding the new bar?" Jean asked pointing to the newly installed rail that ran up the four steps from the gate to the front door of the house.

"Oh it's brilliant Jean, although himself hasn't come around to it, you know yourself, stubborn as ever," Mary answered between breaths.

With that began their daily pilgrimage from the gate of Mary's house, up the main street of the village, around the wheel pump by Murphy's hardware store, down towards the playground, along the lake road and up the convent hill to the church.

"Did you hear about Ann?"

"I did. I can't say I'm surprised at all."

"I know, the cheek of her."

"What do you expect? I mean you remember what her children were like."

"How could I forget? No manners, no manners at all."

The village was still to wake from its sleep at this time in the morning and the women's conversation could be easily heard by anyone that had a mind to.

"Did you go to Billy O'Connors funeral yesterday? I didn't see you there at all."

"I did alright. Weren't the flowers lovely?"

"Gorgeous altogether. Who did them?"

"The family, I'm told."

"Aren't they great to do that, especially with everything that went on?"

"I know, and it's not as if he would've noticed."

The only interruptions they came across were the odd tractor trundling along with a creaky trailer struggling to follow and the distant hum of a radio coming from the building site next to the church.

"Who's that down by the playground?"

“Isn’t it Kathleen’s daughter Lucy? She was the teacher in England for years.”

“It’s an awful shame, isn’t it?”

“I know, and she has another on the way now apparently.”

“Poor Kathleen.”

The conversation slowed as they approached the church thanks to the gradual slope that led up to it. The parish priest was busy cleaning and readying the sacristy for the early morning service. Mary and Jean made their way quietly to the marble steps in front of altar and bowed their heads in respect.

“Will we light a candle?”

“Here, I’ve change for the box.”

“Don’t even think of it. You put some in yesterday. I’ll take care of it.”

“Didn’t he do a lovely job with the carpets?”

“Lovely.”

“It was badly needed.”

After about thirty minutes of a welcome break they were back pounding the pavements towards Mary’s house, finishing the ring.

“How are your knees now?”

“They have their moments. Dr. Burke gave me tablets for them.”

“The arthritis is it?”

“That’s what he said, but the tablets he gave me don’t agree with me at all.”

“My John had the same problem, awful trouble with his bladder with them.”

“Will you come in for a cup of tea?” asked Mary opening her gate as they reached their finishing line.

“I will,” declared Jean, eager to try this new railing.

House-Hunt

Luis Loureiro

The Barrs' arrival at their rented house on Merchiston Avenue was marked by the placement of two peculiar objects on the windowsill, so that the whole neighbourhood now realised the property had at long last found its new occupants. A stuffed raven, wings spread and arching slightly at the tips as if frozen mid-flight, shared the wooden shelf with a vividly lifelike wax model of a human heart, glossy as if the sheen of fresh blood still adorned it.

Jordan had bought these ornaments just a few weeks before, when he got news that a producer from the BBC would like him to work on a mini-series screenplay. The news called for celebration, and for this he had a ritual that he had developed after a few similar successes – he rushed to Notting Hill on the Central Line, and scoured Portobello Road for an appropriate present to himself. The raven and the heart caught his eye, not for their aesthetic appeal (they were, even he would admit, two horrid mementoes of the Victorians' passé Gothic sensibility), but for their relevance. They would get him in the mood for the downbeat script he had been commissioned to rewrite.

By the time the good news had arrived, summer was stretching to an end and the date when he and Clare were due to make the move north soon followed. They would be Edinburgers. He would be a professor at film school; one with a promising project on the side. She would be a mother, now having to do little more than wait until the day when she would have to push. To add to their idyll, they had found what they called a picturesque detached house, on the very road where the film school was, just a few hundred yards away.

It had been the subject of a family dispute, they had been told, and they would be the first ones to live there in a generation. Maybe because of the staleness of decades in waiting, the house seemed to infect the air within with a surprising heaviness given how thoroughly empty it had been left. A week of open windows, letting autumnal Scottish draughts from the North Sea rush in, had helped much, but Clare could always smell something that had been left behind. She blamed it on the panels covering the walls to waist height, supposing they were rotten, and made plans to convince the landlord to replace them before her child was born. Stale air would be bad for the baby.

