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Introduction

John Lavin

Since we started *The Lampeter Review* back in the summer of 2010, we have been primarily – albeit with some notable exceptions – a publisher of short stories and poems. In some ways this has simply been because the standard length of these two forms is an ideal fit for the magazine format - but it has also been ideologically deliberate. Both the short story and the poem suffer considerably compared to the novel in terms of readership and media exposure in the UK and yet it is not immediately easy to see why. Both are accessible and quick to read and in our IPod-shuffle-culture eminently more digestible than a three or four hundred page novel. And yet when it comes to literature it is sprawling epics like Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (coming in at a whopping six hundred and seventy-four pages) and its sequel *Bring Up the Bodies* (a more manageable four hundred and eleven), which capture the publics’ imagination and sell by the truckload, while new collections by Alice Munro and Seamus Heaney – arguably the two greatest living exponents of the short story and the poem – remain largely unread by the public at large.

The reason for this seems to be because we as a culture do not particularly want to engage with what poems and stories, and indeed serious theatre, have to tell us. We are not good, as a society, at being in touch with the places these art forms come from. Put bluntly we are neither good at, nor fond of, looking ourselves in the mirror.

Frank O’ Connor, in his classic study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, says that one of the things which characterises the short story (and for him differentiates it from the novel) is ‘an intense awareness of human loneliness’ and that:

> it might be truer to say that while we often read a familiar novel again for companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood. It is more akin to the mood of Pascal’s saying: *Le silence éternal de ce espaces infinis m’effraie [the eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me.]’

It may be true to say that in our society we want, perhaps now more than ever before, to shut out the silence of those infinite spaces. It is for that reason that, in a culture centered on pop immediacy, people do not turn to the apparently more bite-sized forms of the short story and the poem. If *Wolf Hall* could be slimmed down into thirty pages, or indeed concentrated into a drink or a pill, you can bet that it would be an even greater success but the reason it is ultimately so popular is because *Wolf Hall*, for all its brilliant artistry and invention, offers the reader escapism. There is nothing, of course, wrong with...
that but what short stories and poems offer is something entirely different. They offer a looking glass into the soul. They are concerned not with what we could be but with who we are. Who we are when we wake up in the middle of the night and feel frightened without knowing why - without knowing why except that we can feel our lives passing like broth through a sieve.

Alfred Hitchcock once said that ‘reality is something that none of us can stand, at any time,’ and as a society we have stumbled, almost unthinkingly, into a situation whereby we have come to actualise that viewpoint with little regard for the repercussions. In its own small way, The Lampeter Review seeks to redress the balance and to shift our attention away from unreality, back to the mirror.

In this, our sixth issue, we begin with a new story from the award winning novelist and Professor of Contemporary Literature at Manchester University, Patricia Duncker, whose deliciously dark, ‘Graven Image,’ is one of a series of stories she has written about the Madonna, entitled The Madonna Miracles. This is followed by three new poems of luminous quality and insight from Medbh McGuckian, a writer whose poetry Seamus Heaney has described as being “like the inner lining of consciousness, the inner lining of English itself, and [which] moves amphibiously between the dreamlife and her actual domestic and historical experience as a woman in late-20th-century Ireland.” The semi-autobiographical ‘Red Leatherette,’ comes next, a sharp evocation of a sexual awakening in the seventies, from the marvellously unsentimental Chrissie Gittins. We are also delighted to feature three brand new poems from one of the brightest talents to have come out of Wales in recent years, Joe Dunthorne, author of the sublimely funny Submarine and Wild Abandon.

Staying in Wales, this issue also features new short stories from both Jon Gower and Nigel Jarrett, whose collections Too Cold for Snow and Funderland represent two of the best short fiction collections published anywhere this year. We also have three brand new poems apiece from both Rhian Edwards - her first since the Forward Prize-nominated Clueless Dogs – and Cardiff Poetry Prize winner, Mark Tedinnick. Meanwhile Wales Arts Review editor, Gary Raymond, contributes a beautifully precise portrait of lost youth in ‘The Playing Fields.’

I spoke earlier of serious theatre and notable exceptions and we are lucky enough in this edition of The Lampeter Review to be able to feature two sizeable extracts from Torben Betts, one of the few young British playwrights who can genuinely lay claim to being an exponent of serious, uncompromising theatre. Theatre, in other words, which is interested in holding up a mirror to society rather than creating pallid reconstructions of its past selves or, indeed, musicals based on seventies pop groups. These extracts, from 1999s Incarcerator and 2011s Broken, suggest a way forward for theatre which few are prepared to take, a way forged in the same tradition as Britain’s greatest but most ignored playwright, Edward Bond.

Elsewhere in the issue, the noted Irish short story writer, Nuala Ni Chonchúir, contributes the poems ‘Boxer’ and ‘Rainwisher,’ two pieces of tightly controlled intensity. Christina Dunhill gives us some fascinating insights into the construction of her long poem, ‘The Crocodile God,’ while we ourselves take a look at some of the themes in former contributor Vanessa Gebbie’s The Coward’s Tale. There is poetry from bright new talents Kim Moore, Helen Calcutt and Sarah Hudis and, as ever, there are new and deeply promising pieces from students - Carly Holmes’
‘The Crying Girl’, Hope Bachmann’s ‘Serving Self,’ Maj Ickle’s ‘I am porous’- and other, both well known, and as yet, little known writers, who have approached us through our submissions system.

The photographs in this issue come from the exceptionally talented sixteen-year-old, National Geographic prize winner, Eleanor Bennett. In A Trip to Manchester and Back she takes a close-up view of people and places during a daytrip to Manchester, revealing, in much the same way as a poet or short story writer would do, wider and perhaps even revelatory truths.

John Lavin, Editor
The helicopter approached the beach.
‘I can’t go down any further here. The sand’s too uneven, too steep. We might tip over.’
The anthropologist leaned against his safety harness, peering into the forest, yelling above the roar. ‘But this is the place! This is the place.’

And suddenly he was no longer certain. The beach seemed shorter, the small reef uncovered. Rocks that had lived underwater now smouldered in the heat. Driftwood and various debris; a red plastic jerrican, the shattered hulk of something that suggested a previous life as a boat, and one long oar, lay splintered on the beach. The devastated forest nudged the long white curve, which sloped, vertiginous, towards the rolling tide. The foreshortened distance unsettled the Professor’s bearings. Was this indeed the place where he had first discovered his people?

That clump of coconut palms, some now reduced to jagged, upright teeth, marked the spot where the hidden path into the forest began. I came here, forty years ago, nervous, frightened, convinced I wasn’t ready for the work, and Lopan stood by those palm trees, waiting for me to negotiate the surf. I carried clothes, books, camera, medical box ashore, balancing in the waves, everything held high above my head; and he stood, naked, armed with arrows and an old whaling harpoon, watching, ready to judge what he saw. If he hadn’t liked the look of me I’d have been dead within minutes. In fact what fascinated him was my beard. The islanders don’t grow beards; their hairless brown bodies are perfectly smooth. But I possessed a monstrous ginger beard that matched the freckles. What did Lopan see? A pink, ungainly creature with hairy ginger legs, struggling up the beach, laden with obscure treasures. And he stood in shadow, waiting for me to pitch forwards into the breaking foam. He never moved from the shadow of the forest trees.

The helicopter lurched at an angle, dislocating Rufus from his seat and his memories, still poised one hundred feet above the breakers.
‘I can’t land on this beach.’

‘You must!’ bellowed the anthropologist, whose ginger beard, now meshed with grey, neatly clipped, like elderly topiary, still formed the main feature of his face. They rounded the headland. And here the bay curved into a ruffled blue-green lagoon, where the earthquake and ensuing tsunami had hollowed out a basin of deep water, before thundering inland, flinging tons of salt sea and torrents of sludge into the jungle, snapping the great trees in two, obliterating the
trails, polluting the rich earth. The pilot measured the slope of damp sand beside the lagoon, pushed the chopper’s nose downwards, paused, then dropped.

‘Here!’

The tidemark looked like a giant bite chomped out of the green. Inside the curve of teeth, the vegetation lay blackened, tainted and destroyed. The broken mass stank of putrefaction, the sweet, dead smell of a recently dried-up lake. Higher up, where the rain forest still dressed the slopes, the electric green shimmered, undisturbed.

As he climbed out of the helicopter, Rufus Webster, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, the man who had made his name with his massive two-volume monograph on the islands and their stone-age inhabitants, realised that he was standing on Memorial Beach, in more or less exactly the same spot, where the two evangelical American missionaries, the first white men to set foot upon the island, had been savagely murdered in 1967. The islanders, resisting Christ’s gospel hammer and tongs, coated the bodies in flints. And so the two men, martyrs of the New Testament Church of Jesus Christ our Lord and King, had fallen, unresisting, in the blood-soaked sand, and then, bowled over and over by the tender surf, had been dragged by their killers to the edge of this very forest where they were ritually disembowelled. The islanders ate the hearts and livers of their would-be saviours raw, warm and engorged with blood. Thus, their spirits were honoured and released into the embrace of our common mother, the earth.

The islanders always honoured their dead, friends and enemies alike.

Various genocidal missions against the savage inhabitants of the paradise isle had, of course, been mooted. But finally, after months of negotiation, and lengthy nervous misunderstandings, the islanders agreed to receive one white man, an anthropologist, who would be their mediator with modernity, their interpreter over against this encroaching alien world, which menaced them with technology and disease.

***

Rufus shook his tutor’s hand as he departed from the chilly stone streets and comfortable, carpeted rooms of his college.

‘If you survive this little adventure you’ll be set you up for life. Those islanders will make your scholarly fortune. And to him that already hath, more shall be given; law of the land, my boy. Good things will all be showered upon you – book contracts, conference invitations, more funding, fellowships, prestige. You’ll be given a chair before you’re forty. Don’t forget to write as soon as you can.’ His tutor lit a cigarette. ‘Take lots of Coca Cola. Best thing for runny bowels.’

And so, every three months, the visiting plane dropped off a couple of Coke crates with his renewal of supplies. At first it had been a huge relief to see white men wearing clothes, to talk English rather than pointing at plants and learning whether they were edible, to read the newspapers, albeit months out of date, to stock up on soap and lavatory paper, and ransack the post for news of home. But at the end of three years Rufus realised that he could no longer imagine a world without geckos, phosphorescent fish, flights of aquamarine parrots, and the
clicking hum of Lopan’s eldest wife calling him to eat. The tribe’s curiosity concerning his
equipment never included the desire either to use or possess cameras, pencils and books. Their
language had never been written down. Rufus devised a phonetic system and began to record
their days in Eden.

The islanders’ language contained fewer than a thousand words, but many of these
described the sea and the weather in intricate detail. The suffix ‘Lo’, added to any word,
connected that noun to the earth, which rested at the centre of all their metaphysical systems.
The same word described the earth, as a global phenomenon, and the island itself. Lopan, he
discovered, means chosen one of the earth, a name charged with power and happiness. And
those two words, power and joy, were not only the same, but interchangeable. His people used
the present tense at all times, and had a traditional formula for recounting the past. ‘This is my
memory.’ The nature of individual memories, he noticed, was frequently disputed in ferocious
quarrels. Memory appeared to be linked to ownership and possession. Did they have any
common memories? ‘Yes,’ said Lopan, glaring at him, ‘it is the law.’

He was not admitted to the secret language of the elders in which the law of the tribe
was laid down. But he could hear how this differed from their everyday voices. They expressed
their law as a chant, a rhythm that repeated again and again. Sometimes he captured odd words.
The implications were beyond his comprehension, yet he knew this: their law was a hymn to
the ocean and the earth, a cradle song that every child born on the island recognised, without
understanding.

The islanders faced death daily in their long boats, fearlessly cresting the great waves
beyond the reefs, or scudding silent through the forests, their spears raised. They knew every
corner of their land, every current in their waters, and they lived for the hunt. Rufus never joined
in the hunt, instead he mapped their island carefully, naming each place with their words. Here
is the cave flooded with sea water when the ocean rises, this is the tree that touches sky, here is
our drinking pool filled by our mother the earth. We call this ‘earth water’ for its sweet taste. This
is our island, which the earth gives to us alone. And we defend our land against all enemies.

Rufus became something of a hero in the British press when he saved the occupants
of a passing yacht from being slaughtered, long before they ever reached the beach. What did
they see? One young white man in a grimy T-shirt, waving a battered straw hat, flinging himself
into the sea, and shrieking, ‘Go back! Go back!’ Behind him on the beach stood a group of
impassive warriors, naked, armed, and unashamed. Was this ragged Crusoe figure in need of
rescue? ‘Go back! They are waiting to kill you!’ The incident ended to everybody’s satisfaction.
Rufus regained the shore, immensely relieved, and acclaimed by his adopted tribe for terrifying
the invaders; the yacht sailed away, having received confirmation from the international maritime
agency that the island, notionally British, although the French disputed this, was indeed off limits,
and that the natives were dangerous. The islanders remained intolerant and unyielding. They
would accept one white man, everyone else who dares to set foot upon our land, dies.

***
He possessed a single photograph of his ex-girlfriend, a fellow-student whom he had adored. There she was, dancing in the spray from a sprinkler on the college lawn. The sun behind her transformed the water drops into rainbows, so that she resembled an angel descending into a theatre of green. Lopan gazed at this image, sheathed in plastic, affixed to the wall of the anthropologist’s hut, until, one day, he declared,

‘This is mine, ‘and took the photograph away.

A long period of unpleasant tension followed as Rufus tried to negotiate the return of his treasured image. Then a wonderful idea came to him in the middle of the night: a group portrait of all Lopan’s wives and a swap - my woman for yours. In the early days on the island he had avoided using his cameras in case they were interpreted as weapons. Now only one still worked and he relied on drawings of the islanders, their homes, tools and implements. No one minded his simple lines and shading. Indeed, the response, and the moment of recognition, so far as he could read it, had always been positive.

‘My boat!’
‘My hut!’
‘Lopan and your fire sticks!’

The photographic session resulted in a blurred and stony-faced Polaroid of three nearly naked women, resentful and anxious, glowering at the lens. But Lopan was overjoyed. A formal exchange of portraits occurred. Rufus retrieved his ex-girlfriend, now slightly gritty and torn. Lopan requested individual portraits of everyone in his village. Rufus waited three months for a more robust Polaroid camera and endless rolls of film. Every hut developed a photo-wall of family portraits.

The tribe understood two visual codes: water images, which were reflections in rivers, puddles, lakes, or the shadows of their boats on calm seas, and graven images, which were the carvings they made, usually of animals or fish. Oddly enough the photographs came to be known as graven images, because they were not a gift from the earth, unbidden, unsought, but emerged from one of Rufus’ tools. And the rapidity with which they poured out of the Polaroid suggested that he spent hours creating them in his hut beforehand.

Then one of Lopan’s granddaughters, a boisterous child called Myra, which means silverfish, suddenly died. She had eaten one of the forbidden plants. Her mother was much to blame and a night of wailing ensued. The child’s heart and liver could not be eaten; her spirit remained dishonoured.

Lopan shredded the photograph of Myra, which showed her smiling, balanced on her brother’s back.

‘She is dead. The graven image is destroyed.’ He frowned at Rufus, who felt culpable.

Barring accidents, the islanders lived on into their fifties and sixties. Their kinship system was strange, but suggestive. Each man could choose his father and brother, the words were again interchangeable, regardless of the accident of birth, but once the choice was made there was no going back. Rufus estimated the island’s population at around 800, but unknown villages appeared like revelations in the forest from time to time. The elders settled all disputes. The women were acknowledged as savage hunters and expert fishermen. They hunted alongside
the men and were never confined to camp, but they could not choose their own kin; they waited to be chosen. If a woman was not chosen by a man, she could choose another woman. You are my mother and my sister. And then they would live together in their own hut. The men could and did choose one another as they liked and several young men were clearly stone-age versions of David and Jonathan. But a man was under a tribal obligation to choose at least one wife and produce children. Divorce or separation was unthinkable.

Rufus noted the existence of these queer couples in his research log, and brooded on the fact that white western society always assumed that all stone-age tribes were remorselessly heterosexual. The unusual kinship structure forbade incest and ensured the widest possible spread of genes, and did seem to be based on the affection that people growing up together always have for one another. But the masculine liberty of choice remained the deciding factor.

‘Can the women refuse?’
Lopan’s expression froze into a mask of shock. Rufus hastily explained.
‘On my island the women can say no. Or some of them can.’
Lopan stood transfixed in horror at this breach in the fabric of an orderly culture, and also common sanity.
‘Our women obey,’ he declared grimly, and strode off into the forest.

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The crucial moment of heartfelt acceptance into the tribe came for Rufus during a crisis. Lopan’s youngest wife Sinta, which means huntress, gorged herself on shellfish, one of which must have been diseased, for the girl began vomiting and spent the day squatting in the pit, with a torrent of diarrhoea smearing her ample arse. The wounded huntress groaned piteously; and because she was heavily pregnant her impending loss provoked a wave of hysteria in the huts. Rufus had followed the paramedics’ course, which was obligatory for all anthropologists proposing to spend research time far from hospitals. He took notes, realising that his life depended on it. Now, another life did. He diagnosed gastritis and/or food poisoning, and produced the Coca Cola bottles. Coca Cola is indeed a form of chemotherapy; the islanders sniffed his bowel medicine and pronounced it disgusting. He tipped it down Sinta’s throat, knowing that, if it didn’t work and the girl died, Lopan would kill him. Two bottles of Coke did the trick. Sinta’s temperature dropped, the vomiting ceased and within three days she was making new arrows and mending her nets.

Lopan roused the anthropologist from his afternoon nap.
‘I tell you one thing,’ said the elder of the village, his eyes cloudy with tears. ‘You are my brother and my son.’

Rufus embraced the man who - slowly, slowly, slowly - had become his friend. ‘You are my brother and my father,’ he croaked.

The two empty Coke bottles were attached to the wall of the hut beside Sinta’s photograph, and Rufus, now famous as a great healer, found himself welcome at every fireside. He noticed that Lopan had been preparing to destroy Sinta’s portrait, had she died. Grief involved
the recognition that all flesh is grass, and that the days of man are numbered as the flowers of the field, and the wind passeth over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more.

***

Had his people been swept away with Biblical force? As Rufus gazed upon the island, almost forty years after he had first set foot upon the shore, this lost past, remembered with trepidation and affection, seemed utterly destroyed. The tsunami had altered the coastline, blundered into the forest, liquidated all compass points, and the small signs by which he knew the way. Where was the path from the village to the beach, or the point beneath the coconuts where the boats lay safe from the storm tides? Where were the deep lagoons, half sweet earth-water, half salt, and the coral reefs, laden with tiny, darting, gleaming shoals? Where were the jellyfish floating in lines, their long tendrils straying in the deep? The island was still there, but now unknown, transformed, remade. Should he venture, uninvited, into the seething green, and begin his tragic search?

The helicopter pilot saw the advancing savages long before Rufus did. Silently they appeared in a mass on the edge of the simmering forest, and stood, spears raised, staring. 'My God,' gasped the pilot. He fled back to the helicopter and locked himself in, goggles lowered, ready to rise into cloudless safety. But Rufus plunged through the muddy piles of broken vegetation, stumbling, shouting wildly, beckoning to the advancing warriors. ‘Where is my father and my brother? Where are my huts? Where are my people?’ He found himself embraced by joy. Some of the boys had filled out since his last visit two years before. Karok, which means swift bird, now reached past his shoulder. Lok, which means deep water, swung on his beard, chattering wild songs. Some hurtled back into the forest, shouting for Lopan. ‘The red one is returned. His island is spared. He is come home!’

