

WorGUMBO



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‘Opposites’

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Submissions are open for issue three until 31st August 2011. The theme is 'Light'.
See our website for details of how to submit.

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Contents

Editorial		4
Double Blind Date	- Jim Eigo	5
Either/Or	- Maude Larke	6
The Chilli/Chocolate Combination	- Jamie 'Jimadee' Walsh	7
Two Things I'd Like To Get Straight	- Michael Conley	9
Stake Out	- Phil McNulty	10
Nothing to Lose	- Anthony Ward	14
The Barobic Study	- Martin Jaeger	15
Letter to Susan	- Tim O'Leary	17
Sightseeing	- Carola Huttmann	18
The agony aunt's lament	- Dorothy Burgess	22
Unnatural Tendencies	- Michael Monkhouse	23
Whispers	- Ian Hawley	25
A Mess	- Paula Ward	26
If We Could Do More With Serankot	- Phil McNulty	31
Eve	- Martin Jaeger	32
Crossing	- Carole Bromley	34
Glass Houses	- Len Kuntz	35
Family Gatherings	- Natasha Liu-Thwaites	36
Eleven Types Of Vegetable	- Michael Conley	39
Seduced	- Ian Bartlett	40
Heartbeats, Dreams and New Beginnings	- Guy Lucas	41
On The Bus	- Eunice Yeates	46
a computer, dad	- Carl Palmer	48
Walkabout	- Phil McNulty	49
When You're Down, You're Up	- Downith Monaghan	51
Author Biographies		54

Editorial

Welcome to issue two of *Word Gumbo*. Our theme for this issue was ‘Opposites’ and we were really impressed by the number of different ways you found to interpret that idea, from the reasonably straight-forward ideas of ‘double-dating’ or an ‘either/or’ comparison, to the weird and the wonderful.

We had an even larger number of submissions this time around, breaking the 180 mark, and so our job was even harder in choosing which pieces to put through. What we’ve presented for you here is what we consider to be the very best writing submitted.

That said, while the number of poems, stories and flash-fictions remained high, we are still lacking in both the non-fiction and script categories. We really would love to see your work in those forms, so please send it through and keep Kath and Mike as busy as possible.

We are already accepting submissions for the next issue. The deadline date is August 31st 2011 and the theme is ‘Light’. So, thinking caps on and send us your work.

Finally, if you enjoy the magazine, please tell people about it. We want to grow Gumbo Press to a level where we can start producing chapbooks and other wonderful things. So please post links to us on your social networking sites, sign up to our page on Facebook, post it to your blog etc. etc. and let’s see just what we can achieve together.

And that’s it for now. Many thanks, and happy reading!

Calum Kerr
Managing Editor

Double Blind Date

Jim Eigo

From the passenger seat I turn my pounding head around as far as I can manage and still maintain my surface nonchalance. What do I say? I'm not really keeping track. The move is just an excuse to fill my eyes with her. The sight of her in the flesh once more confirms what memory has known for several hours. I watch them—the exceptional girl I'm now looking at and the exceptional girl I've been entertaining in my head—draw close and kiss in the looking glass of my heated imagination.

In the dark of the backseat of the car, her calm, heavy eyes rise to meet the oncoming headlights. Otherwise she barely registers their passing. Nor does she react to whatever I've just said. Perhaps it merits no response. Under the exaggerated play of flash and shadow she sits, placid, happy by the look of it.

How in hell can she be happy with the guy she's been stuck with the whole damn night, the one she's now stuffed next to? From shoulder to toe, he presses his inexcusable bulk up against her long, fresh body. How can she be happy with the familiar way he's draped his arm around her? Like cocktail sausages, his thick fingers rest on her bare shoulder like they belong there. He disgusts even me, and I'm his best friend. I know the deep rot his flesh hosts. When he smiles (which he does right now with transparent intent, as dumb and smug as the bugs of high summer that right now are smearing themselves across the speeding vehicle's windshield) I can smell it on his breath.

When he smiles she responds with a muted laugh, uncrossing her legs before she crosses them again in the opposite direction. Stockinged thigh strokes stockinged thigh, making a sound like a distant cloud of insects. Something's coming! Can I be the only one who hears it? No, no functioning male within earshot could fail to pick up the signal. My friend moves his free hand from his knee to hers and there it stays—content for now but for how long?

His thoughts leer loud and clear. I can hear the gears in his head whirr from here, like a rogue projector discharging its pictures out into an unsuspecting world, backlit luridly. But in the dark of the hurtling car, if I spoke right now what my heart knows, my startled date might drive us all off the side of the highway into who knows where.

Either/Or

Maude Larke

Either

because I lay awake all night
and sent time spinning with my thoughts
the world turned faster tonight

and because it turned faster
someone who was not holding it close enough
was thrown from the edge and left behind
choking on stardust

Or

because I lay awake all night
and sent thought spinning
seven times around time

my life turned faster tonight
and regained its grip on a spinning world
that had once lost itself from my hold
when it started turning faster

The Chilli/Chocolate Combination

Jamie 'Jimadee' Walsh

Have you ever tried chilli and chocolate? I haven't, but I imagine it to be absolutely awful. Although, having said that I don't really like chilli, so the fact that I'm using it in an argument seems somewhat redundant. It's not the chilli *per se*, but all hot and spicy food in general. Evidently, my tongue lacks the capacity it would normally need to have what you could call an "extensive palette", and instead decides to ignore any taste provided by such spices in lieu of screaming out 'Oh, my God, why? WHY?! The pain! Seven-thousand fire-tipped needles of pain, na na na, na na na, no we don't like vindaloo'. Fortunately, my tongue doesn't have a mouth of its own so can't verbalise such exclamatory-ness whenever faced with such a situation at a formal dinner party (although, the idea of a formal dinner party that serves vindaloo as its main course seems a whole other situation altogether). But I digress...

I could've said "Have you ever tried cheese and chocolate?" since I can cope with cheese. I quite like cheese. In fact, half the time I order a pizza in, I'm a little tempted to leave all the extra toppings, ask them to hold the tomato sauce, and just forget the bread while they're at it in the hope that they'd be so kind as to just bring me a box of melted cheese, but I'm getting away from myself again here. I can't imagine cheese and chocolate being too complimentary. I mean for one thing, they both start with "ch" and end with "e"; it's a marriage made in Hell. (Moments after typing that, I noticed that "chilli" also starts with "ch" so had to add the thing about the "e" at the end too to make my point somehow appear valid.)

But I suppose the reason people like the chilli/chocolate combination comes down to their apparent oppositeness. Things just tend to work well together when accompanied by something on the other end of the scale: light and shade, sweet and sour, Philip Schofield and Holly Willoughby, they all manage to not overpower the other one. There's even more, an almost endless list of opposites that attract (which I won't go into on account of the fact that I'm already about 400 words into this and the fact that I'd like to go to bed sometime tonight), so why did I open with the food one?

Well it would be a bit rubbish if I didn't answer that question considering (a) the question has now been imposed unto the world, and (b) you didn't actually ask it, dear reader, but are now filled with moderate intrigue as to why I posed the question in the first place in the vague hope you get an answer to satisfy the aforementioned intrigue, meaning that I must now (a) come up with something which I suppose could validly be considered an appropriate answer, and (b) not go to bed.

Umm...

Ahh...

Oh, OK, how's this for ya? I've very recently become somewhat addicted to culinary ventures. I suppose (in my head) that's a fancy way of saying 'I like cooking', but of course it gets pretty tough trying to cook something exquisite when you're a student and you're essentially living off beans, mouldy bread

and half an onion. Also I have a not-so-broad palette, did I mention? Therefore, I get my cookery fix from the magic picture-emitting machine in the corner of the room. I suppose I like to think that if this whole University course ends up falling through, or leaving me with no options, or Deal Or No Deal doesn't accept my application, or it does but when I get there I don't get my hundred grand, then at least I could try my hand at cooking.

Maybe not professionally, mind. That whole 'yes chef, no chef, three haggises full chef' malarkey, where Gordon Ramsay ends up saying the f word because he f***in' feels like it would probably get me down after a short while. But if I managed to end up in a Greasy Spoon somewhere, making tried-and-tested breakfasts for construction workers, et cetera, it wouldn't be the most terrible thing to me. Because right now, I know terrible. Terrible is sitting in front of the TV, watching people making the perfect duck à l'orange with glazed carrots and dauphinoise potatoes and other such things that sound really fancy while I'm chowing down on my third packet of Super Noodles of the day (and my sixteenth packet of the week).

So there. There's opposites. There's me, sat in a pokey little flat boiling a kettle for a living, versus the chefs working some amazing culinary processes on the best cuts of meat imaginable. I guess you could say that's more juxtaposition, or contrasting, but for the purposes of this little (well, I say 'little') rant about nothing in particular, I'm going to call it opposites. So there we have it. Opposites like chilli and chocolate complement each other, opposites like braised beef and wafer-thin ham make you feel terrible.

I suppose you could say they're opposites.

Two Things I'd Like To Get Straight

Michael Conley

It is simply not true
that in my back pocket
I carry a list entitled
Things I Am Growing Increasingly Afraid Of
and that Item #1,
printed in red marker
and underlined twice, is
Not Being Taken Seriously.
The absurdity of keeping such a list
would surely serve as evidence
for its own hypothesis
thus rendering the list's existence moot.

It is a similar falsehood
that in my other back pocket
I carry a second list entitled
Things I Have Recently Discovered About Myself
and that many of the items
on List A
are also present on List B,
albeit in a different order.

Stake Out

Phil McNulty

In the rectangle of the rear view mirror his eyes were hard, narrow, deep-set, tough.

Yeah, tough! That's the way life is. Hold it in, give nothing away. Fight your corner. Be prepared for pay back. Any time, any place.

He stretched in the confines of the car. Flexing muscular forearms. Scarred hands extended. He moved them slowly to rub the stubble on his heavy square jaw. He felt like shit but, hey, another day another dollar. He made a mental note to speak to Padrino about the car. What were they trying to do? Cripple him. For a big guy like him the Pontiac was just too fucking tight for a stake-out. And this is how they treat the main man? Shit!

The ear piece crackled, 'How goes it Chico? She out yet?'

'Hey! If she was out you think like I wouldn't tell ya Padrino! Get off my fucking case.'

'Lighten up fella. We're thinking today's the day it's goin' down. Maybe you need some backup, right?'

'Backup! Fucking backup! When have I ever needed that Padrino? You're disrespectin' me an I don't like that.'

'Steady big guy. You're the man, nobody's taking it away. But if she gets wacked on our shift it all hits the fan. You know that.'