Despite this foresight, she knew they would not stay long after she gave birth. Jordan was signed with the school for a year, and would probably want to go somewhere else afterwards. The house was more spacious than the flat in Stockholm, and the neighbourhood was much safer than the one in London, but it was hardly the place to raise a child. The house lacked a lawn, instead being surrounded by a perimeter of coarse gravel, as if contained and separated from the other houses along Merchiston Avenue.

And who would like to let their children out when the pavement saw sporadic

swathes of film students cover it, on their way to and from campus? As much as Clare loved Jordan, she could never see film folk as safe.

For as long as the child was within her womb, however, the house would be more than appropriate. They saw in it an anonymity that appealed to them both. In fact, after sitting for a few hours in his study that first week, Jordan was mortified to realise the raven and heart attracted curious glances from passers-by, most being students. He eventually moved them to the mantelpiece, thinking the house would again blend into the repeating pattern lining the sides of the avenue. All to no avail, as the desolate ring of gravel around it paled when up against the others' verdant gardens.

They did not see how awkwardly the house sat among its peers, how its mossy gables and empty flower pots gave it a look any of the neighbours would label dangerously close to squalid. If either of them had ever left the house with anything but an overpowering sense of purpose, they might have seen its true appearance. Jordan went to the school down the road, usually in the afternoon, and came back in the evening when the darkness veiled the house's features from scrutiny. Clare rushed to town and back a mere couple of times, before her obstetrician's words of caution echoed in her mind and she had to stay home and rest.

Within a week of the couple's arrival in Edinburgh, the house's initial state of disarray had been rectified, after many hours devoted to unpacking their carton boxes. From their condensed state, morsels of their material life were returned to the breathing space they required, on shelves, on end tables. At last fully populated by the couple's material allies, the house's staleness was dampened somewhat under their smell. It now seemed to be a mere inkling of a mouldy odour, coming with the ebb and flow of night and day, strongest when the nightly cold hit the house.

One such night, Clare brewed a mug of tea and held it in cupped hands, feeling the warmth on her skin. She sat on the sofa and brought the tea to her lips, smelling the spiced vapour rising up from the beverage, but not drinking it yet. As she prepared to take a sip, she felt a light thud in her belly – the baby's first kick. Abandoning the mug on the coffee table, she ran to the study to let Jordan know what had happened. By the time she returned to her tea, it had gone unpleasantly cold.

By the beginning of the second week, when all the chaotic matters of unpacking and getting to grips with his teaching position had become less pressing, Jordan made his first solid attempt at starting rewrites. He sat behind his desk, an Ikea mahogany look-alike just barely managing to blend in with the dark wooden panels lining the walls of the study, and pored over three precariously bound scripts. As he read on, a growing sense of despair took hold, until by the end of the first episode he opened his black notebook and jotted down the multiple dubious decisions his colleague had made, for fear of forgetting them as they piled one atop the other.

Wishing he could phone the original writer to ask him what his intention was

– the script left that question blatantly unanswered – Jordan stood up and looked at his notes, as if the bird’s-eye view promised some sort of enlightenment. Perhaps the protagonist had to be likeable, and that might solve everything. And after a few injections of humour, the script might even become an enjoyable read. Of course, the other two scripts might well...

His thought was abruptly cut short by a loud bang, a swift rattle, and a soft thud in quick succession. Jordan looked up and saw a cloud of thin ash spread from the hearth, around the culprit of the sound, a small white mass. As he walked up to the fireplace, the tiny ribcage, the hollows for eyes became clear. A rat’s bony remains had unceremoniously come rattling down the chimney to claim a mound of ash on the hearth as a final resting place. Perhaps an owl lived in the chimney-shaft, he thought, making a mental note to check before the first lighting of the fireplace smoked the creature out. But the rat’s bones might have been there for a long while, the owl’s body, also stripped to its wireframe, waiting to come crashing down the shaft next.

