



From Glasgow to Saturn



Issue 30
Independence

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A Word from the Editors

Independence is a word no writer has to hunt for in the dictionary. The very act of writing demands independence and isolation. Stories are typed out or scribbled in silence; the writer utterly immersed in the world they are creating, but not yet sharing. It is theirs alone.

In Scotland, independence has come to mean something more. It is a political statement, a conversation starter, and stopper, a single word sentence that ends with a question mark.

The writing, music, art and films being made by artists based in Scotland today will be studied by scholars in decades to come as they look for an insight into the mood of the nation as we approach one of the most important moments in our illustrious, globally-influencing history.

At *From Glasgow to Saturn*, we chose the theme of independence for our milestone thirtieth issue, not because we wanted to conduct a straw poll among writers, but because the word itself means so much to so many. As you'll see from reading this issue it is a word that can inspire as much as it can provoke.

There are stories here of fraternal bonds, of men who will commit unspeakable acts to regain some semblance of independence, of those who cannot give up their independence, or those who cannot control it.

There is undoubtedly a more political edge to this issue, and as a politically neutral magazine, it is a pity we saw so few submissions highlighting the perceived benefits of remaining part of the Union. That in itself tells us something of the mood of Scottish writers though.

Whatever happens to our country next year, our literature has a bright future, and in a powerful essay on p6 Booker Prize-winning author James Kelman mounts a passionate defence of the Scots language, and the role it must play in this future, whether the country is independent or not.

So, whatever yer ain views, we hope ye enjoy the issue.

Shaunagh Jones | Calum Maclean | Kevin Scott
Editors

The Way You Tell It (extract)

Karen Campbell

Donald John McCall stares at the grand fireplace his predecessor had installed. A huge and ostentatious mantel, which could almost pass for sandstone in the right light. Pendulous curlicues hint at gargoyles, but without the effort of faces being carved. It is post-modernist gothic, the tourist brochure said. Yes, tourists came here sometimes, when the council did *Doors Open Day* and the like. Gawked at the cabinets, the mantelpiece, the florid portraits. But the hearth in his magnificent fireplace is small and smoky, providing neither warmth nor illumination. And the mantelpiece is far too big for the size of the room. Thank God the money ran out before Councilor Binns had taken delivery of that wood paneling he'd been after. Still, Donald John likes it in here, with his flock wallpaper and his big desk. A cosy nook in which to carry out the business of the day. It makes his meetings feel important, and his meet-ees grateful. It feels like a sanctum.

Not today, mind. This whole wind farm fandango is growing arms and legs. It wakes him up at night, like trees tapping on the windows, like the nagging sense of things not done. All this with a referendum looming too. Scottish Independence. The very words, which had become so stale are now buzzing with bright life force. They thrill through him. He's a good speaker – a very good speaker, he's been told – but he finds it difficult to articulate how proud he is of his country. How it saddens him when being pro-Scottish is seen as anti everything else. They have tried assiduously in this campaign to espouse the positives. Even the negatives must be positive. But it can be hard to explain that being 'Scottish' is no attack, no implicit insult to the status quo. It is the status quo. He is Scottish, that is fact. That his country, his language, his history is made 'other' because it's subsumed by and made dependent on, a bigger status quo, is heartbreaking. For three hundred years, the Scots have tholed this. Whining from their grubby teenage bedroom: *it isn't fair*. And with every whinge and finger of blame, they collude in the Scottish cringe.

These last few years have been a miracle. Donald John had been down in the dirty roots so long, he forgot about the possibility of flowering. But the climate has changed, the rain is softer. A self-determined sun is making them grow tall. Westminster thought by giving the Scots devolution, it would pacify them. Holyrood would be a giant dummy. But you don't 'give' a people freedom. The people will take their freedom, if they want it. How Donald John hopes that they do.

The referendum is seven months away. He cannot believe there's the promise of something he has fought for all his life so tantalisingly within his reach, and that it might come to pass, and that he might miss it. Donald John has done everything correctly. He has

leafleted and campaigned. He has orated, counseled, slogged. He has borne witness. His party are top-dogs, after so many hungry years. They are a split-new broom and they want change. The public aye say they like change; they are frequently daft enough to vote for it. But it's a nonsense. When push comes to shove and the promise of the bright new world you were elected on becomes hard fact and brass tacks, they all revert. Nimbies and naysayers, the lot of them.

For an SNP-led local authority to not push through an SNP-approved-flagship-keynote-keyplank-green revolution-future deal-windpowered-whatever-they-were-calling-it now, is political suicide. If the referendum succeeds, but his leadership fails, well, it's a no-brainer (another modern phrase that Donald John is not quite sure of. But it seems to fit). The ship will sail without him. There will be no place in Free Scotia for an auld cooncil has-been who canna keep his troops in line.

Donald John is a man of both cliché and principle. If he sets out to do a thing, then do it he will. And he'd set out, twenty years since, to be a good councillor, which means representing the people's interests – even if they don't always know just what those interests are. Renewables, renewables. That's all anyone bangs on about today. Schools, houses, roads – you get laughed out the park if you try to prioritise them over the Great God Wind. Wind power is the country's fastest growing energy source, but it still isn't fast enough. The government – his government, so he can't even use the standard council ploy of *they big boys done it and ran away*. No. *His* party has set a target of one hundred per cent renewables by 2020, even if that means foresting every hill, moor and sea with the whirly buggers. Donald John's majority is, for now, still healthy. He is only following orders. Folk understand that, surely? And it is for the best of things, in the best of all possible worlds. How can folk not see that? Without renewables, the world will dry up. No oil, no gas. No heat. No oxygen. Just like this over-stuffed room. He opens the window, in readiness for Mhairi's arrival.

When he thinks of Mhairi, an incredible sadness washes him; rushes out of nowhere and just drenches him. The weight of his heart, his limbs, his head, all collapsing damply inwards. Each day, you just chug on. He is a healthy, purposeful human being. Where is the joy in all of this? Doing good can be very sad. His heart speeds in panicky ticks. There are bad tastes in his mouth. The door opens. He braces himself.

Keeping Scotland British, and Britain English

James Kelman

The British establishment is opposed to Scottish independence. Its campaign, developed over many years, identifies an area of conflict as ‘anti-Englishness’ and portrays as ‘anti-English’ numbers of people from Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Recently the charge was laid against Alasdair Gray. This followed publication of an anthology¹ of essays by 27 Scottish authors on the subject of independence. The majority in favour of independence is overwhelming. I am not sure whether this has been noticed in the public arena: the collection has never been reviewed. One Scottish presenter I heard on BBC Radio Scotland believed strongly that the journalist who first ‘broke the story’ of Gray’s ‘anti-Englishness’ was a credit to contemporary journalism and to be praised for his fearless exposé of the artist. Other than that there has been no media attention to the diverse ideas raised by 27 of Scotland’s more widely known writers. It appears that the charge of ‘anti-Englishness’ is the only review coverage the anthology is to receive within the mainstream media.

My experience of this area of ‘conflict’ begins from the reaction to my early short stories published as a collection forty years ago. These feature male and female characters who use the majority language of their own place and culture. Many of my stories were set outside Scotland but their central characters were working-class Scottish and I used language accordingly. This was not to establish any political or theoretical position. I wanted my stories to succeed; it was necessary that I used language freely. I was surprised by some of the hostility I received. Paranoia was not a risk. Depending on their use of language other Scottish writers were also ‘punished’. I was much luckier than some for whom punishment included limited publication, limited distribution; exclusion from all major bookshops, from libraries, schools and places of further education; being chastised for ‘bad English’, ridiculed by mainstream journalists; dismissed and barely reviewed inside Scotland (never mind beyond).

Marginalisation is a central feature of the Scottish literary tradition. The marginalisation occurs throughout Britain, including Scotland itself. This has applied especially to the work of writers whose ‘Scottishness’, and particularly, ‘working-class Scottishness’ is not concealed by their use of language. The phrase ‘use of language’ is interchangeable with ‘abuse of the English language’. I realised early that a campaign was in operation to keep Scotland British, and Britain English. This was part of a wider campaign to keep the English language ‘English’. The stress lay on ‘Englishness’. Englishness was

¹ *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence*, ed. by Scott Hames (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2012)

interchangeable with Britishness. Yet this 'Englishness' was in itself exclusive; it did not apply to the working class and 'accented regions'. People from Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cumbria, Northumbria, Devon, Cornwall or within a square mile of the Bow Bells of London appeared as marginalised as the rest of us. This point was crucial. It was not a 'national question'. In fact Scottish writers who conform to the establishment's cultural expectations, those who assimilate, will find their place within the establishment. Their work is reviewed in the popular media. They are rewarded with personal attention, appearances on radio and television, little commissions now and again. These writers are said to use English properly and are welcomed, given a home in British literature.

