

FROM
GLASGOW
TO
SATURN

Letter from the Editors

Welcome to Issue 41 of *From Glasgow to Saturn*! As we prepare to enter the new academic year at the University of Glasgow, we're reminded that this very much a time for endings and new beginnings. We're delighted to welcome a new, talented cohort of writers, artists, and photographers to the city, and we can't wait to see the brilliant words and art you'll bring to our next call for submissions.

In that spirit, this issue, we bring you thrilling new voices and welcome back familiar favourites in unfamiliar guises. So, a little suggested reading, if you're unsure of where to start: if you enjoy dark fairy-tales, then turn to Angie Spoto's chilling 'The Little Girl and the Glowworm.' Or maybe you'd prefer a slice of real-life, courtesy of 'The Mother and I Aren't Talking and Other Tales' by Rhona Miller? Lydia Roy's 'Epiphanies' freeze-frames the present, while Sarah Smith's 'Her Vanished Hand' takes us back to times we might wish we could not remember.

In poetry, we span the globe: we suggest you sample Marita Arvaniti's 'The Love Bye-lingual,' the story of a relationship in two tongues. Elsewhere, Irene Hossack explores the 'West of the Euphrates,' while John Bournsnel finds resonance in western pop culture in 'Alfred Molina Is Playing Doctor Octopus.' You'll also find experimental poetry by Alexandra Grunberg, in the form of the stark 'Somebody Died Last Night,' as well as Steve Rigley's wryly humorous 'Retuning.' Steve also supplies this issue's stunning cover, and his artwork is joined inside by photographs by Maria Sledmere and Nour El-Issa, who also bring their poetic skills to bear. And, as always, there is much, much more to choose from...

This latest issue would not be possible without the kindness and generosity of Dr Helen Stoddart and Alex Logie at the University of Glasgow's School of Critical Studies, whose financial support secures the future of *From Glasgow to Saturn*. Thank you to Dr Carolyn Jess-Cooke in Creative Writing for her ongoing, passionate support of the journal. We'd also like to extend our thanks to Sarah Spence, who left the editorial team

during the production of issue 41. We wish her all the best in her new role as Associate Editor at The Polyphony, the blog of Durham University's Centre for Medical Humanities.

Finally, we would like to thank everyone who submitted their work to our recent call for submissions for giving us some very difficult decisions to make this issue. And thank you, as ever, to our wonderfully enthusiastic readers, without whom this journal would not exist.

We can't wait to hear what you think about our latest issue – so why not get in touch via social media and let us know? Follow us on twitter at @glasgow2saturn and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/glasgow2saturn – where we'll soon be posting about how you can get involved in the next issue of *From Glasgow to Saturn*.

Ruth EJ Booth

Valerie Brentjes

Claire Kennedy

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Noresund

Meg MacDonald

It was mine before it was ours:
Chosen, bought, carried, built.
Hands blistered with each turn of the screw.
Held those dreams and fears I knew alone,
held those moments of comfort too.
Now it is just a partial frame –
no bolts, no base:
Nothing that can bear my weight.
I dare not ask you for it back
– or even if you have it still.
Left with wrought iron bones
that seem to weigh so much more now.
Is salvage possible? Discard, buy new?
Until then only borrowed rest –
I was mine before I was ours too.

Marginalia

Aea Varfis-van Warmelo

1. The Baroque movement, prevalent in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, can be characterised by its ¹ opulent, extravagant style. Although similar to the later Rococo movement, it can be distinguished by its focus on ² grandeur, ³ pomposity and weight, unlike Rococo, which explores frivolity, lightness ⁴ and grace. ⁵ The term Baroque derives from the Portuguese *barroco*, meaning ‘irregular ⁶ pearl,’ most likely from the Latin *verruca*, meaning ⁷ ‘wart.’

¹ frankly ridiculous

² clumsy

³ ugliness,

⁴ petticoats, the colour pink

⁵ Unsurprisingly,

⁶ (alternatively: lumpy, malformed, garish)

⁷ – you guessed it –

2. Leda and the Swan (1601) Rubens ¹

Here Rubens depicts the myth of Leda's seduction by Zeus in his swan disguise. Most notably, ² Rubens' portrayal indicates an erotic tenderness between woman and swan, rather than the accepted ³ interpretation that Zeus is deceiving Leda. The work is particularly studied for its relation to Michelangelo's similar (now lost) piece depicting the same image ⁴. The two paintings are mirrored ⁵: Rubens portrays the female form as softly curvaceous ⁶, whereas Michelangelo's Leda is harsh and muscular ⁷.

¹ The first time I saw you, this painting hung above us, mockingly erotic. You'd dropped your pen and it clattered across the floor, echoing throughout the gallery. You were embarrassed, I was in love.

² so you claim,

³ , so I claim,

⁴ , though this is not why either of us liked it

⁵ and indeed there is a similar duality to my memory of this encounter. You had been very still for a very long time before I approached you. We confirmed we both studied art history and I spared a moment to hate myself before asking you out. Two art history students meeting in a gallery – it was a cliché neither of us could truly endure, but one possibly sweetened by the fact that we could endure each other. Later you curved around me like that swan, and at the time I liked it, but now I wonder whether I should have snapped your neck there and then. That is the duality: what was once a throbbingly, obnoxiously happy recollection is now tinted with the belief that the forthcoming catastrophe should have been obvious. I am of course referring to the fact that you have broken my heart, a phrase I use to indulge in another cliché. However,

⁶ and it looks a bit like you

⁷ and it looks a bit like you

3. Las Hilanderas (1650) Velázquez

Although initially a matter of ¹ contention, it is now widely believed that *Las Hilanderas* portrays the myth of Arachne ². The painting is worth noting for several ³ reasons: firstly, the foreground and background depict two temporally distinct scenes from the myth, merged into one continuous narrative ⁴; secondly, Velázquez's layering of narrative is done through a startling use of chiaroscuro ⁵; thirdly, Velázquez borrows Titian's *The Rape of Europa*, and recreates it as the tapestry in the centre of the piece. Foregoing mythical allusions, the painting can also be read as a commentary on artistic creation: indeed, the spinners in the foreground appear to be creating the tapestry seen in the background, and Velázquez may be commenting on the hidden nature of the artist ⁶.

¹ not particularly thrilling

² , Arachne being the Greek word for spider, just in case you were wondering why this makes me think of you.

³ actually very interesting

⁴ , which is an idea I used to struggle with but now seems obvious as I am fully capable of experiencing both now and then with equal intensity, and maybe merging narratives shouldn't feel so confusing. For instance: in the shadowy foreground of my mind is the recollection of you reading these passages to me, and now in the illuminated present I am butchering them. It is an inversion of Velásquez' vision, an *unweaving*, if you will.

⁵ and I do think it startling because it disarms me every time, the way the light pours into that chamber in the background, and the way he is asking you me us to look beyond. The foreground chiaroscuro people are perfunctory, in their own way, concealed for a reason, but it takes both dark and light, foreground and background to weave this story. Maybe this has nothing to do with you but it feels like it should.

⁶ as he becomes someone concealed in shadows and implied rather than present. This is what I think is correct, though you have different thoughts on the matter. Of course your arguments were more compelling when I didn't think you were a loathsome bitch.

4. The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp (1632) Rembrandt ¹

This painting is of note as it merges fact and fiction. Rembrandt had been commissioned to paint the very real practice of public dissection, but the image he portrays is imagined, as an actual dissection would begin by cracking open the chest cavity ² and not the arm. Rembrandt's mise-en-scene employs Christ-like iconography: the corpse's body is prostrate, a cloth draped across its loins, its face partially obscured by a shadow connoting death. ³ Additionally, the work prompts an exploration of the epistemological cycle: none of the students gaze at the corpse, but rather seem to scan a book whose contents are obscured from the viewer, perhaps in an allusion to our preference for the familiar and the ways in which it influences our understanding of the real ⁴. This subversion is manifested in the uncanny vision of the corpse's twisted arm ⁵ and its exposed, manipulated tendons ⁶.

¹ This painting is better than your academic field deserves, and though this fact is definitely not the thing I hate the most about you it is on the fucking list

² (a practice you are familiar with)

³ This has once more reframed my memory of that first Leda'd night. Remember when you got out of bed and giggled when you looked at me, saying that I reminded you of the corpse in this painting? I should have seen that anatomist's glint in your eyes and the hungry way you looked at my flesh, a hunger that wasn't sexual but malicious, like you were already contriving my misery, ready to wrap my tendons around your finger and make me twitch.

⁴ , or perhaps even a commentary on how insipid it is to study art that has already been dissected for years

⁵ which reminds me of your feeble thesis

⁶ which reminds me of your feeble, contorted arguments

5. Portrait of Louis XVI (1780) Callet

Although royal portraits are embroiled in the political context of their creation, Callet's work is a clear indication of later Baroque work. It is very clearly inspired by Rigaud's portrait of Louis XIV, in which the monarch's famous declamation *'l'état c'est moi'* seemingly manifests into a depiction of a powerful, absolutist monarch. The most evident distinction is in subject, as Louis XVI lacks his grandfather's severity, and rather ¹ gazes at the artist and viewer imperiously. ² The frivolity of the piece is indicative of the move to Rococo, particularly in the light colours, as there is little dynamic contrast between the blue and gold. ³ There is no lack of effort on Callet's part to imply the monarch is powerful and divinely appoin⁴

¹ looks a bit like a shrimpy wimp and

² Sometimes I picture Marie-Antoinette and Louis XVI ripping into a pomegranate. They use their mouth and their hands and the seeds burst between their teeth, red juice runs down their face and they laugh and laugh and laugh and

³ You once said that you love this painting because it makes you feel comfortable. In hindsight, this was another red flag.

⁴ I cannot read any more of this drivel. My interest is beginning to wane and I only have a couple more paintings' worth of vitriol, so I must preserve it. Though it was initially cathartic to deface these textbooks that were apparently so beloved that you managed to forget them in my apartment, I am now amazed that you've been able to sustain five years' worth of academic interest in this shockingly dull art, this stupid, stupid art that's all about self-indulgence. It's a visual treat, a macaroon of paint, insubstantial and pretty. Another sign of just how boring you are, but still full of unearned arrogance. You laughed at my thesis and said my writing was 'unnecessarily masculine,' which at the time stung, but now I realise is a statement as vapid as you are.

6. Judith Beheading Holofernes (1598–1599) Caravaggio ¹

Caravaggio's work is a direct retelling of the biblical tale of Judith's seduction and beheading of the general Holofernes, in an attempt to save her people ². The figures are depicted with theatrical flair, illuminated starkly against a dark background ³, their faces delicately painted to depict emotion ⁴. Indeed, Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro is masterful in its simplicity, as the dark background is what enables the vital contrast of Judith's white illumination to glow ⁵, whilst outlining Holofernes' taut but useless muscularity ⁶. Caravaggio places Judith's serving woman on the periphery of the painting, gazing into the central action with anger and bloodlust, possibly as a means of integrating the viewer ⁷.

¹ Absolutely zero prizes for guessing what event in our relationship this reminds me of.

² – which is certainly admirable of Judith, but it does make me wonder what your excuse was

³ much in the same way you woke me up in the middle of the night by switching on the bedside lamp and announcing that you couldn't let my last (might I emphasise: drunken) comment slide

⁴ and Judith's eyebrows even crease in the same way yours do – it's as if you'd been taking notes from her!

⁵ so it's profoundly ironic that you always said we only worked as well as we did because we were such different people, that you could never love someone who loved baroque as much as you did and instead my distaste for it was 'refreshing'

⁶ which echoes your inexplicable claim that I am a 'walking ball of toxic masculinity' and that you had grown tired of my 'sneering condescension.' Of course, any attempt at contradiction was useless – I had already been pinned, your blade already poised

⁷ or a quiet reminder that we are not the subjects or protagonists of this affair, that our melodrama is insignificant in comparison. With this defeat in mind, please turn to the one painting we agreed to love together and you will find my parting comments.

7. Girl with the Pearl Earring (1665) Vermeer

In this piece, Vermeer ¹

¹ Picture me, pen poised, ready to rip this painting to shreds, but completely unable to. The girl's gaze is like a hand gripped around my heart.

I try very hard to see a face other than yours here. You glisten in her pearl and I can almost taste you on my tongue, feel you on my teeth. This painting used to make me weep, the light was gentle, I could hear the brushstrokes. Then, enter you, stage right, with your corrosive presence and exit me, stage left, corroded.