As he prepared to return to his desk, a blemish on the wall captured his attention. It was a mark like many others on those dark wooden panels, but unlike others it held within an object incrusting in the solid wood. From it, a few deep streaks fanned out through the wood, meandering like veins under pale skin. Jordan stretched out his hand, towards the mark as if to touch it, but held back when his finger was a mere inch from its metal centre. No more distractions, he thought. Work was more important.

One morning Clare gathered enough energy to allow herself to be faced with the last couple of cardboard boxes waiting to be unpacked. They had been stowed safely in the cupboard under the stairs, so as not to taint the couple’s sense of achievement for having put all the furniture in place. She crouched rather than bending down – although at four months her growing womb had only just started to impinge on her movements, the possibility of damaging the fragile porcelain being within terrified her. Gracefully, she pulled the smallest of the three boxes and loaded it onto her arms. The box’s comfortable lightness was somewhat worrying, she thought. Every light box could have been heavier, could have contained a few more books to have been read. Maybe she should take her hiatus as an opportunity for self-betterment, and read while gestating, nurturing.

The light from the hallway seeped into the cupboard and she noticed the linoleum flooring, a horrid chess pattern in stark contrast with the parquet. The landlord had thought it unworthy of replacement, she supposed, not because it was appropriate, but because it was so negligible and unimportant. But Clare had noticed it, and for a few moments stood there, paralysed with the box in her arms, thinking of how that patch of tasteless flooring reminded her that she did not own the house.

Even if she did own the house, she could never truly *own* it, and call it hers as whoever had had it built could. The linoleum in the cupboard, the wooden panels everywhere, reminded her however much she felt at home there, it was always someone else’s. She was an occupier and after having spent so many years empty,

the house might well tend to that natural state of balance again. The weight of the previous occupants fell on her shoulders and she felt it as real as a toddler catching a piggyback ride.

The box would have fallen from her arms if she had not put it down on the parquet outside the cupboard. It was the dampness on her skin that struck her as odd first. Then she noticed the linoleum's dullness had a faint gleam to it a few inches beyond the foot of the door. Water. She leaned into the cupboard and saw that the two remaining boxes had been soaked through, the books inside reduced to a pulp. The back wall seemed to be weeping.

One late afternoon Jordan left the film school earlier than he had expected, on account of a student not turning up for an appointment. He walked down Merchiston Avenue towards home, his mind absorbed in thoughts of the script, and how to tackle its growing list of issues. A few yards from the front gate, he looked up to see a woman in her sixties, standing awkwardly looking up at the house. She seemed to be shifting her weight from one foot to the other, as if about to decide to take a step forward and walk up to the door at any time, but chose to stay put.

Jordan approached her and stood in silence for a moment, as she took him for a passer-by and stepped out of his way. When he didn't walk past her, she looked him in the eye blankly, as if sheepishly daring him to expose her for the spy she was.

'I live here,' Jordan stated, just short of being curt. 'Are you... visiting?'

The woman's eyebrows shot up, in feigned surprise. 'Oh... no. I was just admiring your house. It's very quaint,' she lied.

'Thank you. It's not mine. My wife and I are renting.'

She nodded. 'Was it you who put the raven and the heart on the windowsill there?' She pointed to the study window with an arthritic hand. Jordan nodded. 'They were nice. It's a shame they're gone.'

'I just shifted them. They're there.' He was growing impatient with the woman, and took a firm step towards the gate, his back to the house, at once showing her he wished to go in, and barring her view. 'I'm afraid my wife's expecting me.'

'Of course, yes.' She tried to look at the house over his shoulder, but his defensive stance meant her eyes met his instead. Her grey eyes, dulled by age, were lit up with the fire of something that had been left unsaid. Perhaps she would have gone ahead and rung the door bell if he hadn't arrived early from work. But, as things were, he had just had a meaningless conversation with a voyeur, and was determined to get rid of her. With telepathic awareness, she knew she had to leave, and uttered a feeble 'good-bye' and turned to cross the road. Briskly shuffling away, the odd neighbour went into the house directly opposite his.

