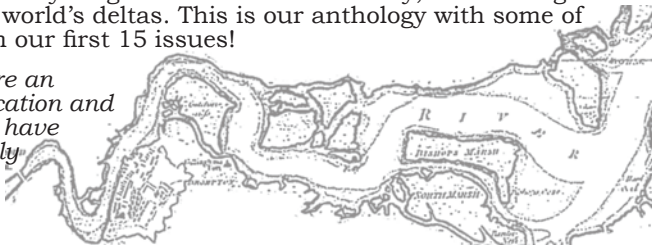


**Confluence** is a literary magazine from Wordsmithery, showcasing words from all the world's deltas. This is our anthology with some of our favourites from our first 15 issues!

*\*Please note: we are an international publication and where possible we have used the text exactly as provided by the writer.*



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Dear Reader

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

*All rivers are one river*

greetings

*Barry Fentiman Hall*  
Editor  
Luton Heights July 2024

.....

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*'Discovery' by Michi Masumi*

## Memories of Ethel

**On the mantelpiece**, the clock ticks loudly from its dark-stained, ugly, wooden case. The fire is slowly dying, embers dimmed to a pale, neon orange, like a decaying peach.

She was young too, once. Children seem unable to believe this of a grandparent. In the faded, sepia-tinted photograph, she is smiling. Just. Was she happy then? What was she thinking about?

Now, she stoops when she walks, wearing sensible brown lace-up shoes of polished leather with thick brown stockings encasing thick pale flesh.

Now, her hair belongs to an eighty-year-old Rapunzel, the silver-threaded, ash-grey plait reaching down past her waist, before she winds it round her head like a Cumberland sausage, pinning it in place with wire grips. Practical and neat. But, sometimes, I have seen it before this ritual, on the rare mornings she sleeps late. Then, it flows loose and free, crowning her shoulders, and she becomes a girl again.

Like so many, hers was a hard life, working in prisons and abattoirs, the cleaning lady bringing up three of her fifteen children on a small barge on the River Ouse with husband Fred, who went blind after being mustard gassed in the war to end all wars. Thank god for council houses, allotments, good neighbours and Guinness.

She takes the long, ivory-handled carving knife from the overstuffed kitchen drawer and slides it down her neck with dexterous fingers, inside her worn petticoat, letting the sharp point rest between her shoulders – a blade of steel skimming blades of bone. My young heart misses a beat. It is the only way she can reach that annoying itch on the skin at the base of her spine.

Born in 1900, Ethel was cut from a different, stoic, cloth – tough and fibrous – unlike my flimsy, easily-bruised, pastel lace. What transformations she must have witnessed. What could it have been like, experiencing such world-changing events? But when I ask her about the past, she is puzzled. Why does it matter? It can't be changed. Life goes on. Then it stops.

Together, we listen to the sound of the clock ticking, on the mantelpiece.

... *From Issue 9.*

**Tumbleweed blew** through the town, heralding Big Bart's steps as he strode down the main thoroughfare. All around him, shutters were slammed as the citizens hid themselves away.

No good folk wanted to see the kind of carnage that was coming.

Little Gulliver had told the outlaw that this town would be under his protection from now on, that the people would no longer be paying for his 'taxes'.

Well, old Bart wasn't about to let that dog lie.

A jingling sound began to ring out from the Empty Jug Saloon.

Taking a moment, Bart lowered his hat and calmly rolled himself a cigarette as Little Gully himself came into view.

Big Bart had taken the time to dress for the occasion, a dark red shirt with intricate embroidery at the sleeves and lapels. The pants were brand new and his boots looked like this was their first outing in the big wide world.

Little Gulliver had his own battered hat, reportedly made by his mother, and a plain yellow shirt with a black bandanna tied around his throat.

A few small splotches of white and black on the material suggested that someone with a bad history of art had tried to paint a panda's face onto the cloth.

Little Gulliver adjusted his belt and took a stand just along the street from Big Bart as the outlaw licked the cigarette closed.

"I thought I told you not to come around here no more." The yellow shirted man said, letting his spurs jingle again as he set his feet apart.

Big Bart didn't say a word, just lit his cigarette and took a long drag before letting the smoke pour from his nose.

Gulliver continued. "If you're here to get yourself a nice jacket, why I expect Miss Millie could oblige you for the right price. If you're looking to cause trouble though... we're going to have a problem."