What is sold as 'British literature' is an enlarged version of what we already know as English literature. This enlarged, or 'greater English' literary tradition includes the literatures of Scotland, Wales and 'accented regional' England. These are perceived as 'branches' or 'strains' of the 'greater English' tradition, the 'High English' tradition. Unless backed into a corner – and perhaps not even then – the British literary establishment will not allow that the literary traditions of Scotland and Wales are distinctive and pluralistic, and that they exist in their own right, as separate and as singular as the American, English, Irish, Nigerian or Jamaican literary traditions. These may well be English-language based literary traditions but each makes use of its own linguistic indigeneity, drawing from the language, culture, tradition and heritage of these diverse communities.

The British Council makes its position clear, and states the priority: 'to develop a wider knowledge of the English language'. There is no mention of the languages of Scotland, Wales, Man, Ireland, and indigenous England itself.

Gàidhlig (Scots Gaelic) is a fair example. Only a small minority communicate in the language; for British State authorities it hardly counts at all. 'Since Scotland is a divided country...' as Somhairle Mac Gill-eain tells us² 'without its own government, dominated by capitalists, whether their names are Scottish or foreign, the state of Gaelic could not be anything other than wretched'. Gàidhlig language and culture have been oppressed, suppressed and repressed. No attempt is made to explain its current state. It is pushed as a sort of phenomenon. We come to see it as inevitable decline, the natural termination of a worthy but obsolete intellectual model. We recognise further that Gàidhlig is a waste of crucial resources; only 'kept alive' through political expediency, the manifestation of a benign and wholesomely generous British State authority. That it might occupy a fundamental part of contemporary culture is dismissed as ludicrous.

Outside specialist media channels Gàidhlig culture is ignored or treated as a loveable anachronism. Stick it in a kilt and call it Balamory. Nevertheless the British State nowadays recognises Gàidhlig as a language. This was not always the case and other languages are

² In his essay, 'Is There a Hope for Gaelic?'

denied the status; stigmatised as dialects and vernaculars, dismissed as non-standard, sub-standard forms of English. These may be acknowledged as the means by which particular communities can speak amongst themselves but are regarded as unsuitable for wider useage. Welcome to 'venacular Scotland'. We are a people without a language, aside from what we have begged, borrowed or stolen from the language that is English. Thank God for linguistic imperialism. But for that our verbal beseechings for alms, hand-outs and subsidies would have been so much gobbledygook to the State authorities. Our non-standard and sub-standard forms of English cannot sell a product or convey an instruction, and are incapable of genuine intellectual discourse: incapable of nourishing a literature.

A powerful section of the Scottish establishment encourages acceptance of this. They would prefer a national literature that aspired to a higher sensitivity, rather like that of England. The English language is 'made for' literature, as it is for all forms of higher discourse, within the drawing rooms of Balmoral and Windsor, the meeting rooms of Eton, Cambridge and Oxford, the back corridors or broom cupboards of Westminster.

The British Council promotes the ascendancy of an English literature which derives its norms, its values, its ethical dynamic from 'Higher English' culture. Scotland's indigenous art and culture are disdained. People are taught how inferior it all is: provincial, parochial and vulgar; unsophisticated, anti-intellectual and embarrassing, and rather shameful. Their so-called 'language' is unable to adapt, incapable of subtlety, of philosophical, political or theological discourse. All matters of the intellect take place in English. There is not a real literature but a vernacular branch of it that cannot travel, that can only find a home locally.

Students finish their college and university degrees trained to that effect. It hurts them to open the pages of a book written by a "blatantly Scottish" author that, *ipso facto*, must be full of idiomatic phenomena, outmoded 'dialects' and general failings; too gritty, too harsh, too rough and ready; too tough, too macho, too working class. Unlike the language of the 'mother-culture' which is a most subtle and sophisticated means of expression, its flexibility and adaptability a byword.

Young people in Scotland and throughout Britain learn that beauty and sophistication, emotional and moral strength; courage and heroism – even boldness – become attributes that inhere within English. These are not recognised as human qualities but aspects of a language that is given us by the conquering culture.

We are fed the fallacy that language may be isolated from those who use it. Linguistic subtleties are isolated from language-users. It is ignored or forgotten that we human beings who use language make language and continue to make it everyday of our lives; that our children create it, and create within it, on a daily basis. We are taught to be grateful to the imperial force that has bestowed upon us their language; a body of knowledge that exists *a priori*, complete and in-itself.

Literary artists proceed with caution! Too free a use of the linguistic body may result in its violation!

Scotland is quite dutiful really, I regret to say, the sense of Britishness remains fairly strong, if not overwhelming. Many writers, and readers, are far too aware of their 'colonial obligations' to the imperial language and guard against the Scotticisation of English. They learn to adapt and some to assimilate. Literary art survives, and occasionally thrives. At its heart is what some academics term a 'lower order sensibility'. This is illustrated by the 'preponderance' of lower order experience, not to mention the lower orders themselves. Peasant and working classes are revealed existentially, typically through the subject's own language. Those elements are at the heart of the Scottish tradition in literature. They are grounded within our wider intellectual tradition, which includes the philosophical, the theological and the social. No other context does justice to this work.

Much of the hostility aroused by Alasdair Gray's so-called 'anti-Englishness' was not in response to a lifetime's creation but to inferences drawn from the publicity surrounding the short essay he has in the anthology mentioned. It was a shabby affair but one outcome was predictable: the burden of proof was on Gray. This made the charade more difficult to counter. Why was it so difficult to defend this great artist? Surely certain factors should have gone without saying? Those who wished to support Alasdair Gray were obliged to return to first principles. What does 'seminal' mean?

How strange for foreign observers that in Scotland itself individuals who should have known better, highly regarded academics and reputable media commentators, were led to attack publicly one of our country's greatest artists. Why should such a situation have arisen? Did a lifetime's art count for nothing? Surely the only burden of proof was on those who accused him of anti-Englishness and racism? Instead the artist was denounced and his reputation derogated.

Alasdair Gray is not only one of Scotland's greatest artists, he is the most public. Sixty years of his writings, drawings, murals and paintings are available to inspection and evaluation. It is here that Gray's humanity, his utter revulsion for all forms of racism and sectarianism, is demonstrated so clearly that nothing needs to be said, neither by him nor in defence of him. People may dislike or take a position against his work but it cannot be ignored and disregarded. This is what we mean by 'seminal'. In Scotland the art of Alasdair Gray is seminal. Not so in 'Britain' where it may be ignored, or noticed; disregarded, or regarded; condemned, or not; praised, whatever, but always in the light of Britishness.

Unfortunately in Scotland that cloying, stultifying colonial mentality continues to dog our imagination and our very apprehension of life. How else to explain that pathetic BBC Radio Scotland presenter's praise for the journalist whose reprehensible nonsense began the affair.

At the core of the British State's anti-independence campaign is an elitism and basic intellectual dishonesty. The contempt for art revealed by the attack on Alasdair Gray is typical.

If nothing else controversies such as this allow us to settle the matter of the distinctiveness of the Scottish tradition in literature, and our existence as a verifiable community of communities, in other words, a country.

Vote Britain

Alan Bissett

People of Scotland, vote with your heart.

Vote with your love for the Queen who nurtured you, cradle to grave,

Who protects you and cares, her most darling subjects, to whom you gave

the glens she adores to roam freely through, the stags her children so dearly like to kill.

First into battle, loyal and true. The enemy's scared of you.

That's why we send you over the top with your och-aye-the-noo Mactivish there's been a murrdderrr jings! crivvens! Deepfriedfuckinmarsbar wee wee dram of whisky hoots mon there's a moose loose about this smackaddict

Vote, Jock. Vote, Sweaty Sock. Talk properly.

Vote with those notes we scrutinise in our shops.

(might be legal tender but looks dodgy to me)

Vote for the Highland Clearances. Baaaaaaaaaaaa.

Vote for nuclear submarines in your water.

Vote for the Olympic Games you didn't vote for

(but you'll pay for it, you'll pay for it).

Vote Conservative. Vote Lib Dem. Vote Libservative. Vote Condabour.

Vote with the chip on your shoulder.

Vote Labour. New Labour. Old Labour. Scottish Labour.

(Get back in line, Scottish Labour, HQ in Solihull will issue their commands shortly,

Just keep the vote coming in from up there thanks goodbye,

Subsidy junkie).

Vote for any argument you construct in your defence being 'anti-English'.

Vote for Scots who make their career in Scotland being 'unambitious'.

Vote for enjoying your own culture being soooooooooo parochial.

Vote God Save the Queen and that bit about us crushing you all.

Hush. There there.

Vote for Scotland being referred to as a 'region', like, say, Yorkshire? Or East Anglia?

Vote for our voices dominating your media, but in no way telling you what to think.

Take a drink. Go on, son, take a drink.

Vote for oil revenue, which we ensure flows directly from us into you.

Vote for being told you're the only country in the world that could not possibly survive and that without us you'd fall to pieces like children abandoned in the wild, caked in faeces.