Later that night Clare woke up in the midst of a dream. Of the dream itself, she remembered nothing but the certainty that she had been suffering. Like a swimmer swallowed by a wave and shaken and rolled until up, down and sideways blend into one, she came out of the warmth of the sheets for air. With each breath entering her lungs, the remnants of the dream dissolved, only to be replaced by the

house's stale scent, which that night made a full return.

She gracefully worked her way out of the bed, careful not to wake Jordan. Guided by instinct, she walked towards the wall, and kneeled so that her face was pressed against one of the wooden panels. Sniffing, being alone allowing her to be as animalistic as she wanted, she searched for the place where the stale smell was strongest. With her hands on the upper border of the panel guiding her, she shuffled along the wall on her knees, nose and cheek rubbing against the ancient varnished oak. But it soon became clear the smell came from elsewhere. In her groggy state, she stubbornly decided she would find its source, and oust it from the house that same night.

As if in a trance, she felt the staleness take hold of her body, dictating where she should go. It commanded her to stand up, to leave the room, every movement feline and elegant as the awkwardness of the child in her womb was forgotten. She found herself in Jordan's study, unsure how her eyes had guided her way through the pitch-black corridors of the house, and felt the smell stronger than ever. It was now as putrid as if all that had lived in that house, human and animal alike, were rotting right under her nose, and she had to swallow as hard and fast as she could to stop herself from emptying her stomach on the parquet.

Her hands, stretched out ahead of her, found the mantelpiece and she grabbed the wooden shelf for dear life, as an infant would grab anything put against its hands. From the hollowness of the fireplace's mouth came what seemed to be a string of breaths, each infected with the stench she had come to know as the house's own scent. Now on her knees, she ventured to lean towards the hearth, feeling the stench materialised as a harsh draught on her cheeks. Letting go of the mantelpiece, she waved her arms in front of her, into the fire-pit, her heart thumping in her chest in the anticipation that her fingertips would touch something unknown. Yet all of a sudden the draught stopped, and she felt her nails scrape at the sooty bricks and mortar-lines of the back wall of the fire-pit. The stench abated, and when she sat on the hearth rug she felt the silence envelop her in such a way that she became sure the stench and the draught had been accompanied by a soft sound.

The next morning when she woke up beside Jordan, she thought the light of dawn had roused her from a vivid nightmare. It was only when she saw her gritty nails that she was convinced otherwise.

The staleness persisted.

As the last remains of summery warmth dissipated and October's chilling winds swept Edinburgh, Jordan and Clare prepared to open their house to guests for the first time since their move. Jordan had invited most of his colleagues at the film school, to what would be a sober, brief dinner party, mostly for Clare's benefit – she had taken to the house, like a hermit, it seemed, now that convincing her to leave home for the briefest excursion was impossible, unless need dictated. The established screenwriters seemed to speak in a wry dialect of their own, a language which Jordan had abandoned in his years in Sweden and Clare had never spoken at all, so he entertained no hope of forging lasting friendships with them. But

perhaps one of the plus-ones would sympathise with the wife's growing womb and decide to keep her company in the coming months.

The week running up to the party was fraught with an awkward tension, and an overcast silence settled on the house. It seemed this shutting of mouths and sewing of lips offered solace from an escalating conflict, that might otherwise break out in an unpredictable manner. A couple of conversations about the child-to-be, starting as mere innocent remarks dropped in the haze of the morning bed, had grown to the point of turning slight divergences into gaping rifts. Clare seemed to have abandoned all domestic responsibilities; no dinner was to be found in the kitchen at the end of the day, and, as the days passed, layer after layer of dust piled on the furniture. Jordan, already exhausted by hours of dealing with unproductive students, and torn between a messy desk and prolonged, fruitless conversations with producers on the phone, cooked and cleaned until weariness guided him to the bedroom. All to keep an unravelling of tensions, that seemed ever more imminent, at bay. In any case, any probing into what had prompted her withdrawal would require far more energy than he had at the time.