Bart finished his smoke, then dropped the remains on the floor.

"Well then..." He said with a calm drawl. "A problem we shall have."

Little Gulliver removed the backpack he carried and set it on the ground. Carefully, he stood up as Bart also removed his own bag and set it before him.

Little Gulliver looked into the eyes of his tormentor and squinted in the heat.

Big Bart stared steadily right back at him.



Quick as a flash, Little Gulliver's hands dove for his bag, but Bart was a hair quicker.

In a moment, his hand was holding up a large piece of paper on which was a number of paint splotches in various hues.

"Know what this is?"

Gulliver looked fearfully at the painting.

"This is my boy's work. Did you know that it was Mother's day this week? Well he made this for my wife."

Pleadingly, Gulliver shook his head.

"He's five." Bart boomed. "And this is a painting of his favourite cuddly toy... Larry the bunny!"

Gulliver made a stricken noise in the back of his throat and gasped as if in pain. Breathing hard, he took a sharp inhale and shoved his hand into his bag to reveal a tiny doll.

"This has articulated limbs and it comes.." He paused for effect. "With a parasol AND a belle of the ball dress!"

Bart squinted harshly as he snarled. It was a hit but he wasn't going to make this easy on Gully.

"I found some flowers out on those trails." He growled while reaching again. "And on those flowers I found these."

A quick wave of his hands and he'd gathered half a dozen bright blue butterflies and flung them into the air.

Gulliver was distracted by the sight and raised his head to follow their flight, mouth open as they soared.

Determined to press the advantage, Bart then held out a tiny item and a small creature.

"Now watch this ya' varmint." He snarled.

Gulliver snapped out of his trance enough to look at the hamster Bart had revealed.

"That ain't nothing!" He cried as defiantly as he could.

"Little Jenny in the school house has a pet hamster, she calls him Sir Cheeks-a-lot and kisses his tiny head every day, what you got that beats that Bart?"

"Me? I have a teeny tiny burrito!"

Gulliver gasped as Bart held up two fingers just barely holding the tiny white package.

Grinning evilly, the town's tormentor moved his hands together, the hamster's nose already twitching.

"Bart.... Even for you... this is too much...."

The man in red just gave Gulliver a look... then passed the tiny burrito into the hamster's grasping hands.

"Oh god! Oh dear lord..." Gulliver gasped as he clutched at his heart and fought the tears that threatened to pour from his eyes as he watched the little creature nibbling happily in Bart's hand.

The yellow clad hero looked from here to there as if for salvation but none came.

He looked in his bag for something to help but though daisies and tiny model puffins were revealed, nothing could beat the tiny hamster eating tiny people food.

Bart had won, he knew it.

With a swagger and a jaunty kick of his heels, he approached the hero who was now sitting on his butt in the dust, gasping as the hamster took a moment away from the burrito to clean his whiskers.

“Ain’t no shame in it.” Bart said as he squatted down in front of his nemesis and gave him a better view. “All men have to admit defeat sometime, it’s one of those things.”

Gulliver’s eyes were still glued to the rodent, nibbling away again in Bart’s palm. “That’s true.” He whispered through his tears. “But there again....” His eyes flicked up to meet Bart’s. “I still have a few cards to play.”

Bart narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “You got nothin’.”

“Oh I got something, I got... MRS HENESSYS!”

The shout surprised both Bart and the hamster, who attempted to hide in Bart’s sleeve.

A door opened and two old women shuffled out, looking determined.

“What is this?” Bart growled.

“Mrs and Mrs Hennessys... They’ve been in love for the last 50 years, married for 45 of ‘em. And that ain’t all.”

Bart glared at the man still sitting in the dirt.

“Today.... Is their anniversary!”

Whipping his head back to look at the two older women, Bart could only watch as the two women embraced lovingly and gave a fond kiss to each other’s hands.

Clutching his chest, Bart sniffed hard. “You’re not kidding about the big guns huh?” He growled.

Gulliver laughed. “Oh Bart, you really think those are the big guns? You ain’t seen nothing yet! Kids!”

All along the roofs of every house, store and warehouse along the street children of all ages popped their heads up.

Fearfully glancing at them, Bart wondered if it was worth covering his eyes.

Then, a light sound from someone hitting a triangle and the children began to sing.