If you were an art period, you would be Baroque – not for beauty or magnitude, but because you are so selfish, dripping with self-obsession, lack of self-control, lack of self-awareness, in fact, lack of self, surrounded by a nasty gaudy gilded frame. It takes so little talent to be convinced that everything is about you and your fucking feelings.

Yet here I am, scribbling in the margins of a sophomoric reference book that you have made *supple* from overuse as if you weren't aware of Wikipedia's existence – and you've made me just as bad as you. I can't even read about this awful art without thinking about you and my feelings. That is arguably the worst thing you have done to me. I used to see myself a beacon of objectivity, comfortably critical and unfeeling. So imagine my disgust at feeling like I deserve more than a footnote or a margin, feeling that I need anything other than my own company.

Ultimately, I think we should both take a note from your art with its light and its shadows, and reassess: we are both vapid, useless students. We encouraged each other to think art was about us, that we deserved something more than the periphery. That's just not true.

All we are is chiaroscuro people: obscured and hidden for a reason.

Her Vanished Hand

Sarah Smith

The church gates are closed but not locked. She remembers them locked. Perhaps because it was night-time. Recalls their skint-kneed, tanned limbs clambering over. Angela McIntyre, smiling, beckoning her in.

Pauline reaches for her make-up bag, flips down the overhead mirror. Lips balmed, she collects her things and gets out of the car.

A variation of stone on the church's exterior suggests a core dating from the Middle Ages, respectfully preserved despite later additions. A small cemetery lies to the east and slopes towards a burn that runs the length of the village.

Pauline is a taphophile. Someone with a love of graveyards. She enjoys wandering around cemeteries. Likes deciphering inscriptions on crumbling gravestones, conjuring stories from lists of names and occupations. Sitting on wooden benches breathing the still, sad air.

Her granny liked a graveyard too. She often took Pauline to this one on days when there was no school and Mum was working. In between the housework and the shopping, the pair of them would take a breather with the local dead. Isa would plonk down her message bag, and they'd sit companionably on a bench or a stone wall. Pauline fishing sweets from a poke, and Isa smoking a nip she'd secreted earlier in a small, zipped compartment of her purse.

It is late summer. Changeable. Trail clouds skim over a faint blue sky. Sunlight pours through gaps in dense leaves, casting shadows. Pauline walks along the main path, stopping now and then to read the engraving on a headstone. She knows this is distraction. She knows she is looking for the angel.

In her mind's eye, the angel overlooks the graveyard, clean, pale, and distinct.

In clear moonlight, with the smell of woods all around, the angel loomed over them, in stark relief against ivy dense as ink. The ordinariness of the cemetery in daylight, forty-five years later, is hard to equate with the portentous scene she remembers. Or thinks she remembers. A quartet of little girls in summer clothes, beginning to shiver as night falls and cold sets in. Angela McIntyre, reading out the inscription, weaving a ghostly story from the angel's warning.

When Mrs McIntyre suggested Pauline play with Angela and her pals, Mum was pleased. She could get on with the housework, while the older girls kept Pauline occupied.

Angela was the eldest, two years ahead of Pauline in school. The other two were in Angela's class and old enough to walk by themselves from adjoining parts of the village. Gail Wilson's ears were pierced with smooth golden globes. Fiona Bell wore flared denims embroidered with yellow-eyed daisies. All three enticed and intimidated in equal measure. Pauline hardly opened her mouth except to answer questions fired at her on unfamiliar topics. They went into fits when she said she preferred David Cassidy over the Bay City Rollers.

The waste ground behind their terraced houses comprised a strip of land full of overgrown shrubs and weeds. The local garage sat to one side. The girls climbed a slatted fence and dropped down onto a low wall. They crept along, careful of splinters and the worst of the nettles. Gradually, a flattened pathway emerged, leading to a rusted delivery van.

The floor had been cleared of dirt and an empty cable reel hauled inside to serve as a table. It was here that a plan was hatched. After tea, they would meet at the McIntyre's and, from there, Angela promised a night-time adventure. She had something to show them.

Pauline's stomach felt knotted and hard. She forked her chips and cold meat and dipped them in bean sauce. Swallowed it down anyway.

Angela chapped on the door at six-thirty. To collect her and promise to walk her home later. It was still light outside.

The McIntyre's house shared the same layout as Pauline's. Their bedrooms were facsimiles of each other. Angela sat cross-legged on a patchwork quilt. Her bed had a padded headboard and a blue gingham valance. Fiona and Gail stretched out on the carpet. Pauline perched on a stool that slid out from Angela's vanity unit.

Angela's eyes shone with intent. They would say they were going down the main street to buy sweeties.

'The Paki's is still open,' said Angela.

Pauline's mum told her not to say *paki* and *chinkie* but not what the alternative was. If she said Hussain's or the Bamboo Garden, folk would look at her like she was from another planet. It was easier just to keep her mouth shut.

The four of them breezed out of the front door into the twilight. Angela's parents barely glanced up from the telly.

It was still relatively warm outside as they walked through the underpass and on to the main street. Instead of heading left to go to the shop, they turned right, towards the cemetery.

Angela scaled the gates first and Fiona followed. Pauline, though smaller, got over without much bother. Gail had short legs and moaned that she would get her clothes ruined. Still, they hauled her over eventually.

It was dark and damp in the graveyard. Even with the moon shining, it was difficult to distinguish the path or to be sure of what she was looking at.

Angela led the way to a cluster of elaborate headstones and her three acolytes watched, mesmerised, as she clambered over a moss-covered stone and began to brush twisted brambles and honeysuckle back from the large headstone itself. Rising from the grave was an alabaster figure, white against dark trees and sky.

Angela's skinny fingers began to trace the letters wrapped around the monument.

'Erected by Thomas Young. In memory of his beloved wife Margaret Keith Cameron. Born 28th November 1854, died 15th August 1895.'

Pauline peered at the words, could make out a jumble of capital letters, numbers and the word *love*. She doubted she would ever be as good a reader as Angela.

Fiona shivered. 'I'm freezing.'

Gail giggled and rubbed her own goose-pimpled arms.

Angela bent down to another carving that contained a list of names. Her sandalled feet tangled in green tendrils of ivy.

'And their children: Thomas, died 1890, aged 2, Agnes, died 1890, aged 1, Maggie, died 1894, aged 18 months.'

All those little children dead. Pauline thought of their bones under the stone. Eyes still glittering in their sockets.

Gail stood open-mouthed.

'Aww. They wee children. That's a pure sin.'

'That's what happened in the olden days,' Angela said, disdainfully.

She pointed at the figure towering above them.

'See that?' she asked Pauline.

Pauline nodded.

'That's his beloved wife, watching over her dead babies.'

She looks like an angel, thought Pauline.

The statue's blank eyes were raised heavenwards, hands clasped in futile prayer.

Angela brushed moss from a stone carved in the shape of an open book. Her voice was laced with catastrophe. *'He who touches her left hand before midnight shall find his own vanished by morning.'*

Fiona wound a piece of chewing gum round her pink tongue.

'What does that even mean, Angela?'

Angela kept her gaze on Pauline.

'It means,' said Angela pointedly, 'that her husband has laid a curse upon the tomb. A warning to those who come near her.'

Pauline peered at the faint, old-fashioned script, letters curling into each other. She thought she recognised the word *midnight* from fairy tales.

Angela clambered back towards them. She nudged Pauline.

'Touch it. I dare you.'

Fiona and Gail giggled, nervously.

Pauline didn't move.

'You're too scared, aren't you?'

'No,' Pauline said flatly.

She was terrified but too frightened of Angela to admit it. She felt sick and trapped and childish. She wanted her mum, her granny, home.

'Go on, then,' Angela said.

Pauline turned and faced the statue.

She inched gingerly over the mosses and lichens that split and slipped under her feet. Globules of sweet, black bramble juice spilled onto thin white flowers. She reached out to steady herself and felt, too late, the spikes hidden beneath their broad leaves. Tears, too fat to hold in, leaked from her eyes.

Pauline stole a glance behind her and saw Gail and Fiona clutching each other, squawking with soap-opera emotion. Angela stood off to one side, watching curiously, like a cat idly toying with a maimed daddy-long-legs.

Pauline felt as if she were a puppet, her legs and arms jangling like string, jerked around by a force much stronger than herself. The realisation that there was no way out built up inside her until it was almost a relief to reach the statue and stretch upwards in search of her hand. If she died here, she might be taken underground by the angel, entombed alongside the dead children, mercifully out of reach of Angela McIntyre.

'Hurry up, Pauline. We cannae wait all night.'

The encroaching boredom in Angela's voice spurred Pauline on.

Her narrow chest filled with hatred and, for a moment, Pauline's limbs juddered into action. She flung her arm up and grasped the stone hand. It was cold and rough and when she drew her own hand back, she saw a dark shape on her palm grow wings. She clawed at it in panic, sending a stout-bodied moth plummeting into the undergrowth.

They walked home, shrouded in silence. There was a palpable sense of something stretched too far and silent acknowledgement that they should

hold tight to the corners, in case it snapped. Fiona and Gail looked relieved when they parted ways at the underpass.

At Pauline's door, Angela paused.

'Do you think that curse is true?' she asked, eyes wide in mock innocence.

Pauline shrugged and stared at the ground. She lifted the letterbox. Let it rattle down noisily. Angela leaned on the pebble-dash wall, pressing herself against it so hard that her bare arms were mottled when she turned around to leave.

Inside, eyebrows were raised at Pauline's getting back so late. By the time she got into her nightie, Mum had come upstairs to set a yellow plastic tumbler of water on the tallboy. Pauline slipped in between the sheets and lay, stock-still, watching moonlight trickle through the gaps in her curtains.

She clenched her left fist. The weight of her plight overwhelmed her. She began to cry. Despite believing she was doomed to remain awake until dawn, sometime later she drifted off to sleep.

Pauline wanders into the corner of the graveyard more by accident than design. It looks similar to how it was forty-five years ago, but the individual memorials are hard to pick out. Only the honeysuckle, still locked in its dance with brambles, provides a clue to the angel's whereabouts. She presses forward and stands in an opening of sorts.

Margaret Cameron and the bodies of her three dead infants are still there. The memorial has been added to, over the years. Two daughters, Catherine and Elizabeth, are mentioned, one of them dying as late as 1974. A smaller stone commemorates Thomas Young, the widower who carved his grief in alabaster, and who died in 1929.

The book is still open, and Pauline leans forward to read the inscription.

*Oh, for a touch of her vanished hand and the sound of her voice
that is*

still. There will be no night there.

Not a curse at all.

Angela McIntyre didn't simply drag a little girl to a locked churchyard to terrify her with a bizarre inscription. Pauline had always imagined Angela's motive was either to test whether the curse was true or just to demonstrate the control she wielded.

Had Angela made up the curse on the spot or had she planned her deceit in advance? Pauline had been sure Angela would have stayed awake for hours, listening out for screams or sirens, proof that the spell had power. Angela McIntyre had simply gone home, laughing.

Pauline had avoided Angela for the rest of the summer holidays. She stuck limpet-like to her mum's side, using her as a shield whenever they were in Angela's orbit. Mum never asked her if anything had happened, but neither did she manoeuvre her back to the group of older girls.

Only once did she feel exposed again. It was a Saturday and she was sent to buy biscuits from the corner shop. As she passed the McIntyre's house on her way to the underpass, she heard muffled voices. Behind the narrow glass insert of her front door, Angela, Fiona, and Gail were staring out at her. Pauline considered retreating, but the alternative route was long and confusing, and, anyway, she was in their sights now. No choice but to put one foot in front of the other. Pick up the terror and shame; find a way of carrying it with her.

As she stands there, Pauline considers the tyranny of childhood. The tiniest ways in which you were different from other people. You watched *Blue Peter* not *Magpie*; *Coronation Street* instead of *Crossroads*. Some families had nail and thread pictures at the top of the stairs and crazy paving in their garden. Some people ate cold meat from a tin, and others bought it sliced at the butcher's counter.

Pauline finds a foothold in front of the grave and reaches out. She curls her fingers around Margaret Cameron's hand. There is no angel. No elaborate wings of pure white stone. Just an ordinary woman that someone loved enough to commemorate.