The new village was under construction on the higher slopes. So far as Rufus could judge all their equipment, even the stainless steel cooking pots he had presented to Lopan’s wives, and Sinta’s magical Coca Cola bottles, and the photographs, which he renewed every time he came, decorated the fresh green walls of woven palms. He began to count the people of his clamouring village, jubilant. Everybody talked at once. Lopan was hunting in the jungle and yes; the little wild pigs were plentiful as ever. The far side of the island seemed less damaged. The earth had already begun her great work of restoration. And no, no one had been lost when the great wave came. The earth had sent her warning, that they might all be spared.

When Lopan pounded into the clearing the rejoicing began anew, but Rufus gazed upon his brother, his father, his teacher and his friend in passionate silence, the tears flooding his cheeks. ‘The big red man is safe,’ said Lopan with deep satisfaction. ‘And your island? Are your people safe?’

‘Yes. The tsunami didn’t get as far as England.’

In a rare moment of revelation, Lopan disclosed one of the tribal secrets, hidden in the
language of the law. The ancients had left a warning. When the sea withdraws and the reef is uncovered and the birds are seen flying inland, take all your people and your weapons and follow the flight of the birds to the highest point, for the ocean will return in anger and mount the sand carrying all before her, yet according to the law, so shall you be saved, until the earth restores her colours and peace returns to your people. No one living had ever seen this, but the warning existed in their common memory and the poetry of their chant.

‘And your message arrives on the beach. My memory is this: some disagree.’ Lopan glared at the villagers pressed around them, pulling at Rufus’ clothes. ‘But I know you. I see your meanings. Your graven image comes before you. Look!’

And he led Rufus towards the makeshift bender that was destined, eventually, to be his hut. In front of the half-constructed shelter stood a near life-size statue of the Virgin Mary, her arms outstretched. The baby Jesus, once cradled in her embrace, had disconnected himself and floated off, so that the lost bolts through her hands now resembled an excessive outburst of stigmata. The statue, made of wood and leaning towards all comers, had clearly been the figurehead on some vanished boat. The paint was waterlogged, cracked and peeling, but her joyful smile and one of her huge inset eyes were still indelible and undefeated. Rufus caught the ferocity of the other eye, partially scraped away, giving the Madonna a curious menacing squint, as if she were taking aim. Her rainbow halo still retained at least five of its colours. Rufus confronted this graven image in surprise. How far had she swum to reach them?

And then he saw the resemblance, this Polynesian Madonna with her outstretched arms did indeed recall the long lost photograph of his ex-girlfriend, now his wife of nearly thirty years, and seeing this sign of the returning image, Lopan had looked for his coming, and had not been disappointed. The old warrior slung a familiar arm around the Madonna and delivered his masterstroke.

‘She comes to us out of the sea, as you do. And now she is one of us. As you are.’

Rufus held out his arms both to the graven image and the man he loved; then saw, with terrible clarity, the sinister glimmer in their eyes, which were on the same level, a little beneath his own. He hesitated. The Madonna was neither safe nor perpetually merciful. Her dangerous love had spared them, this time, this time.

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FOR PEGGY WHO STOOD FOR ME

When her ‘remains’ are carried
To the chapel this Sunday,
She will be the first to pay
A visit to me here,
Sitting upright as at Mass
So that I don’t lose sight of her
Alone among the crowd
At the heel of the court.

Her eyes without a word
Smiling out loud
As they lock around both of us
Their gates of horn.
ROSE INHABITED BY A BEE

Candlemas. The town neither lighted nor watched. Daylight increasing by three minutes, except for her 
A blue less bright, a less intense pink.

With one long stroke, the young man 
With upturned knife, his nota bene hand 
In its sleeve, cuff or glove, has channelled 
Between two pages so that her red and deep lavender 
Stylized cloud will soon be replaced.

For now she remains a letter halved 
Between rose and radiance, a pseudo-flower 
With angel-supporters in gold gowns 
White-shading her unspoken outline:

The colours abnormally darkened just-off 
Straight, leaves filling her spine-fretted space 
With dampened green dots and grey button loops 
That render her, more or less, alone.
A CIRCLE OF CIRCLES

Splendour, mirth and good cheer,
The wish puts them on his arm.
They build themselves out into the blue,
Skated-over, carefree, bright-
Dark arousing blue,
Colour of distances impinging.

Nothing happens in the mirrors
Of the scribbled-open dream,
But brilliant births take place
In the clan to which the night-
Dream belongs.

The just-lived moment is its own
Peculiar minus for one
Who has finally become worldless,
Even to the repose of wishes,
Their incoming forwards, their bygone above.
Gerry Musgrove was already in trouble with my father because he’d borrowed a sleeping bag when he fell out with his parents and he never gave it back. He slept in his car for a week.

He was one of my brother’s friends. And it wasn’t as though I really liked him. But he dared me. We were sitting in the Odeon in Bury on a Saturday night. The Odeon where I’d worked as an usherette during my final school holiday; where the heating was turned up at the interval to encourage the sales of ice cream; where I’d learned that there were two prices for the ice creams – one for when the manager was around and one for when he wasn’t. The permanent usherettes pocketed the difference. They’d pour the coins onto a table and slide the difference into their pockets. It was like the seaside slot machine where pennies drip from one rotating shelf to another and slip down a chute.

There was a gang of us in the cinema. Gerry was sitting next to me. He was broad shouldered and his skin was made paler by the blue-blackness of his thick hair. He started by putting his arm round my shoulder. With his other hand he took my hand and placed it on his thigh. He didn’t turn his head, but looked resolutely at the screen where Paul Newman was swindling Robert Shaw in a double bluff poker game on a swaying train. He did look at me once, and smiled, when Newman and Redford wiped away their fake blood as they sat up on the floral carpet of a Chicago drugstore.

The credits began to climb the screen. Gerry leaned over and caught my mouth with his. The gentle pressing of his lips gradually increased in pressure. He pulled away.

“I dare you to come to Manchester with me. Stay overnight in a posh hotel.”

Mum was in hospital again. It was the middle of the university summer holidays. At home each room was spun thickly with webs of claustrophobia.

“I bet you’re too chicken,” said Gerry.

“I bet you I’m not. You’re on.”

Gerry picked me up the following Saturday. I’d packed my cream vanity case with what I thought I might need. Dad was cleaning the brasses in the breakfast room. The horse brasses,
candlesticks, teapot and the miniature bedpan were lined up on the table waiting for their coat of Brasso.

“You look all dolled up. Where are you off to?”
“Manchester.”
“Who with?”
“Gerry Musgrove.” Dad raised his eyes to the ceiling. The week before Dad had set an alarm clock off outside the door of the front room when he thought Gerry had outstayed his welcome.

“Where in Manchester?”
“We’re going for a meal.”
“You can have a meal in Bury!”
“I know.”
“Don’t you think you should put some more clothes on?”
“I’m going.” I left the room.
“Don’t be late,” he called after me.
I slammed the back door.

Gerry’s Datsun smelt of earth and peppermint.
“All right?” he asked as I moved a pillow from my feet onto the back seat.
“All right,” I replied.
Gerry was partly responsible for embezzling the sports fund at Bury Technical College – money used for expenses when teams played away. He’d been found out and had paid back his share.

“I’ll pay for everything,” he said, with bravado.
“No you won’t.”
He drove at speed between one set of traffic lights and the next, along the road which leads from a small town to a large city – Prestwich, Heaton Park, Cheatham Hill, and finally Piccadilly Gardens. We parked up and Gerry held the door open for me.

“Madam!”
“I thank you, Sir.”
He took my hand as we walked up the steps of The Quest Hotel. The reception desk was cushioned with a bolster of red leatherette. There were rows of lights hanging from the ceiling; the light bulbs were hidden amongst long strips of translucent dripping purple plastic.

“Do you have a booking at all, Sir?” asked the receptionist.
“Yes,” said Gerry. “In the name of Musgrove.”
“Oh yes. You’re in Room 37. If you could sign here, please Mr Musgrove.”
Gerry shot me a mischievous look before he signed.
“Would you like any help with your luggage?”
“No thanks,” said Gerry, grabbing my vanity case.
“This is your key. If you could please leave it here at reception when you’re not actually in
the hotel.”
We called the lift.
“Does he think I’ve not stayed in a hotel before?” said Gerry, indignantly.
“I haven’t,” I said.
Our room was three floors up. The window looked out onto a blank brick wall. I stroked
the beige polyester curtains. Gerry sat on the edge of the bed then fell back and bounced.
“I think it’s one of those orthopaedic mattresses,” he said, as I inspected the bathroom.
“There’s a nice shower cap in here for you.”
“I don’t bother with those.”
“I didn’t think you would.”
In the bedroom I busied myself with the chest of drawers.
“Hair dryer. Gideon’s Bible. Tissues.”
“Come over here,” said Gerry.
“I’m hungry. Let’s go for something to eat.”
He tried to grab my hand and pull me to him. I slipped his grip.
“OK. Have it your own way.”
We found the hotel restaurant and slid into a green banquette.
“What do you fancy?” said Gerry, handing me the menu. “Apart from me, of course.”
“Something meaty.”
“That’ll be me then!”
“Give over, Gerry.”
“I’m having steak,” he said.
“Me too.”
“How do you like yours?”
“Medium rare.”
“I’m a well done kind of guy.”
“Funny, I can’t see your sun tan.”
“Yeah – funny,” said Gerry with a sneer.
The waiter poured a little of our chosen wine into Gerry’s glass. Mateus Rosé.
“Yes, that’s fine,” he said.
“Why didn’t he pour some into my glass?” I asked, after the waiter had gone.
“Because I’m the expert.”
“As if.”
As I cut into my bloodied sirloin I could feel the weight of our room above, waiting for us
to finish. Dread crept into me like a virus from a sneezing child. Our banter abated. We ate desert
in silence.

“Shall we go up?” asked Gerry, unceremoniously. I nodded.

When I pulled the curtains together in our room they didn’t quite close. The acid yellow of the street lights seeped around the edges.

We undressed and pulled back the bedclothes. Gerry touched me as though I were a car engine – checking in with the different components and rotating his attention until I was breathless. When my moans accelerated he came quickly. His body went limp on top of mine and he fell asleep. I rolled him onto his back and he sighed deeply. For a while I lay listening to the drone of traffic in the street, and the rain fingerling the window.

When I woke Gerry was still snoring gently. I crept into the bathroom and dressed, picked up my shoes and gathered my jewellery from the bedside table. The door clicked as I closed it.

Outside there was still a lick of rain on the pavement, but the air was clear and the sky had lifted to blue. I walked through the Sunday city – around the circularity of Manchester Central Library, and past the enticing clothes shops of King Street. At Victoria Railway Station I bought a one-way ticket to Bury.

Bowker Vale, Heaton Park, Bessies o’ th’ Barn. As the train stopped at familiar stations I remembered journeys home from Manchester on Saturday nights when I was still at school. After dancing for hours to Deep Purple and Marvin Gaye in murky nightclubs my friends and I would pile into the carriages of the last the train home. Someone would smash the light bulbs, then all the boys changed seats so they were sat next to a girl – any girl. The point was to have someone to kiss for the length of the journey – it didn’t matter if you’d never seen her before.

From Bury I took the bus to Walmersley and walked the length of Mosley Avenue. Our semi-detached house stood at the end. ‘South’ and ‘View’ were carved into the columns on either side of the front gate. Mum’s carefully tended roses were blooming cerise and magenta in the four symmetrical beds by the side of the house. There was a row of upturned grapefruit skins waiting to catch slugs.

I opened the back door. Dad was standing by the window in the morning room with his arms folded. He looked angry and hurt. We didn’t exchange a word. I went upstairs to my room.
Magic, making and loss

Christina Dunhill

for Michael Mackmin

1
I had the idea of writing a poem based on The Egyptian Book of the Dead.

The Book of the Dead is an elaborate spell. Those who created it believed that its words would make something happen - that something being life after death. In a detailed series of prayers, its words plead the deceased’s integrity to the powers of good in the after-world, and defend it against the powers of evil. These words are thought to act.

The organ who pleads is the heart – ‘mother of being in me, heart’. In this way by the agency of the words she speaks, the whole person has a chance of re-constituting from a part.

Writers work in this way too, trusting a whole work will develop and assemble itself from a fragment, a line of poetry, a paragraph or a page of prose. It has to start somewhere. There may be a plan for the whole or there may not but in either case, the reality of the particular eventual composition has to grow somehow from a piece of the thing itself.

The Book spells out the precise words that must be addressed by the heart to different gods in order to win entry to that posthumous kingdom. One of the strongest themes in this mythology is the terror of disintegration.

God of many names, Lion-god,  
I understand with my heart, I have mastered her.  
Don’t let my heart be carried away.  
God of bandages, god of the cloth  
don’t let me wake up in pieces.
Among the fiends who can sabotage the heart’s words is the Crocodile, who may eat them. The Book envisions four crocodiles of the four directions, north, south, east and west. Particular words must be spoken to each crocodile in turn.

Get back O you Crocodile of the West.  
Detestation of you is in my belly…  
I have absorbed the power of Osiris.

Prince Osiris was killed by his enemies and cut into pieces, which were scattered. He was as unmade as could be. His sister, Isis, collected the pieces and gathered them together. The re-constituted Osiris could not be brought to life, but went on to rule the Kingdom of the Dead. This kingdom became available to anyone who knew the spells to get in.

I had the idea of writing a poem based on The Egyptian Book of the Dead. It became a spell.

2
My poem, *The Crocodile God*, was published in *The Rialto, No 72, Spring/Summer 2011*. It is in two voices, that of a young woman and that of a crocodile chorus, a kind of gang of four based on the four directions of The Book’s crocodiles. This gang speak for the force that animates them as a god of destruction – all-powerful and ineffable, as we think of God.

A young woman falls in love with a crocodile. It’s a ridiculous idea, but bear with me. The crocodile is a powerful androgynous symbol, combining the dangerous aspects of both male and female. My crocodile is imagined male because I have a female protagonist. She loves him with the thrill of flirting with danger; she loves him with the squirming pleasure that the big eaters like crocodiles and wolves induce in children. She loves him because of his inadequacies (as women often love men) and because as she enters young-womanhood, she is bored by the idea of saving herself, sexually or otherwise.

My Crocodile is the Peter Pan clock-(time)-swallower and the destroyer of expression and form. He is the real creature, a hundred million years old, a link to the dinosaurs. Why would you love a crocodile? Because it’s beaten change. Because it’s invulnerable.

*Water won’t penetrate his skin and light can’t sear his eyes. Up, down, sideways go his lids. He is a swimming, walking safe, a seeing machine. Night becomes the movie set his yellow eyes floodlight.*
And the Crocodile loves her because he wants her words. He wants to be articulate.

Look at you, darling!
And look at him, weeping!

His tongue, his huge thick tongue,
is a prisoner on deck.

Pity the poor Croc
pitching and tottering

left behind on the shelf of time
lowing like a cow, and faithful

faithful to one thought:
he wants your hot heart.

He sits like a dog
with his eye on your heart

and on the words inside it.
He has an appetite for words.

You lodge a library.
He wants it.

3.
The young woman taunts the crocodile. He is both the real croc she sees and the unseen principle of destruction. He is what is waiting. His henchmen crocs are his chorus and his priests. They speak in italic while her voice is in roman.

There is him and not yet him.
What is outside him is outside him only
insofar as it is not yet inside him –
that is until he eats.
But she is tantalised. She wants to dice with death, to get close enough to look at it:

What has become, I ventured,  
of those handsome springbok  
those skittery wildebeest?  
I wanted to look in his parlour  
where everything goes when it dies.

Her heart counsels caution but her passion overrules it:

I knew his face, the prince of swallowers,  
and when I saw him, air slipped into me  
a wafer of wind, a film of air,  
a patch of nothing under my heart.  
It was my ticket.

For the nuptial, the poem imports a flavour of the Mississippi Delta to the Nile. The girl challenges her heart to keep writing.

I took a room at the river motel.  
Give me room service, I said,  
put me through to my heart.  
It’s time, I said, don’t leave me alone.  
Let’s write inside his belly.

Come on girly  
come and get wed.  
We’ll show you a wedding bed  
down the plughole  
in the bag  
down the rolling river

sing the scornful crocodile chorus.

The living death nuptial was something I wrote early on and always imagined would be the finale. As foreshadowed, it is a movie scene lit by the eyes of the four crocodiles.
Yellow eyes lit me. I lay belly down.  
The noise was deafening.  

Eight eyes, watching, slowly slid across themselves a sideways lid  
then my heart, my postbox red heart, she jumped out and left me.  

I saw her belt across the sands before my eye turned red.  

I saw their great heads chewing, tearing, tossing squares of flesh into a pile  
like handkerchiefs, that they could keep.  
Then I heard them start to weep.  

I saw my chest on the floor like an empty basket  
and if I'd had words but I had no words  

and all the alarms in the river motel – all the alarms were ringing.  

But in the end I saved her. I let her off with a sentence of ten years darkness before her heart comes back for her. It brings pain with it, but it drowns out the crocodile chorus singing the praises of the ancient prayer swallower with her own words. It stitches the pieces of rag that she has become back together. She has back herself, her speech and her writing. Finally she gets back her eyes.  

4.  
In writing we build things up from bits in the way the Ancient Egyptians saw their prayer words as rebuilding their bodies after death. We are hoping to bring them to life. We are hoping they bring us life.
Making a poem by a combination of design and chance, we believe in the magic of the writing itself, in the writing that comes from writing, that it will grow and become something we could not pre-determine. The end is the surprise we have to write for.

But as writers we know too that events can jump off the page into the world about us. For example, writing about someone we haven’t seen for a decade can lead to them getting in touch, or writing about an idea can bring about an enactment of that idea. Just the other day, a student said to me, ‘I started writing about someone disappearing and then it happened’.

What happened to me writing this poem was that I lost it. I lost the first folder of everything I had. I lost the research. I lost parts of an early version in three voices. I lost computer files. As I worked on the paper edits of sections of the current version, sometimes these went astray too. The poem saved its protagonist and itself in the end but much of the time I was trying to assemble it, it ate itself or got eaten.

Christina Dunhill
October 2012
Net Curtain

The net curtain might have the answer, after all she is a perforated eyelid, a bridal veil between sundered worlds.

The breeze draws her out, sucking her through the open sash window, the shattered bubble-gum after the burst.

The spring wind expels her back into the room with a laboured sigh, the smoker’s dilated exhalation between grateful lugs.

He is toying with her, flirting with her madly. He sweeps her again off her feet. The indecision is becoming clockwork now.
House Share

Your lethargic Labrador has nothing to impart. She has licked every inch of this small apartment, brailed it with her tongue, re-read it a thousand times. This place is nothing but a dog-eared novel, laced in her saliva. She raises a solitary eyebrow at my entrance, pricks up the envelope flap of an ear to the noises that escort me like my own faithful hounds. Trotting to my side, we stare into the chasm of the fridge and abandon all hope. I slump on the settee, she circles her cushion like a vulture, collapses into a coil of herself.

How long have we been sleeping? She laps up the chair leg, her paw, her crotch, my wrist and drifts back into her coma. Even my stabs at conversation bore her. She only really comes to life for that hour when we chance the outside, where I spellbind her with a tennis ball that spins like a planet in orbit, unravelling the silk of her spit. Mind, I swear she is as grateful as I am to return to this box room, the jaundiced settee, the makeshift Coke crate desk, where we kill time, shuteye, waiting for your key to turn.
The Mask

*I have put on a grotesque mask to write these lines (Hugo Williams)*

I have been waking to the melted candle of a realising face, 
the assiduous ceremony of attempting to erase it. 
I scrub it with a nail brush, 
the whitewash of medicated soap, 
still the water runs clear 
to reveal an ungrateful complexion.