Vote Daily Mail and Rupert Murdoch and

illegalimmigrantskilledPrincessDiana and

London London London most exciting city in the world darling

(Glasgow *is* a very violent place, is it not. Do you have art?)

Vote with your heart. Vote Empire. Vote tradition.

Vote for our proud shared history of

enslavingothernationsandstealingtheirnaturalresources

Bringing Wealth and Prosperity to the World!

being on the right side just *once* and that's only because it was against yer actual fucking Hitler

Vote for the #ScottishConspiracy at Westminster

(who really runs the show here eh – Blair, Brown – got your own in that time, we aren't allowed to vote in Holyrood but there's Archie McPhee pulling wee strings in our parliament when we wouldn't even *think* about interfering in how you run your own affairs but while we're at it, this referendum eh? A so-called referendum, is it? Have it *now*, make sure it looks like *this*)

Vote for very, very, very rich people patronising you.

Vote for Glasgow having the highest knife-crime rate and lowest life expectancy in Europe due to our generosity. You may thank us at your leisure.

Vote for the absence of your history in our schools.

All Brits together.

Vote for our shock at your ingratitude!

Vote for us saying 'Eh? Eh?' when you open up your porridge mooth.

Vote for bafflement about why you want the England football team to lose.

We always want the Scots to win (except in referenda).

Vote for psychopathic villains with your accent in a soap opera.

Vote for tuition fees and student loans, ensuring that the brightest of your working-class

(since you still insist upon the term, although Our Leaders had it banned)

will one day rise and take their place in this great land.

Vote for us deploying strategic references to Braveheart to dismiss you all.

Vote for Robert Burns being called by Paxman 'sentimental doggerel'.

Vote for The Iron Lady. Such a *strong* leader, gave this country *backbone*

(you didn't really want the unions, industries or council homes, just made the place look tatty)

Vote for a deregulated banking class, lionising of the
hardworkingwealthgeneratingjobcreatingentrepreneurs

who you will in no way refer to as 'greedy, selfish bastards'. Give them your taxes.

Vote for foreign wars.

Yes, sadly, some of you will die. But you will return to a hero's welcome

Jock

the Union Jack, proud symbol of integrity and honour, draped across your coffin

while your mother, dabbing at her eyes, recalls the words she learned in school

in Kircudbright

'There is some corner of a foreign field that is forever England.'

Vote with your heart.

Independence Day, Ghana, 2013

R. A. Davis

at the parade ground
schoolchildren with serious faces and bright shirts
swing their arms to no drumbeat or call
the brass band is waiting shading its instruments
against a sun already fierce at nine
in the class from the islamic school
the girls hold their heads high
grateful for white headscarves

after the schools but in no order you can see
minor guilds and clubs of this small town
proceed in rank and file
the bakers' heads heaped with loaves
beauticians in assorted sunglasses
the taekwondo team in uniform
joining soldiers and cadets
before the local chief

ignored among the spectators you listen
and hear a child's voice vaguely saying
the word for white-man
as though it's lucky to see one
somewhere at a microphone
a speech is spoken but
the only words you know in this language
are those for *welcome*
white-man and *how are you?*

A Man of the World

James Carson

‘Finland.’

‘Finland?’

‘Finland.’

‘Finland?’

‘Fin..’

‘See if you say fucking Finland wan mair time...’

‘All right, then. Estonia.’

‘RAYMOND! Your point, please’

‘Estonia and Finland, okay? Different countries, same anthem. Same tune, different words.’

‘Right, I jist know I’m gonnae regret this: so?’

‘So, there’s a precedent. All you need to do is swipe a wee tune you like from the internet, then get Liz Lohead to dash off a few lines about mountains and lochs. Sorted!’

‘Naw, Raymond, no’ sorted. No’ sorted at all. Look, we’re gonnae have a national anthem that’s unique, home grown and totally Scottish, right doon tae its kilt socks. Which means we’re no’ gonnae hauf inch a wee tune wi’ a plastic label attached tae it saying Made in China.’

‘All right, then, why don’t we hold a competition? Get the public to vote for their favourite.’

‘Jesus Christ, do I really have tae remind you that it was gie’in the people of Scotland a choice in the first place that got us intae this mess. The last thing we need right now is mair fucking democracy.’

‘Okay, I’m only trying to help.’

‘Well you can help by getting another round in.’

‘Are you sure, Jimmy? I mean, that’s your fourth.’

‘Raymond, I really don’t like tae pull rank, but as your boss I am ordering you tae stop counting ma bevvys. Do you know what kind of day I’ve had?’

‘Come on, Jimmy, get things into perspective. Remember what Shakespeare said: nothing is good or bad; just thinking makes it so.’

‘Well, thank you, Stephen Fry, for that humungously unhelpful gobbet of wisdom. But I’m guessing that the Bard of Avon didnae have tae find an architect for the Scottish embassy in Mongolia by Friday. I’m guessing he wisnae troubled by the fact that Zaha fucking Hadid is so up hersel’ since she built the Olympic swimming pool that she only answers the fucking phone tae God and Obama. I’m guessing William fucking Shakespeare didnae have the First Minister of Scotland breathing doon his neck tae make arrangements for a state visit tae Bujumbura, wherever the fuck that is. And I’m guessing...’

‘Burundi.’

‘Eh?’

‘Bujumbura. Capital of Burundi. It’s in east Africa, next to Rwanda and Tanzania. Was in the news about twenty years back when Rwanda had its civil war between the Hutus and Tutsis. Main exports are coffee and tea. What?’

‘Nothing. It’s just that sometimes I get a terrifying glimpse inside your prefrontal cortex.’

‘So, I take it the First Minister’s not happy.’

‘Damn right she’s no’ happy. Went fucking mental when I told her the embassy in Mongolia’s gonnae be delayed. ‘

‘Right, so that explains the...’

‘AYE!’

‘The eye, yeah, that’s what I was going to say.

Mind you, Jimmy, it’s a belter. She must have some right hook.’

‘Tell me about it. And then, while I’m still dripping hauf ma cornea on tae her oatmeal carpet, who swaggers in withoot so much as a knock on the door, but Postman Pat. And he’s got that sleekit grin on his hackit face like he knows something I don’t.’

‘The rumour is he’s in the frame for the ministry of defence.’

‘Wouldnae surprise me, wee wank. Can jist see him practising sinking the North Korean navy in his bath-tub. Course, soon as he swans in the First Minister goes all sheep-eyed, and says tae me, “Right, James, we’ll discuss the state visit later. The Postmaster General and I have an important meeting about the new stamps”.’

‘What new stamps are these?’

‘Oh my God, Raymond have you no’ seen them? Christ almighty, my poor auntie Margaret in Crieff’s gonnae have another stroke when they come oot.’

‘How? What’s wrong with them?’

‘What’s wrang? All right, Raymond, let’s say you’re designing the first stamps for a new

Scotland. Who are ye gonnae put on them?’

‘Oh, the choice is endless. Maybe William Wallace? Robert the Bruce?’

‘Nope.’

‘Eh, well how about James Watt, Adam Smith? Or if we’re being more inclusive, perhaps Jennie Lee, or even JK Rowling?’

‘Not even close.’

‘So who, then?’

‘Jackie Reid.’

‘Who?’

‘Ian Tough, Stuart Anderson.’

‘Sorry, Jimmy, who are these people?’

‘EXACTLY, RAYMOND! Even you don’t know who they are, and you’re Wikipedia wi’ a pulse.’

‘Hang on, Ian Tough? That rings a bell. Is he not one of the Krankies?’

‘Yes, Raymond, he’s one of the Krankies. And what’s more, he’s the boring one of the Krankies. And Stuart Anderson was a tedious wee boy in a kilt who sang Donald Where’s Your Troosers three times on the telly in 1989. And Jackie Reid’s no’ even a real person.’

‘I don’t get it. Why are they going on the stamps?’

‘Because Postman Pat’s a dickhead. He thinks our country’s ancient and distinguished past is shite. He thinks our great warriors, inventors, scientists and artists are too predictable. So he’s digging up these z-listers and rebranding them as legends of Scottish show business.’

‘Who’s the other one, did you say? Was Jackie Reid not a darts player?’

‘No, that’s Jocky Wilson, and I’ll tell you

something, Raymond: I'd quite happily have seen his gummy coupon on a Scottish stamp instead of the wummin detective fae *Taggart!*'

'What does the First Minister think?'

'Loves them. Absolutely loves them. Thinks they're bold and inventive. I'm sure she's shagging Postman Pat. And then, just as I'm nearly oot the door, she says: "And James, don't forget, I want our anthem on my desk by this time tomorrow." OUR anthem! She gets more like fucking Thatcher by the day.'

'Bloody hell, Jimmy, tomorrow? What are you going to do?'

'Well, luckily, while I was in the lavvy earlier, I had a wee brainwave. See what you think of this: the national anthem of our newly independent nation will be called: GOD HELP SCOTLAND.'

