



From Glasgow to Saturn



Issue 28

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A Word from the Editors

Hello and welcome to Issue 28 of *From Glasgow to Saturn*, our first issue as the new editorial team. We are all great admirers of the magazine and, as editors, look forward to building upon the excellent example set by our predecessors, while at the same time introducing our own take on the publication.

When we opened our call for submissions in early August we could never have predicted the sheer volume of work we would eventually receive. There were moments, during the initial weeks of our editorship, when the trail went cold, when the inbox lay empty and the notion of publishing ourselves under a range of exotic pseudonyms was half-jokingly discussed. Thankfully, those fears came to nothing and it wasn't long until we were inundated with a huge variety of quality pieces. We would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every person who submitted. We hope this enthusiasm will carry through to our next issue.

Now, on to Issue 28. The pieces we've selected are the ones that truly grabbed our attention; that compelled us to read them again; that remained in our thoughts for hours, even days afterwards. Within these pages you will find tales of missing lockets and deposed planets; naïve crows and awkward chats; surreal shifts and conflicted youth. All of this and so much more.

Furthermore, we are delighted to feature the work of artist Megan Taylor in this issue. It is our intention to pursue a rolling policy with regards to our cover art, showcasing a range of styles and images.

So, without further preamble, we invite you to read on, and hope you enjoy our first issue of *From Glasgow to Saturn*.

Shaunagh Jones | Calum Maclean | Kevin Scott

Editors

A Little Warmth

Elaine Reid

Sandra places three filing reports onto my desk, next to the coffee mug filled with blue biro pens and a granola bar wrapper. She asks me to check if they've been completed properly, she's not too sure about her wording, her grammar, can't really remember how Jacob showed her it in the first place. Laughs. Shrugs. Bumps my shoulder with her fingertips.

I flip open the first report. It's been stapled in the wrong place. The dates and times and cabinet locations are covered by a triangle of light blue paper. I scan over Sandra's handwriting, the fat o's and looped g's. She's forgotten to include aisle markers and tray numbers. It's the same with each report. Lists of forgotten wallets, watches, jackets, pacifiers, cellphones, all assigned to a cabinet but nothing more.

I turn around to face Sandra. She's sat back down at her desk, toying with the computer's main database. I tell her about the aisle markers and tray numbers, explain the importance of item positioning. The precision of details. The ease of location. Not just for me, but for her. She lets out a little 'oh'. Not a fat one, it's barely there.

I slide the reports back to her. I don't say anything about the staples.

Sandra turns back around, doesn't open the files, just places them next to a small, framed print of a sunflower. She lays her palms over the keyboard. Leaves them there for a minute. Then continues tapping, hitting the keys with more nail than fingertip.

After a while she swings around, says she's going to get a fruit tea from the canteen and would I like to try, says she only brought the box in yesterday but it seems to be a real hit, didn't think the caffeine junkies in this place would take to regular tea, let alone the fruit stuff. I thank her but decline.

The telephone needs manned. That's what I tell Sandra.

I don't mention Joely. There's no point. It's Thursday. She would call.

New deliveries from the surrounding police departments come in on Mondays and Thursdays for process and storage. Those are the best days to call. That's what I told Joely the first week we spoke, the first week her voice cracked when she asked about the locket, the first week of quick, quiet breaths when I replied I couldn't locate it on our system. But she had to call back. Mondays and Thursdays.

Most people don't, of course. That's why we have cabinet locations and aisle markers and tray numbers. For the things that stay lost. The things that aren't being

looked for anymore, maybe never have been. They stay here, under lock and in incorrectly typed filing reports. Unclaimed, they last eighteen months until they're redistributed. That's what the managers call it, redistribution. Shipped off to thrift stores, re-sold or incinerated. Burn days. That's what the staff call them. The low Tuesdays when the workmen come in dark grey overalls, in trucks, to lift cardboard boxes, black, plastic bags knotted shut with yellow strings, sometimes whole cabinets. On burn days, the workmen tinkle like bells as they leave. That's a joke we have. Pockets full of new toys for their kids or earrings for their wives. A little dust off, a little soak in salted water. Good and clean.

The phone rings.

-Lost and Found.

-Hey, yeah, I don't know if you can help but I was on Newark Street last night, probably about ten o'clock, and I'm pretty sure I dropped my credit card. I was using the ATM, you see. Woke up this morning and I couldn't find it.

Not Joely.

-The first thing you have to do is call your bank. Cards tend to be handed in there. I've just looked over the list of items in today and I'm sorry, no cards. But like I said, contact your bank. They'll cancel your card and send a new one if they have to. You can always call us back next week to check, but it's unlikely. Mondays and Thursdays, we process new items. Best to call then.

-Right, sure, sure. Bank. Then you guys. Thanks buddy.

He wouldn't call back, nothing like Joely.

The second week, she described the locket again. I had remembered. Locketts with no chains are rare. Necklaces, trays full of them. But single lockets, like rings, brooches and buttons were too easy to slip down gutters, find themselves under the tyres of cars or in the pockets of sunny-day thieves. Most people don't look for them.

Joely had taken deep breaths in between sentences. I pictured her cheekbone against the receiver and the shapes her mouth made as she spoke. It was a gold locket, oval, a centimetre in length, if that, with an embossed black cross and three small opals running the length. It opened. She hadn't mentioned that the first time she called.

Inside, were two black and white photographs of a couple in Victorian dress.

Not like the locket I found this morning. The circle of gold I wrapped in tissue. Placed in a box of paper clips in my drawer. No opening. No pictures. No Victorians.

Real creepy looking too, Joely had said. She didn't even know who they were, that made her laugh. The locket belonged to her grandmother, but nobody in her family could trace the couple. She asked if that was strange, if she was stupid to keep

looking, did I think she was stupid to keep looking. No, I told her. Her voice softened and she thanked me for listening, apologised for taking up my time, I was probably busy with other things. I told her to call back. Mondays and Thursdays.

The phone rings.

-Lost and Found.

-Good morning. My son, he's only eight, thinks he left his scarf on a bus last week. I'd get him another one, but it was a present from his Dad who lives in Missouri and you can't buy them here.

-All items left on public transport are dealt with by Port Authority Lost and Found. Can I give you the number, ma'am?

Sandra returns as I recite the last three digits and put the receiver down. She places a cup of fruit tea on my desk, tells me try it, I'll be surprised. The warm liquid is a pale pinkish brown. Tastes like strawberries and tree bark. I tell her it's good, thank her. She squeezes my shoulder and sits down. Starts talking about her husband, her sister, her friends who aren't even that pretty, not in a mean way, but they're definitely not supermodels yet they still seem to land the hunks. That's what came out of her mouth. Land the hunks.

The phone rings.

-Lost and Found.

-Kevin?

Joely.

-Yeah, it's me. It's Kevin.

-I wasn't sure. You sounded different there.

-I got a mouth full of tea, that's all.

-Are you taking a break? I could call back later.

-No. No, don't do that. I'm fine.

-I had a really good feeling when I woke up this morning. You ever get days like that? You get dressed and just know that the day's gonna be a good one. There's a nice little warmth in your belly.

-I know what you mean. I think today might be your lucky one.

-You found it? Kevin, tell me you found it.

-I think I might I have. I don't wanna get your hopes up but a locket came in this morning, gold, little cross.

The line goes quiet. I hear Joely breathing quickly out her nostrils, maybe reaching for a tissue, or a glass of water, even raising her hand to her lips.

-I just knew today was gonna be good. I could just feel it. Didn't I tell you, Kevin?

-You were right. You gotta trust that gut.
-What do I do now? Do you send it out to me?
-It'd be best if you could come into the office, quicker too. Just need to get you to sign for it, that sorta thing.
-Sure, sure. Could I come now? I don't start work 'til four.
-Now's great.

I take my lunch at my desk, picking at the cold pasta I brought in with me. The chunks of olive and sausage have sunk to the bottom of the tub. It tasted better hot, at dinner last night with my brother and his wife. She cooks great Italian food, always gives me leftovers, insists I take some away with me.

Sandra left twenty minutes ago, likes to eat with the admin girls at the soup place around the corner. I ignore the external calls, the double rings. Wait for Celia at the main reception to call through. One extended buzz. The internal call.

I pick out wet, red spirals of pasta and grind them down into a starchy mulch. Let the mess slip down my throat and into my gut. I finish the rest quickly and leave the fork in the empty plastic tub before pressing the lid back on.

From my desk drawer, I take out the box of safety pins. The wrapped knot of gold has shifted to the side. I pick it out. Peel off a corner of tissue. The top of a black cross. No opening. No photographs.

The buzz.

-Celia?

-Kevin, I've got a Miss Mathers here to see you about a lost necklace. Says she spoke to you earlier.

-Yes, that's fine. Send her right in.

-Alright, sending her in.

I hear the receiver click at the other end. Move the empty tub into an empty drawer. Bin the granola wrapper. Place the locket in the centre of the desk. Watch the door.

I imagine her knock. Soft and hurried. Like her voice when she's sad and tells me that losing the locket feels like the world just chipping away at her Grandmother, who was beautiful and smart, really the most intelligent lady, and she can feel the distance building, even though that's silly, even though she's already gone.

But the knock doesn't come. The door brushes open.

-Kevin?

Joely blows the bangs out her eyes, hovers by the door. Her face is a little flushed. She's older than I thought she would be. She rearranges the long patterned scarf that's wound in folds around her neck.

-Please, have a seat. It's good to see you. In real life, I mean.

I motion to Sandra's chair which she moves closer to mine.

Her dark brown hair hangs down to her collarbones.

-I can't believe you've got it. I've just been praying so hard. Somebody up there must like me.

She laughs and peers around the room.

I pick the tissue-covered locket off my desk and hand it to her. Joely's eyes fill. I drop my gaze to her lap as she picks away at the covering.

-You have no idea how much this means to me. I just can't begin to explain—

She stops. Lets the half-sentence hang in mid-air.

-Joely? What is it?

A corner of gold pokes out of the wrapping. No opening. No photographs.

-It's not it. It's not mine.

She peels off the rest of the paper and turns the locket over.

-This isn't it. This isn't mine.

The phone rings. I ignore it. The sharp bleats swallow the silence.

-I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry. I just saw it this morning and there was the cross on the front.

Joely sniffs loudly and hands the locket back to me. Her eyes are glazed and full.

-It's okay. It's not your fault. It was stupid of me to think I'd get it back.

-You can't stop looking.

I put my hand on her shoulder. She doesn't edge away. I can feel bone bumping out from under the wool sweater.

-Do you wanna get some fresh air, Joely? You've had a shock. We should get you something to eat or a coffee.

She takes an orange handkerchief out her purse and dabs at her face. Then nods.

-Sure, I could eat.

I walk her a couple blocks to Del's. She doesn't speak much on the way. Just keeps her head fixed on the sidewalk, eyes scanning the cracks in concrete, the dips and edges. Says it's a force of habit. Wasn't even anywhere near this neighbourhood when the locket fell from its chain around her neck. Says it comforts her though.

Inside the bakery, I fill my lungs with warm, sweet bread and melted butter. We order raisin bagels and cinnamon swirls. The girl wraps them in greaseproof paper and stacks them in a brown bag with the Del's logo in thick, red capitals.

I pause at the tables and chairs but Joely walks out. Away from the smells of sponge and spun sugar. She takes a bite out of a bagel and hands me the bag. We walk slowly back in the direction of my building. The cinnamon swirls are still warm and the icing sticks to the tips of my fingers.

We pass realtors, junk shops, hardware stores, fast food restaurants. Joely stops up ahead in front of a finger-marked glass window. Lines of gold chains and bracelets. Wooden hands wearing rings on every finger. Green cushions pricked with old tie pins and cuff-links.

-It'll be in some place like this, I bet. Some crummy old pawn shop. Sold for booze or crack money by the scumbag that found it.

Joely kicks at the ground under her feet, lowering the bagel to her hip.

-Come on, you can't think like that.

She shrugs.

I take the locket out my pocket.

-Why don't you keep this until you find yours?

-I couldn't do that.

We step around the parked cars in front of my building. Joely hands me the brown bag with the remaining bagel.

-You could keep it. I wouldn't tell anyone.

She smiles and shakes her head.