Becoming

Eloise Birtwhistle

Just as the yellow lichen
growing from the bark
reaches through branches

reaches for the yellow
depth of the crocuses
I crawl in

And just as the light repeats
repeats and surprises
polishes the Kelvin

I wade in as the blue tit
balances on the bracken
as the tenement soaks in the street

my hair lines with pollen
beneath the water
sun quivers on my feet

Night Train Window

Eloise Birtwhistle

She prints her feet through the empty carriage
scribbled forward by hustling wheel on track
to a table seat

One shoulder blade sinks into fuzz
the other, cold against the window
almost touches night

Across, at an identical table
resting against that same black motion
(or resting behind)
again, a young woman's back is bridging
the negative space between seat and glass
(or resting within)

There, the woman's face
looking at her and looking back at her
pressed against and behind and, yes, within
that ink outside

Untitled
Nour El-Issa



Water

Alfie Prendergast

You hold my hand and press. Drifting over the fence. Avoid the flattened barbed wire, hovering above it. A drone on four screaming discs of air buffets above us. It clocks westward ignored. The land is flat to the eye, but full of strong woody lines of coarse grass. *Is this peat?* I ask. *No.* You say. My foot crushes one of the little boulders of vegetation, like a green termite mound, and I hear a wet hiss. We stumble along, you getting ahead. *I should have worn my hiking boots.* I wore my better looking boots, made of thin leather, to impress you. Wet socks. The loch is lit by a low sun and the air silver. Wetter and wetter, softer and softer non-peat. *Look, that grass there is a different colour to here. That must be marsh.* I look. It's true. I'm busy recording myself on my phone; appearing intrepid. The loch actually spreads out further than the bank, under the non-peat, and I'm walking in it. When we get to the water we strip and swim and the water burns our skin. You seem happy as we drink warm white wine.

We climb down the wall, behind the ice cream truck on the headland. There is a track through some brambles and we have to lift our arms up like we've been ordered to by the police. You hold a wicker basket with your swimming things. I get changed as fast as possible and jump in, but you cannot jump in, even if only from a few feet, so you climb down the rocks and make animal noises as you enter. The tide is up and the cove is not calm. Water rolls in in great kneading presses. We swim out against it into the open ocean, and notice a fisherman. The water is grey, and it is autumn, and he looks surprised to see us. He speaks no English and points us out to his friend. We keep turning our arms against the water and relish being seen, surprising someone. The water is massive, lifting us and gently dropping us. He is pointing, round to the rock-edges of the headland. To us. We yell back *What?* and look. There. Upright in the water. A seal. It is *standing* in the water, it's shoulders and head upright and still, massive, and staring at us. It must be over six foot from head to flipper. It is muscular and intelligent, and the world quietens as eye contact is made. Black eyes. And then it turns perfectly and is gone. We chase it down the coastline but do not see it again.

There were cold patches. As you swim in the lake, one drifts under you. Coldness is an absence. A physical void; not a bubble of air; a space of nothingness. Not *in* the water; behind it. It lingers there for a second, stretching out around you. It sends your gaze and all comfort and surety to the shore. That distant edge. How tired your arms feel. How deep the water. How shallow your breath. You will have to swim as much as you've swum already again. Even if you turn back now and don't reach the red buoy in the centre of the lake as planned. Your muscles are stiff. Cold. You worry about your sister, on the beach. You are sure that you can see people, in one splashing glance as your face dips out of the water mid-stroke, moving out from the line of trees beyond the beach. You're sure, as your ears rush with the sound of water and babbling breath, that you hear her cry. You see them grabbing her, throwing objects and clothes into the grey water in which you swim. You stop. All becomes still so quickly. No ripples. The water is a perfect black disc around you. You see the glint of your sister's phone reflecting bright in the sun as she sunbathes peacefully. The sky is clear, and a dark mass of nothingness drifts away from under you. To another part of the lake. Warmth. You turn back to the beach.

Our dad's friend has a house on Barnes common. He is a scuba diver, like our dad, and he has a small inside pool and a sauna at the back of his house. Diving equipment is littered about. He has a parrot and two tortoises. His house smells of hot wood, parrot poo and frying oil. He makes us chips whenever we visit. At the deep end of the pool there's a yellow sign that says 'Beware: Crocodiles' and there's a symbol of a large set of sharp teeth. Below it is the gaping darkness of the drain. I hold the porcelain edge of the overflow gutter and drag myself along until I'm in the deep water, slightly green because he doesn't often clean it or use much chlorine. I dare to get close enough to the drain. I hear the wet echoing sounds of the water flowing into it. Into the black. I imagine the monstrous crocodile in intricate, slow detail. The scales smoothly scraping against the piping in which it lives. Until the force of fear gets too much and I hold the edge tight, tense my legs against the wall and propel myself across to the shallow end of the pool.

Freedom

Mandy Watson

He was trapped.

It had taken a while for him to realise it. Why her family refused to have anything to do with him anymore. That weird conversation with Jim about his father getting violent with a drink in him, the current feminist Zeitgeist, men canny be too careful these days and all that shite.

‘Ah just wint tae make sure wir oan the same page, Derek, aboot wummin an that.’

‘Whit ye oan aboot, man? Ye bin readin that Guardian again?’ Jim wouldn’t be seen dead reading that particular print newspaper but Derek knew fine that Jim, not only read it online, he had a full e-subscription.

Jim had sighed. ‘Naw. Well aye. But that’s no whit ah mean. Ah mean ah widnae wint ye tae get yersel in any kind ae situation. We, as men, hae a duty tae behave oorsels and that.’

Derek returned the sigh. Jim might be an enthusiastic consumer of the Guardian’s journalism, review and commentary, but his attempts to communicate his own analysis were troubled.

‘Away tae fuck, Jim. D’ye wint anither pint or whit?’ And that had been the end of it.

Until, that is, things with him and Linda started changing. Just gradually but the difference was there right enough. Things went along pretty much the same for a while. The same taunts and insults, same snidey comments, same pointless arguments, same escalating fights, same violence, same bruises. But the threats had changed. Subtly, at first, until gradually it all started to make sense.

She would have been sneaky and clever about it. That was her way. No screaming accusations. No calling the authorities. No, just wee hints amid conversation, leading people to draw their own conclusions. He’d seen her do it before. That time when, pushed out her head, she’d actually walked into a fucking door. But he’d noticed that whenever anyone asked about the black eye, she’d hesitate, dipping her head before mumbling out the truth. He’d seen then how people looked at him, known what they’d been thinking.

Back home Linda had just laughed. And laughed and laughed!
'No way out now, fannybaws,' she had cackled. 'If you tell, I'll tell.'

*

Saturday night and it's busy. The injured and infirm of the city come to seek repair and recovery; solace and succour. Confident behind plexiglass, the frowning receptionist seeks to deter, reluctantly recording details. Successful applicants are further challenged in the finding of a space to sit and suffer in the crowded, harshly lit room. There they sit and wait in an alternate universe where time expands as space contracts. There they wait under the watchful eyes of the four stern faces on the poster proclaiming 'zero tolerance of violence and aggression towards healthcare professionals'. There they sit, in the uncomfortable plastic chairs. Waiting and wondering. Speculating and judging.

- *What is she in for anyway? Doesn't even look ill or hurt; in that get up, with all that make up on.*

There they sit formulating their lies, unable to articulate the truth.

- *Well usually just a bottle of wine at the weekend but tonight we were celebrating.*

- *Just the twenty a day, doc, but ah've been cuttin doon, ah only smoke them halfway.*

- *The wall cupboard door wis open and ah didnae see it.*

- *I slipped and fell in the bath.*

- *Aye, everything's fine at home. What do you mean?*

- *Blackouts? Och! Nothing like that, doctor. Just the odd wee dizzy spell.*

- *Recreational drugs? Well maybe when I was younger, but not now doctor, oh no, definitely nothing like that.*

- *She tripped and fell down the stairs. Isn't that right, hen?*

In the last available seat in the room, Derek holds his left arm close to his side. Gingerly. Supporting it with his right hand. His breath is shallow but steady, the way he has taught himself. Up-and-down. Less painful than in-and-out. From his seat at the back he gazes across the sorry room. His vision seems strange and he blinks, trying to focus, to clear it, to make sense but the air is thick and distorted with impatience, deceit and shame. He feels sick and closes his eyes, trying to concentrate on breathing and the

formulation of his own story. He needs a credible history, a witty report of an unfortunate incident, a respectable lie.

For, who would believe the truth?

*

Derek has been waiting in the curtained cubicle for over an hour since the serious nurse interrogated and examined him then made him painfully remove his jacket and shirt and put on some kind of thin cotton garment, printed all over with the faded legend 'NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde'. So he has had plenty of time to compose himself; to rehearse and refine before the next encounter. If only he had such luxury in other aspects of his life, he might be able to cope better, rather than letting instinct take over. He might be able to plan. Be able to escape.

A young man in blue scrubs breezes through the curtains making Derek start, then wince in pain. The clipboard, stethoscope and demeanour suggest doctor; shadowed jaw and hooded eyes suggest a long shift. A practised move closes the curtains with one hand while he glances at the clipboard in the other.

'Mr ... Paterson ... Derek is it?'

'Aye.'

'Can I just check your date of birth, sir?'

'Sixteen, seven, seventy eight.'

'Good. Good.' He looks up from the clipboard at Derek lying on the blue-paper covered couch with the head end positioned at an uncomfortable angle.

'My name's Dr Connery, I'm one of the consultants here. So you've been in the wars, Mr Paterson? The decorating wars, eh?' The doctor smiles at him and Derek manages a smile back. The story has taken hold, now all he needs is consistency and confidence.

'Aye. Well. Ah sort ae slipped and fell aff the ladder. Ah've done somethin tae ma airm.'

'Oakey doakey. Let's have a wee look at you.'

Despite his busyness and athletic physique, the doctor is gentle as he removes the gown covering Derek's torso and the pillow that has been supporting his left arm. There follows a series of manipulations and

questions, pinpricks and pursed lips, requests to squeeze, pull and push. Derek's answers and grimaces are met with a knowing series of hmms, ahas and I sees. Eventually, he stops this bodily inquisition, replaces the pillow and looks Derek in the eye.

'Well, it certainly seems like you've broken the ulnar bone in your forearm but we better get you to x-ray and see what we're dealing with.' Without breaking eye-contact, the doctor raises both eyebrows.

'Now. What about those bruises on your ribs? On your right hand side?'

Shit!

'Eh those? Oh aye? Them. Must've happened at the same time.'

'Really?' the doctor fights the rise in pitch of his voice. 'They look a few days old. Must be quite painful. I can see it's hurting when you breathe.'

Shit! Shit! Why hadnae ah thought ae that? They're even on the ither side fae ma broken airm. Stupid.... The doctor hasn't actually asked a specific question but Derek appreciates his efforts to seem earnest and professional, rather than judgemental, so he deserves some kind of explanation.

'Aye. Well this decorating. It's taking ages, like. And ah took a wee tumble aff the ladder last week too. Mibbe the ladder, shoogly auld thing. Only it didnae seem sae bad at the time. No's bad's the airm, like.' *Liar, it wis worse, much worse, he could hardly breathe.* Derek stops talking but keeps looking at the doctor. Imploring him to believe, to dismiss the characteristic appearance of kick marks. The doctor looks appropriately concerned.

'Oh dear! Not been having any black-outs? Dizzy spells? Nothing I need to know about?'

'No doc, nothing like that. No me. Fit as a fiddle normally.'

'And what about alcohol, do you drink? Have you had a drink tonight?'

Aye ah drink, we both dae. Part ae the problem, probly. Linda's a nightmare wi the drink. But it softens the edges and, thankfully, dulls the memory.

'Well. Aye. Ah had a couple ae cans the night.'

A wink. 'Probably not a great idea when you're up a ladder.'

'Aye, right enough doc. Dinnae make me laugh, it hurts.' Derek grins back at the doctor. *Seem tae hae got away wi it. He's probly too busy tae bother wi the details. If only he knew.*

‘Right, here’s what we’ll do.’ The doctor scribbles on a pale blue card. ‘We’ll get that arm of yours x-rayed and get them to do your ribs while they’re at it. But I have to warn you, depending on what the x-rays show, we might need to keep you in. Just overnight.’