'God help Scotland?'

'Aye.'

'God. Help. Scotland?'

'AYE!'

'Right, and what's the rest of the words?'

'That's the genius part, Raymond. Those are the only words!'

'What? God help Scotland, God help Scotland, God help Scotland, God help...'

'Aye, okay, behave yersel'. It's God Help Scotland in all the international languages.'

'Eh?'

'Don't you see? It makes us look patriotic, but universal, inward focussing, but outward looking!'

'Em...'

'Look, it begins with a wee Gregorian chant, God Help Scotland, in English. Then God

Help Scotland in French, whatever that is...

‘Que Dieu Aide Ecosse’

‘Oh, is that right? Well, then, God Help
Scotland in Spanish...’

‘Que Dios Ayude a Escocia.’

‘Fuck me! Can ye dae German?’

‘Möge Gott helfen, Schottland’

‘Bloody hell, Raymond, whit aboot Hebrew?’

‘סקוטלנד יעזור אלוהים’

‘Ye see! I knew I was dae’in’ the right thing
getting you on my team. All the boys at
Holyrood said, “Naw, dinnae take that wee
swot Raymond; tell him he can get tae
Fisheries.” But I said no way! That boy’s a
rising star, and he’s coming tae Foreign
Affairs wi’ me. Are you getting they pints in
or whit?’

‘Better not. Moira’ll be worried.’

‘She will no’! She knows you’re wi’ me. And
she’s never complained aboot ye being late
yet, has she?’

‘That’s true, actually, she’s been very patient.

Even when I got snowed in at that Nordic
Council meeting you sent me to last month.’

‘Aye, well, there’ll be other Christmases. And
I hear the Faroe Islands have a bleak majesty
in December.’

‘Aye. And thanks again for dropping in to
make sure Moira was okay.’

‘Oh, she was better than okay. I mean, she
was fine. You still going tae that conference
in Belarus next week?’

‘Well, you set it up for me. Why?’

‘Nothing.’

So, what are you going to do about the
embassy in Mongolia?’

‘Well, I don’t mind telling you, it’s a

challenge, Raymond, it really is. I mean, clearly I can't deal with it masel', what wi' being tied to my desk twenty-four seven.'

'Yeah, I can see that.'

'Aye, so I'm gonnae need somebody I can trust tae take it on. Somebody who can mix easily wi' wankers at hame and numpties abroad. You know, a diplomat. Somebody willing tae sacrifice time away fae his family, tae represent his country at the ends of the earth. A man of integrity, but a man of the world. In short, Raymond, I need someone exactly like me.'

'Well, good luck with that.'

'Right, I'm away for a slash. You get the pints in, and when we reconvene, ye can tell me whit ye think of my wee proposition.'

'What proposition's that?'

'Tell me, Raymond, have you ever been tae Mongolia?'

Free Thinking

Stuart Nisbet

‘WelcumtaeGlesca!’ coughs the dosser, staggering past.

‘Friendly, dese Scots,’ says Hortense, looking up at the brass plaque:

‘Bonnie Prince Charlie slept here’

‘Pass de map, dearest’, says her husband.

‘Hold your horses, mon!’ She rubs her eyes, ‘de jetlag’s still festerin’.

‘Dis Prince Charlie, he seems a nice boy, *where’d* he sleep?’ he says.

‘In a big house – stood here when Glasgow was a small place’.

‘Must be true if it’s cast in brass’, he says.

She thumbs her guide book, ‘dis house owner, he help make Glasgow *Second City of the Empire*’.

‘Well, I ain’t bowin’ down no more. Not since eighty-one’.

‘You mean when de modern Prince Charlie come to our island and lower de Union Jack?’

She reads from a big poster:

‘The Merchant City, the Heart of Glasgow’.

‘Can I stand right at its heart?’ She scuffs at the Trongate’s chip wrappers and fag ends. ‘The heart must be here if it say so’. She reads more:

‘The Merchant City – Glasgow’s cultural, creative and artistic capital’.

‘You tink maybe it’s just municipal spin?’

She steps onto the road, clutching her map. ‘De big house stood just here’. She brushes the tarmac with her fingertips.

‘Yo, Hortense!’ he cries, as a First Bus swerves past. He grabs her arm. ‘You still got de *Alternative Tour* thingy from de pub last night?’

She draws a crumpled leaflet from her bag.

‘Says the owner of de missing house got rich growin’ sugar on *our* island – owned 397 chattels,’ I says.

She taps her thick guidebook, ‘Funny, it’s not written here’.

‘You tink maybe dis city’s famous for what de books *don’t* say?’

‘You mean, Glasgow needs to loosen up a little?’ she says.

‘Yeah, like our island. Needs a break from de old colonial shit.’

‘Maybe we could start a campaign?’ she says, looking up and down Argyle Street.

‘Who’s dis Bonnie Prince anyway?’

Under the Flag

Anna Gebbie

The fabric was stretched thin.
Stitches pulled wide,
The walls of cold sea
Were visible once more.

In one corner a hole had worn,
And the citizens underneath
Could see their sky;
Another frayed island.

Every day they gathered
In the patch of unfiltered sunlight.
And every night
Another thread snapped.

Big News

Anna Gebbie

On our island

Your new job

Or car

Or haircut

Spreads like ripples in the bay.

It's easy to be

Big news

In small places.

The Snow Cat

Stephanie Brown

My sister only ever played four notes on the piano. She was once a prodigy whose fingers danced lightly over Chopin, Beethoven, and Debussy, amazing all of us, but without a word one day she stopped. She sat down and played only the notes A and C instead. A and C in quick succession became G and B, and then returned. Over the days, weeks, months, and years we all hoped she would play something else again, but our hope was unfounded and her sad tune went on.

Her teacher still came. He played exercises for her to learn, and showed her the scales in case she had forgotten. She sat as she was told to, and listened like a good girl, staring blankly out at the garden the whole time. Sometimes he played his most frightening Rachmaninov or the haunting melodies he had written himself in the hope of inspiring her. Sometimes I saw him wipe away a tear as he shook his head at my parents at the end of another lesson. My sister was ten then, and it had been two years since she had played anything but A and C, G and B.

Winters were long in our village, long and blanketed in snow and silence. The sun was snuffed out by heavy clouds that hung like the sleepy lids of the sky, and the whole village seemed to curl up like a cat and slumber. I loved to play outside at dusk; at four o'clock the light slid away and left me bathed in the orange glow of the streetlight, in a sea of snow. My mother called me to come inside, but I never could because my snow people were only half-dressed. I would never finish my snowman or snowwoman or snowbaby, because I would always think of something else to add on; a hat, a smile, a coat pocket. I once dressed my snowman in my Grandpa's full military regalia. I never wanted to be finished.

My sister hated to be outside when it was dark. Sometimes she would become so engrossed in one of our games that she wouldn't notice the light failing; then like some poor startled deer that has leapt into the road she would look up suddenly and see the darkness, and run for her life to the safety of our kitchen. It didn't matter to me because I preferred to play alone at times like this. When it was quiet like that, when there was only the sound of my breath and the crunching of my feet in the frozen snow and the muffled laughter from the TV indoors, I played my games. Based on some of my dreams, I galloped around the garden as a unicorn or waded through imaginary swamps of purple goo, and they were so curiously private I didn't like anyone to see me when I played them.

What was even more enjoyable than my dream games was sneaking out of the garden and going for a walk around the village. Emptied of all life, the streets felt like the fishing jar my mother once emptied out, leaving its tadpoles squirming helplessly on the slabs. They had that same recently occupied quality, the same living smell that made it all the more eerie

that there was no one here. *Where have all the people gone?* I used to whisper to myself. *What has happened in this deserted village?* It was at times like this the snow cat would come out to play.

It had taken me a long time to realise she was there. At first she was nothing but a tiny movement in the corner of my eye, gone before I could turn my head, a glimmer that was her eyes in the shadows. And once I knew she was there, it took me even longer to see her. She was nothing like a normal cat; no hiss, no mournful mew, no upturned bin lid betrayed her presence. She wound through the streets like a boa constrictor, making no sound, leaving no footprint. She leapt light as air onto the rooftops and watched us there, invisible in the white except for her black spots. Perhaps she played her own dream games on nights like this. She didn't like to be seen at all, but gradually, she began to trust me. Then I would see her sitting on a rooftop, her paws arranged like folded arms, like a regal lady reclining on a couch, her eyes blinking against the cold, and when she looked down at me she seemed to smile peacefully in that way cats do. I worried about her a lot. I wondered what she ate when it was cold like this and everything was frozen. She couldn't catch fish: the river was frozen solid. I had seen her winding her way up the path into the forest, and wondered if she lived in there. She seemed to stop and look back at me, beckoning me to follow, but my mother had told me never, ever, ever to go into the forest when it was snowy and dark.

