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Applications to: d.edwards@uwtsd.ac.uk

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Editorial

It's a hot, still summer evening, the end of a perfect day; the kind of evening at which – like rugby – Wales excels. I'm standing in my ramshackle garden, knee-high in cuckooflower and grass, holding out a tray of grains to twelve ravenous ducklings. They are seven weeks old now; their mother, having brought them to our pond soon after hatching, has eloped with another drake, placing responsibility for their welfare squarely on human shoulders. The babies are strong and fledged. They are constantly amazed by the appearance of their newly-grown wings, and jump up and down like clockwork toys, frantically flapping these strange appendages. In another week they will fly away. I want them to stay; I've grown fond of them, love the way they rush to greet me when I call. But I also want them to go, so we can repair the damaged pond and replace the plants they have eaten. Most of all, I want them to have that choice, to know that whether they stay or go, it's a decision that rests entirely with them.

For 'staying' inevitably implies the other side of the coin, the 'not staying'. 'Should I stay or should I go?' asked The Clash on their album *Combat Rock*. It implies viable options, a conscious decision, and it's one that we all have to take at some point in our lives. As a nation, we voted on whether to leave or remain in the EU. As individuals, the decision may involve leaving home, a partner, a job, a country. It can

be a painful choice. Staying, too, may involve grief and soul-searching. Whilst remaining where you are is on the surface the more passive option, one that involves less physical and emotional effort, in some ways it can actually be the hardest, because 'staying' is very often a process of letting-go.

With this fairly broad topic as the issue theme, I was eager to see how contributors would interpret it. As usual, they did not disappoint, and the quality of submissions was extremely high, making choices for the magazine difficult. Many contributors chose to write about returning home to a once-loved place, such as Nicholas McGaughey's 'Back to the farm' and Rebecca Trick-Walker's evocative story 'The Swing', both of which are full of haunting images and a sense of loss. There were surprises, too, pieces that took my breath away with their sheer inventiveness, such as Bethany W Pope's imaginative retelling of Alfred Noyes' poem 'The Highwayman', and Becky Tipper's story 'Expecting' about a baby who wants to remain in the womb.

The Lampeter Review is proud to be publishing work by new and emerging writers, particularly by students just starting out on their writing careers. So it was pleasing to be able to include work by Ruth Baker, Dillon Palmer and Helen Cook in this issue, as well as a collaborative piece (submitted by Tyler Keevil) co-authored by a group of Creative Writing students at Cardiff, which presents twelve different viewpoints of an event under the title 'Staying Grounded'. Other new writers include Mari Ellis Dunning and clare e. potter, both fresh and exciting young voices.

We were also delighted to accept contributions from established poets such as Mike Jenkins, Byron Beynon, Chris Hardy, Mark Blayney and Julia Webb, who all had very different interpretations of 'staying'; in particular, Julia Webb's playful but precisely-crafted poems echoed in my head for many days.

This issue also attracted some excellent and ingenious prose pieces, including Rosey Brown's witty modern take on *The Odyssey*, 'Penny Lope', and Salvatore Difalco's existential 'Between Sleeps' where the narrator awakens to find a hole in his ceiling. And in a refreshingly forthright and entertaining piece, 'States: a view from the Left Coast', Tony Kendrew brilliantly captures the experience of moving back to the city, as he goes hunting for ice-cream – not any ice-cream, but cold, dark Häagen-Dasz chocolate ice-cream – and brings the streets alive with vivid and descriptive prose.

Finally, it was with huge pleasure that we received permission from Bloodaxe Books to reproduce three poems from Menna Elfyn's new collection *Bondo*. One

of the finest Welsh-language poets of the age, Menna continues to surprise and delight with her originality and finely-honed work, and I feel privileged to be able to include her work in this issue.

It is impossible to mention all the many talented contributors in a short editorial, but I'd like to thank everyone who sent work in, including those whom we were not able to accept on this occasion. Inevitably, some will have been disappointed. But please do keep submitting, because we very much enjoy reading your work, and one of the great joys of editing is to be able to read so many different and unique voices. Please note that we include visual art in each issue, and also encourage artists to submit to the journal.

Postscript

This afternoon, writing my editorial, I sat in the conservatory and watched the ducklings. Full of attitude, jostling for food, I saw how the rooks – whose ominous presence I feared when the babies were little – now step back from this raucous aquatic crowd. And I saw, too, a tension in the ducklings, an eagerness that wasn't there before. They are feeling the call of the wind, anxious to experience that strong, addictive uplift beneath their wings. There's a whole world out there for them to explore. But I hope they remember the humans who are staying here without them and that, even though they are leaving, they can always come home.

Kathy Miles, Issue Editor

Three Poems

Julia Webb

The language of home hurts my mouth

It spies on me at night, peering in through the letterbox.
Though I left years ago, it hasn't let me go,

when I was six it tied a bit of elastic to my ankle
so I would always bounce back again,

when I was ten it inked its name on the insides of my thighs,
enjoying slipping its hand between my legs,

this is how it is with us – me running, it pouncing.
Mostly it speaks in screeches, the rising voice of accusation.

My hometown doesn't have an i, an a,
or any other friendly letter, all its sounds are hard.

Weeks and months go by now where I barely say its name,
but its language lives inside me,

spills out at odd moments as *fucks* and *shits*,
a whole town teeming with swear words,

but beyond that the shush of pines,
shoulder to shoulder silence, shoulder to shoulder dark.

Sunday Evening

The harvest today is a gaggle of cats,
he has strung them up;
the wire knotted tightly around their tails,
the sheen of their fur dulling
in the smoke from the forge.

The floor is littered with slivers of metal
nestled amongst wood shavings,
and an array of paint brushes
sit in their chemical baths
on the cluttered windowsill.

As she steps through the door carrying
a tray laden with buttered wholemeal
and a metal mug of sweet tea,
she imagines she can feel
the cats' breath on her neck.

He has a bicycle in pieces on the workbench
and is dropping bearings like tiny silver pills
one by one into a tub of grease.
She puts the tray down and turns to leave,
but he whistles for her attention.

He opens her hand and on her palm
he places a flat circular stone;
the whole workshop is painted
on it in miniature – the forge, the cats,
the bicycle, her with her tray of tea.

My mother moves into my house

I catch her in the wardrobe
nibbling skirts and dresses,
her constant munching
keeps me awake at night.
I try to reason with her,
I threaten charms, poisons.
In desperation I stuff clothes
and bedding into plastic bags,
along with sheets of poisonous paper.
I hang traps in the wardrobes,
but still the holes appear.
My mother is having a ball,
she has no intention of going home,
she leaves her silks inside my cardigans,
and when her larvae hatch
their husks litter the floor like tiny gifts.

The Swing

Rebecca Trick-Walker

The swing was still there. Its ropes between the leaves like a lost colour, a forgotten face. My swing. I was sure it had only ever been for me. Perhaps another child had wandered into my aunt's life in later years and sat on it, swung on it, when my cluster of days with her had inevitably thinned out to nothing.

In the house there was so little left that whispered a sense of her. I hadn't expected any photos, but I had hoped for some touch to a room, a spacing of the curtains or a half-shut drawer that spoke of how she was in her place.

The swing did that somehow – almost as if she had forgotten to see to it. Her hands on the rope above mine. The wooden seat, stubbled with young moss. Its tilt to the left, sending me in a mis-weighted direction. The photo-faded light of late summer and scuffed-up dust.

I had only walked this far down the garden to try and find a signal. A week without speaking to Adam. The land line should have been connected before I arrived. I'd woven my way along the overgrown pathways with my phone held high to divine the air for contact. Nothing.

I pushed the empty swing, watched it veer to the left, remembered my aunt smiling through silent tears in the flocked light of sunset.

She had cleared everything. No drawers or boxes of letters to sort; no cases of mementoes; no books even. Nothing beyond a few reference volumes – a dictionary, a guide to the area and an out of date 'Who's Who?' with an ex-library sticker on the spine. She had been an avid reader, with over-flowing piles of paperbacks gathering and growing on the stairs and blocking cupboards. I wondered when she had emptied it all, rid herself of page-turns, of book-marked memories – and if she had lived for long in a bare version of herself.

The mirror. Dark and oval. That was there. Hanging back despite her - as it had been long before I had been tall enough to see myself in it. Would that have been the last thing to go? The effect in it now was strange, as if I had walked in from bright sunshine with the black flashes of no-light disguising my face from itself. I wiped at the glass with my sleeve so that the mirror could come to.

The phone's ring was sudden – an unfamiliar and oversized sound. It was tucked in the corner – I could not imagine my aunt having kept it there.

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

"Adam?"

"It didn't sound like you."

"Echoey in here. Empty."

"You OK?"

"Fine. Bit out of place."

"You'll settle."

"I've tried ringing but it's..."

"Still want me on the weekend?"

"Yes please."

"Need me to bring anything?"

"Box of books on the landing and...some extra towels. The..."

But he was gone. Out of power, out of signal, or a touch of the finger. I'm never certain.

The next morning I answered the door to the delivery of a fridge.

“I didn’t order a fridge,” I explained to the man leafing through his sheaf of forms. He reminded me of the father of a boy I went to school with. Perhaps he was the boy, the close-to-fifty-year-old that he would be, that I am. “I’m waiting for a washing-machine. Should have been here two days ago.”

“No record of that, Mrs...”

“Winters.”

“Have the address. Not the name.... Must be a mix-up. I’ll...I’ll...If you ring this number and re-order, it’ll be with you tomorrow.”

He was that boy – the one I went to school with. He pushed me into a bed of nettles once in a game that wasn’t sure where it wanted to go. The walk was the same – his chest leading him quicker than his legs.

My ‘Mrs Winters’ is not part of Adam. It makes me sound like a settled wife and mother and I am neither. A wife very briefly – to someone else - when I was young enough to carry it in a light ribbony glow. I preferred Winters to my old name and kept it, let it redefine me. Never a mother to my own. Adam has two daughters grown up enough not to have been a big part of our day-to-day lives. Now we are all gently floating apart – and I am here.

In the draught of closing the front door, I caught a forgotten scent of wood and cold tile. It carried a momentary image of my aunt’s face, sharp, like a pressed flower, and then it was gone. I tried to remember when I had last seen her properly. Sometime during my rootless days after university - a summer visit probably. I had felt the bones in her fingers when she’d taken my hands and held them too tightly.

“You will come back,” she’d almost pleaded.

I’d smiled, “I will” – the promise only in the top layer of my words, to be ripped off later.

“I’m fading away on my own here. No one to be myself for. Just a bit of you I want – when you can come.”

“I’ll be back soon,” I’d reassured her.

I'd watched her later, sitting where I'd left her, with her knees up like a girl, and a loose, over-worn cardigan swallowing her body.

I did not go back again. And now I am left with everything she had. Her home, her garden; the spaces left behind and in between – of what I remember of her.

In the morning light, the mirror makes my face look like a mosaic. Those brown cracked pictures that were part of floors in villas or bathing houses. I pull back the loose places on my skin to see if the cracks will smooth away like wrinkles. When I smile they turn into light like threads of web.

I thought of the silk shawl in the middle drawer of the mahogany chest. I found my way into my aunt's bedroom once – before I knew better – and opened cupboard doors and jewellery boxes that I shouldn't have; lifted folded clothes that were huddled tight in the past. Their scent had spoken out against me as they breathed into the room. The shawl had slid like secrets through my fingers. I had heard that real silk could fit through a wedding-ring, no matter what its size. It had to be tested. My hand had been on the drawer of the dressing-table in search of a ring when a door had clicked downstairs. I knew that the edge of the shawl was clasped in the lip of the drawer - that it would whisper what I'd done - but I could not go back.

Last night I sat in candlelight to try and re-shape the shadows in the room to what I knew. I held my hand in front of the flame to watch the translucent pinkness around the core of redder bone. An unreal flesh like a new-formed baby.

Adam did not ring. I should not expect him to. That is why I am here.

I cried in between sleep so that my face felt tight when I woke. There were noises outside in the driveway; slamming, a door sliding. The washing-machine. The morning had caught me out. I grabbed trousers from the floor and a sweatshirt that was too tight to pull on in a hurry from my half-unpacked suitcase.

"Washing-machine." It was the same man frowning away the boy he had been, showing no memory of me from the day before, let alone almost forty years before.

"Through here," I murmured. I left him to it and signed my name when I was asked to. I mouthed it to myself afterwards, in the slow conscious way of learning to form letters that make sense.

In the afternoon, when I knew the light would be low and warm, I dared myself into my aunt's room. The drawers were all empty but, in the wardrobe, pushed to one side, was an elegant, dark green dress, almost black. Nothing else. I pulled it out, held it against me – only for a moment. It must have been my aunt's once, but it was hard to imagine that part of her that had belonged in it. An Aunt Elsie – just Elsie - before I had known her. I thought of my own wardrobe, of the clothes left hanging, two sizes too small and twenty years too late to be worn again. Cut out promises of what I wanted to think of as me. Was this green dress the picture my aunt had held on to - the one that nobody else had seen? She had squeezed my hands so tightly that last day.

Adam liked the house when he finally found it. He stayed one night and we shared a bed like cousins making do – me more on the edge of my side than he on his. It does not make me sad any more. I don't think it does.

"You look tired," he offered as I showed him round the rest of the house in the morning.

"I didn't sleep well."

"You looked tired when I arrived."

"I'm not sleeping well any night then."

"Are you OK?"

I smiled at that, at his need to ask now. "Do you want to see the garden?" I asked.

We did not go down as far as the trees.

We spoke of him coming down in a couple of weeks; he carried the box of books in for me and left them on my new landing. I could see that a part of him was caught up in a frisson of the past, of the two of us alone in a strange house, man and woman, in the dust of intimacy. His hand cupped my face, looking to unlock a way in. I shook my head. It was enough. Our shadows passed the mirror on his way out, an unbalanced thread between us. As he drove off I repeated the letters on his number-plate, over and over.

The light in the passageway could be so gloomy. A strange place to keep a mirror – or perhaps the best. A second or third print out of oneself, like a painted

handprint done again and again, is probably a better version. I started to like the impressionist me that morphed between glass and light.

I did not hear from Adam for another week. When we finally spoke he was sharp, impatient.

“Are you ill?”

I could hear him concentrating on something else – speaking to me as an afterthought.

“No.”

“Your voice. Like you don’t want to speak to me.”

“I always want to speak to you.”

“You’re whispering.”

I wanted to tell him that if he listened to me – properly – he would hear me, understand what was happening. Instead I let him talk until he’d finished - until the line between us clicked into nothing.

It’s like folding yourself away. Being alone. The clothes in the drawer. My aunt on the step. Listening for whispers of scents. As I was walking down the stair I met a girl who wasn’t there. That girl lived here once. She jumped to see the top of her head in a dark oval mirror – thick curls of brown hair, sometimes the flash of the eye that had seen herself. A girl who sat on a swing and felt the air between the turn of the leaves – cool, warm, cool. The promise of warmth somewhere else, higher and further away than the swing could take her.

It is close to the purple shifting light of dusk when I walk down to the swing. The spaces between the trees make the ground look lighter, almost from another part of the day. The ropes against my palms are a fraying comfort. I let the wooden seat take my weight, just for a moment. I do not want to feel the difference. The tears are warm. I close my eyes on them. Make myself hear her in the creak of the branch, her whispers to me every time I swung away, her smile that hid what she couldn’t say.

Backstreets

Mark Blayney

New bracelet, and a can of Tiger.
The look, mild disbelief,
culture shock excused as jetlag, though we're not tired.

That first day we went no further than the nearby grid,
like a child nibbling the edge of an Easter egg.
Tourism is a two-street construct,
a Hilton gleams blandly, proud that its lobby
is the same as Reading or Swindon. Behind its skull façade
temple jostles hostel, café shuffles shop.

We choose the noodle bar that's made least effort,
clatter of aluminium pans, pungent shrimp paste
and strip lights making us green.
We crack two more cans. This is why we're here.

Through the Lavender Evening

Heather Hallberg Yanda

How intimate this act: two
people folding a blanket

they unpinned from the clothesline.
Holding respective corners

they shake away wrinkles; they
shake away uncertainties,

make the first fold, like the spine
of a book. In its pages

exist spirited laughter,
the evolution of their

belief, their hesitations,
failures, and indiscretions.

How carefully they chose their
words and the space that exists

between them, as if all had
to be summoned properly.

So too, the movement of their
folding: its meticulous

choreography -- coming
together, folding, moving

apart, and folding again.
Their obedient shadow

follows. They have always known
whose hands will hold the corners,

who will make the last fold, who
will carry it through the yard,

through the lavender evening,
and into their waiting home.

Staying Put

Jayne Stanton

i
A Nissen hut still shelters
in the brambles.
Each summer Dad gave it a new coat:
Hammerite. We'd mine its innards
for the tricycle to squabble over,
seaside buckets that loved making mud pies,
hated Ingoldmells.

ii
The coalhouse-cum-power-
house of DIY tools
and the push-along mower Mum cursed
over lawns of dandelion and clover.

iii
That heavy-duty shed, its boarded floor
under newspapers and magazines.
Stacked to its apex with *Homes & Gardens,*
Woman's Own, the *Nursing Mirror*,
it was; a marriage of good intentions,
a tinderbox.

Artist's Statement

Natalie Chapman

"Love you mum"

My history, my present and my past: I paint portraits that engage with family identity and issues based around dysfunctional relationships and social documentary. I am influenced by the work of photographers Richard Billingham and Nan Golding, and have similarly focused on spontaneous snapshot-compositions, saturated colour space and incidental objects in order to set a scene of everyday life.

I have returned to the same old photographs of my childhood, to re-arrange my memories and work through family history and its daily struggle. I want my work to feel edgy and to seduce the viewer into contemplating ambiguous tension, a sense of emptiness, boredom and anxiety.

My process involves capturing memories using small collages of family portraits with interior scenes recalled from childhood. These studies are scaled up on large canvases to create presence and intensify personal stories using gritty expression and garish colour. I want to create images about human relationships that are simultaneously tender and dysfunctional.

Sisters With Purple

Australia

Elizabeth Gibson

Amber is obsessed with Australia right now.

Who can blame her? Australia is hot and sunny. Here it is winter, the very peak of it, when the sky is solid tar and the stars scarily clear and bright, like little pinpoints. It is one of those nights I used to love, because it was snug to be inside, and outside... I had stories. Dreams. I had a warm weight beside me.

I close off the memories, as I have learnt to do. I clip them from the picture. There is no war weight next to me. I am alone, dealing with the recycling.

That's better. I head back inside.

In her room Amber is drawing, one of her usual hobbies. This time, though, it isn't cats or horses or leaping dolphins. With one arm she is struggling to hold one of her huge sheets of black card still. Clutched in the other little fist is a chunky silver highlighter. She is meticulously making circles, perfect silver circles, in some kind of pattern.

"Let me see, sweetie." I am muttering, too tired to muster up as much enthusiasm as I should for her artistic ability, which is genuinely remarkable for a child of seven. She sits upright, releasing the card, which bounces back off the table. I grab a corner. Catching things is something I've become good at. I'm just not good at stopping them from falling to begin with.

The first thing I think of is flowers. The circles are clustered neatly: one big globe will be surrounded by eight or so smaller ones, like petals. It looks strangely familiar, and my stomach gives a tiny lurch, though I don't know why. It is like learning something for the first time that should be obvious, that you realise you always knew somewhere inside – some great, universal truth.

“This is how they draw stars in Australia,” she says, her sweet little voice feeling out of place in my mental sea of numbness. “Or how the Abori... how some people draw them.”

“The Aborigines.” I remember vaguely, now. Of course. Australia again.

“But don’t you think, Mamma, don’t you think it’s strange that there they draw stars like this and here people draw stars in, you know, a spiky way, and really stars are just dots?”

I take a moment to process this new, mind-blowing child logic. “Yes. Yes, it is, but Australia is very far away from here. It’s a world away. So it makes sense that it will be different.” I don’t know if this actually makes any sense.

She nods, looking suddenly sad. “It is. It’s so, so far away.” Then she sits back down and gets back to work, and I take it as my cue to leave and make hot chocolate.

-

The next morning I am feeling a bit better. Still shaky, but able to function. Be Mamma. I don’t know why I feel something huge happened yesterday, when all I saw was my daughter drawing stars.

Our daughter.

Though I feel so, so lonely here, doing everything alone.

But you couldn’t help that.

I wonder whether Amber will have forgotten about Australia and moved onto her next big thing. The other kids at school are into online gaming and pugs at the moment, and I am kind of glad my kid prefers arts and crafts. But the Aussie thing has been going on for a bit long, now. It feels different to her other projects – Hama beads, bookmarks, paper chains. I get the impression that it means something more to her, and I also get the impression she doesn’t really know what that something more is.

As we march up and down the supermarket aisles, stockpiling for Christmas and New Year, Amber is quiet. Too quiet. As if she were trying to suppress herself. At last I ask her, “What’s on your mind, angel?”

“Kangaroos,” she answers, fixing me with glowing eyes and a grin of relief. I can tell she has been bottling this up, waiting to be asked. “Kangaroos are on my mind. That they work so differently to the animals we have here. They carry their babies in pouches. Isn’t that cool?”

“Yeah, it’s probably cosy and safe and nice for the baby –”

“The joey. I mean, that is cool, but what *gets* me –” She hangs her head back dramatically – “is that it’s so totally different from here, because it’s so far away, but it works just as well as here.”

“Yeah.” I don’t get why she is so intrigued and delighted about this, but I let her run with it.

“It’s so far away and so separate from everywhere else that its animals evolved in their own way. It’s just... so far.”

“I know, baby.” What do I know? I’ve never been to Australia. I’ve never even left Europe.

Amber trots along, beaming, and I can’t bear to disrupt such happiness by saying stuff about travelling and adventures – or lack of it or them – that might lead to me getting upset. So I stay quiet and we finish the shopping.

-

Christmas Eve, and Amber is making a necklace. This is something she’s done before, and doesn’t have any obvious Antipodean connection, so I relax somewhat. Maybe she’s moved on.

I do notice that all the beads she is using are purple or pink or occasionally silver or white. As, true to her name, Amber is usually more of a reds and oranges and golds kind of person, I wonder whether this necklace is a gift for someone. Maybe me. She makes me a lot of gifts. But she does know that green is my favourite colour, and she usually sticks to it.

I settle on her beanbag and watch for a while. I am just drifting off into a snooze, when –

“Mamma, did I have a Daddy, once?”

Really? Did that just happen? All these years, and no questions... I dizzily sit up.

“What, angel?”

“Did I have a Daddy, as well as a Mamma?”

I stare blearily a moment longer, helpless, and then she seems to make a decision. She scrambles to her feet and goes to her shelves. She crouches down by the bottom one, where the heavy books are; books she isn’t supposed to read on her own but have read to her. With effort, she tugs out a tall, skinny volume, with a purple dustjacket. She hands it to me. I gape.

The photograph on the dust jacket is of a sky, a purple and pink sky with a silver-white moon. Below is what is unmistakably outback.

It is a book about Australia. Of course it is. I open the cover. Something blocks my throat and I cough, trying so hard not to choke or sob or freak Amber out.

Written on the inside title page, in silver highlighter, is “One day... L and J” and then a heart.

“L is for Linda, isn’t it?” Amber’s voice is tiny, gentle. It hits me that even at her tender age she knows she has to be the one who takes control in this moment, who takes care of me.

