

# WordGUMBO

Light

Volume 1  
Issue 3

Oct 2011

Word Gumbo: Vol. 1, Issue 3 is a publication of Gumbo Press, October 2011.

All copyrights remain with the respective authors.

Visit Gumbo Press online at [www.gumbopress.co.uk](http://www.gumbopress.co.uk)  
and follow us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/gumbopress](http://www.facebook.com/gumbopress)

Gumbo Press are:

Calum Kerr – Managing and Fiction Editor

Jo Bell – Poetry Editor

Kath Lloyd – Managing and Non-Fiction Editor

Mike Somers – Script Editor

Contact us at gumbopress AT gmail DOT com.

Submissions are open for issue four until 31<sup>st</sup> October 2011. The theme is ‘Silence’.  
See our website for details of how to submit.

Cover Image:

**APERTURE** — © [Yury Shirokov](http://www.dreamstime.com/stock-photos-aperture-rimagefree7438379-resi3499676) | Dreamstime.com

<http://www.dreamstime.com/stock-photos-aperture-rimagefree7438379-resi3499676>

**Contents**

Editorials		4
Longing For Light	Marilyn Francis	5
Storm's Embrace	Cathy Eaton	6
Shedding Light	Elizabeth Ellerby	7
Archaic Torso of Apollo, after Rilke	Karen Greenbaum-Maya	9
In A Different Light	Downith Monaghan	11
The Strange Disappearance of Arthur Miller	Rewan Tremethick	12
Daylight Robbery	Steph Dickinson	15
Max Wagner	John Harrower	17
The Poet Reclining	Simon Williams	19
Why do the Maltese drive in the shade?	Phil McNulty	20
Babies' Happiness	Brian Evans-Jones	23
My Literary Romance	Elizabeth Eve King	24
Out of body experience	Dave Clark	26
Broad Street	Judith Taylor	28
Interview - Chris Hamilton Emery in conversation with Calum Kerr		29
Tower Of Song	Carl Caulfield	35
Imagination Man	Guy Lucas	44
Earth Hour, New South Wales	Carole Bromley	46
Coffeehouse Encounter	Catherine Lanser	47
The Only People Here Are Naked	Robert Graham	48
Guard Hairs	Simon Williams	52
The Day After Sunday	Joseph Wood	53
Into the Light	Abi Wyatt	54
Inspiration	Howie Good	56
Overexposed	Emma Lannie	57
Light Up the Sky!	R J Dent	59
June 20, 1977	Vivian Faith Prescott	61
Author Biographies		62

## Editorials

And so to issue 3! Welcome to our *Light* edition. We have, as you have come to expect, a wonderful selection of pieces for you this month - short and longer fiction, poems, play scripts, and non-fiction, and a fabulous interview with Salt Publishing's Chris-Hamilton Emery. We have all been truly overwhelmed by the variety and the quality of the work received, and our poetry editor has taking time out from her duties for National Poetry Day to talk specifically about the poetry below, so I won't go on too long.

I just wanted to say the usual thank you to you all and remind you that submissions are open for our next issue - 'Silence' - for which the deadline is 31st October. Also, I shall repeat my plea for you to spread the word. Tell your friends about Gumbo and ask them to join us on Facebook to keep up with all the news.

And... That's it from me for this month. Thanks to you all. Now, it's over to Jo and then on with the this month's bowl of *Word Gumbo*...

*Calum Kerr*  
*Managing Editor*

---

Oh, what a pleasure to read these submissions. There were so many excellent, accomplished poems sent in that this time it was very hard to choose the best. If you didn't get in this time, please do keep trying. The difference between inclusion and exclusion was often a hair's breadth, and must of course come down to simple subjectivity - in the final analysis, it is my own instinct that decides who appears here.

There was less variety in subject than in previous issues: we saw a lot of sunsets, a lot of stars, a lot of sunlight falling on notebooks - but much variety of approach and a great deal of technical skill. Judging by the spelling we have many American readers - welcome to you all.

Those poems which fell into the 'close, but no cigar' category often did so because of a weak ending. Several of them had excellent beginnings but veered just slightly towards the predictable at the end. Getting out of a poem requires as much craft as getting in - if you haven't made it so far, bear that in mind next time but please do keep trying. Even if you don't make it into *Word Gumbo*, the evidence from this issue is that you are generating fantastic and worthy new work in response to our themes. We wish you success with it elsewhere.

*Jo Bell*  
*Poetry Editor*

## Longing For Light

Marilyn Francis

On the draining board this morning  
there's an egg. Boiled. Top lopped off.  
Shell smithereened next to a mound of damp salt.  
Yolk congealed on a coronation spoon.

There are footprints in the butter. The loaf's gone green.  
The dishes are unwashed. On the table there's a bowl  
of furry fruit and a knife with a bone handle  
and a polished blade.

The clock has stopped – of course – its hands are stuck  
the time is Tuesday 1968 and the buses aren't running in France  
and the Nigerians are killing the Biafrans. We are selling them guns.  
The front page of *The Times* pinned to the wall says it's so.

You are staring out of the kitchen window  
seeing nothing. There's nothing to see except a broken  
blue egg by the dustbin. The fledgling trees have grown  
lanky. They sulk in the grey daylight, and secretly long  
for sunshine.

## Storm's Embrace

Cathy Eaton

They were planting a garden. Not a victory garden like during the war.

This time, she and Dibbie were planting perennials. Masses of orange zinnias, Black Eyed Susans, and dozens of daisies with a border of sunflowers. Snacks for the cardinals. Her sister scooped up handfuls of soil and inhaled the rich manure. Wiggling worms squirmed in her palms.

The bright sunshine vanished. Hurry. A storm's coming. They inhaled the moist air. Hurry. They'd never finish everything that needed to be done.

She gazed at the thunderheads massing overhead. Up high, perched on a velvety black cloud was Dibbie, waving, beckoning.

Her heart faltered. Was it time to join her? No. Not yet. Still so much to do.

She waved to her sister, floating overhead, and mouthed her a kiss. Soon, my darling, soon. We'll be together soon.

Rain rushed toward her. She welcomed it, wanted to dance naked inside the storm's embrace. She extended her fingertips. Raindrops embraced her face.

A calloused hand squeezed her fingers. She opened her eyes and turned her head away from rain pounding the window until she faced her husband, his eyes pleading.

"It's all right. I'm still here."

## Shedding Light

Elizabeth Ellerby

One of the first lessons you get as a writer?

To choose something you experienced and write about that event, moment or feeling. Getting used to being picked to pieces and analysed, by everyone from your therapist, to your classmates and tutors.

Worse, you are told to be brutal and ruthless with your editing and analysing of yourself. In this sense, you take a really bright light and shine it down into the places you never wanted to tread.

Necessary? Definitely.

An Evil? Certainly.

Unbearable? Maybe, but if so pick another business to be in. Quick!

Except, all businesses you could choose from have one thing in common: someone who will analyse you. What you say, do and how you act. Seen in that light, without coloured glasses, writing is a career equal to others. So I suppose I can start with something I don't mind sharing, and work up to the less appealing side. Alright, folks?

You know something I truly love to do? Shed light on a subject. Make people see things from a different perspective or just help them to understand something in a way they didn't before.

It's the sort of thing that makes me feel important, you know? 'Cause I can be really awkward in conversations, in groups. See, even if I have an opinion, I won't be likely to interrupt someone else, just in case they get offended. Or, even better, in case my view is wrong in some way – garbling up words is never any fun, and it seems to be something I excel at when I actually think about things.

For example, when I didn't think about what my opinion was and simply gave it verbally before my brain had caught up... it made sense. I hadn't realised I was thinking it, and yet that person said they hadn't thought about it that way. Granted, this was a minor thing to have an opinion on, yet it made me smile at the end of it.

So shedding light, in that sense, is something I would tell people to go for because it has a positive purpose. Yet if you shed light in other areas of life, then the light may take on a decidedly murky quality rather quickly. People are fragile, you know.

So say for instance, you know you're overweight. You acknowledge it for half the year but no longer due to the way it makes you feel. Then you go shopping for clothes. See yourself in a mirror. Or have some well-meaning friend or relative point out that you ought to be on lesser rations at meal times –

Owch. That would be the midday sun hitting your eyes and upper body when you're washing dishes. With your hands in hot water and the sun everywhere else, in a country where the yellow orb's glare is harsher than in England... you're burning up. Burning up and acknowledging all your faults, not

just the one the oblivious person pointed out.

The point is, light is like everything else in that you need to moderate it. Sitting in the dark, mentally and physically, is comforting to a point, and woe betide any that remove you from it too soon. But if you have a valid point, make sure to put your opinion out there. Try to get around the spotlight by remembering that at least one person in the group values your opinion – even if the releasing of said opinion feels like pulling your own teeth without anaesthesia.

Even if you're burning up and fear getting every single word wrong... no-one can appreciate your opinion if you don't say it somehow. Who knows, the whole group might agree. Or you could set off a debate, which is equally satisfying.

Of course, I *shall* be attempting to take my own advice, but I realise I hate having that light on me. In that sense, I am exactly like everyone else...

## Archaic Torso of Apollo, after Rilke

Karen Greenbaum-Maya

In the basement of the Louvre.  
 I dreamt it dark except a marble statue,  
 a torso, no head or limbs,  
 making its own light, translucent  
 as my hand held up against the sun.  
 The torso was no bland god,  
 bow strung across an upright chest,  
 but a god who stopped mid-step  
 to hear, or wait to hear,  
 body crumpling about the center  
 in a posture same as pain,  
 the shoulders canted, better to receive.

I knew, the way you know in dreams,  
 it was the one that Rilke meant,  
 took for his sonnet that year in Paris.  
 I looked for his lines:  
 every part did see me; marble surface  
 much rougher than a wild beast's fur;  
 but holding all the light in the room? oh yes.  
 The lithe marble mass said, again,  
 You too must change your life.  
*Du musst dein Leben ändern.*

The dream set me translating the damned sonnet,  
 and I dithered which life to change.  
 I sweated out arguments for each life,  
 braced to defend each one  
 to my old German college professor.  
 For sure he'd mock me, again,  
 show me softly how I'd mangled the Deutsch.

In a dingy cabaret in the part of town  
where the sidewalks stay broken,  
I waited at a off-kilter table.  
Smoke swirled through the one spotlight,  
and I waited for the music to start up again.  
The music would need no translation.

## **In A Different Light**

Downith Monaghan

Since you moved to the city, people see you in a different light. It was expensive, but the blonde highlights disguise the mousy brown hair and you wear pencil skirts and silk blouses now, instead of scruffy jeans. You even found a shop that carried kitten heels for wide feet. Yes, since you moved to the city, people see you in a different light. But you know better. Back at your new flat, when you shut the door and turn on the light, you see what they don't, what the mirror doesn't reveal. Beneath the swish clothes and silky undergarments, you're still the same bloke from Hampshire.

## The Strange Disappearance of Arthur Miller

Rewan Tremethick

A dark, unimportant one-way street. The only light comes from one flickering lamppost, whose filament's asthmatic wheezing fills the empty road. A poster is wrapped around its metal frame, blotched and faded by the weather. It says that Arthur Miller is missing, and asks if anyone with information concerning his whereabouts could come forward.

It is a rather disinterested poster.

Arthur stands reading it. Rain begins to fall half-heartedly. The poster is making Arthur mad. He is not missing; he might be lost, but he knows exactly where he is. He has *never* forgotten where he has put himself. The Lamppost is out of turn to suggest such a thing. He contemplates giving it a kick, then casts an eye around at the darkness pressing in on him. The orange pall of light he stands in is keeping the blackness away, and so Arthur decides The Lamppost can be forgiven, for now.