Hope and relief flood through Derek. *Kept in? Overnight? Oh please, please, aye please. A nice, fresh bed oan ma own, peace n quiet. A wee escape.*

‘Aye, nae bother, doctor. Thanks.’

‘Ok. Well I’ll just see if I can get a porter to take you to x-ray in a chair. Stop you moving around so much. Now is there anyone with you? Or anyone you need to phone?’

‘No, doctor. No one at aa.’

Freedom.

Somebody Died Last Night

Alexandra Grunberg

the snow the
first fall of winter
‘SOMEBODY DIED -
live
it is reality
a you learn to with
- LAST NIGHT -
you an to
when live in environment that kill
is trying
- THEY WANDERED -
see the
the old beautiful storm an
white as invitation
- INTO THE SNOW’
to say and disappear.
goodbye

Inner Monologue

Alexandra Grunberg

Two young men, lying in the grass
They are very cute
I wonder if they are single
They are not single
They are most definitely a couple
Good day, gentlemen

Untitled
Steve Rigley



Alfred Molina Is Playing Doctor Octopus

John Bournnell

I hadn't been rooting for you
for a while so perhaps some ill fortune
will befall you and swing things

a minor thwarting will get me back
on-side on-message on-time
all qualities which I lack
but delivering this line
I wash my hands of it

and if this is a ploy against you
in this scene I am holding up my hands
to show that they are not bloody or dusty

feed her poetry

I misremember Doctor Octopus but
between us we remember how I shouldn't send you
Larkin unfinished or not, undone or become
old and tired or tiresome

The Mother and I Aren't Talking and Other Tales

Rhona Millar

How r u guyz? She'll message me once a week.

We'll not talk face to face for now. It kind of suits our relationship which has been one of role reversal for many years; she the youth needing, needing, always *needing* something. Me, the silent grit-my-teeth mother who has just about had enough. She used to say that 'I've just about had enough of you lot, you're driving me nuts.' It worked. It happened. We did that to her. Sent her *looo*-py.

I've often wondered about the relationship between mothers and daughters. I've seen many which appear loving and some that seem almost too close; stifling. *Wooo*, I couldn't be doing with that, those mothers that are steering their daughters in directions they didn't have the courage to go in themselves. Mothers who can still throw their daughters a glance as if to say 'No, your opinion doesn't matter, stop talking such rubbish, just keep quiet.' No, if I had to choose, a certain distance from one's mother isn't such a bad thing. If I'm truly honest (and honesty is my *thing* for this year) we've never had a loving relationship. However, she'd disagree if you ask her, I'm sure.

Now I find myself in a place where I could lift the lid off the pot, revealing the carcass that's inside or I could continue to let it simmer away quietly and pretend it's a stew. Such is the dilemma. The sense of limbo; a space to consider your upbringing, all the wrongs, and the unspoken things which haunt us all. Yet I don't hate her as I've always thought; I do love her. Either way, carcass or stew.

I mean it's not the same now as it was,

yet there are gentle reminders at every turn. Like the man in the bookshop who said to the back of my head the other day, 'Can I help you?' I pushed two books across the desk to him, and I saw that even upon seeing me and the books I was purchasing, his chest never lost that puffiness, his eyes

looking down his aquiline nose. I later walked past a doorway to a shop which had two cardboard plaques sellotaped at either side. A bed rested inside, sleeping bag, pillows and a book opened like a tent on top of a person underneath. One sign said, *I am a person just like you*. I walked on and

thought – yes, of course you are. What would change the situation they were in? Ten pence, fifty pence, a chocolate bar?

The rain started to come down thick. I stood thinking about what I could do as people hurried past trying to avoid the spokes of each other's umbrellas. I heard a seagull call out as it hungrily swooped and circled the rooftops. This caused me to worry; even in freedom I saw restraint. I turned back and dropped an apple and banana onto the duvet, they sunk in deep like they were in quick sand, however there was no movement from the person underneath. I thought back to when I gave a banana to a gaunt woman whose build was child-like. She looked at me and looked at the banana as if to say, 'And what the hell do you want me to do with this?'

What is it about the homeless that affects me? It's the same with crying children. Not whimpering children. *That* I find annoying. It's more the unanswered, unacknowledged cries that trouble me. It's like I'm helpless to do anything and I must escape, but I'm trying to change that. I'm trying to face up to it, maybe help if I can. Perhaps offer the mother a reassuring smile. The child, well, I send them a smile – silently.

I was never homeless,

yet I did stay from place to place with some carrier bags containing my clothes from the night before or the next day's work uniform. This was during a time when I would rather stay in places I wasn't really wanted instead of going back home. I recall staying in one such place, I guess we were going out, boyfriend and girlfriend type thing. I'll call him Greg as I can't quite remember his name now; it was a long time ago. We had a mutual appreciation for narcotics. I don't blame his parents for treating me indifferently. They were affluent, with a fancy house, yet inside it was filthy

and there was often no food in the cupboards. That, for some reason, made me feel smug.

I remember once sleeping on the bare mattress in his bedroom when my period came in the night. There was no toilet roll and the blood flowed through my clothes and into the mattress, a crimson diamond shape with a rust smell. His mother was mad in the morning. Perhaps she could see something in me that scared her, reminded her of where she had come from; somewhere she did not want her son to go. A girl who needed saving, was helpless, who couldn't open her mouth to ask for what she needed.

I would never allow them to take me home, his parents, if they ever offered, not that it happened very often. However once they did insist; *they were passing by*. I think they were curious. I asked them to drop me at the local shops, I needed to get food. No way was I going to let them see the garage shaped house I lived in. Like I said, I don't blame his parents.

It mostly wasn't a lie either that I had to go to the shops: the cupboards at home were similar to his. Maybe last night's dinner or the night before that, or even the night before that, would be in the microwave. The life sucked out of it.

She would be there,

her chair sagging, her half-smile scowl and her floral bathrobe. Feet flopped inwards. TV on with some bloke selling steam mops. I would try to get up the stairs as quickly as I could with as little conversation as possible. There'd be no heating or hot water, and I'd sometimes just jump straight into my bed in last night's clothes until she'd come up and shout at me that I was 'just like my Dad.'

Part of me has wondered about telling this story. Would it be cruel to tell it? Part of me wants others to know. Perhaps then I won't feel so alone. Perhaps you will understand, perhaps you won't feel so alone. That is what I tell myself. Now the shoe is on the other foot. I'm the dressing gown wearing, worn-down, poor me shnuffle. I know that's not a word but it

describes me for now, in this moment, I'm not always a shnuffle; you'll see. Sometimes I am as fun and light and fresh as a crisp cotton sheet.

Often I've thought about coming clean,

about telling it as it is. I mean the days of her wearing the dressing gown are in the past, she says it's all in the past really. Only thing is it's now me who sits in my dressing gown surrounded by a campsite of open books. Perhaps I'm getting to see and feel what it was like for her, perhaps I'm being punished for just being a wicked, bad child, perhaps I'm getting a taste of my own medicine. Like I said, all this time, all those years I hated her and perhaps now that it's me going through *this* (whatever *this* is) I'll start to feel compassion. That is the hope. It was never her fault.

I've often wondered about people

who don't want to talk about the past. I don't know any other way. It lives and breathes in me; it's alive. A living thing. People often say, 'Oh it's all in the past,' like it can't be changed, like it doesn't matter and that I should just get over it, forget about it; move on. Sometimes they tut when they say it, as if I'm the one with the problem. I've started to realise there are some things people just can't face up to. What is on the TV today, or what so and so said to so and so is more important than the time my Dad took the pills or the time my Mum wanted to smash her car into a brick wall. Or sometimes more subtle things like the time she chose to hang a massive framed print of my sister next to a tiny one of me. But it's not her fault. I'll not blame her anymore, she was ill. It's all in the past.

Water

Murray McKinstry

I
must
scrub me
of all the muck
and blood and sweat
and tears, of all the stress
and aches and pains and of
the shit stain on my conscience,
of premonition of predestination,
the fear of ending guiding me to end
this life of mine, this great] gift of mine
subtly designed perhaps without designer,
with vitality cascading down onto me not from
a skyhook or from heaven or even a trickling noose,
but a shower. For I am no cog that simply needs greasing,
nor a bottle collecting sorrows that have fallen from the sky,
or even an earthenware jar forcibly reshaped by a sovereignty
outside of space time itself. No. I am my own memory, a
history of me which I won't erase, or forget, or throw
into the dirt, only washing one layer away to
rid me of your woefully ignorant, vile and
irrational, hopelessly deplorable
hatred.

Epiphanies

Lydia Roy

The clock ticks past the sixty second mark in a restaurant near, but not on, the main road leading toward the head offices of an (alas!) dying newspaper

In a convenience store three doors down, a woman places three pounds eighty into the hand of the cashier, having spent the last five minutes with her hand in her purse, counting and re-counting, turning the three pound coins and four twenty pence pieces over in her fingers

In a bathroom, with a strip of green tiles running round the wall there is a girl with two fingers worming at the back of her throat thinking *oh, I should have trimmed my nails before*

A clatter as a teacup is placed back on its saucer, tea bag scrunched at the side

A single pixel of the LED sign in a nearby shop window blinks off, and Mr. Jeremy Hunt – sixty-four, of average build and below average lung functionability – who has been watching from the café opposite tilts his head in acknowledgement

gust of wind flings wide open a door, left ajar for the cat, which clatters on its hinges as

A teenager searches for the definition of ‘substratum’ (*an underlying layer or substance, in particular a layer of rock or soil beneath the surface of the ground*) and nods to himself

Alice Simpson calls out a *hello!* to her sister upon seeing her face from across a crowded public park in which both of their sons (Oswald and Sam) are playing, her sudden rush of goodwill puncturing a silence of seven years, following their mother’s death from

TV flickers, a woman with a reddish birthmark below her left eyebrow and a gaunt man are arguing over the state of

bullet no larger than my thumbnail ricochets off the wall and into

In a dentist's surgery, converted from an old tenement building, a girl of around ten swings her legs off the seat to face a bright triptych of a bay window

eaves and bannisters still bear carved patterns, flowers and petals and long strands of

The mug is raised, up to

Door slams, ah, radiant light

The cursor vanishes from two laptop screens at once.

A train shoots past a station where it had once been scheduled to stop, before the lines were recalibrated and the timetable rewritten

Carly T. steps through the door into Haikah's room for the first time since their fallout in September, when Carly revealed to a gaggle of lanky boys the particulars of Haikah's crush on the bespectacled, corduroy-wearing Dylan McDonald

the woman on the subway platform teeters and falls; a bristle goes through the crowd – *is she...? Does anyone...? What should we...?*

In a bookshop, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* takes an ironic and unnoticed tumble from its shelf

Two men, several streets away from one another, light cigarettes and inhale

Darling, writes the girl, in the left hand corner of a blank page

The globe tilts – a woman snorts in her sleep and wakes the small child lying beside her, who had clambered in after a nightmare involving

car veers, skids – fence unhinges, uproots backwards – grass is torn up in the wake of the still-churning wheels

Brittany peels off her bloodied underwear, and thinks, *fuck, so that's why I've been so*

Music with a repetitive melody – strings and a sweet, rasping voice – comes from a speaker in the corner of a room in which people have gathered to establish the nature of the world's problems and facilitate their solving

bag splits, and out falls: three oranges; four apples (of which one is very slightly bruised); a loaf of bread wrapped up in wax paper; a tin of loose-leaf tea; a pint of milk; a lone receipt that flutters out of reach

Not everything, says Asher's mother from across the dining room table,
has to be a political statement

a man with a pipe walks past the window as a writer stares outward
curtains! she calls, and lies back against her pillowcase, thinking to
herself how lovely it is to still be in bed at this hour

the hand ticks forward

and – again!

She settles her head to the side, so that her cheek presses against the cool
part of the satin; she will have to get up soon, pull on her dressing-gown and
go down to breakfast where, she knows, a stack of letters await her approval

different window, nothing of note – I hoped there would be a bird, at
least

He lets his fork clatter against the plate – but some things, he says, some
things are

hit the ground in quick succession, thud thud thud, and now all four
apples are bruised

A murmur goes round the room, but he isn't listening; he is trying to
work out where he has heard this song before (a wedding, his cousin's – late
in the reception, when the plates had been stacked on the edge of the tables
and the hall had almost emptied, the DJ had played this song as the bride
shuffled listlessly).