“Row, row, rowry boat, gently down the stream!”

Their voices were many, varied and ridiculously cute. The tiniest children were held on the edges of the roofs by the older children as they performed the dances.

Bart was staggering now, ready to fall.

Moving back to his bag he realised he didn’t have anything that could beat such a spectacle. Turning, he looked wildly for his horse and tried to whistle for it, but alas. The children

had come to the verse “If you see a crocodile, don’t forget to SCREAM!” and were too loud for the horse to hear.

Little Gulliver struggled to his feet and took a deep breath.

“You’re done in this town Bart, the folks round here don’t want you back ever again.”

“You think you’ve won?” The red shirted man growled. “This might send me away for now, but I’ll be back. I’ll be back with the whole gang, then we’ll see what happens to you!”

“We can’t let you leave like that Bart. Now is the time for the final solution to all our problems.”

Bart’s face drained of colour at the sound of creaking doors opening all around him.

Every adult had stepped out to the street and each one held a small cardboard box.

Their faces were grim, they would show no mercy.

“You were done for the minute you came into town.” Gulliver said, picking up the hamster from where it had crawled down Bart’s leg and began petting its fluffy back.

“It’s over.”

Big Bart looked into Gulliver’s eyes as the yellow shirted man whistled sharply through his teeth.

As one, every towns person knelt forward and tipped the contents of their boxes into the street.

Hordes of kittens and a huge pack of puppies came bouncing and leaping for Big Bart, who cried out in the knowledge that he was powerless to resist this final assault.

Little Gulliver watched impassively as the wailing man melted in front of him, disappearing down into a sea of inquisitive noses, paws and tongues.

The battle was over.

The town was safe.

Ellie-Mae lifted her skirts and ran out from the saloon doors to Little Gulliver’s side, throwing her arms around his shoulders.

“Oh Gully, you did it!”

“Weren’t me alone Ellie-Mae, the whole town saved itself. There’s nothing more beautiful than people coming together to fight the villains of this world.”

He turned his head to look into his girl’s face, framed as it was by ostrich feathers dyed a bright shade of pink.

“Well, excepting present company of course.”

Ellie-Mae smiled sweetly up at him and drew his head down for a kiss as the townsfolk celebrated the defeat of Big Bart, scourge of Cuddlesville.

... *From Issue 14.*

**Louisa Campbell**

**Dolly**

All day long in Edinburgh Museum,  
below Percy Pilcher's Hawk Glider,  
in a glistening glass case,  
Dolly the sheep spins round and round,  
stuffed.

Her face is kind.  
The sort of face that, if on a human,  
would make you chat to that person on the bus,  
offer them a *Polo*.

*Dolly is the most famous sheep in the world!*  
declares the tasteful chartreuse green sign.

I speak to Dolly, waiting for her woolly head  
to come back round,

*Oh Dolly! I say,  
You must be so...  
Proud! To be so...  
famous!*

Beneath milky-coloured eyelashes,  
Dolly's glassy eyes fill with tears.

*No, no!* she replies,  
*I will always be someone else;  
I will never be me!*

I fear her sadness could pull down the ceiling.

*But, I say – desperate to rescue the conversation –  
you are a...  
science...  
superstar!*  
(The chartreuse sign nods, frantically.)

*Baa, says Dolly,  
baa.*

*... From Issue 12.*

Joseph Clegg

## The Warning Chorus

Weary this morning, another pre-memory. Parting from my last granddaughter, born a quarter century from now, by the gate of the fair. Her golden face distinct, unblushed by age. Brings up the war, they always do. I can't stop her dwelling on what's to come, though time's too short for that. How short, she already knows. I shouldn't need to tell her.

Nothing brigh'er tha' the future, she laughs.

Don't stare too long, then, I reply.

She smirks. A sideways glance s'enough for you.

These prophecies they're handing up! Of course there will be a final war and, yes, it'll end everything. We know that, my dear, but will we fight in it? No, so why should we fret?

I drift away to walk in empty streets. Neighbourhoods bubbled in fear of things foretold. Will yourselves out, I want to scream, march free from predestination, win liberty from lullabies. Hush the warning chorus, shiftless children serving their forecast term. Unbent but crippled, uncosted like they spent their wanton days.