His mind is dangerously close to capsizing. The last thing he remembers is walking to the bus stop. Next moment, here he is, in a street he recognises, walking quickly towards the only source of light he can find. If Arthur really had to think about it, he would say that the last thing he saw was a flash. He might even recall something like a shaking sensation overcoming him. What he will not remember, is the number 27 bus arriving, as it never did.

The light momentarily goes, and Arthur squeaks. Only whilst looking around in the darkness, as the shakes begin to appear, does Arthur realise that there is no one else present to have witnessed his little outburst. The light yawns back on again, but for a second Arthur does not notice. He is beginning to wonder where all the people have gone.

He knows this street. There are things wrong with it, but he knows it. The old lady who shouts at cats that do not exist is absent from her front doorway, which is unusual; she is as permanent a feature as the car on bricks that its owner has ever bothered getting new wheels for. The lack of those things could be coincidence. But no one could have knocked down the disgusting concrete building that should stand opposite Arthur and The lamppost and built a play park in its place in the four days since Arthur has last been down this street, however.

Arthur really wants to look around the corner, to check whether the Tesco with all the letters on the sign stolen is there. He has a feeling it will not be; it seems like the kind of change that would have happened. The darkness seems to clench itself tighter, however. Very slowly, Arthur sticks a foot out of the circle of light he is standing in. His toes seem to chill instantly, and before long goose bumps have run the length of his leg.

Arthur retracts his leg and moves closer to The Lamppost. Another look at the poster tells him that it is dated two weeks ago. He has been missing for two weeks. He spoke to his mother on the phone not twenty minutes ago. She was angry that he had left the front door unlocked when he went to work.

This morning. Yet he has been missing for two weeks.

It occurs to Arthur that he has fallen through some kind of temporal rift. He believes himself to be in a parallel universe.

Not long after this realisation, he swears, then blames The Lamppost for his predicament. It is, after all, the one that is getting things wrong. Arthur is not missing. It is rather rude of a light-bulb on a stick to tell him he is anywhere other than where he knows he is. If anything, considering this usually busy street is completely empty, it would suggest that in fact everyone else is missing.

Arthur wonders how to go about putting up missing persons posters for six billion people.

*Missing: Have you seen these six billion people? Anyone with any information, please contact Arthur Miller.*

How would he even describe them? The best Arthur can come up with is...fleshy.

'This is all your fault,' he tells The Lamppost.

He is aware that it is unfair of him, but he is in a strange place, alone in the dark, and wants someone to blame. He has never had to deal with falling through a temporal rift before. He is not even sure if there is a helpline number he can call.

The thought reminds him of his mobile phone. He retrieves it from his pocket and is happy to find that the screen lights up the alley again to almost the extent that The Lamppost above him is doing. He tries to think what number to dial, and settles on his home address. He gets the answer machine. His parents never go anywhere. They must be missing. He tries his grandparents. They are missing. His friends. Missing. The Vet. Missing.

He is starting to think that he should keep a list of all the people who need to go on the missing persons poster he is going to have to put up. He has settled on the idea of one poster for the whole six billion missing people. He does not like the thought of getting six billion individual posters printed, and then finding out that there are only three billion lampposts in the world.

Arthur puts his phone back in his pocket, and in doing so catches sight of the flyer taped to The Lamppost below the poster detailing his disappearance. It is a poster for a local dating agency.

'We'll help you find someone,' it says cheerily.

*Will they?* Arthur thinks. *Will. Bloody. They?*

It has a phone number on the bottom, and reasoning that dating agencies must be quite good at finding people, Arthur pulls out his phone again and dials their number. He gets the answer machine. The light flickers off again.

'For God's sake,' Arthur snaps.

The Lamppost comes on again, apologetically.

Arthur wants to slam the phone down, but realises how hard this is to achieve with a mobile. He satisfies himself with pressing the End Call button ferociously.

It is only as his mobile phone screen turns off that he realises The Lamppost's bulb has flickered and died again. The darkness is all around him. His skin begins to tingle. His breath begins to quiver. He

stands as still as he can, listening for the kind of unpleasant sounds no one wants to hear whilst standing alone in the darkness.

The light comes on again.

'Make your bloody mind up,' Arthur shouts, giving The Lamppost a sharp kick.

Wrapped around a lamppost, down an unimportant one-way street, there is a poster. It says that Arthur Miller is missing, although no one will be able to read this until the morning. The bulb has fallen out, and smashed on the floor by its base. Finally it seems Arthur Miller agrees with the poster, as he is nowhere to be seen. His whereabouts is still easy to determine, however, as the sound of frantic running and the wailing can still be heard, even though he is now three streets away.

## Daylight Robbery

Steph Dickinson

- HOST: Welcome back to the Clive Phillips local issues phone-in. Lots of calls have been coming in on our main topic, 'should the criminals behind the recent series of wheelee bin thefts be handed life sentences?' Please keep your calls coming in on that. And now on the line we have Sue, from Edge Hill. Hello, Sue.
- SUE: Hello, Clive. Clive, I think it's disgusting that this station hasn't been covering the latest diabolical measures of this council – they're cutting the number of daylight hours.
- HOST: I don't think the council have that power, Sue...
- SUE: They have been! One month ago, it went dark a whole hour later than it will tonight. You watch!
- HOST: Well, it will do, but surely it does the same every year?
- SUE: That's just the type of left wing propaganda you always get on this station. You won't blame this council for anything. I tell you, years ago, when we had decent councillors who actually cared about the people, we had only the amount of darkness we needed to sleep. If they keep taking away the sunlight at this rate, it'll be dark by the time I'm walking home at 4 o'clock!
- HOST: But that's the changing of the seasons...
- SUE: Why do you prop up the regime of this council? They are committing treason against us, the hardworking people, while throwing out benefits to the lazy. I bet they're only taking our hard-earned daylight away to give people on the dole extra hours in bed! They're probably giving them to Europe!
- HOST: Sue, I see your point, but every year it gets progressively darker of an evening, and then lighter again as time moves on. Surely you can't blame the local political situation for that?
- SUE: It's always the same with you so-called intellectuals, trying to blind us ordinary folk with your knowledge and your long words. You might know your history, but I listen to the

people, and I hear what they say, and they say we're losing hours of daylight since this council came to power.

HOST: Well, I have to disagree with you there, but we'll see if we can get someone from the council to come on later and comment on this matter.

SUE: You won't do that, because you disagree with me. It's out of order – the customer is always right, and I'm a paying listener!

HOST: This is a free radio station, Sue. We have to go to the news now.

SUE: It'll be all propaganda anyway, you only tell us what they want you to.

HOST: Thank you for your call, Sue from Edge Hill. If you want to comment on this issue or any other, call us on the usual number. And now, at 12 o'clock, here's the news.

## Max Wagner

John Harrower

I first met Max in the 80's, I can remember it now. It was a smouldering summer's night, lit by embers, and he was stretching himself towards the sunset like he was trying to absorb the last of the sunlight through his fingertips. I'd been walking past the park on the way home from University and the sight of him made me really curious, enough to ask what he was up to. Which is how I found out that was exactly what he thought he was doing. I took him for an eccentric but a good natured one, harmless, and put him out of my already cluttered mind. It wasn't long before I saw him again though, at midday a couple of weeks later in the same park.

He was standing on a bench and reaching up into the air, fingers splayed, palms catching and bouncing the sunlight. There were four or five people gathered round him, similarly sun worshipping, and he talked to them in an energetic, bright tone: "Feel that making you grow, strengthening your bones, scouring out the soul. That's the divine, beamed down to us and renewing those that let it in." He didn't look like a typical hippy, like he spent his evenings playing Spanish guitar to girls with flowers in their hair, he was dressed rather formally in a shirt and tie, but his face was transported by the sunshine falling on it, he was elsewhere, in a better place. As I watched, an alarm sounded on his digital watch and he jumped down from his bench, smiling at those around him until he spotted me and greeted me with a hearty "Oh, it's you again! How are you?" I ended up going for lunch with him, I had to find out more about him, he intrigued me.

We began dating. "All Gods are Sun Gods," he told me while stirring sugar into a coffee as hot and black as a furnace "Without the sun there would no people, and without people there can be no Gods." He worked in a shop selling the latest mobile phones, big as briefcases, and always carried money in his slacks as he sucked up the sunlight. I took to spending the same amount of time as him sunbasking, the summer came and we both turned nut brown.

Then we were living together, the two of us rising with the sun and spending the weekends climbing mountains to get closer to the rays. It was on a sun drenched peak that he began to talk like he was nearing some kind of goal. "People say I should worry about skin cancer, but the sun has never made me feel unhealthy. The more I get, the closer I get to being as perfect as the sun." We started getting older, the mobile phones he was selling were becoming smaller, more popular. We never had kids, neither of us wanted any.

One normal day I was coming back to our little flat from the supermarket to find him squatting over a nest of newspapers arranged on our kitchen table. Before I could even ask what he was doing it became apparent when a single golden egg popped out of Max's rear and into a soft landing. He said that he'd somehow known this or something like it was about to happen and had taken the necessary precautions almost by instinct. He stayed home for 40 days to keep the egg warm, taking it out into the sun

and holding it above his head. Out in the morning time, dressed in his bathrobe, it looked like he held another sun in his hands. The egg shone like it was made of solid, polished gold.

But it was not solid. After 40 days the egg hatched and we were confronted with a golden child, a baby boy with lustrous hair and eyes. Anyway, you know the rest. We raised the boy and he turned out to be the Second Coming of Christ. I never had the chance to play Madonna, Max got all the attention and of course instant, bizarre celebrity. Junior went on to save the world, of course, and Max went back to soaking himself in sun, almost as a habit. We moved into a huge home atop a remote hill on the Equator, for privacy and because we could afford it. Even though he went back to his daily sun baths he never laid another egg. It didn't get him, or me down. Sometimes all you need is one good idea.

## The Poet Reclining

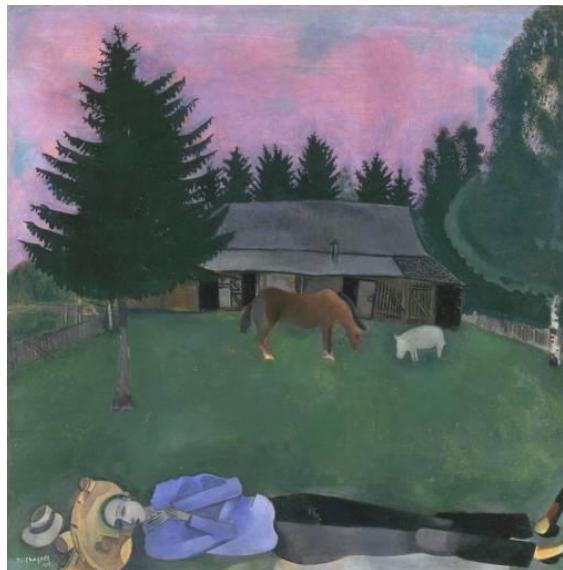
*(after Marc Chagall)*

Simon Williams

Some years after the cow incident,  
before the horse and sheep  
made pies and mutton stews,  
he lay out in the pasture  
practicing, as he had seen  
the great on tombs do.

Even when evening showered  
into mottled purple, he was there,  
ballet pumps on slender feet,  
louche black trousers up  
his elongated legs, blue shirt  
reminding him of sky.

When the dew rose  
and the animals stabled themselves,  
he could feel his body rise,  
pirouette the dawning stars.  
Raising his Fedora to their  
whites and yellows,  
he sneaked one into his jacket pocket.