-You gotta keep hold of it until someone starts searching.

The locket drops back into my pocket. Joely squeezes my arm and turns around. Starts walking.

I call to her.

-I'll speak to you next week?

-Mondays and Thursdays, Kevin.

From the 99th Floor

Bradford Watson

I could see only two floors of lights far above the city, a band of rectangles strapped around the top of the Century Building, illuminating bleakly against the still-blue sky. It was the time of year when night and day were separated only by a thin layer of navy that was neither one nor the other. The whole summer had been one long heat wave; no clouds in the sky and everyone was dried out from the summer's light.

The Century stood in the heart of the city: grand, honest and steady. It lifted the entire landscape high like the centre pole of a tent. Around it rows of smaller skyscrapers diminished for miles and then fell away into a plateau of suburban rooftops. Beyond this there was only the countryside and water. The entire city was on a slant leading towards the stately old building and on that night it strained under the weight. Ladders crisscrossed up its side and siren lights beat against its base. There were floodlights too, and a small crowd had gathered; their pallor tainted by the flashings of red and blue, their faces pointed towards where the ladders stretched, but it was all too high up to see.

At the back of them, where the sirens did not reach, a man dressed in a city suit spoke to me. His trousers were overlong and slack, the collar of his shirt was not concealed under his jacket, and instead the corners lifted on to his lapels and stuck out. He had a crooked stare which at first kept me looking behind to see who he was talking to. As he spoke his anxiety swelled up and he took steps backwards.

'Down to the sixty-sixth! Thirty-three floors! She couldn't even escape the building. Oh God! They found her shoes up there, you know? That's how they knew. She went all the way up there and some of the way back down and nobody saw nothing. A pair of shoes, that's all that's left! Placed neat as you like next to the rail. All the way to the landing above the sixty-sixth. Nobody saw nothing!'

I asked him who she was and he told me nobody saw nothing. I asked him when this happened and he told me her shoes were still up there. All the time his eyes were fixed beyond me like he needed more than just me to hear this. He would not be happy until he had spread this story across the entire town and drawn all the city hotshots, all the cab drivers, the homeless and the whores to his side to mourn with him. His tie was loose, the knot brutally tight, and the underside longer than the main. He grabbed the two strands, squeezed them, yanked them hard away from him and then they fell back down, parting around his gut, and he moved away to find a new audience.

Sequestered from the Century by columns of smaller skyscrapers was the Rotunda, a bright speck shimmering under the gloom of the hard, grey city. Only underneath its vast, glass bubble of a roof could a man really feel at ease. There were marble floors to clack across, like the sound of money on the table. There were portraits of po-faced old men, generations of noble stock. There were huge ornate wooden doors hanging wide open to frame the enormous room sparkling out. High-back chairs, long thick tables, chandeliers – not gaudily lit but dim and restrained – a sleek grand piano in the centre of the room and a small bar at the very back which made it all quite symmetrical. It was a fine place and all encased in the glow from the roof. The semi-sphere had panels of iron running through it like a web, separating the glass up into large panels. The soft lilt of spot lights placed around the outside of the dome made it pulsate, swell up and away, the only living, breathing being in the whole of the landscape. Up on top of the Century I wondered if she could even see the bubble at all that far below, or if it was the first and only thing that she saw. Was it then, watching it shine, that she removed her shoes and placed them neatly down below a rail?

Lucy's lateness was constant. She was a good looking girl with the ever-transient air that she had just come from some splendid party and was passing time before another. Her dresses were never rumpled and she wore just enough make-up so that it seemed she wore none at all, but she would always be late. That night it did not bother me so much. I drank a couple of drinks and let the piano drift in and out of the fragments of lives around me.

'Well, champ, I've never been more proud,' a father spoke.

'Oh, isn't he beautiful, John? Doesn't he just look perfect? Isn't he quite beautiful?' a shrill voiced woman behind me said, to which John replied rather plainly: 'quite beautiful.'

'Shall we go out again tomorrow?

'I should say not, old man, far too hot for that sort of thing. I nearly died on the walk back to the car. Far too hot. No, I say we go down to the ocean tomorrow. Pierce has a beach house you know?'

A couple of tables ahead a man rose to propose a toast and in the recesses beyond the soft notes I could hear 'oh, sometime next year, I imagine. No need to rush things. Well of course Veronica positively died when I asked her.' All these people celebrating, toasting, proposing, living through the clear hot night. We were under a perfect little bubble of light and good fortune. In there nobody cared much about what happened out in the city. The squint-eyed man's grief did not carry through the glass.

Lucy sat down right in front of me as if nothing was amiss, or rather as if it was unusual I had arrived long before she.

‘Oh, you’re here.’

‘Here I am,’ I said, raising my third glass to her.

‘Yes. Well I’ve had a dreadful time of it. This damned heat wave. I’ve spent the entire day trying my very best not to collapse. I’m sorry, darling, I must look a mess.’

Her face was slack, maybe from the heat. She turned abruptly to gather the waiter and order a drink.

‘There’s been a scene by the Century for most of the evening. Did you notice?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Police and all sorts. A girl jumped, apparently. I don’t blame her. I don’t see how anyone can keep up in this weather. Probably she didn’t mean to kill herself at all. Probably she just went up there for some air and fainted from the heat.’ She chuckled to herself.

‘Went up where?’

‘Oh, the observation deck I think. I couldn’t see any sign of her on the pavement though.’

There was a picture that I saw years ago of a woman who jumped from the Empire State in New York. She lay still, eyes closed, her legs crossed and an arm placed up to her chin as if she was considering some small problem. The crushed car underneath her was the only sign of what had taken place. That perfect image lingered far beyond the ugliness of the act itself. She was preserved, young, calm, and beautiful. Outside, from the top of the Century, there was no beauty. An ugly escape, a messy escape.

‘She landed on the sixty-sixth floor,’ I said.

‘I’m not sure I understand, dear.’

‘It annoys me that she didn’t get out is all. She should have at least made it out, cleared the building.’

‘I forget what the house wine is, we’ll need a list.’

‘Yes, of course, and I’ll need another drink.’

‘It really is a most peculiar thing though, darling. I was passing the Century this afternoon and I stopped and thought what a marvellous building, a really marvellous building in the centre of a fine city.’

‘I don’t understand what’s so peculiar about that.’

‘No? I suppose I just find it odd that anyone else would have such a drastically different idea.’ She was talking and talking and soon her frivolity would be irrepressible.

‘This city is rotten and anyway she didn’t even make it out. She’s stuck up there.’

‘Oh, darling, it’s not something to get upset over.’ She looked across the table with a kind of tenderness in her slack expression. We ordered and she spoke of the sales on in town and her mother’s cough. When the old woman visited at the weekend they would shop and then we would take her out for dinner. All evening I would have to hear the phlegm rise in her mother’s throat while I ate.

In between courses I looked up to the domed roof and the sunlight finally diminishing. Lucy grew restless and pushed her feet towards mine under the table cloth with equal parts affection and a desire to annoy me or to shake me from my reverie. She thrust one foot so harshly against my shins that her shoe came off. As she fumbled under the surface to reclaim it I saw a pair of shoes neatly placed together high up above the city. They were brown and all polished up so that they would glint in the sun. They were placed neatly together, pointing out the way as if she were coming from a living room or a bedroom to put them back on. They were perfect and untouched.

I thought about her fall and the beautiful roof, the bubble above delicately glittering, radiating just above the surface of the city. I thought about perfection and then I saw her come down. First her shape flashed through the spotlights, magnified for a second, staining the opulent glow. Then she came down through the glass as clean as if it hadn’t been there at all. Lucy talked some more and I didn’t answer. I was held tight by the body floating down towards our table, ghostly and with an aura of fragmented glass. Her legs were straight, her arms hung limp by her sides. The back of her white blouse above us collected shadows the further she fell. Her skirt distended around her straight legs, her arms limp, stretching out beyond her head balletically, and the lilt of the piano continued on unbroken.

‘Darling, you’ve gone terribly white. Have another glass, won’t you? I’m all on my own here.’

Down she came on to the table, on to the very middle of our table in the centre of the rotunda, a picture of complete serenity. Her hands dropped to her chest. I pushed my plate and cutlery out of the way to make sure her head rested without interruption. There could be no more interruption. She had fallen once more and this time without disturbance and there she lay complete and still with a soft smile and the remnants of dinner at her sides.

‘Aren’t you hungry, darling?’ Lucy said, reaching over for my dessert. She pulled it towards her over the legs of the body. Stretching beyond the edge of the table were the shoeless feet, heels almost together and toes falling away to create a natural V at Lucy’s elbow. Surely there could be some way to retrieve the woman’s shoes. The

Century would be shut by now and, anyway, if they weren't they would not let me in. They would not let anyone near the observation deck. As I rose I realised she did not need them. Lying in the centre of the Rotunda, she had broken free. Shards fell from the roof and continued to fall on Lucy, into our dessert and into her wine. They scattered across the piano, over the rest of the couples, tinkling against their plates, cutlery and the silver trays the waiters carried and I thought how beautiful it all was. How much more fitting that she should be the centrepiece rather than caught on some ledge high up above everything. Here everyone could see her.

Lucy's broken words followed me to the door, growing fainter with the still chiming glass and the notes of the piano. They disappeared with the echoes of marble in the hall and then I was outside, a tiny dab moving up one of the many deep fissures of the city centre. It was hot still but it must rain soon, I thought, and then the whole city would open up. The glow was gone from the Century and I wondered if the shoes would be too. She didn't need them anymore.

Pluto's Lament

Vivien Jones

134240 in the minor planet catalogue

I am untouched,
no spacecraft has squatted on
my impossible surface,
processed
my impossible atmosphere
fleeting gas at perihelion,
frozen nitrogen,
laced with methane,
feeble microbars
fail to keep a grip.

The ninth planet,
since dwarfed.

I am cold,
unobserved for millennia,
discovered in error,
someone didn't do the maths
someone else thought
me and my moon, Charon,
were one, no-one knew
his tiny sisters,
Nix and Hydra,
until Hubble peered.

The ninth planet,
since dwarfed.

I am dark,
too far for light to lift
my rocky heart,

what warmth I know
is just less cold.
Neither day or night
rolls across my face,
silence, true absence,
beats no time
through my existence.

The ninth planet,
since dwarfed.

Pluto's Hope

Vivien Jones

currently, 134240 in the minor planet catalogue

I am to be flown past,
A New Horizon,
ten years heading
like a dart, but sleeping,
at 34,000 miles per hour,
reporting, each week,
only a little awake -
'I'm still here'.

On July 16th 2015
6,000 miles above me,
so close I may hear it,
click, hum and suck
my data, my being.
Its telescopes, particle detectors,
its radio waves, its spectrometer,
its infra-red mapping eye
will gaze across my surface.

They worship knowledge
The New Horizon ones,
They will display their images
like trophies, on bright screens,
coloured and given voice.
They will simulate my being,
make me familiar, beautiful,
they will say my name many times,
make themselves famous.

They could restore me,
The Ninth Planet.

The Land Agent (extract)

J. David Simons

Poland 1919: Palestine or America?

Lev loved Sarah. He had loved her for as long as he could remember. His brothers used to tell him the first word he ever uttered was Sarah, not Mama. Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. Lev loved Sarah. He would have carved that declaration on every tree in the forest if he hadn't been too frightened to go there. For that's where the Catholic farm boys lived with their pigs, their hens and their cows. Jews weren't allowed to live with animals although he wasn't sure if that was a prohibition by God or the State. He was always confused on those matters. Especially as his grandfather Gottlieb had a dog. Bazyli it was called. His grandfather had owned several dogs, all of which he called Bazyli even though they were different breeds. To Lev, this series of Bazylis had merged into one grotesque mongrel in his memory.

Lev loved Sarah. Sarah was all grown-up now. Long limbs and small breasts. She went every month with her mother to the ritual bath to do whatever women do. She was exactly six months older than he was; a fact she never let him forget. Which meant he was always following after everything she did. Into children's school, into Hebrew classes, into the choir. He took up knitting, skipping, climbing trees and throwing stones at dogs because of her. And when Sarah decided to join the Zionist Youth, he did exactly the same. Although in his immaturity, he had no idea what the Zionist Youth was all about.