Through the side window he could see the steps of the Brownstone rising steeply from the pavement elevating the impressive front door and portico above the basement rooms. Very solid. Respectable. Nice success story.

There was a little guy by the kerb, jeans, denim jacket, long hair, leaning on his old Harley, smoking. Photographer from the Globe. Just one good picture could feed him for a month. He was always here. So were the suits in the unmarked Lincoln.

'You still there Chico?'

'Where else would I be? I'm here, they're here. Everything's normal. Don't fuck with me Padrino. If you got something, let me have it. I don't play games.'

'Word on the street is...today's the day. She needs warning. If you won't have back up then you're on your own. The feds are useless. They're just full of Starbucks and Taco Bell and shit. Get close and stay close. Break cover. She needs it. As for the rest of them...stick to the protocol. We don't want them involved. Remember, you're the invisible man.'

Across the street the door opened, as it did every day at this time. She stepped out into the warm sunlight. Gorgeous, fucking gorgeous. That blonde bobbed hair and the perfect white teeth, flashed in a broad smile for the photographer. A soft black leather suit of jacket and short skirt. Bending now to adjust her shoe strap. Jesus! Breasts pendulous in the low top. Leather skirt skin tight against her

thighs. What an assignment! Never mind the discomfort. He counted himself lucky that this lady needed protection. As ever his eyes were everywhere, scanning the street, the pavements, looking for signs of slowing cars, the bastards waiting to rush her. And what? Bundle her away. Legs kicking, skirt riding up high. A stranger's heavy arms around her, holding her tight under her breasts. The adrenalin was pumping. He leaned forward and scribbled a reminder on the dash board memo pad...'Dress more appropriately.' She had to be told. He put the pencil back behind his ear.

She reached the pavement and paused, a hand on the black, spiked, railing. A kind word for the photographer, a slight wave of the hand to the Lincoln. Danger! Danger! This was all too casual.

The door of the Pontiac clicked shut as he eased himself out. Very relaxed. Detached. Disinterested. His eyes were on her. He bought a newspaper. His eyes were on her. She was smiling, stopping here and there, neighbours, street sellers. Overhead a helicopter whined above the noise of the traffic. He looked up. Padrino playing games? Maybe. Maybe, the hit was going down? His eyes were back on her.

At the corner, she paused, looked around, turned into profile, very nice, clothes tight, classy, great body, no wonder people loved her. She looked apprehensive. And then the boyfriend appeared. Expensive suit, slick hair, Slav features. New European money. She smiled. His arm encircled her waist, moving her towards the breakfast diner. At the door, his hand slid down, over the smooth black leather, encircled her right buttock. She was laughing. She should not be laughing.

'Chico, what's the score with you man!' The voice was loud, very loud. He quickly hunched into a doorway, collar up, speaking quietly, vehemently.

'She's with the fiancée. They've gone inside to eat. What you want me to do Padrino?'
'Might be your only chance Chico. Follow them. Wait for the opportunity. Get right up close.'

He straightened and sauntered across to the diner. At the door he stopped, checking the street. The paparazzi had moved his Harley and the Lincoln had moved likewise.

He moved inside. There were tables arranged by the windows and on the main floor of the diner but along two walls there were booths.

She was there, at the far side, bending to slide her long legs under the table and to shuffle onto the red Rexine bench seat. Her black leather skirt- smooth and taut. The boyfriend was heading for the washroom. This was the time. He moved quickly between the tables and squeezed into the booth opposite her. She was surprised but not frightened. That was good. She smiled, nervously, he thought. Brilliant white teeth against red lips. Her eyes narrowed, skin crinkling at the corners. She brushed the blonde fringe back, gently, stylishly, with her hand.

He leaned forwards. 'Don't be scared.'

Her eyes widened, she turned her head, sniffed the air. She was bolt upright, pushing herself back into the red padded seat of the booth, leaving damp palm prints on the glass topped table. 'It's you! It's you!'

He leaned closer, whispering, consoling. 'You don't understand. I'm here to warn you.'

She recoiled. Lips curling in distaste. 'It was you. It's that smell. Fruit. Pear drops!'

His eyes widened in realisation. 'No baby. You've got it wrong. I've been in the car too long. That's all. It's the insulin. I forgot to take it. I'm producing ketones....'

He was aware that he was babbling, but couldn't stop. He was also aware of the look of disgust confronting him.

'...it's acetone you can smell. Like nail polish. Yeh!'

He got no further. The boyfriend was standing over him. A punch to the side of the head knocked him into the wall then strong hands were restraining him.

He heard her say, 'It's him, it's him. It's that voice and that smell!'

And then his world became confused. The police from the Lincoln had cuffed him and were holding him on the floor. One of them was calling in,

'Caucasian, five two about hundred and sixty pounds. Little bald guy Sarge, John Lennon glasses, looks like a rough sleeper. Stinks. Wearing a loose earpiece, no radio, no music player, nothing.'

He was aware of a camera flashing and then the grin on the photographer's face.

She was standing nearby, boyfriend's arm around her shoulder. She shouldn't be looking at him like that. Her arms were folded tightly, protectively in front of her, the black leather straining at the shoulders and elbows. Below the high hemline of the skirt her knees were pressed together. She didn't look happy anymore. She must be confused herself by what was happening to him. Only moments earlier they had been smiling at each other in the booth. And he had been about to tell her when they had stopped him. She had not got the warning.

He could tell her now. Warn her of the danger. Tell her about dressing appropriately. Warn her that a man lying on the floor could stare up at her thighs in such a short skirt, if only she would move her legs a little. But...he was hauled roughly to his feet.

She was much taller than he had expected. The police as well. This was confusing. They'd sent their biggest guys to get the wrong man. He felt a trickle of blood at the side of his mouth.

'You're beautiful,' he started, but could say no more as the fiancée punched him right between the eyes. He sprawled backwards over a table. His glasses had gone and the scene was a milky blur of colour and shapes and movement and noise. He was pulled up by the shoulders and pushed towards the door.

It was bright outside and a crowd had gathered. There was noise from the traffic. A lot of guys leaning on their horns. He could hear the helicopter above them. Uniform cops were in control but as they hit the street the crowd went wild. Shouting, swearing, threatening. This was going badly wrong.

They forced him in the back of a patrol car, a big uniformed cop either side, and headed downtown. He listened to the crackle of the police radio from the front of the car. Heard her name. There'd been an incident. Some guy had tried to hit on her. Stalker they said. If only he'd been there. He felt guilty. Couldn't stop himself sobbing with remorse and anger. He raged against the cuffs but the big police just leaned into him, crushing him.

Then, over the radio, it was Padrino's voice, taunting,

'Didn't need backup, hey Chico. Big man could go it alone hey?

'Fuck you Padrino! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck you Padrino!

The officers in the front of the Chevy turned in surprise at the writhing, screaming prisoner.

Padrino's voice came again, quieter, more diplomatic and conciliatory,

'Chico, you've done ok. Calm down. What's happened, happened. You got in close. I think she trusts you. You've made a good impression. Formed a bond. I think there's a lot of affection there. We can build on that. Now here's the plan....'

Nothing to Lose

Anthony Ward

He stood in front of the machine- cascading with lights. With all the money he had in the world in his pocket. Though he couldn't be sure just what to do with it- knowing he had better things to spend his money on.

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling of the fortune building up inside of him, until eventually he was left with no choice but to drop the last of his coins into the slot, pulling the arm as the reels span- spinning- round and round, his eyes reeling in his head- like pool balls being struck, coming to rest on a bar, then another bar, his heart mounting his chest into his mouth, exposing itself as a sigh as a cherry dropped in third.

He no longer had any money worries.

The Barobic Study

Martin Jaeger

Upon entering Dr. Holland's waiting room, Abbie Carter was stunned to Marie in her orange jump-suit, crutches at her side, seated next to a uniformed marshal. With her gray hair and sweet smile, she looked like any ordinary woman, but knew she wasn't. She was a murderess. Abbie and Marie were in a blind study for a new Multiple Sclerosis drug called Barobic, and Abbie knew Marie was receiving a placebo.

The waiting room was crowded so Abbie was forced to sit next to Marie. Marie chattered incessantly.

"I'm so weak I can barely walk," she said. "If this drug doesn't work, this guy next to me will be carrying me around like a baby in a back pack."

Over the next few months, Abbie and Marie became close. One day, Marie turned to Abbie and told her she killed her husband because he was abusive. Marie's sad eyes made Abbie think back to the day--before she knew Marie--when Abbie stole into the doctor's office and found out she was getting the placebo, while Marie was getting Barobic, and switched the files.

I could have picked the homeless recluse or the old man who didn't have a family...

But she had only a minute to decide. A murderess made the most sense. It was Marie or herself, a widow with two teenage daughters.

One day Marie told Abbie that she wasn't getting better and must be getting the placebo.

"You mustn't give up hope," Abbie said.

Marie smiled at Abbie. "At least I got to meet you."

The words sounded genuine, Abbie thought, but there's something different about Marie, something that doesn't seem right. It's as if she knows the truth-- that I switched the tabs. Something in her eyes—she seems to be looking into my soul.

Over the next few weeks, Abbie became convinced that Marie was toying with her, that the smile on her face was really a sneer, that she hated Abbie. Abbie was frightened; after all Marie had killed before.

Abbie changed her appointment time. She told the nurse, Linda, that she was afraid of Marie.

Two weeks later, Abbie passed Marie in the hallway. Marie was in a wheel chair and glared at Abbie. Now Abbie was certain Marie knew that Abbie switched the files, and was planning to murder her.

Once inside the office, Abbie screamed at the nurse, "I've got to see Dr. Holland. I've got to tell him that Marie is going to kill me."

"Calm down," Linda said. "I'll check with him."

"Dr. Holland," Linda said as she barged into Dr. Holland's office. "Abbie is hysterical. She thinks Marie wants to kill her."

“Damn, it, Linda,” Dr. Holland said. “I told those bastards at the Institute that we have to stop the study. Nearly everyone on Barobic has become paranoid and potentially dangerous.”

“So what should I do?” the nurse asked.

“Does Abbie seem violent?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Linda replied.

“Then call Security.”

Letter to Susan

Tim O'Leary

Susan, we carry with us the weight of what we choose,
knowing its collateral can bruise sometimes
when particular duties become too matter-of-fact.
You won't thank me for having worn your special dress
nor for failing to ignore the guy I tried to blank –
his smell compelled me, much like yours.

I can't tell you how easily I let him use me,
nor how pleased I was at the way his body bent.
When I'd savoured what I thought would cause no hurt,
I picked up my clothes where I'd left off
and took home my half-surrendered self,
a toyed-with dessert in a doggy-bag.