The mornings are curtains drawn to an overlap. There I repair myself in a bearable light, 
patching over the flaws with concubine-white paint. 
I clump down the stairs, knocking the frames of a mother’s gallery, 
a childhood in reverse, 
the spotless skin, the original reward for not noticing.
It was the room in which they always met, and for good reasons. For one, the only window that opened looked out over the playing fields, and more importantly, the entrance to the girl’s college opposite. The five of them could survey the plains, and they could be cool about it, their words on their studies while their eyes widened and pinked at the sight of the girls. Secondly, it was in the corner of the dormitory and so was isolated from most interference from prefecture and busy-bodies of all variety. All bells were muted by distance and timekeeping rendered a weakness-of sorts. It was Nineteen thirty-four, and that room was their headquarters, their settlement in the closing wounds of the English gentry, the clouds of the first Great War cleared around them now, revealing the dense blue sky and long green hills of a new age.

It was a room where they could smoke their first pipe, argue over the merits of Yeats and coldly discuss the praetorian allure of Mosley’s rabble-rousing. This was a room – an institution, in fact – in which only books were tangible. A portrait of the peacockishly uniformed King George V hung off-centre on the wall, a yellowed coat of arms was carved into the cornices and the lead-lattice of the narrow windows gave a caged light to the warmth of the place.

They each had their spot, rarely shuffled. Digger, whose room it was, sat in the captain’s chair, his feet often up on the desk, slightly obscured by the ragged columns of text books, his round face peeking from behind them whenever he had a comment to make. Pip and Tuffer sat at the window, side-on in order to enjoy the reverie as well as the legs of the girls in hockey/netball/rounders gear across the fields. Milton sat in the armchair by the sink. From there he could extinguish cigarettes under the tap and keep one eye on whichever book he had open on his lap. Milton was careful with his words, compensating at some effort for his orange hair, bandy legs and roman nose.

Preece, somehow, always acquired the bed. He was good-looking enough to count it as his right, as throughout life he would find himself in a position that inspired envy. He liked to lie, one arm behind his head, the other holding a cigarette like a conductor’s baton, quoting. This was how he was remembered, anyway, all those years after. During those years after, when all five had lost touch and the world had placed its grimy hands in each of their pockets, the boys would
remember every day of their college life a sunny one, in that room, the only window that opened open, overlooking a hockey practice, Digger with one-liners from his bunker of books, Milton missing half of every conversation and reading every-other line of the book in his lap; Preece quoting long sequences of Benet or Auden or Day Lewis or whomever was de rigueur at the time. The dust danced in the soft sunlight, birds quoted their own verse, the perfect accompaniment to the hockey practice.

They all remembered these days as identical facsimiles of the truth, each friend a perfectly framed picture. In difficult hours, (and each had more than their fair share), it was nice to think back to the times when every day the sun shone and poetry was in the air, and girls wore hockey skirts and tripped across the short grass.

For example,

The morning of an exam, first year, most probably, as it seems the pressure is off, although pressure and stress and nervousness were never in the memory for these scenes, you see, here the war is still four or five years away, Hitler is just another showman in the foreign affairs arena, or at least that is the opinion of Tuffer, whose father plans to see him go into government, into a job where senility will not necessarily force one into retirement, and the wage, considerable, is smaller than the perks, but, of course, as they all do, he fights, and, as they all do, he survives, for better or for worse, forever stamped with the mud and the clawing that was every step further to Berlin, but Tuffer, who did enter government, elected on a campaign that drew on the heroics of his war spent largely in the GHQ of London and then France, never closer than seventy miles to a cocked rifle, was less marked than Pip or Preece, but considerably more so than Milton, whose bad eyesight and searing intellect afforded him a role in intelligence hunched over maps and statistics and reports where he would make the impossible challenges of the few seem more possible, because for him the war was a game, a puzzle, and it had characters, heroes and villains, and the missions he helped to devise, often tellingly elaborate, were to him plots, improbable as Shakespeare, and like Joyce, the artistry was in the execution, and the execution was governed by the detail of the plotting, drawn from hours of study and trial and error, but, as Milton knew only too well, drawn also from literature and the minds of those geniuses he read on those sunny days overlooking the girl’s playing field, a view that Digger could have never agreed with, for although Digger did see the war as man’s last attempt at making a meaning for life, he could not be detached from it like Milton, such as Digger was, leading his men away at Dunkirk and then back again at Sword, and then on again further to the liberation of Holland where he was shot in the hip, the result of which was a life-long limp and an addiction to morphine that lasted many years after the war, but not as long as the memories of the death he saw, and even worse some nights, the tears of children as houses burned, children like they had been, children who would not ever know life without that painful starting point, everything coloured by it, as he and Tuffer, Pip, Milton and Preece were coloured by their privilege and the sunny days and the hockey games, but would now be coloured by their own
war, their own narrative and their own tragedies, none more tragic perhaps, at least, in the eyes of these old romantic lovers of literature, than Pip, who returned from defending Britain’s shores in the sky to find his fiancé had died beneath a collapsed roof while, of all things, delivering a package for a friend who was infirm, a tragedy of circumstance, a story of crushing sadness, the telling of which by Pip would shame Preece into abandoning his tall tales of heroics in North Africa, like the time he lead his men through flames to capture a whole Panza division and was rewarded with dinner at Monty’s table, or the time he turned the Arabs at Tobruk, or another time or another, but instead, rather than admitting to falsities, or ‘embellishments’, as Preece described them to himself in his own mind, he adopted the persona of the strong, silent modest warrior who preferred not to talk of the war, but to selflessly honour Pip’s fallen, tragic fiancé as the true face of heroism, the women at home, and so was just as lauded and respected, if not more so, than if he had carried on with his wild stories.

But here, on this day of example, Pip is keen at the window, Tuffer, still to shed his puppy fat, is slumped in the frame with his nose in a book. In fact, Pip is the only one without a book. This morning’s test, requesting a general insight into the history of England’s verse, is in an hour or so, perhaps sooner; it appears not to be important.

Each of the boys complimented the other when it came to English literature, all insufferably bright; all, bar Milton, far brighter in that college than they would ever be again. Pip knew his novels, his Trollope and his Austen, and he had a grasp of Sterne that a college lecturer would have been proud of. Tuffer had an endearing belief that all Western art ended with the death of Chaucer, and so any knowledge he had of anything to come after that was a begrudging one. He was often challenged on this, and he defended himself with verve, and at length, and in Middle English. Milton, in a tip of the hat to predestination, could recite such substantial chunks of *Paradise Lost* at will that he could turn genius to tedium like milk to cheese. Digger could condense all thirty-three of Shakespeare’s plays to one line plot synopses, and often did so as a party trick, but could just as easily write essays on each. Preece was interested in the future of the written word. He looked to the modern masters; he often said that when reading T.S. Eliot, he could taste him at the back of his throat, and the others boys would grimace.

So, they could, each of them, cover most bases when it came to tests and papers. And here, an overview exam, they could drift in and out, waving at each other as they sailed by. Milton makes a comment about Edmund Spenser. Preece takes a deep drag on his cigarette and blows smoke rings into the air. ‘In English we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploiring its absence,’ he says, and takes another drag. Digger flicks an elastic band toward Milton but it misses and clacks into the wall at the side of his head. Milton does not stir. ‘But Spenser, Preece, is part of some tradition, whether Thomas Stearns Eliot says so or not. It’s not my fault he can’t place him,’ says Milton after a thought. Preece replies with more Eliot babble.
‘Here we go!’ Pip sounds the bugle for the girls running out to hockey practice. Tuffer sits up and closes his book, marking the page before he does so. Milton jumps to his feet and rests awkwardly on Tuffer’s shoulder; Digger knocks several books to the floor as he scrambles to the window. Preece is more relaxed having lost his virginity on a camping trip with his family when he was fifteen to a girl that smelled of ice cream. At least, he was under the impression he had. He was not to find out until he was twenty that what they had done by the tree stump in the woods, although pleasant, was not sex, and did not count. It explained why Preece, the only really handsome young man of the group, was the only one underwhelmed by the presence of girls on the hockey field, or at least, that was the impression he liked to give.

From the field, the four boys in the window resemble medieval murals of the gospel writers, pale honourable faces lost in their own expressionless delight. From the window, the playing fields, harbinger of such delights, is in fact so far away that it appears to be no more than an uneven ship’s dinner table bedecked with marbles rolling from one side to the other as the waves dictate. But the promise of pale soft flesh slowly becoming more and more moist and flushed can increase a boy’s eyesight beyond the realms of what mere biology would restrict. In truth, the girls could be twenty miles away and all four would see every muscle tense, every bead of sweat, and, most importantly, every slow-motion celebratory embrace after a goal.

“Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet; the Lord will smite with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts,” says Milton, attempting to keep it under his breath.

‘Now that, my friend, is poetry.’

‘Isaiah, chapter 3,’ Milton responds mechanically.

‘There goes Theresa.’

‘Let me see.’

Each of them had a favourite; Digger swooned over Maggie with the slender neck and honest eyes, Tuffer broke into a sweat at the sight of Rose with her long legs and full lips, and so on; but Theresa was the default setting for them all. She moved like a swan through golden water, a celestial apparition with hockey stick for pearl-studded trumpet. Her hair bobbed in perfect time with her breasts as she glided across the field, head turned over her shoulder in the direction of play, her neck as smooth and white as a frosted sky.

Pip had spoken to her once, at a bus stop in the town after attending a recital of Bruch (so he had fire in his belly and could suppress the nauseous throat pains that normally accompanied his talking to a girl). They exchanged four sentences each, hers admirably clinical in their brevity, and then sat on different floors of the same bus, neither thinking the same thoughts. Regardless of which, Pip could feel electricity in his fingertips and down his spine for hours afterwards, even as he told the boys what had happened when he returned to the dorm, while jumping on Digger’s bed, but he left out the words he and Theresa had exchanged, for they were his and his alone.
For Milton, Theresa was every heroine of every romance, she was Beatrice and Laura and Ophelia (for, even at this early stage of his life, he had no objection to mixing beauty with madness, although he was not quite at the stage yet where they were synonymous to him), and as he was the last of the group to loose his virginity, surprisingly to an ‘off-duty’ prostitute amidst the dank crackling of a blacked-out house during an air-raid in Nineteen Forty, an occasion which made him believe for many years after that all sex made the heart race that fast, and the bombs fell closer and closer as he reached his tumult, and that it smelled of damp, and that it was, indeed, so ludicrously exciting that his great aunt Maude must have been right when she said that those “secret parts” were the devil’s playground, strange as it was that his ancient moustachioed aunt would deem it appropriate to talk to a young boy about such things, but he believed in beauty, and his aunt’s words only came back to him when adulthood corrupted the lessons that innocence and literature had taught him.

Digger, calm and focussed, was a furious onanist in those sunny days, and Theresa was his target of choice, although he had occasion to experiment with other girls he saw around and a few times, after drink, a couple of the boys, but never any of this group, just to see what it was like, and it was not as pleasurable to him, which was probably due to the alcohol, but as it was, Digger was never to find out that he was a homosexual, and therefore, shortly after leaving the college, with the war interrupting, he had such a weak sexual appetite that he married a librarian twice his age, and whisked her off Brighton where he made a living writing erotic thrillers that sold massively but for which he was too ashamed to admit authorship. Tony Diggs was his pen name, a name that would become a classic of its type by the time of his death, influencing scores of young writers who grew up on his coarse pseudo-intellectual tales.

Of them all, though, it was only Preece who believed he was in love. The other boys had no notion of love outside of verse, no desire for love, no cravings for the understanding of it, seeing, as they did, that the great poets had covered all that there was to cover. Preece does not stand at the news of Theresa’s arrival on the field, for he has a perfect picture of her in his mind. She has make-up on and half a smile and they live by a lake and sail paper boats, like Shelley did at the Kilns. That is love, thinks Preece, when in fact it is just what happens when masturbation is not enough.

They were all to experience love, at some point or another, to differing degrees, and they were all to find different levels of respect for the phenomenon. But these were the sunny days, and the tests went well, and the future looked bright from the skin outwards, regardless of any doubts or secrets the boys themselves may have held, and of course nothing turns out as expected, and how can it when world war looms, and why should it when so many have clashing ideals, and so many have identical ideals, and so many have no ideals at all.
Rain

Kim Moore
(after Mak Dizdar)

We need to learn again to listen to the rain, to sit for hours and watch it skitter across the tarmac of a car park, the way it blinds the windscreen with mist, or just itself, its forcefulness, the metal demand of rain on caravan roofs, or the way it plucks at the sheet of a lake, how the very act of rush as it speeds towards an open drain is just what movement means.

We need to learn the names of all the clouds that carry rain, to learn their shapes by heart, to drive on a road covered with river mist from rain. We must travel to the towns built next to lakes, the ones that worship rain, where the smell of it is everywhere, to find the watermarks on buildings, see how the bridges were shrugged off, how the ground gave way.

We need to learn again to live like rain, if we could land accompanied by thunder and wear away our surroundings purely with our passing, and let our lives get bigger, if we could fill them, in the same way rain fills the emptiness it meets, if we could inhabit the space between us, if we were no longer islands, if we were only water, if you were rain, then I would listen.
They were lemon people—
even their skin came to resemble the pock-marked rind;
nicotine holes, my mother called it—

They dug for gold among the glossy leaves
in a world suspended by flaking ladders—

Papi always seemed uncomfortable standing on the ground—
or maybe just in my embrace,
as I breathed in the tart aroma—
citrus and smoke—

He was happier with his head among the branches,
or perhaps simply resigned—
for them, there was no other way.

(It ended with these groves—
the broken rung took him before the cancer could.)
When she reaches the cashier she greets him with a smile and places her goods on the counter. Washing powder and boxes of tissues. Microwave curries and pre-packaged sandwiches. He makes no move to process them, instead leans over the divide and peers into her face with concern. *Are you okay, dear?*

She smiles more widely. *Oh, don’t worry about me. Today’s one of the better days!* She is used to this attention but still appreciates the compassion that prompts strangers to pause and climb outside of their prickly shells, just for a moment, and reach out to comfort. She is also used to the stares and the nudges, the furtive glances, and barely notices them. She’s been crying for several weeks.

She leaves the shop with her purchases tucked under her arm, drizzling tears onto the soaked collar of her shirt. It is raining hard now and she lifts her face to the inflamed sky, enjoying the sensation of the cooler droplets mingling with her own. Taking the heat from her raw cheeks and glossing the salt-stricken roughness of her skin. For a moment she looks just like everybody else and she stands and savours the brief sense of uniformity before she is jostled from her stillness. The summer storm has hurried the pace of the umbrella-less crowds and they have no patience for stepping around strange young women. She keeps her head high so that the raindrops continue to race the tears down her face and walks home.

She misses her job, but her crying had made her colleagues uncomfortable and so after a couple of weeks, and an unsuccessful session with the in-house counsellor, she’d been gently told that she must take time off. To get herself together. To subdue the visible signs of her soul’s lament. She has weekly telephone conversations with her manager, where her progress is reported ~ *no change* ~ and the disapproval is conveyed through bitten-off sighs and terse expressions of sympathy. Weeping women stretch the tolerance thin and she’s heard that tiny snap over and over again, as her friends, her family, her colleagues, reach the end of their fortitude and discover that pity, unlike her tears, is not limitless.

As she closes the front door of her home behind her and dismantles her packages, she nudges the button on her answering machine with her elbow and releases its imprisoned words into the room. A handful of seconds of her mother’s exasperated worry, the tone scolding her for the anxiety she is wilfully generating and the implied slur on her upbringing. *Bad mother?* beating
with panicked fear just below the surface of the strained recording.

She goes into the bathroom and bathes her face, then dries it as quickly as she can and applies a thick layer of moisturising cream. Before she can even massage it in properly its silkiness is diluted by the jagged trails of tears that will not stop. She shrugs and gives up and goes into the kitchen to prepare food. The last two months, and several nasty cuts, have taught her the wisdom of handling sharp knives when your vision is constantly blurred, so she tends to eat only things that can be removed safely from packaging and heated up without too much effort or preparation. Meal times are now no more than an exercise in re-fuelling her body and she’s lost weight. Eating out alone in restaurants is too intimidating a prospect and since she has become just The Crying Girl, the girl who won’t stop crying, nobody wants to sit opposite her at a table in public. Or even in private. Her very presence now robs people of their appetites.

She’d woken up one morning, it had been a Sunday in the spring, with her pillow soaked through. She’d lain for a while, sobbing and feeling surprised, trying to locate the source of these fierce tears, trying to remember if there had been a bad dream, or bad news. She’d groped through the day with tissues balled up in her fists, looking out at the sun as it shone on everybody else and by the evening the spasms were no longer choking her with their fury and their strength. She could breathe with only a slight hitch in her chest. Limp and exhausted, she’d run a bath and dozed in the warm water, then changed her bedding and curled under the duvet, waiting for the day to end. The tears still came in a steady gentle flow but she was sure they would stop.

She waited for over a week before going to the doctor and only went then because of the pressure her manager put on her. Already, tolerance was being exercised with conscious effort. Through the five minute consultation the doctor struggled to contain his weary yawns and he asked the standard questions without writing anything down. Are you depressed? Are your sleep patterns disrupted? How is your appetite? Do you have sad thoughts? He was already reaching for a prescription pad. She had tried to make him understand that this bizarre phenomenon, for that is how she saw it, was not the result of a depressive disorder or underlying trauma, but was rootless and unprecedented, and all the more concerning for that. Could there be something wrong with my brain? Or my eyes? She had asked. Something neurological? No, I haven’t recently undergone a relationship breakdown. Everything’s fine at work. No bereavement, no separation. No reason to be crying like this.

He had offered anti-depressants, which she refused, and then sent her away. She’d smiled through her tears and thanked him. Her mother, suspicious of the medical profession and her daughter’s predicament, was convinced that she was hiding something unsavoury, something treatable. A soured love affair, or a lump. Perhaps an abortion, or a pregnancy. Unsatisfied with the lack of a suitable explanation, she nigged and pestered, rented books from the library, and diagnosed a neurotic condition. With maybe a hint of selfish bloody-mindedness.

The Crying Girl returned to the doctor a couple of weeks after her first visit and a few days after she had been told her presence would not be welcome at work until her eyes were dry.
once more. The doctor looked at her ravaged face and listened to her concerns with more interest than he had previously shown. He questioned her closely on the routine and pattern of her tears. No pattern. No routine. They just won’t stop. They might slow to a trickle, but they just won’t stop. He sent her for blood tests and eye tests and brain scans, which all came back negative, and then he sent her to a psychiatrist for an examination of her mental state. The psychiatrist’s report shed no light. She was described as sensitive and emotionally literate. She had a strong and comprehensive grasp of reality and her place in the world. There was no evidence of disordered thought processes or serious depression.

The psychiatrist shrugged his shoulders at the doctor and the doctor shrugged his shoulders back, and she sat and cried and waited for someone to explain her tears away. Again she was offered anti-depressants, which again she refused, though she was by now starting to feel the stress of the situation and was tempted by the promise contained in the little tablets. She was offered a range of therapeutic services and for a short while she believed that they could help, but too much emphasis was placed on unblocking past trauma and she soon tired of hearing that she was in denial. The force and volume of her tears increased under hypnosis and she’d left that particular clinic sobbing ferociously. Alternative remedies were investigated, sampled, and then discarded.

And so she withdrew from the well-meaning but useless attention of strangers and turned to her kin for support and solace. Comfort was duly given, but in return an improvement in her condition, a change for the better, was expected of her. When she couldn’t comply with this unspoken decree, disappointment sharpened her interactions with her loved ones ~ For God’s sake, will you just stop your bawling for five minutes! ~ and so she withdrew from them as well and negotiated her way around the bewildering, ceaseless drip of her tears with no one but herself to stand in judgement and despair.