The day of the party started with an aura of surrealism, Clare leaping out of bed as if there were no baby weighing her down. Also seemingly vanishing without explanation, the moody silence and passive aggressiveness of previous days were replaced by a burst of industriousness. She made the kitchen her temple, and in a retreat of steam and spicy scents, started cooking even before Jordan left the house, perplexed by what he saw.

Later, she took out a bucket from the cupboard under the stairs, and poured into it vinegar and bleach. Reaching up to the kitchen cabinets as casually as if still cooking dinner for the party, she produced lemons, and squeezed them, the juice pouring into the mixture from her clenched fists. Armed with her concoction and a cloth, she kneeled by the oak panels of the study, and scrubbed the wooden surface furiously, spreading the mixture on he cracked varnish until the bleach fumes briefly overpowered the smell that reigned supreme in that room. Still, she knew this was a pointless diversion, as the smell resided somewhere within the brick shaft of the chimney. Kneeling by the hearth, she splashed the mixture into the mouth of the fireplace and scrubbed and scoured the bricks until a growing soreness told her she had ripped the cloth through, and her hands were warm with blood. Wincing at the pain of having the bleach on her scraped skin, she took a step into the fireplace, and sat on a soft bed of ash and burnt kindling while making a last effort to rid the bricks of their stale scent. Moments later, emerging from the fire-pit covered in a thick layer of soot, she broke in tears.

If anyone had been watching this frenzied attempt at cleansing the room, they might expect her to be weeping out of frustration – but a triumphant tossing of the cloth aside and a sparkling chain of laughter would prove them wrong. She cried out of joy, and expectation.

Walking back home early that afternoon, in the orange glow of sundown, Jordan saw the neighbour he had met a couple of weeks before. She was about to cross the street to return to her house, but an errant taxi sped down the road just

then, trapping her on that side of the asphalt and forcing her to face the returning husband. She eyed him with the poorly disguised panic of a child that had been caught in the midst of some misdoing. Jordan thought she must have just walked out of his house.

‘Good evening, Mr Barr,’ she said with a nervous smile. ‘I just came around to bring your wife a tin of my homemade shortbread. She mentioned your dinner party tonight, and I thought your guests might enjoy it with a cup of tea or coffee after the meal.’

‘Thank you, how very kind of you,’ he replied, without allowing a look of suspicion to leave his face.

‘Ach, it’s nothing. Your wife was a sweetie to me, so I thought I would do something nice in return.’ Jordan eyed her intensely, in lieu of an inquisitive retort, and the neighbour, now seeming marginally more at ease, went on. ‘She let me see the study last week. Call me morbid, but I have an affinity for these stories, you see.’

And she told Jordan the same story she had told Clare the week before – a tale of a cruel wife and a subdued husband, of a shot to the chest, of cleansing by fire. One of the previous occupants now resided – perpetually – in Cornton Vale, and the other had found his resting place on the house’s hearth some thirty years before. ‘She had taken to the house – wouldn’t leave at all. We didn’t see her out and about for months before she killed the poor man. She was hysterical, the doctor said.’

‘I suppose this explains the cheap rent,’ said Jordan with a quiet laugh once the neighbour had gone quiet. ‘I hope the study wasn’t too messy. You know, writers...’ And with a polite farewell, they parted ways, Jordan barely hiding his unease under a feigned smile.

He left the street behind him, opened the front door and stepped into the house, at a time when that placid avenue in Merchiston grew quieter yet. The shadows of the houses and solitary trees around stretched out on the empty pavements and lawns, blending into a darkness that would soon wrap and consume all. The neighbourhood was cast in a momentary solemn silence, so deep that any sound would not rouse the neighbours, but rather be disregarded as a trick of the mind. Nowhere was this wasteland more deserted than around the Barrs’ house.