It didn't help he had no one else to look up to. His mother was long dead from a women's complaint. His grandfather lived in the woods, his father was either selling liquor, drinking it or spending time with Ewa Kaminski. His eldest brother, Amshel, had announced one Friday afternoon he was going down to the butcher to collect the meat and never came back. It was the first Sabbath meal Lev could ever remember without a dinner of cooked flesh. His two other brothers were always fighting. Either with Lev, each other or the Catholic farmboys in the woods. They ended up fighting for Poland in a war they thought would be good for the Jews. It wasn't good for the Jews. And it wasn't good for them, for they never came back.

He quite liked the Zionist Youth or the Young Guard as they preferred to be called, although he wasn't sure what they were supposed to be guarding. They went on long walks and built fires and talked in Hebrew and sang songs in Hebrew and

danced in circles around the fire. As he grew older and followed Sarah into more senior groups within this Young Guard they learned about the Yishuv or settlement in Palestine, they collected money to help people go there, they discussed Zionism and whether it might be better for the Jews to go and live in Uganda. It was all very abstract to him. Until Sarah said:

‘I am going to Palestine.’

He looked up from whittling a stick, something he did a lot with the Zionist Youth. ‘Why?’

‘What do you mean? Why? What do you think we’ve been preparing for all these years?’

Lev hadn’t thought he was preparing for anything. He had just wanted to hold hands with Sarah as they danced around the fire and went around collecting money to send other people to the Yishuv. It hadn’t occurred to him she might actually want to go there herself.

‘Will you come with me?’ she asked.

He was about to say ‘yes’ to the idea of the two of them walking arm in arm through a land of date palms and donkeys, eating freshly picked oranges, chatting in Hebrew about the house he was building in the Galilee where she would milk cows and ride horses. Then she added:

‘There is a group of us going. Our very own *kvutza*. We’re going to work on the land together, eat together, live together. All for the purpose of building a Jewish commune in our very own homeland.’

‘You’re going with a *kvutza*?’

‘Nine of us. Will you come?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Of course, you will. You always follow me.’

Lev’s eldest brother, Amshel, the one who ran away without picking up the meat for the Sabbath dinner, once told him that their father always looked as if he were carrying an imaginary piece of heavy furniture up a stairway.

‘Look at him, Lev.’ And here Amshel would put a circle of thumb and index finger over his eye to help his young brother focus better on the figure plodding up the street. ‘He looks like he’s *shlepping* a piano.’

But as Lev stood waiting for his father to speak, he knew it wasn’t the weight of an imaginary piece of furniture that pulled him down. But the burden of loss of a wife and two sons. Not to mention Amshel, who had disappeared.

‘Lev. Ewa....your step-mother.....my...we...we just want you to know we would be very happy if you decide to come with us to America.’

‘Yes,’ Ewa said, taking his father’s hand. ‘We would be very happy. One big happy family.’

‘A new beginning for all of us,’ his father continued. ‘After all the tragedies we have suffered.’

‘The tragedies were terrible,’ Eva confirmed.

‘We realise it is a big change for you. But you are old enough to make your own decisions. How old are you?’

‘Eighteen, father.’

‘Yes, old enough to make your own way in life. You can continue to stay here and work in Mr. Borkowski’s store. He says he will be happy to promote you to do the selling instead of me. Or you might choose to go to Palestine with the Young Guard, that is up to you. We will understand.’

Sarah was the opposite of his father. She appeared to float in the air as others carried the weight of her life for her.

‘It would be so good if you came with our *kvutza* to the Yishuv,’ she told him. ‘An even number makes everything so much easier.’

Lev went to the forest. He used to go there with his father, his fighting brothers or the Young Guard. But never alone. And never in such weather. The snow was falling heavy. He pulled down his cap, pushed his scarf up against his mouth. His feet, he couldn’t feel them at all. He had wrapped his punctured boots in old cloths before he set out but the numbness had set in quick. He didn’t think it would be this difficult. But each step sunk deep into the white mush sucking his strength. He would have turned back but he was closer to his destination than he was to his home. Why would someone live out here? With the silence, the Catholic farmers, the robbers and the wolves?

He reached the edge of the pine forest, leaned in close to the first row of trees for shelter, twigs breaking off against his upper arms, branches dragging across this back, dropping their icy load down his neck. He searched for the breach in the perimeter showing the trail. Something slithered and scampered through the frozen leaves inside the forest. A wild beast? A *dybbuk* waiting to pounce on his indecisive soul? He picked up a stout branch the length of his forearm, judged its heft in his palm. It would have to do.

He found the path easy enough and turned into the forest. The snow hardly made it in here but neither did the light. Or any sound. He stopped, held his breath,

just to listen to the silence. 'Aye, yay, yay,' he called out, listened to the words echo off the trees. He brushed off the snow from his coat, stamped his feet on the hard ground, blew into his gloves, hummed loudly as he walked deeper into the forest, brandishing his club.

He saw the light first, from the flutter of flames reflecting in a window. Then the smell of wood smoke. A cottage in the clearing, one stone wall where the fireplace stood, the remaining logs caulked with tar or wood fibre. He looked around for a dog. There used to be a dog. Bazyli? Bazyli? Where are you, you stupid mongrel? He rapped the club against the heavy door. Snow fell from the roof. He knocked again. He heard a wooden bar scraped across, a crack of light, a gust of warmth. A woman's voice, harsh like the wind suddenly picked up through the forest. Zelda. He shivered.

'What do you want?'

'It's me. Lev.'

'I don't know Lev.'

'Lev Gottlieb.'

'Who?'

'My grandfather. I've come to see my *zeide*.'

The door opened further. Zelda squinted at him. A small woman with a square head on top of a square body. Not someone you could knock over with a feather. She could wield an axe like a man, cleared half the trees to make this dwelling.

'I don't see too good.'

'It's Lev. Szmul's son. Will you let me in?'

'He's asleep.'

'I'll wait.'

Zelda scratched her scalp through hair as sparse as winter weeds. 'I don't know when he wakes.'

'Zelda. It's freezing out here.'

'All right, all right. Come in.'

The room was dim, warm and smoky, with the stink of rotten vegetables, drying wool. The roof leaked in a couple of places into rusted tins on the floor. One wall was shelved to the ceiling with books. Two stools. A table carved from a log. There was a kitchen area with a sink, a few pots and peelings, pelts strewn everywhere. He had heard it was Zelda who had skinned them, laying traps for the wolves, slitting their throats when caught. The town folk said she'd even killed a bear, slipped underneath its paws while it stood on its hind legs, ripped open its stomach, then sliced off its testicles. A delicacy from where she came from. Although where that was nobody knew. She was his grandfather's housekeeper for as long as he could remember. He

had never known his grandmother who had died giving birth to his youngest uncle. There was only one bed in this cottage, so Lev had to make up his own mind where Zelda slept.

‘Who is dead?’ she asked.

‘No-one is dead. I just want to talk to him.’

‘He sleeps.’

‘When will he wake?’

She shrugged.

‘I can wait. I brought him some tobacco from the store.’

She took the package, sniffed it hard along an edge, then waddled over to the kitchen area, searched out a bowl. From a pot by the hearth, she ladled out some liquid, handed it to him.

‘It could be a long time. Sit.’ She pointed to a stool by the fireside. He did as he was told. Zelda went over to a pile of skins, lay down and closed her eyes. He watched her as he drank the soup – beans, herbs, bits of bark. More like a potion than a broth. He listened to Zelda’s snoring, the spit of the fire, the droplets of water into the tins, until he slipped off his stool onto one of the pelts, into his own deep sleep.

The rough shaking woke him. And the rancid hiss by his ear. ‘Son of Szmul. Come, come. He is ready.’

‘What time is it?’

‘What do I know about time? He is awake.’

Lev pushed himself to his feet. His forehead ached. ‘Water.’

Zelda nodded to a barrel in the corner. He dipped in a tin cup and drank. It tasted of the forest. A window above his head showed a half-moon high in the sky. He had slept for hours.

‘Come, come,’ Zelda beckoned. She opened the door to the only other room.

His grandfather was sat up in his bed, wrapped in a prayer shawl, tattered black silk *yarmulke* on his head. His beard hung grey and dirty like a hank of raw wool. It had been a while since Lev had last seen him, but he looked the same. Perhaps the old are always just old in the eyes of the young.

‘Which son of Szmul are you?’

Lev looked for a stool. But there was none. Instead, he had to crouch in a half-kneel before the bed. ‘There is only one son now, *zeide*. You know that. I am Lev. The youngest.’

‘Come closer.’

Lev did as he was told.

‘Let me feel you.’

His grandfather’s fingers lightly tapped the skin of his face. The touch was dry like parchment.

‘Ah yes, now I remember. You are the good son.’

‘The good son?’

‘Amshel, he was selfish. The other two, what were their names?’

‘Hershel and Baruch.’

‘Yes, Hershel and Baruch. They only had time for each other. But you, you also look out for others. The name shapes the man, Lev. The name shapes the man. Your name in Hebrew, it means heart. But in Yiddish, ‘Lev’ also means lion. Do you have the heart of a lion, Lev?’

‘I don’t think so, *zeide*.’

‘You are still young. You have time to find one. Why are you here?’

‘My father...Szmul...your son...he is leaving the town.’

‘To Warsaw?’

‘To America.’

His grandfather sighed, a whispery, papery breath. ‘Ah, America.’ Then the anger rose, as Lev knew it would. ‘With that whore he now calls a wife? Not your mother, mind you. Your mother was a good woman. An angel. Not a whore like this one. With her lipstick and fancy ways. When did he decide this?’

‘A few months ago. He is leaving after winter.’

‘He sent you to tell me this? After a few months.’

He waited for his grandfather to calm. ‘He didn’t send me.’

‘He is leaving without telling me? It is that woman. How she drives a wedge between father and son. So if not to tell me, why have you come?’

‘I came to ask your advice.’

‘You are going with him?’

‘That is what I want to ask. The Ziionists want me to go to Palestine. A small group of pioneers. Ten of us.’

‘Ah, the Zionists. They think now the British are in control their dream will come true.’

‘They will arrange the papers. Provide some funds. We are going to start a commune. Build an agriculture settlement in a Jewish homeland.’

‘They will want you to build roads for Jewish capitalists. When you could walk on streets made of gold?’

‘What do you say, *zeide*? I should go to America?’

His grandfather started coughing. An awful sound. Zelda was quickly by his side with a cup of water. He sipped from it then waved her away. 'Listen, Lev. To go to America is simple. It is a fresh start. You make no sacrifices. You go, you get work, you make money, you buy a house, you get married, you have children, you die. To go to Palestine. It is not a fresh beginning. It is like grafting new branches onto old vines. It is complicated. The people. The history. The land.'

'I still don't understand. Where shall I go?'

'It is not for me to tell you. You must make up your own mind. But I think it is best you go somewhere. For here they hate us.'

He left his grandfather coughing into the fringes of his prayer shawl. Zelda caught up with him just outside the door.

'He will be dead before winter is out,' she whispered.

'What?'

'I saw it before. This wasting disease of the lungs. One month. Two at the most.'

He rubbed his eyes. 'I should go back in to see him.'

'No, no. It is just good you came. That is enough. He is very fond of you.' She grabbed his arm. 'What will you do?'

'I shall go to Palestine.'

Zelda fished something out of her apron pocket. 'Can you take this?'

A rag. Something wrapped inside. A tiny stone? A jewel? 'What is it?'

She looked at him coyly. 'My tooth.'

'A tooth?'

'From when I was a child. I want you to bury it in the Holy Land.'

A Dream, to my Mother

Maria Sledmere

The sun loses its shine
in spiralling time
and a world decays
in the greyness of age;
so the saying says.

A lie.

Doubt the blackening
of the clouds in the sky, don't doubt
the energy in your blood so alive;
all the rain, all the water
cannot wash away love.
Reach for those dreams
you've been thinking of.

Blow out the candles;

Your own smoke alone
is making you mad; the chemical
concoction of red, red rage
may be poured, coherently
upon a clean white page.

So remain forever, stay
your favourite age; mother,
each day is a dawn,
a fire, a jewel
clearer than a river, rare
as a shower of meteors,
a dream like no other.