What fool called foresight a gift? Well, there are gifts you can't refuse. Every favour weighs in the wind-tipped scale, our effort is dust on the moth's all-disturbing wings. Trojan honey for suicidal oracles. Another year, another 13-month calendar, preprinted with news.

I no longer dread the fair. A fight starts in the furmity tent, some lost youngster sobs across the fields, feral horses burst through our shelterbelt of yews. None of it surprises me, nor has it ever. Nothing can.

... *From Issue 13.*

**Kitty Coles**

**This Sense Of Being Under Water**

When I move, my clothes billow out  
like sails around me.  
They are slow and I am slow  
with the weight of water.  
The floor is silty,  
giving puffs of sand at each footstep.  
Sleek weeds clasp my ankles like hands,  
impeding my progress.  
I notice my limbs have a greenish cast to them,  
and the air is green-grey,  
with a dim, subaqueous shimmer,  
the twilight of half-drawn curtains,  
perpetual evening.  
The sounds are very distant  
and reach me faintly,  
borne down through the thickness of fathoms  
to this deep bower.  
At the corner of my eye,  
I glimpse strange and glorious fishes.  
They pass in great numbers  
and flare and tremble like candles  
which snuff themselves  
whenever I turn to greet them.  
I open my mouth to speak,  
emit only bubbles,  
a steady stream snaking forever upwards.

*... From Issue 6.*

Sara Collie

## A Year with the Blackbirds

They come in ones and twos. Slowly, steadily I start to notice them. An inquisitive presence hopping near my feet when I walk in green spaces. A rustle in the undergrowth. A distinctive silhouette stretching on garden fences: beak up, head arching back to meet tail feathers in a perfect curve. I start to pay attention to the blackbirds: birds I once thought so ordinary, which keep bringing me strange little flickers of insight, as clear and intricate as the rune-shaped imprints of their claws in the snow.

On a cold February day, I pick my way along the well-trodden paths of the cemetery. This palimpsestic place is a world of its own outside the rhythms of the city and I am often drawn here at afternoon's end. An old lady is hacking away at the ragged sheets of ivy that are choking one particular grave. I pause to marvel at how lovingly she tends to the monument with each slash of her scythe, piling up verdant detritus in the pathway. I step around it, over someone's grave and disturb a perching blackbird. I notice that it, like all the other birds, seems to be particularly skittish today. It shoots up and dive-bombs the bushes, disturbing dunnocks and flocks of finches which dart off in all directions, upsetting a roosting pigeon whose stone grey wings flap about as it coos and the nearby thrushes sing on regardless. Meanwhile the watchful blackbird cannot sit still; he hops from branch to branch, grave to grave, from Mabel, to Eliza, to Martha via Henry, John and Arthur, who are long gone, the lot of them – only minimal details of their lives live on two centuries later. I pause to read the dates and epitaphs that tell of love and loss: the death of a child; the long lonely years of widowhood; the beloved sister and daughter; the soldier killed too soon. My afternoon is expanded far beyond the confines of my own limited horizons. And then time marches on, carrying me with it, leaving the gravestones to the blackbirds which have already settled in to use them as perches, toilets, and nesting places. In the last of the light they seem to be less on edge, as do I.

On the day of the Spring equinox I save the life of a small blackbird that has trapped itself in a netted enclosure on a neighbour's plot at the allotment. When I find him he is flinging himself from one corner to another, his beak, claws and feathers catching in the tiny holes of the netting which was put up to stop birds like him from getting at

delicate seedlings, but which has turned into a trap that will not let him escape. I have no idea how long he has been in there but it is clear that he is desperate and that the more he struggles, the more he gets stuck. In my mind's eye I imagine reaching in, scooping him up and releasing him into the sky from my bare hands in some grand benevolent gesture. But I cannot fit through the door to help him, and I realise that my presence is making him even more agitated so I wedge the flimsy door open and walk away instead. As I do, the clattering stops and by the time I have knelt down to pick the chard I have ventured out for, I hear a swoosh of wings. He is back in the cold, sunny sky where he belongs. I wonder if someone will be along soon to do the same thing for me. I think of this blackbird every time the twitch in my left eyelid returns. I'm told it is barely visible, but I feel it there below the surface, pulsing with distress.