Susan, I'm sorry for this mess. For the indiscretion
and the need. For the blag. Obviously, the lesson's all mine.
I'll give you back your dress in the hope you'll see a way
to bless me with your breath again –
for the sake of my new nakedness
and for the promise of your perfumed skin. With Love.

Sightseeing

Carola Huttmann

The slap reverberated around the train carriage. A moment's startled silence, as passengers absorbed the shock of being witness to a marital tiff, before the chatter and rustling of newspapers resumed. To Tessa, as she tried to find her place on the page of her book, it seemed louder than before.

From beneath her lashes she looked at the feuding couple across the aisle. Her French was barely adequate to order a cup of coffee so she had only the vaguest idea what they were rowing about. Possibly the woman was accusing her husband of having an affair with his secretary, but it was really only a guess.

The man was holding a hand to his cheek. While she watched he removed it to retrieve the scattered pages of his newspaper from the floor. The woman's fingers had left a bright red mark on his face.

The couple sat glowering at each other. Tessa couldn't bear it if they started yelling again and rose to pull her rucksack down from the overhead rack. The couple's raised voices followed her as she pushed her way through to the next carriage. Although pretty full it was much quieter than the one she had left. People were either reading or napping. She found a seat near the end and opening her book glanced at the person opposite her.

The sleeping figure made the breath catch in her throat. There was something extremely arresting about him. Leaning against the window, his head supported on his hand, he had the most stunning long eyelashes she had ever seen. His shoulder length chestnut hair shone in the early evening sunlight which flooded the carriage. For a second she thought she must have been transported into a fairytale.

Not wishing to be caught staring Tessa began reading, but couldn't help stealing occasional glances at the Adonis. She soon got back into the story and jumped when she heard the words which were obviously addressed to her.

'What are you reading?'

Looking up she met intense Mediterranean-blue eyes. A little shyly Tessa held up the book. 'It's my favourite novel and film', she felt herself blush.

'Aah last night I dreamt of Mandeley.'

The dark brown voice, speaking with a vaguely French accent, somehow gave the phrase an added thrill.

'I love the old black and white movies. *Rebecca*, *The Third Man* and my absolute favourite, *Casablanca*.'

'Oh my god, I adore all of those.'

Tessa's enthusiasm drew a charming smile from her opposite. He leant forward.

'Where are you bound for?'

'Brussels. I fly from there to London in the morning.'

'And you'll be put up and entertained by friends or family while you're in the city?'

Tessa shook her head. 'No, I don't know anyone there. I'll probably just find a youth hostel, somewhere cheap to eat and have an early night.'

'Brussels is my stop also', and after a pause, 'this is going to sound frightfully corny, for which I apologize in advance. I happen to be at a bit of a loose end myself tonight, so it would be a real pleasure if you allowed me to show you the city.'

Tessa raised an eyebrow, wondering how best to turn down his invitation without seeming impolite.

'I understand your hesitation, naturally, but I assure you my intentions are entirely honourable. One of my jobs is as tour guide showing visitors around during the summer months.'

With another disarming smile he held out his hand. 'I'm Johann, by the way.'

Damn, thought Tessa, realising he had entirely broken down her resistance and hoping she wouldn't come to regret her decision.

'Okay, you're on', returning his smile she shook his hand and told him her name.

As the train pulled into the station Johann carried both her rucksack and his own overnight bag. He suggested storing their luggage in the station's lockers. They could retrieve it once they were done with sightseeing.

The next few hours disappeared in a flash. Besides visiting the sites that are mandatory for any visitor they walked through the city's botanical gardens, ate in a cheerful Italian pizzeria off Grand Square, wandered briefly into a small art gallery, looked at the buildings of the European Parliament and drank Guinness in an Irish pub, all the while chatting as if they'd known each other for years. They covered topics from art and literature to history, philosophy and even a little politics.

It wasn't often Tessa had the opportunity to discuss such wide-ranging subjects and knew that conversations with her fashion-conscious, celebrity-obsessed friends would seem even more tedious from now on. She loved the fact they hadn't done the usual *tell me all about yourself* stuff. It's what she hated about first dates, but since this wasn't a date in the traditional sense neither of them had felt it necessary to give each other their backstory. Johann had only mentioned that he was studying to be an architect and in return she'd told him that she was hoping, one day, to be a writer and was currently working on her first novel.

Johann paid for nearly everything, only allowing Tessa to drop a small donation into the collection box at the gallery.

'You're a guest in my city, please give me the pleasure of being your host.'

Put like that, how could Tessa refuse his generosity without hurting his feelings?

They meandered through quiet cobbled lanes with tall, narrow houses or lined with tiny bakeries, delicatesseries, cafes and bookshops which, Tessa guessed, would by day be bustling with locals and tourists. She reflected that on her own she would never have discovered this aspect of the city. The thought delighted her.

As they re-emerged from there into Grand Square the first of three loud chimes broke the relative

silence, startling her. Johann gave a soft little laugh at her reaction.

‘Three strokes ... *three?*’ Tessa clasped a hand to her mouth in surprise. ‘It can’t be 3am.’

‘It can, and it is. I love experiencing the city around this time, when it’s quiet and there aren’t many people about.’

‘I’ve never done this before it’s fabulous.’ Tessa spoke in a stage whisper, half-afraid she might break the spell.

‘Would you like to see the Cathedral? It’s the one place that’s very special to me which I haven’t yet shown you.’

‘Will it be open at this hour?’

‘It’s always open. There might even be a choir of monks singing.’

‘Really?’ This city was full of surprises.

Johann was absolutely right. As soon as he pushed open the heavy oak door they were met by the most beautiful sound of low voices singing in unison. They crept down the body of the church as quietly as they could and gingerly sat down on two chairs half hidden by a massive stone column, hoping they wouldn’t creak, thus giving away their presence. About twenty tall figures in long dark robes stood in a circle in front of the altar.

Time dissolved as they sat listening to the men singing. They couldn’t understand the Latin words, but the sound these monks made was sumptuous and utterly mesmerising. It was, therefore, quite a surprise when, completely without warning, the men suddenly stopped and silently melted away into the darkness of the choir stalls.

Johann pulled a gold chain watch from his jacket pocket and held it up to the dim light.

‘We’ve been here almost two hours, but wasn’t it worth it?’

Tessa nodded. She wondered about Johann’s watch. It seemed odd for a young man to be carrying such an object in this day and age. It was clearly old and, she suspected, very valuable, but she felt shy asking about it. She feared it might start the tiresome exchange of insignificant personal details they had so far avoided.

‘What time is your flight?’

‘08.50.’

Tears burned behind her eyes as Tessa realised that something very special was about to end. Johann leant over to gently touch her moist cheek.

Without a word they rose. Johann reached for Tessa’s hand and led her out of the Cathedral and back to the Square. First light was just beginning to appear as through a pale sheet of satin.

‘Let’s go get our bags from the station lockers.’

They walked over to a nearby taxi rank. The driver nodded wearily when Johann told him their destination.

They didn’t speak much until they had reclaimed their belongings. In the main hall Johann indicated the large digitised display overhead showing arrival and departure times.

'There's an airport train leaving in fifteen minutes. Do you want me to come with you?'

'No. I don't like goodbyes and although we've only known each other a few hours this already feels like one.'

'I know. You probably won't believe me when I tell you that this has been the most beautiful night of my life'.

'You're right', Tessa smiled. 'I don't believe you, but thank you. It's a lovely thing to say.'

Then, speaking at the same moment, they asked if they were going to exchange contact details.

Laughing at their synchronicity they both shook their heads.

'Fate will decide if we're ever to meet again,' said Tessa.

Nodding Johann leant forward and lightly kissed her on the cheek.

'There he is.'

Tessa saw the men over Johann's shoulder. Half a dozen or more, in dark suits, exploded up the station steps and flooded the hall. For a nanosecond she wondered who they were. Then, time shifted and things moved in slow motion. She realised the men were running towards them, some were speaking into two-way radios as they ran.

'Johann Prince Johann.'

Stepping back from Tessa a look of horror came over him as Johann put a hand up to his face.

'Where the *hell* have you been for the last three days? We searched the entire city for you.'

Johann spun round to face the enormous man who addressed him.

'I don't think that's any of your business. Anyway I'm back now, so you can all just calm down.'

'Ca ca.... calm down when you go AWOL whenever the notion takes you.'

Red with anger the giant tripped over his own words. He lunged forward to grab Johann by the arm, but the young man dodged his grasp, leaving him fumbling oddly at the air beside him.

Johann turned back to where Tessa stood rooted to the spot, aghast at what was taking place before her.

'I'm so *very* sorry about this, Tessa. Really I am. I didn't mean for this to happen.'

'*Prince* Johann ...? Are you really a prince?'

Her handsome guide and companion of the last few hours nodded, an unutterably sad expression on his face.

'I'm afraid so. I'm only thirteenth in line, but they still make a fuss when I disappear once in a while to go off and do my own thing.'

He stepped close to her once more to plant a gentle kiss on her other cheek, right there in front of his security team.

The big fellow made another attempt to grab his arm, but was again shaken off.

'Thank you, Tessa. Have a safe journey back to London.'

With that Johann turned on his heel and disappeared into the crowd, leaving the men in dark suits, still busy on their radios, to chase after him.

The agony aunt's lament

Dorothy Burgess

You say you don't want romance, you want sturdy love. That reliable, dependable, corduroy-companionable kind of love, freely given by men with bushy beards and prickly socks who propose to look out for you on the long hike through life.

But I think you lie.

I think you want the oiled lothario, flashing teeth, red rose, tango kind of love- all mouth and candles. You want to shake off everyday loyalties, shared child care, the careful pooling of expenses and have cream licked from your breasts. You want champagne poured in your bath and rose petals in your bed. You want as yet untrodden paths beaten to salivation, and lots and lots of shagging in the afternoons.

Unnatural Tendencies

Michael Monkhouse

OPENING MUSIC.

INTERVIEWER: Welcome to 'Crook and Fanny', Radio 4's local sexual deviance programme. My guest tonight prefers to remain anonymous, so we'll call him Bill... Hello Bill.

BILL (shy): Hi.

INTERVIEWER: Bill when did you first become aware of your heterosexual tendencies?

BILL: It was at a party at university. I had a bit to drink, got chatting to an attractive lady and – and held her hand.

INTERVIEWER: How did she react?

BILL: She was fine. Gave me a first in my next essay.

INTERVIEWER: But how did you feel?

BILL: I felt terribly ashamed. I come from a very traditionalist background – my father's a vicar, my other father's a Liberal MP, my brother's a raving bender... But I also felt relieved. I felt I was rebelling against my boarding school education.

INTERVIEWER: And this encouraged you to come out?