Visitation

Helen Addy

Littering the beach with their luggage,
my dead parents appear in my dream.
My father miscounts money into my hand,
crumpled notes lifting in the breeze.
My mother wears a dress she wouldn't wear,
pouring her complaints into a shell.

Their cases floating on the tide,
I push their van along the seafront,
letting go as the engine fires.
My mother posts a sweet into my father's mouth,
their waving arms framed in the wing mirror,
wheels grinding pebbles into dust.

Bird's Eye View

Helen Addy

A mother returns
from taking her shadow for a walk,
her footsteps blunting my song.
She sits under the falling blossom,
her arms like branches deadened by storm,
her mouth a twisted wire.
The swing moans in the breeze,
the blanket shrivels on the grass,
her cartwheeling child,
a flaring sun among the flowers.

Saturday's Child

P.J. Caffrey

Two summers in the beetroot sun
with ma first mate fae beyond our run.
Cowboy season had blown away like
tumbleweed up commando lane.

To be honest, I was scared.
His mob were rougher, bigger, couldn't
care less where they should roam.
Each new place cut my old world to the bone.
Jagged, decimated, derelict wastes, contemptuous,
vile rotted places like I'd seen in films where
bombs had rained. Beam-faced Midge just laughed,
explaining that this was it now, I was in.
His massive grin was like a laughing Cheshire cat's.

Next Saturday we splattered rats. I jolted with each
piercing scream as catapults whacked shapes from beams.
Our captain Phelps smashed my dream then split each
beast from arse to brain. Next I tasted wine. We heaped
a fire in the old mill. That first taste brought me bang up to
thirteen. Then Phelps produced the knife- *Swear the oath...
swear the oath, say it or I'll cut your fuckin throat.*

I grabbed my little coat then
waded through the scummy canal.
My vision cracked. Never will I shake
that scene-where I emerged all gooey-
green onto the sunny side then
bob tailed back to my own run.

And that first mad summer still
sticks to me, like the algae, set me
different, somehow, more free.

The second summer more or less
held me at home. I had a tiny radio.
Roamed those airways. Wore songs
like armour. The Pistols, Suzie,
Undertones, Cooper Clarke's long
drawling tones was how I dressed
myself in dances, up the room.

Then one good Friday Midge appeared
Said *Too much too young...? Well, never
mind the Bollocks*. He had a Harrington
and hat. Church hall discos every Saturday
and second Wednesday; my new best mate
the Cheshire cat could dance like... Rotten.

Friday nights were vampire flicks.
Beam-faced cat boy brought girls.
They're chicks man, he sang, *No lassies or
birds...* Now we rattled out cool Steve
McQueen-like American words. I learned
to kiss with the mouth open. Got taught
the rules of push and shove in punk
melees as Lydon ranted at the Queen.
I was a man, I'd turned fourteen.
Me and beam-faced Midge under a rebel sun.

Next Saturday he never came.
Bang on one, the door got rattled-
like a gun. Phelps stood a good
five paces back. *It was Midge's
first milk run this morning*.
He spat at my feet.
*He's deed...He fell aff
thi float...Blood n' milk ran
doon thi Brediland hill
intae a drain...*
Dont weep McCafferty.
He never suffered any pain.

The Diary of Jimmy Neverleaves (extract)

Grae Cleugh

Prologue

I mean, the whole way it started, aw it was, I went intae my room an' I said I'm no' fuckin' comin' oot again. That's aw it was. I didnae think I was goin' tae change the world or nothin'. Guys like me don't change the world. It's other wans, guys wi' money an' voices, an' enough aboot them tae dae their ain thing. Who get tae be what they want tae. These are the wans make history. That's no' me. Definitely no' me. I'm just a kid fae a workin' class family. I'm naebdy. Absolutely naebdy. Least I was.

Day 1

Ma calls me. She's got the fry on. When I go in, the old man's sittin' pretendin' as usual. Shaved an' got his shirt 'n' tie on like he's goin' tae his work. He's no'. He's no' gone anywhere after his breakfast for four years now. Dressed for a part he's never playin' again, no' at his age. He got the push after the plant shut. Restructurin' they called it. Interestin' word. Implies some kinda rebuildin'. When actually it's a knockin' doon. A demolition. The old man's been bulldozed. He's pretendin' he hasnae. He sees me in my stubble 'n' jeans 'n' t-shirt an' canny believe I've a job an' he doesnae. Sat there readin' his paper, nearly shakin' wi' hate he is. For me, for everythin'.

Ma brings the fry over. I'm no' hungry.

'You eat that. That's a good breakfast,' the old man says.

My ma's been keepin' the peace, tryin' tae, aw this time, an' I think it's takin' its toll.

'Just eat what you can, Jimmy' she says, soundin' dead beat.

I eat some. Naebdy says nothin'.

This is what it's like every fuckin' mornin' now. The old man ragin'. Ready tae blow. Fair enough. Aye. But what gets me's this. He doesnae realise most o' his life he's had it made. House. Pension. Holidays. Job – well no' anymair, but had wan for a fuck of a lot longer than I'll ever huv. An' me? What've I got? Goin' tae get? None o' that.

So I went on the dole. Suits me. Ye give nothin', ye get nothin'. 'Cept fifty quid a week. I'm livin' the high life, aye. But 'ventually, they make you take somethin'. Some

shite job. I've done all sorts. Next eight weeks I'm stackin' shelves in Superbuy. This is what the old man's jealous o'. Eight weeks stackin' shelves for fuck aw. Fuckin' huv the job if he wants it. Cos Superbuy get me for nothin'. Aye, aw I get's the dole I was gettin' anyway. If I don't dae it, they dock my benefit. 'Freeboys' they call us. Cos o' some business-guy, Malone, went in tae a job centre wan day – 'Is this where I get my free boy?' he says. He's famous now.

S'no just the work. Lack o' anythin' decent. There's this brutal fuckin' toon. Fuckin' Westland. Used tae be awright. When I was a kid. Had the plant then. Tons o' shops. Happy families. Now? There's fuck aw. No' for yours truly, anyway. Nothin' tae dae, nae dosh an' nae bird. I did have a bird, Jacqueline. This is a while back. She worked as a bingo caller. She canned me, but. Said I lacked ambition. She was nice that way. Always talkin' me up. I told her she was wrang. I am ambitious. What for, she says tae me. Dunno yet, I said. She didnae like that. Told me so at length. Mair talker than listener was Jacqueline. 'Cept when the telly was on. Talent shows. She loved aw that shite. She was a good ride, right enough. Came like a fuckin' train. Still, I shoulda dumped her. Knew I could dae better. Beggars canny be choosers, but. So it's back tae online porn the now. Sexy teens. Aw that mince. Fuckin' ludicrous. Dunno why I bother. 'Cept it's there. Gets you aff, dun't it? Sometimes.

My best mate, Gerry, he joined up. Lunatic. Goin' tae get himsel' blown up in some fuckin' desert. I miss the cunt. He always loved the guns, but, did Gerry. When we were kids, I was fitba' mad. He always wanted to play soldiers. Fuckin' great when you're eight. He wanted to play fuckin' soldiers when we were fifteen! Mad about it, he was. We used tae play doon where they were buildin' the motorway, in the mud an' sand an' aw the crap. Good practice for the desert, I suppose. Likes a drink tae, Gerry. Course he does. We've had some fuckin' nights. I wish he was here. I wake up sometimes – nights when I sleep – wi' the terrible feelin' he's comin' back in a box. Right in the pit o' my gut I feel it. Then again, he didnae join up cos there's fuck aw here – I mean, there's fuck aw here awright – naw, he wanted tae be a soldier. Jesus. What scares the shite out o' me is I think he wants tae be a fuckin' hero.

'Yer goin' tae be late.' The old man interrupts my daydreamin' aboot seein' Gerry again, alive I hope.

'I'll no' be late' I say tae him.

'Make sure yer no' he says.

I look at him, the old man. My da'. Really look at him. I remember somethin' I huvnae thought aboot in a long time. When I was young, I was his blue-eyed boy. Ye can maybe imagine. Only son. Aw that. Nice-lookin' lad I was tae. Good at fitba'. No'

bad at school. Popular. His eyes used to fuckin' light up when they saw me. Proud. Happy. Thrilled tae be fuckin' alive and huv a son like yours truly, believe it or no'. I 'member wan Christmas he bought me my Raleigh Demon. I was six or somethin'. My first bike. Beautiful dark bottle green colour it was. Like the old racin' cars. He took me tae the park an' taught me how tae go on it. Wiped my tears an' cleaned me up every time I fell. Which was a lot. I know yer old man's supposed tae dae these things. It was mair than that wi' him an' me. I mean tae say, we really loved wan another. No' that we ever said it tae each other, no' two west of Scotland guys, even if wan was only a kid. But it was there awright. Solid as a piece o' fuckin' granite. That love. Somethin' else tae. I could tell even then. We were so fuckin' alike. Even looked like each other. Aye, he was whatever he was, forty-three and I was just a nipper but he used tae say that tae me an' I knew it was true – 'Yer like me when I was a boy, Jimmy.' He liked tae say that tae me. I loved it when he did. I sit here lookin' at him now aw these years later an' I realise somethin'. Somethin' awful. Dire. I'm twenty now. He's fifty-eight. An' we're the same again. Alike. We're both o' us fucked, so we are. For life.

The old man starts tae get restless again. Way he's turnin' the pages o' his paper. Rustlin' full o' fuckin' bile. Ma whips my mostly uneaten plate o' grub away before he says anythin'. Now he looks up at the kitchen clock. An' looks at me. This is my signal. Fuck off tae yer shite job you ungrateful shite. S'what I should do, aye. What I've always done. Every day I have tae, anyway. Instead, the day, somethin' happens. Gives. Inside me. I get up, go tae my room an' shut the door.

I know the old man's comin' in after me sooner or later. He's taken tae bargain' intae my room whenever he likes. When he's got a beef about whatever. Which is aw the time. He didnae used tae dae that. No' when he still had some fuckin' respect for me. He used tae knock wance upon a time. No' now, but. He's markin' his territory these days, comin' in when he feels like it – 'this is my hoose and don't you forget it' he's sayin' - even if it is my fuckin' room. I've been thinkin' aboot puttin' a lock or a bolt on the door but I know he'd never wear that. So what I dae the day is I stick my chest o' drawers under the door handle so ye canny turn it when ye try it. The only way tae get in now's tae break the fuckin' door doon.

I lie on my bed. Eyes wide an' listenin' tae nothin' but the rain ootside. My plan thus far, such as it is, is basic, simple. I'm no' goin' tae Superbuy the day. That's aw. They can phone the broo an' complain aboot me no' turnin' up if they want. They can dock my money. They can do what they fuckin' like. But I'm no' goin' in. No chance.

Few minutes later, there's the knockin' on my door fae the old man. So fuckin' predictable. Three times. Whack, whack, fuckin' whack. Nae words. Just his angry

poundin' tellin' me tae get my arse in gear. Then after a few minutes, there's the same again but louder. I lie there, sayin', daein' nothin'. No' long after this, I hear the handle movin'.

'What's wrang wi' this door?' he shouts through at me.

I reply simply, cooly that I've put my chest o' drawers in front o' it an' that before he asks, naw, I'm no' goin' in tae work the day.

He unleashes a tirade o' angry fuckin' abuse that would shame a docker on a Saturday night. I say nothin'. Which makes him mair angry an' he starts really bangin' on the door now. This gets my ma's attention, an' I hear her comin' an' her an' him arguin'. After a minute or two o' this, he finally backs off an' fucks off, away tae the kitchen I think, still grumblin' tae himsel', but.

'Are you sick, Jimmy?' ma says tae me through the door.

'No, I'm no' sick, ma" I say, 'I'm just no' goin in.'

'He's no' sick, he's just fuckin' lazy!' the old man shouts back through tae us.

'Shut up George an' go and get yersel' a cuppa tea' she shouts tae him, 'and don't use that language tae me again!' They have another go at each other in the hall now. He blames her for me daein' this, she blames him an' so on: I've been a recurrin' fuckin' theme o' their fights over the years, especially in relation to my many failures since leavin' school.

'Jimmy, you've got tae go in. They'll stop yer money' ma says.