A few weeks later Amanda says to me, 'boundaries don't have to be about defending yourself like a fortress. What if you thought about them differently? What if you imagined them instead as a bird, singing on a fence, marking its ground?' The image resonates, but I cannot remember now if I pictured that blackbird or something smaller. No matter, most times I hear birdsong now it is a blackbird – they are the birds that frequent our garden most often – and I think of her telling me that and remember that my edges can be firm and soft, definite and gentle at the same time. That using my voice to sing rather than scream or sigh is always an option. It works well enough for birds. I think about giving it a try.

One sleepless night after the clocks have changed, I sit in the garden watching the day emerge from the wrong side. As the sun gently eases itself over the horizon, I listen to a blackbird singing. It is a playful tune that progresses up the scale as if it were climbing a ladder out of the bird's throat ready to launch itself into the air at full throttle. Alone, solitary, this is not the full blown majesty of the dawn chorus that I can expect later in the year, but a quieter, more contemplative song. I sit there, arms wrapped tightly around myself in a lonely embrace, huddling for warmth, listening intently. Though different in timbre, something about it reminds me of the piece of music played at the Remembrance Sunday services I went to every year when I was a young girl: The Last Post. Almost as though the bird is a bugle, softly remembering something, someone, some great tragedy as it sings out. Even as I think it, I know I am projecting my own concerns onto the bird. I know that the bird is simply marking its territory, or else making an early attempt to attract a mate. Is it as out



of sync with the seasons as I am? Grief can do that, can knock a person sideways into another timeline where everything slows down interminably as the world rushes on regardless. I have read through the stages a hundred times, analysing myself, trying to work out where I am in the process. It hasn't changed anything. Some things settle whether you want them to or not and the things you want to hold on to often evaporate without warning, ephemeral as a song escaping a bird's throat at dawn. The garden begins to re-emerge from under the cloak of night: colours and outlines creep back into the world and I come out of the trance that the blackbird's song had induced. Looking up at the hedge, I can see the source of the music, can just make out his beak and beady eye, outlined in a matching orange ring. I can see his throat swell and sink as the song continues to gurgle up within it. I sit a while longer to listen until I can no longer deny the new day. The sudden motion of me rising to my feet sends invisible shockwaves over to the hedge, spooking the blackbird. He takes off in a clatter of wings mid-verse to find another branch in another garden on which to perch and sing. But I barely notice; my thoughts have already turned to the oblivion of sleep.

Days later I find blackbird feathers floating in the bird bath and all over the garden, marking my trail as I potter about. Inspired, I write a haiku about the feathers, observe that each one seems to be daring me to fly. I wonder what bold things I could attempt to do, what challenges I should be setting myself. Then I witness two blackbirds fighting on the shed roof, violently twisting and diving, beaks agape as they peck ferociously at each other, feathers flying everywhere and I realise once again that I am reading meanings where they do not exist, obscuring the truth and the violence of nature. I, too, am part of nature, of course. What violence might I unleash if I follow through on my bold thoughts of flying? Am I better off with two feet on the ground, shaky though it is? I wish I knew the answer.

As Spring turns to summer I spend more time outside in the company of a pair of blackbirds who have claimed the garden as their own. They watch as I dig over the flower beds, darting down when my work is done to prise juicy worms from the overturned earth. The male likes taking long baths in the birdbath, splashing most of its contents over the laundry we string up next to it and fighting off other, smaller birds that want a turn. The brown female bird becomes a regular presence on the long hot afternoons, hopping around the lawn, pecking the sun-baked ground in search of worms. She knows what to do to keep herself alive. I sit and watch, pen in hand ready to write,



*'The Status of Blackbirds' by Michi Masumi*

my concentration disturbed by the flicker of her wings, my train of thought lost. Every so often she cocks her head to look at me inquisitively, though for the most part she seems unconcerned by my presence. Mostly she just gets on with the business of pecking for worms, seeking out the things that bring her sustenance. I watch her sprightly dance, reading each movement like the pages of a book; a long-lost instruction manual for life. She cares not if other birds come and go, she cares not if every peck pulls up a worm, she cares not if the sun comes out or turns to shade, she cares not what I am scribbling down on my pages. Later, she'll sit on her usual perch with a bellyful of worms, discordantly singing in the evening, marking the edges of her feeding ground. But now is the time for what gives her life: now is the time to peck for worms.