Her doctor reviews the situation monthly, her manager weekly, and her mother every other day. She continues to take walks, and shop, and submit to newly found cures as and when they are offered to her. Nothing works. She continues to cry, and puzzle everyone, and stubbornly refuse to take the pills that she is told will numb her sorrow and quieten any underlying, unacknowledged depression.

As the weeks slip away from her, she starts to make peace with her soul’s reaction to life. She starts to believe that, when she is ready, the tears will stop. She has learned to walk with her head up and look people in the eye, and not mind when they look away. She is The Crying Girl. She will continue to be so for as long as she continues to cry. And for as long as she continues to cry, there will be a reason for those tears.

And so now she spoons her lonely meal into her trembling mouth and mops absentmindedly at her swollen cheeks and laughs at the programme she is watching on the television. Tomorrow she plans to take a bus into the heart of the city and maybe go to a museum. By tomorrow, she may have stopped crying.
From Broken

Torben Betts

From Scene 2

ADAM: I shall never be cured by comedy. What I need is love. I need to give and to receive love. I need that old intimacy she and I shared before the war. Before the war Paul says is about oil, diamonds, copper, tin. The war we are told is about spreading human rights and freedom. I must go home with this coat. Go home with this and save my marriage.

With the coat he leaves the bar and comes out onto a freezing street.

The CHORUS OF THE DISPOSSESSED appear, begging, threatening.

Merry Christmas to you all.

CHORUS: We are the dispossessed.
We are the down-at-heel.
We are the love-deprived and lonely masses.
We are the victims of the system.
Through no fault of our own we are trapped in dependency.
Through no fault of our own we must beg for alms.
We are by no means the undeserving poor.
We are more sinned against than sinning.
Chuck your spare change at us therefore
And then thrash us if you please.
Would you like to beat us, sir?
What would you like to do to us?
We will suffer anything for the price of a good square meal.
FIRST: Enter me for fifteen dollars.
SECOND: Or me!
THIRD: Or even me!
FIRST: I have a nice, firm arse, sir.
SECOND: But I am younger.
FIRST: Perhaps but ill-proportioned though.
SECOND: My flesh is tender, yours is tough.
FIRST: Feel that rump, it’s like a rock.
THIRD: Take me rather.
FIRST/SECOND: Quiet!
THIRD: These two are infected.
FIRST/SECOND: Lies!
ADAM: I have nothing to offer you. Nothing to give.
FIRST: You can spit in my eye then.
ADAM: I have no desire to.
SECOND: Break my nose with a butt from your forehead.
ADAM: I have no desire to.
THIRD: You can knee me in the belly, sir.
ADAM: I have no desire to.
CHORUS: No desire to take out your frustrations on the unfortunate poor?
ADAM: I just want to get home to my wife.
CHORUS: But we are the people, sir.
We are the suffering people.
We are you compatriots.
We are your fellow man.
You have a wife at home.
   Oh, that’s nice.
   With warm and welcoming dugs, no doubt,
   And a comforting motherly smile.
   Oh, that’s so nice.
   She will tell you whatever you want to hear.
   That you are worthwhile.
   That you are a good man.
   That your life is not just a wilderness of pain.
   Lovely woman, his wife.
   So kind and so understanding.
ADAM: You don’t even know her!
CHORUS: And at home also there’s a roaring fire.
   That’s very, very nice.
   And a stuffed bird waiting with all the trimmings.
Oh nice, nice, such niceness, nice.
Brussels sprouts and cranberry sauce.
   Roasted spuds, a bottle of wine.
ADAM: Don’t come any closer.
CHORUS: A tree decked with tinsel.
Perfectly-wrapped presents under its branches.
ADAM: I fought for you.
I killed for you.
I very nearly died for you.
CHORUS: We are the dispossessed.
We are the down-at-heel.
We are the love-deprived and lonely masses.
We are the victims of the system.
ADAM: You said.
CHORUS: That’s all nice then.
So very, very nice then.
ADAM: And I am quite as desperate as all of you.
CHORUS: A cigarette then?
A can or two of beer?
A half-bottle of gin?
Something to transport us away from our unhappiness.
We’d kill ourselves but there’s always hope.
Always faith in the kindness,
- In the kindness of strangers such as yourself.
So what can you spare us?
What can you spare?
ADAM: I am in the same predicament as you but…
CHORUS: An insult, that!
Look at him with a coat he don’t even wear.
Lets take a peek at the label.
Ooh, Italian?
Worth a few dollars.
Real animal fur.
Such niceness, nice.
- So very nice.
ADAM: Take your hands off it!
CHORUS: Oh, such a pauper here.
Oh, such a genuine guttersnipe, this.
ADAM: I pawned my medal.
My service medal.
This coat is for my dearest wife.
She suffers from the cold.
CHORUS: He talks of the cold?
    Does she live on the streets?
    He talks of the cold?
Does she eat from the bins?
He talks of the cold?
    Does she sleep in a sewer?
He talks of the cold?
    Does she sleep in a ditch?
    He talks of the cold?
Is she raped every night for a drag on a fag?
    For a swig from a can?
    For a half-eaten pie?
    For a bag of cold chips?
ADAM: I don’t know how I can help you.
CHORUS: We are the dispossessed.
We are the down-at-heel.
We are the love-deprived and lonely masses.
We are the victims of the system.
ADAM: Yes, I think you said.
FIRST: I was thrown out of home at the age of thirteen.
    Beaten by my stepfather…
    Neglected by my drunken mother.
These are all clichés perhaps but true nonetheless.
    I lived in a barn.
    I stole from the newsagents.
    I traded my flesh.
    I am a victim of the system
ADAM: I am sorry for you.
SECOND: I attended a church school.
    The fathers there fiddled with me…
    They learned me the bible
    And they taught me right from wrong
    While they made me rub their sweating backs,
    And suck their glistening cocks.
    I am a victim of the system.
ADAM: I am so sorry for you.
THIRD: I joined a gang in order to fit in.
    We’d roam the city in search of our kicks.
With knives and with hammers
We’d stab and we’d steal.
We hated the world and we wanted revenge.
I followed the pack like a sheep to survive.
I craved the company of violent young men.
I needed their rules.
To test myself in the face of dangers.
I am a victim of the system.
ADAM: I am so, so sorry for you.
CHORUS: We are at the end of our tethers.
We must now threaten you with violence.
ADAM: I wouldn’t…
CHORUS: We are the dispossessed.
We are the down-at-heel.
We are the love-deprived and lonely masses.
We are the victims of the system.
ADAM: Yes, I do think that you already said.
CHORUS: We therefore approach you with a terrible menace.
ADAM: I advise against this course of action.
CHORUS: We are three and you are just the one.
ADAM: I will break every bone in all three of your bodies.
FIRST: Somehow he convinces me.
SECOND: He has the air of the psychopath, I agree.
THIRD: His unhappiness unsettles me.
CHORUS: Then we shall drift away into the night
Drift into the night and leave him to his solitude.
ADAM: Wait!
CHORUS: He calls us back.
He means to kill us.
Feel the hatred in his look.
This is a man on the edge of despair.
It’s time to run…
I have a knife.
And I a bottle which I’ll break…
ADAM: People, people, hear me, people…
All I have done in this short life of mine is destroy.
My wife tries to teach me the ways of her faith.
Perhaps she is right.
I think it is wrong to see people live in this way.
To live in the degraded way that you do.
It shames us all.
It should shame every member of society.
How can a man sleep happily when so much injustice exists all around him?
Injustice that we all can do something to change.
Take therefore this coat.
Sell it.
Pay for the deposit on a flat for all of you.
Lift yourself out of this squalor.
Promise me not to drink or take drugs.
Promise me you will do all of this.
Promise me you will improve your lives,
    Find some honest labour,
    Maybe start a family.
Live as friends and spread kindness and love.
CHORUS: Oh, sir! We promise, we promise!
You are a saint, you are an angel.
Let us kiss your hand, you lifesaving man.
Let us grovel in our gratitude.
Let us worship at the altar of your compassion.
ADAM: Stand, please, and promise me.
CHORUS: We promise, we promise.
You have our word of honour, sir.
ADAM: Then here.
Take the coat.
This is my sacrifice.
This is perhaps how I may atone for my crimes.
CHORUS: Oh, feel the quality.
Oh feel the warmth.
This is true craftsmanship.
SECOND: Let me be the first to try it on.
FIRST: I am the oldest so it should be me who’s the first.
THIRD: He handed it to me so I am its keeper.
FIRST: Bow down to us for we are your queen!
OTHERS: Your Majesty.
FIRST: See how we strut
Quite unlike a girl that’s born to squalor and scraping.
OTHERS: We see thee strut.
FIRST: We are oozing class.
We are emanating something close to magnificence.
OTHERS: You ooze it, Ma’am.
You emanate it.
FIRST: Then you are my unworthy subjects, yes?
OTHERS: We are born to serve, Majesty.
Born to stoop and to cringe, Ma’am.
Unfit even to lick the excrement from off your dainty pointed boots.
FIRST: Take your hands off it!
How dare you grab the royal gown!
This has been in the family for a thousand years.
SECOND: But what did you do to deserve such luxury?
THIRD: What feat of public service did you perform?
SECOND: She was merely shunted out of some aristocrat snatch.
THIRD: The privileged minge of a mother born to luxuries!
SECOND: And suddenly the infant’s queen!
THIRD: And we’re in the fields and she’s by the fire.
SECOND: Look at her swagger with her snout in the air.
THIRD: And anyway her ancestors assumed the crown by many acts of theft.
SECOND: Of murder.
THIRD: Of brutal aggression.
FIRST: Our subjects expected it of us.
Our subjects expected us to flex our royal muscle.
SECOND: I just want to try it on.
FIRST: Yes, I feel like a goddess, feel quite divine.
THIRD: I am freezing, just let me…
FIRST: Take your filthy paws from off the royal robe!
SECOND: If you would just…
FIRST: (Placing a paper bag on her head.) And see also the royal crown.
Oh, that adds a little to my gait.
See how now I glide with such grace.
Bow down to me, you monkeys, bow!
And never dare to turn your back!
THIRD: I demand a turn.
SECOND: Distribute the blanket now!
A good sovereign would share her fortune with her subjects.
FIRST: Look, fuck off!
I am nice and warm!
THIRD: I'll turn nasty, people!
I'll turn extremely nasty on you both.
FIRST: Here’s our knife.
It slits the throat of the lousy dog who touches us again.
SECOND: You couldn’t do it, you crazy bitch.
FIRST: Treason! This is high treason, no?!
THIRD: It’s mine!
SECOND: It’s mine!
FIRST: The robe belongs to us, I say!
The robe belongs to us!
They fight, ripping the coat from the queen and eventually it is torn to pieces.
ADAM: You fools! You idiots!
It will get you nothing now!
Oh, God in heaven save us all.
CHORUS: Should we pray for salvation?
ADAM: Do what you will.
The CHORUS fall to their knees and pray.
Then let me pray with you.

ADAM joins them.

CHORUS/ADAM: We are the dispossessed.
We are the down-at-heel.
We are the love-deprived and lonely masses.
We are the victims of the system.

Enter a PIMP in a suit.

PIMP: I have here fifty crisp new notes in my hand
Earned from eight long hours behind a desk.
I work in a bank.
My day starts at nine.
My morning tea break is at eleven.
I lunch at one on a sandwich or a salad.
I have a cigarette at three and a coffee as well.
I end my day at five and return to my home.
The train is choked full of others like me.
I am married but lovelessly
I have three children but wish it were otherwise.
We are none of us close.
We all drift about the house like polite but joyless ghosts.
I consequently feel trapped and have a hankering for danger
Since my life has been mapped out for me since birth.
I do not like rockclimbing or riding motorcycles at speed.
    I do not like any dangerous sports.
Alcohol sickens me so illicit sex is my release.
I am comforted by the fact that my pension is good.
And I focus my life on the day I'll retire.
I use prostitutes on a weekly basis.
Usually as a Friday night extravagance.
And I’m as lonely as sin and as horny as hell.
Which of you will oblige me?
I require unprotected sex in the back of my vehicle.
I like both young men and girls.
I do not discriminate.
I am fond of anal, oral and vaginal engagements.
I can be both gentle and brutal.
I do not like addicts and can detect them on sight.
All veins therefore must be pure and all blood must be clean.
Sometimes beforehand I like to talk about my life.
It will be a minor moan, perhaps, a negligible whine.
Nothing more than an account of the week’s frustrations.
I expect you to suffer this in silence.
I do not require advice.
Just a listening ear.
Fifty dollars is a generous sum, you will agree.
Which of you will oblige me?
FIRST: I will! I will!
PIMP: Adequate body. Full figure. Not bad, not bad at all.
Something of a regal bearing, I should say.
Turn around, if you’d be so kind.
Delicate buttocks and quite excellent curves.
A most pleasing cut of meat is this.
Yes, I think I could work with you.
Forgive me, I am not in truth a banker.
Just testing the water, so to speak.
I am in fact an entrepreneur.
I am what you might call an agent of love.
I will find you wealthy clients:
Politicians, lawyers and the like
And you will let them penetrate you.
And then you shall give me thirty per cent.
It's a good enough life.
You will have your own home.
Meals out and even friends of a sort.
Is this agreed?
FIRST: This is agreed.
PIMP: Then congratulations, my dear, and welcome to your future.
\textit{They leave arm in arm.}
FIRST/SECOND/ADAM: We are the dispossessed.
We are the down-at-heel.
We are the love-deprived and lonely masses.
We are the victims of the system.
\textit{Enter a CHURCHMAN.}
CHURCHMAN: Do you sometimes feel like you’re all alone in the world?
CHORUS: We do!
CHURCHMAN: Do you wish there was someone who really cared about you?
\hspace{1em} Someone you could always rely upon?
CHORUS: We do! We do!
CHURCHMAN: Even close friends and family let us down sometimes.
\hspace{1em} But I know that you all have one friend who will never ever disappoint you.
CHORUS: Who is that one? Tell us who is that one!
CHURCHMAN: My friends, despite what those phoney scientists say,
\hspace{1em} You are not here on this earth just by accident.
\hspace{1em} Jesus loves you and He wants you to love Him.
\hspace{1em} There is just one thing that separates you from God and a better, happier life.
SECOND: Tell me! Tell me what separates me from a happier life!
CHURCHMAN: That one thing is sin, my friend.
SECOND: Then wipe away my sin, Father!
CHURCHMAN: Jesus loves you.
Oh, more than you can ever imagine.
And there’s nothing you can do to make him stop.
SECOND: Never let him stop! Please never let him stop!
CHURCHMAN: Then come with me, son.
\hspace{1em} Join our growing group.
\hspace{1em} And help us prepare for the Second Coming of Christ.
\hspace{1em} When the wicked shall be destroyed and the repentant shall be saved.
SECOND: Take me! Oh, take me with you to the ends of the earth.
CHURCHMAN: Then congratulations, my son, and welcome to your future.

_They leave arm in arm._

THIRD/ADAM: We are the dispossessed.
We are the down-at-heel.
We are the love-deprived and lonely masses.
We are the victims of the system.

_Enter MILITARY MAN._

MILITARY MAN: All around us the forces of darkness are gathering.
Envious nations wanting to destroy our glorious way of life.
Our freedoms, our hard-won democracy.
Do you love your country, boys?
Do you love this Christian land?
Well, sometimes when you love something
You must be prepared to fight to protect it.
The war still rages but victory is close.
We need more brave young men and women to see it to its end.
I can promise you a salary.

I can promise you a generous pension.
I can promise you comradeship.
I can promise you adventure.
What life is here for you in this rain-soaked gutter,
You illiterate mob of rule breakers and graffiti artists?
What do you possibly have to lose?
Hone your bodies and cleanse your souls.
Become like sleek and savage fighting machines.
Learn discipline and order.

Learn industry and selflessness.
Learn courage and self-sacrifice.
Come, fine boys, and help defend us from the evil ones.
Live like warriors in jungle and desert.
Your brothers and your sisters await you out there.
We have but one short life, my boys,
We have but one short life.
Let us endeavour then to make our mark.
THIRD: I salute you, sir, and I shall serve.
MILITARY MAN: Then congratulations, soldier, and welcome to your future.
Scene 7

*Dying for Ten Million. Spotlight on ADAM, crowned. Wild cheering.*

SHOWMAN: So, Adam, see! They’re on your side.
SHOWWOMAN: Now make the country swell with pride
SHOWMAN: And answer this your final question.
SHOWWOMAN: Think with care is our suggestion,
SHOWMAN: Think with care before you speak,
SHOWWOMAN: If fame and wealth are what you seek.
SHOWMAN: The final category is…war.

You’ve thirty seconds.
SHOWWOMAN: And no more.

You ready?
ADAM: Yes.
SHOWMAN: Then listen well.

*A drum roll.*

SHOWWOMAN: Which man first wrote that “War is hell”?

*The clock ticks for twenty seconds.*

SHOWMAN: Ten seconds left.
SHOWWOMAN: So make a guess.
ADAM: William Tecumseh Sherman.
BOTH: Yes!!!

Wild cheering, fireworks, applause etc.

Oh, Adam, huge congratulations!
SHOWMAN: It’s time methinks for Action Stations.
BOTH: His second fight!

*Wild cheering, applause.*
SHOWMAN: And if he wins
SHOWWOMAN: A life of ease and joy begins.
SHOWMAN: Ten million dollars in his bank!
SHOWWOMAN: There someone whom you’d like to thank
Before we meet your eager rival?
SHOWMAN: And start your battle for survival?
    Or say hello to, say goodbye,
SHOWWOMAN: In case they have to watch you die,
SHOWMAN: A wife, a child, now watching this?
SHOWWOMAN: Smile at least or blow a kiss!
ADAM: There’s no-one.
SHOWWOMAN: No-one?
ADAM: I’m on my own.
SHOWWOMAN: No loved ones watching this at home?
ADAM: There’s no-one.
SHOWWOMAN: Well, that’s sad.
SHOWMAN: Nay, tragic.
SHOWWOMAN: But if you weave your violent magic
    One more time and claim your prize,
SHOWMAN: The girls will flock to part their thighs
    And help you spend your hard-won coins,
SHOWWOMAN: You’ll swim in breasts and lips and loins!
SHOWMAN: Perhaps you’ll scape this rain-soaked land
SHOWWOMAN: And live a life on foreign sand?
SHOWMAN: Yes, buy yourself a desert isle,
SHOWWOMAN: Some house in the renaissance style,
    With landscaped gardens…
SHOWMAN: …fountains…
SHOWWOMAN: …maze,
SHOWMAN: You’ll wile away contented days
    With cocktails served beside the pool,
SHOWWOMAN: Your friends the coolest of the cool,
SHOWMAN: Yes, rock stars, actors, catwalk strutters
SHOWWOMAN: So far removed from city gutters,
    So far removed from factory floor,
    From unemployment, crime and war,
SHOWMAN: Far from the stench of human pain.
The tedium, the sweat…
SHOWWOMAN: ...and strain
   You used to know a fading dream:
BOTH: You’ll be the cat what got the cream!

   Wild cheering, applause.

SHOWMAN: Yes, death or wealth shall be your fate:
SHOWWOMAN: Then let us not procrastinate
SHOWMAN: And welcome with no more ado
   The one, the only:
BOTH: Vince Tattoo!!

   Booing, hissing as VINCE appears, dressed as a gladiator.

Angry chants of “Scum! Scum! Scum!” resound all around.

SHOWMAN: Thank you!
SHOWWOMAN: Your description’s right.
SHOWMAN: And if you’ve got the appetite…
SHOWMAN: It’s apt.
SHOWWOMAN: …we’ll outline his transgressions.
SHOWMAN: The ones at least that got confessions.
SHOWWOMAN: This Vince looks like a normal feller,
SHOWMAN: Yet locked he three kids in a cellar:
   Dark and damp,
SHOWWOMAN: And chained to bars
And kept them there for…
SHOWMAN: Yars and yars!