“Yes. L for Linda. For me.”

“And J... is for my Daddy?”

“No, J is for Jules. Jules was... supposed to be your Mummy. I was your Mamma, she was your Mummy. I loved her and she loved me and she wanted us to have a baby, so much. But she died before you were born.”

“How?” Her voice is surprisingly steady.

God, how do you explain evil to a child of seven? How do you let that into their life? “Sometimes... people do bad things. Somebody set off a bomb. It killed a lot of people. Including Jules.”

Amber nods, dark curls bobbing. She looks serious, but not distressed, yet. That's a good sign, I guess. Maybe we can get through this without either of us unravelling.

"I'm glad you have that book. I don't know how it got there. I don't think I ever saw it. But that's her writing." I take a breath. "She always loved travelling, and wanted us to go all over the world. There's a little bit of her in there, for you to keep. There's a little bit of her in lots of things in the house... the paintings, the knickknacks... I'll tell you all her stories. If you want." I stop and swallow, realising this is a lot for a small person. Maybe she doesn't want to hear about it. I waited seven years to tell her the most important story of my life – and the story of her existence – because I wanted to spare her from the ending.

Amber's eyes really are amber. They are a light brown-gold, very unusual. She nods. "Please tell me. Please tell me *all*" – she flings her arms out wide – "about her. About my Mummy." Then she flops down onto her bed, suddenly seeming exhausted. "I can't believe I have two Mammas now! I always only had one!"

And that, the pure joy and excitement in her voice, is what makes me finally sneak away and have my cry.

-

The stars are lethal tonight. I keep forgetting it is Christmas Eve. Kids keep throwing glitter and seeds on the ground – "Reindeer Food" – and I keep wanting to tell them that birds will eat it and get sick. But I am too tired. I just stand and look at the stars.

They are dots. Like Amber said, they are just dots. Balls of fire. Why should we draw them as spiky, and not round? If we want to illustrate the emission of heat, what is the difference between spikes and smaller circles, radiating out?

In Australia things are different because it is far away. But things are also exactly the same. Stars are stars. Animals raise and protect their young, whether inside them or out. And the sky can be beautiful, and the moon can be perfect.

And bad things can happen. People can die young.

But perhaps I need to see things in a different way.

Maybe you made it there. Maybe you are in Australia, right now, seeing the sky from the cover of your book, the sky you ached for. The mauves and violets and fuchsias and indigos.

I am thinking of everything but you, Jules. Everything but you. The sky without you silhouetted against it, the baked earth without your shadow. The sound of an outback night without the sound of your breath. The smell of eucalyptus without a hint of your sweat or lavender body spray.

I have survived nearly eight years by scraping you out of the picture. As I told Amber, you are in the paintings you chose, the knickknacks you bought. But I choose to see only the dreamy colours of the Kandinsky print and the curves of the chicken salt and pepper shakers, and not your hands hanging them, shaking them.

I have banished you to some other continent. To the other side of the world. To save Amber? To save myself?

Suddenly I am heaving with sobs. Families drifting back from Mass give me strange looks, and I duck beneath our front yard's low wall. Suddenly it is happening. I am slotting you back into the picture.

You are everywhere. I see you in Australia, in Manchester. I see you here, curled up beside me, telling me all the places we'll go next Christmas – Norway, Iceland. I run inside and see you standing motionless in front of the Kandinsky, the way you would, just staring as you lost yourself completely to its mystery. In the kitchen you laugh as you shake salt, too much salt, on the sweet potatoes that have appeared for you, and I make the chickens cluck in disapproval.

I watch you explore every room of the house, dashing about, and then we are going back in time, fifteen years, and you are dashing down my corridor in our student halls to grab me and cry, "Lindie, let's have a baby." And I am laughing and saying, "Not yet." And we go forward, and you ask me again and again and again until ten years later I say, "Okay. Why not."

I was finally ready for one of your adventures.

I never made it to Australia. But I did have Amber.

-

You've never been in Amber's room – or, not while it has been Amber's room. You were in it when it was a storeroom, full to the brim with papers and dust. You were talking about getting started on tidying it, making a nursery, but you died before that happened. I did the best with it I could, but you were always the artistic one. Amber would have loved you so much.

I sink into my usual beanbag, watch the ghost of you sit down on the bed and cuddle up with our child. Her stocking is all ready; her tiny tree decorated. She appears to be asleep, but as I dream your arms around her, she stirs.

"Mamma?"

"Yes, baby?"

"There are two necklaces on my desk. One is for you and one is for Mummy. For Jules."

I inspect the desk, find them. Mine is green, like spring. Yours is purple and pink and silver and white, like summer, your favourite season, and like the land you so longed to see, and maybe did. Now you are back.

"Thank you, angel." I put on my own necklace, then take yours to my – our – room. I drape it over the bedpost on your side, the side I never go near. I pat where you would be.

I need to go and be Santa now. It occurs to me that in Australia, Christmas is in summer. Things can be so, so different within the same world. Within the same life. Amber was right. Maybe I was the one who wasn't really here, who took a trip to another continent.

Time to start a new chapter in my life and my daughter's, one with her other parent in it.

I lay out presents, fill Amber's stocking. Think of the first story I want to tell her about you. I'll go for the chickens. Then I curl up in the middle of our bed, cuddled between where you would be and where I usually am. I dream of kangaroos and Kandinsky, and stars and salt shakers, and Amber, and you, and where we could travel next.

Three Poems

clare e. potter

Still

Stay close to the line, dolly peg the sheets we squelched in the bath, hoist up the pole so they blow like ship sails, turn our vessel to face the sun—our floating island with goosegog bush and horseradish leaves, big enough for umbrellas. Stay on the garden path as I feed slugs to our ferret and you talk about the only year the tree had plums. Stay there at the stump of the spruce which grew bigger than the house after twenty Christmases being taken in replanted, takeninreplanted. Stay frozen like the milk out of the bottle, hatchet at your shoulder poised between up and down, your nylon slippers scorch-marked from firespit. Stay as the sheets thwack and Rocky's jaw shhmacks and the aspen leaves shiver, steady the deck, tie a rope round me, keep me on board, don't go indoors to stoke the fire, peel potatoes, or do the pools; let's stay where the fruit is underfoot and never ever eat it.

Responsibility

Go! He says,
I'll be the anchor, I'll
steady the boat. You
take your talent out
of the house. Walk
the rivers, sit in fields,
eye-tumble beach stones;
remember—this is your
work. The house

will be OK. The kids
will be OK. We
will be OK. But
if you don't do this,
it will mean Death. Don't,
don't you waste me,
don't you dare waste
what I'm offering . . .

See the horizon—swim for your life!
Keep eyes fixed
on where you're heading.
We'll fish. We'll fish
from the same sea.
Treasure for us if you
just dive and go;

come to the kitchen
when you need to eat
and let us all be still, talk
adventure, have our fill.

• • •

That's how my father tells it as he stands
in the road where she'd lived, his mother
at 17 for the jubilee street party,
she in the picture from the old town book
leaning to the left a little. Pretty
as a rose bud all about bloom not yet
thinned out. Promise of cake and pie and a stout maybe,
promise of clearing plates back in a house
stuffed with love, happy the queen
or was it the king had come to the throne,
united before the war, before all those wars
that squatted on another street.

Not the highest nor the widest

Morfudd Owen

A collection of short fiction.

We are hugging. It is a long, drawn-out hug, almost closer to a wrestling move than a show of affection. Once we are done you let go of me. Your hair is static and floats as though there was no gravity around you. You carefully close the black buttons of your coat and turn towards the door. You turn back to assess the room and for a moment I think that you have changed your mind and you are going to stay.

**

It started in the pond. She would lie on her back in the water, gently stroking the surface as though it was an animal she had tamed. Her hair darkened and expanded to form a crown around her head. The water was always cold, even in the summer, but you could never tell by looking at her. Regardless of the water's temperature she was quiet and her face silent. She kicked her legs and waited for the small ripples that she knew would follow. The wind would wrinkle the pond and only complete stillness could reimpose balance, but nature was rarely still for long. One day she started submerging herself under the water. She'd done it before in the bath but this was different. The bath water was clear whereas the pond was brown and full of bugs and birds that dived for food, and air bubbles and twigs and flies, algae and insects and brown flakes. She would hold herself under the water's surface level for as long as she could, one hand pinching her nose and the other forcing water up so that she would remain down. She wanted to open her eyes but the murky water stung and she was scolded when she went

home with red bloodshot eyes. Her wet and dripping clothes were no longer a surprise and they had become almost expected, although she never gave an explanation of why they had ended up this way. Goggles ruined the experience for her because it felt more like swimming than submerging – and swimming was common whereas submersion was all hers. One day when she had been under the water for almost as long as she had ever been, she forced herself to open her eyes. At first the water stung and her instinct was to close her eyes, but then she forced herself to keep them open. She saw the sunlight refracting through the water to show her all the things she had never noticed before. She saw twigs and leaves twirling, small figures darting and bubbles of air floating upward. Her eyes burned but it was worth it. She saw everything. Her body was willing her to pull up because her lungs could not support her curiosity any longer, but she stayed down, wrapping her arm in a branch at the bottom of the pond. She wanted to keep watching. She wanted to see everything.

**

He says goodbye. I smile then turn my back on him. I am facing the sea, falling into the blue. I start walking, dragging my black suitcase behind me. One of the wheels is broken so it always pulls to the left. I turn around. He is already smaller, his checked shirt now a hazy mix of red and blue. He waves at me. I start to lift my hand but the suitcase pulls itself into a hole in the road so I turn back, leaving him behind. When I look again, he is gone, an empty space where he stood. I want to run to find him, to prove that he has not disappeared, but I keep walking, pretending that he is still behind me, forever waving goodbye.

**

There is a cliff near my house. It is not the highest, nor is it the widest. It has three sharp points that stick out into the water. There used to be four but time and the sea eroded the fourth away. The grey rocks have black edges of seaweed and littered among the black is the burst of colour from the tackle boxes. Three generations of fishermen stand on the cliff, one at each point. There used to be four but time and the sea eroded the fourth away.

**

Staying Grounded: Twelve Eyewitness Accounts of the Event

Tyler Keevil

1.

I was in the Three Corners care home for the elderly. My Grandpa had been recounting his days on board the *Elsie*, a crabbing boat which had moved through the years alongside Grandpa. He had a view of the boat from his room and everyone in here knew he wouldn't have it any other way. Out of the frosted window, I could see the *Elsie* as she sat on the placid waters; small pools eddied around her tar-coloured boards. I had heard this story many times before, so decided to busy myself with the stuffing in the armchair.

He was approaching the part where his boat had hit an ocean swell when he stopped. I quit fiddling and looked up; it was unlike Grandpa to finish stories early, especially his favourites. His arms were outstretched and hovering. I could see the tiny hairs along his arms becoming rigid; the wrinkles on his skin appeared to fill with air and pucker. His jaw fell open. I watched as his false teeth unhooked themselves. There was a soft squelch and tendrils of saliva bathed the teeth as they hit against the top of his jaw. I felt hot. Phlegm filled my throat. My eyes were blurring when I felt my body slow against the new weight in the room. I lifted my arms up to join the collection of memories which swam above my head. Newspaper cuttings, black and white photos, and letters from my late Grandma cocooned my body. In this space, I felt safe. The last thing I saw was the *Elsie*, her mooring rope broken, her mast alight and her boards travelling upwards. Her bow hit the care home within a matter of minutes.

2.

I was on a ferry in the Irish sea. And it was funny 'cause you'd think, when this stuff happens, the first thing you'd think of would be your children. That's what it's meant to be, right? That maternal instinct is supposed to rise above everything. I should've grabbed them, held them to my chest, told them not to worry. But I didn't. I didn't.

It was instantaneous though, y'know? It just happened. One second I'm staring out at the waves and the next my feet aren't on the deck anymore and little Billy is above my head and Lucy is clutching at my shoulder trying to stay grounded but I'm not grounded either and my face is wet cause the water's rising upwards in little drops. Like backwards rain.

In that moment, I just thought of my Mother.

And I suppose it's kinda fitting, right? It makes sense. When it comes to the end, the person you think of is the one who was there at the beginning.

3.

Mummy was tugging on my hand, weaving her way through the loud crowds of the Glastonbury Festival. She was determined to get us back to the tent before the rain came down. I remember the clouds looking very grey, just like my favourite toy Blue. He's an elephant. He's my best friend because we are both six years old. Mummy yanked my hand as she rushed to the tent. I stepped on a few yucky bits of rubbish that were lying about. Mummy's favourite band, the Floaters, started playing. I don't like them because they are very boring and sing very sad songs. A grumble of thunder sounded in my ears. I waited for the rain. I even reached out my hand but nothing came. Instead I let out a shout when I saw that Blue was flying up into the sky.

"Mummy! Mummy! Blue's trying to be an astronaut!"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"But he is! We aren't supposed to be astronauts today!" I shouted as I tried to pull free from her grasp. When she finally let go, I felt my feet lift off the ground. I called out to her, but she was floating too. She was shouting my name over and over again. We both began to go toward the sky, just like everything else. I watched as the truck where we got our hotdogs bumped into a person. I looked back at my mummy.

"Mummy I don't like this!" I called. I was crying – my tears not falling down my face but instead hitting Blue who was floating above me.

4.

I was at the London observatory with my twelve-year-old granddaughter Emily. Walking down the aisle to our seats in the planetarium, the slow paced queue came to a sudden halt. At first I thought the lady in front of me had tripped, causing the soda in her large paper cup to fly over her shoulder into my face. I used my Hermes scarf, a gift from the faculty when I retired, to wipe my eyes. When I opened them I saw that the lady who had tripped was holding the arm of the leather seat to her right so tightly the muscles in her arms were rigid.

Then I noticed the paper cup floating towards the ceiling and tiny brown droplets of soda circling my head. My body floated several feet from the safety of the floor. I felt sick. Not the kind of sick you feel when you've eaten something dodgy, but the kind of sick you feel when you first experience sea sickness, when the contents of your stomach slosh around, doing backflips, and your head feels like it's being held down by a heavy weight, so much so that you can barely hold your chin up. I looked to my left to see Emily floating away from me. I tried to swim through the air, my arms and legs flailing wildly trying to reach out to her unsuccessfully. Up and up we went towards the stars, my ears filled with the sound of bodies crashing through the ceiling until there was silence.

5.

I was enjoying a rare evening off from attending charity events and enjoying a well-deserved bath. It started with a razor rising an inch or so off the enamelled shelf, where I'd just put it. This was followed by the loo roll and the towel, floating upwards. And then me. I could do nothing to stop the inches growing between the bath tub and myself. No amount of flapping my arms would get me back down. The bath water was rising with me too; my torso was still submerged in water but my legs developed goosebumps as the cold air came into contact with my skin. Soon my head was pressed up against the ceiling. I tried to manoeuvre myself towards the door. The air was clogged up with too many things, twice I'd already had to dodge flying clay mugs that had once contained our toothbrushes. I couldn't gain any control of my body's movement. Only up and down, up and down. A pile of sample bath tiles floated alongside and around me. One hit the ceiling and rebounded off the plaster, plummeting straight into the top of my head. It knocked me backwards. The water splashed in my face as I tumbled through the air, and choked me as I inhaled it. Then the back of my head hit the side of the bath, hard.

6.

I was in the library crouched between two of the revolving stacks, head in hands, trying to will the headache away. That's when I heard a boy cry out for his mum.

Maybe I imagined it: a kid in the university library was not unheard of, but it was a rarity. I felt a lightness take over me while my feet wandered into the abyss. I've finally succumb to these darn headaches, I thought. But then I heard the boy call out for a second time and I opened my eyes.

I was no longer on the ground but, then again, nothing else was either. Even the stacks were starting to shift slightly from where they were loose from years of constant use. I grabbed ahold of a free-floating copy of *Comorbidities in Headache Disorders* before flailing onto the uppermost shelves of the stacks. I sidled along the shelf, my feet rising above my head as I kept my hands firmly locked onto the cool metal. When I rounded the end of the stacks I could see the boy and his mum. She was sobbing, watching him flail to keep away from the open window he was drifting slowly towards. I launched myself towards him and upon grabbing hold of his shoulders pushed him gently towards the harsh cries of his mother. Then, I was gone.

7.

A peculiar school of muddy coloured fish had appeared the week before. They had stubby tails, and neon stripes. They were the same size in length as my pocket *River Fish of North America* handbook. I assumed they had found their way to the swamp because it's connected to a narrow underground stream. They liked the wide, leafy seaweed that grew right in the centre of the swamp. I was up to my knees, counting the school size to see if they matched up to a particular species in the book.

I'd been hunched for a good half hour to see them and my back ached so I stretched backwards. I closed my eyes, sighing with satisfaction and when I opened them I noticed - although who would fail to - that the fish were no longer down in the water but on a level with my face, flailing and tangled in seaweed. And the water was now up to my waist and rising fast and I too was rising. Encapsulated, unable to swim or escape and the water rose quicker than me, covered my neck, my face. The fish were high above and I sputtered, gasped, struggled...

8.

I was on a boat in the Atlantic when it happened. It was my sister Elsie's hen party. I don't mean a hen party for a wedding: I'm twelve, and my sister is nine. She wanted a hen party for her ninth birthday – like with actual hens. On a boat. Me and my dad organized it all.

The hens had clipped wings, which meant they couldn't fly overboard. So they were running loose, claws scrabbling the decking, when two hens seemed to take flight, flapping up into the air. At first I thought they hadn't been clipped

properly. But then all the hens were in the air, turning and fluttering, feathers floating around us. And bird-doo, too. Elsie said, 'Gross,' as some hit her shoe, which was no longer touching the deck.

I felt a shiver – like passing through a shadow on a hot day – and I took a step towards her and just kept going, flying towards the stern. I thought the boat was tipping, that I was going overboard. I managed to grab onto the railing, and looked over the side.

I saw a spray of water, scattering outwards from the boat's propeller, all the drops glittering like little jewels in the sun. And I saw all this impossible space between us and the water. There was this funny-weird stink, of boat gas or diesel. Then somebody collided with me – my sister – and knocked me loose. Clinging to each other like starfish, we cartwheeled out into the sky, which was no longer above us, since up and down no longer meant anything.

9.

I was skinning a large flying fox. The critter was sought after by a particularly wealthy Englishman who insisted that *no one could do the thing justice but you*. No sooner did I have his pelt sliced open than the knife slipped into the body cavity – a slight change in pressure was all it took – and the innards began to swell up from the incision. It created a vacuous sucking noise as a greasy, sweating tangle of organs slithered out: the stomach, liver, kidneys, and intestines, all still strung together. Blood drifted in beaded droplets. His ribcage was wrapped around his oesophagus, hanging loose as the lungs slipped free and deflated. I lost my scalpel in the shock, and that too drifted from my hand, a glistening silver leaf in the warm Maldivian breeze. I lost the ground beneath my feet, my sterile silver table, the plastic packets to collect the organs. On the table, now a few feet away from me, the non-ionised salt drifted from its Tupperware box – snowfall in reverse, scattering like stars across a mottled wooden sky.

10.

I was making a sales pitch in the head-teacher's office of a private high school. At first the laminated photos of solar panel samples, which were spread across the table between Mrs Oldham and I, began to float. They had been slipping over each other for the past half an hour as we spoke, with the air conditioning behind me being so strong and all, but now they hung in the air as a partition between our shocked faces. Then again, it was probably more confusion than shock. After a minute or two of open-mouthed silence I reached for one. I remember the dull ache of my knees seemed less intense as I shuffled out of the green leather upholstery. I kicked the table. It flew. This heavy mahogany table, worthy of at least four young men's muscles to lift, just flew to the opposite wall, taking Mrs

Oldham and her sofa with it. She pushed it back, easy as dust. We could have played tennis with that table had the floor not heaved a great sigh like a dying dog. Then I saw the stone cross on the roof of the hall. Some tiles were missing; as I drifted past, I was thinking that the school would have to re-tile it before they installed our panels.

11.

I was in the park, listening to my iPod.

She got me considering...

I'd seen this girl, and I felt a tingle in my feet. My mind was working up to something monumental and I could barely contain myself. *Just go over there and speak to her, she'll be sweet about it.* This was my safe zone, a place I could admire from afar, but now my brain was churning something new -

What if?

I couldn't sit and stare any longer. So I reasoned myself, willed myself, and I picked myself up off that metal bench. Bench was hot so the skin at the bottom of my shorts stuck to the metal. Sweating from nervousness, or the damned heat?

Com'on, she's out of your league.

A sickly feeling rose in my stomach. Nervous? No, something else. Horrendous loudness of creatures screaming, birds of flesh and metal plummeting from the sky and cracking the earth. There was an element of weightlessness, and then I was floating next to her. In that moment of confusion, she pushed herself towards me. We touched hands. Maybe she'd been looking from afar too? Maybe she was just terrified.

Kiss me?

Without gravity, matter is nothing and so nothing matters: but she mattered to me. Then I cried out, because I knew what happened next. I knew what happened to a universe without gravity. They warned us this would happen, sometime in the future – but not now, not when I was just about to meet the love of my life.

I don't even know her name!

And just like that, like the snap end of a song: my iPod stopped its sweet, sweet tune and in a split second, silence. Nothingness.

12.

I was in the library when it happened. I remember reading something weird on one of the book covers, something about Shaking-Spears, when everything went dark. I don't like the dark. Mummy used to turn off my bed light at night-time but I just cried. Daddy put glow-in-the-dark stars on my bedroom walls to make me feel better. Daddy is an astro-fizzy-sist. He liked my stars.

My best friend Dean hugged me when it went dark and the teacher gathered us in a line. Then the books on the shelves started floatin' like in my dream that one time, and one hit me on the head. Dean said, 'Gosh we're flying!' and, as he let go of me, I felt like I was swimming. I hadn't got my fifteen metre badge yet but I was swimming, swimming in the air.

I kept going higher and higher and higher. My friends were still in the library. I could see them even though it was still dark. The lightbulbs shattered around me and made a really loud bang. Or maybe that was the ceiling breaking apart? I got a bit scared then because there were these massive bricks floating right past me.

I swam higher. Up above the buildings, the trees, the clouds, the stars. Daddy told me stars are much bigger close up. He was right: Daddy's so clever. I stretched my arm up over my head and felt my hair stand on end. I laughed and laughed, higher and higher, no longer needing to stay on earth, reaching towards heaven.

Featuring contributions from: Libby Brown, Oli Cowmeadow, Becky Charnock, Chloe Hodgkinson, Tyler Keevil, Sophie Lay, Kerry McDonnell, Holly Naylor, Laurie Parrett, Shanon Storm, Kate Whinnett, and Amy Wright

Afterword

On the short story module I was teaching last year at the University of Gloucestershire, for several weeks the group adopted a new approach to workshopping. Though collaborative writing had already been integrated into our dramatic writing modules, we hadn't undertaken such a project on a prose module before. Our group began by reading 'The Wrong Sun' from Douglas Coupland's *Life After God*; the second half of the story takes the form of anecdotes told by various people who've died in a nuclear blast, detailing their last moments on earth.