'I know, ma. But I canny. No' the day' I say tae her.

There's a wee pause then.

'Awright love. Do ye want me tae phone in sick for ye?' she says.

'Dae what ye want, ma' I say tae her.

'I'll phone an' tell them' she says.

Which she does.

I know I should care aboot the money enough tae ring them masel'. I know that. But the day, naw, I just don't fuckin' care. Fuck them.

Ma chaps my door later, offers me a cuppa tea before she goes tae her work.

'No ta ma, I'm fine' I say.

'See ye after. Ye'll need tae make yer ain lunch' she says.

An' then I hear her get hersel' ready an' go. She works four half-days a week cleanin' at a bookies. She's the only breadwinner in this hoose now. Which is hard for the old man tae take, me tae, but what can ye dae? I gie her my benefit money, right enough, aye, the whole weekly fifty quid fuckin' fortune they tell ye ye should be so fuckin' grateful for. I make do wi' what I can earn on the side, cash-in-hand, like. Ma

still tries tae gie me the odd tenner tae get masel' a pint or whatever, but I never take it. I don't gie her enough as it is. I dae the fuckin' best I can, but.

No' long after ma shoots aff, I hear the old man head oot. He does this every day. Sometimes wonder where he goes aw the time. I used tae think the bookies or the pub, but he doesnae have the dosh for a bet or a drink now. Maybe the odd pint. Ma says he goes for long walks or somethin'. Tae think. Be by himsel'. Or just kill time maybe. I've asked him if he wants company, ye know, if it's a day I'm here, no' workin', but he never does. Expect he likes bein' on his own sometimes. As I say, we're alike, me an' him.

Now they're both o' them oot the hoose, I can leave my room if I want. Dae what I like roon' here. But I don't. S'the weirdest thing. Aw day the day, I hardly move an inch. I don't make masel' a lunch or a cuppa tea or anythin'. Later, when ma comes back – the old man makes it home before her but doesnae come knockin' at my door – I don't come oot tae have my dinner or anythin'. Fact is, I don't dae fuck aw. Nothin'. Aw day. Nae telly, nae internet, music. I don't even read, which I dae a lot normally. It's like I'm paralysed or somethin', an' no' just an arm or a leg or even my bottom half or somethin', but aw o' me. Body and soul. Utterly fuckin' paralysed. Canny dae anythin'. I think aboot stuff I s'ppose, ye know, some way tae get oot o' aw this, but I don't come up wi' anythin'. Any ideas. I mean, what can ye dae?

So I stay here in my room. Don't leave wance. I talk tae ma through the door an' she's a bit worried aboot me. But I won't leave my fuckin' room. No' tae eat, drink, piss, shite, nothin'. Which is easier than ye think. Cos if nothin's goin' in, nothin' comin' oot.

Here, in my room, by masel', aw day, I find somethin' oot that surprises me. It feels awright bein' in here like this. Good, even. 'Magine.

The Gifts of Silence

P.J. Caffrey

Here are the subtlest, most sacred
gifts of all our silences. Like every song
not written but spread amongst the
stelli-scripture of the stars or smoothed
across the moody oceans of all our un-spoken
fears.

They comb back winter trees.
They untangle lengths of August's
coiled wheat and start across the quiet hours
of our thought's like lightning bursts of pure and
sudden love.

These silences are where we go for ripening,
in-between the spaces of what we choose to say
as sudden presentations of our souls. They cut
new outlines for the clean sharp moon.

They airbrush cleverly the ever pondered skies.
They come like April's first born scent of the honey rose.
First whiff of the heart's bloom. They stare from that fresh
conviction in your eyes that has me kiss them.

The Seventeenth Year

Pauline Lynch

Easy in the middle pews,
I watched the principle mourners
fill the dreaded front seats,
their weight almost capsizing
the creaking ship,

but she stayed straight,
buoyed on faith
and faith alone. Duty dictated
my presence; this ship
and your uncle
meant nothing to me.

Flanked by distant family
I would sing this man out, goddamit.
I would raise my voice and sing the coffin out
on a sea of holy semi-quavers
set sail on a Catholic wind
to Heaven, to Hell, to Nowhere.

I would sing, I would
sing, I would
sing him out

but I was a dormant volcano,
flash-ignited.
I could not sing,
and my tears were lava
poured for the love of you.

The Drunk

Björn Halldórsson

From the moment he came in I could tell he was going to be trouble. If this had been my bar I would have booted him right back out, but the barman just served up his drink without even a raised eyebrow.

This was a nice bar, not fancy but comfortable, with a warm atmosphere, done up in the style of a 50s diner. The large, kidney-shaped bar counter dominated the room but along the walls there were booths and tables lit with misshapen candles in coloured glass jars. The ceiling lights shone a dull yellow through thick velvet screens and there were no windows. Down here we were below street level and if you stepped outside after a few in the afternoon the evening sun would blind you, like a kid coming out of a three o'clock movie. It was a popular spot, sought out by an older crowd that had grown tired of the clubbing scene and the roar and ruckus of Friday nights. Here they opened early and shut early, and if they bothered to play any music at all it was something soft in the background. I'd been coming here for a good long while. Not long enough or often enough to know the staff by name or call myself a regular, but enough that I exchanged a nod with them. I didn't like anyone coming in who didn't get the vibe of the place.

I could smell the guy already. That apothecary smell of an alcoholic's sweat, a dying liver preserved in spirits. Although there were people in most of the booths along the wall it was just the two of us sitting at the bar. I always take a book with me and sit at the bar when I go out alone. It lets people know that you're open for conversation while at the same time you don't look like you're trying to get anywhere, like with girls. Besides, I don't like taking up a whole table just by myself.

From the state of his clothes I could tell he was on his way down but not all the way there yet. He looked like a bobber, floating up from the bottom of the barrel every few years. Cleaning up for long enough to shave and give his family some hope, then falling right back in. Weekend alcoholics call it a bender when you stay drunk for a few days straight. Lifers call it a bender when you sober up for a few months.

'What are you reading there?'

His halitosis wafted over me, bitter and ancient. When you stop taking care of yourself the first thing to go is the teeth. He was giving me the boozier-stare, eyes fixed in their sockets while the head rolled around them.

'Don't want to talk to you, man. Just want to read my book,' I said, laying down the law. He didn't seem particularly affronted but kept staring at me.

The thing I've never understood about drunks is why they always want to talk to someone who doesn't want to talk to them. I've got no patience for it. An old boss of mine used to say that when a drunk starts bothering you at a bar, forty percent of people will talk to him, hoping he'll go away, thirty percent will ignore him or move to another table, twenty percent will chalk it up as an experience and chitchat with him, and ten percent will immediately tell him to fuck off. 'Either way,' he'd say, 'Nobody really wants to talk to a drunk. There ain't nothing worse than a chatty drunk.'

It was harder and harder to focus on my book. I could feel him looking at me but I wasn't going to give him a window. Finally I glanced at him from the corner of my eye but he seemed to have given up and was playing with his drink instead. He'd asked for a glass of water and between sips he would make an effort to splash drops of it from his fingers into the whisky. 'Makes the malt come alive,' a friend of mine used to say. Soon enough this guy would be in a doorway somewhere, necking Bell's from a plastic bottle, but for now he could still dabble dirty fingernails into 10-year-old Macallan.

His suit jacket was blue with pinstripes. There was a stain on the cuff. When he turned his head away from me I could see that the collar of his shirt was yellow with old sweat at the nape of his neck. He scanned the room, searching for someone with more patience than myself. The bartender was staying well out of the way, polishing glasses at the other end of the bar, probably regretting having served the old guy. I was trying to get back into my book but it wasn't happening. I held it open on the table in front of me but kept my eye on the drunk and saw his face crease into a smile. He'd seen a target.

In the booth closest to us was a group of university kids. First-years for my money, three boys and a girl. The boys were rather dull-looking but the girl was pretty. Olive skin and straight black hair cut into a fringe, fierce eyes behind black-framed glasses. The type of smart girl who'd have your heart for breakfast and still have you begging her to take the liver for lunch. The boys were all pandering to her, shocked to find her in their midst and willing to humiliate and stomp each other into the ground to get her attention. The four of them must have been doing some group assignment because they all had a copy of the same book. The girl's copy was littered with scribbled post-its; the pages covered in notes and brightly highlighted sentences. The boys' copies hardly had a break in their spines. She was lecturing them about something, and it was almost comical watching their faces as they tried to look contemplative.

‘It’s not about the money,’ she was saying. ‘Even though Raskolnikov tries to convince himself that he’s going to do good with the money, that’s not what tips the scales and makes him go through with it.’

While she talked her fingers flipped back and forth through the pages but she never looked down at the book.

‘What really swings it for him is that he convinces himself that Miss Ivanovna is a parasite on society, something almost sub-human that he is justified in ridding the world of. That’s why he kills her.’

She pronounced the names of the characters with deliberate precision, the flow of words slowing down while she ran through the unfamiliar arrangement of letters. The boys nodded eagerly as if to say: ‘That’s just what I was thinking!’ They were sitting on one side of the booth and the girl had a whole bench to herself. Squeezed in together like that, nodding in unison like a doe-eyed Cerberus, hoping for a bone.

‘Raskolnikov never had any freedom.’

The old guy had found his entry point. ‘His whole deal was that he believed himself predestined to kill the pawnbroker. He never had any freedom because he didn’t think he was capable of doing anything but kill her.’

The kids looked up, the boys frowning at the interruption but the girl looking quizzical behind her geek frames.

‘Yes,’ she finally answered, ‘but that’s what gave him the freedom to do it. By convincing himself that he had no choice he was able to go through with the crime that he already intended to commit. He was just fooling himself about the motive.’

The drunk was now turned all the way around on his stool, with legs crossed and one elbow resting on the bar behind him. He was smirking.

‘Freedom is the ability to choose. If he believed himself incapable of not killing Miss Ivanovna, then he had no choice and therefore no freedom.’

On their side of the table the three boys were collectively trying to turn the old guy to stone with their eyes, but the girl’s expression hadn’t softened any.

‘Obviously he was only trying to make things easier on himself’ she said. ‘Justifying his actions by convincing himself that he was predestined to commit the murder, when really it was his own will that chose to do it.’

The drunk sipped his whisky and then swirled the rest of the drink around the bottom of the glass, playing the thing out for all it was worth, taking his time to answer. He put the glass down and laced his fingers together on his knee.

‘If he had convinced himself that he had no choice, then he really had no choice. If he truly believed in his own fate, then there was no other option available to him but to follow through with it.’

I couldn't sit back any longer. I hate seeing people bullied into a conversation like this and the kids were obviously too polite to tell him straight out that they didn't want to talk to him. I closed my book and laid it aside.

'Is this guy bothering you?' I asked the girl and then turned to the drunk, 'Stop bothering those kids man, just leave them be. They don't want to talk to you.'

All eyes fell on me. Even some of the people in the other booths had stopped talking and were looking at me. I felt my ears flush red; maybe my voice had been a little louder than I meant it to be. After a moment the girl spoke for the group, sizing me up with a cold stare.

'He's not bothering us, we're having a conversation. Why don't you just mind your own business?'

She was obviously a twenty percent type. On their side of the table the boys gave another hearty nod and the drunk smiled to himself and dabbled more water into his glass.

'Hey, I was just trying to help,' I said. 'It looked like he was bothering you guys. Just tell him to fuck off, you don't have to talk to him.' The drunk didn't say anything but that smirk of his was getting on my nerves. 'What's so funny?'

'Nothing.' He said, face suddenly concerned and serious, hamming it up. 'I didn't mean to cause any trouble here.' He turned to the kids and said gravely, 'If this man is right and I'm bothering you then I apologise and will be on my way.'

'No, please stay,' said the girl and then locked those piercing eyes on me again. 'Please leave us alone now. We're trying to have a conversation.'

'Don't you talk to me like that!' I was up out of my chair and I could feel that the flush had spread all over my face. 'I was just trying to help you out!'

The bartender was out in front of the bar like a shot, he must have been watching us the entire time.

'Alright man,' he said, 'you have to leave now. I can't have you bothering the other customers.'

I turned to him, ready to speak my piece, but I stumbled just a little bit. He grabbed me by the shoulder and said, 'Friend, you've had enough. Come along now.'