(link: [www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=2143](http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=2143))

## Why do the Maltese drive in the shade?

Phil McNulty

We struck lucky.

The '45' bus to Mellieha, to connect with the Gozo ferry, was a decent Volvo. Yellow, orange, white with gold trim and, unlike some of the other public transport relics here, it was probably built in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The elderly women crossing themselves as they entered the bus would seem anachronistic in Britain. In Malta they were commonplace and their behaviour looked like common sense.

This is a Catholic country, obedient, school uniformed with churches lying heavily on the land and with a catholicity of business names- MacSean's Patisserie, Micallef Swimming Pools, Schindler's Lifts and Elevators, Lawrence Fenech Granite Monuments, Albert Sultana Tyres and Motor Parts, Grech's Central Store and St. Mary's Supermarket.

The gritty arterial sprawl is an ant-heap of humanity. Valletta, Msida, Birkirkara, congested, dirty, sometimes derelict. The most densely populated area in Europe.

Our Volvo driver, mature, sullen and grizzled, kept good speed around the quaysides of Marsamxett and along the cramped and chaotic main road to Mosta, with its domed miracle church. The congregation saved by the faulty detonator on a German bomb.

Beyond Mosta, on the steep roads into and out of Bugibba and St. Pauls, we had comfortable views of the tightly terraced dry earth and the roadside shrines.

We were the last foot passengers onto the roll on – roll off ferry to Gozo and enjoyed the bright and windy channel crossing past Comino and into Mgarr harbour. From there we had a fairly comprehensive tour of the island - the citadel at Victoria, Calypso's Cave above Ramla Bay, the prehistoric Ggantija temples and the Inland Sea.

Some eight hours later the ferry returned us to Malta. From the upper deck we could clearly see the single yellow bus at the quayside. From the clamour and urgency on the companionway down to the car deck it seemed the sighting had panicked those passengers needing to return to Valetta that evening.

As the Ro-Ro doors opened and the ferry docked we ran past uniformed officials at the head of a passenger stampede towards the single bus. It was an ancient battered Leyland and was again a number '45'.

We claimed the first seats and looked forward towards a picture of Jesus over the windscreen. He looked young and hip, handsome, dashing, darkly bearded with charm and good looks yet pale and intense. So did the driver- with sideburns, tinted flat top, earring and gum. Johnny Depp in charge of a '45' bus. His manner was omnipotent.

Above and behind the driver's seat was a shrine to the Virgin Mary. The elderly passengers crossed themselves.

Johnny snarled, sneered and pouted at every girl boarding the bus. In some cases he called after them as they giggled and wiggled their way down the central aisle.

Outside two more '45's parked alongside us. They were both Volvos. The Leyland quickly filled to capacity. The engine juddered. It then lurched backwards and staggered forwards before gaining speed as we left the ferry port. This routine accompanied every temporary halt on the road back.

The journey was immediately punishing. Our bodies absorbed every shock and bump. The old joke-

'Why do the Maltese drive in the shade?'

'To avoid the pot holes!'

-is a desperate lie. There are also potholes in the shade. The lady in front crossed herself repeatedly, kissing her forefinger each time. Her companion rocked and genuflected, muttering incantations to her rosary.

We had the illusion of speed but were generally in low gear and we screamed down the hill to St. Paul's Bay with the torture of metal on barely lubricated metal. The bus banged and rattled around the harbour, swaying and swerving and driven with total abandon. An oncoming farm wagon was forced completely off the road.

In Bugibba, girls on the pavement screamed as we veered towards them horn blaring. A man stood shakily to stop the bus using the greasy pull-cord to ring the bell. Then off again. More blaring horn and young girls screaming and waving. No skill in this driving, all intuition and luck and flinging the bus through impossible gaps. A lot of fear, a lot of public acknowledgement. It's not every day you see Johnny Depp driving a Maltese bus.

At Triq al Harifa, just before Sahha, he changed tactics and now blared his horn as each girl alighted the bus. He saw girls and reached for the horn. For Cassanova the two were linked.

We banged and rattled past the dismal outline of Blokrete the concrete company and, on the bus, Mary's votive light shone brighter in the five o'clock gloom.

Numbed by the journey I was now only capable of registering monosyllabic signs- 'Dad's Garage', 'Joe's Auto Spares', 'Jimmy Auto Dealer' and D. Kayos- how appropriate.

Two more girls, more honking. Johnny's friend at a crossroads, waving and shouting. I clenched the chrome seat bar for safety. I had become selectively blind- 'Rocky Auto Dealer', 'Didi Auto Repairs'. What did it mean?

On the road outside Msida, radio blaring 'House of the Rising Sun', I looked at the Virgin Mary. I had premonitions, saw disasters and hoped for miracles. 'Blessed art though amongst women. Thank you for this life affirming experience'.

We lumbered through the impenetrable traffic outside Pieta. Internal neon lights illuminated the passengers- spectral rows of pale and frightened ghouls. Half the bulbs were defective and none worked near the votive candle.

Johnny's seven ton babe magnet lurched into the terminus at Valletta. The engine stalled. We felt

joy. We disembarked quickly. The yellow, orange, white and chrome vehicle was passive. Neatly italicized messages either side of the exit door exhorted us to 'be lucky' and to 'thank God'. We were and we did!

We hurried through the arch between the Cavaliers towards the well being of the town.

Truly, in the land of the Hospitaller Knight and the pedestrian tourist, the bus driver is king.

## Babies' Happiness

Brian Evans-Jones

The happiness of babies is an older technology:  
a filament bulb, incandescent.  
It burns on the retina – overlays all we see.  
Though the darkness clicks back,  
there is no happiness like it.  
Ours beside it is a low-energy bulb, coughing  
into yellow.

Perhaps in a fire-filled cave  
where the hunters boasted after a meal  
and toddlers fought with dogs for the bones,  
one mother looked at her child, and thought:  
*Our happiness now is a stick borrowed from the fire –  
spluttering into life, flickering in the wind and smoke.  
But my baby's smile is the moon  
as it runs from behind the clouds:  
clear, and pure white, and everywhere.*

## My Literary Romance

Elizabeth Eve King

My friend says I write light fiction---and it's true I guess.

He said "It's not like you're Hemmingway or something...."

Well that's certainly true! For one thing I'm alive. And female....and a vegetarian.

Definitely -not -Hemmingway. I do like short sentences though.

Thoughtfully I hefted a Hemmingway, then balanced Sylvia Plath on one hand, but they were paperbacks, so I guess my judgment was skewed by material things (another problem of mine according to my friend.)

The hard backed collection of Danielle Steele was considerably weightier. And when I attempted to heft the complete works of Nora Roberts, I could barely lift them. (Maybe I need to work out more.)

My friend is reading Nietzsche. When he wasn't looking I cautiously hoisted it. It was hardly heavier than a feather. The same was true of Sartre. In fact, it was even lighter, barely weighting more than a thought.

I snuck off to the bathroom, surreptitious concealing Sartre beneath my sweater. Once inside, door locked, I greedily browsed through the pages. The sentences were brisk and clipped. The words were sparser, less rich and velvet than Nora or Danielle.

"Three o'clock is always too late or too early for anything you want to do." I read. Well that's true enough... I never have been a morning person. But heavy?

I reached for Nora, which I had wheeled in, concealing it, inside a carry-on bag.

"She had large doe eyes..."

Now that was a disturbing image!

I pictured huge liquid brown eyes, lacking whites, black horizontal pupils, spread wide on either side of a small human face, like some alien monster or cubist nightmare.

I couldn't sleep that night.

The next day, sleep deprived and haunted I returned to my friend.

I once again slunk into the bathroom with Sartre.

"If I became a philosopher... it's all been to seduce women."

And so??? Like this is news? Sounds like every guy I know.

I read another .... "We do not judge the people we love." Humm...maybe I was missing something? I hurried home to Nora.... (She'd been too heavy to keep lugging around. Although to be honest it gave me the heebie-jeebies to have the doe eyed woman lurking inside the pages of my room at night.)

"When we grow up, we lose the talent for loving without restrictions." I tried hefting the volume again... I had been working out, but even so I could raise it only an inch off the ground.

Maybe I should try Nietzsche and Danielle?

"He who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying." Nietzsche.

"Sometimes, if you aren't sure about something, you have to just jump off the bridge and grow wings on your way down." Danielle

"Invisible threads are the strongest ties." Nietzsche.

"It's hard being visible, so I've made myself invisible." Danielle.

My friend has become lachrymose. He hardly looks at me when I enter his home. His eyes follow me morosely as I scuttle in to use his bathroom, trying to discover the secret of profundity.

I am haunted by the doe faced woman. She creeps into my dreams upon those rare nights when I am able to sleep. Her face talks wordlessly of predation and fear.

Nietzsche though... he speaks to me of dancing and laughter..."We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once. And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh."

Ha, Ha. I try to laugh. But somewhere out there I see a doe eyed woman, running through the snow, beset by predators, threatened by famine, her child's head framed in the scope of a rifle.

## Out of body experience

Dave Clark

Apparently my heart stopped during the operation.

The first I knew about it was when I woke up and found myself floating upwards, towards a great light. I could see my body flat out below me, raw red rip where the surgeon had been, but otherwise serene and peaceful, an anaesthetised smile on my face.

The scene played out in slow motion. The surgeon was swearing at everyone, barking insults and orders. A junior doctor was juggling inexpertly with the defibrillator, shocking my body with powerful electric jolts. A machine was beeping, which added to the general air of panic. I was the only one with any sense of perspective and watched over events with a calm detachment.

The light drew me towards it, I felt like a moth confronted by some divine table-lamp, unable to resist, but before I could float further upwards I heard the machine stop beeping, the surgeon stop cursing and looked down to see my lifeline twitching back into motion. I was alive, and as if to confirm the fact found myself floating back into my body.

I woke up the next day in cold pyjamas and an all over body sweat. I unbuttoned my top and checked the scar, it was as if somebody had crocheted a ladder across my chest.

Up until that point I'd never believed in any god, but now I'd seen the very path to heaven. Lying there in that bed I knew I was a changed man. "I died in that hospital," I told my wife, when she came to visit, and on countless occasions thereafter.

"You lived," she always replied. She never shared my conversion, my new stance on life. She remained a doubter.

Life wasn't the same after my experience. My day-to-day life no longer seemed real, nothing was important. In my work I either finished a job or I didn't, sold or didn't sell, did well or did badly. At home, it all mattered even less. Part of me was just waiting to die, for that moment when I saw the bright light open up above me and trod the path to the pearly gates.

Samantha eventually reached a point where she simply refused to discuss my experience. In desperation I searched the web for people who'd been in a similar position. I soon found out about the Out Of Body Club, an online site for people who'd died on the operating table.

Strangely the group was 45% atheist, a fact I know from reading the results of the survey they published on the front page. The atheists all had similar experiences to me, similar insights, felt a renewed passion for life, wanted to use their close escape to do something meaningful. They even shared the feeling that there was more to life than science alone could tell us, they just didn't think god could add anything.

I discussed our differences in detail with many of my online friends. Karen in particular, I'd talk to for hours. She was a divorcee, had lost her job, her husband and her home within a year, and just as

she was recovering from all that she'd had a heart-attack. Why she refused to die when her heart stopped I couldn't understand, she'd got nothing left to live for.

"That's exactly why I had to live," she'd replied, "I didn't want to die alone, to die without purpose, nobody knowing, nobody caring. I want people to grieve my death."

It turned out that Karen lived nearby, just a 40 minute drive, and we arranged to meet up. We both needed to talk face-to-face about what we'd been through. I told Samantha I had to meet a client for work.