Jordan found Clare in the study, sat behind his desk with such confidence and calmness she could not possibly feel she was invading his space. Her hands were gloved in white, and she had put on a black dress for the evening; one that at her fourth month pregnant had become far too tight. Jordan’s eyes set on her stomach at once, as it looked so flat she must be wearing some sort of band to press it tightly, underneath the dress.

She met his horrified stare at her belly with a wide smile, at once tender, and triumphant.

The many questions burning in Jordan’s mind would have to wait. The party would start in less than an hour.

In the fireplace, flames roared on.

Mourning Rose

Rebecca Chapman

The day lingers and I am grateful.
Consumed by the darkness
We are more alone than ever.
I seek solace wrapped in a piece of
You left behind.
Your words dangle on the wall,
Fading like childhood memories.

All things bright and beautiful.
You echo inside me.
I have celebrated you in that orange dress that
Stole the final diamonds from your tired eyes.
Standing amongst those who would have
condemned us, I am bitter.
Words sweeter than the truth.
How you would have laughed.
My heart crumbles over you
In the shape of a rose.

Awake in my sleep.
You are engraved in my dreams.
A warm face brushes past mine.
Ephemeral
Like morning dew on
Freshly spun webs.

Love should be easier.

Sam

Louise Blythe Summers

Outside the clouds were gathering and mist was seeping onto the road. Little droplets of water were already collecting on the window and forming little streams as they ran down. He checked his phone for the fifteenth time in the last five minutes and rubbed the side of his face when he saw the absence of bars. It was rough; he hadn't had time to shave this morning. His thigh was still pressed up against the woman squeezed into the seat next to him, and it was getting hot. She smelled strange, like Johnson's shampoo and baby vomit. He supposed the small pink blob on her knee was the cause. The baby wasn't making it terribly easy to hold down his urge to vomit all over the bald head of the elderly man in front of him. He ran a hand through his hair and a waft of stale vodka rose from his head like steam. The woman next to him shot him a disgusted look and made to shift away from him, not that it made much difference. The pink thing gurgled at him from her lap and he felt sicker.

She'd genuinely smiled at him, even when he had turned to check over his shoulder that it was definitely him she was smiling at. It wasn't much but it was enough and when he finally forced himself over to her she'd smiled again with the gap between her two front teeth firmly in view. She'd bitten her lip when she'd listened to him talk. She hadn't talked to him much, just listened and it wasn't until she left he'd realised he didn't even know where she was from.

Granted, she had laughed at him, but it had been warm and maybe he'd deserved it and she'd given him her fucking number before she left. Scrawled it into the back of his hand, with the sharp tip of a biro so that even though the ink had rubbed off before the dawn, there was a faint red outline where she'd scratched it in his skin. And for some reason when he'd woken up in the morning on the floor of someone else's kitchen, with his sort-of friend snoring next to him into the lino, he'd thought it was more permanent than any of the tattoos etched into his skin.

The driver revved the engine again and the bus shuddered, choked and then sighed back into silence. Someone tutted audibly from the back and one of the little pensioners nearer the front was coughing up a lung into her initialled handkerchief. He slid down his seat a little and stared out into the rain. The bus had stopped halfway to home, and he would have gladly got out there and then walked back, letting the rain wash off the smell of vodka and the stickiness between his fingers, but instead he shut his eyes and tried to block out the sound of the bus driver and his mechanic having a screaming match under the wheel of the coach.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, vibrating up his arm and he whipped it out with relief which almost immediately faded to disappointment.

Message not sent.

“Fuck.”

The woman next to him made an obvious show of craning her neck round to see if there were any free seats. There weren't. The windows were starting to steam up. The chill from the open coach door was sliding its way through the aisle and making people shiver. He pulled his hood up over his head, trying to ignore the second wave of sour alcohol and leant his throbbing forehead against the cool of the window.