I also wondered if she was really a real cat at all. Perhaps she was a ghost or spirit of some sort. A ghost of a cat; the spirit of the forest. My sister said she was probably a magic cat, because we didn't have big cats like that around the village. Not to mention that if she was a real big cat she would chase me and try to eat me. This was all very well, but I had seen her breath in the night air, silhouetted against the sky. I had seen the snowflakes clinging to her whiskers. My sister was the only person I ever told about the snow cat. The other children would have laughed and jeered, and that was exactly why she wouldn't let them see her. My sister knew I wouldn't lie to her. I was the one who defended her when they all called her names. I spoke for her when she wouldn't speak. I lied to our mother when she pulled a teddy's eyes out and said it was me. I played with her in the playground when no one else would, and I kicked a boy in the stomach when he threw stones at her. They never understood. She was quiet, that was all. She was far away. I looked after her, even though she was older than me. I was eight and she was ten. I was eight like she was eight when the bad man came, but I could never play piano like she had then.

The bad man came out of the forest while my sister played alone in the garden. I know what I was doing at the time, less from memory than from the amount of times I had to repeat it for the policemen. I was playing with my dolls in the living room. I was smearing my mother's makeup onto their faces. I saw my sister go skipping past the window once, nothing more. She wouldn't answer my mother when she called, and when we went outside to look

for her we found her sitting down in the snow, her face all tears, whimpering quietly. She looked up at my mother with strangely large eyes, bewitched. Her woollen tights were ripped to pieces. My father ran into the shed and ripped his workbench off the wall and smashed everything up to pieces in there. His hands shook. Months later, the beads of sweat would appear on his head and I knew he wanted to do something terrible. Because he couldn't he silenced himself with whisky.

You cannot change the past, my mother said, so I tried to help my sister forget. I wanted her to forget the prison of A and C, G and B. I knew she played it because she was frightened, because part of her remained trapped back there. But I knew she wasn't lost, and I would help her find her way out. She would come back and be like she was again. I wouldn't leave her behind so I took her out to play with me and we went looking for the snow cat. I knew the snow cat would trust my sister; she was so soft and kind and helpless too. But out in the street the boys were playing sledge.

'Hey look, it's that girl who never talks.'

'Hey retard, why'd you never talk?'

It wasn't late enough, or cold enough, for the snow cat. She never came out when other people were around.

'Fuck off,' I shouted, and hurled a rock, slipping another heavy sharp one into my pocket just in case.

We went back to the garden to make an igloo instead. It proved to be a fantastic igloo, and we took blankets from the house outside to furnish it. Our mother brought us hot chocolate, and we sat inside pretending to be arctic explorers. My sister had caught frostbite, and I had to saw her legs off to save her life. In terror, she ran outside, but I had to catch her before it was too late! In fits of giggles, we wheeled around the igloo like that. In a bid to escape, my sister began running the perimeter of the garden, right up to the mouth of the forest where the garden ended. It must have been late then; the light had escaped us, for I could discern nothing at all in the pathway, nothing at all until he was upon us.

Still no features were discernible, he was nothing but a man-shaped part of the forest advancing towards us. His unexpected proximity caused my skin to prickle with fear, and I knew from the way my sister has frozen that it was him. How she could recognise him, I didn't know. Maybe that time was preserved in the formaldehyde jar of her unconscious memory; his precise outline, his way of moving, the weight of his footfall. His face loomed into the light, and I knew it was him too, from his grotesque grin, from the way he brought one finger up to his lips white as worms, and came closer. Behind his head there was nothing but the yellow moon, bright against the sky, illuminating the forest path that was not a path at all but only a space between the densely packed trees, where the snow was six feet deep and errant striplings were suffocated. I imagined I could hear him panting, saw blood

dripping from his jaws. I heard a howl far away in the forest. But the man in the moon was clear that night: he smiled down on me and my sister. And before we could run, before we even opened our mouths to scream, the snow cat leapt upon him and knocked him down. We staggered backwards. The snow cat ravaged him, wringing him by the neck. Her beautiful coat was flecked with blood. She turned round to watch us go, her muzzle all pink, blinked her eyes peacefully and licked her lips.

While the policemen were still in the kitchen, drinking tea and talking in hushed voices to our parents, I sat with my sister on the piano stool. A and C, she played. G and B.

‘Let’s play a duet,’ I said, and chimed in clumsily on the high notes. Slowly, her little left paw crept towards the keys. Almost as though she was unaware of it, it began to join in. Chords: A, C, D. I slipped my hand away from the keys slowly, afraid of breaking the spell. Without even breaking time, without a word, our song became Prelude in E Minor by Chopin, and she didn’t even seem to notice until her fingers created the rolling thunder of the song’s climax. Then she stopped, and looked up at me with a grateful and wondering smile.

The Broken West

Kirsty Logan

Daniel first kisses his brother in a town where no-one knows them, a no-account place that's barely even a town, just some buildings clustered around the highway: a smoky bar, an empty motel, a convenience store that only sells candy and condoms and beer. The nearest gas station is ten miles away. The nearest bus station is fifty.

The trail had gone cold somewhere around Louisville, but now their father's journal is back on track. They know for sure he was in this town, and only a year before he died. They can't be sure whether he's wanted here, but it's possible. Thirty miles up the road there's a bank and a school, and Dad could rarely pass those institutions without some inklings of a crime. If their father was here then, maybe their brother is here now.

Daniel can taste the place on the back of his tongue: beer and peanuts and stale sweat. Shreds of cheatgrass rustle in his boot-treads with every step. He's spent a year checking the face of everyone he passes – does that guy have his eyes, Jack's chin, Dad's ears? The only thing he's discovered is how similar everyone looks. He can't even tell anymore which noses look like his, which foreheads, which hairlines. They're all like his, and yet none are.

Jack climbs onto a barstool, orders a beer and a shot of bourbon. The barman looks at Daniel – the same? – and before Daniel nods he compares the barman's face to Jack's.

Five drinks later, Jack goes to the bathroom. As soon as the bathroom door shuts, Daniel orders three bourbons and necks them, one after the other, swallowing hard so he can't cough them back up. Saliva fills his mouth, and he grips the bar until red train tracks appear on his palms.

The bourbon stays down, and Daniel is still pretending not to notice the guy who followed Jack into the bathroom – scrawny, red-eyed, his leather jacket hanging off his shoulders like he's only bones. Tonight is Jack's turn at the Investigation, though he takes more turns than Daniel because he enjoys it more. Daniel always worries that it'll get too far before he finds out, that the other man will already be inside him before he recognises the shape of his eyes or the angle of his nose. That doesn't seem to bother Jack, and yet he still won't kiss Daniel.

Daniel had tried in Topeka, to make Jack feel better after he'd puked up a bottle of whisky. He'd tried in Oklahoma City, to distract Jack after he'd been knocked back by every waitress in the diner. He'd tried in Little Rock, to console Jack after their truck's tire blew again. Daniel had been shoved away, yelled at, puked on. For Jack, the lost brother is more valuable than the found. Daniel knows it, but it still feels like a sucker-punch.

Daniel's halfway through his next beer when Jack slides back into his barstool, his eyes glazed and his cheeks scraped raw. Daniel can't tell if he's been fighting or fucking, and it doesn't really matter. Faces look different close up, and the only way to get that close to a stranger is to kiss them or choke them. It's just someone else to cross off the list. Someone else they didn't recognise.

At midnight the bar closes, and Daniel steers Jack across the highway to the motel. The road is acned with yellow starthistle and the parking lot is empty except for their pickup, road-dusted and dipped in rust. The motel's flickering floodlights pick out movement: shapes flashing white then grey. Daniel's still squinting his smoke-reddened eyes, trying to combine the shapes into something he knows, when Jack shouts out a cuss and launches himself away from Daniel and into the side of the pickup, except that between Jack and the pickup there's that moving shape, and Daniel sees now that it's a person.

Jack's shouting, pressing the person against the pickup, and he's sliding down the door and trying to crawl under the truck, and Jack grabs his ankles and pulls him back out, skin on gravel. And Daniel sees his face and it's just a kid, it's a boy, scrambling and choking, trying to do anything, to be anywhere except here. That kid's saying sorry sorry no please no.

Jack is not listening. He is kicking, punching, screaming. Daniel is grabbing at limbs: Jack's, the kid's, trying to get Jack to stop, but Jack isn't stopping, even when Daniel's sure he knows it's just a kid. Daniel gets in between Jack and the kid, Jack's kicks tangling in his legs but he stays standing, and he holds Jack's jaw with both hands and he kisses him.

And the kid is crying behind them, gravel crunching as he tries to move away, but all Daniel knows is Jack, and it's taking everything in him to hold Jack still and kiss him hard and not cry. Because this is it, it's working, Jack's kissing him back, even as his muscles are tight and his hands are twitching and Daniel can taste the anger in their mouths. This time, in this no-account barely-town, it's happening just right. As right as it can be, at least.

And Jack pushes him away, but by that time the kid has already run across the empty highway, still crying but both legs working, pumping to get him away.