BILL: Yes but gradually. It was difficult at first – people called me names: straight boy, breast-fondler, vag-stuffer... Even DJ: you know the expression 'to flip over and play the B-side'?

INTERVIEWER: Alas, yes... So you're now a practising heterosexual?

BILL: Yes but I'm getting better at it.... Last night I kissed a girl with tongues...

INTERVIEWER: I'm sorry?

BILL: With hammer and tongs and...

INTERVIEWER: I'll have to stop you there.

BILL: Sorry.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for your courage and listeners, if you'd like to contact Bill, check out his ad in your nearest phone booth, or see a psychiatrist.

CLOSING MUSIC.

Whispers

Ian Hawley

I smirked to myself as I dropped the body of my wife in the boot and slammed the lid down. They'd thought I was stupid, her and her brother, they thought they could do away with me, obviously they thought they could claim on my insurances. Well, I wouldn't make it easy.

It was only by chance a week ago now that I'd overheard her talking to her brother in the kitchen at all. I'd been on the toilet, and their voices had travelled up the pipes to me. She'd been tasked to keep me amused and happy for an hour or two and then bring me home, and it was then that he was going to jump out on me. I even heard them talking about getting in a professional cleaner afterwards so everything looked normal.

I didn't let them know I'd heard them of course. I let them play their game, watching them as they sneaked around, talking in whispers when they thought I was close. It was then that I'd stopped taking my tablets for my Paranoid Schizophrenia. After all, its only paranoid if they're not really out to get you.

Jane had been easy enough. She'd spent the day with me, she'd bought me a new pair of trainers and a few books I'd wanted, she'd even taken me for dinner. I was really surprised how cold and callous she seemed, there wasn't a hint in her eyes about the deed she had planned. No signs of remorse for what they were going to do. I snapped her neck when she opened the boot to put the shoes inside. Quick and easy, no one in the car park even saw me do it.

I left her in the boot as I drove home, It was night by the time I got home and the house was in total darkness. He'd obviously switched them off so he could take me out in the dark, so I switched off the lights and coasted to the end of the street before I slipped out and into the house via the back door.

The kitchen knife was the first thing I found and I silently entered the back room. I could see his silhouette as he stood before the window looking out for me, and I held my breath as I sneaked up on him.

The first stab was the hardest, going in just under the lung and cutting up and with a gasp he staggered forward as I continued to strike home, two, three four times. As he sank to the floor, the lights came on around me and I turned around, bloody knife in my hands ready to defend myself against any and all attackers.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" a man wearing a party hat shouted, before a woman at the front screamed as she saw the body. I didn't know what to do. I felt so stupid, I'd obviously got it wrong.

A Mess

Paula Ward

Elizabeth had never been more certain of anything in her life.

After being asked to take a seat she placed her Fendi handbag carefully underneath her chair. She smoothed down her ice white skirt that complimented the grey tailored jacket nicely, and crossed her legs at the ankle. She leafed through a woman's health magazine: 'Your first trimester.' Bored, she quickly put it back down. She read the notice board that claimed 123 people had missed their appointments in the last month. If all those people didn't attend then why the eternal wait when you make an emergency appointment? She surveyed the room. A disgusting old man with a racking cough was busy examining the contents of his tissue. A snotty girl of about six reaching as far as she could up her left nostril, her mother trying to slap her hand away. A bungee rope of snot boinging from her finger. Elizabeth gagged and picked up the magazine again. Apart from the muffled voices behind reception, the room was like a library, which was the way Elizabeth preferred it.

The door swung open as a pram barged its way in. A toddler charging past bounded onto the seat next to Elizabeth.

'Mackenzie,' shouted the owner of the pram, 'what have I told you about running off.' Elizabeth recognised the woman as Susan Williams. A loud but plain girl, the kind of girl too rough to hang about with, one of those girls that went all the way – frequently. Although to call her a girl now, was pushing it. Elizabeth picked up another magazine, but the little boy found it amusing to run his car up her leg. She crossed them away from him but children don't understand subtlety.

'Mackenzie, don't do that to the lady,' said Susan, hoisting him up onto the chair with one arm. 'I'm sorry about that. Oh my God! It's Lizzy Canon, isn't it?'

Elizabeth looked up, 'Yes it is, well, actually it's Elizabeth Craven now. I'm sorry, but... you are... Sarah... Sharon?'

'Susan. Susan Williams from Mr Wilson's English class. You remember? I had short brown hair back then. A big difference from this,' she said, gesturing to a wild mass of peroxide. Elizabeth smiled and turned over a page.

'So what have you been up to? Any kids yet?' said Susan, heaving herself into the chair next to her.

'No.'

'Leaving it a bit late aren't you? I've got those two little buggers with another on the way. Just found out last week.'

'How lovely,' said Elizabeth returning to her magazine.

'Yeah it is,' Susan said, smiling. 'It's a pity things haven't worked out but he's pissed off just like the others did.'

Elizabeth looked around. The snotty girl's mother glared in their direction and tried to occupy her daughter with a tattered version of Red Riding Hood.

'Piss, piss, piss, piss,' chanted the little boy.

'Don't you be saying words like that,' said Susan. 'Kids eh.'

Elizabeth went over to the receptionist.

'Excuse me; I've been here twenty five minutes, any idea when I'll be seen?'

'Let's see. Emergency appointment is it? Yes, you're fourth on the list. Sorry, but we only have one doctor in today.'

Elizabeth returned to her seat.

'Emergency appointment? What are you here for?' said Susan, giving a bottle of murky coloured liquid to the one year old in the pram.

'What's that he's drinking?' said Elizabeth, repulsed at the bottle that when tipped exposed brown ground in stains.

'Tea, he loves it. He can have anything we have now. You should've seen him the other night, caught him supping out of my can of lager. Talk about funny.'

She wished she get up and walk out but that was out of the question. Yet, as much as Susan was not Elizabeth's type of person, she did intrigue her. She proceeded in asking Susan as many questions as she could about motherhood. This topic seemed to enthral Susan. She leaned in closer as if she was revealing a top secret to the privileged few, and as long as she was talking about herself, it would take the focus off Elizabeth. Yes Susan, look how interested I am but Elizabeth's mind concentrated on the children, the one in the pram in particular. A bald, chubby dimpled thing with two little teeth when it smiled. She watched as he threw the bottle on the floor, a sprinkler watering the feet of all around as it spun. He laughed as the game began. Susan didn't appear to notice. She carried on talking the whole time while mechanically bending down to pick it up and give it back to him; at least she thought it was a him. The soggy blue teddy bear was the only clue. On the fifth time it must have registered and she threw the bottle in her bag, gave him a dummy and rocked the pram violently. It was as if by instinct she knew what to do. Was it instinct Elizabeth wondered? Does every woman have some sort of wiring that gets programmed to maternal once a child is born? Will her mothering switch ever be turned on?

'I bet its hard work looking after kids?'

'It's a fulltime job, especially when they're babies. But I wouldn't do without them,' said Susan, looking into the pram, 'Hey! Get out of there!'

Looking down Elizabeth saw the contents of her bag being strewn across the floor, mobile phone, purse, receipts, lipstick, pregnancy test, pens. Mackenzie took delight in drawing a smiley face on the beige lino in fuscia pink lipstick. Elizabeth made a scramble for her possessions.

'That is very naughty Mackenzie,' said Susan, snatching the lipstick off him and handing it back to Elizabeth. Mackenzie threw back his head onto the lino and kicked out his feet. Elizabeth put her bag on her shoulder and watched in horror. He rolled over and continually head butted the floor.

'Will he not hurt himself doing that?'

'Nah, he'll stop in a minute,' said Susan, picking up a magazine.

Alarmed at the scene in front of her, she genuinely did not want to see the boy come to any harm.

'Mackenzie, see what I've got here?' said Elizabeth, foraging in her bag. 'It's a surprise.'

Mackenzie looked around. He saw the edge of a chocolate bar peeping out from Elizabeth's hands. 'Me want, me want.'

Elizabeth patted the chair at the side of her and the boy clambered on with the agility of a chimp. Dark eager eyes following every movement of her hands.

'That's the first time anyone has ever brought him out of a tantrum. You must have the magic touch...'

'Susan Williams,' shouted the receptionist.

'Oh, that's me,' she said getting up, 'is there any chance you could watch him?' she said motioning to the hypnotised boy, 'It seems a shame to spoil his mood now.'

'But...he doesn't even...'

'You'll be fine,' said Susan, pushing the pram through the door.

'...know...me...'

Mackenzie tugged at Elizabeth's sleeve, 'Choc choc,' he cried.

She peeled off the wrapper and gave him the chocolate bar. She watched him chomp noisily into the bar, telling him to eat it slowly so he wouldn't get a stomach ache, but these kind of scare tactics don't work on a three year old. He sat there swinging his legs to and fro. Elizabeth wanted to look away but was hypnotised to the chocolate slime and saliva now running down the sides of his mouth. Wipe it for God's sake. Surely it must be irritating you? Do you not know how disgusting it looks? She gagged again. It wasn't a very big bar of chocolate so no doubt he'd eat it in no time. Thank God, but what would he do once he had finished? How would she entertain him? What if he had another tantrum? She was scared. No, that was ridiculous. A respectable woman like herself who was used to dealing with people couldn't be scared of a three year old boy. Revolted - yes, scared - no.

He's nearly finished. All that was left was half an inch of goiness that had extended all over the boy's hands, face, front of t-shirt and even hairline. What would Susan say? She hunted for tissues in her bag. She tried to wipe the boy's head but a dry tissue doesn't make much of an impact and it only seemed to irritate him.

'Gerroff,' he said, smacking Elizabeth away. She looked down at the chocolate smears on her white skirt. It was dry clean only.

'More choc choc,' he said, through his last mouthful.

'There is no more. All gone!' said Elizabeth, holding out both hands.

'More choc choc,' he said, opening Elizabeth's jacket and feeling inside the pocket. Elizabeth kept

him at arm's length but could feel the resistance.

'More choc choc,' he growled. The snotty girl's mother was looking over again. Elizabeth glared back. 'Now stop it,' she said, attempting to shake the boy off. 'Your mum will be out in a minute.'

'Mummy... where my mummy gone?' he cried.

The doctor's door opened at that moment as Mackenzie ran to open it.

'See, I've not left you, Mummy's here,' said Susan scooping the child into her arms, 'let's clean you up.' She got the wet wipes from her bag and with a flourish the chocolate mess was gone.

'Thanks for looking after him.'

Well, it's certainly been an experience was the only answer she could muster.

'September 15th they've given me,' she said, patting an already ample stomach. 'Come on little man, get your coat, and for being a good boy I think we'll go to the park. How about that?'