I come to think of her as a friend, Lady Blackbird, until one afternoon when I am sat near the window feeder which she often frequents. She takes her time, checking repeatedly over her shoulder that she is safe before she begins sorting through the seeds. The sunflower hearts get swallowed whole, but others she throws out behind her: discarded duds. As I sit and read, one such flung-away seed hits me in the face, right under my eye. I realise that I am not a friend to her, but just another part of the garden scenery. It stings a little. She cares not, continues pecking, eating not just for nourishment but for pleasure too. She is in the moment, as birds are. Gone already, by the time I look up again, just like the moment.

The summer gets progressively hotter, dryer. In the heat of August, all the local blackbirds begin to behave very strangely. I arrive home from work one day to what looks like a garden full of dead birds: several distorted bodies are sprawled out on the scorched lawn and the shed roof. They are motionless balls of feather: beaks agape; eyes wide and lifeless. The shock of finding all these corpses lifts as I realise they are not dead, that they cannot be dead because they are all panting furiously. They snap suddenly out of the trance they seem to be in as I approach and fly off heavily, as if drugged. It happens the next day and then again the next. I even observe them landing on the ground, settling into this stretched out, fluffed up pose. I am alarmed enough to look it up and discover that it is actually a normal behaviour known as 'sunning' which enables the birds to produce more oil from their glands in order to keep parasites off them. I had thought they were panting because they were too hot. I had thought they were dying. Were dead. But I am wrong again about the birds: it is a behaviour they apparently enjoy, much like some humans like to

sunbathe. I cannot help feeling perturbed by all these panting birds. By my own tendency to assume the absolute worst.

Summer fades to autumn and as the nights draw in I notice that it is always at twilight that the blackbird's song is the loudest now. Not the sweet lilting chirps of Spring mornings anymore. No harmonising with other birds. No, this is blackbird's moment for singing a solo. As the light fades his voice becomes a clattering cacophony of trills and clicks, exclamations and shrieks. There, on the edge of the garden, obscured by the branches of an overgrown bush he sings his song of the day which I imagine is part diary-keeping and local news: where the juiciest worms have been found today; the comings and goings of the blue tits and goldfinches; an evaluation of birdbath water levels and cleanliness. It is part love song too, to his faithful Lady Blackbird companion, letting us all know that his heart has been claimed by her. And of course, it is also a defiant challenge to all the other birds of the garden. We live here, he sings. This is the edge of our space, here at the fence. All this lawn is ours for pecking. There at the feeder we help ourselves to seeds and breadcrumbs every morning. Share some if you will, but make sure to leave enough for me and my Mrs for we may well have a nestful of hungry beaks to feed one day. Yes, he is announcing these plans he has for the future too if I listen hard. His song is for me as well, is it not? A reminder that this is not 'my' garden. That I belong to it, just as he does. That here, now, we share this space.

As the light fades I admit to myself that his song may well be none of these things. I know I am imagining, projecting again, as always. I love the blackbird's song all the more despite this because it allows me this little creative act which does not deny him his song and his meaning, but which co-exists with my own in the darkening evening. The light fades still further and his daily litany continues, crescendos, grows in grandeur and pace until suddenly, I realise that the song has long since ended, like the light, like the day. He has left his perch and silently flown back to his nest to roost with Lady Blackbird and dream a blackbird sleep.

I take my cue and head inside to my desk. I have lingered long enough, outside with the blackbirds. My pen and notebook await me. It is time to attend to my own song now.

... *From Issue 11.*

## Mark Connors

### Key Largo

His dad would watch them watching paint dry:  
*Humphrey B and Edward G: real actors,*  
not like the fella who can't speak  
who makes the boxing films, or the little bloke  
with the perfect teeth, who can fix a drink,  
shout in a courtroom, look good with Dustin Hoffman,  
but couldn't fight his way out of a crisp packet.  
Even Toots, with his *Riddler* laugh,  
And the other hood, who doesn't say much,  
could act their way out of a bin bag.  
As for Bacall, and the woman who played  
the blonde gangster's moll who spent the film drunk,  
they make these new Hollywood women  
look no better than those from the local *am dram*.