And Daniel can see, even in the flicker of the floodlights, that the kid doesn't look like either of them.

The second time that Daniel kisses his brother is after Jack gets the shit kicked out of him for the third time in a week. Jack lies on his hard motel bed, boots dusting gravel on the blanket, and cries until he chokes. After an hour, he lets Daniel wipe off the blood and the dirt and the dried tears. After two hours, he lets Daniel hold him. After three, he sleeps.

Daniel lies rigid on the single bed, not daring to move in case Jack wakes and pushes him away. His arm is numb under Jack's shoulder and he desperately has to piss, but he does not move. He breathes slowly, filling his lungs with his brother's smell: sweat and whisky and

something metallic. He focuses on the paintings of faded green trees hanging crooked on the wall and the dripping sound coming from the bathroom. He can feel the heat of Jack's skin on his cheek.

Tonight's fight had not been part of the Investigation. Someone had tried again to steal their truck, and this time it wasn't some punk kid. The guy had left the truck, but not before ramming his extremities into Jack's belly.

A beating was worth saving the truck. Without the truck, they'd never find their brother, and the Investigation would be a failure. All that sex, all that blood, would be for nothing. Daniel knows it was worth it, but he'd still give anything to make Jack stop hurting.

Daniel slides down on the bed, holding his breath until he's dizzy, hardly daring to move in case he wakes Jack. Finally his face is level with Jack's, though his feet are now hanging off the edge of the bed. Lying here, he's reminded of how small Jack's bones are.

Daniel inches his body sideways, trying to press as much of it as possible against Jack. They meet at the shins, arms, lips, forehead, and suddenly it's a kiss, sweet and soft. Daniel stays that way for a long time, his body tight against Jack's.

Three weeks later, two states over, another piece-of-shit town. The brothers have moved up in the world: this town has a gas station *and* a diner. Daniel, of course, wants to go to the diner; Jack, of course, stomps wordlessly to the bar. Daniel does not drive the pickup, Daniel does not get the bed by the window, and Daniel does not choose where they go. Daniel knows that this town must have a daytime, but they've been here for fourteen hours and the sky is still dark. The stench of flowering goldenrod is caught at the back of Daniel's throat.

Their father's journal is hard to follow: it seemed like he'd written a lot of it drunk, or in a moving car. Daniel and Jack don't even know if he's been through this town, but that doesn't stop Daniel peering at each face as they walk through the bar.

The bar smells of farms: dirt and the flesh of animals. Jack points at the cheapest bottle and the barman empties it into two glasses. The faces in here are the same as the faces in every dirty bar in every shit town in the whole of this stinking country. The same and not the same.

Daniel hasn't even touched his drink, but he can feel the fumes burning up his nose. Jack's glass is half empty, and he keeps his fist clenched around it between gulps, as if afraid someone will snatch it away before he is done. Daniel tries to watch Jack out of the corner of his eye, wishing he had hair to hide behind. Jack shaves both their heads monthly – he says it helps to see their bone structure and features, helps to memorise them. It makes their faces easier to compare.

Jack seems intent on his drink, so Daniel slides an inch closer on his barstool. Jack drains his glass and slams it on the bar, the crack gunshot-loud over the droning jukebox. Daniel gets the message, slides two inches away on his stool.

There has been no kissing lately. Every morning, Jack undresses, showers, and redresses behind a locked bathroom door. If they could afford it, Daniel is sure that Jack would book separate rooms.

Tonight it is Daniel's turn at the Investigation. He raises his glass, fumes clouding in his throat, then lowers it. Standing by the pool table, in mud-spattered boots and a wrinkled t-shirt, is a man. He pulls his hair back from his face to take a shot, and Daniel sees Jack's nose. The ball thumps into the pocket, and the man smiles: Daniel sees Dad's dimple.

Daniel finishes his drink in three burning gulps, swallowing hard to keep it from rising back up. He fixes his eyes on the man's legs and walks towards him. He pulls a cigarette from the crumpled pack in his pocket, sticks it between his lips, and asks for a light.

Five minutes later they're in the alley behind the bar, the man's face lit by the sickly yellow moon. Daniel pushes him against the wall, stumbling on ground littered with broken planks, smashed bottles, shreds of plastic. The man licks Daniel's neck and Daniel pulls away, holding the man's hair back off his face with both hands, looking for Jack's nose. The man shows his teeth and undoes Daniel's belt. Daniel stares at the man's face under the dull half-moon, and he knows. He sees himself, his brother, his father.

Daniel stumbles, gets his balance. The man has Daniel's pants down on the uneven ground and Daniel doesn't want it, can't want it, but his body doesn't listen; his body knows that the man smells like Jack, that the man has the shapes and angles of Jack, and his body knows that that is good enough. Daniel leans his head back against the wall and stares up at the moon and feels the spread of the man's saliva across his skin.

Daniel leaves the man on his knees in the alley and goes back into the bar, back to his brother. Jack looks up and raises his eyebrows – is it? – but Daniel just shakes his head. He takes Jack's unsteady arm, slides him off the barstool, and leads him back to the motel.

Hammond

Björn Halldórsson

The very last thing I do after I kill him is to step outside and then re-enter the flat to get the feeling of walking in on the scene with fresh eyes. This is to see if anything looks out of place or otherwise seems suspicious. It's a trick I learnt from my boss at the bookstore; she insists that we exit and re-enter the store whenever we've finished arranging some display of new books in order to get the full feel of the customer seeing the display for the first time. The scene in the living room seems perfectly natural to me.

On the coffee table a heap of Hammond's grim Dunhill cigarettes sits in the ashtray next to the crumpled pack they came from. Also on the table is an open and half-finished bottle of 12 year-old Macallan and one of the thick bottomed whisky glasses that he so pompously refers to as an 'old-fashioned'. In the centre of the room is Hammond himself, gently swinging from a noose attached to the light fixture. Being very worried about whether it would support his weight I tested it on myself weeks ago. This is an old house and the hook had probably supported some sort of grand chandelier in its day, but it was best to be certain. Since Hammond is quite a lot heavier than me, I had clamped between my legs the biggest of his idiotic dumbbells and then threaded a piece of rope over the hook. The ceiling gave a groan when I put my weight on the rope, but the hook seemed sturdy enough. Obviously, that wasn't the same rope that I hanged him with.

He seems strangely peaceful, his head lolling forward and tucked between his shoulders. He's wet himself. Possibly more, judging from the smell. There is a dark spot on the crotch of his navy pinstripes, with streaks running down his right leg to the cuff. Little drops of piss are tinkling off the toe of his lacquered shoe and gathering in a wet spot on the Turkish carpet. This infuriates me; the carpet is mine. It set me back quite a bit of money and after two years of Hammond dropping cigarette ash on it despite my protests this seems like his final act of inconsideration. I hope that when the emergency services have been over the place and cut Hammond down I will be able to get the stain out with my mother's recipe of soap water with a shot of vinegar and lemon juice.

When I close the front door I don't bother with any wiping of fingerprints from doorknobs or other such nonsense, I live here after all. There is a slight drizzle outside and the morning's air feels crisp and fresh. I adjust my scarf and start walking at a brisk pace. Where to go now? I need to be away for a while. It would be ideal if someone else discovered the body but I'll probably have to do it myself, though I need to be away long enough to give Hammond a reasonable time frame to kill himself. I might as well stay away for the rest of the day and not discover him until this afternoon, once I have finished my lectures and the

Philosophy and Modern Thought workshop. Who knows, maybe I'll get lucky and one of Hammond's friends will drop by and find him. Best to make sure that my phone is on and has a full battery. If someone else does discover him I want to be certain that I'm able to answer when they call me with the news.

It won't hurt to have some sort of alibi fairly close to the time of Hammond's death, so I decide to go kill some time at a coffeehouse until my lectures start. There is a nearby place that I often go to, a quiet sort of place. They know me there, which will help. I am, of course, hoping to not need an alibi at all, but it won't hurt to be safe. It's by no means a bulletproof alibi, but I read somewhere, possibly in an Agatha Christie or a Nero Wolfe, that there is nothing more suspicious than a bulletproof alibi, so maybe it's just as well.

I'd been thinking of murdering Hammond for a long time.

It started as idle pondering, 'If I were to kill him, how should I go about it?' and so on. The first inkling of the idea came to me about a year ago, when I realised that he would never vacate my life willingly. On top of that, he had ingratiated himself with my parents who just thought the world of him. I'd tried to avoid having him meet them but to no avail. I set the date of their visit at a time when I knew him to be away in London but the bastard cancelled his trip when he got wind of them coming, saying things such as 'I simply won't hear of it old son!' and 'I must thank them for your gentile upbringing, without which where would we be?' His habit of speaking like a character out of Wodehouse always grated my nerves. Once they arrived he swooped in, all smiles, exchanging a firm grip with my father and even going so far as to peck my mother's hand. It was all terribly embarrassing. After the visit I could not have a civil conversation with my parents on the telephone without them asking after Hammond.