   Applause, cheering.

SHOWWOMAN: And when his wife became suspicious
SHOWMAN: This gentleman did something vicious,
SHOWWOMAN: He throttled her with her own knickers,
SHOWMAN: Then hurried forth in winklepickers,
SHOWWOMAN: This man the world thought calm and placid,
SHOWMAN: And bought himself a tub of acid,
SHOWWOMAN: Then poured it out into his bath,
SHOWMAN: While sawing her poor corpse in half,
SHOWWOMAN: Dissolved these sections in his home,
SHOWMAN: Till nought was left but teeth and bone.
SHOWWOMAN: And these he buried in his garden.
Making out she’d left him.
SHOWMAN:                                      Pardon
Us we pray but that’s not all.
SHOWWOMAN: This next will sicken and appal
SHOWMAN: Unless your guts are in fine fettle
Then leave the room…
SHOWWOMAN: ...put on that kettle.
For what this Vince did next, for shame…
SHOWMAN: Perhaps his parents were to blame.
SHOWWOMAN: He took those teens one at a time
SHOWMAN: And, well, I think you know the crime.
SHOWWOMAN: He raped them first then made them plead
SHOWMAN: But of their cries he took no heed…
They begged him:
BOTH:                        ‘Please, sir, let us go!’
SHOWWOMAN: But did this devil listen?

STUDIO AUDIENCE:            No!!
SHOWWOMAN: His soul was dead, with no compassion:
SHOWMAN: He murdered them in grisly fashion,
SHOWWOMAN: Removing brain and heart and guts,
SHOWMAN: Yes, chopping out their leanest cuts:
SHOWWOMAN: He fried them up…
SHOWMAN:                                      ...such was his vice,
SHOWWOMAN: And served them up with long-grained rice
That very night for his old mum.
SHOWMAN: Yes, Vince Tattoo is truly…
STUDIO AUDIENCE:            Scum!!
SHOWWOMAN: He piled the bodies in his van
SHOWMAN: This sick, tormented, dreadful man,
SHOWWOMAN: And drove his cargo far away
SHOWMAN: We know not where unto this day.
SHOWWOMAN: He keeps that card close to his chest
SHOWMAN: With hope that it might spare him.
SHOWWOMAN: Rest
Assured, however, he’s mistaken
SHOWMAN: This little ploy won’t save his bacon.
SHOWWOMAN: So, Adam’s set, his weapon’s drawn.
It’s Mr Nice…
SHOWMAN: …v Satan’s spawn.

Wild cheering. Screaming etc.

Music.

After circling each other for a time, ADAM and VINCE engage in desperate, violent combat with knives and swords.

Eventually ADAM gains control of the fight and has VINCE down, a foot on his head, knife ready to kill.

VINCE: (A catchphrase, a plea.) I’m dying for ten million!

SHOWMAN: Our audience now, prepare to vote!
SHOWWOMAN: Yes, punch the red on your remote
If you would like to see him die,
SHOWMAN: To say to Vince Tattoo ‘goodbye!’
The red then for this man to croak.
SHOWWOMAN: But should you wish to spare this bloke
Then place your finger on the green.
SHOWMAN: Results show up upon that screen!
SHOWWOMAN: And while they do this, you at home,
Must dial these numbers on your phone:
SHOWMAN: Three six zero three one two
And Adam here will run him through,
SHOWWOMAN: Three six zero three one three
The killer’s loose. We’ll set him free.

The sound of a heart beating and buttons pushed and votes cast.

SHOWMAN: Okay it seems the votes are cast.
SHOWWOMAN: Must Vince Tattoo now breathe his last?
SHOWMAN: Lets start the countdown.
SHOWWOMAN: Fingers crossed.

Twenty tones counting down.

On a large screen two bars, red and green. The red bar races across the screen, the green bar barely moves.

Then the word DEATH flashes triumphantly on the screen.

Wild cheering, applause.

SHOWMAN: Sorry, Vince, all hope is lost.
SHOWWOMAN: So when you’re ready, Adam, please…
SHOWMAN: Our lust for vengeance do appease
SHOWWOMAN: And end this monster’s mortal days
SHOWMAN: Obeying what the public says.

ADAM ready to kill VINCE, the studio audience cheering wildly.

ADAM then calls for quiet.

ADAM: I will not kill this man.

Loud disapproval.

I will kill no more people.

Loud disapproval.

I now am a wealthy man.

Wild cheering.

But this money I hereby donate to the people.

Wild cheering.
Five million to build a hospital.
For the wounded military personnel.

_Wild cheering._

Five to build a library.
To stock it full of books.
That for those who seek it there the truth might be revealed.

_Wild cheering._

This I freely give with one proviso.
That this man sacrifice me now before the eyes of the world.

_Loud disapproval._

SHOWMAN: Lets put it to the public vote!
SHOWWOMAN: Yes, punch the red on your remote
   If you would like to see him die,
SHOWMAN: To say to Adam ‘Thanks, goodbye!’
   The red then for this man to croak.
SHOWWOMAN: But should you wish to spare this bloke
   Refuse his charity, his offers,
   His gift towards the public coffers,
Then place your finger on the green.
SHOWMAN: Results show up upon that screen!
SHOWWOMAN: And while they do this, you at home,
SHOWMAN: Must dial these numbers on your phone:
SHOWWOMAN: Three six zero three one two
SHOWMAN: And Vincent here will run him through,
SHOWWOMAN: And we'll start building straightaway.
SHOWMAN: We'll call the architects today!
SHOWWOMAN: Or three six zero three one three
   It’s Adam’s loot.
SHOWMAN: It’s history.

_Twenty tones counting down._
On the screen two bars, red and green. Both bars move steadily, slowly across. In the end the red is slightly longer.

*Then the word DEATH flashes triumphantly on the screen.*

*Wild cheering, applause and loud disapproval in equal measure.*

*Pandemonium threatens to break out.*

SHOWWOMAN: (*Shouting above it.*) You’ll still know greatness, glory, fame!  
SHOWMAN: Those buildings both shall bear your name!  
SHOWWOMAN: And Vincent, you’re a lucky swell!  
SHOWMAN: Adam, thank you and farewell!

*VINCE stands and takes a knife.*

*ADAM makes ready to die.*

*A light change as VINCE prepares to strike. Everyone freezes.*

*The CHORUS OF THE DISAPPEARED appear.*

CHORUS: We are the disappeared.  
We are the unjustly killed.  
We are the love-deprived and lonely masses.  
We are the victims of the system.

FIRST: They brutalised my delicate flesh.

SECOND: They made me dream of death and dying.

THIRD: They filled my head with lies.

CHORUS: We are the disappeared.  
We are the unjustly killed.

FIRST: I was murdered by my pimp.
SECOND: I was a part of a suicide pact.

THIRD: And I was burnt alive in a tank.

CHORUS: Live to tell our stories, Adam.
    Live to point the finger, please.
    Live to make the perpetrators pay.

   GRETA appears on a cross, above.

   The CHORUS disappears.

   Light changes back.

   VINCE’s knife comes down.

ADAM: No! Wait!

   He is stabbed.

   He drops, clutching his wound.

   As he dies slowly, canned laughter once more fills the air.

   Fade to black.
A Trip to Manchester & Back

Eleanor Bennett
from INCARCERATOR

Torben Betts

(Scene 1, 8 and 19)

Scene One

JESSOP, in a state of panic, is changing into his wedding suit. MORRIS, his best man, is watching him, lager in hand.

MORRIS: I tell ya, sunshine…fucking chill!

You need to…

JESSOP: Fuck!

MORRIS: …calm down!

JESSOP: I will!

MORRIS: Your freedom’s fucked but no-one’s dead!

No problem then!

JESSOP: Inside my head

It feels like twenty voices scream:

‘Wake up, ya cunt! Don’t live the dream!’

I’m sweatin’, mate! I’m shittin’ rocks!

MORRIS: So cancel it!

JESSOP: Just…pass me socks!

MORRIS: A ring, a church, all blessed by God…

JESSOP: What time is it?

MORRIS: A firing squad

Would shake a man up less than this!

JESSOP: I’m going for me umpteenth piss…

MORRIS: You infant!

JESSOP: (Leaving.) And so off I fuck!

MORRIS: I see the serpent Marriage suck

The joyful juices from his heart,

Now Cupid’s loathsome, toxic dart

Has pierced his breast, his youth is spent.
Oblivious to Love's intent,
Says 'Matrimony, bind these hands!
I'll live a drudge to your demands!
Shackle me! Denude my hopes!
Tether me with mawkish ropes!
Take my horizons, shrink them, please,
Into one room! You must appease
This selfless yearning for castration!
For servitude, emasculation!
For days of toil and nights of tension
...and saving up for that extension.'

This wretched tool, this creeping toad...

JESSOP: (Entering.) My bladder burns, but nothing's flowed.
MORRIS: Look, where's the father of the bride?
  His shotgun's where?
JESSOP: The cab's outside!
MORRIS: Now listen, pal...just pause for breath
  And think!
JESSOP: O, fuck!
MORRIS: It seems like Death
  Has gripped you by the greasy nuts
  And sapped you of your blood and guts
  And now...
JESSOP: O, fuck! I hardly know her!
  Who is she? Fuck!
MORRIS: Just take it slower!
  It's just a day. A piece of paper.
  Think of it as just...a caper.
  A social custom, etiquette.
  S'all bollocks, mate.
JESSOP: I'm deep in debt:
    She's made me fork out seven grand!
    Her daddy's skint!
MORRIS: Don't understand...
JESSOP: For string quartets, egg mayonnaise,
    For salmon (smoked) and canapes,
    For champagne, wine (both red and white)
    And evening nosh by candlelight,
Some arsehole with his discotheque…

MORRIS: (Offering beer.) Look, have a…

JESSOP: (Accepting.) I’m a nervous wreck.

MORRIS: You’ve borrowed from the bank more cash?
For fuck’s sake!

JESSOP: Was a little rash!
You’ve got to help me…

MORRIS: No can do…
I bailed you…

JESSOP: I depend on you.

MORRIS: I lend you money every year!
You owe…

JESSOP: Fuck me…I’ve got the fear.
I promised her…

MORRIS: Just calm yourself!
It’s detrimental to the health
Is all this stress!

JESSOP: I’ve…

MORRIS: Take control!

JESSOP: There’s more fulfilment on the dole!

MORRIS: Just stop! Now think! What’s happened, mate?
You’ve changed, my son. You’ve changed of late.
Where has he gone, that carefree cub,
The life and soul of bar and club?
Who’d break girls’ hearts with just a smile,
Who celebrated life? And while
We other bastards sweated, schemed,
You glided through your days? It seemed
That God, his angels, Jesus Christ
All wanted sex with you. Now, spliced,
My friend, all that must stop.
Some female’s plucked you from the shop.
Now, calm. That’s it. Yes, have a breather.
Those days are gone.

JESSOP: I won’t deceive her!

MORRIS: Of course you won’t. And nor you should.

JESSOP: I love!

MORRIS: I know…but weren’t it good
When, minted up, we’d prowl the night,
And sniff out kicks and such delight
As this rank place affords a lad?
Those were the best days that we had:
Like hawks, we’d first survey the scene,
We’d pounce and then we’d reconvene
Next morning and discuss our kills,
Comparing notes.

JESSOP: Sad, childish thrills!
There comes a time for that to cease:
The loveless fuck, the girl as piece
Of passive flesh, the drunken spiel,
That spurting out of pain. I feel,
That now with her… It’s more, it’s love…
It’s something I’ve been dreaming of
Since I was just a kid. No more
Foul fumblings on the floor,
No more cold nights on strangers’ rugs,
And fake emotions fuelled by drugs,
No more false laughter, smiling, nodding
Just to get my desperate rod in!
I’m moving on, Stu. Moving out.
I’m growing up.

MORRIS: (Aside.) Just, hear him spout
That age-old lie, that lame excuse…

JESSOP: I’ll put my life to better use!

MORRIS: Forget the debt then, seize the day.
You’d kill for her…?

JESSOP: O, I would slay
The man who dared to breathe
Unwholesome air on her! Unsheathe
My sword of honour, flashing keen,
Then hack the heart from out the fiend
Who’d threaten her with eyes of lust,
First slice his belly, then I’d bust
His teeth and gums, tear out his tongue,
I’d rupture kidney, puncture lung,
I’d gouge my eyes out with a skewer,
I'd drink the contents of a sewer,
I'd set my flesh and bone on fire,
Unclothed, I'd crawl across barbed wire,
I'd trample babies, OAPs
To place a plaster on her knees!
For her, I'd swallow powdered glass…

MORRIS: *(Aside.*) Perhaps he’d take one up the arse.
JESSOP: Her breasts could launch a thousand ships!

Her body! Christ, she does these strips,
These shows for me…they drive me wild,
She does the nurse, the nun, the child,
She does these voices, dresses up,
She dances just like this. I cup
A tit like this, our groins like so…
We fuck ourselves unconscious. O,
It’s ecstasy, it’s drugs, it’s death!
I smell destruction on her breath,
I can’t express…she is my life…
My soul, my heart, my flesh…

MORRIS: Your wife!!
*(A pause.)*
So come, dear friend, the hour is nigh:
You now must love…until you die.

**Scene Eight**

SMITH, in bathrobe, is standing by a bed, on which JESSOP sprawls.

SMITH: This hankering! This throbbing zeal!
This carnival of flesh! I feel,
Alive! Alive! We two are one,
And this our moment in the sun!
He makes love like a Roman god,
Such passion and such thirst. His rod,
A stalk of lust, a sheer delight!
*(Waking him.)* I’ll want some more the same tonight,
You tiger!

JESSOP: Surely, sweet, you jest!
I need at least a fortnight’s rest!
You’ve ruined me! I’m ripped and raw!

SMITH: A honeymoon’s created for
    Incessant nakedness and sex!
    We’re bonding, darling!

JESSOP: Should I flex
    My mating muscle one more time,
    It’s curtains!

SMITH: You are in your prime!
    You’re ripe for plucking!

JESSOP: I’m still young,
    But this has aged me!

SMITH: Then your tongue,
    That like a lizard darts and flicks,
    Shall service me!

JESSOP: I’m twenty-six,
    But now a cripple here I lie…

SMITH: Ah, fuck you then!

JESSOP: Well, I can try
    But…

SMITH: Do you know how many men
    Would amputate themselves and then
    Would murder mothers to be here
    With me? Like this? A hemisphere
    Of frantic, wild, testosterone
    Would die for this!!

JESSOP: But…

SMITH: Had I known
    That impotence was all I…

JESSOP: What?!?
    I’m black and blue!

SMITH: My Lancelot!
    Just playing, babe. You have a snooze.
    I shall my own sweet self amuse,
    But think of you! My greatest lover…
    Almost. So…

JESSOP: You’ve had another
    Better? Have you? Tell me! Please!
    How many? Who?
SMITH: (Aside.) I’m such a tease!
JESSOP: I cannot stand the thought…
SMITH: Relax!
JESSOP: You scratching other bastards’ backs!
   You straddling them and grinding, oh,
   It stabs me here!
SMITH: Just let it go.
   It’s over now.
JESSOP: The thought of you,
   With them inside…
SMITH: I never knew
   You had a problem…
JESSOP: Christ, it hurts!
   You ripping off their jeans and shirts,
   You, naked, writhing, carnal, hot
   With other men!
SMITH: Look, is it not
   A thing that’s passed? I like to fuck,
   But now just you.
JESSOP: So, did you suck
   Them ever? Make them scream?
   Or did they… (To self.) Christ, my self-esteem,
   It plummets earthward. Did you moan,
   And smile and snarl and grunt and groan?
   How big were… Did they satisfy?
   Or were they…? Did you…? Maybe I
   Am as the rabbit to the ram?
   What size…?
SMITH: You want a diagram?
   Or shall I…?
JESSOP: No. Yes. I don’t know.
   Just tell me, were they…
SMITH: Some like so!
   And some like truncheons, some like that!
   The athlete, the acrobat!
   From tip to base…from here to here,
   They’d plug and prod and persevere,
   They’d grind away until…
JESSOP: Enough!!
You torture me!

SMITH: They’d overstuff
Me with their love. They’d often…

JESSOP: Stop!

SMITH: And snake-like slither…

JESSOP: Let it drop,
I beg you, please. I’ll do my best.
Just let me…

SMITH: Then I’ll get undressed,
And come to you, my husband dear,
My poor, exhausted cavalier.

JESSOP: I love you, Vic. I really do.

SMITH: (Aside.) How sweet.

JESSOP: And I’ll be faithful, true.
I worship you. You’re all I need.
My loyalty is guaranteed.
I’ll never let you down, I swear.
I love you like…

SMITH: And you’ll take care
Of me? Defend me? Love me?

JESSOP: Oh, by the sun that shines above me,
You will never ever come to ill!
There’s not a man I wouldn’t kill.
You know that, love?

SMITH: And I’ll stay true.
I’ll be the perfect wife for you.

JESSOP: Then kiss me. Let us always feel
This passion.

SMITH: Boy… you have a deal.

(They kiss etc.)

Scene Nineteen

The pub. Usual sounds. The CHORUS as barman. LIDDLE and JESSOP drink sadly at the bar. JESSOP is very drunk, chin on chest.

JESSOP: So fuck me! Fuck her! Fucking hell!
And fuck the fucking kid as well!
F*ck the Bank of England, fuck it!
Here’s my purple pecker, suck it!
F*ck the fucking politicians!
All fucking English…fucked…traditions!
F*ck the fucking House of Lords,
Those pompous cunts! They’re fucking frauds!
Ah, fuck the world! Those royal fuckers!
We fund those leeches. Fucking suckers!
They wallow in our income tax,
With butchered beasts across their backs,
The fucking royal, fucked-up fops,
They stole our land! They stole our crops!
And left us homeless, fucking shits!
Then shipped us off to death with Fritz,
Those fat-arsed fucks! They’re fucking smug!
They’re peacocks strutting! I’m a slug!
I’m worthless, broken, bolloxed, skint!
I’ll torch the fucking Royal Mint!
I’ll burn those bastards in their beds!
I’ll suck their brains from out their heads!
Complacent, loud-mouthed turds, they stuff
Their guts with…

CHORUS: That’s enough!
It’s not the first time you’ve made clear
Your tendency to violence here.
You seem to want to dish out punches,
Whilst punters chew their ploughman’s lunches.

JESSOP: I’m sorry. Fuck it. Sorry. Here.
I’ll keep me gob shut with more beer.

(JESSOP drinks, watched by LIDDLE. A silence.)
Serving Self
Hope Bachmann

A cuddle
you asked for.
Stiff arm
placed
over
warm, soft and soon sleeping.
A cold Shouldered frame
for the naked bodies
failing to embrace.

Listening to your echoes,
Not a heart beating
but feet running.

Drowning me in desperate eyes
I hold breath in clenched fist
with arms weak
muscles torn,
and count the patches
plasters
already
sewn and stuck.
Ready to repeat.
Falter.
Rewind.

Feeding you
Tender loin cuts,
Veal,
Lamb,
I carve the meat
for you,
and sit
swimming in entrails
with lips pinched shut.
Two Poems

Helen Calcutt

Fishing

Take silk, and water: cast and fish,
adopt gold, wade slow beneath waist-height

be with the slow meditation of tide,
where light moves against the glittering slue of Antrea
exist in the nearness of dawn,
in weightlessness of after-dark, where the rug has been shaken out,
the roof taken down, and the sea

turning on a wheel that is both she, and absence
   both smoke, and iridescence.