'Yay,' he screeched, jumping up and down.

'It's been nice bumping into you Lizzy.'

'Yes, you too,' said Elizabeth, and she really did mean it.

'You'll have to let me know how you go on,' she whispered, pointing to the bag.

Elizabeth laughed a little too loudly.

Susan and her brood jostled out with as much noise as they clattered in with.

Then nothing.

The waiting room went back to its library feel quietness, yet it didn't feel quite right.

Empty, hollow somehow.

She slumped back against the chair. What would she say to the doctor? The doctor would be the only one who knew, apart from Susan Williams who had mistakenly come to the wrong conclusion. Even Richard didn't know. He'd always been so sure on the matter; she knew she couldn't tell him.

After seeing Susan and her children today, and how Susan's face had lit up when they had told her due date, would she ever feel like that? Considering the polarity in the two of them, she should be able to cope, shouldn't she?

'Elizabeth Craven, Doctor Ratchet will see you now.'

Elizabeth took a seat in front of the doctor, smoothing down her chocolate smeared skirt; she then shakily took the pregnancy test out of her bag and handed it to the doctor. The doctor looked up and smiled for a split second before seeing the look on Elizabeth's face.

'Not the news you were hoping for?'

'No,' she said, quavering.

'There are options available to you Elizabeth, although, you are aware that you haven't much time left,' he said, script like.

Elizabeth nodded without looking up. She thought of Susan Williams and her children. Damn Susan Williams. She plucked up the courage to ask.

‘What is involved in a termination?’

‘Physically, these days it’s a relatively straightforward procedure, but no operation is without its risks, but mentally....’ he faltered, ‘...this has to be your decision and it has to be the right one for you,’ he said going back to the script in his head.

Elizabeth looked down at her crisp white skirt and rubbed at the brown smudge. She wondered if it will ever come out or would it be stained forever.

If We Could Do More With Serankot

Phil McNulty

Serankot- Nepal, 1980. The start of the Jonsom Trail

On a wall by a wooden gate. A girl with oval eyes smiles, a white tooth smile at the strangers struggling on the trail and we welcome the gentle offer of chay - at this altitude in this heat - and follow her to her house to wait on the verandah.

Where an old man with yellowed dry skin and sunken face is laid out in a long chair, while flies cluster on his closed lids and on his barely open lips, through his nose and ears, sensing his decay, seeking his last drop of moisture, his last breath, his final breeze, his shallow air, his slight rustling. We stand, watching, as plump girls in Hessian dresses, long hair tied loose, attend, now and then, in the heat of morning, to waft the flies from their grandfather.

Then, in the coolness of the wooden walls, in the big room, behind, filled with smoke and people, we take tea- heavy with yak butter and salt- in beaten bowls. While the family gather and watch and give encouragement. And we hand our rupees to help them subsist, before returning to the porch and the old man with his congregation of flies.

Then to the gate in the wall, where the young girl is preparing her eyes and practicing her smile.

Eve

Martin Jaeger

On the day of her father's funeral, Eve sat in the first pew, where she had heard her father, the Reverend Ferris Hodge, condemn her and her mother for most of her life.

It was different in the beginning. When Eve was born, she was hailed as the miracle child. Hodge was unable to have children--yet Catherine became pregnant.

As word of the miracle spread, the congregation grew in size. Hodge lauded his family and the charitable God.

Until after services, one day, a congregant, Wesley Cooper, tall, clean-cut, his face flushed, met with Hodge.

"Reverend Hodge, every time you preach about the miracle child...it's like a dagger in my heart. It's my baby. I can't bear to see you making a fool of yourself any longer."

Hodge hurried home, and finding Catherine in the kitchen, pushed her to the ground. "You slut...you tramp! You made a fool of me...in my church...in front of God."

Hodge told the congregation there was no miracle child, and Catherine, 'his harlot' has been consorting with Satan and had conceived, Eve 'the devil's child.'

Eve and Catherine were forced to sit in the front row, every week, as Hodge railed at them. As an act of charity, Hodge decided they both could stay in his home; but in church, he humiliated them. "There are the sinners," he said and pointed to them. Eve, confused, and her mother, mortified, ended up sobbing at every service. Hodge had split himself into two men: one who talks of forgiveness in church, and one haunted by hate.

Catherine sought revenge on Eve because she was the source of Catherine's misfortunes. "If you hadn't have been born, Hodge would never have found out."

Finally, Catherine, worn down, and dispirited, died from an overdose of drugs. For Eve, Catherine's death meant one less person to torment her.

Hodge, who hated Eve more than Catherine, raised Eve as little more than a prisoner, without love, isolating her from adults and children, and locking her up in a tool shed in the back yard at his pleasure. At school, she was snubbed by the other children as if she had leprosy. No one would come near her. No one took pity on her. There was no way, having been born a bastard, to atone for having destroyed Hodge's life.

Now, the service was over. Eve stood outside and accepted the condolences of her father's congregation. After the last person left, she opened the lid of the coffin, and took a picture of Hodge's dead body. She then had her father's body taken away and cremated.

Then, at Eve's request, an artist made an oil painting from her photo.

The painting was hung in the den where a spotlight shone on it. Every evening before dinner, Eve pulled out the urn that contained Hodge's ashes, put some ashes on her fingers, and rubbed them hard into Hodge's face, obliterating it.

Crossing

Carole Bromley

I'm listening to a podcast
about why it is poetry does not
travel, especially not across
the Atlantic and I tune out
and picture the poems
of Frederick Seidel and
Stephen Dunn that set off
with such high hopes
like the Pilgrim Fathers
in reverse plummeting
into the grey waves
where the Lusitania sank.
I imagine the slim volumes
bobbing awhile, still hoping
to sight land while all the time
the swell dragged at their pages.
And I wonder if they were met
halfway by the complete works
of J.H.Prynne in a life raft,
drifting with only one flare left
to alert the good folk on
either shore to his existence.

Glass Houses

Len Kuntz

She is making a list of our broken things, parcelling, parting, sorting them out as bum might garbage from a can.

She holds up a torn photo, shakes it at the overhead light and laughs without a trace of mirth.

The children are sleeping. I put them down. It was difficult concocting happy endings to the stories I told them. I know my boy had a question for me but he stayed quiet, just drew the cover up to his chin, steeling his eyes.

The wind whips in through the hole in the window over the sink. Glass, like a shattered silver mouth, is pieced on the sill, the chrome rim, inside the drain. The air pouring in at an angle sounds ghoulish and there is nothing for me to do but shiver. I've already apologized for shooting the arrow.

I take a long swig of whiskey, think about biting the mouth of the bottle off and crunching down the glass, imagine the shards doing their damndest to slice my throat, my gut, my intestinal tubes.

The cops are on their way, which is why I haven't cleaned anything up. She wants evidence of my madness, needs to paint me as harmful, a threat, and maybe I am, though if I were going to hurt anyone it'd be myself.

Mom left my father for a navy man when I was two. I never knew her. Dad said the key to happiness was to find a woman and work hard at making her love you, every day. When he'd say shit like that his eyes got wet and glassy and his jaw slid out, side to side, like a cow chewing cud. He never remarried and at my wedding he looked the most proud I'd ever seen him.

I keep thinking about glass houses, greenhouses, how they let all that light in, how what you see is what you get, no gimmickry, no hiding, the glass a form of naked boundaries. We had pledged all the same things every other couple does. And she's not blaming me. She says, "People change. It's cliché, but true." She says I've got to accept that we've grown apart, another demand, another cliché that, apparently, is also real.

I know his name and where he lives. He looks a lot like my brother but with more muscle and a quicker step. He'll make her happy and that should be enough for me, shouldn't it, I mean if I really prized her happiness above all as I've claimed?

The arrow through the window meant something or maybe it didn't. Maybe it wasn't ever love to begin with because, by definition, love should not be so fleeting and fickle.

I hear the car door slam. There are probably two officers. I'll bet one is married. I'll bet one is happy and the other is damaged to the core.

Family Gatherings

Natasha Liu-Thwaites

The first time I heard *Moon River*, I was in a hotel bar with my grandfather, celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday. There was a pianist playing music at a beautiful grand piano. The room was alive with voices and laughter. There seemed to be two celebrations going on that night – my Granddad’s birthday and something else, perhaps an anniversary of some kind.

I was ten years old and I loved family gatherings. I loved getting dressed-up, and I think I chose a particularly pink dress that evening. I loved seeing my grandparents. I loved seeing family members I hadn’t seen for a long time; there was something exciting and special about it. I liked the attention, the drama of it. That night, I remember standing at the bar talking to my Granddad while that song played. I loved the tune. It was so pretty, so rousing somehow.

I was his favourite, you see, and we always talked like grown-ups.

It was years later that I saw the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and watched Audrey Hepburn’s beautiful Holly Golightly singing that very song on the fire escape steps outside her flat. I adored that film. I preferred the book, but I decided I related to Holly Golightly, and would love Audrey Hepburn forever. I liked the scene in the film where they kissed in the rain, and I liked the idea of a romance like that.

But still, I think of my grandfather when I hear that sad, delicate tune playing, and I think of the haze of that night. What were we talking about? I think it might have been love, even. He always asked me if I had a boyfriend, and I didn’t then, of course, and nor did I for a long, long time. And whilst I associate that song with romance, I also associate it with a different love.

For my Granddad. Strange, blurred memories of my Granddad.

My thoughts were drifting. It was only that Alice had started singing the song as we drove on our journey back to London. Alice, my little cousin. She had been there too that night, but she was very little then, about the age when she used to have her tantrums. Piercing, red-faced tantrums which drove my Aunt Iz spare. I remember them well. They would start with noise, and then progress to a wet, swollen face which looked ready to explode. And then her red hair, as red as her face, would be all over the place, a sticky mess against her salty freckled cheeks. She was often taken away somewhere to “calm down.”

I glanced over at her now. She was twenty-two, and I was twenty-eight. She was a lot sweeter nowadays but she still had the red hair and freckles, and she still had the vivacious personality. She was definitely having fun as a student, and she seemed to have a different boyfriend every time I saw her. She had insisted on driving us that day in her recently acquired Mini.

“What made you sing that?” I asked impulsively, before I let the thought of it fade away com-

pletely.

Alice scrunched up her face, clearly trying to think of what she had been singing.

“Oh!” she said with a grimace. “You mean *Moon River*? Goodness knows, as I hate it.”

I pursed my lips. We never *were* very similar. In fact we were complete opposites, weren’t we?

“Well, something must have triggered it,” I pressed gently.

Alice started humming it again, a pensive expression on her face.

“I think I just saw a sign for a river or something... I know. I was thinking of Mum. She likes the song. Always watches those silly old films. It was a Sunday afternoon thing in our house when we were growing up.”