I wasn't being deliberately duplicitous, it was just that she didn't understand why my experience was so important to me. "It was just a lucky escape, that's all," was her interpretation.

We met in a pub, the Old Sailor, a pub that had clearly once been a smoky local, but was now half-heartedly converted into a pub that served food and catered for families. You could still see the tobacco stains on the walls though.

I hadn't expected Karen to be good looking. Most of the people in the Out of Body Club were elderly, and though I knew Karen was a young widow I'd blanked the fact from my mind, I'd assumed she'd be a baby bloomer, not a still-blooming beauty, with raven hair and oak-brown eyes. "Shit," I thought to myself.

We talked for hours. I had to phone Samantha with another lie, then again with another. I looked up a nearby hotel on my i-pad and booked a room for the night, just so that I could drain every minute out of this opportunity. I guess I knew, somehow, that I could never meet Karen again after his. We talked about everything and nothing. Mostly I wanted to know why she didn't believe in god, when she'd been that close to him, when she'd seen such a clear sign.

"Was it a sign though?" she asked, "or just a trick of the mind? What happened before modern surgery, before defibrillators, how did people find god then, when there were no signs, no bright lights, just death?"

She continued. "I don't think there's a god, nobody watching over us. Maybe the point of the experience was simply a reminder to watch over ourselves, our subconscious mind showing us that life was important. It's why I decided I had to live, had to make my life special."

She was right, of course. God or no god, divine message or simply note to self, the learning point was the same. Watch over yourself, take care of everything that's important in your life.

I phoned Samantha and told her that my plans had changed again and I was coming home after all. I stopped at the service station to buy petrol and, on a whim, bought her flowers, some sort of lily. I realised that in all the months since my operation I'd completely forgotten to tell her how glad I was to still be alive, to still be with her.

**Broad Street**

Judith Taylor

spring                    evening    sky  
    lucid and deep  
making the buildings    look like cardboard

    it's the colour of it  
lifts my heart    not            pink  
not quite            not any more  
    but you know it was

## Interview

Chris Hamilton Emery in conversation with *Calum Kerr*

**Chris Hamilton-Emery is a director of [Salt Publishing](#), an award-winning, independent press. He is also the author of [Dr. Mephisto](#), [Radio Nostalgia](#) and [The Departure](#).**

*Salt is now a respected, admired and award-winning publishing company, but it is still relatively new and, of course, independent. How did it all start?*

Well, thanks for that very kind description, Calum. For me it started back in 1999, when I first met John Kinsella in Churchill College in Cambridge — back then I was a senior manager at Cambridge University Press and I'd been writing poetry for decades and came across John on an academic mailing list — he was terrifically supportive of my work and helped it turn a corner. Anyway, one afternoon we met up to chat about poetry and a possible collaboration on some anthologies called *Catalyst* — we ended up compiling four books but none of them saw the light of day, I can't for the life of me remember why. But at this first meeting — I was in a serious suit, John was dressed head to foot in anarchist black — we just got on, really got on, and like all solid business, it all derives from wanting to share time with someone, to work on something together because you like them and like what they do. It took a year to bring our first four books to market; that was back in 2000. Since then, we've been on this explosive journey, growing the business and taking it in lots of different directions, though we're still essentially a small press with a turnover under a quarter of a million.

*A couple of years ago you were in the press with your 'Just One Book' campaign. How did that come about and did it succeed?*

We were facing bankruptcy, again, and the house was on the line and it was all looking pretty dreadful to be honest, lots of tears. We'd had huge support from the Arts Council of England to drive the business forward and had built up considerable financial commitments and suddenly there was no more support, they pulled the rug and we were stuck with the bills coming in and we were needing to find £15,000 of sales a month to just break even and it was very tough, very tough indeed. There comes a point, this awful point, when you know that it's all over, all the options are gone, the path ends, and you're left with nothing, so on this day, in the afternoon I came up with the idea of JustOneBook — a simple economic assertion that if people bought just one book then the press would stay afloat. I announced it on

Facebook and within hours the money was coming in and in a few days we'd done over £20,000 pounds of business and our customers saved us — they bought us a month to turn it round and we worked flat out to get things back on track. It was still tough and it took a year to climb out of the hole we'd got into with ACE, but we learned a lot and spent another twelve months finding the books that would give us better sales and better stability — however, publishing is all sophisticated gambling and we've faced the same terrors since. I guess it's about spreading the risks on a range of products and balancing the list out. Some books you know you'll make a loss on, but when you're betting your home, you need a few winners to carry things forward. It was an important lesson in many ways, and one thing you learn as a publisher is that when things get tough it can be very, very lonely.

*You have a rich and varied list including a lot of poetry and short stories – something which mainstream publishers have tended to steer away from. Is this a conscious decision to fill a gap in the market, or just personal preference?*

Independent publishing is about niches, yes: those little gaps you can spot and fill. Like most literary presses, we started out with a commitment to *serious* literature and had a messianic vision of what poetry should be and where it should go — as we grew we took the decision to make the publishing our primary income, once you do that the nature of publishing shifts. You've got to make money, publishing is extremely cash intensive, and of course you've got to make profits to pay the mortgage and feed the kids. So those gaps in the market change, really, you look for ones that you care about but that have the commercial possibility of letting you earn a living. There's always a natural tension between commercial and aesthetic concerns, but at the end of the day you have to be able to afford your tastes or you'll go bust. What I've learned is that literature is driven by readerships and not by the assertions and assaults of poets and writers. Readerships permit the art to move forward and sometimes to move backward and sideways!

*Do you publish based on what you enjoy, or do you always have your business head on, considering the marketing potential?*

The longer you do it the better you get at *seeing* the market, well, let's be clearer, seeing your own market — it's a big world out there, but that's just the benefit of experience. Though you take *better* risks, make *better* bets on a writer or a book. The fundamental components of publishing are very simple: *the right book by the right author at the right time in the right place*. But solving that matrix of concerns can be phenomenally difficult and books you feel are a dead cert can bomb and books you feel will be of

marginal interest can suddenly go mainstream and take off. You're only as good as your last success in publishing and three months of bad sales can have you on your knees. It's a very fickle industry in that sense. The margin for success and failure is very tiny. I think one is increasingly aware of these pressures if you're publishing for a living rather than as a serious hobby. So, yes, I think I'm much more wary now of losing my home, which in fact we recently did, as we've had to sell up and move! We had a terrible year and had to take drastic action, but we're happy now and have a cheaper home on the coast. To come back to your question, though, I always enjoy what I publish, but what I publish can be brutal to me and my family. What you love can ruin you. Right now, the publishing is very solid and the books are doing well and the business is now flying.

*You have a full and steady list of publications. How do you find your new titles? What is the balance of existing authors, submissions from agents, commissions and unsolicited manuscripts?*

We've spent a lot of time over the past few years finding new editors to bring into the business to work with us developing things. They're doing brilliantly well, but finding titles is an active pursuit, you have to be out in the broad community of writers listening to people, talking to people, finding out who's hot and who's not, what things people are reading, what they're looking forward to — a good publisher is very connected to the world of writing. It's interesting looking at Picador and Cape and Faber and seeing more of the editors' students coming through into lists, more and more people are coming into the art through Creative Writing MAs — I suppose that's one new filter. I've certainly given talks at over 20 British universities and I like to get a feeling for what's happening out there, but this is a small part of it. I don't believe in submissions as a route in to my business, it tells me nothing about the writer and if I'm betting £3,000 to £6,000 of my money on someone I want to make bloody sure they're well placed to succeed as a writer. Agents can certainly help here, they can provide important context and act as a filter, so you can see more clearly the choices to be made. With poetry, though, it's a grass roots thing — writing is social and if no one has heard of you you're not going to be a good fit for my little business. We tend to work with writers who are committed to playing a part in the broader literary community, who get their hands dirty, who read and participate. The first question I'm often asked in a bookstore is, "Who is this person, I've never heard of them?" If I can't answer that, then no one will buy the book. I think this is getting harder for writers.

*The world of publishing is going through a lot of changes at the moment with the move to e-books. How is this affecting you?*

I've mixed feelings and have been quite public about this, I've dithered a lot — we've just had an Amazon

No. 1 bestselling poetry title with Jane Holland's *Boudicca & Co.* which was a terrific thing, and around 20 of our titles are bestsellers on Kindle — however, the revenue is poor, Amazon's publisher tools are poor, the cash comes late, and it's all too fragile an income stream. But the numbers are exciting and I'm torn about how much time to invest in it. Right now, it's purely marginal income, but we might be able to scale it in some way, though it's hard to see how. Promoting books on Kindle is an art right now. How one stimulates sales of eBooks is rather arcane and it's a very different world to selling to bookshops. But we've cracked it all technically and as I write this I've just this moment launched Niall Boyce's sci fi saga *Veronica Britton: Chronic Detective* on Kindle.

*As well as a publisher, you are a poet. How would you classify what you write?*

I'd classify it as loss making. I'm not a good bet as a poet, I'm eternally grateful to my original publishers, Arc, they were fantastically supportive when I finally got my break. My first two books were scrapped, and my luck changed as a writer when I discovered the avant-garde back in Cambridge in the 90s and started to change everything I did as a writer — then my debut *Dr. Mephisto* came out and, well, it was a transformative moment. My writing life exploded and some difficult, but I hope worthwhile, books emerged from this period. However, I wrote myself into a corner and I've been working for the best part of a decade to get myself out of it. The new book will be published by my own company — that in itself was a difficult decision to make — it's called *The Departure* and as that title might infer it's about leaving and embarking in equal measure: about a change of life and a change of art. But I don't want to give the impression that I've closed the door on experimentation, this is still a big part of my make up as a writer and I see this book as an important step in my artistic life. In fact, I owe a debt to Helena Nelson at Hap-penstance who provoked me to attend to my own writing and of course to Roddy Lumsden who asked me to pull a book together and to the wonderful David Morley, who pricked my conscience. I hope this book is a more accessible work, more amenable, and more fun for my few readers.

*I won't ask where you get your ideas from, but do you have any particular sources of inspiration? Nature, family, emotions, etc?*

I think the most important thing as a writer is to develop what I'd call one's *sensibility*, specific subjects hold no interest for me, I'm sure I have my touchstones, but I'd probably shy away from them if I felt they were taking hold of my writing in any way. I don't want to come over all mystical, but I think writers often hear words and phrases and they form this puzzle, they're the beginnings of these little psychic journeys into something, into a possibility of utterance, and one gets carried along — it's like Csikszentmihalyi's theories of *flow* — Angela France pointed me to this. Sometimes these moments can be lost, some

are dead ends, but the really interesting poems are ones where you lose control and have no sense of the end, no sense of the beginning either, everything is happening outside of time. That's what excites me as a writer, and listening to the interior narrative, it can be filled with surprises and sometimes with horrors and sometimes with delights. It's not so much about voice, and I distrust the treacly obsession with discovering one's voice, I think it's about discovering the Other's voice and being in the dark about the sudden rapture of expression. All of which emerges from a profound silence — but others have written on that better than I can here.

*You have recently enrolled to become a student again. What course are you taking, what do you hope to get from it, and why have you decided to take this step at this point in your career/life?*

Yes, I'm doing the Creative Writing MA in Poetry with Lavinia Greenlaw and George Szirtes — I'm off for my first lecture in half an hour. I feel I've a lot to learn as an artist and I think one should never be frightened of starting out again and making a new beginning. No one can ever know the entire possibilities and practices of our art, so I'm very much looking forward to learning from these two writers, whom I admire enormously, and from my peers on the course, whose company I'm very much looking forward to. As for timing, I was worried about ageing as a writer and about the six year gap since my last book and I thought Salt would easily take over the rest of my life and what's left of its leisure, but this is me drawing a line in the sand and saying, 'Time for *my* writing, now.' I need to attend to myself for a year or two and I'm in the mood to change a lot more in my writing life, too.