Here your body is let go of. With your mind only
move deeper among silver links, and rifts,
into the nave of fish

and ask nothing – reach and pull-to the living tide
where selvage-weed loops
   between slips of pure wet,
      where flesh
tears inwardly, and the sea outwardly,
and the net, humbly, softly withdraws its licks and throws,
   its limpid bowl of blue scales, and blood-silk.

Here your shadow rehearses itself.
Embellishes afresh, and afresh, under the moon’s wild cross –
as if dawn could seek you and find you
among ghosts; as it could single you out, and the strange light could bend you
into more than a man,

more than a wade, or a cast.

Your movement, like the bright underside of a white sail.
Everything between you and the big world hums freely –
Here the sun holds a fire to its lips.
Here the sea is good to you, because it asks nothing,

even though you take everything.
Goa

‘Bodies are cleansed by water,
the mind is purified by truth.’ Manu

Sometimes,
the sea from the sea swallows the door,
to sleep in human water.

I close the mouth of the sun

sit and watch from behind
where the door breaks
and the sea lifts out, like an inland storm.

Later,
when only this indoor light can be seen

we talk in ripples that circle us,
drink to our lost worlds.

I don’t know why it comes,
though they say ‘there’s nowhere else
it can be,
    than in human water.’
'I don't want him here,' said Roy's wife, Emily, the moment Roy hung up the phone. ‘Twice in a month? What’s wrong with the guy?’ With one hand supporting her pregnant belly, she lowered herself onto a kitchen chair, moon-landing slow.

Roy moved to comfort her, used now to his wife’s over-emotional reactions. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘Maurice has no social skills – he won’t take no for an answer.’

‘I’m pregnant,’ said Emily, beginning to cry; ‘I need my home to be a safe place.’

Roy massaged her shoulders in a half-hearted gesture of consolation. For some reason, pregnancy had encouraged Emily to use the vocabulary of an American self-help guide; Roy blamed the birthing books: colourful folio hardbacks which he had yet to open. If he was honest with himself, Roy knew that one of the reasons he’d permitted Maurice to visit was that Maurice – weird though he was – offered some distraction from the awful tedium of paternity.

Roy taught sociology in Cardiff where Maurice was the University’s Director of Information Services (a librarian, as far as Roy could work out), and for the past year they had occupied neighbouring offices. During awkward meetings at the communal kettle, Maurice had broken the ice with odd facts (for example, when he saw Roy blowing his nose he mentioned that one’s immune system can be strengthened by mucophagy – the practice of eating snot), and so they developed a friendship, of sorts.

Maurice was especially interested in Roy’s home life. Four years ago, at Emily’s insistence, Roy and she had left the city and moved to Mid Wales. Roy drove to work from their cottage on the edge of the Cambrian Mountains, and, depending on his schedule – and how badly he needed a break from baby conversations – he sometimes overnighted at a bed and breakfast in Cardiff. On those nights he and Maurice – who lived alone, or at least never mentioned any relationship or family – would meet for an ale at the Pen and Wig.
So when university broke for summer, it had seemed appropriate and harmless to mention to Maurice that he’d be welcome, sometime, to stay with them in Mid Wales. Roy’s invitation – if it could even be called an invitation – had been casual and hypothetical, but Maurice seized on the offer and immediately suggested possible dates.

The first visit did not go well. Maurice examined the house as though he was a prospective buyer, and then, as they drank tea at the kitchen table, he turned his gaze on Emily. ‘Isn’t it incredible,’ he said, staring at her bump, ‘to think that every one of us was, for the first half hour of our lives, a single-celled organism?’

Later, sharing poppadoms in the local Indian, Maurice asked Emily if her breasts hurt. ‘Have you started to lactate yet?’ Emily made as visual a display of shock and offense as she could manage, but Maurice was undeterred. ‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘what’s it like for your body to learn a new skill in adulthood? I remember the first time I ejaculated – I was in shock. I did that? It was incredible. Do you experience your milk as a miracle?’

It was therefore a testament to his wife, Roy thought, that despite her misgivings, a fortnight later she greeted Maurice as if he were a dearly missed friend. ‘Come in,’ she said, holding her belly, and then, with a pointedness designed for Roy, she added ‘it’s great to see you again so unexpectedly soon.’

‘You look even more beautiful than last time,’ said Maurice, wiping rainwater from his glasses. ‘You’re a very lucky man, Roy.’

Roy laughed and said, ‘Don’t I know it,’ but he was thinking how long it had been since he’d wanted to make love to his wife. He thought about her flatulence, the yellow-stained nursing pads that she left crumpled in her discarded bras, and that infuriating breathing she affected every time she hauled herself from the couch: a purposeful blowing that reminded Roy of a weight-lifter’s preparations.

When they sat to eat lunch, Maurice managed several minutes of polite soup-related conversation, but as soon as they finished, his gaze returned to Emily’s pregnant body. ‘I remember,’ he said, ‘when I visited Vienna, I saw the Woman of Willendorf at the Naturhistorisches Museum. The Woman of Willendorf is a limestone statuette, no bigger than my hand. Her tiny arms are draped atop her huge bosoms and her stomach hangs over but doesn’t hide her pubic region; in fact, the sculptor has taken great care to emphasise her parts. I cannot explain how powerfully the statue affected me. I stared at it for an hour. It was carved 24,000 years before the common era, but time has not one bit diminished its power.’

‘Fascinating,’ said Emily, glaring at Roy.

‘The ovum is the only human cell visible to the naked eye.’

‘Is that right?’ said Roy.

‘You know what?’ said Emily. ‘I think I might have a lie down. You boys will be going for your walk soon, and the little guy is kicking.’
'Really?' said Maurice. 'May I feel?'

'Emily’s right; we should get going while the rain’s off. There’s thunder forecast this evening.'

'He does a lot more than kick, you know,' said Maurice. 'Both sexes masturbate in utero, and it’s not unusual to see an erection on a sonogram.'

'Come on,' said Roy, placing a hand on Maurice’s shoulder.

They walked out and the sun broke through and the morning rain rose as steam. They crossed a field where cows chewed yellow oat grass and swished their tails at flies. They climbed to the crest of the hill and stood there, looking out. ‘Wow!’ said Maurice. ‘Look at that!’ Roy wearily followed his gaze and saw a rainbow arcing across the familiar landscape. ‘What a sight!’ said Maurice, binoculars swinging from his neck.

They crossed a stile, breathed the sticky smell of damp pollen, slid down to the shore of the lake. Beneath the overhang of a blackthorn tree, Maurice spotted a butterfly – a small copper, he said – and clambered after it on all fours. Then he ran down to the lakeside beach and Roy waited, patiently, as Maurice tried again and again to skim a stone. When finally he was successful, he followed the stone’s hopping flight, awestruck as if he’d conjured a golden calf. ‘I think we should keep moving,’ said Roy; ‘I’m worried about the weather changing.’

So they walked on, curving round the head of the lake, laying footprints in the caramel sand. Across the water, the earlier rainfall sped down the hillside in silver lines, but at the mouth of the valley, the river snaked a lazy S. Maurice paused on the rope bridge, watched fish puncture the river’s still surface, and then he set out across the meadow, through buttercup and knapweed and sorrel. ‘Wait,’ he said, seizing mid-step. He looked through his binoculars, back across the meadow, towards the far side of the bay. ‘Yes, it’s a red kite!’

Roy waited, kicking the ground, the smell of wild thyme making him hungry.

‘Wow!’ said Maurice, again and again. ‘They’re beautiful birds. Do you want a shot of the binoculars?’

‘I think we should press on,’ said Roy; ‘those clouds look nasty.’ It was true: the horizon had blackened as if sketched in charcoal.

When the storm hit, it was fiercer than Roy had imagined. They were still some miles from home but he knew of a pub in which they could shelter. As Roy jogged for cover, holding his jacket over his head, Maurice stood still, hands outstretched, watching raindrops shatter on his palms. Even when the lightning flashed – great silver insect legs crawling across the horizon – Maurice refused to hurry. ‘Look at that!’ he said. ‘How could humanity have witnessed lightning and not have invented gods?’

Inside the pub, Maurice moved no faster. It was the same when they drank in the Pen and Wig: Maurice paced the bar, stroking his beard at each tap, as if playing a simultaneous
chess match. So while Maurice studied the pumps, Roy sat at the window, drinking too fast. He watched the lightning and wondered how long the storm would last.

‘Isn’t it amazing?’ said Maurice when he’d finally chosen.

‘It certainly is chucking it down,’ said Roy.

‘How long do you think it will last?’

Roy shrugged.

‘We shouldn’t leave Emily for too long, should we?’

‘Why not?’ said Roy.

Maurice looked into his pint. ‘I’ll tell you something about lightning: without lightning, there would be no life growing inside Emily or anywhere else.’

‘Is that right?’ said Roy.

‘In the fifties, a fellow named Stanley Miller conducted a famous experiment at the University of Chicago. He put a reconstruction of the primordial atmosphere – methane, ammonia, hydrogen, and water vapour – into a beaker and simulated lightning by zapping the mixture with an electric charge. What did he get? Amino acids: the building blocks of proteins.’

‘Right,’ said Roy.

‘So, if it wasn’t for lightning, none of this would exist.’

Roy didn’t have anything to say to that, so he nodded as appreciatively as he could manage, swigged his beer, and then stared into the dwindling storm. Two minutes later, he had finished his glass. He stood up and slapped his palms against the table. ‘More drinks,’ he said, in a voice supposed to sound hearty.

Maurice looked at his near-full glass, looked at Roy’s empty glass, looked outside. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It looks like it’s easing off. Shouldn’t we think about walking home?’

But Roy had no enthusiasm for home: the one-way tension between Emily and Maurice was excruciating, and, at any rate, he was relieved to be out of the house. Maurice lacked the social awareness to appreciate when Roy was disinterested, and so Roy could invest minimal energy in the conversation. In contrast, were Roy to meet Emily’s wittering with similar nonchalance, she would soon be shouting about her need for a support network or his responsibility to love her changing body. Being with Maurice was almost as good as being alone.

When Roy returned with new drinks, however, Maurice didn’t thank him. Instead, he cleaned his spectacles, a nervous tic Roy had often observed at work, and then watched the horizon reddening as the last of the storm clouds moved east. Roy wondered if Maurice played darts. Probably not, he decided.

‘What does it feel like,’ asked Maurice after a minute of silence, ‘to create a life?’

‘What does it feel like?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Roy; ‘it’s pretty tiring.’

‘But what does it feel like… spiritually?’
‘Spiritually?’

‘That maybe isn’t the right word,’ said Maurice. ‘But do you know what I mean?’

‘I know that I haven’t had sex in six months,’ said Roy. He saw that this reference to Emily’s sex life had flustered Maurice, and, judgement skewed by the pace of his drinking, he decided to attempt the sort of conversation that blokier men call ‘banter’. ‘Do you have a thing for pregnant women, Maurice? Like a fetish?’

Maurice’s mouth opened but he made no sound.

‘Don’t be embarrassed, mate; I’m not judgmental.’ Roy was laughing but he saw that Maurice was taking the question seriously. His face was as red as the sunset and he was, for once, lost for words. Jesus Christ, Roy thought, the guy’s a fetishist! He started to imagine horrendous scenarios: Maurice at the top of the stairs, exposing himself to Emily; waking in the night to find Maurice kneeling between Emily’s legs. He realised it was his responsibility – for Emily’s sake – that he kept Maurice in the pub for as long as possible.

‘I’ll tell you something about lightning that will blow your mind,’ said Maurice, when the silence had become intense.

‘Go for it,’ said Roy, imagining Maurice sucking Emily’s protruding navel.

‘You get lightning in outer space.’

‘Amazing.’

‘And it can be huge. Do you know how big the solar system is?’

‘Big,’ said Roy. He would keep Maurice here until he thought Emily had gone to bed.

‘Okay. Imagine trying to walk around the world, yes? Well, you could fit more than a million earths into the sun. But if this beer mat was the solar system then the sun would be smaller than a pin prick.’

‘Okay,’ said Roy. He imagined Maurice rubbing his penis against Emily’s planet-like belly.

‘Now, the next nearest star is probably Proxima Centauri, and on this scale its solar system would be another beer mat, a whole football pitch away. That’s normal for the space between stars in our galaxy.’

‘That’s a long way.’

‘Yes, but there are 200 billion to 400 billion stars in the Milky Way.’

‘That many?’

‘And somewhere in outer space, near galaxy 3C303, there’s a bolt of space lightning that’s longer than the whole Milky Way.’

Every time Maurice said ‘Milky Way’, Roy felt a pang of discomfort.

‘Incidentally, if we imagine that this beer mat represents the Milky Way, then the nearest galaxy, Andromeda, would be another beer mat over on that table. Scientists estimate there are several hundred billion galaxies in the universe.’

‘So?’ said Roy, with a petulance that surprised him. ‘The universe is huge.’

‘It’s beyond comprehension.’
‘We should look at the menu – the food here’s supposed to be good.’
‘Oh,’ said Maurice, ‘won’t Emily want to eat with us?’
‘She’s been pretty funny about food recently,’ lied Roy. ‘She won’t sit down for a meal, just snacks all the time.’
‘Okay,’ said Maurice, sounding disappointed. It occurred to Roy that perhaps Maurice had interpreted his invitation as a way to broach some sexual tryst. Roy had read about this sort of thing: men who liked to watch other men have sex with their pregnant wives. It occurred to Roy that he knew almost nothing about this diminutive bearded man. He looked at his guest and wondered if he could be dangerous.

When they finally left the pub, it was dark and Roy was drunker than he’d been in months. He was dawdling, partly through drunkenness, and partly to delay their arrival home. But Maurice wasn’t hurrying either; he was gazing at the clear night sky. One thing Roy had to concede to Emily was that she’d been right about the stars out here: on nights like this they seemed so close that Roy almost walked with a stoop.

He could hear Maurice naming constellations, but when Roy looked upwards the stars shook, as if someone had rattled the sky. ‘Look into the past,’ said Maurice. ‘That light was produced when Julius Caesar was alive.’

Even as a child, Roy had shown no interest in space.
‘But that’s nothing,’ continued Maurice. ‘The Hubble Telescope has detected infrared light that’s twelve billion years old. Twelve billion! We’re watching the universe as it existed in the aftermath of the big bang.’

‘Yeah,’ said Roy.
‘And you can bet your life that somewhere far away, some civilisation with telescopes we can’t even imagine, is watching us right now. They’re looking at us and thinking, I wonder what happened to them; I wonder what their solar system is like now.’

‘That sounds a bit Star Trek for me,’ said Roy. But the thought creeped him out, and all the way home he imagined little green men in space helmets, billions of years in their future, watching him and Maurice and Emily.

Back home, he creaked the door open, thinking that Emily might be asleep. She was asleep, but she hadn’t made it to bed: she was snoring loudly on the sofa. She was drooling and the room smelled of flatus. Roy looked at her and felt embarrassed, but Maurice was smiling over Emily as if she was his firstborn. Behind them, the TV played quietly, long ignored.

‘Isn’t that beautiful?’ whispered Maurice.

Roy didn’t know what to say. He turned the TV off and sat on the edge of the sofa. He thought again about the little green men. Then he kissed his wife on the cheek, because that was the sort of thing he thought a husband ought to do. The warmth of her skin surprised him. He
gazed at her, trying to summon the appropriate emotion; he saw how each snore lifted her fringe and then laid it to rest on her forehead. He felt watched and had no idea what he was expected to do. Behind him, he could hear Maurice breathing in rhythm with Emily’s sleep.

‘Can I touch?’ asked Maurice. ‘Can I feel the baby kick?’

Emily’s snores now seemed the only normal noise in the room. Roy was terrified she would wake up.

‘You don’t mind, do you, Roy?’

‘Well–’

‘It’s okay,’ said Maurice. ‘Look.’ Gently, so as not to wake her, Maurice lifted Emily’s maternity blouse an inch at a time. Roy looked at his dome-bellied wife – his leg was trembling. ‘Maurice—’ he said, unsure how to finish the sentence.

Maurice put his finger to his lips. ‘The baby’s probably sleeping too.’ He reached his hand out, moving it as slowly as he’d moved Emily’s blouse.

‘Maurice—’ said Roy. Maurice’s fingers were bent into a claw. His long nails were lined with semicircles of black dirt, and his calloused knuckles bristled with hair. ‘Maurice—’ said Roy.

Later, Roy convinced himself that he’d grabbed Maurice’s wrist before he’d touched Emily. In truth, he had let Maurice touch her – had, in fact, let Maurice rest his palm on her for four or five seconds. But when he did grab Maurice’s wrist, he grabbed it so suddenly and so hard that afterwards both men stood in startled silence.

‘Roy?’ said Maurice, alarmed.

Roy dropped Maurice’s wrist, stepped back. ‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. ‘I’m tired – we’re tired. It’s—’

‘Of course,’ said Maurice, shaking the pain from his wrist. The two men faced each other – nodding, shrugging, smiling, seeking the words that would restore normality.

‘I should get Emily to bed,’ said Roy.

‘Of course.’

‘You know where you’re going for the bathroom, right?’

Roy listened as Maurice’s footsteps ascended the stairs, and when he heard the guest-room door click shut, he opened the back door and walked into the garden. His leg was still shaking and he wondered again what he’d look like to the little green men. He stood alone, looked up at the sky, and tried to comprehend the scale of things.

When he returned inside, Roy sat next to his wife and wiped her mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. As he started to lower Emily’s blouse, he stopped. Her belly was perfectly spherical, like something from physics. He watched the bump rise and fall with her breathing, and he searched for any sign of the baby. After a moment, he lowered his head. He could smell the cocoa butter
that Emily used to deter stretch marks. He moved closer, feeling the heat rise from his wife’s body, and then he rested his ear near her navel. Roy stayed like that for a long time, listening for the sound of his baby. He listened and listened, but this time he heard nothing.
I am porous

Maj Ickle

I am porous
There are holes in my floor where animals climb in
Climb in and scratch about looking for food
I try to fill up the holes with my belongings
But strange things are getting in

A homing pigeon speckled green with frightened eyes
Her harness coming off her wing
Inside are notes between people I don’t know
Hungry, I pore over them

The other animals want to take from me
But this pigeon wants my help
Her mission is honourable
In service to lovers
If I help her she can carry on.
Three Poems
Margery Kivel

it’s time to tighten armadillo plates

shut down, close up openings,
gasp and pull the drawstrings;
that or abandon the shell,
hover with toes dangling,
riding the jet stream.

*    *    *    *    *    *    *

a small flock of goldfinches
are working the thistle heads;
stems bending under the weight,
feathers and beak emerge as

helmets of black, white and red
flash among the sea of grasses
as they dig for seed - tap, tap
tapping seed on stone.

their bodies soften, merge
in autumnal blending;
within the blink of an eye
they are gone with the wind

*    *    *    *    *    *
in the winter of life
it is not the resistance
but the flexibility that enables
one to open to the wind

and let the burrs pass
without hooking
onto the fibers of
we, the thick coated,

who fear the seed's power
to reproduce.
this new and exciting turn

of events can be as small as
soft green Emerald moths
clinging to my window screen,

or as large as the returning
wave of color and song;
warblers in the spring,
doorways to new worlds.

today the viburnum
has white ballerinas
dancing the length of
outstretched branches.

in the morning there was
a fox in the apple tree;
what came before I didn’t see,
only the eventual jump down.

bare, stark trees now carry
thick coverings of leaves
in all the shapes and greens
of our known universe.

birds and wind have sown
sways of color in the fields,
the gift from last year’s bounty
distributed with a heavy hand.
each direction, near and far, 
up and down, east and west 
presents new observations, 
new signs of life waiting.

would that I had eagle eye 
to take in a broader swathe 
of this table of abundance 
to savor even more delights.

or be the tiny ant and see 
the world from its perspective, 
feel the soft petals under foot 
and taste the sweet honey dew.
Step by Step

I look behind me and you are there, sitting on the back porch steps of a sunny black and white day; they call you “Daddy’s girl.”