With Coupland's work serving as a creative catalyst, each member of the group came up with a possible catastrophic event. Our apocalyptic spectrum included zombies, meteor strikes, and time freezing, among others. We then voted on the premise that seemed to contain the most dramatic potential, choosing a scenario in which the force of gravity abruptly 'ends' – or at least goes on hiatus – meaning things no longer stay grounded on earth, but float free.

Each group member then created a character, and a setting – though not to write about themselves. These story components were mixed together and redistributed to create new and unique combinations. That simple 'shift' seemed

to ease the pressure, and enabled the contributors to write more freely.

The individual vignettes were generated in class and typed up afterwards, and subsequently workshopped collectively: everybody had input on each piece. The process took several weeks and between sessions we would collate the pieces into a single document. Having the end goal of a completed collaborative work helped provide a sense of focus and purpose.

The results were striking, and make up this publication. Each standalone scene is distinct and inventive, but equally noteworthy is the overall cohesion. As a portfolio they are held together by the gravitational premise as well as aspects of tone and style: particularly the blend of offbeat humour and resigned stoicism. In these 'eyewitness accounts' there seems to be a unifying sense of transcending not just gravity, but daily life, and existence itself.

Three Poems

Menna Elfyn

Niwlo

'You mention fields, air, rain, this is all I know about Wales'
Arantxa Urretabizkaia mewn gohebiaeth â'r bardd

Ni ddeallwn y dafnau brith
all daflu niwl dros ein llygaid,
wrth hongian yn yr awyr,
a'n rhwydo drwy ffawd at ffydd.

Gall un niwlen fechan
faglu'r golwg wrth i'r entrych
edrych fel ffenest lle hapchwarae,
ymbalfalu am gip i'r gorwel wnaf.

Ai dyma ein hanes ni?
' All I know of Wales'?
Pobl y niwlen ydym,
o dawch i'w drwch ynom.

Er dyfod dro'n ôl i'r cae hir
a'i alw'n faes i'n hiraeth,
ni allem fyned ôl-yn ôl,
na symud troed at borfeydd glasach.

Yma, yr ydym yn dyheu
fel rhan o'n creu i'n crawni
ar dir Cambriaidd, yr hyn sydd
yn faen o danom.

Misting

'You mention fields, air, rain, this is all I know about Wales.'
Arantxa Urretabizkaia in correspondence with the poet

We don't understand the speckling of drops
that cloud our eyes,

this misting in the air
that confuses fate with faith.

A single droplet seems enough
of a distraction, like a fairground

arcade's dark glass
enticing us elsewhere.

"All I know of Wales", you say.
But is this our history?

Why must we be people of the mist
feeling ourselves dissolving?

Ages ago we came here, and yet
are still confused by the mysteries

of who we never were
and what we'll never be.

Heddiw, cerddwn i gasglu'r praidd
a'r rhai ar ddisberod, ar erchwyn
dibyn, a'r môr yn awchu'r niwl
a'i ddwyn i'w gôl i'r llanw olchi ei drem.

xirimiri, ddaw drosom oll, smwclaw
a *lanbro* yn y pellter mawr tu hwnt
sydd ynghudd tu ôl i'r mynyddoedd,
lle mae 'lan' a 'bro' yn nes at gymylau

amser. Syllwn , ar oledd fel o hyd
a'n cariad at gaeau, ac at aer
ac at law, *lan da lan* ei fwrw drosom,
nes i'r awyr yn sydyn , hawyr bach
o'i gorsedd eiriaseddu.

Xirimiri—Basgeg am law mân;lanbro gair Basgeg am wylio'r storm a'r niwl; lan da lan - ymadrodd yn iaith y Basg am bopeth!

But this is is where we yearn
for our own acre of creation,

the stone where we stand
precambrian.

Today we're collecting the flock,
even the ones that wish to wander lost.

There's no secret for them
in the world's weather.

Fields, air, rain, as you say,
and our long hide and seek in the mountains,

but sometimes
our eyes will rise
for a sudden
incandescence.

Bondo

Bendith o dan y bondo.
Deuddyn sy'n sgwrsio a gwrando,
adeiniog bonblu'n cyd-byncio.
Ninnau, clyd ŷm a chryno,
ein mawl ar wefusau yno,
bendith yw byd y bondo.

Pa fyd gwell, nag yma'n huno
heb ofn gerllaw wrth ddeffro?
Gwên cymar ar awr blygeinio,
cyn i'r dydd a'i wawl fraslunio
a'n gwasgar, hyd awr ein clwydo
i fendith o dan y bondo.

I annedd dangnef rôl mwstro
daeth pigau euraid i byncio;
'Croeso haf' mewn brig, anwylo
ein nythaid, bu mynych gyffro
'n eu plu, cyn in ddadflino,
a'n bendith o dan y bondo.

Oes o ŷyl yw'n noswylio.
Pa bris sydd i'n llys breswylio?
I bob cyw daw gwawr ehedo
o raid ar ei hynt-- anturio.
Cân ein pader i'w plith – fel heno:
Ein pryder boed iddo esmwytho;

boed bendith ar nyth eu bondo.

Benediction of Eaves

Benediction of eaves!
Blessings to all paired things
they shield.
Snug under soffits we sing:
blessed be
the tabernacles of our eaves.

What more delicious
than under overhangs
to sleep, and unalarmed
wake to our aubade,
before the day
drafts itself, disperses us –
but only till we roost again
in the grace and godsend of the eaves.

After the mass migrations,
songs spill from summer gables.
Flight's flurries settle.
Fledglings hallow
our own sweet brood indoors –
boon of eaves-born birds.

Each day ends triumphant
in a coming home;
but home, we know, is where
we leave from:
hatchlings raise the latch
and go.

Let fly blessings:
may your eaves' lease
always bring you joy.

Ysgol Gân y drudwns

Gnaws etyn adnabod bore
Gwalchmai ap Meilyr

A daeth taith fawr
ddwsinau o ddrudwns
i ben.
Nid sbienddrych
o bell yn gorwelio
eu plu sy.
Ond bore heddiw
seicdreiddwyr eu cof
sy'n nodi sain
eu hen ganiadau.

Wedi clwydo
deffro wnant,
ehedant
i bedwar ban, cydganant,
hymian mewn ffurfafen
fel taflen Ysgol Gân,
llond galeri yn oedfa'r nos,
a'r Gymanfa yn agosáu.

Altos fan hyn,
desgant fan draw,
basso profundo o gysgodion dwyfol
Yn solffeio—*do, mi, ti.*

A'r haul, ymuna â'r saint,
seinio pibau ei organ
wrth amenio ac amenio
y Duw adeiniog.

Ar adain cân
glissando yn y nen.

Eto eu llef sy'n rhy bell o'n gafael.

Singing School for Starlings

A bird's instinct is to know morning
Gwalchmai ap Meilyr

It's long journey's end
for a murmuration of starlings.

Their feathers seen,
not through field-glasses
on a far horizon,
but here and now
where the whitecoats explain
how birds remember
their old songs -

released from the gates of sleep
they wake on the wing, humming
to the earth's four corners,
and the sky's page is a sheet
from the hymn-book of Singing School,
the gallery full for evensong
their Gymanfa in full voice.

Altos here,
descant there
a basso profundo of shadows
sol fa - *do, mi, ti*.

The sun will join the refrain,
sounding itself.
And voicing, Amen. Amen,
is the wing-ed God.

Ond wrth godi ael
gwelwn Ddiwygiad,
cyffesion ffydd o adenydd.

A'r Durtur anwel?
Rhy astud yw i ni ei chlywed.

On a flight of song
the flock's hymn flows
beyond our reach.
Yet open our eyes
and see a Revival,
a confession of birds,

the great invisible Dove
too attentive to be heard

Menna Elfyn, *Bondo: Bilingual Welsh-English Edition*, trans. Elin ap Hywel, Gillian Clarke et al. (Bloodaxe Books, 2017)
www.bloodaxebooks.com

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The Highwayman

For Kate Garrett-Nield and Carly Holmes

Bethany W Pope

Wine Red Was His Velvet Coat

You know the type; a man, no, a boy really, not so lovely as he thinks, but dressing the part. His skin is clear, but you can see where the spots were, once, at the edges of his glossy new beard. His teeth are crooked, and the back ones are going already, but you can only see the rot at kissing-distance and, by then, it's too late. By the time it gets to kissing, you're already his. You know what he does for a living (if you can call it a living) and you don't approve, but he tells you that he loves you (he does, he does) and he brings you flowers made of real velvet, scented with violets, so that their beauty will not wilt, and he brings you something black and very sweet which (he says) he found in one of the coaches he picked off. That was the night he came in wearing the wig, the white horsehair wig he hawked in Salisbury to buy those doeskin breeches he wore so well. He fed you the chocolate, a square at a time, lying together under the arbor. He kissed the taste from your mouth with the hot root of his tongue.

The Landlord's Black-Eyed Daughter

You know the story. She's beautiful, of course, with all that long hair, oily at the roots, but carefully brushed and smelling like jasmine and her own hot flesh. But her beauty isn't all of it. She's funny, too. Making jokes with the lads while pouring the beer. She never takes no guff, though. Touch her uninvited and she'll go all stiff and formal, like a body made of stone. Press her, and she'll stick that little silver knife she carries right into your throat. Bess can go off like a flintlock, when she needs to. It's part of her wonder. That hard little edge.

His Face Burned Like a Brand

One more job, that's how he sold it, one more job then he'd go clean, buy my father out, and we'd live together, here, making pies or suchlike, drowning idiots in ale. I was sixteen and drunk on kisses. Drunk on his kisses. He climbed out through the window when he heard my father's tread on the stairs. His horse was waiting directly below, tied to the cherry tree. The branches were blossoming, pale against the blackish wood. The petals were wet; fragile as paper. He mounted the horse (moonlight glinted, white, on the hilt of his rapier, on the edges of his spurs) and he stood up in the stirrups, leaning in towards the window as I leaned out of it. We couldn't reach across that gulf, but he grinned up at me with those bad teeth and took a handful of my black hair in his fist. I smiled down at him, liking the game (and the small pain which came with it), liking the feel of my hair tugging on his fingers. He buried his face in the black that I grew, kissing the tresses and his own knuckles through them, and I felt something warm spreading out from the roots, spreading downward, blossoming in me like fire from the centre of a pyre. We were burning, alright. We burned through the night.

King George's Men Came Marching

The stableboy who works for the inn told us what he'd heard. Skinny lad, with a goat's long face, and hair already so sparse the scalp was peeping through it. He had no reason to tell us anything. This scoundrel was a pest, at worst, picking off the stupidest of travelers; foreigners and suchlike, the kind who were rich enough to want to show themselves in Society but too poor to afford the services of a guard. We were happy for the information, of course. Our battalion would be issued a small bonus for his dispatch, but the lad wouldn't see a farthing of it. He must have had some other motive. In any case, what happened to the girl was very sad. The Lord above knows what she was thinking, acting out like that. Ah well, we got our bonus, the landlord got his settlement, and the neighbors withdrew with a story to tell. I expect that local tongues will be wagging over this for years. Lord knows they've not much else to talk about. Country folk feed on gossip as though it were bread.

Her Finger Moved in the Moonlight

They said they didn't mean to hurt me, but that was a lie. They wouldn't have touched me, like that, if they'd meant no harm. They tied me up to the bedpost after I stuck that fat boy in the hand when he tried to grab my never-you-mind. The fat boy kissed me right on the lips, when I was well tied and he'd grown back his courage. My hands were bound before me, my back lashed to the post; if I'd been tying one of them, I would have done a better job of it. Bound my wrists back around the bedstead. Saved some rope. But they liked the way my arms pushed my bosoms up when they were tied in the front, so they did it like that. The skinny man (older, with a scar on his cheek and molars splintered by a bayonet) was playing with my bubbies when the Sargent came in, scowled a bit, and forced them to keep their hands to themselves. Their quarry would be coming soon, he said. They wanted to be certain to get him. For the bonus. He said this, then turned on his heels to eat more of my father's good ham in the warm kitchen. The fat boy laughed, when the old gentleman was safely gone, saying, 'Righto, sir. Like we'll be seeing any of that.' He wiped more of his blood on the rough red of his coat. I'd done a good job of sticking him. The bleeding hadn't stopped yet. The soldiers had two muskets each. They loaded both of them. The skinny man kept one on his lap and the other leaning up against the windowsill with the gullet pointing up. The fat boy, for a joke, propped his spare gun against my chest, barrel up, like a single black eye, peering between my white breasts. My fingers were a few inches from the trigger, but the rope had some give to it. I was stronger than I looked. I heard, once, that this kind of musket was called a Brown Bess. We shared a name, my killer and I. We shared something else, too. A promise; a threat.

With a Bunch of Lace at His Throat

I was coming home, coming late, but fast, my saddlebags heavy with coin and candlesticks. It was a good coach and the driver was careless. I'd had a good night, sure enough, but I could make it better, aye, even better still. My thoughts were all black silk and jasmine; a laugh, rough, like the cry of a crow. I spurred Galleon hard, too hard, in the flanks, but she was a good girl and I knew she'd forgive me. I wanted my Bess. The inn was dark (too dark) considering that it wasn't midnight yet. That made me careful. It was quiet, too. I drew back on the rein when we crested the hill leading up to the gate. I almost dismounted, thinking to creep round the back and climb that cherry tree which would hoist me right up to her room, but something taut in the air held me back. I heard laughter, from

the kitchen. The landlord, laughing scared. And that's when I heard the sound of the shot. It shattered the moonlight. I heard the shouts of angry men, and that was enough warning for any man. I mounted up again on Galleon, headed back towards Salisbury. I stayed that night in another inn. I didn't hear about Bess until the morning and you can bet that, when I did, I rode that highway like a bead of quicksilver, bright and dangerous, and oh so fast. My musket was out, as I rode, and so was my rapier. My horse, my good Galleon, knew where we were going and I trusted her to get me there. But they were waiting for me, the soldiers. They'd kept very still, by the side of the road. They saw me coming, and I was too angry to be careful. I heard a loud roar, right before the road splashed red.

Stripey Cup

Ghost

Abigail Staniforth

She didn't "come with the house". You bricked her into it.

Every forgotten anniversary and last-minute birthday present; every late dinner, every night you didn't make it home. Every rushed phone call, every "you too". Every hollow promise professed, proclaimed, carved into stone gathering dust, broken. Every squeak of bed-spring 'til you roll off, spent, and she hadn't even begun.

Every raised hand hidden in the edge of your raised voice, every time she looked into your eyes and wondered if it would be easy for you to take her life, if it would happen quickly, before she knew it. If she'd have time to hate you. If you'd cry.

She gave it up. I don't know what "it" is, but she gave up something. She probably didn't mention it, and when you didn't notice - or didn't care to notice - you placed down that first brick. When, years later, you sneered at some ambition of hers, maybe her career, you gave your spit as mortar. You sealed her in.

She didn't "come with the house". You bricked her into it.

Love at Graveside

Christopher Hollis

Adored,
do you still love me in the ground?
Has formaldehyde preserved
your pure heart?
Are you dreaming down there?
Will you become the chlorophyll
In the flowers I pick for
another girl?
Will she see you in them?
Will she know?

Lingering

(for Catherine)

Mari Ellis Dunning

I couldn't stand the cedarwood stench that grew
in your absence, so I migrated, birdlike,

to the smaller back bedroom. Each night,
I hear your shallow breath seeping

through the thin wall, picture you, one leg
cocked, reaching for me through darkness.

I found your keyring under the sofa, gathering
dust, forgotten, and on it – that photo of us,

of you, a bearded stranger, and me, girlish
and unsure, cloaked in a vintage dress

awaiting assurance of my beauty.
With oversized marigolds and an old tea towel,

I bleached your skin cells from the skirting,
swabbed your residue from the foundations.

You clung like smoke to the wallpaper.

The Park

Geoffrey Heptonstall

COSMO: Course it's a good place to walk a dog. If I had a dog. I'd be a better man if I had a dog. He says to me, he says, 'What do you want a dog for?' To walk it, of course, I said, but he wasn't listening. Well, they don't listen, do they?

GORDON BENNETT: Who?

COSMO: Who what?

GORDON BENNETT: Who doesn't listen? You said they don't listen.

COSMO: Well, they don't, do they?

GORDON BENNETT: Who?

COSMO: Who? Why do you keep saying who? You don't listen neither. You should be in government. I should be in government. I'd be somebody then, somebody they listened to. It's always me who does the listening.

GORDON BENNETT: What you listening for?

COSMO: The enemy

GORDON BENNETT: Which one?

COSMO: The enemy within. You have only to be hereabouts for a little while before you hear them, whispering the secrets of betrayal for enemy ears.

GORDON BENNETT: You want to speak to somebody.

COSMO: I am doing. I'm speaking to you.

GORDON BENNETT: I'm not important. I mean, I'm not prime minister, married to the Queen. Not yet, anyway.

COSMO: No, I am. So you shut your face.

GORDON BENNETT: Sorry and all that. I was forgetting. How d'you get that, then?

COSMO: Get what?

GORDON BENNETT: Being prime minister.

COSMO: Process of elimination.

GORDON BENNETT: Who did you eliminate?

COSMO: All those what stood in my way.

GORDON BENNETT: You mean everyone else? If you did that how come I'm alive?

COSMO: You're not important.

GORDON BENNETT: I wondered why the streets was empty. I put it down to the water supply.

COSMO: How did you know? How did you know I'd put something down the water supply?

GORDON BENNETT: You of all those present had the strongest motive.

COSMO: Well, it's a question of respect due to someone in my elevated position. I could have been Chancellor of the Exchequer. I'd be good with money if I had any money.

GORDON BENNETT: You need qualifications. I got qualifications.

COSMO: Which is?

GORDON BENNETT: I live not ten minutes away, for a start.

COSMO: Like me. Very nice park, it is, too. Having royalty close by gives it a bit of class.

GORDON BENNETT: I get on very well with her. I mean, I always cheer her on. Well, you got to get on with your neighbours, especially when they're respectable. Standards are important.

COSMO: She keeps dogs. This is an ideal park to have a dog but for the fact that it says NO DOGS ALLOWED. NO DOGS ALLOWED. That's what it says. NO DOGS ALLOWED.

GORDON BENNETT: I wish you'd shut up about dogs.

COSMO: It says NO DOGS ALLOWED.

GORDON BENNETT: That was my idea. Well, I always said that. They listen to me.

COSMO: I never listen to you.

GORDON BENNETT: I could be dead for all you care. Dead and buried. Washed out to sea. They don't go that far, though.

COSMO: Who you on about now?

GORDON BENNETT: You see them on the bridges waiting to jump. When they fall in they hang about in the water. Some change their minds. Their fingers is all torn because they've been scratching at the piers, trying to claw their way up. Too late, though, to change your mind when you're drowning.

COSMO: I prefer to look at the sky. You don't see stars. Never. It's the result of the air pollution. So if you don't drown you choke to death.

GORDON BENNETT: Or they'll shoot you. I think I'd prefer a good clean arrow through my head.

COSMO: The trouble with you is you lower the tone of the neighbourhood. This was a very respectable place until you came along.

GORDON BENNETT: What is that supposed to mean?

COSMO: There was never any trouble – no drownings or shootings until you came along. Now it's all you hear about. This place is full of dead bodies. I've lost count. I expect I'll be next. Next on your list.

GORDON BENNETT: A minute ago it was you who was in charge. Now you're saying it's me. And I've never set foot inside the House of Lords since I renounced my title at the age of twenty-one.

COSMO: I never renounced mine. If ever I was to be asked for the secret of my success it would be as follows: 1. I live in a respectable neighbourhood. 2. I am entitled to a free bottle of wine with every meal.

GORDON BENNETT: Well, that's different, then. I didn't know you was quality. Course in a high class park like this what can you expect?

COSMO: I don't expect much, myself. There's others may be on the grab, but I'm content serve my country as best I may.

GORDON BENNETT: How d'you do that, then?

COSMO: Firstly by knowing my place. Second by the sensible advice I give to all who will listen. And, never forget, that when I speak the nation listens.

GORDON BENNETT: Can you do something about the pigeons?

COSMO: I'll have my people get on to it right away.

GORDON BENNETT: Thank you. At last something is to be done. You deserve a medal.

COSMO: I have a row of medals for all the good ideas I have had over the years. I'll tell you one of my ideas. I suggested they open up a Tesco at Victoria. Monck Street. I'm too busy to manage it myself of course, but I go in regular.

GORDON BENNETT: I don't go there no more.

COSMO: You're much missed by staff and customers alike.

GORDON BENNETT: No, I'm not, more's the pity.

COSMO: What you done then? Not that again?

GORDON BENNETT: I was guilty of an offence there that I don't care to mention. They need to provide toilets for customers is all I can say. It's different here in the park.

COSMO: What was the outcome?

GORDON BENNETT: What of?

COSMO: Your offence. What was the outcome?

GORDON BENNETT: There was a bit of a mess. They had to get out disinfectant. Disgusting the smell of disinfectant. Don't they think about their customers?

COSMO: Your comments have been noted.

GORDON BENNETT: Who by?

COSMO: Me.

GORDON BENNETT: I've never been back. It was an outrage the way I was treated. I had a good mind to consult my solicitor. But he's a busy man now that he's inside. Pentonville.

COSMO: Not nearly as good an address, is it? Bit of a comedown, really. When I tell people where I live they look with respect. If I was to seek my fortune elsewhere I would be at a definite disadvantage. But here we rule the world.

GORDON BENNETT: And it's a better world for it.

COSMO: Course it's a good place to walk a dog.

GORDON BENNETT: Take a lot of looking after, dogs. I nearly had a dog once but it went under a bus before I could catch it. I was going to call it Prince. That was going to be the name of my dog.

COSMO: I'd call a dog Horse Guard. Good name for a dog.

GORDON BENNETT: Could be confusing, though. Ritz is a good name. More in keeping with the nature of a dog, in my opinion. Very intelligent creatures, dogs. More so than humans. You can teach a dog to do anything.

COSMO: You can't teach it to be human.

GORDON BENNETT: You can have a good try.

COSMO: Then there's the trees.

GORDON BENNETT: What about them?

COSMO: Well, you get dogs in the park and you get trees in the park. And flowers.

GORDON BENNETT: And people.

COSMO: Well, you has to be very special person to live in a park like this. You need to know people.

GORDON BENNETT: I know you.

COSMO: That's my point. That is my very point, Gordon.

GORDON BENNETT: Mr Bennett to you, Cosmo.

COSMO: Mr Cosmo to you, Mr Bennett.

GORDON BENNETT: That your real name, then?

COSMO: It's my only name. It's all a person needs in the park.

GORDON BENNETT: So this where you were born?

COSMO: Under that very tree. It's called the Cosmo tree. You ask anyone who knows this park where my tree is and they'll tell you.

GORDON BENNETT: I don't need to ask. I know. You just told me.

COSMO: I should charge for dispensing information when asked. I'm often asked. I always give an answer even when I'm not sure if it's the right one. It's only polite.

GORDON BENNETT: I tell 'em to stick it.

COSMO: But you know the park better than anyone.

GORDON BENNETT: And how did I learn? I learned the hard way. The hard way is the best way, believe me.

COSMO: I learned by walking. I let my legs do the talking. And when I speak the nation listens.

GORDON BENNETT: Anyway, where does it say NO DOGS ALLOWED?

COSMO: There are signs everywhere. I put them up.

GORDON BENNETT: I never see any.

COSMO: They're in all the major world languages. I speak several fluently.