*Asking you to name your favourite writer from the Salt lists would be like asking you to pick a favourite child. So, instead, who are your favourite writers outside of Salt? And, if you could have published any one writer from the past, who would it have been?*

That's a great and difficult question, I'm a big admirer of so many other writers around the world, though that sounds a pretty vacuous statement. In the UK I'll be continuing to read Sean Bonney, Sasha Dugdale, Annie Freud, Katherine Kilalea, Geraldine Monk, James Sheard, John Stammers, to name a few. But honestly, I read widely and there are too many people whose work I love to do justice here. From the past, I would have loved to have published Yeats through his career — and further back? Donne — though I bet he would have been a nightmare to work with.

*If you could go back to your younger self and give him some advice, what would it be?*

Get out more. You have to have a life to write otherwise the oxygen of your creativity gets a little

stinky. It was hard to find the social structures back in the 80s — it was all pre-computer, pre-internet, if you turned up for a poetry workshop back then it was a bit depressing, but I wish I'd known about some people and had searched out some places to just, you know, talk about the art. I wish I'd moved to London, too. Manchester back then was a literature desert. Good music though. The important thing is to keep removing the delusions: you know? Keep shedding the preconceptions and the constructs of yourself as a writer. You can be trapped in your judgements. You can be trapped in your taste. Seek out more collisions with the art, keep on trying to make yourself uncomfortable. Comfort is the death of art.

*Finally, what's coming up for Salt and yourself? Anything exciting on the horizon you're able to share?*

For Salt, it's all about *focus*, we're centring our work on the new annual *Best of* anthologies, and will publish more anthologies and guides. We're honing the list and taking even more care about the great writers we're bringing in to our business. For me, it's the new MA at UEA and then probably the PhD, I've got *The Departure* to promote and, suddenly, the world is changing for me in ways I can't control or predict. It's all about prioritising my own writing for now.

## Tower Of Song

Carl Caulfield

*A bedroom/living room is evoked; a very tidy room where everything is in its place.*

*HE enters, carrying a briefcase, breathes a sigh. He takes off jacket, hangs it up, moves into the room, puts briefcase on top of coffee table. He then goes to drinks cabinet and pours himself a drink.*

*He moves towards CD player and puts on Leonard Cohen's "Tower Of Song."*

*He moves rhythmically around room for a bit before slouching onto sofa. Undoes tie, smiles and sips. Suspicion. He looks startled a moment and sits up, sniffs at drink, sips again. Shakes head, sips again, pulls face.*

HE: Told her not to touch my drinks!

*He slams drink on desk. He gets up, switches off CD, returns to sofa, picks up briefcase, opens it, pulls out a wad of essays. He then takes out a small mini-cassette recorder and switches it on.*

VOICE ON TAPE: ...Next one...um...student's name: Rachel Hill.

*He groans.*

HE: Brain dead!

VOICE: There's a certificate pinned to the cover sheet...can't read what the GP's written...

HE: Lobotomy?

VOICE: Also...a scrappy little message. Can't decipher it.

HE: You'll do better than me, mate!

VOICE: She's done the second question! On Beckett!

*He groans.*

HE: Habit is a great deadener as the great man said.

VOICE: Okay...Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* takes place on a country road with two tramps and a tree and this image is meant to be symbolical of a timeless limbo. There are only two characters in the play.

HE: ...Pozzo and Lucky...?

VOICE: There is the character of Godot but he never turns up. Beckett said that it's a play where nothing happens - twice.

HE: A bit like this essay!

VOICE: When it was first produced it caused riots and audiences smashed the seats...*(SHE enters and watches him a moment. )*...but apparently the prisoners of San Quentin knew what it was all about...

*He stops tape, sits up, alert.*

HE: What are you doing here?

SHE: You're good. Must be radar.

HE: Cheap perfume.

SHE: Not that cheap.

HE: Trust me. El reeko. *(He holds up glass.)* Plus the practical jokes. Narrowed it down to you or my cleaner.

SHE: Sorry about that. Couldn't resist.

*She takes his glass, goes to drinks cabinet and pours another drink into a new glass. She takes this to him. He sips.*

HE: Better.

SHE: Glenmorangie.

HE: So...how did you...?

*She holds up keys, rattles them. He nods.*

SHE: Why didn't you answer my calls?

HE: What calls? *(She goes to answering machine, plays message. It's her voice asking him to call her.)* I've been busy. That time of year.

SHE: Well...you pick up your walkabout phone...like this...and then dial...thus...then say something like...hello...how are you? Or, if you're feeling really cheeky...why not pop round for a drink...?

HE: You can do that!?

SHE: People do it all the time. They even have phone sex these days.

HE: Christ! That explains all that interference!

SHE: Long distance orgasms.

HE: No mess, I suppose.

SHE: That may well appeal to you, of course...your ...how shall I?... anal approach...

HE: Anal approach? I think I'll stick to the phone sex.

SHE: Well, I wouldn't know...It's been months. The ball was very squarely in your court.

*HE gets up, goes to drinks cabinet.*

HE: Fancy a drink?

*HE hands her a drink. They sit.*

SHE: Who's doing that lot for you?

HE: Someone from the Uni.

SHE: How much?

HE: Ten dollars an hour.

SHE: You can't afford that.

HE: I can.

SHE: I could do it for nothing.

HE: Thanks, but I prefer to pay.

SHE: Fine.

*She gets up, moves around him.*

HE: What's the matter?

SHE: Nothing.

HE: Then why are you doing that?...Circling me like a fish. Cricks my neck.

SHE: It hasn't occurred to you to ask me how I've been.

HE: You're looking great. You've lost weight. Is that a new hairdo? Love the dress.

*She's wearing trousers.*

SHE: Would you have contacted me?

HE: Perhaps...Look, I don't know.

SHE: You're not one of those really indecisive types, are you?...To dump or not to dump, that is the question.

HE: No, I'm not. I don't think I'm indecisive at least!...I was going to contact you...

SHE: When?...To say what?

HE: Well...I've thought it through, you see...and...I don't think we...you and me...we...

SHE: Don't think we what?

HE: Work...as an item.

SHE: Item! You make it sound like something out of a colour catalogue!...Must be easier for you to do this.

HE: What do you mean?

SHE: You don't have to look me in the eye!

*Silence.*

HE: Look, I'm sorry. I should have been upfront earlier.

SHE: Thanks for sparing my feelings.

HE: Look, let's be frank...I can see why you were attracted to me, but I think...I came after all those others...

SHE: What others?

HE: Other men.

SHE: What about them?

HE: Well, they were...very male...I mean, very controlling according to you...and I must have seemed...I don't know...

SHE: What are you on about?

HE: Perhaps it was because you made all the moves...at the start.

SHE: Well, you weren't going to, that's for sure.

- HE: You approached me in the cafeteria. You took my arm and led me to a table. You wore a silver bangle with your name etched on it. I liked your voice and your hands. I could hear the squelch of your sandals and smell your cheap perfume.
- SHE: It's not that cheap! David Jones'...on special.
- HE: You invited me out to dinner that night. You had no idea how much you put me through when you did that. How would I dress? How would I get there? What if I dropped potato on my tie...on my chin...How would I know? How would I deal with going to the toilet? How would I piss into the porcelain? What if I missed and it went onto my shoes...?
- SHE: I'm sorry if you spent all evening worrying about peeing on your shoes...
- HE: I didn't...It was very exciting, don't get me wrong, but it was also...unnerving. You knew everything about me. I knew nothing. You did all the talking.
- SHE: So I came on a bit strong...I was nervous, too, you know!
- HE: It wasn't just then. It was all of those outings...I don't want to feel ashamed about the way I am.
- SHE: I never made you!
- HE: Not intentionally...
- SHE: What do you mean?
- HE: Oh, nothing...doesn't...forget...
- SHE: No, come on, tell me! You've started!
- HE: Oh, all those ferry trips where you'd describe the texture of the fucking water, how it bled green and blue and turquoise into the distance or you'd rave on about the colour of a petal or how a dog went about its doggy tricks, all that. Sometimes, I just wanted to listen to the silence, feel the breeze in my hair and create my own world.
- SHE: I was just sharing things. You made everything seem fresh...

HE: It felt like you were scoring points sometimes.

*Silence.*

SHE: God, you're so cynical and self-absorbed.

*He gets to his feet.*

HE: All of my life, I've had to put up with the arrogance of so many people who wanted to share their world with me. What they saw was such a big deal! All because of a couple of pissholes in the middle of their head! Yet, you don't see a damn thing half the time. You don't use this miraculous gift! I hate your assumption that you've stolen all the light in this world.

*She pecks him on the cheek. He spins around.*

SHE: Why are you so angry?

HE: Oh, we're not allowed to be angry either, are we? We're meant to be wise and serene. Play your violin, doff your plumed cap and hold out the begging bowl.

SHE: You need to relax. Have you masturbated lately? It doesn't make you go blind, you know...or at least...blind-er! (*She moves forward and kisses him, on the neck, tries to seduce him, but he doesn't respond*) Maybe you have!

HE: Why do you assume that?

SHE: You're so tense. People need to make bodily contact.

HE: What makes you think I haven't! You see!

*Silence. He sits down.*

SHE: Is that it? Is there someone else?

HE: Maybe.

SHE: Oh, come on!

HE: That's my business.

SHE: Don't play around with me! Have you met someone?

HE: Not necessarily!

SHE: Jesus Christ! You either have or you haven't! I have a right to know. Is it serious?

HE: You're making assumptions again!

SHE: Listen, you deadshit...

HE: There isn't anyone serious. I'm not into that.

SHE: Well, why the hell didn't you say that!?

HE: You don't pick up the clues do you? Like I said, I prefer to pay for it! It's amazing what you can do with a phone!

*Silence.*

SHE: You're joking. You're just being cruel. Aren't you?

HE: You don't know everything about me after all.

SHE: I don't believe you. You're just...

*Silence.*

HE: Her name's Justine. She comes here at any time...very discreet, no questions asked. One hundred and twenty dollars and the deal's done.

*Silence.*

SHE: That's pathetic. The deal!? I feel sorry for you. You don't have to do that.

HE: I prefer to...

SHE: How often does she come?

HE: Once a week.

SHE: And how long has...?

HE: Three months.

*Silence. She goes over to her bag. The light begins to drain from the room.. She walks close to him*

SHE: Arsehole!

HE: It's just the way I prefer things...

SHE: Sorry I bothered you.

HE: Thanks for coming around...

SHE: No, I can see you've got your own little world here. You don't need to go out...it all comes to you! And I'm very sorry about the assumptions I made. You're right about the trips. Big mistake. But the biggest was that I thought...When I saw you in that cafeteria, I had to really dare myself to go over and talk to you. I wondered why I wasn't able to catch your attention. I thought you looked gorgeous...gorgeous and gentle. I liked your face. I had no idea you were....I mean, you didn't carry a white stick or anything....How was I to know? You moved around with such grace...

HE: You didn't know...?!

SHE: Not until you mentioned it. You knew your way around. You even said hello to the dinner ladies. You looked into my eyes and you listened. I liked that. You actually listened. I told you about myself, if you remember...The next day the dinner ladies told me all about you.

HE: I...I didn't know that.

SHE: But I thought you had ESP. Give me a ring sometime!