I look behind me and you are racing the wind, known to all as “the fastest girl on the playground - she lived on air to be light.”

I look behind me and find that you are hidden among the trees; something has been lost within that step to woman.

I look behind me, there you are hillside searching for the dream time; awake and in your sleep, you ask “where did it go beyond the edge?”

I look behind me, and you’re wearing the map of love on a rocky coast, with its jagged curves and sags, diving with the ducks for fish.

I look within, and gather loosely those separations of you and me, becoming one in time for the last dance.
Some Reflections on *The Coward’s Tale* by Vanessa Gebbie

Ros Hudis

As a follower of Vanessa Gebbie’s remarkable short fiction, I was intrigued to know how she would come at the particular challenges of a longer work in her début novel, *The Cowards Tale*, published by Bloomsbury Press in February. In an online interview earlier this year,* Gebbie, describing the creative process behind her novel, noted how she didn’t want to produce a conventional ‘single narrative’ novel, but was drawn to try something different. The result is a compelling deployment of ‘short fictions’ through the narrative, that skilfully inter-meshes the intensities of this genre with the broader unfolding, characteristic of a novel, and also offers a concentrated experience akin to reading poetry.

From the opening pages we step out into the world of a south Welsh mining town, set perhaps in the fifties or sixties. The idiom of the description has been likened to Dylan Thomas and this is perhaps a deliberate evocation on Gebbie’s part, to bring certain associations to bare on our initial reading. For me, the framing atmosphere is also reminiscent, in it’s combination of a stylised faux-naivete, and detailed, gently humorous observation coupled with an archetypal resonance, of the paintings of Stanley Spencer. But this surface is a fragile coating laid over a deep, collective, calamity. We embark on a journey into the subtext of this world in the company of Laddy Merridew a lonely school boy, newly arrived in the town to stay with his gran, while his parents try to resolve their broken marriage. Laddy forms an alliance with Ianto Passchendaele Jenkins, the town beggar, and, as an outsider, is curious about the odd names or strange habits of some of the characters he meets, like Half Harris, or Factual Philips. He discovers that, for the price of a toffee, Ianto will tell, to an audience of townsfolk, the tales behind these oddities.
It becomes clear that each story-episode relates to, or sheds light on, a disaster that occurred several generations back, when the local, ironically named ‘Kindly Light’ pit collapsed, causing an underground explosion that killed many of the colliers. In Chaucerian style, each individual’s tale is structurally complete in itself, yet is also one staging post on a journey into a particular – and indeed literal – ‘heart of darkness’ and that adds another layer or angle to the gradual emergence of the bigger picture, that of the poignant and sometimes devastating relationship of past trauma to present reality in this community.

In this process Gebbie avoids melodrama, and achieves a balance of wit and compassion, but nevertheless steers us, with quiet relentlessness, into confronting both the full horror of the accident and witnessing the associated grief. And each tale evokes and dramatises stages in the process of mourning and restitution, collectively creating a meta-structure and figurative enactment of healing.

Gebbie’s capacity for poetic thinking is clear in the way both individual parts, and the novel structure as a whole, are bolted by the central metaphor of mining or digging under. That same thinking is there in the selection and depiction of naturalistic detail that resonates with subtext and narrative. Take this description of the town pianos: *There were ebony uprights in the chapels, polished once, now dull as shadows. Penuel and Bethel’s pianos – their chords rising into the tight air on Sundays to drop down the cracks between the flagstones. Pianos in the houses, many, used as sideboards in the middle rooms, lamps and doilies on the lids, photographs and more photographs. Ashtrays. Budgies. And there is a pervasive lyricism allied to a rhythmic sense that gives the plain, concrete language the charge of poetry: The only lights are from the lamps. The walls glow at me. There is a draught and the light licks over a pile of mud, wet and gleaming. The rocks are alive and in the walls I do see shapes, like they are in the flames of a good fire at home.*

A secondary metaphor – that of the process of loosening or displacement - weaves through the narrative, shifting the boundaries of knowledge and opinion for its characters, or stirring memories. In a manner similar to Breton folk tales, wind, for example, is depicted as an agent of unsettlement, disordering the surface structure. At other times it seems to carry remnants of the town’s old identity: *sometimes the wind will lose its voice in the noises of the town. Then it finds it again in the alders that line the river where Half Harris catches his cloths and sticks....it sings in the wires that carry men’s voices out of the valley...* This essentially poetic device creates movement within the narrative as whole and a suggestive counter-point to the solidity of the realism.
Ianto himself is given a voice that blends the elevated modalities of story-telling address with demotic, whilst also conveying the flavour of each character. This juxtaposition of registers creates a ritualising lense that filters the realism and also serves as metaphor for the way storytelling functions both as source of comfort, with its promise of progression and transformation, and of preservation.

Ianto uses his stories to remind, to explain, but also to change and humanise the perception of his listeners. He functions as historian, shaman, elegist, narrative guide and guardian of secrets. But within this frame, he himself undergoes a progression that underpins the overall structure. As he grows closer to Laddy, his language becomes increasingly personalised until he finally reveals his own perceived role in the catastrophe and why he considers himself a coward. He experiences, through the telling, a bleak confrontation with the memory and his own emotions of survivor guilt – beyond the comforts of story telling. But through his stories he has given Laddy and his community both increased realism and increased compassion; this is delicately given back to him in the concluding chapters in what can only be described as acts of love.

Here we see Vanessa Gebbie synthesising moral vision, an intrinsically poetic imagination, and her mastery and understanding of the processes of story telling, to create a structure greater then the sum of its parts: one that both intimately memorialises welsh mining communities and dramatises the universal processes of mourning and healing after collective tragedy.

* June 1 Chicks Dig Book
Numbering the Houses

Robert Nisbet

Numbers 2 and 4 in the Crescent, Don and I,
back and fore to each other, listening to *Dick Barton*,
collecting stamps of the Empire, storing conkers.
Later, down to Steff’s and Jinksy’s, 18 and 32.
Football then, dubbing boots, cutting switches,
a few too many of Jinksy’s shittier schemes, the fireworks
tied to cats, the stones at garden birds. As we walked back
we’d rattle switches on the front gates
of 16, 14, 12, 10, 8, but gave up on Number 8
when the Mr Jarman there (witty kids,
we called him “Old Jarman”) gave us gyp
a couple of times. Our parents said that Old Jarman
had been injured at Tobruk. He’d had it tough.
By now we had the street by name and number.
And then the new girl, Lydia, arrived in 24, and *Wooff*.
at once it was all fireworks, life was in Technicolor
and Lydia was every number we knew, 1957,
Top 20 (and I remember Jinksy, in the barber’s,
showing me a photo in his mag, *Vital Statistics*,
and droning, “Like Lydia, boy. 38, 24 …”)
One night, soon afterwards,
Don and I were playing Buddy Holly songs
and we thought of the curve in the Crescent,
Jinksy’s house looking out quite easily
at Lydia’s bedroom window. That was
the shape of things, it seemed.
We found ourselves
at the wrong end of the street.
Greatest of Ease
Nigel Jarrett

I half-blamed Timmy for my predicament before realising how stupid I’d look. The problem is not that I’m struggling to imagine what it’s like to suffer from creeping paralysis but that my son, Timmy, is taking a course in circus skills. You’d have to admit that the co-ordination required to juggle six wooden clubs while balancing on a high-wire is the antithesis of attempting in vain to battle against muscle failure, which gets so bad that the patient eventually becomes speechless and has to be fed through a tube. Tubes everywhere, in fact.

Having said that, Timmy did take up his big-top apprenticeship after I’d started writing my story about a fictitious novelist called Malcolm Harvard and how he succumbed to ALS - Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. Directly as a result of Timmy’s change of occupation, I gave Malcolm a son who is also training to be an acrobat. ALS is all too real, I’m afraid. For weeks I’ve been reading up on it. After atrophying to a standstill, the victim often lives for aeons, the head full of normal thoughts and fancies while the body becomes as useless as a damp bag of cement. In the end it’s the corporeal that fails and kills you but you’re able to watch yourself depart. Some show! It was as if Timmy were turning my story into a conceit, and I don’t care for them. Too contrived.

So I’ve momentarily hit pause on the Malcolm story and here I am writing about a writer (me) reflecting on writing a story about both a writer suffering from ALS and a son who is, inter alia, learning to fly through the air. If you are still with me - which is what Timmy and Malcolm’s son must preface any apprehensive thoughts with as they wing towards their ‘catchers’ up there above the net - my defence is that Malcolm Harvard was to have been based partly on my good self. This is not unusual among writers. But I didn’t want to patronise readers by suggesting that they could not grasp the enormity of contracting a degenerative disease unless something else, in this case trainee tragi-comic entertainers, were invented to contrast with it and give it emphasis. Especially entertainers belonging to the sufferer’s family and with no sign of having inherited
the complaint. (Not yet, anyway, as Malcolm Harvard is, or was to be, in his late forties and moderately successful.) However, conceits arise unbidden and one is seduced enough to begin writing almost before they are recognised for the insidious creatures they are. The fact is that I do have a son called Timmy and he is considering a job as a street entertainer. I haven't questioned him that closely, but I understand that aerial tricks have to be mastered with everything else before one can specialise - in Timmy’s case, by literally coming down to earth in the square at Covent Garden, dressed as Harlequin. It’s an all-in package sponsored by the National Lottery. I’m impressed. What can one say? One’s children are not one’s self and will do as they wish.

As for Malcolm, he has six best-selling crime novels to his credit and has been shortlisted for the Stiletto Award. His son is called Tommy. I describe these facts in the present tense because I see Malcolm and his son as now waiting for me to bring them on to the stage. It seems fanciful, but on the other hand I think of Malcolm’s affliction as still worsening, as though it were not made up but had a life of its own, which in any story I write it would have, as it would in reality. While Timmy and his ambitions are real, Malcolm Harvard is in one sense the sort of person I would like to be. He is therefore not only fictional but also not autobiographical, at least in the sense that what one aspires to be is obviously not what one actually is at any given time. I have no desire to write crime fiction and am not prize-winning material, but I would like to be as successful as Malcolm and win the admiration of peers and betters. I’ve just this minute thought that I will have to give Tommy some function that will not draw attention to his father’s plight too obviously. Maybe he can become the rock on which Malcolm, in his unmitigated distress, can lean even more than he does on his wife, Muriel. I’ve just made up Muriel, though immediately the ‘conceit affect’ has come into play and I’m aware that Malcolm and I could be accused of having a ‘problem’ with women: that because the one female character in the projected story is flawed for some unspecified reason, we - Malcolm and I - betray ‘gender bias’. It would be easier to have Tommy weaken and make Muriel a tower of strength, as Malcolm, a professional penny-a-liner and no Thomas Hardy, might put it. But if Muriel were real and did have a problem coping one would have to say so, risking critical disapproval. Not that Malcolm is the sort of person who would worry about that. With such a consideration in mind, of course, I should bite one of Malcolm’s bullets and resume my story, portraying Tommy as one of the best circus trainees there had ever been and Malcolm as in a worse physical state than anyone could imagine. Naturally, Malcolm’s ‘difficulty’ with Muriel would probably be unspoken; whereas mine with any woman you’d care to name and especially with my wife would have to be (wrongly) inferred from how I’d depicted Muriel as a spouse unfit to deal with extraordinary marital circumstances. My wife, with whom I always share work in progress, has already objected to the similarity between the names Timmy and Tommy. Thank god her name is Rachel. I am prepared to change Tommy to something less provocative. Perhaps Malcolm’s inability to rely on Muriel for succour and love is a conscious reversal on my part of Rachel’s sometimes overbearing but well-intentioned attitude towards me. Thank goodness, too, that this is not a piece intended for publication.
Having said that, I’ve now decided on the hoof to have Malcolm experience a change of heart conditioned by - well, his condition. I would imagine that ALS is pretty sobering if not suicidally depressing. So he more or less gives up crime fiction and turns instead towards graver matters (no pun intended). He plans an autobiographical memoir chronicling his decline. Tommy, a drug-user, fakes a burglary at the family home while his mother and father are at the hospital for one of Malcolm’s check-ups. He steals his father’s laptop and PC, among other things, and plans to sell them on for cash. The loss of his machines becomes symbolic of Malcolm’s coming incapacity to write anything down, even though his head is more than usually full of rational thought and rich emotion. At first, neither Malcolm nor Muriel suspects their son of ‘breaking in’ or know about the drug-taking. What I’m writing here will therefore be a story about a story about a writer writing a story about a story - his own. I can’t believe that Malcolm wouldn’t meditate on his life as well as his illness. And no doubt Muriel would help out, perhaps learning to type if she doesn’t already know how. Tommy, after a conditional discharge and being assigned a social worker, would remain in the home as a wayward son forgiven by desperately-loving parents.

On second thoughts, though, and as I am a different writer from Malcolm, the foregoing sounds too sentimental when I read it over. I can almost feel pathos, Malcolm’s crime-writer stock-in-trade, oozing between the words like jam from an over-filled sandwich. In my stories I need people with flaws. So I’m going to have Tommy running away from home, Muriel unable to cope and shacking up with a body-building carpenter, and Malcolm himself failing to make the literary transition from entertaining to serious. Let the critics of misogyny squirm.

I could even reveal mischievously at this point my intention to confess that I am Malcolm after all, that I am in the early stages of ALS and that I’ve seen off its first sorties in my legs and lower jaw. (I’ve done my research. Remember?). Furthermore, I could explain this convoluted piece, this story of a story of a story of a story, as the way people like Malcolm Harvard and me - writers - prepare for our assaults on page and computer screen. I guess it’s also how the ALS virus works, buzzing about aimlessly before launching its first attacks while on its way through the vessels of Mr Harvey’s transportation system, as Malcolm in literary mode would have to picturesquely describe it, split infinitives ‘n’ all..

But to tell the truth - honestly - these ramblings themselves might become the start of Malcolm’s change of direction: a story of a story of a story of a story of a story in which the thieving son and stressed-out wife will be ditched in favour of egocentric reportage and philosophising. I should be surprised if a man about to be over-run and handed a life sentence would not have lots to think about and unlimited time to do it. I’ve even thought of a title, Greatest of Ease, a reference to Timmy/Tommy and that eccentric choice of occupation among the clowns. That’s if the circus element is to be retained, or even acknowledged as reality or
device. Imagining what it would be like for Malcolm to go through all the heart-searching over plot, character and narrative voice will be a challenge. Until you’ve had the first twinges of ALS (they’re more painful than that - so I’ve learned), or have seen the Alamo through to its resolution and been wheeled off, a survivor in chains, there’s no knowing what it will or would be like.

To repeat, I’ve boned up on the subject. But books are books. There’s no substitute for experience. As one of Malcolm’s shadowy protagonists might say, or would have said in its author’s about-to-be- abandoned persona, ‘Bring it on!'
Three Poems
Mark Tredinnick

After a Long Drought

Late afternoon is caught
in its own headlamps, astonished
At the cool ambition of the light; the lake stands beside the road, painting
Herself in watercolours, the way she used to run:
cloud shadows still wet in the middle
Distance a week after rain. Meantime, nothing’s changed
The mind of the Cullarin Range,
which sits gravely by, straight-backed
And dry-eyed, arranging your obit all over again
in charcoal and deadfall
and all this born again weather
Your Voice

Your voice, saying my name, is the beach
    when I first catch sight of it, down
Through the scribbly gums, nursemaids of this quiet light; your voice, an infidel,
Lies almost untouched—and, there, untouched again—
By the pale water, which is time. And time again. Your voice,
    a mare’s hoofprint winnowed
By onshore gales, has had been waiting for me beyond the trees,
Sitting in the ocean’s lap, hoarding light and silence, and listening
    for my syllables to arrive and step
    into the soft hollow of its longing.
Forest Walk

This is my devotion: to walk sometimes
    with the dog through the sclerophyll
Cathedral of the morning. I let myself
Off my lead to follow a half-made track,
    thinking a dilapidated liturgy,
Through bracken fern and native raspberry, three kinds
Of gum and a hundred kinds of weed,
    toward nowhere in particular.

For the dog, the trail is a cartography
    of smells, its landmarks
Excrement and rabbit holes and old impressions
Left in mud. For me, it’s a way
    I can’t find, most times, to lose
My way among brown butterflies; to fall out of the frantic schedules of the shallow hours
That count down most of one’s time on earth. The forest path
    is a labyrinth of bells and several local species

Of solitude. I go out daily, hoping for the rest of me,
    the otherness in all of us; I come back with dew
Drenched boots. And a weary dog. Inside my life—is it like this for you?—
I’m the blowfly that got inside the house: open two windows
And watch it beat itself up
    against every way it can’t get out, until
It can’t remember why it wanted to. This is my devotion, then: to walk
    with the dog among frogsong and falling bark:
see if I can’t lose myself for the trees.
Love Imperfect

John Gower

If you marry a black-hearted woman your blood will turn to bourbon sure as the sun sets. That’s what his grandmother believed anyway and she should know – blessed with the ability to predict when the house martins would return, or which night a friend would seed a child. And Alan did marry a blackheart, which just confirms what someone once said – that life is, in itself, and is forever, shipwreck.

He’d met her in the Forget-Me-Not, a pub on the city’s east side, where the police had recently armour-plated their vans after a job-lot of bazookas made their way onto the streets. The outside of the hostelry had a rusty sign swinging over a pockmarked gravel lot, complete with torched cars. This was a bar where you drank to forget, even to forget your own name if you could, where the lighting threw long dark shadows behind the freakish scrum at the bar. These were drinkers on an industrial scale. They drank Guldendrak at 12%, West Country cider which had the bouquet of horse piss, and brain-dissolving cocktails with names from battlefield situations because the original owner had been in the SAS. Forget? They’d have drunk Lethe water if had been on tap.

His wife-to-be had extraordinary hair, as if she used the same hairdresser as the Gorgons, flailing clumps that looked like plant tendrils uncurling in one of those BBC nature films that can look stunning if you watch it after dropping acid. When the purple tigers come out to play in the tangerine reeds.

‘Fancy a drink?’ she asked in a sandpaper voice, rasped by centuries of fag smoke.

‘I’ll have a Hand Grenade, thanks?’

Her name was Pet, short for Petula. She specialised in fleecing men; it was her job, her survival tactic. Three Grenades for him and a slickly smooth routine from her and he was hers, hooked, roped, catastrophically. It was the line about the disabled daughter that usually did it. Got them on her side, feeling sorry, wanting to help.

‘I’m very sorry to hear that. I can’t imagine anything worse than losing a child.’
She took him home, followed the usual pattern of seduction. She showed him the photographs – the girl in the playground, the one with the sunny smile, and then mimicked the tiny snap of the little coffin lid – “she must have been so lonely that day.” Then came the seduction. She always wore stockings when she went hunting. They also hid the varicose veins. “Feed…me…weird…things” she said. Her eyes moved in the direction of the odd food on the bedside table. A tin of snails. Brussels sprouts in pickling vinegar. Limited edition Turkish Delight Hobnobs.

They were married six months later, in a registry office where the most miserable guests – all on her side of the family, boondocks villages somewhere down west - were bribed with cooking sherry and a reception at the Forget that featured left-over grub from the previous night’s darts tournament, freshened up by some squirts of water from a plant spray. The happiest day of his life, just before the salmonella hiding in a dodgy Scotch egg put him on the critical list.

It didn’t take her long to open the joint bank account, to learn what he was worth alive or dead to the insurance men, memorise his pin number, setting a course for the heart of his cash. Pet thought a suicide note and a cliff walk might be the way to do it. Nudge him over where the land crumbles and even the sea campion can’t find purchase in the friable soil. Over you go, husband, whoops a daisy!