*pissed at everyone, I should have known after yesterday, fucking
hysterical over nothing* – she yanks open the bathroom cabinet and fumbles
for a

no glass in the windshield – glass in the passenger seat, across the
dashboard, glass sticking out from the rubber of the wheel – mangled
plastic, the arrow on the fuel gauge spinning and a sticky feeling in his
mouth

a man in a long black coat, with a bottle in his hand and the ghostly
quality of a dream antagonist

then scores it through with her pen; three long strokes

The first man drops his lighter and a girl in a red skirt picks it up for him, places it into his hand without touching his fingers, and he is hurt by this although he knows

It lies there, declining.

and the man closest takes a step forward, stops

Haikah is cross-legged on the bed when she enters, looking for all the world like a gladiatorial martyr awaiting the scraping sound of the portcullis underneath the wheels, unheeded, there is a pebble – smallish, round, with a barely perceptible dent in one side – and as the train careens past, it flies from the tracks

and flickers back once more

Her lipstick comes off on the china, a berry colour, and he stares at the lines of her mouth that are left

stairs polished, the smell of lavender and the gleam of each step

He shakes her hand, and smiles at her – *I'll see you again soon, hmm?*
Six months, remember, tell your mum she can make the appointment at the desk – before she totters out of the door, back towards the waiting room in which her mother sits, flipping magazines

as he presses the button on the remote, the screen blacks

They have not been married for long, but frays are starting to show in the way she has angled her head, the tapping of his fingers against the arm of the sofa

Oswald's foot slips against the metal of the climbing frame, and he topples back; Alice sees her sister's face contort, finds her eyes darting away, to Sam, her Sam, sitting in the sand with his bucket – a wave of relief, and then sick, awful guilt

his fingers resume their typing, their respite short-lived
the papers on the countertop scatter

When the waitress next comes over – *is everything still okay for you, sir?* – he thinks about mentioning it, the pixel gone rogue – but no, no, he meets her eyes and says, *mm-hmm, thank you dear*

the dregs have bled into the saucer, and when the teacup next is lifted
they will drip

pressing further back, careful of her nails, the tap running full spurt
above her head and the voices from the living room just down the hall

She takes the receipt, half-wishes that the cashier had met her eye

the noise of cars is faint, not loud enough to drown the quiet tick of the
clock hand as it moves forward and wobbles, the arrow-point of its head
aligning with the black line of the hour mark for just a second, hovering
there – and then

The Love Bye-Lingual

Marita Arvaniti

Σε τι γλώσσα να γράψω για σένα –

τη δική σου ή τη δική μου;

Ή μήπως κάποια τρίτη, ξέχωρη;¹

a part of us, and apart from us,

something that neither of us will understand,

but both will learn to live with?

Which words should I learn to speak

to describe what your smile looked like

όταν με κοίταζες, για μια στιγμή,

πριν γυρίσεις από την άλλη και γελάσεις;²

Before you reached out, in the dark,

και με τράβηξες κοντά σου, στο σκοτάδι,³

and leaned your face close to mine, in the dark –

το δέρμα σου να κοκκινίζει σαν να ντρέπεσαι, στο σκοτάδι,

σαν να σε έκαψε κάποιος ήλιος, στο σκοτάδι –⁴

like it was me that did it. In the dark.

Με ποιο σύστημα να βάλω τόνους

η να τους εγκαταλείψω μια και καλή;

Δεν ξερω αν θελω να ξερεις, ουτε λιγο,

Τις διακυμάνσεις της φωνής μου όταν μιλάω για σενα.⁵

¹ In what language should I write about you –
yours or mine?

Or maybe a third one, separate:

² when you looked at me, just for a moment,
before turning the other way to laugh?

³ and pulled me closer, in the dark,

⁴ your skin flushing like you're embarrassed, in the dark,
like you were burned by an invisible sun, in the dark –

⁵ Which system should I use to accent my words

or should I give it up completely?

I don't think I want you to know, not even a little bit,
how my voice waxes and wanes when I talk about you.

I want you to remember it without any help from me.

I want you to hear my accents when you think.

Στο σκοτάδι, στο φως και στη μέση, τους θέλω να σου μιλάω
με μια γλώσσα που θα με καλύπτει και φανερώνει ταυτόχρονα.⁶

I don't want to be hidden but I want the pretense.

Να πώς σου μιλάω και με καταλαβαίνεις.

Να πώς σου μιλάω και με βλέπεις, όπως είμαι.

Με ακούς, όπως είμαι. Το κορμί μου⁷ the palimpsest
of a million words, κι από γλώσσες άλλο τίποτα.

Κοκκινίζεις πάλι.⁸ That's fine.

You were never prettier than this, flushed and smiling.

Δεν είχε πάντα λέξη η γλώσσα για τα μάτια σου.

Δεν είχε λέξεις για πολλά, αλλά τις βρίσκει.

Ή θα τις βρει. Κάποια στιγμή.⁹

But they won't be for us.

⁶ In the dark, and the light and the in-between, I want to be talking to you
in a language that hides and reveals me at the same time.

⁷ This is how I will speak, and you will understand me.

This is how I will speak, and you will see me, as I am.

Hear me, as I am. My body

⁸ full of tongues.

You're blushing again.

⁹ There wasn't always a word in language for your eyes.

There weren't words for many things, but it finds them.

Or it will find them. Some day.

mr. freeze pop

Hannah Summers

Premature summer days
 (the Anthropocene can be scenic,
 (unfelt traumas don't disappear,
(playing hide & seek with microplastics
 (classified: less than 5mm,
(clambering through the arteries of a whale
 (washed-up imago
(like a ruptured wheelie bin,
 (the stench
 (a smell like seaweeds,
(pharmaceutically useful,
(but will i nourish the soil
 (when i burst into clouds,
 (like the puffs of flies
(under that ice-lolly wrapper

(Mr. Freeze Pop)

teaching children about narwhals)
rising from the pond's wet clay)
a maggoty cumulus)
with mercury fillings?)
Wikipedia says)
burnt hair or body odour)
of the city on a hot day)
but with delusions of grandeur)
on the shores of my news feed)
– hypothetically possible)
sources include glitter)
and nuclear waste)
they slink into nightmares)
but only intermittently)
cast algae bloom over Queen's Park lagoon.

white on white

Nour El-Issa

falling hard on liquid canvas
warping into itself as depth-in-imagery
caught in orbits lost and found
eyes line up in a tangle of nervous matter

elasticated aesthetics
dry fibres jeer and moan as they loosen
around telescopic academics in magnifying glasses
looking for sparks

Unidentified

Fiona Ashley

She finally allowed herself a smile when she saw the bothy was in darkness. Car Abhainn had only one room and was not on any of the main tourist trails. It was two hours in all directions from any civilisation and had no mobile phone signal: no interruptions, no calls for help, no temptation to quickly check that he was okay. She stood at the door and looked at her surroundings. The River Add was encased in icy banks, guarded by thick icicles that threatened to trap anything careless enough to fall in. Her footprints were soon dismissed as the wind conjured up spinning snow dancers who fell back, exhausted, ensuring there was no visible evidence of where she was or how she got there.

Inside there was a fire set in the little brick fireplace next to the sleeping platform. She dropped her rucksack on the floor, pulled one of the benches over to the hearth and lit the fire. The sound of the wood crackling drowned out the mournful wind, and she inhaled as the comforting smell of peat filled the room. She lay back on the bench and began the conscious effort of relaxing. Starting with her toes, she methodically tensed and relaxed every part of her, registering no surprise when she found her shoulders and neck already tense and resisting her plea to relax. Ignoring the laminated warning pinned to the noticeboard, she lit her candle, infused with essential oils of lavender, rose and ylang-ylang, guaranteed to soothe away anxiety. It was worth a try. She unrolled her sleeping bag, making sure her feet were closest to the fire.

She braced herself before heading back out for firewood and water. The wind claimed her, found gaps in her clothing and covered her in painful, biting kisses. The snow attacked her, trying its best to take out her eyes, blind her and laugh as she fell down the slippery bank to the frozen warmth of the Add. She stood her ground at the door, waited for a lull in the storm, and made for the trees. The darkness of the forest was disorientating. She kept to the edge, fearful of losing sight of the bothy, and quickly

gathered enough wood for the night. The small burn that fed the violent Add was much more obliging and she filled her water bladders without any problems.

Back inside, she sat and waited for the water to boil. She couldn't believe she had done it. From the first mention of respite care to now had been a perdition of wavering, justifying, crying and pleading but she had stubbornly carried on, sustained by the delicious thought of time to herself. Her sentence respited for a wee while. A chance to sit alone with no responsibilities, no demands, no guilt. Her mum told her to book a spa break, get a massage, drink Prosecco and relax. Her ex said she should stay at home, just in case he needed her, but stay in her pyjamas, rent films from Amazon and order pizza every day. She smiled, told them both that was exactly what she was going to do, then made her plans in secret.

Kenneth was the only one who knew the truth. Her beloved boy. As she washed his skinny legs, carefully checking for sores, she described what the mountains were like. How nothing looked better than the view from the top of a mountain, above the clouds, as you turned a full circle and saw more and more mountains all around. How nothing tasted nicer than sweet tea from a thermos flask, accompanied by a cheese and pickle sandwich, eaten in the lee of a glacial deposit at three thousand feet. How nothing felt better than exhausted legs and sore feet when you peeled off your wool socks and soothed your toes in the river by the bothy. She imagined him smile as she told him about her first attempts at conquering Munros, and the row she got from an angry camper as she steeped her feet above him, in the stream running off Coire Odhar, unaware of mountain etiquette that said she was supposed to check for other walkers filling their water flasks. She gently massaged his wasted legs and her heart broke again, another tiny shard chipped off as she pitied him for never being allowed to experience her Highlands for himself, and pitied herself for the loss.

When he coughed, choked a little, and she suctioned up the saliva he was finding it increasingly difficult to swallow, she told him about the bothy she had chosen: Car Abhainn – the winding river. She described the black grouse who supposedly lived around it; the ruined church and holy well that

marked the route pilgrims took to get to the abbey at Iona; the stone bridge across the River Add that drovers used to get their cattle safely over the water. She made up tales of travellers who found solace and rest at the bothy before they continued on their journey, enriched. She invented brave highlanders who stopped at the bothy on their way to join William Wallace and Andrew Moray, and those from centuries later who used it to hide from the Duke of Cumberland's men. The whole place took on a mystical charm for her, promising peace. She hoped he understood.

She added the boiling water to the foil packet and sealed it tight, waited the requisite eight minutes for the powder to rehydrate into vegetable chilli. On the table beneath the window she saw the obligatory guest book. She brought it over to the fire and flicked through the pages. The common themes seemed to be the fabulous scenery, how amazing the wildlife was, and how horrific the midges were. She smiled, picturing tourists from America and Australia optimistically dressed in shorts to show off their tanned limbs, only to arrive at the bothy looking like measles victims, destined to spend the whole night scratching until they bled. Her mind flickered to Kenneth, wondering whether he would be aware of a midge bite, if he would feel the itch but be incapable of signalling how much he wanted her to scratch it for him. The piteous horror of it made her sob and she angrily wiped her eyes. This was her peace, her respite. She lifted the pen and wrote her own entry: *So happy to be here. I never want to go home!* At the

column for name and address she hesitated. She didn't want to be herself here: a daughter, an ex-wife, a carer, a mum. She wanted to be Jenna from New York on the trip of a lifetime; Suzie from Adelaide travelling the world; Callie from Toronto visiting the old country, looking for traces of ancestors cleared in 1810. She signed herself *Kylie from Sydney* and closed the book.

She woke, startled, panicked by the unfamiliar surroundings, certain she heard Kenneth crying out for her. Her heart beat so hard she imagined she could see the vibrations it caused on her skin. The absolute silence comforted her, and the unfamiliar shapes of the bothy's interior, illuminated by the moon, made themselves known. But the fire had gone out and the

bothy was freezing. She shivered as she got out of the sleeping bag and reached for her fleece. The sudden scream terrified her, flooding her with fear so visceral she had to fight the urge to vomit. The noise came again, full of terror and despair. She slowly went over to the window to see undisturbed snow all around. Silly notions of horror films and cabins in the woods were not helping. Screaming meant pain and fear and that meant, realistically, that someone was out there in trouble. She dressed quickly and opened the door. The moon was full, painting the land with sparkles, but it was too cold for beauty and the glen looked sterile and unforgiving in its blanket of snow. If someone was hurt she would have to find them quickly. A broken ankle would be fatal out here in the cold.