GORDON BENNETT: Well, go on then, if you can speak foreign. Say something.

COSMO: You wouldn't understand.

GORDON BENNETT: Try me.

COSMO: Nizhni vyet vomsograd unt der savarone.

GORDON BENNETT: What's it mean, then?

COSMO: It's too dirty to repeat in English.

GORDON BENNETT: And there was me thinking it was poetry.

COSMO: Oh well, it's that as well. It's just different being foreign. A lot of foreigners would appreciate it.

GORDON BENNETT: They can understand it if they're foreign.

COSMO: It helps them feel at home in our wonderful park.

GORDON BENNETT: I tell 'em to stick it. I could say what you said if I knew how it was done. How's it done, then?

COSMO: It's surprising what you can find wandering through the park.

GORDON BENNETT: That's where a dog comes in handy. Surprised you haven't got a dog. You say you'd be a better man if you had a dog. I'd be a lot worse because of the fleas. I'd be good with money, though, if I had any money.

COSMO: But who needs money when you've got your freedom? Who needs money when you've got this park? Who needs money when you've got palaces and churches and elegant houses close by? Who needs money when you live as we do?

GORDON BENNETT: You need money to feed a dog.

COSMO: But here we rule the world. That's what it means to live in the park.

Two Poems

Mike Jenkins

Driftwood Cross

He unwrapped the present under the tree
beneath the star, the family star,
silver glitter fallen, patchy yet so familiar.

'Is this for me?' he untied the ribbon
and carefully tore off golden paper,
inside a cross made from driftwood.

'It's specially for you Taid,
I made it for you to remember
when we're away after the holidays.'

He held the smooth wood closely,
it was like clutching her fingers,
steadying him as they walked by the sea.

'That's lovely dear, I'll put it by here.'
On the mantelpiece above the fire
his daughter had built so meticulously.

Later that day, full and glowing,
he sat and dozed and day-dreamed ;
the cross recalling twisted limbs.

In the hearth he fancied flames
were tongues telling tales of his woman,
but he woke to ash, warmth gone.

He picked up that cross and grasped it,
knowing it would be his companion
back to the bay where it belonged.

Woz There?

Woz there really
terraces all over Georgetown
with sheep squattin in doorways,
sheep oo looked as if
they'd done a shift down-a pit?

Woz there really
a white tip bottom o the ill,
a ghost o lime night-time
like snow out o season,
or a ewge lump o pijin shit?

Woz there really
a whool waste of land
where gypsy caravans settled
f months, sellin theyer carpets
an doin the rounds of tarmac?

Woz there really
a street fulla workers
in gas, water an railways
an all of em nationalised,
before scaffolders an 'lectricians moved in?

Woz there really
kids out there most evenin's
playin footie, tag, rounders
an neighbours rantin an ravin
coz o precious cars an rose-bushes?

Woz there really
a bus full of ol people
speakin Welsh as natural
as colliers gobbin dust ;
language like oaks round-a village?

Woz there really
a man runnin up an down the ill,
a boxer trainin, thin as a skellington
in the ood of is tracksuit,
disappearin over-a brow the las time?

in this big city of mine

for Lucy Linford

Teige Maddison

days after days have gone under my wondering
in this body-less wheelbarrow;
london, this big city of mine, is
taking your ego to greet the birth of your bones,
it is london agreeing your decline,
it is london drawing circles around your friends
and pulling them in like a failing parachute,

and you are also the parachute,
the person crawling once more
lapping up the blaring nursery rhyme
we are stuck on repeat
we are stuck on repeat-
addiction, being relentless, tows in the guilt
to which i bow.

harmony is held under the slack of the parachute cords
no whispers of comfort and okayness allow themselves to be heard

but you hang me above this city,
you the onlooker, galling reaper-historian of the self
pointing at the live-map, to my tragedy
-the one that never got away-
to the pain of remembering but these memories
are my mother living, are appointments scribbled out in diaries
and a self-beating vinyl 45, scratched.

your hands melt pulling the cord,
the shadow on the lip of our page reflects a saw,
i don’t know why we goad it to cut the world apart.

Between Sleeps

Salvatore Difalco

There was a hole in my ceiling, directly over my bed. I'd been awoken from a deep and nurturing sleep by a whooshing sound. Air pouring in through the hole made this sound. As I rubbed my eyes, I wondered if a meteorite had smashed through the roof. I live on the top floor of my tenement and have often speculated what would happen if a meteorite were to blaze down from the heavens and smash through the roof. I arose and thanked God for no rain. Had it rained that morning my bed would have been doused. But as it was the sky presented a plentifully blue bouquet, with feathered boa clouds gently snaking over the city ramparts.

I inspected the hole, and found it distinguished by some kind of turbulence. It resembled in miniature the whirlpool I had seen at Niagara Falls many years ago. I took a ride on something called the Spanish Aerocar over this whirlpool. I still recall the stiff winds of the gorge rocking the Aerocar, and the fear.

Nevertheless, air flowed violently from the mysterious aperture in the ceiling. I am not a meteorologist or a physicist, nor do I believe in magic or supernatural forces. But this hole in my ceiling looked suspicious, that is to say, phenomenal. I didn't want to endanger myself in any way by inspecting it further and perhaps setting off some kind of chain reaction. I've learned during my half-century on the planet to always seek expert help when you have no idea what you're doing. Overcoming stupidity or ignorance can be achieved, at some risk, through trial and error, or can be obviated painlessly for a price. I was prepared to pay that price.

Of course, my next move was to summon the super, Arthur, who would be inclined to know what the hole was, having superintended the tenement, according to his telling, for more than 20 years. Surely during those two decades he had encountered an anomaly similar to this. Then again, he may have never encountered anything like it. The answer to that question rested in superposition. At that moment, both possibilities were true.

I dressed and went down to his office in the basement. It's funny, some people are basement people, suited by character or genetics to work and live in the subterrain. Pale, pudgy and gray-lipped, Arthur could be the least helpful person in the world if you caught him on a bad day. What constituted a bad day for him presented a mystery to me, though I believe it may have had something to do with the disposal of garbage. A big dirty job—Arthur always lamented what a toll it took on him, taking out the tenement's absurd amount of garbage. It was like a garbage factory, he used to say. The residents, many who were pensioned, unemployed or on disability, did nothing all day but produce garbage. In a way, their efforts, and the efforts of individuals like them peppered throughout the city, kept it working. Garbage trucks, landfill sites, recycling plants. Think of all those jobs, all those families. We needed garbage, and my tenement could have been considered a small garbage factory working at the very apex of productivity.

"What do you want?' Arthur said upon answering his door.

"No good morning? No how are you? Where's your humanity, Arthur? You've been living in the dungeon for too long."

"Hey, Sammy, go fuck a duck will ya. What the hell is your beef today?"

"Did a meteorite hit us last night?"

Arthur blinked. His eyelashes were very faint and his emphatic blinking only emphasized their faintness.

"There's a hole in my bedroom ceiling," I added.

"Were you yanking your pud too hard last night?"

When Arthur made vulgar little comments like this one I tended to ignore them. Whenever I dared to call him out on his vulgarities, he simply responded with harsher words, verbal assaults of an odious nature, and denigrations of my mother and my family that I could not bear to hear.

"I don't know what caused it," I said, "but I suspect a meteorite."

"Why is that, was there debris? Was there debris on your bed? Did anything burn? I heard no fire alarm."

"Nothing burned. It may have been an ice-meteorite."

"Maybe frozen waste evacuated from a passenger plane. I've heard of that. Did you find thawing feces on your bed?"

"No, nothing like that. Maybe you should come and look at it yourself."

Arthur grumbled to himself. He told me he'd be up in a few minutes.

I returned to my flat. I had to get ready for a doctor's appointment scheduled for ten a.m. across town. My stomach had been bothering me for several weeks. It felt like a hole had been bored into my stomach lining and stuff was leaking into the rest of my abdomen. My bowel movements had been irregular, often accompanied by bloody discharges. The human body is an exercise in pain and putrefaction. No getting around it.

I poured myself a glass of chocolate milk, my usual breakfast. I need something cold and sweet in my stomach first thing in the morning or I feel unsettled and lightheaded. I use lactose free chocolate milk to avoid unnecessary gas. I went into the bedroom to check out the hole. It was still there, still whirling, still blowing air into the room. I saw nothing else to note, no debris, no thawing feces.

When Arthur at last arrived he had a small swarthy man with him.

"This is Manolo. He's a roof guy who lives in the building."

"Hello, Manolo."

"Yo. What up?"

"There's a hole in my bedroom ceiling."

Manolo rubbed his whiskered chin and shook his head. His hair resembled field grasses gathered for kindling. I had trouble meeting his gaze, his black eyes darting hither and thither like tadpoles.

"Let's have a look," Arthur said.

"Vamanos," said Manolo.

As we walked to my bedroom I asked if Manolo was Mexican. Both he and Arthur shot me dirty looks.

"He's from Panama," Arthur declared.

"Si, I ham from Panama," Manolo said. "I ham in Canada dos annos—two years."

"He's a refugee," Arthur said.

"Si, I ham a refugee," Manolo said.

Being the son of humble Sicilian immigrants who had also escaped their own species of oppression in the old country, I withdrew all judgments about the man's appearance—modest in a word, that is to say scruffy—and his manner of address. I myself have never shaken off my faint Sicilian twang.

In the bedroom, both Arthur and he gazed at the hole in silence for an interminable length of time. So much time passed that I observed the shadow of my cactus plant creeping across the wall. Arthur and Manolo continued their keen but rather inert investigation.

At last I cleared my throat.

Arthur looked at Manolo. Manolo looked at me. The three of us seemed to telepathically exchange volumes of information, but this impression lacked substance. I gathered nothing from their faces. In a poker game I would have been nonplussed. Manolo seemed altogether reluctant to speak in Spanish or English.

Arthur nodded at me.

"What?" I said. "What do you mean by that nod?"

"Well," he said, "I think we have a situation."

Manolo ducked his darting eyes and moved from foot to foot. I noticed he

was wearing Jesus sandals. His toenails needed trimming and his feet demanded a good wash. But the same could have been said about my feet, I suppose—though I wore slippers indoors, bear-paws. They provided my feet with the maximum degree of warmth and comfort possible for a middle-aged man. I could care less that they looked childish, clownish. A man with frozen toes hobbling about his flat and knocking over lamps and whatnot looks childish, clownish.

I demanded an explanation from Arthur.

"I'm going to hand over this part of the investigation to Manolo. Manolo, please."

Manolo cleared his throat and brought a curled hand to his lower lip.

"I ham thinking we need a priest," he said.

"What!' I cried. "A priest! What are you saying?"

"That is no ordinary hole, muchacho. I ham sure it is a demon who has caused the vortex you see now."

"Vortex?" The word puzzled and frightened me. All this mumbo jumbo was giving me acute anxiety.

"Yup," Arthur said. "A vortex. Not the first time. Back in 2002 a bigger one almost took old Mrs. Coons away. Poor thing died of heart failure a few weeks later anyway. We had to call in a priest on that occasion."

"Why wasn't I told this when I rented the place?"

"Statute of limitations," Arthur said. "Didn't have to say squat, legally speaking. Didn't think it would return, neither. Now we got us a situation. And we're gonna need a priest. Do you know a good priest?"

I had no idea what Arthur meant by a good priest. Most of the priests I had known were not good, at least by normal human standards. Perhaps the Pope and God Himself saw it differently. But seeking a priest to exorcise some kind of demon from my bedroom seemed about as ridiculous as believing the Earth was flat.

"I'm not buying all this hooey," I declared.

Arthur bent his head and spread his arms. "This is no joke," he said.

Manolo concurred with a gentle head bob.

"Well, what am I supposed to do now?" I asked. "Is the place like haunted or whatever?"

Arthur looked at Manolo. Manolo shrugged.

"It's not so much that it's haunted, like, by a ghost," Arthur said. "It's possessed, you see. The demon possesses the flat now."

"So I can't take a shower? Will Beelzebub come up through the drain and eat my balls or what have you? Well, I've got a friggin doctor's appointment. Beelzebub can suck my dick. I can't go to the doctor's without showering."

"Try a sponge bath," Arthur said.

I glared at him. Maybe he thought he was being funny, but there was

nothing funny about this cluster fuck.

"Okay," Arthur said. "We need to find a priest chop chop. No telling what this thing is gonna do. I'd be careful if I were you."

With that Arthur and Manolo departed. I went into my bedroom. The hole continued whirling, spewing out cool air. Apart from that, I detected no evil or redoubtable presence in the bedroom. I suspected Arthur and Manolo of magical thinking. Weren't we well past exorcisms in the 21st century? No doubt some kind of time-space anomaly or quantum disturbance explained the hole. Not much a priest could do except perhaps cause further decoherence.

I showered despite the possibility of something going terribly wrong. I was careful not to step awkwardly in the slick tub, and dried myself off with great care. I smelled and felt clean and knew the visit to the doctor would be that much easier. I exited and caught the crosstown bus. I like to travel by bus, it's soothing. Sometimes people can be annoying, but wherever you find people, the annoyance factor is sure to rise.

Dr. Hubert examined me thoroughly and said he was concerned about the puffiness around my midsection.

"Too many cheeseburgers?"

"I'm a vegetarian, doc."

At the mention of this his eyes perked up. He probed my abdomen with his thumb and hit upon a delicate area.

"Hurts?"

"If I stuck my thumb in that exact spot on your body, would it hurt?"

Dr. Hubert smiled. His nicotine-stained teeth never failed to shock me. An admitted smoker, he had likely not seen a dentist in some years. But I would never judge him for that. He was a good doctor, at least I thought he was a good doctor.

"I think you should curb the legumes a bit."

"That's my major protein source."

"Yeah, think it's messing with your digestive system. Lots of inflammation going on. You're completely inflamed."

"Gosh, that sounds awful."

"It's not good being so inflamed. I'll give you some anti-inflammatory meds but you have to cut out the chickpeas and lentils and whatnot."

"That's messed up, man."

"Trust me, Sammy. I'm the doctor."

"Ah, yes. Do you know anything about paranormal activity?"

Dr. Hubert flared his nostrils. "Had an aunt once, who believed she was the reincarnation of Marie Antoinette. She died from overeating peaches and clotted cream. True story. But I guess that's not what you mean."

"No, not really. There was a hole in my ceiling this morn. Super seems to

think it's a paranormal presence. He's calling a priest."

"Well, priests have to earn their bread somehow, eh?"

With that, I departed, feeling both relieved and concerned. Being human is often a matter of contrary feelings colliding. I had to let one go to deal with the other. Relief could wait. A hole in my ceiling caused by God knows what took precedence for now. I hopped the bus home. Arthur met me in the foyer.

"We found a priest," he announced, squeezing his hands together. "Father—"

"I don't want to know his name. When can he perform the exorcism?"

"Hold your horses. That's not how it works, buddy boy. First you have to dish out some loot—grease the holy palm so to speak."

This took me aback. The priest wanted remuneration for his services? I guess it made sense. They got paid for weddings and funerals, baptisms. Everyone likes to be paid for their work. Only writers do it for free. Small problem, I was broke. I couldn't rub two nickels together. I explained this to Arthur, who needed no proof of my penury. I was always late with my rent, always scrambling to get enough money together to pay it. I felt somewhat slighted. Knowing my situation, how could Arthur ask me to pay the priest? After all, wasn't this on the landlord?

"Mr. Rose won't pay for it."

"Why not, it's his friggin building?"

"Mr. Rose doesn't roll that way."

"No? Well, fuck Mr. Rose, and fuck the voodoo priest. I don't need them."

"This problem won't go away."

"I'll deal with it."

"I'm warning you."

"Arthur, let me worry about it. I'm a big boy."

With that, I returned to my flat, determined not to let this thing set me back further. I didn't need more nonsense in my life, which had become a garish carousel of snorting nostrils and spinning heads. My intestines buckled. Ugh. I sat on the toilet and tried to expel whatever was growling in there. Minor success. If I don't go twice a day I feel ill. A woman I used to date went once a month. Imagine that? She had abused laxatives as a teenager and had lost the ability to go without chemical assistance. When she finally kicked the drugs—due to blood toxicity—she had to resign herself to monthly bowel movements. Despite this, she was an optimistic person, always smiling and joking. But I could see the pain and discomfort and the idea of only shitting once a month shadowing her eyes. The idea that she shat only once a month also shadowed my efforts to carry on a normal relationship.

Life can be a real bastard. I went into the bedroom and looked at the hole. I wasn't going to let it intimidate me. Sometimes you have to draw a line in the sand of life. Sometimes you have to say, This is shit I will not eat!

I stretched out on my bed. The whooshing air from the hole cooled my face. It felt good, albeit somewhat foul-smelling.

"Hey, demon," I said, "if you wanna cha-cha now's as good a time as ever. We might have to call in Ghostbusters if you get outa hand. Come on. Show me what you got. I'm raring and ready."

But the demon must have been having an afternoon nap. There was no action forthcoming. These things only get to you when you let them get to you. Arthur and Manolo were convinced it was one thing, when clearly it was something else. What it was remained a mystery that perhaps would never be solved.

I shut my eyes and let my thoughts dance about for a few minutes before I let myself drift off to sleep. I dreamed of nothing and when I awoke nothing had changed except my view of things.

Eastern and Oriental

The E&O hotel, George Town, Penang

Chris Hardy

When I went back to the E&O
I met myself beneath a Casuarina
that shaded lizards
suspended on a wall
like seconds,

then my father buying kernels
from a man squatting over
a nest of paper cones.
As we walked to the hotel
I heard what he was saying
but not the words.

Odysseus poured blood
into a ditch in Hell
to make his dead friends speak,
and my still pulsing life
filled corridors with familiars

who had stayed behind when I
went into the cloud of darkness
that spun down
from the ceiling fan
when we switched it off
and shut the door.

It's always the same at checkout.
You wait to pay for time
already used, like laundry,
while the maid is in the room
cleaning ghosts away.

Abeyance

For Melody, on Our 19th Anniversary

Joseph Hutchison

Your Skyped smile froze (a dropped
connection), though it pleased me
to study your pixelated face
while I waited for some server
or satellite to free us. Strange,
how time, which haunts us,
makes us anxious when it stops,
leaving voices and gestures we adore
in blurred abeyance. Better to let it
flow. Let it rush on and carry us,
day by month by year, toward
that long arrestment all of us
are born for. The laptop screen
held your image tight, held mine
tight as well where you waited
in another country. After a while
I thought I'd quit, restart—but
then the screen blinked and released us
into the flow again. Your smile,
unstuck, fluttered comically, as mine
must have, because you laughed,
we both laughed, filled with the bliss
of bowing into the screen's ghost-light,
aging but alive, alive with something
unaccountably young within us.

Kitchen Daze

Suzy and the Silk Road

Alex Barr

'A small-town mentality. That's what you've got, I realise.'

Her blue eyes were moist. It wasn't like her to find fault. Or be anything but affectionate.

We were clearing up after the dinner. Professor and Mrs Chen had left, and Tom had retreated to his bedroom. Suzy said, 'So rude, to disappear during coffee.'

'Maybe I got tired of hearing about eyes filled with distance. What distance do I get? The hedge outside the kitchen window. I'm stuck here.'

'It's my *work*, Mike. I come to your auctions. I try to help when you're stressed. I need support as well.'

'You get it from your department.'

She put down the plate she was holding, hesitantly, as if tempted to smash it. Then left the kitchen, leaving me with a sense of doom and lead in my stomach.

Until the crème brulée conversation had limped. Tom, embarrassed by this rite of passage into adulthood, mumbling replies to questions. Mrs Chen equally embarrassed, no doubt because she spoke little English, and unused to knives and forks had a struggle with the hotpot. But the Professor dealt single-mindedly with the food, and by the time I brought coffee was rescuing the evening.

'So, Dr Pritchard, the Kizil caves are your oyster.' He joined his hands like shells, then opened them with a broad smile. 'You will visit western China. Ironic that my duties in Beijing leave little time for that pleasure, yet here I am in the UK. In a town which though small'—he laughed and held up thumb and finger an inch apart—'boasts a university.'

Suzy laughed too, appreciative. Tom looked interested for once. Perhaps suddenly aware that his mother commanded international respect. Or surprised to find that Chinese people have a rich sense of humour. I stirred my coffee vigorously, the spoon ringing against the cup.

The Professor said, 'The light, you know, is very special there. So clear. As if reaching out you could touch the distant mountains.'

'I like the sound of that.'

She glanced quickly at me to gauge my reaction. I focussed on the contents of my cup.

'Yes, the distance.' The Professor gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling. 'You see it in the eyes of those who live there.'

'The thousand-yard stare? A term,' she explained, 'from American cowboy films.'

'Ah.' He laughed again, and turned to his wife to interpret in Chinese. That's when I left.

At breakfast I knew I had to put things right. Suzy was looking sadly out of the window. No doubt imagining Tajikstan and Kyrgyzstan, whereas all I saw was the same view as ever. The sky was a sampler of clouds—cotton wool, gauze, skeins of unspun yarn—with rich blue near the zenith and duck-egg just above the hedge. A Scots pine waved fingers of glaucous green. But these sights didn't raise my spirits.

With a tremendous effort I said, 'So. The Silk Road.'

'You don't approve.'

'I won't feel like this for long. It's just suddenly very real.'

'I've been planning it for ages.'

'I know. I've been focussed on work. A dispute over a stream someone says was diverted, illegally. Till that's resolved we can't sell Thomas's fields. And Brian's in hospital.'

She took my hand. It was a relief. 'Listen, it sounds romantic. But imagine grey towns with communist-era blocks of flats. And most of my time will be spent in caves.'

So not much joy from distant mountains? I began to feel calmer. Suzy's face had lost its tense expression. I thought of a Madonna in an icon, and shivered, as if in the presence of something mysterious.

'The wall paintings are beautiful, Mike,' she said suddenly. 'Can I show you?'

'Please do.'

She went to her desk in the study and brought back a scroll, which she unrolled with reverence. 'This is Guanyin. "Goddess of mercy", according to Professor Chen, though I prefer "bodhisattva of compassion"'.

'Bodhisattva?'

'One dedicated to the enlightenment of all beings. "Observing the cries of the world" in Chinese.'

She held the painting for me to study. A woman in voluminous robes and tall headdress sat by a river under overhanging rocks. In her hand was a willow branch. Her expression was peaceful, heavy-lidded eyes half closed. Suzy rolled it up.

'Are you all right now?'

'Fine.'

We kissed and went our ways, she to the university, I to the auction rooms. Even if work left me free to go, what purpose would I have? Aimless wandering in foreign parts seemed ridiculous.

Next day, a setback. Symbols and pictures can stir you, as demagogues know. Suzy's passport was open on her desk. I saw a flash of colour—two visas. One bore a disc the blue of a summer sky. Around the edge, gold ears of wheat and Cyrillic writing. In the centre a gold sun rose above snow-capped mountains, and in the foreground, a strange figure stretched pale blue wings.

The other visa had a circular emblem. More ears of wheat and sprigs of maybe ivy, bound in red, white, and green ribbons. In the centre, above an open book (the Qur'an?) another sun, a red one, shot rays of dawn as it rose above—yes, more snowy mountains.