As Pet took over his life, so he increased his use of beta-blockers. The stress threatened to wrestle him to the ground. She said some terrible things to him but none took hold so deeply in his soul as the word “useless,” muttered through nicotine teeth, over and over again. Useless. Look at you, you’re useless. About as useless as useless gets.

One day he summoned up the courage to challenge her.

“You’re just a p-p-pathogen.’

Her face was blank. She was the sort of woman who would have looked for the index in a dictionary. Eliza to his Pygmalion. He had married the classroom dunce, the woman who lived on intellectual skid row. Her ignorance hurt him like a knife.

How bad was this era in his life? How bad? He felt he had to locate the hardest kind of granite before starting to scrape through it with his fingernails, finally getting to the other side with his digits turned into ribbons of bloody meat after all the tunnelling, only to find her waiting there, wearing her best reptilian smile. Escape is useless, Alan. Just take it on the chin like my two previous husbands.
Both had escaped her clutches, but only through the velvet-lined doors of the local crematorium. First, solo aspirin adventure. Second, heart malfunction courtesy of too much gut-rot vodka, cheapest stuff in the hypermarket. Revenge of the Taiga, as it was called.

The time with his wife had turned Alan paranoid. He thought the water was screaming when he boiled it. That sort of paranoid.

Alan tried to escape in a myriad ways. It was his doom. One night he dropped a tab of ecstasy in an aircraft hangar of a gay nightclub and kissed a man who had a wiry moustache and wore a lumberjack shirt to the accompaniment of a Kylie Minogue remix pounding away on the skanked up sound system. But the man he kissed wore ill-fitting dentures and a loose plastic incisor found its way into Alan’s mouth. The end of the affair. Throwing up in the toilet he felt at the furthest point removed from the Andrew Gold single that came through the thin walls. “Love is in the air,” he sang, “everywhere you look around.”

Alan also tried suicide, but the tree on which he planned to hang himself was the more pliable sort of young ash tree. His legs touched the ground and the noose hung pathetically around his neck. But his next gambit delivered with a vengeance. After drinking a flagon of homemade rhubarb wine, he took the dog for a walk and met Pet’s best friend Poppaline. She invited him in to her prefab and straight away took off his shirt. She almost turned him inside out in bed. Then Alan found out that it was Pet who had put her up to it, another means of control, pulling his sexual string from two streets away. And a guarantee of divorce.

‘She can’t have, I mean, you can’t be serious, you said you love me and everything and your eyes burned fucking sincerity when you said it. Please tell me it’s a lie.’

No lie, Pet used his fling with Pop as grounds for divorce, dividing the equity on the house with her slack-moral friend who had prostituted herself in order to buy a three bedroom Barratt house on a soulless estate.

Meanwhile some Greek divinities, during an afternoon of languor and indolence on their cloud chaise-longs, happened to turn their scanners to find Alan. They could see he was a falling man, but without sufficient grandeur about him to make them want to trifle with him. Not a hero’s arc, certainly. He was a fly, like so many of them. But Tiresias, the blind man and the seer, kept watching him, idly interested. A hero on the slide always made for good sport.

Alan had his watch stolen in a hostel for broody alcoholics, each denizen of the place sporting a smashed temple as if was a cultish tattoo. He got his soul stolen by Special Brew, a dozen cans
a day of the stuff, washed down with cocktails – Concorde British red wine mixed with Brasso – shaken not stirred. He turned skeletal and started sporting his own temple-tattoo. He knew his angels had fled, left for another land. He kept away from his family, not wishing to contaminate them with his perfect shame. And at night, as he rode his nightmares through rattlesnake deserts punctuated by Joshua trees he heard the sound of Pet’s laughter, agonisingly amplified as if by a fog-horn.

One night, after a session inhaling the carbon tetrachloride from a couple of old fire extinguishers he found in a Portakabin, he had a vision involving Kim Basinger. It was more a vision than a fantasy, his brain scrambled as if it been whizzed through a Magimix. He was making love with Kim on the sand, with scuttling ghost crabs regarding their passion from the safety of their burrows. Fairy terns hovered over the waves. The sun held firm to its zenith. But Kim was embracing him in the most intimate way and he was as confused as he’d ever been in his miserable weed of a life. And once his body had stopped shuddering and his heart had stopped pounding like an Olympic athlete going over the hurdles and he had rolled over onto his back, he asked the dumbass question that had pushed itself to the front of the queue.

‘Are you really Kim Basinger?’ His voice quivering now - a little croak like a tree frog.

The voice that replied had a man’s timbre. In his carbon tet semi-coma he’d been sexually assaulted by a bin man who had found him in a huddle of cardboard boxes behind an Indian takeaway.

Alan needed to wrap some coils of copper round his skull and then plug himself in to the National Grid to expunge the memory of that one. And even if he did, and frazzled his brains so that there was just a pencil’s length of charcoal remaining, he still wouldn’t able to shake off the nauseating thought of it.

In a daze he fumbled in his wallet. He had ninety pounds left in the world. He was surprised he had that much. What does a man do who has just ninety pounds left to his name and has just been brutally taken as a lover by a man with the scent of putrefaction about him?

First he had a shower at the Salvation Army hostel and asked if they could supply him with some clean clothes. The man through the security hatch said he was sure to find something. In the foyer the old blind guy who always sat there next to the oversized TV was doing his usual party piece: answering all the questions on Countdown. Dressed in discards – a trench coat with wide lapels, a black polo neck jumper and jeans from a hip-hop design empire – Alan took his battered driver’s licence down to the cheapest car hire place in the city. He put twenty five pounds down
on a sporty car which looked as if it had had half a dozen not-so-careful owners. He got in, gunned the engine, and headed for his dread encounter with Mr. Wayne. He’d been given the man’s card years ago by a man who told him never to divulge these numbers to anyone other than “when you’re at the very end of your tether and there’s nowhere else to go, ask Mr. Wayne and he’ll put the full stop to things, oh yes.” The card had a Swansea number and ‘The Purple Room’ emblazoned on it. The Purple Room: it’s where you beach after drowning. It’s where the unpleasant stuff really begins.

A digital camera, wired into the police mainframe, picked Alan up on the M4, doing ninety eight near the pagodas of Macarthur Glen, but by the time the cops themselves had caught up with him he was on the barren stretch near Eglwys Nunydd reservoir, with the coking ovens of the steelworks beyond. The cops liked hot-rodders like Alan, just because they liked to drive fast themselves. Nine minutes later Alan was still ahead, taking, by now, two police cars with him into Cadoxton where he hung a really sharp one and drove through the grounds of an old people’s home. Even the ones suffering from Alzheimer’s remembered how to run when Alan in his Ford Cosworth with tinted windows and go-faster stripes came at them, doing seventy across the lawn with the police hard on his tail. He ditched them in classic movie fashion by doing a U-turn and driving straight at them. The old folk looked like ghosts on the run.

From Swansea Docks McDonalds Alan phoned Mr Wayne, a most dangerous man indeed. A man who could rearrange a man’s hairline just as deftly as preparing a fresh squid. Slit. Unpeel. Turn inside out. Threat is three quarters of fear, and all that. When Mr. Wayne found out that Alan could only pay sixty five pounds he decided to subcontract, give it to a tigress who liked her flesh.

She was doing her nails when Mr. Wayne phoned. Marvin Gaye was playing on the sound system. She looked in the mirror. A cover girl looked back – Elle, Hello or Cosmo. Lady Luck always looked a hundred per cent plus when she went out.

The Lady was a gold credit card whore with some speciality lines that would shock Amnesty International. She could leave a man wishing he was in intensive care, rather than by a woman with compassionless eyes tightening the attachments on her power tools, and fitting one of those things you use to grout bathroom tiles. The Lady was bad. She tossed a couple of family packs of bandages into her handbag and went outside to flag a cab over to Mr. Wayne’s lock-up.

There was a car already parked outside. Over the city a helicopter circled like an angry hornet. Looking for joy riders probably. Mr. Wayne was counting out the money he’s been given.
The customer was already strapped in place, several twists of masking tape making a cocoon of his lower face.

Mr. Wayne went through the routine as if he was reading it from a brochure. ‘My beautiful assistant here will be helping you to express all the pain that’s built up inside you. Think of it as intensive therapy, but with knives and stuff, and at the end, when you have the gorgeous release that death brings, when the Great Redeemer comes to clip your ticket, you will by then have been purged, or at least have plenty of other stuff to think about.’

Even as he finished his explanation The Lady was getting changed into some overalls, her Victoria’s Secret underwear incongruous among the oil cans and workbenches.

Lady Luck walked over to the industrial sander and flicked the on-switch.

Mr. Wayne continued, ‘Think of those medieval mendicants, scourging themselves on the way to Santiago de Compostela, wherever hell else they were walking. It worked for them, Alan. We’ll be using a drug which numbs the pain but keeps you lucid, a triumph for our pharmacologists.’ He got the stuff from a bent consultant at Morriston Hospital. This new American drug was fresh off the line – it had only just finished clinical trials in Bethesda, Maryland.

Mr Wayne had the syringe ready and with semi-professional dexterity plunged the needle into the jugular. Alan’s body juddered, his chest ready to burst out of his shirt. Fear is white, a room with no doors.

‘Hey, ho, hey ho!’ said Lady Luck, as she started flensing.

There was a riptide of red, and a supernova of scarlet and most of the eight pints inside him was released by the spinning blades and whirring carborunda of the hooker who was getting the price of a pair of not-so-special shoes for what she was doing. And Alan’s life did flash before him, a spurting cocktail of memory: a grasshopper warbler singing in a reedy fen, his father’s pride when he scored a try against Pembroke Dock, a hillside lit up by early sun as his uncle worked the ferrets in a rabbit warren, the first schoolyard kiss, the Clash in concert, his mother using dock leaves to salve nettle stings, his brother’s go-kart upended after a failed stunt - the years turned into shards.

After she had switched off the power tools and surveyed her handiwork Mr Wayne spoke up.

‘It’s like euthanasia, but a bit more cathartic. Not that anyone comes back for more.’
She took the money and went off into the night, cursing the red flecks on the hems of her sleeves.

After burning his clothes and Lady Luck’s overalls, Mr. Wayne took Alan’s remains, which looked more like watered-down cat food than anything human, and dumped them on a piece of waste land. As he did so a single coin from Alan’s pocket, which had stuck to the outside of the bin sack, fell off and lay there glistening in a bed of ground ivy and milfoil. Two days later a small boy called Idwal found it and took it straight away to invest in something nice from Mr. Boonda’s shop, where the kindly old man gave him two extra pineapple chunks for his money. Idwal shared the bag with Christine, the twelve-year old girl with snaggle teeth and freckles so big her cheek looked like an archipelago of small brown islands, telling her to close her eyes and guess the flavour. She guessed apple.

Five years after Alan’s death The Purple Room is still open for business. You’ve got to be desperate to go there, but at least they have a supper license nowadays. They make a good vegetable curry while you wait for your end to come. If you choose pain they’ll give you pain. But do try to relax over dinner. After all, it’s not everyday someone tries to pulverise you down to your essential molecules. Not every day that particular final act follows on from dessert.
Two Poems

Nuala Ní Chonchúir

Boxer

They call him the pugilist priest,
though he gave it up once he got
the parish in Muinamuice,
where no one mentions the boy
who lost an eye to his fist
the night he stole a kiss
on the low boreen, under the moon.
A jumped-up Judas, the priest thinks,
he belongs in Dublin, or a place like it.
Rainwisher

*after Petr Holec*

Dikoo’s daughter wears a mango-bright boubou, but no fruit grows on the edge of the Chalbi desert.

Dikoo’s daughter has not once in her three years tasted sweet juice on her tongue or had a full belly.

Dikoo’s daughter is seventeen pounds of air and skin, she cannot even stand up to draw a circle in the dust.

Dikoo says, ‘I think this drought could last forever.’ Her husband lifts his cup to the gods, begs for rain.
Contributors

**Patricia Duncker** is the author of five novels and two collections of short fiction including Hallucinating Foucault (1996), winner of the McKitterick Prize and the Dillons First Fiction Award, and Miss Webster and Chérif (2006) shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, 2007. Her fifth novel, The Strange Case of the Composer and his Judge (Bloomsbury, 2010), was shortlisted for the CWA Golden Dagger award for the Best Crime Novel of the Year. Her critical work includes a collection of essays on writing, theory and contemporary literature, Writing on the Wall (2002). She is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of Manchester. She has lived in Aberystwyth for over twenty years. www.patriciaduncker.com

**Medbh McGuckian** was born in 1950 in Belfast where she continues to live. She has been Writer-in-Residence at Queen’s University, Belfast, the University of Ulster, Coleraine, and Trinity College, Dublin, and Visiting Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. Among the prizes she has won are England’s National Poetry Competition, The Cheltenham Award, The Rooney Prize, the Bass Ireland Award for Literature, the Denis Devlin Award, and in 2002, The Forward Prize for Best Poem. She received the American Ireland Fund Literary Award in 1998. Her latest book is The High Caul Cap (The Gallery Press, 2012).

Litro and Horizon Review, and five have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. She has published two poetry collections, Armature (Arc, 2003), and I'll Dress One Night As You (Salt, 2009)

Joe Dunthorne's first novel, SUBMARINE (2008), has been translated into 12 languages and made into a feature film of the same name. His first poetry collection was published in the Faber New Poets series in 2010. His second novel WILD ABANDON won the Encore Prize for Best Second Novel of 2011. He lives in London

Christina Dunhill lives in London where she teaches at the City Lit and works as an integrative counsellor. Her pamphlet collection, Blackbirds, was published by HappenStance in June, and sold out in three months.

Rhian Edwards' first collection of poems Clueless Dogs was published by Seren in May 2012 and was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for First Collection 2012. Her pamphlet of poems, Parade the Fib, (Tall-Lighthouse), was awarded the Poetry Book Society Choice for autumn 2008. Rhian's poems have appeared in the Guardian, Times Literary Supplement, Poetry Review, Arete, the Spectator, Poetry London, Poetry Wales, the London Magazine, Stand and Planet Magazine. Rhian is a poet and musician and has delivered over 300 stage, radio and festival performances world-wide. She lives in South Wales with her husband Blake and their dog Lola.

Gary Raymond is a Newport-born-and-based writer, critic and academic. He was co-founder and editor of The Raconteur and now is editor-in-chief at Wales Arts Review. He has published extensively in the fields of fiction, poetry and is a produced playwright. He has published non-fiction on a wide range of cultural topics, from Jose Saramago to George Orwell to Batman. His latest book is an introduction to the life, work and legacy of J.R.R. Tolkien, out in late 2012 from Ivy Press. You can read new critical work from him most weeks at www.WalesArtsReview.org. Gary Raymond lectures in English and Creative Writing at University of Wales, Newport.
Kim Moore was a winner in the 2012 Poetry Business Pamphlet Competition and her first pamphlet ‘If We Could Speak Like Wolves’ was published by Smith/Doorstop in May 2012. She received an Eric Gregory Award and the Geoffrey Dearmer prize in 2011 and works as a peripatetic brass teacher.

Sarah Hudis lives in Bontnewydd, a rural hamlet near Tregaron. She has won several poetry competitions in Wales, including the R.S Thomas prize, the World Book Day competition at Ceredigion museum and prizes in Tregaron Eisteddfod. She is bilingual and writes poetry in both Welsh and English.

Carly Holmes is 36 and into the final year of her PhD at Lampeter. She’s had work published in Cambrensis, Unhinged, and Theurgy magazines. She’s ploughing doggedly through writing a novel for her PhD, which, she’s discovering, is seriously cutting into her daily nap time.

Eleanor Leonne Bennett is a 16 year old internationally award winning photographer and artist who has won first places with National Geographic, The World Photography Organisation, Nature’s Best Photography, Papworth Trust, Mencap, The Woodland Trust and Postal Heritage. Her photography has been published in the Telegraph, The Guardian, BBC News Website and on the cover of books and magazines in the United states and Canada. Her art is globally exhibited, having shown work in London, Paris, Indonesia, Los Angeles, Florida, Washington, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Spain, Germany, Japan, Australia and The Environmental Photographer of the year Exhibition (2011) amongst many other locations.

Torben Betts is an award-winning English playwright. Works include: The Unconquered, Best New Play 2007 Critics Award for Theatre in Scotland (Tron/ Traverse/Arcola/Brits-off-Broadway); A Listening Heaven, nominated for Best New Play at the 2001 TMA Awards (Edinburgh Royal Lyceum); Lie of the Land, nominated for Edinburgh Fringe First Award 2008 (Edinburgh Pleasance/Arcola); Clockwatching (Orange Tree Theatre); The Company Man (Orange Tree Theatre); The Biggleswades (Southwark Playhouse); Five Visions of the Faithful (Edinburgh Festival); The Lunatic Queen (Riverside Studios);
The Error of Their Ways (HERE Arts Center New York); The Swing of Things (Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough).

Hope Bachmann is a BA student at Trinity Saint David

Helen Calcutt is a poet, dancer and choreographer, specialising in the fusion between movement and language. Her first collection of poetry, under the working title ‘In the falling deer’s mouth’ is expected from Perdika Press this year, and includes poems reflecting her interest in the lyrical nature of language, the natural world, and its life and death cycles. She is qualified practitioner of arts, graduating from the Black Swans Partnership Training Programme in 2011, awarded an ACE grant for professional development, and an ARVON writing grant in the same year. In June 2012 she was appointed writer in residence at the Clent Hills in association with the National Trust, one of the first residencies of this kind. She was born in 1988 in the industrial Black Country


Margery Kivel My life has been a long journey back to self. The first expressions were through my artwork. Then in 1998 I was ordained and served as the pastor of a church for 5 years. Once I learned to trust myself, it became an incredible experience of painting with words. Marriage took me to the east side of the state, but the spiritual work continued and my husband and I worked the platform together, he from the left side of the brain and I from the right side. My husband’s death in January of 2009 ended everything. It felt like I had been shot from a cannon, and left as puffed rice in a bowl. In the early hours of the morning I started writing poetry. That became the focus of my journey and the means of my healing. Every day is a new revelation and a new vision as I continue to write and find myself. My hope is that someone will find a tidbit in one of my poems to chew upon, a connection of experience
Maj Ikle arranges to meet her subconscious every morning to collaborate on writing to capture moments of personal truth that reveal universal involvement.

Robert Nisbet teaches creative writing at Trinity Saint David, English classes for Swansea University and works with local history and sports journalism. His poems have appeared in Poetry Wales, Planet, Smiths Knoll, Orbis, The Interpreter’s House, The Coffee House, Other Poetry, on the London Grip website, and in his chapbook, Merlin’s Lane (Prolebooks, 2011).

Nigel Jarrett is a freelance writer and music critic and a winner of the Rhys Davies Award for short fiction. In 2011, Parthian published his début story collection, Funderland, which was long-listed for The Edge Hill Prize and has collected enthusiastic reviews - Lesley McDowell, in the Independent on Sunday, said ‘(Jarrett) is not afraid of unusual perspectives and his bravery is well rewarded in this unusual and sensitive collection.’ This year he was again a finalist in the Rhys Davies awards. He lives in Monmouthshire.


Jon Gower is a former BBC Wales arts and media correspondent, who was educated at Girton College, Cambridge, where he read English. He is a documentary maker for television and radio and has eleven books to his name, in both Welsh and English. They include An Island Called Smith, about a disappearing island in Chesapeake Bay, which gained him the John Morgan travel writing prize, and Uncharted, a novel described by Jan Morris as ‘unflagging and unfailingly inventive.’ In 2009 he was awarded a major Creative Wales award to explore the Welsh settlement in Patagonia. Jon is currently a Hay Festival International Fellow. His latest books include The Story of Wales and Too Cold for Snow.