*She exits. The stage slowly darkens.*

## Imagination Man

Guy Lucas

It is said that there are three worlds. First is a world where the sun shines and the clouds glide and the rain falls; a world where people buy houses, go to work and fall in and out of love. It is a world run by people, money, fear and loathing. It is a world built to end.

The second world is the afterlife; the world of the soul, spirit, the phantom and the ghost. It is a world run by the dead, for the dead. It is built on hope, faith, happiness and joy. It is a world designed to last.

But there is a third world.

It is a world that both the mortal and immortal alike visit on a daily basis without even knowing that they are there. It is a world that is ever growing, ever expanding, laughing and crying. It is a nightmare and a fantasy; euphoria and dejection. It is a world between worlds that only you and I can see.

It is *my* world. For I am the Imagination Man, and I am always watching, saving, collecting.

The world of the imagination is a joy and a curse, filled and fuelled by the dreams, fears and untruths of you and those you hold dear.

As I walk my quaint chocolate cobbled streets I see things you cannot even begin to imagine – or can you? Did these creations come from *your* mind? Did these phantoms of the heart stroll through my gates from your subconscious? Is it your mind that is turning the light into dark and the sea into stone?

I talk with such bleakness, because, you see, I remember the time – the time of the child – when all things in your world were bright and happy; a time when the fields of corn swayed peacefully in the springtime zephyr and birds chirped and sung their early morning song. It was a time when the smells of sugar cane, candy floss and the crashing sea mists filled the air and everything that you ate tasted of toffee-apples and ice-cream and syrup. It was a time of simple pleasures.

I remember the day you were taken to the park by your grandparents and you ate tuna sandwiches and chocolate and your imagination turned my world into a giant climbing frame built of jungle trees, vines and rushing rivers of chocolate fish. It was a world of adventure, laughter and secret quests. That day made me the happiest that I had been for a very long time . . . but it was not meant to be.

Soon after came the time of adolescence and your mind turned my world into a swirling vortex of hallucination and paranoia. Your girlfriend filled every window down my imaginary street, holding, embracing others in scenes that you tried so hard to detain. Soon every door was padlocked, sealing your fears inside. You held back your dreams to save your fears, but it was too much. At the tender age of eighteen the padlocks in my world vaporised and your nightmares filled my life. Murderers, zombies and back-stabbing friends cavorted about my lands turning the sky black and the sun red. My own imagination could not build enough walls to save me from your ghosts.

But the worst was yet to come. Now, in your tender middle age, your imagination is all but gone. I spend my days walking through endless white seeing nothing but lottery balls and money piles and naked colleagues. I see only the bad, never the good. You no longer imagine a world that is free and limitless, but a world that is destined to be, and forever will be, restricted and closed. You see the worst and never the best; you do not dream of candy forests and talking pets, you do not think about the girl next door in a pretty white dress, you just see your life, your wife and the end of time. There is no light in your world, only dark.

I am here to tell you, dear reader, that that is not the way it's meant to be. Dreams are only what you make them. You may think that these dreams of yours are nothing but imagination that must be restrained, but in my world they are fact, fate, and everything that matters. Don't you see? If you lock your dreams away behind padlocked doors then there, forever, they will remain, until one day the locks will no longer hold and they will buckle and break and your mind will once again be set free and be filled with dreams and hopes and aspirations . . . but, by then it will be too late. By then you will have entered the age of the old and you will be able to do nothing but imagine your life in the way it could, and should, have been.

Dear reader I urge you, do not lock away your dreams, for they are real, more real than you could ever see; only you could see, if you put down the locks, and let them be. For I am the Imagination Man and I come from a world where nothing is as it seems.

## Earth Hour, New South Wales

Carole Bromley

At 20.00 hours precisely  
we switch off the lights, pull out the plugs,  
try to do a 1000 piece jigsaw of Lake Geneva  
by candlelight. Some hope. Start to talk,  
play animal, vegetable, mineral;  
stand out under the stars, cannot believe  
there can possibly be so many.

They are the only colour on earth;  
Billy and Lotte curled up in the dark,  
the possum grunting under the deck,  
the rainbow lorikeets roosting in the tree,  
the kangaroos asleep in the bush  
and our faces, upturned to the Milky Way,  
the whole hemisphere, different shades of grey.

## Coffeehouse Encounter

Catherine Lanser

She looked like her dad. I could see the resemblance when they walked into the coffee shop. They were with a woman I assumed was her mother and another boy who seemed to resemble the woman.

The little girl's skin was milky brown, like the cream on the latte I was drinking, like her father's. Her eyes were similar football shapes rimmed in dark brown to match the iris inside. Her hair, the same texture as her father's which was peaking out from beneath his baseball cap, was pulled tightly into a pony tail that had more volume than my hair could ever conceive of. Strands stuck out against the light in every which way resembling the worn fabric on an old couch.

I saw her again as I stood up to leave, her face shining as her mom handed her a clear plastic to-go box with the rocky road brownie inside. I had thought about purchasing the dark chocolate confection, with its mountain of chocolate chips and marshmallows, but had chosen a plain crispy rice treat instead. I had regretted my decision immediately, the cereal the same consistency as if it had been left to spoil in the milk too long.

In the doorway I stopped to read the signs advertising dogsitting, yoga classes and music lessons. I needed none, but was steadying myself before returning to the midday sun after contemplating my latest heartbreak in the dimness of the coffeehouse. I heard the voices of the family bouncing off the walls of the entryway and I looked over my shoulder once more. The little girl trailed behind.

She smiled at me the same way she had encountered the brownie.

"So beautiful," she said softly and left.

## The Only People Here Are Naked

Robert Graham

I know you wouldn't want me to be here, but I am.

I'm trying not to think about you. There's no shortage of distractions – there must be several hundred people in this sports hall. The photographer is at the front somewhere, I think. I've lost sight of him just now but he has been walking about the place trailed by assistants with walkie-talkies.

I've come on my own, but many of the people around me seem to have come in groups. I cannot imagine how one might propose an outing like this to one's friends.

Outside, it's cold. Early May – I suppose it could have gone either way, but it would be cold, wouldn't it? What was I thinking of? Revenge, I suppose.

A guy with a goatee catches my eye. 'Bit of a novel experience this, eh?'

I make a small sound in response.

He's in his 50s, wearing a brown corduroy jacket. 'I think we're all being rather heroic, as a matter of fact.'

I look at him and make no reply. What would I say? If you were here, you would no doubt be talking to all and sundry. You would be striking deals, you would be making bets. But enough of that.

Carol, the counsellor, has an office off a cobbled path that runs from the main road in the village. From there, you walk up a ginnel and enter through the side of the building. The room is fresh and clean, recently painted in a shade somewhere between white and cream. The client sits on one of those Klippan sofas - you know, the IKEA budget model - and faces a bare wall. Beneath the paint, one can see the impression of the brickwork beneath. Not much of a view, then. Carol sits opposite in a brown leather bucket seat.

To begin with, I didn't much warm to her. She seemed rather cool and I was probably expecting someone more obviously empathetic. But perhaps some of that was down to me not wanting to be there.

She handed me a mug of tea and sat down. She crossed her legs, looked at me and nodded. 'Okay. Where would you like to start, Louise?'

'I'm not sure.'

She combed the fingers of one hand through those of the other. 'I wonder if it might be an idea to begin with the moment you first became aware of what had happened?'

I could feel myself flinch.

'Have I said something wrong?' she said.

So at least she was intuitive. 'I know it may only be semantics, but I can't think of it as just

something that happened. It was something he did. He had a choice and that's what he chose to do. The weather is something that happens.'

'I'm sorry. I should have chosen my words more carefully. Clearly it was something that Rennie did.' Her head went up and down a little; was she leaving space for me to move on? 'You must have been very shocked when you learned what had - what Rennie had done.'

'Spread out at arm's length,' one of the assistants tells us. She is standing on a step-ladder, her buttocks pressed against the top step. The sound of her voice through the megaphone reminds me of school sports days. This is the second time we've been told. I suppose we aren't spread out as well as they would like.

I was up at 5.30 and in too big a rush for a coffee. I could really do with some now, even if it would only add to the jitters.

'When the time comes,' says the assistant with the megaphone, 'please take off all your clothes, including shoes, socks, hats, watches - everything! - and leave them in a pile in front of you.'

In response, an amused murmur passes through the hall. It strikes me now that what we are all here for is really going to happen. I'm not sure I can go through with this. And as for revenge - well, what do you care?

'I suppose one could call it shock,' I said, remembering the thudding of my heart. 'I knew what he was like, but I just couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe he would be that stupid. At first, I was in denial.'

Carol studied me carefully. She has striking eyes, cornflower blue. She took a breath and exhaled through her nose. 'How long did it take for you to accept that he really had done it then?'

'Days.' I shook my head. 'Days.' I looked at the painted brickwork and lost myself. If only I could. And then I laughed, a bitter laugh. 'It certainly had all my friends stumped. I mean, it's not like any of them could tell me it was going to be all right.'

She nodded and waited.

I found her through my friend Becky. Carol's counselling service is connected to the local church Becky attends. The set-up is that clients are asked to make a donation according to what they can afford, which in my situation is ideal.

'I don't suppose you get many people in here with my particular problem.'

'Not precisely, but an awful lot of my clients come to me to talk about debt, debt and the related problems.'

An anxious silence spreads through the grey gloom. The walkie-talkie activity increases, although I can't hear what is being said. Everybody knows the moment will come soon. Just then a dog appears among us, trotting around our feet and stops to sniff at mine. It looks like a cross between a Husky and

something smaller. I'm fond of dogs, but at this point I'm too apprehensive to reach down and pet it. A blonde woman in dungarees approaches, though, and scratches it behind the ear.

'What a sweetie,' she murmurs.

One of the walkie-talkie people appears out of nowhere. 'Excuse me,' she says, reaching for the dog. 'It can't be in here.'

The blonde woman protests, but the dog is already on its way.

'No,' the assistant cries, sounding more urgent now.

The blonde woman gets to her feet. 'She seems a bit uptight, given what we're all here for.'

As dog and assistant disappear into the throng, I smile back. Do I want to be chatting with strangers and then taking my clothes off in front of them?

In a sudden surge, everybody starts peeling off, clothes and arms flying everywhere. I must have missed the signal. It doesn't take more than a couple of minutes before some of those around me have finished undressing. They bend or squat to fold their clothes in neat piles on the floor before them, and then stand up naked.

I have been so hypnotized by the storm around me that I finish a long minute or two after my neighbours. When I go to unfasten my watch I see it has stopped. I study the second hand carefully, but it really has stopped. 7:49. The battery must have run out. Strange that it should have happened on such a singular occasion.

'If you need glasses to get about,' says the assistant with the megaphone, 'you can stick them under your arm during the shoot.'

These are the circumstances in which I have become naked with hundreds of others. What will I do if someone I know sees me here? It's very unlikely that that will happen, but to be honest, now that my clothes are off, I'm not sure I care any more. The only people here are naked, and I don't know any of them. When you don't know them and they're all naked, too, you can't mind being naked yourself.

Moments later, we get the shout to move out and I end up next to a guy with dreadlocks. He's not tall and with his pixie features, he looks a bit like Prince.

He glances at me and gives a friendly nod. 'It's funny, without clothes you can't pigeonhole people the same way.'

I look around and it's true: we all look exactly the same.

'I mean,' he says, 'you could be an accountant or a dinner lady. I can't tell. I've got nothing to go on.'

With the dreadlocks, I think, it's safe to say that he probably isn't an accountant. 'Actually, I'm a deputy chief police commissioner,' I say.

'You're shitting me.'