Through this and other encounters he utterly ensconced himself in my life, entrenched among my friends, acquaintances and family. I could tell that we were doomed to be 'best friends' for the rest of both our lives if I didn't do something about it now, and nobody seemed to believe me when I said we just rented together and actually weren't all that close. In fact in some instances their looks when I made such claims were actually insinuating. I had tried broaching the subject of him leaving several times but he simply gazed at me with that confused look of his that he used whenever he pretended not to understand what you meant. I had seen him use it many times to get out of paying his tab or to disarm some witty remark made at his expense, staring you down with such concern and puzzlement in his eyes that you could not help but think you had just uttered some completely horrid faux pas. No one seemed to be able to see him in his true light. Everyone else seemed to think him just a 'stand-up guy', a 'right riot'. Mind you, none of them had to live with him.

He had at that time just been kicked off his floor at Salisbury Hall for having a mini-fridge and a humidifier in his room, both of which he refused to give up, claiming asthma and diabetes to justify the appliances. I should have turned him away right there at the doorstep, but I felt a host's urge to offer him a cup of tea and while I was in the kitchen fussing with warming the kettle and sifting the leaves, he simply lugged his travel chest up the stairs and unpacked the lot. I brought the tea back into the living room and he was nowhere to be seen. I walked up the flight of stairs to the spare room I used for working or housing the occasional guest to find him sprawled out on the bed reading a book with his shoes on, his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. He had already hung up two of his silly draperies and his framed poster of Monet's water lilies, and had all the air of having occupied that room for years. I poured him a cup of tea, received a 'most kind old chap' and then had to sit there, saucer on my lap, on the only chair, and finish my own cup in silence while he went back to the book, his cup and saucer balanced on his barrel chest.

The coffeehouse is empty when I come in, aside from a surly barista with an eyebrow ring at the counter. I order a coffee, fussing with the change to make an impression on him, then ask him the time so he'll remember if questioned, if it even comes to that. Claiming a corner table by the window, I sit down and start reviewing the events of the day.

When I entered the living room that morning Hammond was passed out drunk on the sofa. He had stayed up until God knows what hour last night to watch a series of Godard movies with a Kurosawa chaser. I am quite certain that Hammond does not enjoy this sort of culturally significant cinema. I believe that, much like his reading of Lord Byron's poetry or his framed poster of Monet's water lilies, it's just something that he does so that he can tell people that he has. Most likely he had stumbled in conversation with someone down at the pub, expounding his high opinion of these directors only to be then found out as not having ever seen their movies, and now felt the need to do a little homework. He had obviously fetched the whisky bottle from the cupboard to help the medicine go down, and thus gradually gotten very, very drunk while smoking his emergency supply of Dunhills. Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* was still playing on the screen, so he couldn't have passed out more than a couple of hours earlier.

He didn't look good. Greasy hair plastered to his scalp, stains on his shirt. I immediately recognised this as the opportunity I had been waiting for, but just to be certain I pinched his nose shut to see how he would respond; if he awoke I could claim I was waking him so he would not miss his *History and the Brontës* class. After I had held his nose for a couple of seconds he groaned, mumbled and pushed my hand away before resettling and going back to sleep. That would do.

In the kitchen I put on my yellow dishwashing gloves, making sure they were dry and clean, then went into the conservatory and yanked the clothesline out of the wall. It was a long piece of wire covered in yellow plastic, screwed to the wall on each end and then threaded through hooks on the walls, back and forth. The loops that held the screws were made by splicing the wire back onto itself and so were thoroughly attached and secure, and I made sure to yank the line savagely out of the wall, leaving ugly holes in the plaster. It would have to look like an impulse suicide, since I had no illusions of faking a suicide note. I tried to get some of Hammond's fingerprints on the clothesline, and then threaded the loop at one end back on to itself, creating a noose. Kicking my shoes off, I got up on the coffee table to measure the proper length and then tied the other end to the light fixture, pulling on it to make sure that the knot wouldn't slip.

Now, the main event. I needed to somehow get him up into that noose. Grabbing both of his hands, I pulled him forward, ducking in at the last minute so that when he fell face first out of the couch the weight of his body landed on my shoulder. I bent my knees and then heaved myself up holding him in a fireman's grip. My knees almost buckled from the weight, but I managed to stay on my feet and get up on the coffee table, a sturdy piece of furniture fully capable of supporting the both of us. I could hear Hammond mumbling something, it sounded like 'thanks, old chum.' He seemed to think I was helping him upstairs.

Everything had been pretty thoroughly planned out up until this point, where I figured I would just have to get him up there somehow. Balancing the weight on my right leg I reached out and caught the noose, holding it with one hand while I let Hammond slip down in front of me, keeping a tight grip around him until my hand was against his lower back, latched in the crook of his arm. With my one arm thus placed and the other sticking straight out holding the noose it must have looked like the two of us were in the middle of a waltz, and I was just getting ready to give him a dip. Surprisingly though, Hammond gave me a bit of help at this point by taking some of the weight onto his own two feet, though I dared not let him go, and acted swiftly for fear that he was coming around. I slipped the noose over his head and secured it. Even though I had tested the strength of the ceiling hook I couldn't trust what such a great yank could do to it, and so I stepped down onto the floor, planning to let the clothesline gradually take his weight. I was still holding onto his body, my head hovering around his midsection, when I heard him give a soft chuckle.

'What are you up to,' he mumbled, grinning with half shut eyes. He stroked the back of my head, running his fingers through my hair.

I flinched away from his body, leaving him to drop the last few centimetres. With the wrench of the clothesline a spray of white plaster came loose from the ceiling and fell to the ground like dandruff. I at least had enough presence of mind to duck from under it and keep a safe distance so as to not leave any marks on the floor.

Hammond had come awake in the noose. Awake and kicking. His legs flung about, toes trying and failing to get a foothold on the coffee table, his hands grabbing at the clothesline. There were these great, rattling heaves coming from him, and all the while he was staring down at me with bulging eyes, an innocent look of utter astonishment on his face and two throbbing veins on his forehead that I had never seen before.

It really did take an inordinate amount of time for him to stop thrashing and making noises, but at his legs did stop kicking. His hands slipped from his throat and fell limp to his sides, a gentle swaying all that his efforts had left him with. His eyes still seemed alive to me though, still had that look of surprise. I allowed myself a few moments to be rewarded by the blissful sense of weightlessness that had come over me when he stopped moving, and then I started getting things in order. As I moved around the room, Hammond's eyes seemed to follow me, like eyes in a Victorian painting.

Sitting in the coffeehouse, the weightlessness remains. It may sound silly but it's slowly dawning on me that once this day is over I will never have to see him again. I will never have to hear his voice, see his face or smell his cigarettes. I won't ever need to come home to one of his messes in the kitchen or the bathroom or to find he has rearranged the living room furniture and hung up a horrid jazz poster on the bathroom door. It is the first time that I truly understand the finality of death, and thinking about it almost fills me with regret over the whole thing. It really is too bad things went the way they did. His poor parents, having to bury their only son. Poor dead Hammond, hanging from a light fixture in the living room, I guess he couldn't help it. He didn't know any better. It is a shame, but the thing ran its course and now it's done.

It's almost time to head off to my lecture. Outside it has stopped raining and the sun is out, the wet street gleaming with sunbeams. They reflect off the ground and off of everything and paint the inside of the coffeehouse a dark, honey-coloured yellow. The world looks brand new. I check my watch again and get ready to leave. Later today I will go home and discover his body.

Edgelands

Steven Carson

There is the kingdom at the edge of the
World, and beyond the endless rolling freeze –
No less likely home to be had by men
Who dwell in softer earth, far over seas
In those eternal plains beneath endless sky,
Though Byzantines came after Roman drum,
And through the rough and darkling seas they still
From far reaches to ancient Alba come.

Gaps: A Conversation

Ero Filippaki

Be independent.

Those hers were words.

She being despondent swung her ladle full of lentils

And exclaimed:

Be In Deep End E.D.

She looked like a quirky cartoon character

Coveted by Wrinkles and Moss.

And so Being Deep Ended, I,

Tongue-startled, sat

And stirred.

All maternities aside, it was a good conversation.

Independence Dates

Elizabeth Reeder

The erosion of independence as we age is persistent and steady. My parents, who have both had debilitating illnesses when relatively young, have had to fight to keep their independence. My mom is still fighting, even as her body fails, again and again, to keep her safe. I am aware, I fear, that my mom will have to have permanent 24 hour care within the next few months and that independence, or the illusion of it, will be gone. These short pieces capture moments of this erosion and form part of a collection of lyrical essays on memory, landscape, creativity and loss.