My heart beat faster. I tried to breathe deeply but my pulse barely slowed. There was a buzzing behind my eyes. Emerging from a cave she would see those snow-capped Central Asian peaks, lit by the strong sunlight that warms the skin like a blessing. She would hear rolling wheatfields rustle in a welcome breeze. I would not.

I thought the sensation would pass, and wandered around the study. I stumbled against a book left on the floor and knelt to look at the cover. A photo by an early explorer. In the foreground a stony plain with a yurt, a cart, and three grazing ponies. In the emptiness beyond, mountains, the highest and furthest capped with snow.

I imagined camping there, bearded and windburnt, hungrily eating strange food, then preparing for the hard trek through the pass. My body would ache from the last ride, my clothes would smell of leather and horse sweat. At each resting place, the day past and the unknown day to come would balance like wings.

The buzzing spread to my wrists and forearms. I clamped my bowed head between my hands, and groaned.

'Mike? What's wrong?'

I struggled to my feet as Suzy came in. Weak sun lit her face and made highlights in her hair. I thought her beautiful and remote. There was a silence.

'Well, Mike? You used to be able to talk about your feelings.'

'I'm ashamed of my feelings. I want you to be happy.'

'It doesn't feel like it.'

'I want to see those mountains, ride those ponies—'

'*Ponies?*'

'Smell those alien smells. Talk to salt-of-the-earth types in brightly-coloured tunics and goatskin hats. I want adventure.'

Suzy pushed back her hair and held her fingertips to her temples. The gesture pained me.

She said, 'This is work, Mike. You've got your own work. You need to get over this. It's like you envying Brian.'

My office looked onto neglected garden and was mainly grey, with harsh strip lights and boring pictures. His had a view across the square, subtle pastel shades, and Italian table lamps. Behind his desk was a large framed print of *The Colossus* by Goya: that huge naked giant outlined against the sky, with tiny fleeing figures in the foreground.

I looked at her. As always my heart warmed at the sight. Grey-blue eyes full of concern, empty of any guile. Her honest face, its rosy complexion framed by long curtains of hair the colour of ripe wheat. Her generous maternal bosom. I thought of all we'd been through together.

She said, 'And he's in hospital. Do you still envy him?'

'No.'

She picked up the book and passport and went out.

That night I hardly slept. I tried to focus on the problem with the stream, but the book cover was insistent. At four in the morning, still restless, fearing my sighing and turning was keeping Suzy awake, I rolled out of bed and dressed awkwardly in the gloom. On the landing the door to Tom's room was partly open. I listened and heard quiet breathing. I went downstairs, made coffee, and went in the garden.

The hedge was a dark wall penning me in. I thought of cutting it lower to improve the view but decided the shears would wake Suzy and Tom and the neighbours. I drank from the outside tap, hoping to find the water cold like a mountain stream, but it was lukewarm. The eastern sky was pale, neither blue nor orange, cut off not by mountains but by roofs and the odd tree. The traffic sounds were surprisingly persistent. Saturday. Some people had to trail to work, while I was free to do anything—except go to the Silk Road.

I had to drive somewhere. I remembered the gorge at Devil's Bridge, which I'd only seen from above. The experience I needed? A path wound steeply down, and gripping the handrail with the sound of rushing water in my ears was almost an adventure. A *controlled* adventure. Notices told me what plants to

look for and which views were best, and pointed out a cave once used by bandits. Additions to my collection of Interesting Things! But nothing like the high Pamirs, where no doubt there were bandits still. No ride into the unknown, just shopping, and ferrying Tom to band practice.

At the base of the gorge the torrent was loud, but not enough to drown my thoughts. Soon I'd have to drive home. Could I talk to Suzy without being emotional? Immature even? Below the waterfall sticks and leaves danced in the agitated pool. Suzy was bound for *real* adventure, and I was just watching a sycamore leaf bob clownishly. I willed it to move on downstream. It didn't.

'Where've you been? I'd no idea where you were.'

She wasn't cross but distressed, her voice almost musical with agitation. I wished she *would* be cross, and beat my chest with her small fists as she did early in our marriage. I would hold her wrists, the struggle would excite us, and we would make love with most of our clothes on.

I realised with shame that I'd wanted to worry her.

I said, 'The gorge. Where's Tom?'

'Watching TV. Doesn't want to go to band practice.'

I sighed. 'I'll persuade him. The show must go on and all that.'

'So you'll succeed where I failed?' She glared. 'You probably will.'

I moved to go to my son but Suzy said, 'Why are you spoiling it for me? It's difficult enough.'

'Why?'

She stood by the window, watching two robins bicker on the bird table, advancing and retreating, fluttering up in turn. 'My flights will create seven tons of carbon emissions. More than I normally produce in a year.'

'You could use offsets.'

She pulled a face. 'Offsets are bullshit, Mike. You know that. No, I just have to live with the guilt.'

I tried not to show pleasure at her guilt.

'You deserve one trip, surely?'

She studied me warily.

I said, 'I doubt Professor Chen feels guilty, flying from China.'

'He's a distinguished scholar. We're lucky to get him. He lectures on the *feng liu* school of philosophy.'

'Which is?'

'As I understand it, living according to oneself, not according to others.'

'Does that mean being selfish?'

She squeezed her eyes shut. 'It means not being snared by your emotions.'

I looked at the print on the wall, a peaceful French river, a scene by

Manet, but there was no refuge there. Even the colours were tainted. We stood like statues empty of words. She had her back to the sink, I leaned against the fridge, feeling its murmur along my spine like the voice of the world's sufferings. There we were, reasonably successful and well-off, unable to look at one another.

We had somehow become strangers. We discussed household matters like the ambassadors of rival countries. At last she said, 'We have to discuss arrangements when I'm away.'

'Of course.'

'You will look after Tom, won't you? You didn't do much when he was a baby.'

I had a choice. React to that barb, or make the conversation positive? With a great effort I chose kindness.

'Everything will be fine, Suzy. You'll come back from a successful trip and find everything in perfect order.'

I saw surprise flicker across her face. Then my kindness sank in. Suddenly lively, she said, 'It's fascinating to discover the pigments they used in those cave paintings. And so worthwhile to let the world see them.'

'How will you arrange that?'

'A database. But it's a mammoth job to getting the images into it.'

'Sounds very technical.'

'Yes, but not just technical. There's a devotional side.'

The words unsettled me. I wanted to take the angelic look off her face. I wanted her to wear tartish lipstick, and taste it as I kissed her deeply and brought her under my power. I wanted her to lean over me naked, her long hair and heavy breasts brushing my face and chest. Her devotion should be to me, not painted bodhisattvas.

She seemed unaware of my change of mood. Moved to her desk and turned on her laptop.

'Can I show you some more of the paintings? They aren't just from Kizil. Some are from Dunhuang and Turfan.'

Exotic names like bullets in my brain. I turned away. 'I've got things to do.'

I went outside and trimmed the lawn edge with shears, fussily, a few grass blades at a time. Waited for the poison to drain away, but it didn't. I longed to be greeted at exotic airports, a man with a cosmopolitan outlook instead of a small-town mentality. To spend days full of purpose, days bound in sheaves with golden cords instead of faded ribbons. To see Central Asian peasants with eyes full of distance. The Pamirs instead of the rooftops! I forced myself to snip with great concentration, so when it rained I hardly noticed.

I visited Brian in hospital. His rosy outdoor complexion had faded to grey, and his voice, so commanding on the podium taking bids, was almost a whisper.

'How are you coping, Mike? Sorry to drop you in it.'

'Don't worry about me. Concentrate on getting better.'

'You've lost weight. Isn't Suzy feeding you?'

'She'd say that remark was sexist.'

He smiled faintly. 'You're a lucky man, Mike. She's a star.'

Yes, I thought, a rising star leaving me earthbound.

Early the following Sunday, full of dread, not knowing what to do, I skipped breakfast and got in the car. I thought I might visit the gorge again, but the memory of that day's pain kept me away. The grim tension between myself and Suzy persisted. Tom had decamped to stay with a school friend. After a few days, in reply to a worried message from us, he texted *Oh don't worry abt ME am ok*. I found the *ME* chilling.

I drove to Aberystwyth and parked illegally on the prom, not caring whether I got fined or clamped. Gusts of wind from between the buildings unbalanced me as I walked. Students from the once grand terraces laughed as they emerged in groups. I felt they were mocking the way the wind tugged my thinning hair. I thought of Suzy as a student, the way her blue eyes held mine. Our earnest discussions—did God exist? Her questions about my life that no-one else had ever asked. So smug now about her trip! And these students thought nothing of going to China. But they would grow old.

I clung to the handrail staring at the heaving sea. The wind from inland battered me, but at least kept away the spray. I suddenly noticed near me a man, short and stout, with the weathered face and flat cap of a farmer. He turned to greet me.

'Good day to you, Mr Pritchard.'

It was the client whose fields I was going to auction. His wife, hardly older than Suzy, had died of a cerebral haemorrhage early that year. His cheeks were wet. I was afraid he'd be embarrassed to own his tears, and almost turned away to spare him, but then realised they were a tribute he wore with love and pride. I shook his hand warmly, unable to find words. For some minutes we watched the sea together, in a silence broken only by gulls and an empty bottle rolled by the wind.

He said, 'They tell me it's early days. Late days are better, are they?'

'I'm sorry Mr Thomas, I really don't know.'

'Well, whatever comes. Tied to the land, aren't we?'

He smiled ruefully. I shook his hand again before he moved away.

I carried on watching the waves fuss with the shingle. An hour passed.

Suddenly, against the grey indistinct horizon I seemed to see a giant figure, standing like Goya's colossus. But this was the figure on the scroll, Guanyin. Her flowing headdress shielded her face from wind. Heavy white robes with embroidered flowers wrapped her body. She held a willow branch. Her smile radiated peace. Her face was Suzy's.

I sent a text: *Coming home. Happy to STAY home. Will pick up something really good for lunch.*

Staying On

Mark Blayney

Barrel of mist below the mountain:
draught excluder for the gods.
Orange flowers on your dress
unfurling as you lean over railings
to return a boatman's wave.

We walk back beneath a plant that's bigger than you.
Past the gold temple that's visible everywhere,
mushrooming between buildings, a homing beacon
in warrening streets.

A day with nothing done,
spent well.

Back to the farm

Nicholas McGaughey

after a year, there were clouds of red admirals
flummoxing in the lounge, where
hock-soups and beeswax,
and hoolies, fiery
as the blue-smoke turf, warmed these walls,
gone damp and stale
in her absence.

Her cruet sits where she placed it.
He necks his malt with pills:
A planet with no sun to follow,
no reason to rise, in this house, made theirs
over fifteen years,
its slat and stone
a prison on his pillow.

No one hears an old man flapping,
aimless as a sheet un-winched,
empty as a date not there,
under the clock alone
and waiting on the same hour,
chiming the same day from the mantel.
Silent as a Sunday.
Loud as a love with no home.

Holding

Eluned Jones

I see you standing on the grey shingle below her;
waiting as she tenses, holding herself
to jump from this seafront pavement
that is filled with a sense of being
on the edge. And I place a benevolent
symmetry into your face as I pass, pretending
to look at the daffodils maddened with colour,
the daffodils screaming with yellow and wind
and with the weight of an expectation;
pretending not to look at how your nose
is like the proverbial button bringing
your face together into familiarity,
two sides of a fabric held.
So I think that, yes, you have held her before
and you will hold her again,
but I want to ask: why do you wait,
why do your hands seem through muscle alone
to express a thought you may have had
about how it once felt to be tender?

Penny Lope

Rosey Brown

and then, about twenty years later, I wake one morning to a choir of seagulls and a bang at the door.

I pull on my Adventure Time nightie, rush past myself, sagging in the hallway mirror. The seagulls so loud – maybe the bins? Has the system changed again? I try to smooth my hair, open the door – and at first, I do not recognise you.

I do not recognise you until you say

"HELLO PENNY."

It is you, somewhere underneath the dirt and wrinkled skin, and the shroud of plastic bags. The bags are quite something. There must be at least twenty bags for life, the handles running up both your arms. One wedged in each armpit, a few more in the crooks of your elbows. I gesture to them and you look down at yourself as if surprised.

"FUNNY THEY MAKE YOU PAY FOR THEM NOW!"

You are yelling over the seagulls, which are circling you like vultures – eying you up, the voluptuous mass of red and blue plastic. You open one bag and it's full of multipacks of crisps, obscure ones, the types that no adult would buy, Skips, Frazzles. Another is full of old train tickets. You are rummaging for something; meanwhile the seagulls wheeling, reeling, in stitches at the sight of you.

"MAYBE IT'D BE BETTER IF I CAME INSIDE," you shout, wrestling a pack of Quavers from one.

You take a step as if to come in but I'm holding onto the doorframe, blocking your way. The curtains all up Elm Street are twitching something shocking but there's no way I'm going to let you in. Is there? After all this time?

What's the collective noun for seagulls? A parliament? A plague? A disgust? What I would like to do is shut the door in your face, and watch them through the eyelet, plucking at your kidneys like they're soggy sglodion from Family Fish Bar. But now, one of them shits and it nearly hits you.

"OK," I say, "OK. Come in."

I step back awkwardly, walk backwards all the way down the narrow hallway, facing you. And then we're in the living room and oh god, I think, it's just the same as when you left, and I worry you'll think it's because I'm sentimental. But actually I'm just lazy.

"I wasn't sure you'd still be here," you say. You find the bag you were looking for and pull out an old copy of *On The Road*, cover half torn away.

"I borrowed this, I thought I'd bring it back. Sorry, the spine is cracked. I've reread it so much that my bloodstream is pretty much just apple pie and icecream."

You tell me all about what you've been doing: that you took a train from Cardiff Central and then just kept going, going, riding the trains ever since. Of course I already knew this. The money, bits and pieces of it, had been coming out of our joint bank account, the one my Dad reluctantly helped us to set up when we graduated. A train ticket in Aberdeen, a packet of crisps at Clapham Junction.

"I learnt all the tricks to fare dodge," you brag. "Hanging around in the toilets, pretending to be asleep."

You settle yourself, stickily, onto the maroon sofa your mum gave us when we moved in.

"Mostly I would buy a 'gamble' ticket to the next stop, then ride the train as far as I could. When the conductor came and told me I had to get off, I would look puzzled, speak to him in Greek. This is where that fling with Anastasia in first

year really paid off. Every time, I would hold up the ticket and say:

έχεις όμορφα μάτια
(you have beautiful eyes)

μπύρα, ψωμί, σας παρακαλούμε, μαλάκας
(beer, bread, please, wanker)

Αγάλι-αγάλι γίνεται η αγουρίδα μέλι
(a green fruit gets ripe slowly)"

You act out the confusion and it is, indeed, convincing. Perhaps some people would romanticise you, scrutinise the philosophical intricacies of your weird decision. But the fact is, you stink, and as you talk I picture you, trying to wash yourself in the cramped station bathrooms, sleeping on platform benches and waiting room seats.

You tell me all about the things you saw, the stray dogs and backs of council houses and flooded fields and rain sodden sheep that couldn't get up and stately homes and litter and estuaries and family picnics and building sites with yellow cranes and office blocks and cottages and coasts and aquaducts and pigeons and a woman with a snake in her handbag and the phones getting smaller and then bigger again and a man photographed sitting on the floor and you have been going, going, going, and only after a long bout of these stories do you think to ask:

"Have you been here all this time? Waiting?"

"You mean, waiting for you?"

You nod and I want to laugh and scream at the same time.

"It wasn't that I was waiting. More that I never got around to leaving."

And you're not sure what to say to that so you ask "What have you been up to?"

What have I been up to? I have two hobbies. One is finding faces in the paisley wallpaper upstairs. The other is dating. Dating is an excellent way to waste your time, and that is how I have spent a good chunk of the last twenty years: dealing with men, in various formats. Tried speed dating. Tried those

weird video dating profiles. *Hi I'm Penny, I enjoy reading, cocktails, and rolling boulders up and down hills.*

Then the internet, emails for a bit, and then it was chatrooms and MSN Messenger jamming up my landline for hours, and Mum'd come round say "I called you FOUR TIMES but all I got was *boop boop beepboop eeeeeeeegur DANGgurDANGaeeeeeeeeeeeeepeep epepeeppeep"***.** Then broadband and OKCupid and eHarmony, and my Facebook oscillating between Single and It's complicated. Now I've got Tinder, and Bumble, and the rest, and my favourite men are the ones who "breadcrumb" you.

Of course I don't say any of this. Instead I say:

"I'm still working at St Fagan's, actually. Not on reception any more, but, operating that loom - do you remember the one, in the woollen mill?"

That dark thick-walled cottage - people duck in through the low door - marvel at the shuttle, weaving its way through the threads like a dolphin through woollen waves - politely ask a question – oh yes, I see – and bash their heads on the way out.

I've woven all sorts of things. I used to do feminist slogans, pornographic images, long elaborate knock knock jokes in cursive script. I once re-did the Bayeux tapestry as a rave: Edward the Confessor in neon orange, and silver thread for the strobe. But you know, I'm 42 now and my weaving has matured. Sometimes I weave tax returns. Sometimes I do fish, rising from deep water. Sometimes I just do flowers. Flowers are nice.

I work at it all day, then, to save the museum on wool costs, I unpick it all. Unweave my work, come back the next day, and start again.

"I don't remember," you say.

"Never mind. Anyway Rhodri, it's been lovely but it's time for you to go."

You look a little hurt.

"Don't you want to hear the rest?"

I have visions – of me, caving in. Of you, settling into the armchair, holding your hand out for my phone and, when I give it to you, steadily removing all the contacts from it, deleting all the dick pics I've accrued, uninstalling all the dating apps. Then smiling, and asking for a cup of tea.

"I think it's best. The trains will be missing you."

I see you to the door, and as you shamble off, the seagulls swarming around you, I remember the other thing I've done, since you left. Of course! I painted the front of the house.

It's a deep sea-green. A colour you never did like.

Expecting

Becky Tipper

It was in May, when the baby was exactly one week past her due date, that it occurred to me she might never come at all.

I never knew, until I got pregnant, that pregnancy officially lasts forty weeks and not nine months as I'd always thought. And that they start the counting two weeks before you even became pregnant, as if time rolls backwards just because a life is going to begin.

At forty-one weeks, my belly – huge and ripe like some unearthly melon – was larger than I could ever have imagined. Time fell slow as syrup. And each day that we thought might be 'the one' would pass uneventful and unfulfilled. I'd long since ceased to glow. Now I lumbered on my swollen feet and tottered about on cramping calves. I'd thrash uncomfortably all night, bolt awake at 3 a.m. with only the blue glow of the computer to keep me company.

Those long nights, I sat up late and scoured the internet for tips, my eyes and shoulders hot and sore. The internet offered elixirs and tricks for women in my situation, of course. Curries. Vigorous exercise. Raspberry-leaf tea. Pineapples. My mother-in-law, who was staying with us until the baby came, liked to wink saucily and say there were other ways to get things moving that would help pass the time too. Which is perhaps why my husband didn't seem to mind the wait that much.

Each evening, I sat down with a fresh pineapple, sliced off its outrageous hair, trimmed the scales away and cut it into chunks. The first one had been exciting and succulent – reminding me of the rare occasions in my childhood we'd had a fresh one. But after three days, I'd come to hate the things – my lips and tongue tingled, my belly sloshed horribly with their fibrous juice, and still there was no baby.

At my check-up, the nurse did the usual things. She dipped the little strip of paper in my urine sample and took my blood pressure. She was a stocky Northern woman with crescent eyes and chubby cheeks, her face pale and inscrutable as a

moon. I watched her hands as they traced the shape of the baby's head low in my belly.

'Forty-one weeks now?' she said.

I nodded. I told her my mother-in-law had been murmuring darkly about induction and caesareans if this went on any longer.

The nurse smiled vaguely as she slid the monitor over the jelly on my skin. 'Oh no, we don't rush things so much nowadays.'

'Really?'

She slid the machine over my bump and I heard the heartbeat – my tiny daughter's heartbeat – whooshing and rushing in a *wow-wow-wow-wow* of perpetual astonishment. It was rapid, like a little bird's heart. The nurse tilted her head to listen and closed her eyes for a moment as if it were music, or as if the baby were telling her something very important, very softly. She nodded approval. 'She's doing fine. Just perfectly comfy inside her mum,' she said. 'Let her take her time about it, love.'

'Oh,' I said.

She wiped me clean with a paper towel and I pulled my top down again.

'Is there nothing I can do, though?' Tentatively, I mentioned the pineapples.

'Pineapples?' She was wrapping up the monitor and didn't look at me. She sighed, seeming irritable now. 'I don't know about that,' she said.

'Or the moon?' I was getting desperate now. 'Might I go into labour on the next full moon?' Online, in the anxious chatter of other waiting women, there was much talk of the moon – how its gravitational pull could also influence amniotic fluid, tugging at the tides inside us as well as the salty oceans. 'Or storms?' I asked. 'I heard the change in air pressure can bring things on?'

The nurse raised her eyebrows. 'Did you read that on the internet? I do wish people wouldn't fall for that claptrap.' She clicked on her computer, her mind already on the next patient.

'Make an appointment for a week's time,' she said, and leaned over her desk and flung the door open for me.

As I walked down the corridor, I heard her bang it shut behind me.

We watched the moon – my belly and I – standing out on the back steps in the late spring evenings, the world buzzing with the coming of summer. At the bottom of the garden, the trains grumbled through the tunnel, carrying the last straggling commuters home. And each evening, up in the sticky, city sky, the moon filled out until its dimpled face was as perfectly round as a slice of pineapple.

At forty-three weeks, I sat up all night, watching as a storm drenched the city and slickened the patio, and now and then the lightning flashed the garden alive for a second. The baby kicked and spun, but stayed resolutely where she was.

The days were growing longer, easing open the summer. I became sure something would happen on the solstice; it seemed a moment for all things to peak – the earth ripe and hot, the day stretched to capacity. But it came and went, and still there was no baby.

For a few months, I went for my check-ups every week. But by autumn, I began to feel that the nurses were irritated with seeing so much of me. I suggested I could just get in touch if anything changed and they agreed readily. You know the signs, they said, just call if something happens.

It's strange how you can get used to things. Even the exhausted ache of it all became normal. It's how I imagine growing old to be – the stiffness and creakiness that you simply stop noticing, because that's just what life feels like. I've grown used to the heft of it – bending down to reach something from a low shelf in the shops and then the monumental effort it takes to get up again, as if I'm suddenly on a planet with insurmountable gravity.

At first, of course, everyone was sympathetic. We'd bump into the people from our ante-natal group pushing their prams, all deflated and wide-eyed, and they'd laugh and tell me I should enjoy it and get some sleep while I could!

But as the months went by, I started to see it, with the regulars on the bus and the people at work – a hardening in their faces, an irritation, as if this was my fault. As if I'd been milking it for too long now. And when I saw the ante-natal class mums around town, chatting over lattes and breastfeeding, they'd turn away as if they hadn't noticed me. But then I could hardly blame them – after all, what could they say?

At work, they moved me to the back office, cataloguing and repairing the damaged books. They said it was for my own good – there was less lifting and I wouldn't be on my feet as much. Which was true, although of course it also keeps me out of the way. No uncomfortable moments for the frequent library visitors who've been seeing me like this for so long.

It is awkward for people, I'm aware of that. Even the woman in the Tesco Metro, who'd always given me a cheery 'Not long now! Hang in there, love!' back when I was buying pineapples, started to make excuses to leave the till when she saw I was in her queue.