I smile. I could say that actually I'm a person whose life has been ruined, but I don't want to get into confessions here. 'Yes,' I say. 'I am.'

The second session with Carol was different: to begin with, I said less, she said more. It was informative, although nothing was a great surprise. As I had thought, I would lose our home. 'Because,' she said, 'Rennie used the house as collateral on the loan he took out.'

'I should have paid more attention to what he was doing.'

'Perhaps, but there would always have been plenty of room for him to get things past you. Have you much saved?'

'A few thousand I was able to put aside over the years. Nothing from Rennie. The business was always precarious.'

'And of course there's been a recession for a couple of years now.'

'That wasn't what did for him. It was the loan – it was trying to expand into China.'

I must have sounded bitter.

'Business is always a gamble,' Carol said. 'To a certain extent, successful companies are lucky companies.'

'Rennie was more than a gambler. He was reckless to the point of being suicidal.'

And the word just sat there between us like a large toad.

The photographer is directing my group now, arranging us in a circle around a bed of yellow tulips. Like many of us here today, the tulips are past their best. Not far past, and I would like to think that the same could be said about me. Although some of the people around me are young (by which I mean younger than me - in their 20s or 30s), more are old: over 60, over 70, perhaps even in their 80s. I can look around and see what I've got to look forward to - or not. The actual looking is problematic: face-on, one doesn't want to be seen to be staring, and from the rear - well, one doesn't look long.

The exhibition that comes out of today's shoot will tour North America, Europe and Japan. My reluctance to be seen without clothes on, even by you, was one of the things that annoyed you about me. And here I am now, stretching my arms to the sky, arching back. Here I am baring my all for the photographer, hunched behind his protruding lens, inching in on a cherry picker. We, the nude models, surround the flowerbed in concentric circles and simulate opening up like a flower. It feels freeing, there's no doubt, but it's so quickly over. One of the photographer's assistants thanks us and tells us to take five. I'm not sure if the flowerbed shots are done with. Nobody tells us anything.

## Guard Hairs

Simon Williams

You think I'm white, but all you see is bear  
and I'm hidden from you not by snow,  
though heaven-knows there's still enough of that,  
but by the fields your thoughts cross.

Know my skin is black, absorbing all the little heat  
I can from the insipid sun.  
My hairs, like light-pipes, guide the warmth  
to where I need it, in the muscle.

They're like the see-through flakes that fall  
and pile in these white fields and dunes.  
Whether I walk, or swim, or hole up in  
a birthing den – the Inuit call it Iglu –

I am still bear and fear only other bears.  
You men, with cracking tools that sound like ice,  
leave easy food, when seals are scarce.  
I broke a claw on where you keep your waste.

Only the seal-smell Inuit know us well.  
They know we walk like men,  
talk when we've a mind to, tell them  
what we know. It's now of little use,

but when we walk with four sure feet across the flows  
and swim to where the seal and walrus are,  
they know we're neither white, nor black  
but, like so many things, transparent.

## The Day After Sunday

Joseph Wood

One day they will make a bridge to the sun so that we can all kiss the only source of our life, and we will burn and crumble with smirks that will be misinterpreted as smiles. We shall ask it 'Why do you bother?' and the reply shall be 'So you can see what you're doing.' We will be dismayed that this servant is not working for us but working only so we can see our own demise. There will be great vengeance and a thousand missiles will be sent forth, all countries united in this assault. All the missiles will burn a hundred miles from the target and we will be left looking up at this light that threatens to blind us dare we stare straight at it and we will reconsider our priorities. We will set our planet aflame and let the light from our star burn a dim glow on the other planets' horizons as we show that we are capable of illumination and heat and our flames shall not diminish by nightfall, they will grow taller and brighter. We will stand forever blinded and charred with our heads held high. Forests and cities will burn. We will pour crude oil into the sea and ignite that also. Earth will shed its blue and green image in place of a brand new orange glow. From Venus we will see our old home spray sparks in its orbit and we will look at the old sun, closer now, and see that it is not deterred by our attempt at undermining it. It will smirk at us as we smirked at it, only with broader expression and sharper fangs and we shall all lay down on the cold surface of our new planet exhausted. We will not move, we will only wish that our antagonist would fade and in that wish we will see that in moving closer to the sun we undermined our own goal. We will move to Jupiter and from there we will watch the sun as its fire is extinguished by time. The planets will realign so that they are now within Earth's maternal prosperity. We will worship our old home as though it were a god, forgetting that it was us who created it. We will deify it and build pyramids in its honour. There will be dances to commemorate it and photographs to celebrate it and we will indulge in these so as not to anger that which is our only source of life.

## Into the Light

Abi Wyatt

‘They’re angry because they’re frightened. They don’t know what else to do.’

The silver-haired man in the patched and faded jeans is speaking up close to Sarah’s ear. He is careful not to look at her face but instead stares over her shoulder so that his gaze skims over the frail old lady who is restlessly waving her stick. It comes to rest, finally, on the face of her companion, slightly younger and vaguely androgynous. Every so often, she bends over her friend, smoothing the confusion of her hair.

There are no young people here. The mean age is probably seventy. But most of those who appear to be younger bear the outward signs of illness or handicap. Some people are confined to wheelchairs, others are partially-sighted; there are those who can barely breathe and some who are crippled and wasted. The effects of osteoporosis and vitamin deficiency are also much in evidence. People do not eat like they used to now the cost of foodstuffs has soared. Fuel, too, has gone up and up so people have to make choices. It is better to be hungry than to perish from the cold.

The unvarnished truth is that, like it or not, there are just too *many* people. All of them are uncomfortable and some of them are utterly bemused. Probably, they would be mill about if they only had the space to do so. One can tell from their faces that they are both frightened and confused. As it is, they are pressed back to back and fragile shoulder to shoulder, crammed together in this tiny space for hours at a time. It is impossible to guess whose turn will come next. There is no discernible system. There is nothing for it but to watch and wait and hope for the best.

First thing every morning, the noise is oppressive. Everyone is talking very loudly. There is pushing and shoving; sometimes screaming. People fall over in the crush. Eventually, however, the hubbub subsides and settles down to a kind of hum. Occasionally, someone coughs or farts or, worse, somebody weeps.

The air is thick with the stink of fear, rank BO and urine. Sarah tries not to think about this. She knows she will need to go soon. How long, she wonders, can she cross her legs before the strain of it is just too much for her? The last time she wet herself she was barely eleven years old. It was half-way through evensong in the church of St Michael and St Andrew. It was winter time and the unheated church was unbelievably cold. She should have gone before she left home. Her mother was always reminding her. Such was her anguish and humiliation she hid behind a grave stone. Later, she sat in a shallow bath and sobbed till she thought her chest would burst.

Sarah doesn’t know the man at her side but his voice is reassuring. Once or twice, he has reached out his hand on her arm and laid it down lightly on her arm. It is an odd feeling, a man’s hand, those pale, slender fingers. Connor’s hands were big and strong. It seems to her a long time ago.

'I know,' she whispers, 'and they're all so young. Part of me wants to feel sorry for them.' She does not turn towards the man but stares steadily ahead. 'Look at that one over there by the fence. She can't be more than twenty. What makes a pretty girl like that get involved in something like this?'

The man smiles a quick, tight smile and raises one overgrown eyebrow. Why does the fact that the girl is so pretty somehow make it worse? Sarah doesn't know but it *does* make it worse – and then she is suddenly exhausted. She wants nothing so much as to rest her cheek against this stranger's chest. 'What is your name?' she asks him softly.

She turns her face towards him. His grey eyes seem to glow with kindness and the smallest hint of a smile. This, she thinks, may be the last time, the very last time she does this. But, just as she thinks it, the barricade lifts and she hears the tell-tale click.

'You, you, you and you.'

The words come spitting like bullets. The speaker is blond with the kind of beard a young man grows because he can. Sarah feels the bolt-gun nuzzle her ribs, persuading her nearer her comforter. It seems that, after all, the time has passed for the giving and receiving of names.

Too late, she thinks; it is always too late; but she takes the trembling hand he offers. The years fall away like flesh from the bone as she follows him into the light.

## Inspiration

Howie Good

arrives like boys of twelve  
racing on ten-speeds

into the vast, monotonous sunlight  
bordered by green

## Overexposed

Emma Lannie

In the photograph I'm in the water, half in shadow, completely naked. I am eight years old, and my mother had just promised me a new toy truck if I posed for her. I would have done it even without the truck. I like it when I'm the centre of attention. I always did. Secretly, I think she knew that, too.

I loved the gaze of the lens. So much bigger than her actual eye. And I felt myself fill it, stretch out to fit the space it could capture. I was looking out at my mother and at the world. And if the world wanted to look back, then yeah, it could. I welcomed it. I was eight and in complete possession of my body. The world could do what it wanted with me.

The light at that time of day is so forgiving. It lends itself perfectly to the illusion of beauty. I am naked in front of my mother. Her camera is trained on me. And I want this. I want to be in all the pictures she ever takes. Above all else, I want to make my mother happy. I don't know if she actually sees me when she looks through the lens. Sometimes I think that I'm just a shape in the landscape that the light hits in a certain way. And this makes me beautiful. Or maybe she sees me as a person, not her son, but a creature other than her. A thing to be recorded and inspected at close range, in minute detail.

I remember having to stand as still as possible. I was not permitted to move. The world around me could move all it wanted. Although I think my mother would have commanded it to stop if she thought it would listen. I remained still for my mother while she made me into a god. She told me this was something that would stay with me all my life.

Elena sleeps in a knot, always with one leg hanging long, kicked out of the covers. I watch her from the doorway. The light hits her body in blocks. This high up, we don't need curtains. Even when I've had curtains, I never closed them anyway. And yes, I know where that comes from.

Soon she will wake, and her hand will travel across to my side of the bed. She will find it cold. I have been standing here for hours.

When she wakes, I will back out of the room so that she knows she is completely alone. She will get up and search for me. She always does now. She'll find me on the sofa, reading. I will acknowledge her with a nod, but I won't look up from the page. In my peripheral vision, Elena will twine one long leg around the other, half-yoga, half-awkwardness, the dark fur of her pubis the only discernible shape I can see. I will read to the end of the page, and then I'll fold the corner and close the book. She'll wait for me to let her know it's okay, which I do with a glance that drops to her breasts the instant after meeting her eye. She will approach me then, beautiful and self-conscious, and I will do whatever I want.

The trees in the photograph are almost black, a natural frame, reflected in the water to further encroach

on me. And I'm there in my small body, my hands spread. I am not afraid. I'm defiant. I'm daring the lens in closer, my fingers against the water like it's a sheet of glass. My fingertips are wet, but I do not break the surface. I am in control here. I know I'm the centre of everything. I am the point at which the not-water meets the water. And my eyes are fixed on my mother's camera. And you can wonder if it represents a birth, this naked child emerging from the water. But I can tell you, for me, it was just the opposite; it was a return. I still don't know if my mother understood that.

There is no other reflection. My mother is too far away, although she's not that far away at all. I can make out every tiny check on her shirt, and see the twist of the knot she's tied it up with. She isn't wearing a bra. She never did in those days. This, this holding down of a button, this opening and closing of a shutter, this is how she holds me. And after the first time, there is the unravelling of film and the tenderness of baths and the fixing me into permanence. I am held forever.

Elena used to be in her own life. Her time for me was almost an afterthought, something she tagged onto an already full existence. She fitted me in. But I worked the thread of her self-esteem loose, and now she is only in my life. I had to take my time. But time is nothing to someone used to standing still. I withdrew from her, waited until she was at her most vulnerable, and gave not enough. And then I gave less. I fucked her with my eyes closed, kept my expression blank throughout. I acted like she didn't exist, and after a while it worked.