He hadn't sent her much. Just a 'Hey, how was your night? Sam x.' But it had taken him ages to write, poring over each word as he queued for the bus, deleting the questions about going for a drink, how many people she'd been with and her name. Her name.

He'd only got her first name, Leila, and when he'd asked for her second she had laughed and said, 'That'd be telling.'

'You know mine.'

'Because you told me, I didn't ask. Where's the fun in that?'

'What fun?'

'The fun in finding out.'

He'd paused then, not entirely sure what to say and she'd laughed again, quietly this time, so softly you could barely catch it.

And she had said: 'The more you learn about someone, the harder it is to forget them.' She had left not long after that, leaving the red scratches on the back of his hand, and he wondered now if there hadn't been a tiny bit of anger in her eyes when she had scored her number in.

The bus driver interrupted his thoughts by striding back into his seat and barely allowing enough time for his mechanic to follow him before shutting the doors and starting the bus again. This time it turned over and started and a sigh of relief echoed round the seats. The driver turned slightly in his seat. “Back on the road folks.” He pulled out of the layby back onto the motorway and almost into the side of a tiny Clio.

Sam crossed his arms across his chest, shoving his cold hands into his armpits, hoping his fingers would stop hurting soon. The bus felt colder than it had done when it was still. He thought that it was probably a sign that the closer he got to home, the colder it got.

He didn't go home very often, maybe once a holiday. Sometimes not even that. Now, he had the last of his stuff to move into storage before the rest of them moved out and the house got sold. He had called his sister and asked her to move it for him, she lived in the same town after all, but even his pregnant baby sister wouldn't go near the place anymore. She'd taken all her things when she tested positive and had never gone back. His sister might have gotten pregnant early, but she was an older mother than theirs had even been. She said she wanted him back down when she went into labour and he told her he wouldn't miss it for the world, and she told him all about the place she and her boyfriend had moved into and the colour they'd painted the walls of the baby's room and how he could sleep on the sofa for a

couple of days if he wanted and he'd felt so warm and so choked up he had to put the phone down before she could hear him cough.

He checked his phone again.

Message resending...

He put it back in his pocket. At least when the message wouldn't send he wasn't worrying about her reply.

"Text me if you want to."

"Of course I want to text you."

And why the fuck wouldn't he want to? He'd asked for her number, hadn't he? What did that even mean?

God, he felt rough. And home wasn't going to help much. He didn't want to see who commanded the house now and he didn't want to try and guess whether this one hit her or not. He didn't want to learn the names of all his squeaky clean new half-brothers and half-sisters. He didn't want to move the last of his stuff, all that was left of him in that house. It was all stuffed into a corner of the room he used to share with his brother who went down South the minute he turned sixteen and never let him know what England was like. It wasn't much, just a few books, old photographs and report cards. Stuff parents would have kept for nostalgia, to remember when their children were young and innocent and relied on them for everything and asked questions about the things they had taken for granted.

His phone vibrated again, he almost elbowed the baby in his excitement to reach it.

"Sorry, sorry," he murmured in the woman's direction, reluctant to actually talk directly to her face. If she thought his hair smelt bad she should try his breath.

One new message.

Read.

My night was fine I guess.

Did you get your bus alright?

x

Reply?

He'd told her about home. He'd forgotten but he remembered now. He couldn't help himself, the way she'd bitten her lip at him and tilted her head. Her hair had brushed his face when she'd leant towards him to hear what he was saying. He hadn't wanted to move. He never wanted to move. He'd spilled his life to her, all these stories about home. And he'd told how he had to go back, how he had to get the bus. And he'd told her about all the boyfriends and the half-brothers and sisters. He told her about the smell of alcohol and burning toast. He told her about how much a belt stings. She'd touched his face, she was cold but it was soft, like snowflakes landing on your outstretched hand.

She had left not long after that, leaving the red scratches on the back of his hand and telling him to text her if he wanted to. And before she was gone, she had said she wouldn't mind being there. If he'd wanted someone to be there. She wouldn't mind.

He had got his bus fine, yeah, but he wished he hadn't.