I make a point of going to different shops now, so they don't get to know me. Or I have it delivered. And it's easy enough, if you try, to go unnoticed. The city is so busy, the people constantly changing.

Somehow, I think I really believed that the baby would arrive after a year – it seemed a nice, neat amount of time to be late. And it made a kind of sense, as if we'd had the right *date* all along, but somehow everyone had just got the year wrong.

But that anniversary passed, twelve moons swelling and shrinking. And then the years followed on, and here I am now, still waiting for my baby.

I say 'my baby' but of course I really mean 'you' – because it's you I've been talking to all this time. Cajoling, begging, pleading, expecting. Waiting to meet you.

I miss what you haven't become, I miss it with an aching emptiness even though I am full of you.

Of course, I have come to know you. After all this time, how could I not? But it's been a blinder, bumpier kind of knowing. I can almost see your outline sometimes – the curve of your head, the little bubble of your foot or hand moving in an arc. I've come to know your habits. How you tumble and squirm when I walk to the bus, woken from your sleep by my brisk steps and the morning air. How, when I sit on the couch after dinner, you'll hear the *Coronation Street* theme begin and start to turn and twist, dancing slowly. I've always thought it's such a sad song for a soap opera, a melancholy tune of longing and what is not-to-be. Perhaps that's why you like it.

And when a storm is coming, you often know first – there's an electricity in you then, in the way you move. And when the rain finally breaks, you become very still – hushed – as if you are straining to listen to it above the sounds of my body. As if you long to know what is outside, even though you don't dare to come and see it for yourself.

Not that I blame you, really. It's something I have always feared, initiating a child into the ugliness of the world. The fact that all things will die. I can't blame you for wanting to stay forever in the possibility of it all. And the best part of things is often just before they begin, isn't it? It's funny, I remember how the first butterfly-turn of you in my belly felt exactly like a leap of anticipation (it's called 'quickening' although of course that doesn't seem a very apt word for you).

Already, there are so many things that you've been insulated from, inside the dark warmth of me. If you'd have come when you were due, you could have known two of your grandparents, and they would have known you. In these few short years, they are both gone. Things haven't gone well between your father and me, either. It was a strain on us, the waiting, although I think we were strained already. He checks in now and then, which is good of him I suppose.

The world's a different place now. I keep a timeline of things you missed – a funny sort of album, not of memories, but of what could have been.

Tonight, it's five years since you should have come. It's May and the world is ripening and blooming. In the garden – the scent of spring heavy in the warming air – I fold my hands over my belly and sing to you and you kick, rising up in recognition.

And it strikes me like a kick in the guts that this is us – this is how it is always going to be. And I turn and head inside to the room that was to be yours.

I've kept all the clothes we had ready for your arrival. I remember how amazed I was at their tininess when I first washed and folded them – shaped for little legs and arms as small and sweet as plums. Soft blankets like handkerchiefs.

The clothes are mostly pink and yellow: pink because everyone knew you were a girl, and yellow because I didn't want to limit you to pink. This means they are adorned with elephants (which, in the world of babies' clothes, are pink) and giraffes (which are yellow). Which is strange, actually, because I read recently that elephants' pregnancies last for two years, and giraffes' for sixteen months.

I take them out one by one and hold them to my face a moment, these clothes decorated with perpetually-pregnant African creatures, and then drop them into a black plastic bag. Perhaps it was an omen. I think about how huge and heavy those poor pregnant elephants must be, and how tired. And how relieved those giraffe mothers must be when their babies finally fall to the ground, all gangly and teetering. Apparently, the reason giraffe gestation is so long is because the babies have to grow tall enough so that the fall to earth when they are born won't harm them. Is that what you've been doing – waiting until it felt safe to emerge? No wonder you've not made it out yet.

I lug the bags out of the flat and down the stairs, and set them in the hallway ready to take to the charity shop tomorrow – even though the man in the downstairs flat will probably complain if he gets up early and finds them outside his door in the morning.

And then the pain hits me, low and rolling at first like a sound I'm not quite conscious of, like an approaching train from far away. I stop and press my hands to the base of my belly and wait. Soon, it comes again, heavy and sure. And I realize that finally, at long last, you are coming.

The labour moved quickly. Although the pain seemed to go on endlessly, somehow it felt as if it all lasted only seconds – as if it was not happening in the time of this world.

Now, the midwives are cleaning and weighing and measuring you. You have been silent through all this, and I worry that I should be able to hear you cry, but there is no panic in the room – everyone moves steadily and calmly – and then a nurse walks over, beaming, and hands you to me, wrapped in a blanket.

And here you are.

When I hold you for the first time in the delivery room, you are just the length of my arm – I can rest your head in the crook of my elbow so your back lies against my forearm and I cradle your bottom in my palm. You fit so perfectly that it seems my arm was designed for exactly this purpose. You weigh just five and half pounds, and you are forty-eight centimetres long, which the nurses say is petite, although in the normal range for a baby.

But you are not a normal baby.

You do not have the proportions of a baby with their heavy, lolling heads so big on their bodies. Your eyes are not crumpled at the light of a new world, and your body is not curled and limp like a newborn's. Instead, you are a tiny child, as small and perfectly formed as a doll. I should have known, of course – you have been growing older all along. You are precisely as old as you should be.

Back in our hospital room you sit upright in your cot, all on your own, blinking and turning your little head to take everything in. Your hair is long and hangs straight and smooth down your back, shining and glossy. The nurses must have brushed it when they dressed you. They have put you in a white cotton sleep-suit and wrapped a crocheted blanket around you. You sit, knitting your fingers together in your lap patiently, and looking around with your blue, blue eyes. I hadn't expected you to have blue eyes.

You crane your neck to see out of the window, although the view is just the murky back of another red-brick building and a tangle of drainpipes. You peer around the room, frowning at the paraphernalia of tissues, magazines and water bottles on the bedside table, and scrutinizing the vase of roses your father sent (with a note promising he'll come to see us soon). I don't know whether you can talk yet, but I don't ask you. There is such intent in your face, and such knowledge, that I am a little afraid of what you might say.

When a nurse comes in to bring me lunch, I realize that I am incredibly hungry. I feel as if I could eat and eat without ever stopping.

'Oh how lovely,' she says, her face lighting up as she looks at yours. 'Hello, beautiful girl! What blue eyes you have!' She smiles at me. 'Well done, Mum. Worth the wait, eh?'

She sets the tray of food on the table that swings out from the bed.

'I'll just leave it for whenever you're ready. Can you reach that, love?'

I nod and the nurse pads out of the room, her footsteps light as a bird's, and we are alone again.

There is an apple on the tray that she has left; it is red and round and shiny as glass. I see your eyes light on it. I watch as you pull the blanket around your shoulders like a cape and knot it with your tiny fingers. Then, perfectly sure on your feet, you swing yourself out of your cot and down onto the chair beside the bed. You take a couple of fairy-steps across the seat, and make a delicate hop

onto the arm of the chair so that you can stretch up to the tray where the apple sits. You reach up with both hands and take it, and then you settle your tiny self into the chair and lift the apple, cupped in your palms, to your mouth.

I see your teeth flash white as you open wide and take a bite. You crunch it thoughtfully, and that sound is all I can hear in the room.

And then you look at me with those round, bright eyes – expectant – as if you're waiting for me to say something.

Staying Put

Chris Hardy

You could have been a curious child
staring from the beach,
one step from which would make you
learn to swim and match
the creatures waiting in the deep.

Or a climber in the highest tree,
careful to avoid a fall because
you guessed that from the top
you'd see an unknown country
to which you'd travel.

But there was never any doubt,
no world of choice was hidden,
you always had one thought,
nothing would ever happen.

A Parrot for Father

Aaya

Laila Sumpton

She holds onto her elbow
her arms kept empty
of her own flesh - from cradling
three generations - twining their fears
in her braid, she still carries their secrets:

broken toys, stolen kisses, bribes and bruises -
they still come back to her,
need her nod, a worn hand on their back -
the way she always soothes them,
holds their hands in water
as she peels back the plaster.

Their mother is a holiday home
for cocktail conversation, polo debates,
chatter on rising stocks
and how emeralds should be cut.

Whilst she is the waiting shawl
folded at the foot of the bed,
draped about an armchair,
or fraying on the veranda,
able to wrap any crisis or tamasha
deep in the smell of home -
of tamarind, churran, cloves.

She prays to witness dawn
for gods not wages -
waits till her braid whitens,
arthritis stops her darning
and their faces cloud over.
Only then will they let her go.

You asked why

Phil Wood

I keep a wooden peg
among the plastic ones.
Reminds me of our gran
pegging her eighty years
along the washing line -
your cleanliness is there
for all to see she'd say -
her fall, a semaphore
of clothes tangled around
her arthritic arms waving
for help, for love, for me;
and me, not seeing, lost
in digging up a nest
of ants; exposing eggs
to hatch in holiday sun,
my hands proud with mud.

The Urban Tree

Eluned Jones

Take the tree in your hand.
It is young, almost but not quite
a sapling, slender enough for you
to measure its bark in your palm;
to match the sightlines plotted by one life
to a newer telling
of how sap will re-distribute this weather
into multiplying cells.
You lean inwards, appreciating the diagonal,
how such a simple life can support you,
even as you try to reprieve your own body
from its dependence on the feet
that struggle between holding and being
pushed down.
So you hold up a hand to all you perceive,
bark and rough air;
and perhaps there may be a weakness
along your eyes in the gradual seconds
as your sight merges with something subtler;
making you wonder at that tree in your hand,
at how a thing as expected as your muscle and bone
can shape such *aliveness*; for that
is the only way you can describe it;
the will for height that seems to reduce you,
even though you thought yourself
essential. So you stand, finally,
wondering at how your feet can carry you
here on this unlikely field of tarmac,

where you are suddenly aware
of how tarmac can only think
in downwardness. Roots, you are forced to say,
will one day gather, unhinging this place;

Pinochet's List

1985, Chile

Ruth Baker

Luis Ramŷrez Carrasco sat in the window seat of the third carriage of the 13.25 Valparaiso to Santiago train. At his feet was the small bag his daughter Maria had helped him pack which carried almost everything he owned. Maria had not been able to come to the train station to see him off and at this he was largely relieved. He did not like to see his daughters cry.

Luis was not a man of action. Now over seventy years old, he acknowledged to himself that he had been slow all his life. His slowing down in old age meant that he was almost grinding to a stop. He had made sure he had arrived at the station an hour before his train was due to leave to ensure that his meandering walk down the platform did not cause him to miss his train. He smoked while he waited. He was going back to Santiago, to where he was born, to where they had all lived before 1973.

Luis was not the only passenger in the third carriage that day. He was joined by a film crew: three people chasing around a tall pale man who nodded genially at everyone getting on the train. In general, Luis did not approve of film crews. They got in the way of ordinary life, and Luis felt that the concept of anonymity was one that everyone should aspire to maintain. He turned away from them and rested his head against the cold window of the train.

He had been back to Santiago often enough since the coup, but only to visit. He thought of the morning he had woken in December 1973 with a terrible feeling that something was wrong. It lay in his stomach like bile, threatening to escape up his throat. He had turned to his wife Matilda. She was sleeping soundly next to him. But the door to their twenty-two-year-old daughter Valentina's room still stood wide open. She had not returned from their friend's house the night before.

Luis teetered on the brink of madness through the months that followed. He remembered the nights he couldn't sleep, listening to the sound of his wife's nightmares, her screams and whimpering, and the quiet edges of darkness just before dawn when he imagined the click of the key in the front door and Valentina's light tread across the hallway to her room. "Papa," she used to call him, in a voice that meant he gave her anything she asked for. "Papa."

Rumours swirled - of neighbours who saw a van pull up that day and two young women who were hauled into it. And worse rumours, of torture at the Villa Grimaldi, mutilated body parts flushed into the sewers of the city, iron bunk beds used so that two friends or siblings could be electrocuted at the same time. Unspeakable things done to women that had Luis once rushing to the toilet to dry heave. There were stories of firing squads too, in requisitioned school athletics tracks and in office courtyards.
"They kill them and then they kill them again and again. Wasting bullets into their empty skulls," his neighbour told him one day. Luis shut the door on him. For weeks, he spoke to no one.

Shouts from the film crew hauled Luis back to the present. They were playing cards, someone had just won in spectacular form.
"I'll have that, and that, and that!" the tall man was saying, gathering up cards from his companions.

Luis felt a surge of anger at their happiness. The train was by now more than half way to Santiago. He'd known, of course, that he would eventually have to come back there to live, but he'd avoided it as long as possible. When it became clear that Valentina simply wasn't coming back he'd left the city in 1976. Maria was already in Valparaiso; he stayed with her. Matilda refused to come. She also refused to believe that Valentina was dead. She would stay in the family home in Santiago until Valentina returned. Luis and Matilda parted bitterly. He had nothing to say to the accusation that he was favouring his living daughter Maria over the missing Valentina. He simply told his wife that he would come back to visit her if she would let him. She refused him for three years. And then, inexplicably, she relented and he began making short trips back to Santiago.

The truth was, Luis couldn't stand the way Santiago reminded him constantly of Valentina. The park where he'd taught her to swing, the school down the road where she shot in through the gate to be first in line for class aged seven, the cinema where he'd dropped her off on her first date and hugged her crying at the end when it hadn't gone well. Valparaiso had none of those memories. It was all

sky and birds wheeling over the surf and the thick smell of salty fish. Better to think that Valentina was dead and happy, than alive and tortured.

But Matilda wanted him back. Permanently. Luis agreed to be the prodigal husband; he told her he would return.
“Sometimes I see Valentina waiting outside the window,” Matilda said to him on the phone.
“But when I go outside to greet her, she is gone”.

The film crew were making more noise than ever. Cards over, there seemed to be some argument between the journalist (Luis had decided he was a journalist) and the cameraman. English. Always the English, Luis thought, making noise and poking their noses where they had no business to be. The English and the Americans, in cahoots with Pinochet like giddy school-children at the playground bully’s tea party. Let them come and film the mountains and the sunsets and the local people dancing in town squares. If they cared enough they could see Chile was not all that it first seemed to be.

The land outside the window at that point was very flat, the horizon so far in the distance that it seemed as though one could look down the whole of Chile and see the thin spine of South America spindling down and down to Cape Horn and the end of the earth. It seemed to Luis that the junta would carry on, with all its violence and death, on and on and on, like Chile itself, curving along the passage of time until the end of the world. Would it ever stop? Luis knew he would die eventually, his wife would die, new generations would be born and die, Chile would stumble on in violence. Pinochet was immortal.

In his bag Maria had packed a notebook. Luis liked to make lists; boats he had seen arriving at the port, the names of birds he had spotted on mountain walks as well as important dates: birthdays, marriages and deaths. Now he took it out and began to write another list.

He wrote in a mixture of Spanish and English, the English he could dredge up from his school days. He felt it was important he write in both, it seemed to add to the urgency that he felt now, the imperative need to get the words down in as many ways as could be understood. He titled it *“A list of atrocities I have heard of in Chile in the last 12 years”*. He listed as many as he could think of. The terrible rumours, the relatives and friends that had gone missing, the mass graves that hikers came across in the countryside. The train was pulling into the suburbs of Santiago now and still he wrote, his handwriting becoming more unsteady as he

reached the end of the page. Then he added the message:

"You are a foreign journalist. I beg that you and your film crew show the true side of Chile to the world. Do not let us be forgotten."

His fingers trembled as he folded the list over so that no part of his writing could be seen. The train was drawing up to the central station now; he reached down to pick up his bag. People around him were pulling luggage down from the racks, but the film crew looked in no rush. Luis pushed his way past several people until he found himself between the carriage door and the journalist himself. Their eyes met. Luis did not smile. He stepped forward to the door, fixed his eyes on the platform beyond the glass and in the last moment slipped the note of paper into the man's hands. The train stopped, the doors opened, and Luis made his unsteady way down the steps onto the platform. He did not look back.

It was a twenty-minute walk to the family home. Luis followed the familiar route through the main city and down the side streets that lead to the small gated compound around the house. He let himself in. It was early afternoon and he found his wife asleep in bed. He threw his bag down and joined her. She did not stir. As he lay there Luis felt alive for the first time in many years. It was as though his tiny act of defiance had in some way vindicated the loss of Valentina. For once he had done something.

Outside a shadow shifted among the trees across the road. Luis had not noticed the man who had followed him off the train and down the empty streets home. Six and a half seconds later Luis' address was added to a list in a notebook that the man carried. Then he turned on his heel to make his way back to the city centre, where he rode the Metro out to the Villa Grimaldi.

Two Poems

Heidi Williamson

Dunblane

Walking the hill to our old flat,
the pubs and benches we used to visit
accumulate behind us.

The Golf Club rests greenly in its aisle.
The old new Tesco seems emptier now.

We discover play parks, museums,
heritage sites that as students
we never deigned to find.

We watch the future
we couldn't presume

run ahead towards
the climbing frames,
the swirled slide

that delivers him
lightly onto the earth.

These small blue plaques

on the sides of buildings, the bridge –
each set like a tooth, surprisingly, in crumbling stone.
Gold-edged signs of interest and importance.

In what seems like a moment, they become odd as a house
seen from the garden first thing; when the mist clears and a window
hosts a disembodied torso turning on taps and boiling a kettle.

The chinks of cups, clicks of appliances and native bark
of a winter cough surprise the grass and its inhabitants.
The gold-edged eye of the blackbird commemorates it.

Like a blackbird, I like to sing after rain.
Like a blackbird, there is no sign I can add to my body
to state its past more accurately than my body.

Hotel

Mark Blayney

Early morning walk to the lake
past our receptionists asleep in the hallway.
They get up to let us out. Sleepy shy smiles.

Pavements full of motorbikes so walk in the street,
weaving lanes of traffic. Ignore those that head towards you –
They will swerve past, but you confuse them if you move.

In the alleys between buildings families wash clothes
cook on Primus stoves, sleep in shifts,
watch us.

Where there is a patch of unoccupied pavement
play badminton
or sit on little blue stools and smoke.

Bike noise punctuates our dreams now,
the lake's silence-oasis more beautiful than the view.

Back through beaded curtains, receptionists
no longer in pyjamas. They give sweets to our son.
They want to know where we are from,
how we live our lives, what our families do,
what we believe.

Outside, a motorbike goes down through each gear
till it reaches a massaged purr.

Almost Love

Cheers Dad

Children of Men

Wes Lee

They had decided to view the house on the first Saturday in spring. Purely a spur of the moment thing. They would drive up the coast to meet the landlord, stopping in on the way back to Palmer's Garden centre, then they could kill two birds with one stone, buy a plant, which they loved, and look at a house which they wanted to fall in love with.

They had not moved in three years, which for them was an aeon. They had always been peripatetic. There was nothing better than the promise of a house. A fresh start. All the feelings that come with a new beginning.

"That magic hour," Tom said. "An hour's drive from Wellington and people don't want to do the travelling."

One hour out, prices dropped dramatically, so they could afford the rent on top of the petrol. It would work out exactly the same as renting an apartment in the city.

Karen longed for the country and the beach, but also the benefits of the city. To find a happy medium was almost impossible. You had to choose one thing or another. There was always some kind of sacrifice. They knew that now, after years of renting.

They had told themselves they would only buy a house if it was easy, and it had never become easy. Neither of them had inherited anything from their parents, and they had never managed to save. They lived hand to mouth. They had always lived hand to mouth. They knew there were a lot of people like themselves, people in their late-fifties who didn't own anything, who had never really thought of tomorrow. Thinking, or not, that it was a long way off.

Ageing punk rockers. People who still wore black every day.

"We live for the day," they had always told each other. And both of them had genuinely believed it. They had been together for over thirty years. When they met in their mid-twenties it had been easier to believe.

Karen's mother had died five years ago, after a long and painful battle with

cancer. The packing up of her rented townhouse; the few things that were left and now adorned their rooms.

The last to go had been Tom's father, and it had loosened him in some way. She had seen that eternal optimism dented. She had never thought it would diminish, but his father's death had changed him.

They knew they could not go on forever the way they were. When they could no longer work, the money would run out. And it was impossible to live on a pension, not in the city anyway. They would have to move out to a caravan park. A slow, degrading spiral of mould and decrepitude.

One of the things they said half-jokingly was they could end it. They had the power in a way.

"When we get to the stage where we're not having any fun we'll just check out."

The idea was no longer in the *never-never*. The future was visible. Like an island slowly uncovering in the mist, the mist burned off in the sun, and there it was.

They laughed at articles in the Sunday paper showing people in their seventies backpacking around the world, living these glorious lives. Or standing in front of their Ponderosa spread in Queenstown with every light blazing in the house behind them.

As if that was the norm.

"Creamed corn, mould, and incontinence pads more like," Karen would quip.

And Tom would laugh.

That kind of old age was a chimera. A mirage manufactured by advertising agencies for the 1%, who by luck or by hard work, or both, could dream of that kind of life.

"You have to be brave to *really* get old," Tom would say.

"The only perfect lives are the lives of loved babies that die," Karen told him. She knew it was a terrible thing to say, but only *they* escaped suffering. If they died in their sleep. Warm in their beds.

They'd have to do it before they got infirm, or their choices would be taken away. It had to come sooner rather than later. It can't be on the constant back-burner. At some point the water has to boil dry.

"I want some of that," Tom had said half-jokingly when they had watched Michael Caine's watery, old eyes as he administered the euthanasia crystals to his wife in *Children of Men*.

Because it's painless. You can go quietly.

And maybe in the next few years something like that would come along. Controlling death was another way of controlling people. Governments don't want taxpayers topping themselves. But soon there would be too many people not

paying tax, and consuming, they might get to thinking that it was a good idea to get rid of the useless eaters.

The blinking spot in the middle of their hands will turn black one day. Blink and blink, then turn black. Like *Logan's Run*.

The name on the box of euthanasia crystals had said: *QUIETUS* in bright blue letters.

"Quietus, that's from Shakespeare. Hamlet's soliloquy," Tom had told her. "It sounds peaceful yet it's supposed to fill you with horror."

The landlord was tiny like a bird. Dressed in black, her long auburn hair twisted in a French plait. Moneyed, but not showy about it.

"Hi, I'm Jude," she held out her hand.

"I'm Tom. And this is my wife Karen."

They had gone into the house, which they politely said was too small. It was a hovel. A sad, depressing hovel.

"I have another house," Jude said, "but I wasn't planning on letting it. It's over the road, virtually on the beach, if you want to take a look? There's a great view of Kapiti island from the deck... We haven't decided if we want to live in it or stay in the apartment in town."

The house was a stucco bungalow. Rattan blinds on the huge picture-windows in the lounge. Two cane chairs turned to face the sea. A damp, closed-up smell.

"Keep your shoes on," Jude said. "I had a few drinks with friends in the week, there may be glass on the floor."

Karen walked through the French doors that opened from the lounge. She leaned on the rail of the balcony.

"I could stand here for hours," she said.

The roar of the sea. The absolute roar, it blocked everything else out.

"It's a pity it's such a wild day. When it's sunny it's incredible... My husband has a contract in Denmark, it was supposed to be for three months, but it has lasted for three years.
So it's kind of a let's see situation," Jude said. "You're both from Wellington?"

"I am," Karen said.