'Don't fucking touch me!' I yanked free of his grip. He backed off, arms raised like he was trying to calm me down, but still ready to step in if I didn't leave on my own. I downed my drink and grabbed my book. The kids watched my movements closely, looking scared, but the drunk was smirking again, enjoying himself. The people in the other booths looked away when I passed them, pretending that they hadn't been watching the entire scene.

On my way to the door I realised that I'd never come here again. The drunk had seen to that. As the door closed behind me I heard the buzz of conversation start again. I hadn't noticed how quiet it had become.

I had to wait in the alley opposite the bar for a good long while before the drunk finally left. My book was mangled in my hands, twisted and rolled between my fingers. When he exited and started ambling down the street I stuck the book in my inside pocket and followed at a distance. His steps were a bit shaky but he wasn't all over the pavement.

After walking some length he took a short cut through an alley and I upped my pace. When I turned the corner I saw that he was pissing up against the wall next to a skip, the stream running between his legs. I walked right up to him.

'You think you're pretty funny?' I said.

He turned his head around, surprised, still pissing.

'Pardon?' he said.

I grabbed his head and slammed his forehead into the wall. I may have done this several times. At some point he was on the ground and I kicked him where he lay, curled up into the corner between the skip and the wall. I think I stomped on his head too before I left him, afterwards my shoes were covered in blood and urine. I had to throw them out.

I don't know what happened to him, whether he lived or died. There was nothing in the papers about it over the next few days. I never went back to that bar again.

An Insult To The Brain (extract)

Maggie Graham

Neither day nor night in the artificial light in which I wake.

Close your eyes.

Woman with a history of smoking and migraine.

Right sensorimotor disturbance.

Agraphia

Dysphasia

Visual disturbance

MRI Brain confirmed recent infarct.

Close your eyes

Vagabond delirium

Speech slurred and vision blurred.

In the tomb of the brain's room, wound.

Close your eyes.

Every bed is narrow

I hunch here stunned and mute.

Empty team of specialists. How tall, like a race of trees.

‘Can you say, the future of Scottish football is secure?’

What has become of me?

I do not speak loosely.

Speaking limb is stilled.

Tongue stuck in my jaw.

Close your eyes, my darling.

Ah, the dead will have a voice. What about the pricey pain, little mother of silence? It hurts to be murdered.

Close your eyes and think about nice things. Roses and chocolate and shooting stars and fairgrounds and candy floss and church bells. And me, do you ever think about me?

Anywhere but here.

Stationery shop on Boulevard St Germain, cigarettes and metro tickets on the graves of De Beauvoir and Sartre. Droplets of water on the flowers on Beckett’s grave. Picasso museum, Bistro in the Marie with the transvestites and grumpy waitress. Patchen Place, Djuna Barnes McDougal street, Bleecker street, Moma. Jamaica Bay, Abingdon Square, White Horse Tavern. Magnolia bakery, Biography Books, St Pauls, the V&A, Globe theatre, South Bank, Somerset House, Lee Miller’s photographs, Picasso, Peonies, Chinese slippers, green tea, Champagne, scallops with bacon and leeks, crab, lobster, birthday lunch at Rogano’s, Christmas Eve, figs, triple milled soap, lanes, mews, the British library, the Courtauld, cognac, Maker’s Mark, Barbara Hepworth, Jackson Pollock, Patti Smith, Erik Satie, Mahler Symphonies, The Pursuit of Love, To the Lighthouse, the Tub, Max Richter’s Blue Notebooks, Loba, Fast Speaking Woman, Pieces Of A Song, sitting on my doorstep with the first coffee and cigarette of the day, parties, picnics in Luxembourg Gardens with wine in a chilled

sleeve and those nice metal seats, afternoons alone at the Film Theatre, Whistle Down The Wind. Street markets, farmers markets, straw bags, heather honey. Lunar Baedeker, Bob Marley, Lotte Lenya, bright blues and white of Crete, metsez in the village squares, siestas, apricots from the tree, Ulysses, Sylvia Beech, Alice B. Toklas, Julia Child, The Ladies Almanac and I Could Never Be lonely Without a Husband.....Berthe Morisot, just the very idea of Duncan Grant, embroidery silks, pinking shears.....black polo necks, comfort fit jeans, Keith Richards, Collage, Prosecco, Emily Brontë, Cranford, Hyndland Books, Saint Chappell, Judy Chicago, Little Italy, sheets blowing on the line, Scotia Bar, Mina Loy.....bamboo knitting needles, baby cashmere.....Jamieson's yarn from the Shetlands, Lucy Cavendish, Christ, A Room of One's Own.

Still here.

Behold. A stream of phantasms to save me.

Befriending the furies. A half dozen of her, walking in a circle of magic, contorting wool around their needles, green, white, mauve or violet.

Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf, Anne Waldman, Diane Di Prima.

(Three Modernists novelists, one Post-Impressionist and two Beats) What more could a girl ask for?

Hour of complicated knitting. Bring me the firmness of her hand; it can make black roses, cast a charm over vacant hours.

Diane says: Rending red velvet.

Vanessa says: Such a rich tapestry.

Mina says: Revolving in the enervating dusk.

Virginia says: Rainbows and Bells.

Djuna says: Sacred streetwalker.

Anne says: Know yourself, yourself.

Alice says: Hello Grandma.

Oh, my pretty one. Alice is five, pigtailed and pinafores for school, she is undressing her doll.

Alice says, remember, Grandma, when you were a child, you liked to take your dolls pants off so that everyone could see their vaginas and your mummy was forever putting them back on. Wasn't that silly, not as if they could catch cold. My dolls are naked most of the time, and nobody minds. And you had a black dolly with a turban and gold earrings and your daddy called her a darkie and your mummy didn't like that either. My mummy certainly wouldn't. And you had a Native American doll and even you called her a squaw and the baby on her back a wee papoose. Isn't that funny! You had lots of dolls, didn't you, And toy brushes and mops, and even a washing machine. Now who would want a washing machine. Although Bathsheba likes yours, doesn't she; loves to watch the spin cycle. I don't have a washing machine but I have a sewing kit and a knitting bag from Cath Kidston. And my own little baking tins and my apron. Imagine Grandma, all those books you read and wrote and I, your only granddaughter has all the domestic virtues in miniature. Your mummy would have loved me. Not that you don't. I know that you do, it's just that you will kidnap me, put me in jeans and take me on adventures. I so enjoyed our last adventure to the Geology Museum and your friend Verity's bookshop, Wasn't it kind of her to give me free books? But I didn't like it when she kissed me; her breath smelt funny. Remember your mummy's breath smelt funny, a lot of mummies did in the olden days. And sometimes your mummy wasn't even dressed when you got home from school. My mummy collects me from school and if she's too busy at the shop, then you do. But we're not terribly sure if you'll be able to do that now. Oh, dearie me. That's what your Grandma used to say. I've noticed you saying 'oh dear' quite a lot lately. Do you know that you do that? It gets right on my Mummy's nerves. I'm not supposed to tell you that. But not Daddy's. Daddy loves you, but that's because you're his Mummy, and you brought him up all by yourself. And you're very proud of him because he's a brilliant musician. And you really shouldn't worry that we'll move to Stockholm to be near Grandpa, because Mummy says it would be fucking freezing and too bloody expensive And anyway, who would look after me. I couldn't be left all by myself the way you were half the time.

Close your eyes and think about...

Vanessa says: A grandchild! How delightful.

Alice says: Are you spossed to have so many visitors, Grandma? Wouldn't it be lovely if it were just you and me? I'm not terribly sure about these old ladies, and that ones breath smells like Verity's.

Djuna says: Precocious child. Did no one tell you that it's rude to point?

Alice says: Not that I can recall, no.

Virginia says: Little girl, shush.

Alice's clever clear little brow darkens, boding an impending squall.

Why must I shush?

Virginia says: Because your grandmother has been ill and must rest.

Alice says: Oh, very well then.

Alice sleeps, clutching her doll. I look at her and I love her. I held her the day she was born. Nine pounds two, healthy heft for my arms.

Vanessa says: One of the worst passions, though. I always wanted Virginia to write a book about the maternal instinct, so animal and remorseless.

Virginia says: How could I? I was barren and mad.

Vanessa says nothing.

Virginia covers the sleeping child, strokes her bonny brown hair.

Although, Virginia says, I often wondered what.....to have a little chatterbox like her, to hold my hand, skipping and dance along the pavement. To splash in the sea, to hear her sing, watch her dance. To hold, wrapped in a warmed towel after her bath. To read her stories, tuck her in, kiss her goodnight. To knit mittens and brightly-coloured scarves...

Diane (knitting something a mile long in primary colours) says...

Yeah. Never liked those namby pamby pastels they insist on sticking kids in. But yr better off knitting for them than giving over yr life to them. Spending yr life in service to them. It's ok to love them more than life but not more than poetry, not more than prose, not more than yr art. You gotta love yr art.

Listen sweetheart. Yr gonna be okay. You have leave to stop, you have leave to get sick, you have leave to get strung out, you have leave to get mad, you have leave to go vagabonding, you have leave to disappear, you have leave to spend time with all of us. You have leave to be with your people, your tribe. You have leave to stop. D'ya hear me. Just stop! Fix what needs your heart or your hand. And you can come back. You might be even better than before. Because, what won't stop, what will never stop, is the spirit and the voices coming through you.

They say it was smoking caused your stroke. Maybe. Maybe t'was stress. How often you been stressed out, baby? Teaching, setting up groups and newsletters and magazines and federations'. Fuck federations, I say. And guilt. That'll do it every time. Wrong kinda guilt too. Caring what others think. Even the dead.

No more of that. Pick up your needles and your pretty yarn and knit, just keep knitting till it covers your feet, that'll keep you warm on cold nights.

Virginia (knitting a moss green garment, for Leonard?) says: I could have insisted.....But don't, whatever you do, let them prescribe glasses of milk and milk puddings. It will do nothing whatsoever for your health, and will make you fat. I resembled nothing more than a prize heifer on that regime. When they eventually bring you books, pen and paper, do not permit them to be taken away. That is the most absurd prescription ever for an intelligent woman. In the meantime, try not to look at your fellow patients; that will only depress you. Look out of the window instead, Compose clouds or a sea.

I would not know how to begin. Who will tell me who I am now?

Anne Waldman, silk and cashmere scarves draped dramatically steps forward and declaims.

Woman who screams as she goes.

Locked in woman
Dysphasia woman
Infarct woman
Agraphia woman

Woman who clears as she goes

Teacher woman
Drinking woman
Dancing woman

Woman who tears as she goes.

Soul woman
Poetic woman
Sad woman

Woman who strokes as she goes

Woman/stroke/woman

Virginia says, Gracious.

Anne says, WHAT?

Who will tell? Who will try? Tears. She said tears.

Virginia says, Oh my dear. We have overtired you; you are positively blanched with fatigue. Rest now, before the medical men descend again to tell you how wrong you are. Close your eyes. Rest in the quiet dark. Close your eyes and imagine blue skies, calm seas, Bougainvillea, mountain goats, cold rose wine..... you can see the words, can't you.....so far from this place.....just imagine.....and when you wake you must tell me if you still dream. I'd be fascinated to know.....

And so they all continue knitting over the sleeping woman in an acute stroke unit in the City of Glasgow.

Diane knits candy stripes and remembers the long black scarf she knitted for her friend Freddy in a Manhattan maternity hospital. And how staff and patients alike condemned her.

Mina twists shreds of silver foil through her yarn, knits a fantastic assemblage on circular needles, and plots how to spirit the woman away from this place of torture.

Djuna stabs needle into yarn and suffers remembering suffering prettily in Paris.

Anne knits a row from here and a stitch from everywhere and determines to invite this woman to take the Emily Dickinson chair of silent scribbling at the Jack Kerouac school of disembodied poetics.

Vanessa knits waves of blue, green and stone, thinking of her portrait of Virginia knitting in her armchair. Surely one of her best.

Virginia continues her moss green pullover and remembers her mother, sitting on the doorstep knitting, whilst her children played cricket.