27 November

Dad is not well. He sleeps for a full twenty-four hours after being discharged from the hospital. When we try to give him his meds the next day, my brother and I are sure we'll give him the wrong pills, the wrong doses, and with this many pills surely we'll kill him. Dad forces them down with water, refuses food. He won't let Gordon help him to the bathroom but my brother sits outside the door for over half an hour to make sure he's okay. At times it's possible dad's fallen asleep; at other times it's clear he's nauseous with the meds. He makes it back to bed, sleeps more. We help him down the stairs the next day, Friday, for our delayed Thanksgiving dinner. He's a patriarch in name only.

He's not feeling any better on Saturday and talks about going to the doctor's open clinic the next day. He's barely walking, can't hold his attention long enough to carry on a brief conversation, and we say we think it's unsafe for him to drive. Gord and I, separately, more than once, offer to take him to the doctor the next morning. Dad wakes up before seven on Sunday and asks my sister-in-law to move their car so he can get his car out. She does.

What should I have said? she says comforting her newborn after she's rushed upstairs to tell us. I didn't know how to say no.

Dad's already gone. He could kill someone, kill himself, and he's made Gordon's wife complicit in anything that might happen.

Excuse me, I say, and go back into the room where my partner is still asleep on the slow-leaking air mattress. I close the door. Pack up our stuff. If they don't fucking want my help, then I'll not fucking give it.

Gordon knocks on the door, Elizabeth, lets go get him.

It takes a few phone calls and three phone books to find the right address. We're just over the train tracks sitting at the lights and both of us stare at a tree fluttering with birds; as we drive by and see plain old starlings rustling there I say, I thought those were waxwings.

So did I, says Gord.

The doctor's office is quiet and we introduce ourselves as the kids of Frank Reeder to the nurse at the desk who disappears, finds dad and asks if it's okay if we come in. He says yes and she shows us to where my dad sits in a room waiting for a doctor. He's slow and considered speaking to the doctor; it's a long history he has to explain to the newbie, who doesn't say much of anything at all.

I'm fine, Dad says as we leave, I'm fine. But he lets me drive him home.

2 February

Mom's in a nursing home, rehabbing from lung surgery which exacerbated an already present but not yet named condition. She can come home when she can manage the long walk from the car and up the six steps to their house.

It's a flail. Involuntary. The wild movement which cuts a line out of forced stillness, the slurred steps of a shifted gait. This arm here, struck out. Imagine a light held by two pinched fingers (if they could still pinch), lights off, slow shutter speed, and it arcs, a yoyo caught in light, in flight. It's not like she doesn't know, she does.

This man in the wheelchair, a c-curve of a back, his face expressionless, something else that goes. You can already see it, how mom stares a little bit too long, how her face waits

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before curving into a smile. But she knows it and her ears, with turtles dangling (the only earrings she has here) turn red. She looks, blinks slowly, He has Parkinson's, she says.

She blinks, hiding her blue eyes just for a second. And when she walks she lifts her legs clearly until the 10th or 11th step when her left leg gets tired and doesn't quite clear the floor. I ignore it and she tries to.

Wax Works

George Craig

She's had the arthritis for as long as I've known her. But recently it's become a real distorting force: twisting her spine, contorting her joints, meandering through her hands to cripple her fingers. She's never spoken of the disease, never complained, but its hold over her is clear; knuckles gnarled and warping, the involuntary winces of pain from her gradual dislocations.

So I do what anyone would, and persuade her. But one after another the doctors shrug, 'Age,' and she gives up. Lets go of the possibility of opening a screw-top jar, the dignity of holding a knife firmly enough to quarter a sandwich, the joy of shaking another's hand. Then I find the wax, on one of those middle-of-the-night teleshopping transmissions designed to exploit insomniacs. Maybe? Worth a try. They take my details and ship out this hardened plastic oval bowl and six packs of soon-to-be-molten wax the next day.

I leave her alone with it on the first day to grow accustomed. Now she's expert; her movements have become those of an artist absorbed in her work. Hands slide smoothly into the bowl, submerged to the wrists. They remain there for a few seconds then silently lift from the hot-pool of wax, a congealing white film engulfing their outline. Then again. And again.

With each submersion, her tongue seals itself to the roof of her mouth, holding there as her breathing stops, then releases in a warm sigh. Eight, nine, ten times she gasps as her hands re-emerge from the wax, each time thicker, whiter. Finally, she slips her hands into clear plastic bags and lifts them to her face as the heat seeps into her joints. The bags steam, the wax cools. She removes the plastic to reveal smooth wax gloves and regards them with affection, before pushing the sheaths downwards from her wrists, letting perfect hollow casts drop into the bowl and liquefy.

'Feel', she says. Her hands are soft and warm. Like a child's. Sealed with a plump pinkened veneer, fresh protection against the moist destructive air. She takes my hand between hers and squeezes.

Author Biographies

Alan Bissett

Alan Bissett is a novelist, playwright and performer from Falkirk. He was Glenfiddich Scottish Writer of the Year 2011 and his books, plays and short films have won numerous awards, both national and international, including a Scottish Bafta. His most recent novel is *Pack Men* and he will be touring his one-man show, *Ban This Filth*, later in the year.

Stephanie Brown

Stephanie Brown is a second year part-time student on the University of Glasgow's Creative Writing MLitt course.

Karen Campbell

Karen Campbell is a graduate of Glasgow University's Creative Writing Masters. Before turning to writing, she was a police officer with Strathclyde Police, and has published four novels (all Hodder & Stoughton) focusing on the politics of policing, and the people behind the uniform. Her fifth book, *This is Where I Am*, about a Somali refugee living in Glasgow, is published by Bloomsbury March 2013.

James Carson

James Carson was born in Glasgow, next to an abattoir, which possibly explains a lifetime butchering the English language. He's currently studying for the MLitt in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. His writing has appeared in magazines, such as *From Glasgow to Saturn* and *Fractured West*, and in anthologies, including *Tip Tap Flat* and *A Sense of Place*. He recently co-organised a literary event for LGBT History Month, which attracted contributions from Scotland, England, Hungary and the USA. James now lives next to a brewery, which perhaps accounts for his carefree approach to punctuation.

Steven Carson

Steven Carson was born at a young age in Glasgow, Scotland and currently lives in Milngavie. He is a supporter of Scottish independence and is pro-immigration. He also writes and takes photographs for his blog at <http://bateof.blogspot.com>

George Craig

George's stories have been published in *From Glasgow to Saturn*, *Tip Tap Flat*, placed runner-up in The Guardian Short Story Competition and shortlisted for the Bridport Prize. He completed the Faber Academy's Novel Writing course (2010), graduated with distinction from Glasgow University's MLitt (2011) and holds a previous Honours degree in law from Glasgow University and a Masters degree in Comparative Jurisprudence from NYU. He is currently working on a first novel and a collection of stories.

R.A. Davis

R. A. Davis was born in Edinburgh, raised in Kent, grew up in Wales and settled in Glasgow. He holds an MLitt in Creative Writing from Glasgow University. He lives temporarily in Ghana.

Ero Filippaki

Born and raised in Athens, Greece, Ero Filippaki is a PhD candidate in the University of Glasgow, currently researching Body Politics and Language in WWII novels. Keen on psychoanalysis, the literature of the abject as well as the literary genre of science-fiction, she loves exploring the possibilities of linguistics, literature, and the body. She enjoys writing short stories and poems and travelling, and aspires to combine both in a full-time vocation.

Ruth Foulis

Ruth Lillian Foulis has studied at Glasgow School of Art and Ontario College of Art and Design. She works predominantly in collage, lomography, and moving image, exploring dreamlike landscapes found in world around us and those hidden within the mind.

Anna Gebbie

Anna Gebbie is currently a second year Modern Languages student at Glasgow University. She is originally from Edinburgh, and lived there until starting university.

Björn Halldórsson

Björn Halldórsson was born in Reykjavík, 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 their two cats.

James Kelman

James Kelman has been writing stories and essays since his early twenties and does not look like stopping.

Kirsty Logan

Kirsty Logan lives in Glasgow and writes fiction about islands, fairytales, and sex (and often all three). She is currently a fiction writer, literary editor and book reviewer, while also working on a novel and a short story collection. Her work has been published in many places, from the prestigious to the preposterous. She has a semicolon tattooed on her toe. Say hello at www.kirstylogan.com.

Stuart Nisbet

Stuart Nisbet is a curious blend of engineer and historian, whose history PhD was completed when his three children were at University. In recent years he has been exploring Glasgow's historical links with the Caribbean. He has published factual history books and articles, but has recently moved into literary 'fiction'. An honorary fellow of the Department of Archaeology, he is currently doing the Creative Writing: Fiction course in the University's Centre for Open Studies.

Elizabeth Reeder

Elizabeth Reeder, originally from Chicago, lives and works in Glasgow. She teaches on the Creative Writing Programme at University of Glasgow and recent publications include two novels, *Ramshackle* (shortlisted for the Saltire First Book Award) and *Fremont*. You can find her at www.ekreeder.com or please do follow on twitter @ekreeder