"Edinburgh, originally," Tom said. "I came over with my parents as a teenager."

"I can't detect a Scottish accent?"

"He was an army brat," Karen told her.

"Navy," Tom said.

"We would be terrible on one of those TV shows where couples have to answer questions about each other behind a screen," Karen said.

"Your favourite colour?" Tom laughed.

"What's that, over there?" Karen pointed at the green netting around the base of the huge macrocarpa.

"Well that's rather a sad story," Jude paused. "We let it out to a nice young couple and they decided to have a chainsaw party. They cut off all the lower branches. We put up a windbreak. I know it's ugly."

"We're great tenants," Karen said staring out at the sea.

"I'm sure you are."

The dark macrocarpa obscured most of the view of the beach. It looked almost black on this cloudy day.

"The bathroom needs freshening. A bit of paint," Jude said.

"We love to paint... Is that something you would be amenable to?" Tom said.

"Of course."

"I might have picked up a flea. Can you see anything?" Karen said scratching her thigh.

Tom stared at her legs.

"Their eggs lie dormant in empty houses," she said. "The cat can be long gone."

"There's no bite, just a red mark *there*. It's no flea."

They were sitting in the car outside the garden centre waiting for Jude's phone call. She had promised to ring them with a decision within the hour when she had spoken to her husband in Denmark. They had bought a ficus and a jar of home-made chilli jam.

"She wants to bring her mother back there for a last look," Karen said. *To sit on the balcony listening to that roar.*

Jude had told them the house belonged to her ninety-one year old mother who was in a retirement home in Christchurch.

"The sea... the sound of the waves," Tom said staring through the windscreen.

"Ten years ago we would have jumped at it... I think I am becoming a tire-kicker."

"You're not a tire-kicker."

"A lot of people look at houses on Trademe and they have no intention of moving, they just want to dream of something better. Looking at other people's photos of bathrooms and balconies and sea views, but without the motivation to do anything."

"I get that," Tom said.

"But we *will* move. At least I think we will. I want to. Do you?"

"Of course. I want something better."

Karen stared at the poinsettias lined up in cheerful rows outside the garden centre. She thought about Kapiti Island, its unique shape, as all islands have a unique shape. Some more than others. Seven bumps along the skyline. She remembered fossicking in the rockpools as a child at Pukerua Bay with her mother. The island always in the background.

"When I was a teenager it used to lift my heart, turning the corner at Pukerua Bay and the island there, the glittering sea."

She remembered how the wind never stopped when they had stayed at her mother's place when she was dying. The macrocarpa scraping against the weatherboards, until Tom finally went out and cut off the offending branch. Scraping all night long. That was a terrible time. Terrible and a blessing at the same time, although she never saw the blessing until later.

"When Jude said it's rather a sad story, I thought she was going to say someone had died there," Karen said. "I think she just wanted to show off... Her house. Her life. The life she imagines for herself and her husband when he comes back from Denmark. Like she was showing us her future. As if she wanted us to witness it, then it would be real."

"Maybe it was a life she saw without him?" Tom said.

"She seemed to like telling us about the drinks with a few friends."

"The swingers."

Karen laughed.

"I don't want to die there," she said. "But I don't want to die anywhere. Don't get me wrong, I know I have to die, but I want to die in a nebulous place... Do you get what I mean? I don't want it to be *somewhere*. In a fixed place. In a house. I suppose it's because I don't want to say *this* is the last place. I want to go without leaving anything, not even my body. Is that so strange?"

"No."

He understands her. You think it's so strange, that no one would understand you, but Tom understands.

"I had a dream last night. I was at my childhood house walking around the garden and all my toys were there, waving."

The garden was like a sea and everything was flowing around. The toys all lined up smiling.

"All the teddy bears," Tom echoed.

She could see herself never committing again. They would be in the same apartment forever, tarting it up periodically, whenever they had reached their tolerance, and telling each other it was OK. Far from ideal. Until the landlord sold it, or died.

"And that mulch. What was that all about?" she said. "It was a hive for mosquitoes. You knew she was never going to do anything with it. All those grand

plans and you could see she wasn't going to do any of it."

"Good intentions. But no follow-through," Tom said.

"That stove was ancient."

"You couldn't get parts for it."

"I think stoves like that only exist at the bottom of the South Island... It looked like something out of a 50s spaceship. All those dials."

"The bathroom was a shocker," he said.

"We could have made it good. All that work, I was prepared to do it, but why should we?"

"I'm still prepared to do it," Tom said.

At the house she had seen the old Tom. The man who would do anything for her, who had driven in the middle of the night to hire a *Rug Doctor* because the night before they had moved into a house the departing students had thrown a keg party and the carpet was soaked with beer.

He had that old fire in his eyes, looking out at the view to Kapiti. His face flushed, trying to please Jude, trying to make her laugh so she would choose them, so they could have that life.

All she needed to say was: 'Let's do it."

Bank Holiday

Eluned Jones

Aunty Jean sits with her crisps, her face
to the wide blue, the sky and sea
on a plate before her. They have come,
Jean and Harold, from the landlocked city
three hours to the east
with its grey buildings, its cars,
and with an inexorable sense of history to place it.
But here, the air is higher somehow, the sky
more generous, so they come each August
to be no longer aunt, uncle,
but to sit with their white hair and a picnic,
watching a beach, the dogs, the sea.
This isn't a large thing, or anything
significant; the car is parked as neatly here
as on any suburban street, the B&B
respectable, but it's an escape - "so different",
Jean sighs, "so open; I remember
coming here as a girl, with mum and dad,
and Butcher the dog - yes, he loved to swim,
why, look at those dogs now
playing in the shallows, chasing a ball."
She finishes her crisps and opens
a thermos - tea, because it's August,
and hot, for once, and Harold says nothing,
just grunts companionably and enjoys
the view. So there's a history here, Aunty Jean,
not one of industry but a far more important story
of how you were a girl with pigtails

enjoying the perfect summer
when your ankles were thin and your knees
didn't complain every time you stood up.
And perhaps that's why you come back, really,

A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris (with Open Window)

after the painting by Gwen John

Byron Beynon

She is isolated
within her room,
its open window
an eye onto the mysterious sky.
She is there watching
with us,
new-lighted,
as we see a coat
discarded on a chair
delicate as lace.
Her shy table
up against the wall
keeps company
with an anonymous book,
its leaves exposed
to the subtle strokes of mood and air.
A determined silence waits.

The Violinist's Requiem:

i.m. W.H. Hartley (1878-1912) and his bandmates

D.N.J. Palmer

I.
Your father – the choirmaster – pulls you down
From the ranks with a gentle applause. You have something
To show, and you ask him to move aside. Lyric sheets are passed
Around from singer to singer. The organist nods at you and
Begins playing. The choir follow your lead, as if you were
Your father, and sing the mighty and glorious words
Then with my waking thoughts bright with Thy praise;
Out of my stony griefs Bethel I'll raise and then there is

A sort of silence throughout the vaulted hall. No applause.
Just a quiet appreciation. Your father clasps your arm, thanking
You for the hymn. You return to the choir's ranks and your brothers
And sisters in God.

II.
The choirmaster, now old and drained, stands on the docks, shaking
Gratefully the hand of a tired sailor. Neither man cries; it is too cold
And the bitterness of the Atlantic stills hangs onto the sailor's clothes
Even after two weeks. There is an air of sadness about the docks, and the fog
Of the Mersey circles around their feet like the way that leaves swim around a pond, collecting
One another and forming a mass of dead, brown material. Your body

Is taken from the ship and passed over to the old choirmaster. No more ships, my son
He promises.

III.
Your family need time. To think, to pray, to cry, to forget and to remember.
Thousands
Come to see your last performance in the church. You take centre stage
As always and hold your violin in your hands. They still sting from the
Sea waters, but you play through the pain like you were taught. Your father
Prepares to lead the singing, but he struggles to start. You step down
Off your plinth and clasp his arm softly. Together
You conduct the crowds in their remorseful but thankful singing.

As the music plays, you watch the congregation stand still, and smile pitifully
For the souls you lost before. Their thousand weeping faces, cold and wet,
Stay with you still but the music calms them as their heads fall lower
And lower. You join the final hymn and it sounds out across
The sea of sunken heads, guiding you to God.
Or if on joyful wing, cleaving the sky
Sun, moon, and stars forgot, upwards I fly
Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee

Note – The italicised lines are taken from the hymn *Nearer, My God, To Thee* by Sarah Flower Adams. Hartley introduced the song to the church where his father was the choirmaster, and it was allegedly the last song that the Titanic's band played. Hartley was a violinist and the band's leader, until the very end. All the band perished; only three of their bodies were recovered.

The Escape Tunnel

Andrew Hanson

They should make lipstick out of watermelon, I told my mother. Was the flesh red and pink, or pink and red? It had the bloody brightness of a raw steak, yet was as welcoming as a lily flower. Even as a child I knew there was something special about the colour. In my desert hometown people painted buildings powerful colours, but no-one painted their house watermelon. On a hot afternoon in Santiago, trailing my mother and grandparents down long colonial streets, seeing the capital as my grandpa thought we should, around each corner I would hope to see a man with a fruit cart, selling acid red wedges bigger than your face, the black seeds shining like beetles. Then I would tug on arms, and kick up until I got some.

Sitting in a small square, my mother smiled at me as I guzzled my prize. My grandparents were conservative, cautious, and would only give me treats for good behaviour.

"Are you enjoying that, my sweet?" asked grandma.

I stopped munching. "Yes, thank, you!"

"Try not to get it on your dress."

"Some chance of that," said my mother.

Near our bench was a stone sculpture, a large head of a woman turned to face the sky. In her gaze there was something of peace. I finished my watermelon slice, held onto the stripy green skin, and took my brother's too. Then I walked to the sculpture and placed the skins over her eyes, like giant fleshy sunglasses. The oval shapes fitted perfectly.

"Now the sun won't hurt her eyes!" I shouted. My mother laughed. My grandma was not impressed, told me that I should respect a work of art, and gave me a smack on my hand. A month later, at school back home, I drew a picture of a face where every feature was made out of a fruit or vegetable. Then I folded it in half, and mailed it to my grandma.

Home was Copiapó, a mining town surrounded by the Atacama. We were warned never to go for a walk or run off on a whim – the desert is empty of landmarks and water. My father, who worked in a mine twenty miles away, told the tale of a workmate's cousin, who got lost in the hills and died of thirst. When they found his body lying in the sand, two years later, it had shrivelled and dried like a prune. Mummified, I think you say. No one in England has heard of Copiapó, except that thirty-three men were trapped in a mine there, seven hundred metres below ground, and were rescued after sixty-nine days. *Los 33* became a global story. The rescuers drilled three escape shafts, and eventually one got through. That is where I come from.

In my late teens I decided to train as a nurse. At the end of my final year I went travelling with a *weona*, a mate. A tall, slim woman, a Spanish thoroughbred as we called her teasingly, Marta came from a wealthy family but had the same desire to help others as me. We were hiking near the coast, struggling over a ridge then dropping down zig-zags through lush forest to a path by a river. Ahead lay a small stone church and old monastery. A simple bell tower, the bell framed by arches, the corner of an adobe wall. We felt the earthquake before anything else – the groans of the earth that are too deep for humans to hear – and then as rocks rolled down the hill and we fell to our knees, the bell tower wobbled and collapsed in a roar of brick and broken wood. It is hard to do anything after a quake. But after a quick hug, we ran ahead, finding that the church too was partly collapsed. Four foreign hikers had been ahead of us on the path, and one of these was already putting his ear to the rubble. He was broad shouldered with a curly beard, and wore round glasses which he soon removed. The sunlight was dirty in the dust.

"I can hear someone. Jesus, Nick, I can hear someone!" he shouted to his mate.

"James, it's not safe – that wall – it could go any second."

"It'll be okay – it's leaning in. If it goes, it will go that way. We need to start clearing this stuff!" He picked up a stone, staggered under the weight, and moved it a short way, then started coughing.

"Hola! Have you called the bomberos?" I asked.

"Who? No – sorry—

"There's no signal," said Marta, checking her phone. "And there could be more shocks."

"There's someone in there, they're moaning, they're in pain!" the man said half to us, and half to his friends, who moved forward uneasily. With myself and Marta, we formed two chains, trying to move rubble piece by piece with our bare hands. We all picked up cuts and bruises. Villagers arrived, then an hour later

a professional rescue team, who took over, and just before sunset pulled a body from the rubble. James walked over to me, his face sticky with sweat and grey with dust, his beard like a filthy pot scourer.

"We had to try," he said.

"We didn't," I replied, and smiled. Eighteen months later we were married. When I think of the man who died there – an old priest – I think of my daughter. His life for hers.

I became pregnant six months after our wedding. Now that I am weighing everything up, I can see that James has looked after me, respected me, and loved me. Thinking of those early days makes me tremble inside, and I'm scared that I will melt. It's better for me to find something critical to say: James likes to be in control, to take all the decisions. Although in that he is like myself. His family at first saw me as an exotic creature he had picked up on holiday, but when I got a job in London as a nurse, I seemed to become more ordinary. Then Camila was born, and we all pulled together.

Camila now sits to my right, colouring her book with a special pen that has six tips, slowing unearthing a rainbow-coloured dinosaur from the lines and numbers. You make a discovery, you get an impression of shape, then you fill in the details. Be it gold deposits, dinosaurs or men, it takes a while before you can see the thing for what it really is. The tube train rocks from side to side, but Camila keeps going; there are plenty of stops before we get to Heathrow. James flies often: as an engineer on big construction projects, he often works abroad. For me it is a rare thing. I was shocked at how expensive tickets are when booked at the last minute.

"I want to show my pictures to grandma," says Camila.

"Yes precious, she'll love to see them."

"So we're on summer holidays?"

"Yeah, of course we are!"

"Can I ride a llama? Will they have any?"

"Lots and lots of times!"

So last year's greatest hit is still good. That at least hasn't changed. I look across the carriage and see a young woman with a face like Marta, long and elegant. Perhaps she also goes travelling, has found the same wild happiness as we did. Standing at the border between Chile and Argentina, we stood in thick mist. Below us lay the road meandering into the fog, above us Christ the Redeemer on a marble base, above him the high Andes covered in cloud. We joked that the vision of Christ was pretty murky. And then as we stood there, swigging on a water bottle, hands on hips, not quite ready to go, the fog parted, and we saw a green valley guarded by high white peaks, shining in the sun with the pure, hard brilliance of the divine. And we laughed and said it was a sign, and promised each

other great jobs and gorgeous husbands. The woman catches my eye, and I look away. When she stands she looks less like Marta, too full in the hips, too pleased with herself. For a few seconds I walk into her life, imagining. Her world, her language.

James has never been keen on Camila learning Spanish. After all, English is the language of business, and bringing her up bilingual might slow her progress. So she knows a few words, enough to be polite but little else. Not enough to walk into a school in Chile. Though children are still bendy, at her age; 'plastic', I've heard the doctors say at Guy's Hospital, where I work on a general ward. James would have liked another child, but I've always kept him back. In my mind I put the Santiago metro plan on top of the London one. Somehow they join together easily, as though one is simply a level down from the other. A flight of steps or an escalator could join the two... We stop at Green Park for what seems like an age. In Santiago there are some beautiful murals in the metro stations, they are famous. But the fact is, I hate being underground.

I silently pray for miners working deep below the surface. It's something that my mother and I used to do every day while I grew up, first thing in the morning. It feels like the right thing to do, sitting here, waiting. Then the train moves again. And I keep praying, the rhythm taking me on another couple of stops, through Knightsbridge and Gloucester Road. James would say that there is no God – but how did those miners survive without God? In the early weeks when they did not know if anyone was coming to rescue them, when they might have been assumed dead, when they were out of contact with humanity, astronauts on the far side of the moon, with so little to feed the senses that they could forget what was up or down, right or wrong, and go ragingly, violently insane, in those weeks, God supported them. I count the stops remaining to the airport, and then pray for myself, and Camila, and for James. For guidance, health, and forgiveness.

It was two weeks ago to the day: "We've got the CT scan," the nurse said. "T4 complete." I squeezed James's hand, looked away and blinked the tears from my eyes. He had been cycling, waiting at a junction. The car had gone by so fast, that by the time James hit the ground it was almost gone. He had fallen against a metal bollard. I knew exactly what 'T4 complete' meant: a wheelchair, no more walking, no more freedom, no more children, years of care and adaptation, a journey of anger and grief and a desperate effort to find some acceptance. Years of darkness. I remember again the statue of Christ the Redeemer; that day is so far away now. A severed spinal cord cannot be redeemed, at least outside of heaven, and I hope to be around a long time before I make that journey. James will always need someone to care for him. Poor James, I cannot think about him now, I have to shut him out. Breathe.

As a teenager I was desperate to leave Copiapó: it was the cold, and the drought, and the wind that blasts you with sand. Still, it is cheaper to live there than it is in Santiago, or so my parents told me, when I asked. I asked them yesterday. And I did some calculations, the kind a single parent would do.

"Mama, can we play 'I spy'?" whispers Camila in my ear.

"Yes, but don't point or I'll know what you're thinking!"

"I spy with my little eye something beginning with huh!"

I struggle with hair, hands, even humans, before I spot the sequinned fabric horse stitched onto the jumper of a girl a few years older than Camila, sitting down the carriage.

"Is it a horse, you clever clementine?"

"I didn't think you were *ever* going to get that!" She folds her arms. "I'm going to have a magic llama-horse."

"*Are* you?"

"Daddy's going to get me one when he comes home."

"Yes, maybe he will," I say, but she doesn't hear me over the noise of the tube as we leave Earl's Court. My poor *niña*, she still doesn't understand how serious the accident is. We were planning changes to the house: having the doors widened, turning the living room into a downstairs bedroom, getting plans to extend out the back for an accessible bathroom, getting counselling and care to help him adjust. Today all this has an unreal, fuzzy shape. Even the train coming out of the tunnel into the daylight does not help. It just reminds me how little sleep I've had as my eyes adjust to the light. The next station is Baron's Court; I remember learning English. Tennis; it must only bounce once on the court. But caught out, caught fast, caught in a trap. Out of the teens now, twelve stations left. I count through them on my fingers. Then I pray again. Just get me through to the airport; it's the waiting, the sitting here that is so hard. I am not leaving James, I am simply taking the tube to the airport, where I will simply take a one-way flight to Chile, where I will simply stay for the rest of my life.

At Hammersmith a British Asian family of four get on and sit opposite us. The father and son wear matching traditional dress, while the girl is in jeans and a pink fleece, her hair in bunches tied with red bands. Her headscarfed mother is carrying shopping bags and a large, clingfilm-wrapped slice of watermelon. The girl doesn't want to sit down, and is pulled onto her father's lap, where she tries to get her brother to play a handclapping game.

Towards Ealing, South Ealing, where I have a Mexican colleague, Alegria, who is also a nurse at Guy's Hospital. C'mon, bust your ass over to my place, she'll say at the end of a hard week. Sometimes vodka, sometimes tequila, sometimes water, always a laugh. She's a mate, and maybe a friend.

My heart rate is rising and I'm sweaty, uncomfortable. The girl opposite

points at the watermelon, but she can't have any yet, her mother is firm. I stare at it, I dive into that colour and let the world slide out of focus. I swim through my memories, into my future, into all time together at once. I find the place where desire tries to chisel something from the rockface of reality. A stop or two later the family opposite stands up to get off. As the doors open and they step onto the platform, I find myself following: I grab Camila by the wrist, yank the pull handle on our heavy suitcase, and jump out, the doors bleeping shut behind us. Then the force that propelled me out of the tube carriage leaves me, and I'm left standing there like a mannequin. The platform is eerily silent, until the train moves off and drones into the distance. I become conscious of the noise of my breathing, of the heat of the sun on my cheeks.

"You're hurting my arm!" says Camila. "Mama!"

"Oh, sorry," I say and shake myself free, and look around, slowly turning letters into words, Bos-ton Ma-nor. Several stops from the airport. Tiny crystals shine in the platform, scrubby purple flowers wave by the tracks, an aircraft descends lazily in a distant patch of sky. Though I feel like I am still underground, a long, long way underground. Camila puts her arms out and spins around, but with wary eyes, waiting for me to act. I sigh, slowly exhaling.

I expect we can't be too far from Ealing – a longish taxi ride to Alegria. I crouch, and put a hand on my daughter's shoulder.

"We're going to visit my favourite friend. She's a nurse too. We're going to visit her today. That's what we're going to do."

Then I whisper, "Perhaps she can rescue me."

Freya Makes Me

Kate Hendry

A rare day together.
Her brother away, her father at work.
All morning, she wants me to play.

I give her ten minutes
at the doll's house
before it's time to leave.

We walk the dog up Blackford Hill,
She collects black broom seeds,
fills my pockets till the poppers burst.

On the drive home, she makes me
listen to *Matilda*, again. Makes me
wait in our dark street, for the end.

At night, I dream of escape –
swimming under the sea,
as if one breath could last forever.

I wake: my hand on my thigh
feels like hers. I find her
sitting up in bed, occupied

with the Boots catalogue.
She is circling what she wants:
fingerless gloves, nail clippers,

golden polish. I climb in beside her.
'This is our favourite task,' she says
and hands me a pen.

looking for a way out, I got caught

after Paul Pacifico

Teige Maddison

i taught myself among books, the opposite of megaphones -
taps made of a well-rusted skin grown in this house that supposed
our shortcomings:

if you're gonna fuck it up, fuck it up early.

the taps talk.

here come closer, they say.

closer.

sink.

Alone Again

In a Two-Bit Town

Helen Cook

Sonny

You don' have to be somebody to be of interest in this town. You can be nobody and some party will tell you how high up the wall you pissed on Friday night after your last beer. You can cross the street and folk will tell you you've had a haircut, got new boots, tried out for the football team, wrestled in the last row of the picture house with a girl who oughta know better. Everyone knows your daddy's a lush, your momma died early worn out and worn down, you don' have no mister to look up to cept the pool hall guy and he ain't gonna be around too much longer. You can hear that in his lungs.

In this wind-blown place you drive a pick up that's beat, with gears that grind and a windscreen wearing the badge of a man who's rolled across it. Cowboy music twangs from the radio; you catch the news that a coyote's run off with the sheriff's chickens. You kinda admire her sass. Everything round here has forgot its colour; wind and sand has beaten the town bare. The stink of oil rolls in, sucks out the air, makes you swallow more than you need. So you throw back a slug, light up a smoke for the first sweet savour that traces the air for a pitiful short time. So you light up another, shoot a few frames, get an earful of gusting outside, warm your ass on the mean fire.

When there's only one beautiful girl in your scrubby town you're obsessed with her so you don' understand the power she's got. Trouble is, she don' know how to use it proper, so she practises, takes down a whole heap a green boys in the finding out. And you're one of 'em, one with urges you ain't got no control over and a chin full o pimples peppered as the berries on a hickory bush. She gives you those eyes from up under her lashes and lets your hand explore places she ain't allowed you anywhere near before. Places you've only dreamed about. And then she freezes you. Leaves you strung out wound up something terrible like a spring

about to bust. You feel you might die from the hunger for her. You know she's no good, but what can you do when the wanting's a drug and her smile's a shot into your vein.