Alice paused and seemed to visibly shudder.

“This weekend is *not* going to be fun,” she said.

We were going to Aunt Iz’s for another birthday party - her fiftieth this time. Alice lived near me now in Exeter, so we had become rather closer over the past year, and any family trips back to London were generally made together. Alice had a rocky relationship with her mother.

“She will have to have everything perfect, and she will be endlessly fussing, and she will undoubtedly disapprove of everything I have recently done, or any plans I intend on for the future.” Alice sighed heavily. “Honestly Meg, I don’t think we will ever get on. And all those old songs, like *Moon River*, it’s like they’re stuck in my head to forever remind me of her, and to torture me.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Alice, that all sounds very dramatic.”

“Oscar always was the favourite,” she said bluntly, talking of her older brother.

“No way,” I said firmly. I had just remembered something. “I remember when you were born you know. I was...six or something.”

Alice glanced over with interest.

“Aunt Iz was completely thrilled to have had a little girl. She said she had wanted Oscar to be a girl. I remember her saying that.”

“Yes, but that all changed when I grew up into a red-haired brat,” Alice said quickly.

There was a silence, and I sensed something rather sad in the air. Before I could say anything, she said in a tone that I guessed she wanted to be jokey, “Do you remember my tantrums? I could scream for England then.”

I smiled.

“I do remember.”

“That was all about Oscar really. I just wanted ...Well, maybe I wanted some attention too.”

“He didn’t get *all* the attention,” I protested.

“No,” Alice agreed. “But you got a good chunk of it.”

Her tone was flat and I was taken-aback.

“What do you mean? I barely spent any time with your parents growing up. It was only family gatherings.”

“Exactly. That was enough. And then there was Granddad. He only had eyes for you.”

I felt very hot suddenly, a little nauseous. I wound down the window a touch and stared ahead.

After a moment, I said, “Maybe that wasn’t so great. Maybe it wasn’t like you thought.”

I swallowed.

Alice was frowning.

“What do you mean?”

I was twisting my scarf vigorously between my fingers, trying not to be seen, although I couldn’t stop myself. I opened the window a little more.

“Meg?” prompted Alice. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

I felt faint, and silly for saying anything. How stupid! Guilt washed over me. I loved my Granddad so much you see. Our relationship had been special, hadn’t it? I had worn my prettiest pink clothes for him. We had talked like grown-ups. We..... But what did it matter now? That was a long time ago.

“Meg!” Alice’s voice was almost snapping.

“Nothing!” I answered hurriedly. “I just mean, he wasn’t *always* nice to me. You only saw him on the odd special occasion. And I know for a fact that he adored you. He told me you made him laugh. He liked your personality the best I think. It’s just you were younger. You didn’t have a chance to get to know him.” I was aware of my rambling.

Alice looked unconvinced.

We drove in silence for a while. At one point Alice switched on the radio, but nothing caught her attention, and she quickly switched it off again.

“Not long now,” she finally said, gently said. “Just the London traffic to negotiate.”

I still felt nauseous, but eventually I said, “Your mum loves you, you know. She loves you in the right way for a mum.”

Alice said nothing.

When we arrived at her house a while later, I noted that she gave Aunt Iz a particularly big squeeze, and tenderly handed her the bunch of flowers that she had bought at the petrol station, slightly wilted now after the journey.

“Happy Birthday, Mum,” she said, more quietly than was usual for her.

“Oh, Alice. That’s lovely! Thank you.”

Alice smiled thinly at me as I then hugged Aunt Iz.

Almost hauntingly, I could hear the tinkling notes of *Moon River* drifting from the living room.

Eleven Types Of Vegetable

Michael Conley

Something has got into the soil.
We were so careful, but
there it is. We won't be able
to get it out again. We have identified
eleven types of vegetable
which you should probably
avoid from now on. However,
for reasons of national
security, we are not at liberty
to name these vegetables specifically.

Our advice is to observe
your neighbours carefully.
Watch their shopping bags;
make a note of what goes in
and who comes out.
Look for clumps of hair
in the shrubbery, frequent
dentist appointments
and eventually, death.
If you have children,
encourage them to play indoors
and try not to have any more.
There is no need to panic. We are all
in this together.

Seduced

Ian Bartlett

We are complete opposites; I am dressed in black, as etiquette dictates, while you are in all in white, your dress perfectly complimenting your pale colouring. I stand quietly with my wife, against the wall on one side of the crowded ballroom, while you circulate happily among the other guests.

There is a certain air of inevitability, if that makes sense. I just know that you and I will be better acquainted before the end of the evening. I try hard not to stare at you, but I find it hard to tear my eyes away, and I am sure you are amusedly aware of this, as you smile at me every time I catch your eye.

The waiters and waitresses are moving quietly and efficiently in a well-rehearsed regimented way, and I am perfectly content to stand and watch everyone else bustle around; it is in my nature. Some say that I'm lazy because I appear not to do much, but that is the whole point of employing a large staff.

A clergyman crosses between us and approaches a waiter, who quickly and dutifully hurries away.

One of those irritatingly bombastic military types is edging towards us. Knowing how much I despise the breed, my wife (bless her!) smoothly moves between other guests to intercept him and she engages him in conversation before he can get too close to me. (One of these Brigadiers or Generals or whatever was stood next to me earlier, but I pointedly ignored him and so he marched off in search of another victim; I allow myself a wry smile at the memory.)

Suddenly I feel a nudge at my elbow. It is you, and your subtle scent and the heat of your body so close to me heighten my senses, and I almost gasp as you put one hand on my shoulder and the other on my hip. You smile that perfect smile, and you arch one beautiful eyebrow as you lean further into me. I feel your soft, warm breath on my ear as you whisper: "Checkmate"

Heartbeats, Dreams and New Beginnings

Guy Lucas

Darkness. He used to be called Dave, Dave Seagraves. But now he has no name. Not yet.

His heart starts to beat.

Thump, thump, thump.

His eyes open slowly and fill with crimson horizons. The world is a blur; an austere *maybe*. He knows he is underwater, but he is not drowning. He is breathing. The world starts to shift and bend and before him he sees his twin, just like himself, curled up and starting the first steps in her new life. It's a girl; he cannot see this, but he feels it from somewhere deep within like a gentle whispering. He tries to speak but his mouth does not move. He can see her heart beating within her chest. In silence they watch each other, waiting.

'Hello?' He hears a voice - a female voice. 'Can you hear me?'

He tries once more to speak, and as before, his lips do not move, but sounds form.

'Yes.'

Did he say that? He can't tell. This world feels so alien.

'This is weird,' says the female. 'Can you really hear me?'

'Yes,' he replies. 'Who are you? Are you . . . my sister?'

'I think so. We are twins. I've never been a twin before.'

'Before? . . . What do you mean before?'

An image of his old wife flashes across his mind, and then is gone. He still has his old memories. He can remember his wife, his children, their home, even their dog, Lotti, and the way she would wag her tail and steal his slippers when he first got out of bed in the morning. Loss hits him like a punch to the chest. Were they really memories, or was it a dream? Was this a dream?

'What is happening?'

The female chuckles. 'Your memories have already started to go I see. We are to be re-born, to start our lives again with a different mother and father and a different way of life, to form new memories and learn from new mistakes. Isn't it exciting?'

He thinks about this. 'Yes, I guess it is.' His wife flashes before him again, her long red hair blowing in a morning zephyr, her smile sparkling like a sinking gem.

They exist in silence, bobbing up and down in the amniotic fluid, the umbilical cords floating like snakes between them. Finally the female - his twin - speaks. 'What did you used to be?'

He is taken aback. 'What do you mean?'

'You know, in your old life. What did you do?'

Thinking back he lets his mind wander. Inside he smiles as he remembers his life, the laughs, the happiness, the memories quick to form and late to die. He sees himself stood before his bedroom

mirror, dressed in a grey suit with a briefcase in his hand, his wife's arms wrapped around his shoulders, she kisses his cheek. They laugh.

'I was an accountant. You?'

The female thinks back. 'My name is Sal. I'm stood at the foot of a classroom; children, young and eager, watch me as I scrawl upon a blackboard. I look at the classroom door and see a man standing behind the glass. He has stubble around his chin and neck and gelled, spiky hair. He blows me a kiss and I blush. No one sees.'

'What year did you teach?'

'Primary.'

'Cool.'

'Yes, it was. You married?'

'I was, and you?'

'Well, not quite. He was.'

'Ah.'

More silence. Thoughts drift back to his wife; her long beautiful hair and her mischievous smile; the curve of her body and the way she flicks her hair in that sexy, come to bed kind of way. He misses her, now more than ever.

'Will we ever see them again?' he asks.

Sal sighs. 'I doubt it. We probably wouldn't remember them if we did. We may not even be re-born into the same country as before, you do know that?'

'I – I never really thought about it to be honest.'

'I did,' said the woman, shifting her body slightly.

Outside, in another world, a woman feels her baby kick for the first time.

'I hope we are. A fresh start. Can you imagine being born to an African tribe? Or a business tycoon's mistress? God I'm giddy with excitement.'

'Me too, I guess.'

#

Days pass. On some they talk about their old lives, on others they sit in silence, thinking. As they grow they become closer, physically as well as emotionally. He starts to come around to the idea that he is to have this person as his twin sister. He wonders if she would be the same after being brought up by different people. Would he be the same?

When he thinks about his wife he can no longer see the colour of her hair or the sparkle in her eyes. He can't even hear the tone of her voice; when her mouth opens in the depths of his subconscious there is only silence. She is a person from a dream just woken from, distant, fading, evanescent. He knows that she is there, but not what she looks like. As memories of the living fade, the memories of the dead start to surface.

'How long has it been?' Sal asks one day.

'Since what?'

'Since you died.'

He thinks. 'I don't know, not exactly. I died in 2004, September 14th, I remember that, I don't know how, but I do. It took about six months of judgement before I was allowed in and then I spent a few years in heaven – well, at least it felt like a few years. I lost track of time once inside. I did the usual things, but I just wanted to try again. My wife and kids have plenty of life left yet and I wouldn't see them for another forty years minimum, unless, God forbid, one had an accident, like me. It was a spur of the moment thing, I guess. I just wanted to have another go, and here I am. How strange,' he smirks, 'that details like that just come and go. What about you?'

'I died in 2009. I was murdered by my lover's wife. It was my fault entirely and I accepted that once at the gates. I was judged but managed to get in on account that I acted through love, not want for sex and procreation, and I asked him to tell her on numerous occasions. He didn't, obviously. I resented my life and having spent so long in the queue I decided I wanted to prove to myself that I could do better. I wanted to lead a life that I could be proud of; as soon as I entered I signed straight up, and here we are. Two different lives brought together. Quite amazing isn't it, the circle of life?'