Down into the depths of sleep. I cannot be reached; I've drawn a ring around me. Knotting the string that ties those moments together. I dream of the weaving, the woman who sits at her loom. The body, my body that hangs there feminine. Writing down the white words of the swans, melding marvels. Was it a book or was it a dream? I am the thought in the room without mirrors.

White Bird's Homage to its Own

Marion McCready

(after *Patti Smith* 1979, by Robert Mapplethorpe)

Among gossamer,
bird eye, beak and wing.
A tree, dying to be your perch,
lick of leaf-veins at your elbow.
Bird-nest hair.
What season, what wind
has undone your coiffured smile?
Eggshell bones
in your hollow wrists,
tubular body, caught,
ringed. He,
the urban bird-catcher,
you, the piebald dream.
You, the piebald dream.
The urban bird-catcher,
ringed. He,
tubular body, caught,
in your hollow wrists.
Eggshell bones
have undone your coiffured smile.
What season, what wind?
Bird-nest hair,
lick of leaf-veins at your elbow.
A tree, dying to be your perch.
Bird eye, beak and wing
among gossamer.

Brambles

Marion McCready

a strangle of them cling to the gate
then they come towards us multiplying in the air

creeping up the street the fragile weight
of these hooded Furies

are everywhere
like postcards from the past

death fruits bloods of Christ
the unpicked ones

harden on their arching canes

all late summer
we fed on the purple tears

as our hearts gave way
to cardiac arrest

Ripped and Holy

Ewan Gault

Other than a drunk at St George's Cross, who laboured under the belief that the cars needed his help in understanding the traffic lights, most pedestrians kept well out the way. I revved my engine as the man removed his shirt and presented it like a matador to the first car. Horns he wanted and horns he should have got. But the car backed away and the more he stamped and shook his shirt the more it tried to skulk silently off. And who can blame it? For his shirt wasn't red so much as pink and wasn't even a shirt but a sleeveless vest that struck me as hugely inappropriate for the time of year.

Eventually he managed to land a blow on a bus full of light. But it wasn't telling, so our friend whipped off his belt and chased the bus, lashing at it with chunky buckle blows. I say our friend for I knew the matador as a boy called Molloy. He kept running after the bus swinging his belt but it was now out of reach and I doubted he was ever going to catch it. Soon enough his trousers let him down and he fell with a crunch to the ground.

The lights turned green and I accelerated off. Molloy was still on the road with his jeans round his ankles. For a moment I considered stopping. There were traffic cones around a burst water pipe that I thought could be of use. But I had a delivery to do and didn't much like this Molloy character anyway. At parties he always gripped my hand with the kind of gravitas that could win Presidential elections whilst shouting, 'You and me Stitch, you and me all the way.' Like a lot of other people he suffered the illusion that I understood him, that I liked and might even help him.

A scenester type girl standing on the pavement was waving at me in a sarcastic manner, like a hitchhiker that had given up hope. I felt my heart crunch with a write-off panic, thinking it was Hannah. She's about the only reason I keep at this job, tooling about town, a danger to lollipop men when I see a face like hers. It wasn't Hannah but I returned the girl's greeting and realised she was digging the music. I slowed down, opening my window, but remembered at the last that the tape player was broken beyond hope and that I'd been twitching to the siren's wails and 4/4 beat of the car's right back wheel.

Suddenly, I realised that if I could see Hannah and say all the words that were gridlocked inside my head then everything would be alright. Ripping the receipt from the bag I understood that I had another 20 minutes to make the delivery. I turned off St George's road and pulled up outside Gowser's. If she was anywhere, she'd be here.

I switched the engine off and looked out at the darkness. Not for the first time that night I had been driving without any lights.

I pressed a buzzer but wasn't answered so began pressing all the others. Eventually a voice snapped, 'Who is it?'

'Stitch,' I shouted. This seemed to do the trick, and after a few more words and the sound of someone falling from a great height I was flying up the stairs.

Gowser looked like he was wearing make-up. Actually I really hoped he was wearing make-up 'cause no one's face should look like that.

'How's it going?' I shouted, like he was deaf or a foreigner.

'Well, we're one pill short of a picnic.'

'And your eyes?'

'Not worth the paper they're written on....But It's good to see you man.' He got on his tiptoes and kissed me wet on the lips, his stubble crawling all over my chin.

I found a bit of carpet next to Nicky who smiled at me as if I was a clever cat.

'You smell of dough and cheese,' she said.

'Well, you smell of ashtrays and poppers.'

'Are you working?' I nodded and she clapped her hands. Everyone seemed very beautiful and together. Some of the very worst moments of my life had happened in this flat but still I came back. Everyone did. Some kamikaze love kept blowing us here. I felt the weariness of cutting about town, maps that didn't make sense, and the lurching somersault compass suddenly leave me.

'Seen Hannah at all?' I picked fluff from the carpet, trying to sound disinterested.

'Nah, not for a bit, Johnny was here though, he left this,' Nicky said waving a wrap of cocaine in my face. 'Want some?'

There was hardly any left so I flattened out the paper to get at the creases. The wrap was made from a magazine picture of Kate Moss. I looked at the squares and triangles of the paper and thought of the panels on stain glass windows. The cocaine was all but finished so I lifted her silent sneering pout to my mouth. My tongue felt a little numb after this and spent the next few minutes exploring the backs of my teeth as if I'd just come from the dentist.

'Never says a thing, that's her secret,' said Nicky, looking at the wrap.

'Course she doesn't,' snorted Gowser, 'she's a picture in a magazine.'

'I know.'

'Well try telling that moon cat.' He pointed at Gordie and started off on some story about having to kick a toilet door down because Gordie had been deep in

conversation with an FHM front cover. 'Comes out mumbling shite about how Jordan's actually a nice person.'

'She's not called Jordan anymore,' Nicky explained, 'she's got her own name now.'

I nodded but in truth was much more interested in watching Frenchie who was holding a frozen chip to Gordie's face.

I padded over and Gordie attempted a smile but was prevented by his horribly swollen top lip. 'You alright, Captain?'

'Right as rain, just an allergic reaction,' he shrugged, looking embarrassed. Frenchie started pawing at me and rambling on about how she hoped I'd have a good year and that happiness was in store for me but I told her to be quiet because we had done with all that.

She held another frozen chip to the lip but Gordie brushed her hand away.

'I'm alright, it's happened before.'

'I think you should take him to hospital.' Gordie's face was the colour of three-day-old porridge. 'His tongue and throat could start swelling,' said Frenchie, with an air of professionalism. 'The frozen chips appear to have had no effect.'

We were all agreed and I found myself helping Gordie into the corridor. I accidentally opened a door thinking it was the way out but stumbled into a bedroom with a couple asleep in a bed and a pair of long legs in laddered green tights sticking out from beneath the curtains. They were playing strange music that seemed to have come from a time before.

'Fucking ket-heads,' hissed Gowser. I agreed but wasn't sure if he was angry about their drug habits or choice of music. The track changed and I heard Jimmy Nail singing 'On this night of a thousand stars,' and realised they were listening to the Evita soundtrack.

'Fuck's sake,' I murmured to Gowser, who twisted his face and said.

'I know.'

At the door Gowser started unwrapping some cling-film and handed me a tab of acid. 'This should help you on your way.' I wanted to salute like some pilot sent off on a mission but by then he had closed the door and was gone.

Out on the street I looked at my Pizza Hut car, wondering why I hadn't realised that the red object on the company's logo resembled nothing so much as a UFO. I felt sure that a horrible amount of time had been lost but my watch told me I still had five minutes to make the delivery.

Gordie rested against the car with his head tilted and said, 'It looks like snow.' I took a squint at the first few snowflakes twinkling and frozen on the far off window of the night.

Soon we were driving, this time with headlights. The pizzas had caused the windscreen to steam up however, so they were of little use to me, but at least meant that others could see us. Everything was going well so I pasted the tab of acid to the roof of my mouth. Gordie kept mumbling that this was no laughing matter.

'Who's laughing?' I shouted, but the driving was getting more difficult with the poor visibility and Gordie reaching out to touch my hair whilst whispering;

'If it wasn't for you, feather-brain, we would have got away with it.'

'Stop,' I snapped, but my hair held an endless fascination for him and soon enough it did for me too. I have oddly fine hair, much like a baby's, but it had never felt like this. I kept rushing my fingers through it to find Gordie's fingers already there.

'It's much nicer than normal.'

'Yes.' Then I remembered, showering this morning and washing my hair again and again with this incredible mint shampoo that made my scalp tingle. 'Magic shampoo,' I gasped.

The Road Ahead was closed. It was the only road leading to Spiers Wharf but there were yellow signs that said Diversion. We followed them to a series of dead-ends in an abandoned industrial estate. It felt like a trap. 'Where's my Pizza Hut cap? I need it to keep my head together.' Gordie was saying nothing for he had slipped into a shivery sleep, his hands wrapped round himself like a straitjacket.

I stared at the map but the streets kept drifting this way and that like fronds of coral at the bottom of the ocean. After some searching breaths I got out of the car, slipped through a gap in the fence and crawled up a bank, my fingers rich with mud.

The arm in charge of carrying the delivery bag was tiring so I swapped it for the other one, all the time making sure that the pizzas were kept flat. I was doing well, my clever feet having found a concrete path. But I was being followed. After hiding in a bush for a couple of minutes I realised my assailant was not a man but a fox. I am no lover of foxes, but this fox seemed more urbane than urban and approached me with an easy air. I was reminded of the 'Fantastic Mr Fox' by Roald Dahl in which the fox drinks cider and describes it as tasting like rainbows.

Curious to know this creature's thoughts I unpacked one of the pizzas and presented my friend with a slice. He sniffed it, licked it, then scampered off into the dark - another traditionalist, incapable of accepting pineapple's place in the family of pizza toppings.

I rushed ever on and was soon at the building when I saw with a sickening lurch that there was a canal and I was on the wrong side of it. Only now do I wonder what a canal was doing at that height but the Victorians were nothing if not ingenious. A swan floated among moonlight and shopping trolleys coming up for air. It ferried towards my bank and for a moment I thought I was saved but it was too small. Fortunately I spied a bridge and understood that this would be a better way of crossing.

I found the correct buzzer and was soon announcing my name and profession. Using the lift seemed like a way to save time, but I hadn't considered the damage that standing in front of a mirrored wall might do. My reflection reminded me of doing self-portraits in primary school; the teacher telling me that the eyes were all wrong. I tore my stare away, made the delivery without any further adventures and legged it back to the gap in the fence – but the car was no longer there. I started walking. It was all over. Strangely this did not seem such a bad thing. I had never felt that I was made to deliver and it was only a matter of time before my employers made this discovery as well. Then I saw it at the T-junction, the bonnet crumpled by a streetlight. Gordie was standing next to the vehicle drumming his fingers on the roof.

'Sorry Stitch. You were taking ages. I really wanted to get to hospital.'

I found myself saying, 'It's not your fault,' when clearly it was. He looked scared and so I guess did I. 'We're fucked.'

'We could burn it.'

'Would that help?'

'You could say you saw some neds stealing it. Go back all confused. The police find the burnt out car. Who's to know?' I scratched my head, sure that there must be a flaw in the plan.

'How'll we do it?' Gordie waved a clipper and bottle of poppers in front of me. There was a look in his eyes which made me suspect he had planned things to turn out like this all along.

We splashed what was left of the poppers over the driver's seat but the clipper failed to light. Eventually the seat caught and we leapt back. The flames shimmered, green, faint, invisible, out.

'That's it?'

The material on the seat was a molten black stubble. My Pizza Hut cap slipped off as I turned on Gordie. 'Well that was some plan.' It was hard to tell if he was grinning. 'We'll go to jail for this.'

He shook his head. 'Calm down Stitch, it's perfect.'

'How's it perfect?'

He pointed at the charred seat, my green Level 2 Training hat sitting innocently on it, and with great sadness said, 'Spontaneous combustion. That's why you crashed the car.'

'It happened to you at the wheel,' he explained as we walked towards Garscube Road.

The streets were deserted and it took us ages to get a taxi. The driver looked like he had been awake as long as us and seemed in no need of conversation. I kept trying to close my eyes but firework displays were going off in the front of my head. Gordie started squeezing my hand:

'Will they put those big electric shock things on my chest?' His mouth and the words coming out of it seemed all out of sync, like some badly dubbed movie.