And god, she's beautiful. But I only let myself tell her that when we're in some public place and I have my hands up her dress. I whisper it quiet into her hair. And if we're at the gallery, I'll always wait until the guard walks in before slipping my hand back down, just so she has to walk past him knowing he knows.

In the photograph, the sunlight makes a halo in the water around me. I am all the selves I am ever going to be, right there. I stand poised, an animal ready to spring. And I could be feral, I could have been raised out there, in the woods. I guess I was, in part. I understand the play of light better than I understand how to be with others. And part of that is knowing there's a darkness that's present everywhere, even if it's out of shot.

## Light Up the Sky!

R J Dent

***I AM THE GOD OF HELL-FIRE AND I BRING YOU – FIRE!*** Arthur Brown sang into Travis's ears as he lit the fuse with his lighter, and then took two steps back. He quickly turned and made his way across the stained concrete floor of the dark and derelict factory. Outside, Travis crossed the empty road and turned a corner.

***I GOT A BAD DESIRE – OH, OH, OH, I'M ON FIRE,*** Bruce Springsteen moaned as Travis carefully opened the door of an empty office block and made his way up the stairs to the office that overlooked the factory. It was a meticulously selected vantage point from which to watch the factory burn. He stood in front of the boarded-up window and peered through the large hole he had drilled into the wooden sheet the previous day, in order to ensure a good view of the fire. And from where he stood, the view was better than good – it was wonderful.

***BURN BABY BURN, DISCO INFERNO*** sounded in the stereo earpieces as Travis saw that the factory was burning inside every window. At the moment, the fire was on the ground floor only, but Travis knew it would spread quickly.

***CAN'T SLEEP, BED'S ON FIRE, DON'T TOUCH ME, I'M A REAL LIVE WIRE!*** David Byrne warned, and Travis, knowing that he was secure inside the office and alone – and would be for several minutes, unzipped his trousers and pulled his stiffening cock out. He wrapped his hand around it and started slowly masturbating as the first tongues of flame licked the window frames of the distant building.

***COME ON BABY LIGHT MY FIRE, TRY TO SET THE NIGHT ON FIRE!*** Jim Morrison demanded and, as he masturbated faster, Travis thought that he ought to change the order of the songs, so that The Doors' song was before ***BURN BABY BURN***, for it set up the mood for masturbating, whereas the Trammyps' song was simply a eulogy that extolled the virtues of standing still, looking at flames. Travis then tried to think of a song to use as a segue track between the Doors and the Trammyps, but all he could think of was Van Halen's ***LIGHT UP THE SKY***, but which wasn't quite right. Despite that, Travis started thinking of the last few lines of its final chorus: ***OOH MAMA, SEE THE FIRELIGHTS, OOH, LIGHTIN' UP THE SKY... LIGHT 'EM UP!*** Travis abruptly changed the music as his sexual pleasure increased commensurately with the spreading fire light inside the building. Travis could see a bright glare from inside the old factory as the petrol-soaked machinery caught fire. Soon the petrol-soaked internal doors would ignite and the whole place would catch fire and burn magnificently.

***WILD FIRE SHOOTING THROUGH MY VEINS, BURNING FEVER TO MY BRAIN*** sang Paul Rodgers, as Travis came hard, ejaculating on to the office floor. Travis's panting was laboured as he tucked his sticky cock back into his trousers and zipped up. ***WILD FIRE WOMAN, SOMETHING–***

Travis switched the music off as something inside the building exploded, blasting the window frames out onto the street.

*Time to go.* Travis left the office building, only looking back once as he reached his car, climbed in, shut the door and started the engine.

Tomorrow he would burn the Town Hall to the ground.

And he had to compile a brand new selection of songs to play as a soundtrack to his work.

**June 20, 1977**

Vivian Faith Prescott

The first barrel of oil flowed 800 miles down the Pipeline and was hauled across the Alaska Highway and ferried to our island. We'd won the lottery: the first barrel of oil. We heated it up with all our kinetic energy, the Budweiser and BBQ. In the morning, we broke our longer chains, treated it for impurities, distributed it. Some townfolk went hunting with a new outboard. Some relit waterlogged wood inside their stoves. Some donated to our City's diesel light plant to watch the Six Million Dollar Man on the Zenith. Some folks set fire to themselves. You could see our flash from Salyut 5.

## Author Biographies

### Carole Bromley

Carole Bromley is from York. Has had poems all over the place for the last fifteen years, two pamphlets from Smith/Doorstop and a number of prizes. Her first collection, *A Guided Tour of the Ice House*, will be launched on October 7th.

### Carl Caulfield

Award-winning playwright, Carl Caulfield, was born in the UK, but has spent the last 20 years in Australia. His play, *Being Sellers*, transferred to New York late last year, and *Shakespeare's Fools* won Best New Play at the 32nd Annual CONDA Awards (City of Newcastle Drama Awards) in Australia earlier in 2011. *Tower Of Song* was performed in 1997 as part of the Newcastle Fringe Festival in NSW, Australia, starring Rod Ansell and Kath Leahy from Stray Dogs Theatre Company

### Dave Clark

Dave Clark lives in Cambridge and works for a charity in London. He has written one (unpublished) novel and numerous short stories. His stories have also appeared in the charity anthologies *50 Stories for Pakistan* and *100 Stories for Queensland*.

### R J Dent

R J Dent is a poet, novelist, translator, short story writer, blogger, researcher and creative writing tutor. His latest book is an English translation of Le Comte de Lautréamont's *The Songs of Maldoror*. His website is [www.rjdent.com](http://www.rjdent.com).

### Steph Dickinson

I'm an English literature student based in Liverpool. My primary passion is for political activism, a factor which seems to infect a lot of my writing inadvertently. I take inspiration from the outside world, and put it to paper from the window seat of a shared terraced house.

**Cathy Eaton**

Cathy Eaton teaches fiction. Following graduate work at Breadloaf School of English, she spent her sabbatical writing short stories. She believes that conceiving a story and then living through its many transformations is like being pregnant, giving birth and raising a child: some days a joy, other days a heart-ache.

**Elizabeth Ellerby**

I'm 20 and currently studying Creative Writing at MMU Cheshire. I tend to write more fiction and poems rather than non-fiction. I thought I would try to write this non-fiction piece for a change. Writing is mostly a hobby for me, but I like learning how to improve my skills.

**Brian Evans-Jones**

Brian Evans-Jones lives contentedly in Winchester with his wife and baby daughter. He writes poetry, dabbles in short fiction and drama, and teaches creative writing to adults and children through the Open University, Winchester University, and community venues throughout Hampshire. Find out more at [www.brianevansjones.com](http://www.brianevansjones.com).

**Marilyn Francis**

Marilyn Francis lives and works, and sometimes writes poetry, down in the wild south west of England.

**Howie Good**

Howie Good, a journalism professor at SUNY New Paltz, is the author of the full-length poetry collections *Lovesick* (Press Americana, 2009), *Heart With a Dirty Windshield* (BeWrite Books, 2010), and *Everything Reminds Me of Me* (Desperanto, 2011), as well as numerous print and digital poetry chapbooks, including most recently *Love Dagger* from Right Hand Pointing, *To Shadowy Blue* from Gold Wake Press, and *Love in a Time of Paranoia* from Diamond Point Press.

**Robert Graham**

Robert Graham's short stories have appeared in magazines and on Radio 4. He is the co-author of three Creative Writing handbooks. His other publications include a novel, *Holy Joe*, (Troubador, 2006), a short story collection, *The Only Living Boy* (Salt, 2009), and a chapbook, *A Man Walks Into A Kitchen* (Salt, 2011).

**Karen Greenbaum-Maya**

Karen Greenbaum-Maya is a clinical psychologist in Claremont, California, and once studied German Lit. Her poems and photographs appear in many publications. She was nominated for the 2010 Pushcart Prize. Her first chapbook, *Eggs Satori*, a finalist of note in Pudding House Publications' 2010 competition, will be published in 2011.

**John Harrower**

John Harrower 25, WM, NS, GSOH, OMG, WLTM interesting individuals that he can shamelessly use as characters in his flash fiction or put in ridiculous and often fantastical situations for embarrassing effect. Find him in Stirling, Scotland scrawling non sequiturs in underpasses.

**Elizabeth Eve King**

E.E. King's novel, *Dirk Quigby's Guide to the Afterlife*, came out in 2010. She has published numerous short stories. The New Short Fiction Series is launching her Short Story Anthology, *Real Conversations With Imaginary Friends*, by E.E. King, Sponsor, Barnes & Noble, 2012.

**Emma Lannie**

Emma J Lannie was born in Manchester and now lives in Derby, where she writes stories, works on The Novel, and wishes she had a dog. She has been published in *Bugged*, *Even More Tonto Short Stories*, *Best of the Web* and *Six Sentences*, and blogs at [garglingwithvimto.blogspot.com](http://garglingwithvimto.blogspot.com)

**Catherine Lanser**

Catherine Lanser lives in Madison, Wisconsin. Her essays "The Great Walnut Caper", "Forever Eighteen", and "Playing with Tradition" have appeared in Adams Media's *Classic Christmas*, *Chick Ink* and *Christmas Traditions: True Stories that Celebrate the Spirit of the Season*. Her essay "The Smell of Lilacs" appears in *Stories of Strength*.

**Guy Lucas**

Guy Lucas is 22 and a student primary teacher from Lincolnshire. He loves writing speculative fiction and asking the age old questions "why?" and "what if?" He has also discovered the joy of writing about himself in the third person.

**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](http://www.writeitdownith.wordpress.com).

**Vivian Faith Prescott**

Vivian Faith Prescott is a fifth generation Alaskan who lives in Sitka and Kodiak, Alaska. She's the Co-Director of Raven's Blanket, a non-profit. Her poetry and non-fiction have appeared in *Praxilla*, *Drunken Boat*, *Orion headless*, *Catapult to Mars* and *Turtle Quarterly*. Vivian's website is <http://www.vivianfaithprescott.com> and she blogs at <http://planetalaska.blogspot.com>

**Judith Taylor**

Judith Taylor comes from Perthshire and now lives in Aberdeen, where she is a Managing Editor at Pushing Out the Boat magazine. Her first chapbook collection, *Earthlight*, was published by Koo Press (2006) and her second, *Local Colour*, by Calder Wood Press (2010).

**Rewan Tremethick**

An aspiring novelist and stand-up comedian, Rewan has a degree in Creative Writing, and is currently living in Cornwall. His first novel - a fantasy - *Politics in Blood*, is almost ready to be sent to publishers. To keep track of his journey, ramblings and writing news, follow him on Twitter @RewanTremethick.

**Simon Williams**

Simon Williams is a full-time writer; part fact, part poetry. He has four published books, the latest being *Quirks*, from Oversteps Books ([www.overstepsbooks.com](http://www.overstepsbooks.com)). He enjoys picking up odd facts and news items as subject matter for new poems and reads his work widely, at everything from slams to lit festivals'.

**Joseph Wood**

Joseph James Wood was born in Leeds and currently lives in Ormskirk, near Liverpool, where he is studying creative writing and English literature at Edge Hill University. In his writing, reality often takes a back seat to allow greater freedom for an exploration of existential themes and ideas.

**Abi Wyatt**

Abi Wyatt writes for her life in the shadow of Carne Brea in Cornwall. Her poetry and short fiction have been widely published over the past three years. Her poetry collection, *Moths in a Jar* (Palores) was published in 2010. She is the founder member of Redruth Writers.