'Yes,' he chuckles. 'I guess it is.'

'What are you going to do differently?' Sal asks.

'I don't know. I guess I'll just live for the moment, you know, be my own person, travel the world, shoot for the stars, do all the things I regret not doing in my past life. But then, I enjoyed being married, you know, settling down and having kids, buying a house, decorating it, and then selling it and doing it again. Yes . . . I did enjoy that, but then, I don't want to forget my wife, it would feel weird falling in love with someone else. I might just be a free spirit. What about you?'

'What you just said, the marriage I mean. I never had a family. What with long school hours and marking afterwards, I never had time to go out and meet people, never mind date and settle down. I was in love, but not properly, not with the other person feeling the same. No, if there is one thing I want it is to fall in love and be loved in return. That feeling for me is what this life is all about.'

'I will make sure I go out when you have your first boyfriends around then.' They both laugh. 'My God, I can't believe this is going to happen. I will have a sister.'

Sal smirked. 'You better look after me, none of this sibling rivalry rubbish, okay, I mean it. You even try to push me around and I'll bitch slap you back to the afterlife.'

'Don't worry,' he laughs. 'I wouldn't dream of it.'

'Good, 'cos my arms may not work now, but my legs can deliver one hell of a kick, right in your teeny testicles.'

They laugh and then fall silent.

'Hey, you reckon our new mum can hear us?' he asks.

'I don't know, maybe. Although if she could hear, I assume we would more than likely be born into a mental institution.'

'Yeah, you're probably right.'

#

Days turn to weeks, weeks turn to months and memories turn to nothing.

'Hey, Dave.'

'Yeah?'

'Do you feel okay?'

'Err, yeah, sure, why?'

She shifts uneasily and her throat grow tighter. 'I don't know. My n-neck is hurting. It feels like I'm b-being strangled.'

'I wouldn't worry,' he found himself saying. 'It is a bit cramped in here, what with your fat lump in the way.'

'I'm being s-serious. It doesn't feel right.'

'Your v-voice sounds better today. You could hardly s-speak yesterday. Thought our voice would have gone completely by now.'

'Dave!'

'Sorry.'

Dave thinks about what to say and finds he can't even remember what has just been said. His mind is like a painting in reverse, what was once a stunning watercolour is now nothing but a blank canvas.

His sister is more than this. She can feel the blank canvas crumble as the umbilical cord tightens around her neck. Fear pumps through with every weakening heartbeat. 'D-D-D-Dave,' she whispers. 'Hold my hand.'

Together they flex their stubby fingers and reach, linking together in the liquid darkness. Dave notices that she is cold, even in the warmth of their humble home. He can think of nothing and he squeezes a baby squeeze and feels comfort in the confusion.

Two heartbeats *thump* in the darkness, their sounds soothing. Sal tries to speak but no words come, in mind or mouth. Her heartbeat starts to slow. Together they listen, waiting.

'S-s-s-sis?'

Her tiny hand grows limp in his.

'Hey, hey sis, you t-t-t-t-there? Come on this isn't funny.'

Silence.

He sits in silence; he wants to cry but no longer knows how. She is all he can remember now, nothing of the time before, or the life he once lived, the wife he once loved. All he knows is his sister, and now she was fading.

His world jerks and light seeps in as the water drains away, the pre-life plug pulled. The sudden jump jolts the second heartbeat back into rhythmic thud. A tiny hand tightens in his own. He can remember nothing now as his world fades, clamping down on his sides and forcing him away, pulling him from his sister and his home. The more he is squeezed the more memory he loses, the world becomes empty, a flash of white in an infinite space ready to be re-filled with new experiences, views and beliefs. Everything is a blur. His hand is pulled from his sisters and he starts crying, screaming out in confusion. What is happening? Where am I going? *Help me!*

Then it is over. Light fills his world and he feels giant hands clasping his sides and head like a flesh bed calming him, carrying him to a new life.

His mind now is blank, completely empty of everything, no memories of his conversations, his dreams, his aspirations.

Somewhere in the white expanse, another baby is crying. A sister he no longer knows he has – but he will.

He takes his first breath and, cradled in his mother's arms, begins to cry.

On The Bus

Eunice Yeates

The bus has been rattling along for about an hour. Sprawling suburbs give way to neatly divided fields of rapeseed, and the traffic is sparse. It's a clear day, likely to be quite warm later. Food odours waft from the back rows and someone opens a window in the roof. The passengers have settled in; there's a steady hum of conversation, unobtrusive, not unpleasant. Sophie notices the gardens and homes spreading wider now. She is briefly startled by two large dogs racing through an open gate and barking wildly at the oncoming bus. A man wearing a Frank Zappa T-shirt a size too small for him is weeding a flower bed; he stands up stiffly and calls them inside. The dogs turn and trot obediently toward him, meek as lambs. Sophie sees roadside advertisements for a family restaurant and a billboard with an illustration of a cheerful undertaker. The slogan reads: We take care of yours.

Soon enough the bus is navigating the narrow streets of a small town. Sophie doesn't catch the name; it looks like all small towns. She spots the restaurant from the ad and is oddly pleased to find that it's doing a brisk trade. A makeshift shelter near the end of the main street designates the bus stop, and a couple of passengers alight. A welcome breeze moves through the centre aisle. Sophie stares absently at her hands, Brian used to say she had hands like a farm girl.

The bus is about to depart when there's a small commotion outside. Sophie cranes her neck and sees a woman thumping the door and signalling wildly to the driver. The hydraulic doors open with a soft fizz and the woman squeezes on, a clutter of bags and parcels in her wake. Sophie inadvertently catches her eye and the woman smiles broadly. She gives a small wave and lumbers toward Sophie, as if to an old friend. Incensed, Sophie slaps open a mindless magazine which someone had left behind, and pretends to read a column on cellulite creams. The woman hefts her belongings onto the shelf overhead, and almost topples when the bus abruptly moves off. The seat bounces slightly under her bodyweight and Sophie can smell the perfume or scented soap she uses, it's something like lilac.

—Alright, love?

Sophie gives her a pinched smile and makes a production of returning purposefully to the daft article.

—It's good, that glossy. Great fashion tips, the woman says, touching her hair lightly.

—Would you like to borrow it, asks Sophie, proffering the magazine.

—No, no, that's OK. I like to look out the window. I like the countryside. Sometimes you see rabbits in those fields, you know. You read on, I won't disturb you. Where are you headed?

Sophie falters before answering.

—Um, Oldpoint.

—Oldpoint is lovely. Oldpoint is the best. Have you family there?

This defies belief, thinks Sophie, exasperated. Of all the empty seats on this bus, the random stranger and serial talker lands on top of me.

—I'm visiting a friend.

She hopes the tone is clipped enough to convey her unwillingness to chat further.

—An old friend, is it?

Sophie turns in her seat to look fully at the woman for the first time. Such an open face.

—Well, yes, an old friend. She has a house there. I really needed to leave town for a few days. I just broke up with my boyfriend, you see.

The woman nods. There is a pause.

—I keep thinking about him. I think about him all the time. And I keep crying and I can't sleep at night.

The woman is not saying anything and Sophie sighs loudly to punctuate her point. She finishes by throwing her hands up in supplication.

—It's just a break-up, darling, it's not cancer.

Sophie fires a furious look at the woman who smiles kindly and offers her a fruit pastille. Inexplicably, Sophie accepts it. She doesn't even like fruit pastilles. Neither of them speaks for several minutes. The sweetness in Sophie's mouth tastes strange.

—The thing is, he wasn't good to me. He wasn't good to me at all. He wasn't right for me.

The woman does not comment. Sophie scrutinises her again. She looks serene as a Buddha.

—I mean, no one thought he was right for me, you know?

—Well isn't it a good thing you're away from all that now. You'll be fine, pet. I'm just going to sit here and watch the countryside. It gives my head peace. Is that alright?

She pats Sophie's hand warmly, twice. Sophie shifts in her seat and turns into herself, arms folded across her belly. She thinks about the failed relationship. She is furious with herself. The magazine lies upside down on her lap, askew and useless.

Looking out the window Sophie sees a sign for Oldpoint. Not long now. The landscape has levelled the way it does when you know the sea will come into view at any moment. When the bus stops at a small crossroads, Sophie spies a rabbit on the other side of a ditch. The creature is unmoving and Sophie looks again, more carefully, to be sure. It's definitely a rabbit. Delighted, she turns to share the find with her bus companion, who is sleeping soundlessly, her chin to her chest, her hair fallen forward. When Sophie looks back the rabbit has gone. The bus pulls off, turning right, and Sophie sees the sparkle of blue water ahead.

a computer, dad

Carl Palmer

like going to the library
only quicker
we can stay right here

not a TV, a monitor
watch what is typed
view search results

it can't see you, dad
or hear you
no need to whisper

okay, I'll ask it
rhode island red rooster
enter and presto

see, wasn't that quick
oh really
a hen

let's try something else
no need to whisper, dad
tomorrow's lottery numbers

no, it won't tell you that
okay I guess you're right
I'll turn it off

Walkabout

Phil McNulty

Me Dad, well he's Wolarawaree from Kangy Angy and me mum's Wereeweea from Nerrigundah. They say these earth names help them centre, be more Aboriginal, but, really, they're Lancashire born and bred.

They wanted me to fit in, be like other kids, so gave me a proper name. They called me Hawkmoon, to express their unique love.

It didn't work, not with living in Skelmersdale,

In our house we had wind catchers and oil burners and candles and me mum and dad smoked special cigarettes. They bought the ingredients from Wayne, outside the bookies on a Thursday. Everyone called him Rocky. I think that was his earth name.

One day we lit candles to the Gods in the Benefits Office. They told Dad he was unemployable, and we all celebrated. It didn't stop the neighbours calling us hippies though or prevent stuff being thrown at the windows.

When I was ten, me dad said I should go walkabout to help me think about becoming a man and over my future and so on. He made me cheese sandwiches with pickle and gave me a can of coke and a joss stick, but no matches, because he said they were dangerous.

Then he opened the door, looked up and down the street and said, 'Go! Go! Go!'

Just like that.

So I did.

I kept right low behind walls and hid in the corners of buildings all the way to the edge of our estate.

I stayed away from the underpasses and footpaths and kept to the high ground and the roadways just as me Dad had taught me. And there were others walking this walk, I could tell they were avoiding the traffic as well and on a mission to the centre of our town.

And soon, there it was, rising up before us. Our Concourse, our covered shops, our place for walkabouts to loiter and to find themselves.