'On your chest? They'll stick them on the side of your head.'

I tried to ignore him. But he was crushing my fingers and making stupid wheezing sounds. 'Stop rolling your eyes,' I cried.

'What eyes, what rolling,' he replied in a voice you would only use when talking to an invisible friend. As we hurtled down St George's Road I saw the whole Mad Squad sitting on a pile of earth near the burst water pipe. They were stripped down to their underwear, dancing about in the freezing water, sunglasses on their face, straw hats on their heads.

An ambulance sped towards them, its siren lassoing around itself, striking fear into my heart.

'Fucking space cadets,' said the taxi driver.

I murmured an agreement whilst fingers pirouetted and salsaed up and down my knees. We were suddenly at the hospital's entrance. I paid for the journey from my float and we slithered through the door, over a carpet that seemed to be held together with blackened chewing gum and congealed blood.

We stood in line.

'Stop flapping your arms and stand like a normal man. Look at me. I can stand like a normal man. Just do that or we'll be in trouble.' At reception a young lady asked what Gordie had taken.

'Pills, Ketamine and a little coke,' he listed, like he'd been asked what he'd eaten at a particularly fancy restaurant.

'And your friend, what's wrong with him?'

'Oh, he spontaneously combusted twenty minutes ago.'

The woman tutted and looked at me as if I was to blame.

We sat for a while on the cold hospital floor, next to a Christmas tree, whose fairy lights flashed like a warning. Families with screaming children had colonised

whole rows of seats. There was a commotion at the door as a trolley was pulled in, a flurry of white jackets. The other patients craned their necks. I saw two long legs, green tights that were ripped and holy. I looked at the girl under the oxygen mask, her closed white lids heavy as the moon. It was Hannah.

For some reason I thought the speckled floor could explain things. In the midst of all the carnage something had gone horribly, crushingly wrong. Gordie's name was called through the speakers and as he disappeared with two nurses I found myself hoping I would never have to see him again. I looked at an old Jakey whose shoulder had come out of joint, a girl curled up and sobbing round a bucket, a boy with the side of his face punched in, his eyes daring anyone to look. They looked like the dried-out remains of some primordial soup from which the rest of mankind had evolved long, long ago.

I got to my feet. Nobody budged as I weaved through the seats. I had spontaneously combusted. They could not touch me. I walked into the winter's night, the cold hitting my new skin. There were a hundred things I promised to never do again.

A Murder of Crows

Ceris Aston

Old Corvus sat in the old thorn tree. Slow came the morning and the light greyed and the dark bird form silhouetted against the dawn

so still he might have been a part of it.

He opened a bright brown eye.

Small creatures were stirring. It was the passing time, early birds encountered night-dwellers as they made themselves occult.

A flurry of feathers

Youth landed beside him, kowtowed, cawing. Corvus moved not but blinked a morning greeting.

He listened.

'How,' Youth exclaimed, 'beautiful is morning! Watch the sun rise! See the colours start to show...

and listen to the morning song of the featherless below. Imagine what they sing of! Hear the rising falling tones and harmonies of voice.'

Corvus replied

'It's not song you hear but rudimentary communication. Their interests are few- food, shelter, flirtation.

You romanticise the species. They act only according to their nature. Do not attribute false values to such as these.'

Youth rhapsodised further.

'Look' Corvus spoke, 'By the fence'

A corpse.

Youth was awed at human recognition of its beauty and magnificence.

'They hang it like a pennant- see it shimmer in the light! What greater honour! Such remembrance of life'

Grey figure in the morning rays emerged from the dawning, silver barrel glinting.

A warning.

Corvus would have interjected but Youth spoke on.

'The way they work together is worthy to inspire. Their constructions are complex and...'

As the shock of feathers flurried and the limp body dropped

Brown eyes bright fixed unblinking

Slow through the air was Youth's body sinking

Hung in the morning

A murder of crows.

You Are Standing...

Eric Percak

You are standing, holding a cup of coffee. You think it might be empty, but are unsure. Why are you still holding it? Because someone is talking to you. Though it would be more accurate to say, at you, because you haven't been doing much of the speaking. This is hardly a conversation but it's not exactly a lecture either because this person seems friendly enough. They have even made you laugh a few times or stated something interesting that caused you to pause in contemplation. Why then are you uncomfortable?

Is it because you believe this person might try to sell you something, or maybe ask you for a charitable donation? That seems unlikely, as this person's demeanor has never indicated a propensity for business. You raise your cup to your mouth and it is confirmed; the coffee has already been drunk. You finished it a few minutes ago without noticing. A nervous habit to deal with this person who is talking to you.

Are you uncomfortable because this person is a stranger? That could hardly be true, you've seen this face on several different occasions, you've just never met them properly until now. You laugh at another joke, one that you would have only smiled at in a different circumstance. You're not sure if it was funny, or, now that you think about it, if it was even intended as a joke. You look at your feet and trace your finger around the coffee cup. That's when it occurs to you: this person is attempting to make a proposition for sex.

You knew that you were looking rather attractive today; in that outfit you bought while vintage shopping. The last time you were near a mirror, your skin was blemish free and your hair arranged in the perfectly messy way you like it. Yes, you were sure that you looked damn good. But still; you see the wedding ring, and in fact, this person has mentioned the loving spouse in question at least once with caring affection.

You're becoming frustrated now. Doesn't this perfect stranger have any sense of body language? You wonder why it is not obvious to this person that you have finished your coffee, that you are now ready to do something else with yourself. Your hand grasps your phone in your pocket, hoping that it will ring and rescue you from this person. You wonder if you'll greet this person next time you meet or if you'll pretend you don't see them.

You begin to speak but then hesitate and apologise for interrupting. The person is polite. There is no strain in their voice when they say, 'Please,' and gesture for you

to continue. You are flustered now. You can't possibly make eye contact. You straighten up your body and exhale. You're not sure what to say. Either something like, 'Well, I just...' or 'I really should...' or 'Excuse me, but...' Yet you say none of these.

You smile again. That smile you do so well. The one that gets you into conversations like this so often. That smile that proves you're sincere, that you're a good person, that you've enjoyed these past few moments. It's through that smile you say, 'Nice to meet you.'

Author Biographies

Helen Addy

Helen Addy, 34, lives in the beautiful town of Forres. She graduated from the University of Glasgow with an MA, in 1998. She has two young daughters who are a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. Her poems has previously appeared in the 2010 Bugged anthology, SOUTH 42, Carillon, Pushing Out the Boat and Shetland Libraries' Bards in the Bog project April/May 2012. Her work has also featured online in Shot Glass Journal, Snakeskin and What the Dickens? She is a member of forWORDS, a local writing group and is currently working (steadily and hopefully) towards a first pamphlet.

Ceris Aston

Ceris Aston lives mostly in Scotland, while spending as much time travelling as she possibly can. Being in her final year of a Liberal Arts degree she is rarely to be found without her nose in a book. She is endlessly frustrated by her inability to express the ideas that come to her. So far, she has worked as a runner in various zombie movies, a stone-age survival skills instructor, a library assistant and occasional journalist. When she grows up she would like to be an astronaut, but it seems unlikely.

P.J Caffrey

Writer of poems, short fiction and screenplays. First screenplay was nominated for best screenwriting at the Milan Film Festival this year. Just completed the Mlitt at Glasgow. Born 1974, still alive, just.

Grae Cleugh

Grae's first full-length play F***ing Games was produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 2001 and was directed by Dominic Cooke. It later won Grae the Laurence Olivier Award for the UK's Most Promising Playwright. Grae's second play The Patriot was produced at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow. Grae was awarded an AHRC scholarship and completed a Masters degree in Playwriting at Royal Holloway, University of London. Though based permanently in Glasgow, Grae is also an assessor for new writing at Arts Council England. The Diary of Jimmy Neverleaves is Grae's first novel.

Ewan Gault

Ewan Gault's short stories have won or been short listed for The Scotsman/Orange Competition, The Fish/CWA Prize, Glasgow 2020 and Bloody Scotland. Since graduating from Glasgow University's Creative Writing Masters with a distinction he has lived in Japan, Italy, Ethiopia and England. His stories have appeared in New Writing Scotland and Gutter and have recently been performed at Outside Thoughts and The Brompton Design Festival.

Maggie Graham

Maggie Graham is the author of *Sitting Among The Eskimos* (Headline Review), which was shortlisted for the Saltire First book Award. She was the recipient of the Robert Louis Stevenson award in 2000. She has also written two radio scripts for Radio 4: an adaptation of *Sitting Among The Eskimos* and *Forever Young*. She has published poetry and short fiction in magazines and anthologies including *New Writing* and *New Writing Scotland*. Maggie lives in Glasgow.

Björn Halldórsson

Björn Halldórsson was born in Reykjavik Iceland in 1983. He holds a BA in English and American literature from the University of East Anglia and is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing at the University of Glasgow. He lives in Glasgow with his girlfriend and two cats.

Vivien Jones

A poetry chapbook, *Something in the Blood*, was published in February 2008 (Selkirk Lapwing Press) and another, *Hare* (Erbacce Press) in March 2008. Her first poetry collection – *About Time, Too* – was published by Indigo Dreams Publishing in September 2010. She also won the Poetry London Prize that year. She has twice performed as a Poetry Double with Jacob Polley and Jen Hadfield. A short fiction collection - *White Poppies* - on a theme of women amongst warriors (Pewter Rose Press) has just been published with the aid of a Creative Scotland Writer's Bursary. She is currently adapting two of the stories for theatre performance.

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Pauline Lynch

Pauline Lynch trained as an actor and has worked internationally in film, television and theatre. Her stage play *King of the Gypsies* played at the Edinburgh Festival in 2008 before touring nationally. Pauline also penned 'Roar' for Poorboy Theatre

Company, a walking installation piece for the National Museum of Scotland. She shortlisted in the final four for the Gillian Purvis Award, and has been published in The Guardian and Ironstone. She has just completed the MLitt Creative Writing programme at the University of Glasgow.

Marion McCready

Marion McCready lives in Dunoon, Argyll. Her poems have appeared in a variety of publications including The Edinburgh Review, Northwords Now and The Glasgow Herald. Calder Wood Press published her pamphlet collection, Vintage Sea, in 2011.

Elaine Reid

Elaine is a Glasgow born short story writer, with head and heart stuck firmly in the east coast of America, about to enter the second year of the Creative Writing MFA. Her work was performed at the inaugural Outside Thoughts event and she has read at the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the recent Valve Literary Journal showcase. Elaine was once commissioned to travel to Inverness and write a blog for an Italian restaurant chain which gives her the hope that one day she'll be able to quit her retail job and live off words. Away from literature, Elaine buys and sells vintage clothing, claims to be fluent in German and blames most of her failings on alcohol and/or the internet.

Eric Percak

Eric Percak is a PhD Student in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. He grew up in suburban Chicago before attending the University of Denver, where he received a BA in Music. He currently lives in Glasgow with his husky labrador mix, Germany.

J. David Simons

J. David Simons' first novel, The Credit Draper was published in May 2008 by Two Ravens Press and was short-listed for The McKitterick Prize in June 2009. His second novel The Liberation of Celia Kahn was published in February 2011 by Five Leaves Publishing along with a re-print of The Credit Draper. He was the recipient of a Writer's Bursary from Creative Scotland in September 2009 and was awarded a Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship in April 2011.

Maria Sledmere

Maria Sledmere is a student of English Literature at Glasgow University. She loves wandering aimlessly around the city, and writes in short bursts between studying and drawing pictures of fairies. Currently, she is secretary of the one-year-old Glasgow University Creative Society, hoping that it will keep her imagination working throughout her degree.

Megan Taylor

Megan graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 2012 with a BA(hons) in Communication Design, specialising in illustration. Since graduating, she has been involved in various roles such as lecturing and set/spatial design projects. Within her eclectic practice, her working process aims to challenge the perception of the spectator and question the meaning of space, through exploration of large-scale experimental drawing and juxtapositions in site-specific spaces. For more of her work, visit <http://meganelizabethtaylor.com/>

Bradford Watson

Bradford Watson is a short story writer. He is currently a student on the creative writing MFA at Glasgow University.