The screaming stopped, replaced by a coughing, whimpering sound. The stillness of the night made it easy to follow so she jogged as best she could, flailing and slipping through the snow to the banks of the Add. The sheep was on its side, its wool sodden and heavy, like an island in the flow of the river. She breathed heavily, sweating under her layers, as initial relief turned to concern. The poor animal had to be helped and she was the only one here to do it. The Add was narrowed by the ice on its banks but it didn't look solid enough to take her weight. She went as close as she dared and poked the sheep with her walking pole. It turned to look at her, helpless eyes that she was conditioned to respond to. She lay down on the snow and eased herself towards the edge, smelling the heat of the wet sheep. She cursed the stupidity of the animal for falling in, peeled off her gloves, and kept crawling forwards.

The frozen moss and tussocks crunched beneath her as she finally got far enough to grab handfuls of wool. The sheep was a dead weight, lying there freezing to death. She shouted at it, trying to scare it into moving and pulled it towards herself at the same time. The sheep kicked wildly and fought for its life, wrenching itself away from her. She lunged for it, grabbing wool again as the sheep, exhausted, fell again and took them both back into the river.

Cold shock gripped her, painful and angry. She gasped for air but couldn't move, paralysed by the cold as the water flowed inside her clothes.

Her brain screamed at her to get up, get out of the water and get back to the bothy, light the fire, strip off, get into the sleeping bag and cry with pain as warmth returned to her extremities and her core. But she was tangled up with the sheep, which was fatally heavy and pressed her down into the rocks and stones of the river bed. The jagged icicles along the bank promised purchase for her frozen fingers but her hands were too cold to grip and her arms slid back into the water. She screamed for her life, echoing the sound that had brought her out here in the middle of the night, hoping someone, anyone, would hear her, defying the isolation she stupidly sought.

The sheep stopped kicking and she could no longer hear it breathing. Its death galvanised her into a further effort to wriggle free, no longer fearful of being hurt by cloven hooves. Kicking out herself, she wedged her boot against a rock and scraped herself out from under the animal. Her jacket caught and tore but she wedged and scraped until she was out.

The cold slowed her down and made her confused. The bank of the river seemed so high she couldn't understand how to get out of the water. There were no steps and nothing to grab onto. A moment of clarity told her to drag the sheep over and stand on it. Finally out of the Add, lying in the snow, shivering violently, she began to feel warmth. At the back of her mind she knew this was a bad sign but couldn't help feeling relief that the pain was receding. She could feel the warmth of Kenneth's body as she cuddled him before bed, and she kissed his forehead, stroking his hair.

Kenneth shouted at her, 'Get up! No-one knows where you are! No-one is coming looking for you!'

She jerked awake, adrenaline flooded her system and she crawled towards the bothy. She would not die like this.

Inside the bothy, the air was frigid and sore to breathe. She stripped off her wet clothes, struggling with each zip, each button and each strap. It took so long and was such an effort but she knew it was necessary. Get colder to get warm. Get dry to get warm. Get into the sleeping bag to get warm. She knelt in front of the fire, cocooned in her sleeping bag, shivering uncontrollably as she tried to spin the wheel of her disposable lighter. It sparked occasionally

but failed to light. She cried with frustration. She wanted to see Kenneth again, hold him against her and say sorry, over and over again. The selfishness of her behaviour sickened her. She kept trying to light the spark, without any real hope of it catching. Then a small flame glowed yellow before her eyes. She lit the paper and watched as the kindling took flame, waiting for the heat to build.

Her teeth chattered so hard they were audible above the fire. She would never leave him again. Her stupid research and plans had been laughable. She had forgotten the brutal truth of the Highlands in winter. Too many years in the city, close to the hospital and mum, had romanticised her memories. How had she forgotten the pain of a twisted ankle? The staggering exhaustion of an unforecast sunny day with no sun cream and rucksack straps biting into sunburnt flesh? The frozen fear carried on a sudden wind at the loose boulder field that marked the way down? There was no kailyard at Car Abhainn. She stacked the peat and curled up in front of the fire. Tomorrow she would go home.

The moon shone brightly and the stars were brilliant points of light in the sky. The wind blew, whipping the snow into blue will-o-the-wisps as spirits pleaded admittance into the warmth. The bothy door rattled under the onslaught as more and more bogles fought their way in through every crack and fissure in the old bothy. The fire twisted and flared in the gusts, each one cooling it slightly, until it went out.

Untitled

Maria Sledmere



History Repeating

Irene Hossack

In our search for *CBeebies*,
Sky News appears on the screen.

I watch you watching it, see you
hearing strange words from another
lexicon, words that repeat themselves
through reports of conflict:
so-called Islamic State
Mosul Syria Calais Jungle
Aleppo Damascus
Myanmar. And I'm reminded

of my own introduction
to words from another place
their sound resonating
in my naive ears: Khmer Rouge
Phnom Penh Ho Chi Minh
Bay of Pigs Viet Cong Laos
the Killing Fields napalm.

And my mother, listening to the radio,
hearing: Luftwaffe Nazi
Bergen-Belsen Auschwitz
El Alamein doodlebug Mussolini
Burma Lord Haw-Haw ...

West of the Euphrates

Irene Hossack

A cornice runs on the outer walls
of an ancient temple,
south of Babylon,
built to honour love and heaven,
touching thresholds at Uruk –
where words began.

The Tigris meets the Euphrates
by a barkless tree where
Adam and Mohammed rose
with the Word in their own
language, promising a beginning
for human frailty.

Buried under the baking remnants
at Ur – collaterals of twenty-first century
cant, where the beginning
is destroyed for
fortune, fame and power.

The Little Girl and the Glow-Worm

Angie Spoto

On a bright October afternoon with the leaves yellow in the sunlight and the buildings like paper puppets against the sky, walked a little girl. Her hair was bundled up tight inside a red woollen cap despite the unseasonable heat. On this particular street stood a fishmonger, and through the shop's wide glass window lay rows and rows of fish atop a bed of sparkling ice.

The scent of fish was strong, even from all the way across the street, where a bakery stood. Rows and rows of cakes and sweets sat in colourful congress behind the large glass window. Because the sun was so bold, the icing of some cakes had begun to slip, like drooping candle wax, and a cherry had slid from the top of one cupcake and now rested askew against a slice of banana bread. The scent of the sweets was strong, even from all the way across the street, where the fishmonger stood.

The girl walked along the street, thinking about her hair bundled up tight inside her hat. It was a very nice hat. Blood red, like a cherry. But although the hat was undoubtedly lovely, the little girl found it too hot, and her scalp itched and sweated unbearably. She didn't dare touch the hat, for it had been her mother's, and her mother would be giving her no more gifts. She had died the summer before.

The little girl turned to peer through the large glass window of the fishmonger's, with its rows and rows of silver-pink fish. The fishes' skin, which reflected the sun in blues and greens, was very beautiful. But the flesh of the fish – the pinky insides – was too much like her own soft pink skin.

One particular fish – a very big and gruesome trout – winked at her when the sun caught its eye. Her hand reached up and patted the top of her hat, just as the resident of her hair had ordered her to.

A sugary scent blew on the wind and momentarily nudged aside the stench of fish. She said nothing to the fish as she turned from them and walked across the street to the bakery.

‘Hello,’ she said, tapping the glass of the bakery window. She spoke to a particularly pretty cupcake with frosting piled high in coral swirls and dusted with rosy sprinkles. Again, she patted the top of her hat.

The worm whispered in her ear: ‘Come along, silly girl! You’re wasting the day!’

The resident of the little girl’s hair was a little white glow-worm as pale as the girl’s hair, which hardly ever saw the sun.

The glow-worm was a gift from her father. It was on the day of her mother’s funeral, when the black coffin was lowered into the black earth, that her father had reached for both her hands.

‘My dear,’ he said. His hands were hot even though it was a crisp summer day. Clouds filled the sky and a chilly breeze shuddered through the leaves. ‘I would like to give you a gift.’

He reached for her hair and began sliding the pins one by one from her locks. Slowly her hair unfurled and her father reached his hand inside the tumbling mass of curls and deposited something there. A hot sting prickled her scalp.

‘Oh,’ she said, reaching up to knock the little worm away, but her father snatched her hand and held it. ‘No, you mustn’t ever remove it. It belonged to your mother, and she wore it in her hair until the day she died, and now it belongs to you. It’s a family heirloom, dear.’

‘An heirloom?’ she asked. She always imagined heirlooms as jewels – pretty rings or golden necklaces or an old pocket watch. But as it was a gift from her father, she obeyed his wishes. ‘Well, it’s a strange heirloom, Father, but if you say so.’

‘Yes, I do say so,’ said her father, his voice rising, as if she’d disagreed with him. But then the wrinkles around his eyes crumpled tight and he sighed, and the little girl thought he might cry. ‘Promise me you’ll never remove it. It lights up and will be very beautiful at night. And the voice! It has a magnificent singing voice. You will be the most beautiful girl when you grow older. All the young men will want you.’

‘All because of my hair?’ said the little girl.

‘Yes, yes, now promise me, will you, dear?’ said her father, and he placed his hands on her shoulders.

She looked into his very dark eyes and saw herself, her own yellow hair all undone and her nose which was as yet too big to be pretty and her own eyes so much like her dead mother’s. The little worm stung her again and began to burrow itself into the nape of her neck. It hurt terribly of course, but the little girl hated to see her father cry and she said, ‘Yes, I promise. I will never remove the glow-worm that lives inside my hair until the day I die.’

Her father swept her up into his arms. She wasn’t such a little girl anymore, but he carried her anyway, on his hip. Together they walked away from the coffin in the dark ground.

Unbeknownst to the girl and her father, a mass of worms wriggled themselves toward the mother’s coffin and began to eat away at the coffin’s wood. By the time the sun set, the coffin and its contents had been completely eaten up, and all that remained was the wriggling family of worms.

The little girl had been wearing the glow-worm in her hair every day since. It had made a nice home for itself in the flesh at the back of her neck and sometimes dug deep enough to chew on her soft grey brain. The wound had ceased to bleed and only leaked a little fluid now and again, but often the girl felt hot from fever and her scalp itched terribly where the worm had deposited its eggs, which grew and grew yet never hatched. Yet she was true to her word. Never again did she try to knock the worm from its place.

‘But it’s such a sweet little cake, isn’t it?’ said the girl to the worm.

‘What did I say? Don’t tarry. You just never listen now, do you?’

The girl sighed. ‘Yes, alright.’ As she set off down the street, she turned her head to look toward the fishmonger.

‘Didn’t we need some fish?’ chirped the glow-worm. ‘Go back over there and buy some! A big pink salmon!’ The girl didn’t remember her father asking her to pick up fish, but the worm bit her so hard that she crossed the street without a second thought.

When she opened the door to the fishmongers, a bell chimed. A boy wearing a white hat and apron stood behind the fish display.

‘Can I help you, miss?’ the boy asked, moving beside her so that they both stood before the display. The sun beat on their backs through the large window, and their bodies cast shadows across the fish.

When the girl looked up at the boy, she noticed right away the ruddy glow across his cheeks and nose. She liked him immediately.

‘Yes,’ she said, patting the top of the hat. ‘I’m looking for a salmon.’

‘Well, you’ve come to the right place,’ he said, sweeping his arm across the display. ‘Will this one do?’

He pointed at a very plump salmon, but the worm whispered in her ear, ‘Look, he’s trying to cheat you! Can’t you see that big mouldy spot on the salmon’s underside? Pick another one!’

‘Oh, perhaps not that one,’ said the girl. She looked at the boy from the very corner of her eye and was surprised to find he was looking at her in much the same way. Their gazes met and they both immediately looked away.

‘Will this one do then, miss?’ he asked, pointing to another stout salmon. This time, he had to reach across her, and his arm brushed against her coat.

‘Not that one!’ chirped the worm, louder this time than before. ‘What a cheapskate this boy is. Can’t you see how dry that one is? Ask for another!’

‘Oh, perhaps not that one either,’ said the girl, trying to be as polite as possible. She hoped the boy didn’t find her too pretentious, but he only nodded and reached further across her to gesture to another fish. But this time, he reached so high and far, that he brushed the girl’s hat with his elbow.

The hat came tumbling off her head.