It was packed with young girls, all circling with new prams, comparing new babies with new clothes outside the discount stores and charity shops.

Then, a man in a collar said, 'They're keeping away from the unheated homes the Gods have given them.'

I kept away from him.

Later, I swapped my joss stick for a cigarette and, because the shops were closing, because our centre was closing, the Mister said I had to leave.

But when it became dark, the roads and the roundabouts all looked the same to me and the

sign language was strange.

Then the moon came out and I walked with it at my back and found my way to our estate, to our street and to our house, where me dad put his arms round me, then lit a candle for my safe return and made me chips and asked what I had discovered.

'I want to be a town-planner,' I said, as I gave him the cigarette.

'Or.... an Aborigine, like you.'

When You're Down, You're Up

Downith Monaghan

I said I would give anything to be a writer. And I guess I did. At first, it hadn't gone well. I thought my short story "Circus" ticked all the boxes: story arc - a family's trip to the circus; drama - lost tickets, spilled drinks; and humour - clowns. Yeah, well the clowns in the writing workshop weren't buying it.

"Laughing about lost tickets? C'mon she would've ripped him a new one."

"Boring and trite."

"I'm not sure about the clown, unless, were you going for post-modern?"

We aren't allowed to talk when our writing is being critiqued. And I admit I've struggled with that rule. Still, I think our tutor, Clive, over-reacted when he shoved his handkerchief in my mouth. I just wanted to stand up for my story: to explain that it really happened, just like I wrote it. But, it was straight on to the next piece- incest, self-mutilation, and satanic worship. Talk about inability to suspend disbelief. But everyone else raved about it, especially Clive.

After class I waited for Beth to ask where she got her inspiration. "I don't know Nick. It just comes. Sometimes I take childhood experiences and big them up, but mostly it's just me making shit up." See, that was my problem. No childhood trauma. My parents *did* laugh about those lost tickets. My mother baked brownies and Dad and I did woodworking. I had a happy childhood - so sue me.

Last month I found this flyer stuffed in my mailbox. "Unhappy childhood? Nightmares bringing you down? Replace your unhappy memories - cheaper and quicker than therapy."

Replace your memories? Brilliant! I drove straight over to the address on the flyer. It was a small shop at the end of the high street. A girl with multiple piercings and a big grin was working the cash. Behind her were rows of gleaming glass jars filled with crazy shit - seashells, ribbons, bubbles . . . One looked like it held a rainbow, another fireflies.

I grabbed an order form: "Choose your memories - 3 for a fiver." There was a list with stuff like pets (pony, puppy, kitten); orthodontics; financial stability; and siblings (please specify number and gender).

The guy in front of me was ticking boxes like a clerk on speed. When he reached the cash, he handed over the form and a credit card. The girl filled a small box with bits from different jars and handed it over. Then it was my turn. I handed her my blank form. She smiled. "Hi, I'm sorry but you have to tick what you want." She leaned over to show me the list and I swear she smelled of freshly baked bread.

Wait," I said. "You don't understand. I HAD a happy childhood."

She looked at me again. "Then what are you doing here?"

"I want to buy some *unhappy* memories."

"Uh, we don't really have those."

“Please! I’m willing to pay extra.”

She tilted her head, looking me up and down. Then she pushed a buzzer and a door behind her, on the left, opened. She jerked her thumb at it. “Go see Pete in the back.”

* * *

“You’re telling me you want bad memories so you can *write* better? That is seriously fucked up.” Pete stroked his beard. “I dunno. I’m trying to help people here – it’s kind of my personal mission.”

“You would be helping me. I really need this. *Please.*”

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do.” He walked me over to the door. “Come back tomorrow morning.”

When I went back the next day, Sophie buzzed me straight through. Pete met me at the door and led me into a small lab. “Okay,” he said. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know. Just random bad times.”

“Look, this is kinda new territory for me,” he said. “So let’s take it slowly. Why don’t we start with benign neglect?”

I thought about Clive and how much he liked the dark stuff.

“No, that won’t do it. I need more than that.”

“Okay, I’ll throw in some minor bullying at school, maybe a bit of bedwetting...”

He began reaching for some vials on the lab table.

* * *

Things improved. Clive said my next piece was the most promising yet. He spared me the handkerchief from then on. Beth started waiting for me after class. I paid another visit to Pete. The next day my story rocked the workshop and I scored with Beth. I was on a roll.

I phoned Pete. “I need something really hardcore.”

“Nope. I can’t do that. Too risky.”

“I’ll pay you three grand.” It was all I had left of my savings.

In the end he agreed and told me to give him a few days.

When I walked into his lab six days ago, I nearly puked.

”Jesus what’s that smell?”

Pete rubbed his hands together.” I’ve really outdone myself. I’ve captured the smell of fear.”

He handed me a small vial. “Good luck mate, you’ll need it.”

That night I heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs, and then someone screaming. I sat up, panting and sweat-soaked, and switched on the light - there was blood everywhere. I spent the rest of the night at the kitchen table –baseball bat leaned against my chair. As soon as it was light I went down to the

shop and waited for Pete. When he finally arrived, he said, “Jesus, you look like shit.”

“Yeah, bad night. Listen, I need you to erase the latest memories.”

He shook his head. “Didn’t you read the fine print? I can’t. They’re permanent.”

I haven’t been back to my bedroom since – I nap on the couch when I can, but mostly I just lie there waiting for the nightmares to come. Oh, the good news? I’ve just had a story accepted for publication.

Author Biographies

Ian Bartlett

“A good writer is one who:

- enthralls his/her readers,
- uses correct grammar and spelling,
- directs the readers' "mind-movies",
- constantly has original and captivating plot-lines.

Until such a writer appears, you'll have to make do with me! “

Carole Bromley

Carole Bromley teaches creative writing at York University. Her work is widely published and she has won a number of first prizes, including the Bridport. She has two pamphlets with Smith/Doorstop and her first full-length collection will be published by them in October 2011.

Dorothy Burgess

Dorothy Burgess lives half the time in Southport and the other half on the Southbank. She is a founder member of Southbank Women and an active member of Southport Writers' circle.

Michael Conley

Michael D Conley is a 27 year old teacher living in Manchester. He has been published in a variety of magazines including *Cadaverine*, *Bewilderbliss* and *Sentinel Quarterly*, and in March 2011 was selected to read during Season 3 of *Carol Ann Duffy and Friends* at the Royal Exchange.

Jim Eigo

An early AIDS activist, Jim Eigo drafted the original proposal for expanding access to experimental AIDS drugs and sat on the federal panel that implemented it. His recent flash fiction appears in *6S: The Love Book*, the Slam & Flash issue of *The Legendary*, *riverbabble* 19, and *Polluto* 8.

Ian Hawley

Ian Hawley is a happily married, bald mad man, with two children and some fish. His writing gives him a chance to put to paper his strange thoughts, views and ideas, hopefully before he gets committed to a mental hospital. Something his family expect at any time.

Carola Huttmann

Carola Huttmann has lived in Orkney since 1995. Passionate about all forms of writing she draws much of her creative inspiration from the Islands' tranquil charm, their history and richness of tradition. She is currently working on a novel and a pamphlet of her poems.

Martin Jaeger

Martin Jaeger has been published in print and online magazines. He tries to create imaginative pieces that will intrigue the reader, who will then have a greater appreciation for writers. He is pleased if the reader has gained an insight into the thing we call life.

Len Kuntz

Len Kuntz is a writer from Washington State. His work appears widely in print and online at such places as *Housefire*, *Train Writes*, *Verse Wisconsin* and also at lenkuntz.blogspot.com

Maude Larke

Maude Larke lives in France. She has come back to creative writing after years in universities, analyzing others' texts, and to classical music as an ardent amateur, after fifteen years of piano and voice in her youth. Publications include *Naugatuck River Review*, *Oberon*, *Cyclamens and Swords*, *riverbabble*, *52|250*, and *Sketchbook*.

Natasha Liu-Thwaites

Natasha is a trained doctor specialising in psychiatry, who has taken a year out of her job to study for an MA in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Winchester. She has always enjoyed writing poems and short stories, and she is currently working on her first novel.

Guy Lucas

I am 22 years old. I've been writing for little under four years now and have a plethora of strange and fantastical stories under my wing. I like the weird, wonderful and impossible to explain, for what greater thrill is there than explaining the unexplainable?

Phil McNulty

Phil McNulty was born in Liverpool in 1954. He has worked in fairgrounds, factories, oil refineries, education and housing. He is a published travel writer, essayist and poet and divides his time between Spain and the UK. His work has featured on BBC radio. His book on educational leadership is used internationally.

Downith Monaghan

Downith Monaghan is currently pursuing her Masters in Creative and Critical Writing at Winchester University. Her short stories have been published in *Litmus* and *Vortex*. She blogs at www.writeitdownith.wordpress.com.

Michael Monkhouse

Born North, bred South, educated Cambridge, bored in Germany, now in Rome... My career spans over five jokes. I've trodden Footlights, performed in Italy, and once got a smile outa a German. Currently in my very early thirties, I'm enjoying this chance to spread my wings and burn my fingers.

Tim O'Leary

Tim O'Leary is a photographer and former archaeologist, new to poetry in the last two years. His work has appeared in *Poetry Salzburg Review* and, in 2011, has been shortlisted for competitions at *Grist*, *Strokestown* and *Poetry on the Lake*.

Carl Palmer

Carl Palmer, nominee for the Micro Award and three Pushcart Prizes, from Old Mill Road in Ridgeway VA, now lives in University Place WA. without wristwatch, cell phone or alarm clock. *Long Weekends Forever*.

Jamie 'Jimadee' Walsh

I'm 22, currently studying Creative Writing at MMU Cheshire, and if I was to describe myself with regards to writing, I'd have to go with "a somewhat linguistically advanced toddler". I haven't been writing for long, but have found this 'blogging' style particularly enjoyable. More of the same exists at <http://hardlyamazing.blogspot.com/>

Anthony Ward

Anthony Ward is from the North of England and has been writing in his spare time for a number of years. He has been published in a number of literary magazines including *South*, *Neon Highway*, *Borderlines*, *Es-sence*, and *Blinking Cursor* amongst others.

Paula Ward

Paula Ward has recently graduated with BA Hons in English Literature and Creative Writing from Edge Hill University. This is her second short story to be accepted for publication, although her first for an e-zine. Her first story 'Frost Breath' features in a collection of short stories named *Duality 3*.

Eunice Yeates

Eunice Yeates is a freelance writer. Born in Dublin—now based in Belfast—she has also lived in Belgium, Japan, the US, and South Africa. Eunice has worked in educational publishing for 12 years. She has a special interest in Irish literature and writes fiction whenever the courage prevails.