You got buddies who can't think beyond their dicks; you're the same but you kinda figure there must be more. So you look for it in the slim arms of a woman who can't help but cry over everything and is old enough to be your momma. What you find there wraps you in a comfort blanket, one that don't scratch and seems fresh off the line where it's blown out cool and clean. That's how she makes you feel, cool and clean and not thinking about the gold band on her finger just the time you take to pleasure each other. But you spoil that too cos you don't know how to treasure it.

There's only so long you can sit at the pond with a rod in your hand and a yearning in your gut waiting for the big bite that never comes. You watch a mockingbird dipping at the edge, ripples spreading like pearls on a string. Hush little baby don't you cry, daddy loves you and so do I; it's there in your memory somewhere, buried deep where you don't like to go. You stare at the flatlands, horizon broke by a few scrubby trees and listen to an old timer's story. Makes you believe you might come across some spirit, some joy someday. Makes you feel mad as hell.

And one day, one day, you think you'll leave this town. Find one with a picture house that's still showing John Wayne rounding 'em up and heading on out. A few dollars in the back pocket of your Wranglers and you're heading out too, down Mexico way for the tequila and the colour. But one day comes and goes, blows out on the dust and you're still a no-body in a two-bit town with everyone's nose in your back. Those Saturday night films in the crummy picture house are black and white dreams and even they don' last. One day something might just happen, jump up like a jackrabbit and change your life. It'll be a long wait and you sure ain't holdin' your breath. You're born, you grow up and then you die. What else is there to know?

Ruth

When you're a woman on the wrong side of forty in a town like this, you expect your life to be over. You've got yourself a husband, but he ain't the lovin' or even interested kind. Seems like it might be better if he raised his fist occasionally, better than not seeing you're there at the other side of the table day in day out. Better than knowing he don' really want a woman at all. Your momma asked before she up and died, what's wrong with you girl? You got your man, one with a job that don' mean him comin' home with oil under his nails, one that pays the bills, gives you a house a your own where nobody can tell you to git afore you're ready to. What's wrong wi' you girl?

You don' have to feel the shape of it in your mouth to know the words won't ever make her understand. So you don' try an' the meaning stays inside and sucks you dry like an old creek in the back o' July. You got a husband and a house but you ain't got no life, you're invisible, you don' even cast a shadow in the afternoon street. So you see the doc, for your nerves, see him for months until you make out that look in his eye as you go through his door, the one that tells you it's a waste of time. There's nothing he can do for what's wrong with you. There ain't no pill for lonesomeness, no potion for regret, no remedy to turn your man around, remind him you're his woman.

And when a young boy comes suddenly to your porch one hot afternoon, arriving like something fresh, remindin' you not everyone's dried up and faded, it's like a glass of iced lemon cordial when you're just about dying of thirst. You drink him in cos when he throws you a look you know he's seeing you, and when you cry he asks you what's wrong. You can't find the words cos there's a lump that won't swallow and anyways, you don' know where to start. But there's only so many cans of soda or cold beers he can drink in your kitchen before things go further than words. And you know it ain't right, but you got no inclination to stop it and he's kind and gentle and you can't believe he sees above your forty-odd years. And you forget about the gold band on your third finger.

In your bed that creaks cos it's dried up from not bein' used for anything 'cept sleepin' you remember your young girl dreams as you lay with your boy, arms tangled and the afternoon sun pushin' up under the curtain. Dreams you got from the picture house shows where a man loves a woman til her heart hammers and she can't breathe, and she looks up at him with her Bette Davis eyes. Where the big ol' moon watches over lovers as they light up, smoke curlin' and swirlin', sittin side by side on some porch swing that don' ever exist. But you know, deep down, you ain't no Bette Davis and your life's gone beyond dreams.

It don't last, you know it never would. You wait, one afternoon, the table set, but he don't come. You wait some more, but you know where he is, where his mind's at. The new dress that reminds you what colour feels like, clings like a burden, so you take it off, put something washed-out back on. Close the bedroom door, close it against the remembering. There's not a thing you can do 'cept carry on as before, go back to your dust-bowl life. You know darn well there ain't a single soul who cares 'bout the fact you cast a shadow after all. No –one will notice the new dead look in your eyes. Only it's deeper now cos you've known joy for a while.

States: a view from the Left Coast

Tony Kendrew

Chocolate Dark Chocolate

I turn aside from the computer, disgusted at the provinciality of people, specifically the Brits with their transatlantic invective. I had somehow landed at an online discussion about panties, where the Brits were expressing outrage at the use of the word. Egged on by tabloid anti-Americanism, they gave not a thought to the possibility that the American writer might be using it quite innocently, without titillation or prurience. I am a happy user of the word, a good word, more colourful than the prudish underwear, lacking the subterranean, and with a hint of onomatopoeia. The fact that in the UK it usually describes underwear worn by girls, as opposed to women, is the UK's problem. People on this side of the pond will continue to shun the monarchy of the old world's underwear.

I push back from my desk and walk to the cupboard where I keep my stash of chocolate. I am out. It's almost dark, 9:45 on a midsummer evening. I put too much garlic in the salad dressing and now what I want is a stick of chocolate ice cream coated in dark chocolate with the words Häagen-Dasz printed on the box. There's a gas station with a small convenience store a few blocks up the road next to the health food supermarket. They have a freezer for ice cream. They'll have it.

So I set off. I could drive, but why not walk? It's a beautiful evening, and Oh, the freedom to choose and move and eat what I want – the delights of city living!

I have just moved from the country. I am new to 24-hour shopping, invisible parties over the fence, trash collection, the chirp of crosswalks, wail of police cars,

library forecourts strewn with homeless backpacks and cowed dogs. Now I live in a city. It's not a city of treeless streets, multistory buildings, corner shops, plastic bags blowing in the wind. This is California, where we call almost anywhere with a shopping mall a city. Yes, there is San Francisco and LA, with their echoing downtowns and late night buses, but Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Napa are also cities, and three blocks from city hall people tend their trumpet vines, hybrid cars slide into free parking spaces, and trees shade cafes and the lawns of low-slung apartment buildings.

Minutes from home I see from half a block away a man inside the gas station approach the door and lock it. Darn. It's 10 already. Further on, the parking lot in front of the supermarket is empty and the lights are out. I stop to think. There's an all-night Safeway about a mile up the road. I walk on, powered by chocolate withdrawal.

I used to love cities. I had forgotten the buzz of walking the streets, especially at night — the shadows cast by orange lights, the rhythm of footsteps echoing off buildings, the slinking of cats. And in winter the fog of getting to work, breath steaming at the bus stop, the smell of coffee, the flashing lights of dawn deliveries, the warmth of crowded trains. Perhaps I can return to being a city person.

I reach a small shopping mall set back from the road and see a Baskin Robbins, its white light flooding the parking area. I have not noticed it by day, driving by. I cross the road and approach. In all the whiteness inside a single teenager scoops for a small group of customers from her pods of colored ice cream. But it's not soft fruity color in a cup or a cone I crave, it's the bite into cold dark chocolate, and the serious skill of preventing soft tiles of pure chocolate flaking off and being lost forever in the dirt. I turn away and keep going, crossing the road again and through the boxwood hedge to Safeway. The double doors slide open. Inside it's dazzling, and cold. I think I'm the only one in there. I wander around looking for a freezer near the checkouts and end up in the aisle with the frozen food. There's a woman with a cart staring at the chicken pies. I stare at the ice cream. A man joins us. He looks interesting, in a foreign, alternative sort of way. Perhaps it's his haircut, or his canvas shoes. "OK, what's for dinner?"

He has a French accent. I can tell from just four words. It's that "Okkay," that guttural r and that "dinere." In the time it takes me to find the Häagen-Dasz section, the woman has discovered that he is from Paris and he has discovered that her daughter is at this exact moment an exchange student in that very city. I am tempted to celebrate the diversity and serendipity of city life by exercising my

French, but the two of them are so flirty and tight I can't find a way in. Three's a crowd, even in the Safeway freezer aisle. Besides I am devastated to see that the only Häagen-Dasz bars are in six-pack boxes. Yes, there are tempting single cups of chocolate chip on the bottom shelf, but that's not why I have just walked a mile and a half in the dark. I turn my back on Paris, who is now telling California what sights her daughter must not miss, drop the temptation to tell her they'll probably be on strike when her daughter gets there, and go to the checkout. "No, we don't stock single bars."

I am quite miffed that I have not been able to express my outrage to a fellow European that the American megastore Safeway – with shelf after shelf of dolphin-free tuna and gluten-free crackers - cannot satisfy my small midnight need for an ice cream, but leave the dazzling cold and slip into the warmth and darkness of the parking lot, resigned to the blonde wholesomeness of Baskin Robbins. Better move. Gotta be there by 11.

This is not a horror story. No one is going to assault me in the parking lot. No car will try to run me down crossing the road. On the contrary, they will slow down and stop to let me cross safely. (Experience *that* outside the USA!) On the other hand, where I now live, if I took a handful of rocks from the short path to the street and threw them in six directions they would land on six different houses whose inhabitants I have not met and am unlikely to meet. Is that not a horror story? That's why I call my new home a city whether it is or it isn't, why I've been recovering from the culture shock of not being able to wave at everyone I pass, of not knowing who is sick, whose pears are ripe, who just got their teeth fixed, who got busted, who is in jail, who is dead. My city pad has a quiet back yard, a scratch of grass six paces north to south and seven paces east to west. I know the compass bearings because the city is not so dense to hide where the sun rises and sets, not so grey to dim its glow on the ivy climbing the electricity pole.

There are plenty of pleasant green cities in the UK and plenty of seriously crowded cities in the States, even in La La Land. There's not much difference between how densely people live in the cities of the US and the UK, though the British part of me still gets caught with that word "city" — something to do with cathedrals and the monarchy, neither of which go down too well over here, where a town becomes a city when it elects a mayor, a process shorn of pomp and circumstance.

But what is this? A small gas station next to Safeway still open at this hour? Inside, a young man with a tight blue Sikh turban is on his knees stocking the

lower shelves with bottles. I greet him, calling him Saardar-ji, in honor, among other things, of a hair-raising ride from Amritsar to Delhi staring at a turban on the back of a motor bike many years ago. He smiles, appreciative at being recognized. I ask him if he has any ice cream, and he leads me to a freezer, where a plain cardboard box overflows with loose unidentified Häagen-Dasz bars. "I'm looking for chocolate," I say. "Oh yes, this is Chocolate Dark Chocolate. Look!" He reaches down and takes one out. Scribbled on the wrapping with a black felt-tipped pen are the letters CDC. That's exactly what I want! But where's the original packaging? Where did they come from? And how long have they been there? This sudden invasion of doubt is not a reflection of an American obsession with standardized food and the obligation of tamper-proof packaging as much as the stirrings of memories from my history with Indian shopkeepers.

I have to break again to tell you a story.

A few years ago I pulled into a gas station in far Northern California. I started the pump, left the gas hose in my car and went inside to pay. The man behind the counter looked East Indian and, as you may have guessed, I have a soft spot for Indians. Traveling in India as a jaundiced hippie I spent time with two communities in particular - Punjabis, of whom many are Sikhs, and Gujaratis. In the last few years these two communities have pretty much carved up the motel and gas station business in California. In an attempt at friendliness I asked the man at the till where he was from in India, hoping I could perhaps try out a few of the greetings I picked up on my travels. People like that.

He replied, rather brusquely, "I am Punjabi. Why do you ask?"

"Oh," I said, innocently, "I thought you might be Gujarati." (My Gujarati is better than my Punjabi.)

"Those fuckers!" he shouted. "No way!" He sneered at me, and turned to look at the till. "That'll be $24.36."

I paid and walked stiffly out and got into my car and drove away. The hose popped right off at the pump and trailed along the forecourt, hanging from the side of the car. I had never done that before. I know I should be ashamed of myself, but now I can't help laughing!

Back in my new home city with Saardar-ji, the drool of my approaching fulfilment easily overcomes my historical hesitation. This is not India, after

all. No pirated Häagen-Dasz bars here. This is the real deal. No barcode on the packet? Not for resale? No problem. “Great!” I say, and walk to the till, saved from the blinding assault of Baskin Robbins. He slides the ice cream across the counter towards me.

“That’ll be $2.89.”

Contributors

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ALEX BARR's story collection *My Life With Eva* was published last year by Parthian. *Take a Look At Me-e-e!* a book of stories for children about farm animals based on his smallholding experience, appeared in 2014 from Pont Books (Gomer). Before moving to Pembrokeshire he taught architecture at Manchester Metropolitan University.

BYRON BEYNON's work has appeared in several publications including *The Interpreter's House*, *Agenda*, *Crannog*, *Planet*, *The Sante Fe Literary Review*, *Poetry Wales*, *London Magazine* and *The Yellow Nib*. He coordinated the Wales' section of the anthology *Fifty Strong* (Heinemman). Collections include *Cuffs* (Rack Press) and *The Echoing Coastline* (Agenda Editions).

MARK BLAYNEY won the Somerset Maugham Award for *Two Kinds of Silence*. His third story collection *Doppelgängers* and poetry *Loud Music Makes You Drive Faster* are published by Parthian. He's been longlisted for the National Poetry Competition, is a Hay Festival Writer at Work and was awarded a Wales Media Award for his journalism. www.markblayney.weebly.com

ROSEY BROWN lives in Cardiff, and can often be found reading at events such as SOFAR sounds, Milieu, Juke and Seren First Thursday. After finishing her MA in Creative Writing she won a 15/16 Literature Wales Bursary, and was a Writer at Work at Hay Literature Festival in 2016 and 2017. Rosey regularly leads creative writing workshops in a variety of settings, and she is a member of NAWE.

HELEN COOK is originally from Plymouth, but has lived in Wales since 1983. She now lives near Llandysul and is in her final year of a Creative Writing degree at Lampeter after retiring from a career as a primary school teacher. She belongs to a couple of writing groups and has had a short story published in the Blue Pencils anthology, Bangor University.

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MENNA ELFYN is one of the foremost Welsh-language writers. An award-winning and prolific poet, she has also published plays, libretti and children's novels, co-edited *The Bloodaxe Book of Modern Welsh Poetry* (2003) with John Rowlands, and published a biography of the poet Eluned Phillips. She was Wales's National Children's Laureate in 2002, and was made President of Wales PEN Cymru in 2004. Until 2017, she was Creative Director in the School of Cultural Studies at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David.

ELIZABETH GIBSON was announced as a New North Poet at the 2017 Northern Writers' Awards. Her writing has appeared in *The Compass*, *Cake*, *Antiphon*, *Creative Review*, *The Poetry Shed* and *Ink, Sweat & Tears*. She edits *Foxglove Journal* and the Word Life section of *Now Then Manchester*. She tweets @Grizonne and blogs at http://elizabethgibsonwriter.blogspot.co.uk.

ANDREW HANSON lives in south London, where he gives private tuition and suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome. He has been published by Popshot, Earlyworks Press and elsewhere. He is currently searching for an agent for his novel.

CHRIS HARDY's poems have been widely published and his fourth collection, *Sunshine at the end of the world* (Indigo Dreams, 2017) has been very well reviewed. He is in the poetry and music group LiTTLe MACHiNe performing at literary events across the country. "A guitarist as well as a poet Chris Hardy consistently hits the right note", Roger McGough.

KATE HENDRY's poetry has been widely published in magazines, including *The Rialto*, *The North*, *Gutter* and *The Reader*. Her first collection, *The Lost Original*, was published by Happenstance Press in 2016.

GEOFFREY HEPTONSTALL is the author of a novel, *Heaven's Invention*, published by Black Wolf in 2017. His plays include *Providence,* published by Lampeter Review in 2013. He was an associate writer with Duck Down Theatre Co. Recent fiction has appeared in *Bandit Fiction*, *Fiction Week*, *Scarlet Leaf Review* and *Writers' Café*. Recent essays and reviews have appeared in *The London Magazine*, *London Progressive Journal* and *Montreal Review*. Recent poetry has appeared in *The High Window, Poetry Pacific* and *Optimum*.

CHRISTOPHER HOLLIS is a 23 year old ex student of Lampeter's Creative Writing class. He is currently working on a comic book.

JOSEPH HUTCHISON, Poet Laureate of Colorado (2014-2019), is the award-winning author of 17 poetry collections, including *Eyes of the Cuervo/Ojos del Crow* (an illustrated, bilingual collection with translations by Patricia Herminia); *The World As Is: New & Selected Poems, 1972-2015*; *The Satire Lounge*; and *Marked Men*. At the University of Denver's University College, he directs two graduate level programs for working adults: Professional Creative Writing and Arts & Culture. Hutchison lives in the mountains southwest of the city with his wife, Iyengar yoga instructor Melody Madonna.

MIKE JENKINS is a retired English teacher living in Merthyr Tydfil and blogs regularly on his website www.mikejenkins.net. The poem 'Woz there?' will be in his next book published by Culture Matters later in the year and illustrated by Swansea artist Alan Perry, while 'Driftwood Cross' is actually set in Aberaeron. He has won an Eric Gregory Award, John Tripp Prize for Spoken Poetry and Wales Book of the Year. Latest books are *Sofa Surfin* (Carreg Gwalch) poems in Merthyr dialect and *Bring the Rising Home*! (Culture Matters) with artist Gustavius Payne. Former editor of *Poetry Wales'* magazine and co-editor of *Red Poets* magazine for 25 years. Occasionally conducts writing workshops both for adults and children.

ELUNED JONES lives in Aberystwyth, mid Wales, where she is a member of the Word Distillery group, based at Aberystwyth Arts Centre. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in various magazines including *Shearsman*, *Envoi*, *The Interpreter's House* and *Ink Sweat and Tears*.

TYLER KEEVIL is a writer and teacher from Vancouver who now lives in Wales. Until 2017 he was a Senior Lecturer and the Undergraduate Course Leader in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. The students in his short story class collaborated to co-write the piece included in this issue, 'Staying Grounded: Twelve Eyewitness Accounts of the Event'. This past year Tyler made the transition to Cardiff University, where he continues to lecture in Creative Writing.

TONY KENDREW lives, writes and hikes in Northern California, where he looks after the content of scienceandnonduality.com. He has produced two CDs of his poetry, and a collection, *Feathers Scattered in the Wind*, was published by Iconau in 2014. www.feathersscatteredinthewind.com

WES LEE is originally from the UK, but now lives on the Kapiti Coast of New Zealand. She is the author of *Body, Remember* (Eyewear Publishing, 2017), *Shooting Gallery* (Steele Roberts, 2016), and *Cowboy Genes* (Grist Books, University of Huddersfield Press, 2014). Her work has appeared in *New Writing Scotland*, *The London Magazine*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry New Zealand*, and many other journals and anthologies. She has won a number of awards for her writing, most recently as a contributor to *Remembering Oluwale*, winner of The Saboteur Awards Best Anthology 2017.

TEIGE MADDISON is a poet who likes poems that bite, poems that are lyrical. You may see him drunkenly telling poems to strangers in bars a lot. He likes red wine and dancing, with or without clothes on, to RHCP in his flat in London.

NICHOLAS McGAUGHEY is an actor and voice over artist. He has poems forthcoming in *Poetry Salzburg Review*/*Voices Israel*/*Sarasvati*/*Blood Puddles*/ *Urban Arts*/*3 Elements Review* / *Dusk Anthology*/*An Outbreak of Peace Anthology*/ *Lit-Tapes* and *Skylight 47*. He performed his one man show at Llandeilo Lit Fest this year and at Caerleon Lit Fest Last year. He is currently filming *Lyrebird,* a film set in WW2 which should be released next year.

MORFUDD OWEN is a Welsh writer currently undertaking a MSt in Creative Writing at Oxford University. Her written work encompasses poetry, prose and drama and has been published in many different publishing platforms.

D.N.J. PALMER was born in East Sussex but spent most of his childhood living in Belfast and Worcestershire. He is currently doing an undergraduate in Creative Writing and Philosophy at University of Wales Trinity Saint David and is working on his first poetry-infused novel. He spends most of his free time in East London.

BETHANY W POPE was named by the Huffington Post as 'one of the five Expat poets to watch in 2016'. Nicholas Lezard, writing for The Guardian, described her latest collection as "poetry as salvation".....'This harrowing collection drawn from a youth spent in an orphanage delights in language as a place of private escape.' Bethany has won many literary awards and published several collections of poetry. Her first novel, *Masque*, was published by Seren in 2016.

clare e. potter is Landmark Trust's poet-in-residence at Llwyn Celyn medieval house and recently Moravian Academy Pennsylvania. October's Artist in Residence for the Wales Arts Review. clare has translated poems for National Poet of Wales, Ifor ap Glyn. Collaborates in community projects. Received Arts Council funding to collaborate with a jazz quintet to create a response to Hurricane Katrina. Second poetry collection on the way thanks to a Literature Wales bursary

ABIGAIL STANIFORTH is a writer with a degree in Theatre and Performance Studies. She is interested in fantasy and horror, the autobiographical and the experimental, and wrote and performed in a two-man show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2013. She moved to Swansea in 2016 for love.

JAYNE STANTON lives in Leicestershire. Her poems have appeared in various print and online magazines, and anthologies including *Best British & Irish Poets 2017* (Eyewear). She has written commissions for a county museum, University of Leicester's Centre for New Writing, UoL poems for International Women's Day 2018, and a city residency. A pamphlet, *Beyond the Tune*, is published by Soundswrite Press (2014).

LAILA SUMPTON is a London based poet who performs across the country and facilitates poetry projects for learners of all ages and abilities in schools, universities, hospitals, museums, galleries and parks. She co-directs refugee and migrant poetry collective Bards Without Borders, is an Associate Writer at Spread the Word and a member of the Keats House Poets. Her work has been published in numerous anthologies including DUSK by Arachne Press most recently, and she is working on her first pamphlet.

BECKY TIPPER was born in the West Midlands and currently lives in Portland, Maine. Her short stories and essays have been published in *Prole*, *Literary Mama*, *The Weekend Read* by For Books' Sake, in two Mother's Milk Books anthologies, and elsewhere. She has won the Bridport Prize for flash fiction, and was the runner-up in the 2017 Society of Authors' Tom-Gallon Award for a short story.

REBECCA TRICK-WALKER was born and brought up in Pembrokeshire where she now lives with her family. She has had a number of plays broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and has completed a novel which was longlisted for the 2017 Bath Novel Award.

JULIA WEBB lives in Norwich. She is a poetry editor for *Lighthouse*. She has an MA in poetry from UEA. Her first collection *Bird Sisters* was published by Nine Arches Press in 2016. She is currently working on her second collection, which is due for publication in Sspring 2019.

HEIDI WILLIAMSON is a poet and creative writing tutor. She studied prose and poetry at UEA. Her two award-winning Bloodaxe collections are *Electric Shadow* (2011) and *The Print Museum* (2016). She is a Poetry Surgeon for The Poetry Society and mentors writers through The Poetry School and The Writing Coach. www.heidiwilliamsonpoet.com

PHIL WOOD works in a statistics office. Enjoys working with numbers and words. He has a B.A. Hons in English Literature from UCW Aberystwyth. Recently published work can be found in: *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *London Grip* and *Allegro*.

HEATHER HALLBERG YANDA teaches in the English Department at Alfred University, in the hills of upstate New York. She has poems published in such journals as *Iodine Poetry Review* and *Barely South Review*. Her first collection, *Late Summer's Origami*, is forthcoming from Ashland Poetry Press in January, 2019.

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