‘Oh, no!’ she cried, reaching for it, but it was too late. It had fallen to the floor and landed at the boy’s feet.

The girl’s stomach turned inside out. When the glow-worm wasn’t encased in the hat, it began to sing.

When it sang, its whole body lit up with such a strong glow it was as if the girl had a tangle of fairy lights caught up in her tresses. But it wasn't the glowing that unnerved people; it was the singing. The glow-worm sang in the highest falsetto.

The boy tilted his head to the side. 'What is that?' he asked.

'Oh, nothing,' said the little girl, scooping up the hat and pushing it back onto her head. But once the worm got singing there was no stopping it.

The girl shoved her white hair back under the hat, but rogue strands slipped out and fell around her shoulders.

The worm's singing grew louder. The boy, who had at first helpfully stepped forward to pick up the girl's hat, began to back away. His cheeks turned almost as red as the girl's hat. He stuck his fingers into his ears and said loudly, 'What is that noise?'

The girl felt sick. She saw the glittering ice and the fleshy fish atop it, all slick and soft like her own skin, and her knees went weak. The boy backed away as far as the small shop would allow. The girl's chest heaved. The worm sang and sang, and the noise filled her ears until it began to take shape. It was a red light, a scarlet velvet curtain that shut across her eyes, and all she could see was this bright colour, like blood, like her hat, like the entrails of a crushed worm. Her chest heaved and heaved and without her knowing it, she vomited across the tray of fish.

The next thing she heard was the sweet little chime of the fishmonger's door as the boy dragged her out onto the street.

The little girl staggered down the street, past the scent of the bakery and the pretty sweets in the window, until she reached her home. Her father placed her in her bed. The red curtain that had fallen over her in the fishmonger's shop fell over her again, this time trapping her beneath its weight. She dreamt she was a silky, pink fish swimming in a sea of ice, searching and searching for a red woollen cap that had once belonged to her mother. She dreamt the boy fished her from the sea and wrapped her tight in a bed of newsprint.

She died three days later.

Her father unspooled the girl's hair from beneath the hat and tucked it around her like a blanket. He drew her eyes closed with the tips of his fingers. When his back was turned, the little worm crawled out from beneath the dead girl's locks.

By the time the sun set, all that remained in the girl's bed was a single, white glow-worm, wriggling its way in search of a new neck in which to burrow.

Moon Baby

Angie Spoto

She swims through supernovas,
dances on the edge of planetary rings.
Baby breathes the universe.

The truth eludes her:
the solar storms are beating blood,
the constellations – cuts of flesh,
the dark matter doesn't matter.

She isn't yet alive.
Already, I'm imagining her dead.

I call her moon baby
because she was made of a moon so full
it overflowed from one night
into another into another.

I imagine her universe like my universe,
myself her galaxy, grief
like constellations – sharp points
of light that make pictures you can hardly read.

I try to make sense of grief like the Greeks
mapped the night sky:
they made concessions and so do I.

Untitled

Steve Rigley



Fifty Sketches for Lua

Maria Sledmere

1. The first time we properly went for a drink together, she drew a symbol on the back of my hand. The biro was running out of ink and bumped awkwardly on each tendon, so that what was supposed to be a spiral became a series of curved and disjointed lines.
2. There was something about the way she would text me at all hours, let me linger awhile in her elliptical world – then slip away again, the moving triplet of dots vanishing at last. We never said goodbye or goodnight, the way I did as a kid messaging my crush on MSN. We never bookended these exchanges with any formality; it was a case of ghosting in and out of each other's presence (...)
3. Her first act was to shoot me in the rain. She mimed a gunshot with her pretty white fingers. A bad actress, I did not mime my own death. I kissed her instead. We nearly fell in the fountain; our bodies would settle there, growing ferric like all the pennies and leaves.
4. I recall how people looked different afterwards. Every face seemed printed with hers, street after street of these infinite replicas. I had to keep checking Facebook to see if she was online, to make sure she still existed.
5. Listening to songs with 'blue' in the title. This was a habit I fell into. She used to love 'Pale Blue Eyes' and would hum it in the bath, in the kitchen, when shedding her clothes for a job – swirling, secret, spectral.
6. When they cut off her phone, we didn't see each other for weeks. She told me she was too shy to buzz the doorbell, which made me sad. I had thought there was a space we'd carved for ourselves, in some way a sharing. The lovely-sounding quality of *also*.

7. One time we had a midnight rendezvous after drinks with the college girls. All of them drew in flowing lines, their conversation was equally fluid and smooth – mostly about cocktails and boys. They rounded off lists of conquests, slipped into seamy stories which made my skin prick. I sipped the obligatory martinis and watched her eyes dart over the room. They were pale grey, but I always knew she wished they were blue. Some people have these personal disappointments; things they carry awhile the way a child carries marbles for an almost interminable phase.
8. She told me how she used to dream, after meeting new people, that she was in a meadow: everything dandy, but then her pockets would empty of their marbles. They would roll away with exaggerated clattering, then start popping – one by one. No globe was safe. They were treacherous, shatterable, hot. I heard her therapist friend, the one that chewed tobacco and weighed about 70 pounds, tell her the dreams were manifestations of social anxiety. ‘You think everyone’s gonna leave you,’ he said. Sometimes I find bits of glass in the carpet.
9. I think of her, and it is always raining when I think of her.
10. The first time I met her, I was taking life-drawing classes and she walked in late, started stripping immediately. She’s done it so many times the shyness is gone. The shyness comes in other ways.
11. ‘June,’ she said one day, ‘when will you let me cook for you?’
12. She used to take it all the time, pulling baggies of white powder from her tattered handbag at many of the college parties. It made her eyes roll back, her lips go blue. If I felt her pulse – a chance brush of fingers and wrists – her heartbeat slowed to a dulling beat, a creature buried deep inside her, unreachable.
13. There were weeks she spent crashing at mine; then she’d disappear without trace. I’d picture her slinking down alleyways. I always knew

she'd come back eventually, mewling for milk. We kissed each time anew like strangers. I think often of her little cattish mouth, its peculiar cleanness.

14. Once, she relayed a dream that wasn't really a dream, but a memory of youthful tranquility. There were, she said, all these rose-coloured caravans lining a cliff, looking out over a turquoise ocean. Then everything happened, in so many words. I asked her how exactly the violence started. When I touched on that word, her eyes would glaze over and she'd go very quiet. I started to suspect maybe the caravans were just something she'd seen in a magazine once.
15. The powder made her pee, constantly. We had this routine where I'd help her stumble to the bathroom intermittently. The boys were in the next room, blasting psytrance from the battered stereo. She talked mostly about the streets, the secret routes of trade and exchange. Places you could hide in the night where no-one would find you. She'd do another bump and pick up again, dancing in someone's kitchen, telling me over and over how she felt *shimmery*.
16. 'You can stay whenever you want,' I kept telling her. I'd write letters on post-its in the studio. *Lua, come home*. I would stick them along my desk and then tear them down at the end of the day. I'm not sure who I was writing to.
17. The first girl I ever kissed was six months younger than I was. She wore electric blue mascara and I remember thinking that kissing her was like locking wings with a butterfly. Sounds corny, but when I fluttered my eyes open for just a second – in that awkward, virginal way – the light caught her lashes and flared out blue, and it was all quite flighty, soft, and wonderful. We didn't talk at all after that, not even at school.
18. It's raining when I walk home now, always raining. Sometimes I forget what happened and expect Lua to be home, burning pans in my flat and smoking out the window. I see her in the glass of shopfronts, her

face upon the mannequins. I flick through my old portfolio and there she is, all lissom and thin, caught between crisp sugar paper and thick black Indian ink.

19. I passed by her figure in a phone-box. Nobody else in the world, surely, had those lurid leggings – the thrift shop ones with the cherry print. Nobody else in the world, surely, still used a phone box.
20. The funny thing is blue eyes are the most common. Blue eyes were maybe all she wanted; she didn't know how precious she was.
21. Only recently I discovered there's a song called 'Lua'. Its fragility gives me the chills. *I know that it is freezing but I think we have to walk...*
22. We kissed in the rain outside with the smokers. I wouldn't wash my hair for days, just to keep the smell of the smoke and the memory inside of how it felt. She was lost in the shadows, in the dark of the street and thump of the club. It could be summer but she'd be shivering anyway, tapping cigarettes off strangers. She had the wild look that made everyone submit.
23. Those fingers, curled around some tiny amber smoulder. Her mouth in the rain, the wet dark smell of her neck like leaves long-trodden in the sticky sweet earth.
24. We couldn't share clothes, because I'm a lot bigger. This used to bother me; I'd try lending her my blouses and skirts but they'd swallow her body. She always ate in line with me, toast for toast, tea for tea; but then she'd go days without eating altogether. She told me one day, 'I just don't want to be too much.'
25. The drugs made her vulnerable to boys. They'd drape themselves over her on some pretence or other, hungry for those flickers of laughter.
26. Only once did she persuade me to take a few bumps. Obsessively I checked the symptoms online, but she put her hand on my thigh and

breathed in my ear, and I just did it. Snorted off keys that weren't hers or mine. I lay against the sofa and she sort of melted into me, we melted into each other. It was like coming home, whatever that means.

27. Her voice never quite cottoned onto Lou Reed's brand of talking-blues. Her voice was high, kind of tremolo sweet. You could imagine her in an angels' choir at some Catholic school, all blonde hair and starry-eyed sorrow. I tried to get her to work in octaves, to find a parallel range; she'd lean out the window (probably it was raining) singing *down for you is up*, trying to master a soprano. I guess with someone more self-assured it would've been super cheesy, but when the 'up' harmonised with my internal impression of Lou Reed's voice, it made me quite dizzy.
28. I brought glasses of milk over to the windowsill, and we'd watch the students stumble drunk up the street, all of them quoting trashy reality shows or trying to fix each other's wobbly figures.
29. Once, at the college, they splayed her across a black marble plinth with an apple in her mouth. It was the one occasion I stole glances at my peers' work. Weirdly, all the boys went in for safe and swivelling lines, while the girls were scratchy, uncertain, pornographic. They used built-up contours to emphasise the space between things, gaps you would lust for behind the angles. I still don't really get the significance of the apple – a bit too on-the-nose Eve?
30. 'Do you ever think about the future?' I asked her, admiring the pillow-shaped crease on her cheek, which looked like the fold of a book. 'What's for breakfast?' she said.
31. The truth was Lua had lots of truths. 'I had a child once. A little lizard thing inside me, with eyes and fingers and all. They swept him away.' I caught her looking at baby shoes when I was buying her boots for winter. She twirled the laces in her fingers, long enough for me to know there was something still starving. I told her she could sleep with men if

she wanted, if she was safe. She turned away to face the wall, sucking her breath into silence.

32. There were all these secrets, like seeds inside her.
33. We got lost, the only time we ventured out of the city. We were out all day, nine hours in all, circling the hills and the woods. It rained relentlessly. Secretly, I enjoyed the strange looped routes of return, how we doubled over ourselves and saw everything as a shadow of our first impressions. She was quiet and even held my hand. She was so cold, I knew I'd failed her then – maybe not for the first time.
34. I asked her, near the start, 'Have you ever flown?' She said there were other ways of becoming light, then sipped her milkshake clear and dry.
35. She woke up in the middle of the night, started shaking me. 'I can hear it,' she cried. 'The sea. It's downstairs, the roar. It's coming.' I looked out the window and it wasn't raining. 'Go back to sleep.' She pleaded with me, threatened to leave, so eventually I had to investigate. The roar of the sea was my MP3 player, stuffed in a bag, blasting my gym playlist through the headphones. She gasped with relief as soon as I hit the little off button. I touched her brow and it was liquid with sweat.
36. The drawings started to sell. Life-size versions of Lua, parallel symmetries of her figure cut in different stances. She told me she'd seen photos of Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* in a catalogue once. She asked if I wanted her to be a human paintbrush. She took off all her clothes with the usual nonchalance, started smearing her skin in my Indian ink. I tore up everything we made that day, even the love. It was just no good, it took too long.
37. 'You always use black, never blue,' she said once. 'Why is that?'
38. I just wanted to draw her. The concavity of her stomach, the little bolt of each bone.

39. She had a knack for taking her clothes off. She could just slide out of them, like a selkie slipping out of her skin. She must've spent time freezing in the street – must've spent long nights lusting after coats and sweaters – but now she seemed always a little too warm, a little too frazzled, ecstatic.
40. She said there is nothing bluer than a river, because a river is never twice the same. A river is always losing itself, miserable listless and bluer than blue. She always powdered her nose a shade too pale.
41. I had the privilege of dancing with her on a handful of occasions. I had no sense of how to make time dissolve in the sensual – at least not at first – but she would drag me closer to the abyss with her darker twists, her closer muscle. I was underwater, then. I let her take me with her, deep into the blue dark, the light pollution.
42. A record she came home with, second-hand: Jeff Buckley, *Sketches for My Sweetheart the Drunk*. All these unfinished songs with their crackle and grit, their voluptuous lust, their artful sparseness and close despair. What was it about these desolate men that appealed to the lost girl, waif as she was from the wrong side of the river?
43. I wonder sometimes if the smouldering glow of those cigarettes were a way of defeating the blue. You know, lamplights hanging like oranges along the navy-shaded suburban avenues.
44. The museum commissioned an exhibition called *Memorandum in Blue*. Upon its completion, I nearly renamed it *Jewel Box of Flesh*. It was a collection of recent sketchbook vignettes, workings towards negative space. She could never have been my paintbrush; she was much too liquid to be held.
45. We ate out a lot and waiters loved to flirt with us. We competed for attention and made it a game to match their hopeful eyes, leaving

extravagant tips. Lua went to the bathroom so frequently I wondered how we got through the meal at all.

46. She kept an old postcard from someone whose name she never divulged. It just said 'love M.' Although faded, the postcard beheld a brilliant body of water. In lieu of a location, the small print just read 'Where You Want to Be Right Now.' I know this because she used to carry it in her back pocket, and I once felt it, felt the soft card bending against fingers, flesh.
47. I used to find her asleep at bus stops around town, her lap strewn with unrolled Rizlas, candy wrappers.
48. 'Why?' Is it sufficient to question, to skirt around the issue the way ink spills like black milk, the way critics read into my work their own private mythologies?
49. Lua was a girl in love with dissociatives. We lay on the floor after fighting, fucking. We lay on many floors without chronology. She said, 'I can't be a part of this perfect existence.' We had the house then, maybe, the mortgage supported by my drawing – which of course depended upon her body. She said the walls were moving, they were intestinal, slipping and sliding over one another, looming in to digest her.
50. I return to the river, not quite the river it was before. What was more faithful to form than any crudely patented spattering of paint? What recreated that flow without end, the needless accumulation of shade and shape? What was closer to truth? They wrote of my work: *a palatial, bounded sadness of the body; a truly remarkable exercise in monochrome*. I weep because the river is more a bottle-green jealousy, a trembling grey, than any luxurious blue. What I would give just to brush over the blue capillaries of her wrist, to touch their slow and regular cadence. To reach for one last time the thing underneath, the vulnerable intricate mass of shadow. Its halo, a cigarette glow. With

each new page, I trace back the trajectories of her flesh, those lost afternoons. With each new page her body eludes me, till I am left with mere lines and the things she said, running like threads. Currents in the water, those virgules of time that preserve us as we were in skin together. But she has or she had so many skins – merely thinness glistening. I run out of sugar paper, *I love you*. Somehow in salt and in water, not quite the river it was before. The running blood, the afternoons. I send her a message every now and then, a few empty words with the vital ellipsis. This is it, the language that carries us. I learn to tune out: to be absent, lingering on the embankment, listening for rain, for water upon water and the soft blue gloam that brings darkness again. I see her sometimes, a quivering spark – the way the worst user is sensitive to light at the end of everything, spiralling backwards. 50mg follow the first, the last.

Steve Rigley

85

Poem for Two

Steve Rigley

1: _____

2: _____

NOW WE CAN RETURN TO

WHAT WE CANNOT CONFIRM

IN A CROWDED RUSH HOUR

AROUND 8.45

WHAT WE DO KNOW IS THAT

WHAT APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN

HEARD WHAT THEY DESCRIBE AS

I STILL CANNOT CONFIRM

Tomorrow; an earring
washed up in the laundry,

like your magenta lip
sunk on the blue chipped mug

near where you'd opened up
your thumb. Remembering

how last night you had knelt,
yawning, washing their hair.

A late meal; bickering,
your hand raised in grace and

finally, the dimmed light
and the empty steps of

your slipper, now slipped off
by the foot of the bed.

About the Contributors

Marita Arvaniti took a wrong turn on her way to Athens and ended up in Glasgow, which served her really well because now she gets to wear all the nice sweaters she has collected over the years but never worn since they were far too warm for Greek weather. Occasionally, she misses the sun. She is studying Fantasy and used to study Theatre, which ought to tell you everything you need to know.

Fiona Ashley graduated from the University of Glasgow, MLitt Creative Writing (Merit), in 2009. It was her full intention to become a full-time writer at this time but life intervened. However, her desire to be a writer never waned, and she now writes regularly in the beautiful setting of Argyll, with the support of her delightfully complicated LGBTQ family. She writes prose fiction and poetry in Scots and English. She has completed her first novel and is working on her second.

Born in Sheffield, **Eloise Birtwhistle** has lived in Glasgow since 2012. She studied English Literature at the University of Glasgow and entered into the Creative Writing MLitt there in 2017. Her poems follow on from a lyric tradition, seeking connections between the self and the world that surrounds us. As well as writing her own poetry, she is interested in creating inclusive spaces that encourage writing and community. Eloise is a Director of the non-profit organisation Uncovered Artistry.

John Boursnell is a writer and artist living in Glasgow.

Nour El-Issa is a fourth-year English Literature and Maths student who is currently working on expanding his body of work in poetry, photography, and essays. He tweets far too much and hopes this counts as regular creative writing. It does not.

Alexandra Grunberg is a fiction author, poet, and screenwriter. Her work has appeared in various publications certified by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. She is the resident screenwriter of Magic Dog Productions. Her poetry was long-listed for the 2018 Ivan Juritz prize. You can learn more at her website, alexandragrunberg.weebly.com.

Irene Hossack's poetry has been published internationally over the years. Her collection *North of All Borders* was published by Stupor Mundi Books in May 2018 and is available on Amazon. She teaches Creative Writing and Applied Linguistics at the Open University.

Meg MacDonald is an apprentice of godhood and the fantastic. Studying for a PhD in English Literature, she is concerned that her thesis, 'Gods Wall to Wall: The Rise and Fall of Gods in Fantasy 1989–2017,' might form its own belief structure and deify itself when her back is turned. She is an avid consumer of literature and glitter, a progenitor of hilarity and resistance. Knitter, baker, repairer, grower. She likes to run but is uncomfortable with the fact and wonders what her 14-year-old self would say.

Murray McKinstry is a writer, poet, and postgraduate student at the University of Glasgow. He enjoys writing about, amongst other things, existentialism, mental health, politics, and The Beat Generation. He is currently working on his first novel, and also plans to release his first poetry collection in the near future.

Rhona Millar is currently studying on the MLitt Creative Writing programme at Glasgow University. She started writing in 2014 after studying Creative Writing with the Open University. Her work has been published in journals such as *Gutter*, *Litro*, *Quotidian*, *Octavious*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, and *Ink, Sweat and Tears*. You can also find her writing online at Mindbodygreen and Elephant Journal. She enjoys trail running, cycling, hillwalking, art, and performance.

Alfie Prendergast is a writer currently studying an MLitt in Creative Writing at Glasgow University. He writes about human futures, occult pasts, and thoughts overheard. He is currently working on his first novel for publication, as well as producing *Open Mic Podcast*, a literary reading podcast which hopes to capture the intrepid energy of open mic reading nights in podcast form.

Steve Rigley is currently enrolled part-time on the MLitt Creative Writing at Glasgow University. Three stops down on the subway, and in his other life, leads the Graphic Design pathway at the Glasgow School of Art, maintaining research interests in Graphic Design history and the mapping of practice.

Lydia Roy is an undergrad at Glasgow University, and a writer of stories, poems, and the occasional course-mandated essay. She has been published in Eastern Michigan University's *Acta Cogitata: An Undergraduate Journal in Philosophy*, and is currently working on a number of projects, in various stages of completion.

Maria Sledmere is a former student (MA English Literature, MLitt Modernities) of the University of Glasgow, and will be coming back in autumn to start a DFA within the Creative Writing department.

Sarah Smith lives in Glasgow and writes fiction as well as working as a literacy tutor and genealogist. Her short stories, poetry, and flash fiction have been published by *New Writing Scotland*, *50GS*, *Leaf Books*, *Duality*, and *Gilded Dirt*. Sarah is studying for an MLitt in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. She blogs at sarahsmithwriter.wordpress.com and can be found on Twitter @truesarahsmith.

Angie Spoto is an American fiction writer and poet. Her most recent endeavours include a lyrical essay about her Italian family, a collection of horror surrealist fairy tales, and a fantasy novel about grief. She is working toward a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow, and volunteers with the Glasgow-based social enterprise Uncovered Artistry, which supports the creativity of domestic and sexual abuse survivors. She is artist in residence at HIV Scotland. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies, including *Crooked Holster*, *From Glasgow to Saturn*, and *Toad Suck Review*.

Hannah Isobel Summers is a writer, artist, and English tutor from Scotland. She holds a degree in Sculpture and has spent the last two years teaching English in Chile, recently returning to Glasgow to study an MLitt in Creative Writing.

Aea Varfis-van Warmelo is a writer and actor who recently graduated from the University of Glasgow with a degree in English Literature and Theatre Studies. In her final year she was awarded the prizes for Best Dissertation in English Literature (for a dissertation in Creative Writing) and Best Performance in Theatre Studies (for a performance of Samuel Beckett's short piece, *Play*). Aea currently hopes she did not peak at 21.

During a 23-year career as a clinical physicist in the NHS, **Mandy Watson** authored and contributed to a diverse range of scientific and technical publications. However, recent early retirement has provided opportunity to explore more creative forms of writing. One of the first-born of Livingston New Town, she has also lived in Aberdeen and Bath before settling down 25 years ago to live the dream in the West End of Glasgow.

About the Editors

Ruth EJ Booth is an award-winning writer and academic based in Glasgow. Winner of the BSFA Award for Best Short Story (2014), Ruth is a columnist for Scottish SF journal *Shoreline of Infinity* and a member of the Glasgow SF Writers Circle. She has served on juries for the British Fantasy and James White Awards. As an academic of Fantasy, she has presented in Helsinki and Glasgow, and co-organized the 2017 and 2018 GIFCon events. She is on the Programme Committee for Ytterbium, the 2019 Eastercon, and will begin a DFA in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow this Autumn. Ruth is shortlisted for this year's British Fantasy Award for Best Short Story.

Valerie Brentjes is an editor, writer, and translator from the Netherlands. Her Dutch translation of Marissa Meyer and Douglas Holgate's graphic novel *Wires and Nerve* was published by Blossom Books in 2017. Her own writing has appeared in *404 Ink*. She lives in Scotland, where she recently completed a Master's degree in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow.

Claire J Kennedy is originally from the Highlands but moved to Glasgow in 2009 to study and now calls Glasgow home. She graduated with a first class honours in Psychology in 2014 and the theme of mental health recurs often in her prose, alongside dreams and socio-political issues. She has just completed an MLitt in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow, and is working on a political thriller novel, written in Scots and English. She is also a freelance editor and an intern with the Scottish Writers' Centre. Her short fiction can be found in *GUM* and *Qmunicate*.

E. C. Lewis is a Glasgow based writer and editor. She earned a dual BA in History (Honors) and Medieval and Renaissance Literature, and is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow. Her writing engages with the minutiae of life, examining the ordinary in order to further explore the beauty in what it means to be human.

Jennifer Constable – Jenny to her nearest and dearest – is a Journalism and History graduate from the University of Strathclyde, and is currently studying an MLitt in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. Native to Glasgow, she writes children’s fiction about selkies, and dabbles in experimental poetry exploring the topics of sex and the female body. Her writing focuses largely on traditional Celtic folklore and female identity. Jenny’s work has been featured in *The Scotsman*, *Bella Caledonia*, and *Commonspace Magazine*. When not writing in her impressive variety of patterned notebooks, she can be found on Twitter (@JennyLConstable), shouting futilely into the void or else scrolling through the feed of Bodega Cats.

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