His son never agreed. Backed his argument up  
with Pacino, De Niro, Foster, Streep,  
told his dad it was a generational blind spot  
before realising the actors of late  
just didn't do it for him the same way they did.  
And he finds it comforting that he had  
at least this in common with his dad  
and wished they'd had time to discuss it.  
He pours a drink, watches *Key Largo*,  
waits for his own son to sigh deep when he says:  
*they just can't act like they used to, these days.*

... *From Issue 8.*

**Emily Cotterill**

## **Installing a Terrarium in the Town Square**

On a shapeless day before summer, take the children from the edge of learning something, bring them through the drizzle to see the stopper go in. Place commemorative paving by the discount supermarket. Seal the thing in a second layer so teenagers kicking

pebbles can't crack the archived atmosphere. Back away. Over the years graffiti will grow wide across the outside, long small eclipses, throwing the name of a bored boy into the path of photosynthesis. In the dark, the curve of the glass will hold the S bend of a ready girl's back.

The same green plants live and die and grow. Eventually those children from the sealing head to comprehensive, knowing that when what dystopia is coming emerges, they were there at the blind hope saving of something. When they panic, use your knuckles, break all the glass

*... From Issue 12.*

**David Cramer Smith**

## **classmates' parents' cars**

### **Jamie**

Jamie's dad drove a grey BMW 5-series. That's why Jamie was a little fuckhead. He never let his sister ride up front; his dad never implemented a fair system. When he got to school he would get out and give everyone a look like "Hey, my dad's got a BMW 5-series." Jamie works at the Tesco in Gillingham now and drives a heavily-dinged Ford Fiesta. He regularly gives his girlfriend the cold shoulder. She never knows exactly what she's done wrong.

### **Ed**

Every autumn Ed's mum would get a new car. Some kind of luxury SUV. She would trade in their 'old' model for the latest version, as though it were an iPhone. She used to give me a lift to school. I'd have to be at the meeting spot at the end of their street, which was lined with beautiful detached houses, by 7.45 or they'd go without me. I'd be there at 7.46 blowing hot air into my cupped hands, wondering if they'd already gone, and then they'd rock up with with this big, brash new-car attitude that made me want to simultaneously stare and avert my eyes. Ed's little sister would move over to the middle seat and I'd climb into the gorgeous warmth, pretending it was my car, my life.

When we got to school I didn't want to get out. I wanted to live in their car. It was bigger than my bedroom and smarter than my dad. The seats were huge and made of soft, black leather, and could be programmed to remember your preferred position. The blue LED dials on the dashboard were awesome and futuristic, and the new-car smell was delicious. It gave me a headache but I loved it.

"When are your mum and dad going to get a new car," Ed asked me once as we walked through the school gates. I wanted to karate chop each word he spoke.

Ed worked as a derivatives trader for a few years, but I saw on Facebook that he'd "quit the rat race" to go travelling with an expensive DSLR camera. He took dozens of beautiful, soulless photos and relentlessly posted them to his Facebook. They got a lot of likes from people who have spent zero time in person with Ed since school.

## **Aaron**

Aaron's mum and dad shared a little Peugeot 205. Aaron has two brothers, one older, one younger. They're all tall. Like, baller tall. When his older brother had his growth spurt their parents got a second-hand Ford Sierra as well, so they could fit all the arms and legs inside the car. They had both cars until the last son left home, when they traded them in for a nearly new Toyota Corolla. All three boys went to top universities and got jobs in the public sector. They are still a close family.

## **Em**

Em took GCSE art and got an A\*. Her portfolio was full of stuff about body image. Some time during year 10 Em's dad spent a large chunk of the family's life savings on an MG convertible, baby blue. Em was mortified and would make him park around the corner if he picked her up from school. He'd sit there with the top down, grinning and wearing a Hawaiian shirt, which was also grinning. When she came round the corner he'd toot the horn and wave and shout "Hi snuggalump!" We'd laugh and say things like "Your dad's cool", and she'd tell us to fuck off.

Em became a paediatrician, but she daydreams of being an artist. Her friends from university are yuppies, and Em migrated to the same gentrified London suburb as they did when she got her first graduate job. They all wear pearl earrings and speak with 'Received Pronunciation' (smattered with ironic use of London slang), even though none of them grew up speaking with that accent (or have spent any time with people who use London slang unironically). Em's dad sold the MG after less than a year but he still wears Hawaiian shirts.

## **Liam**

Liam's dad is one of the partners of a law firm. When we were at school he had a Land Rover Discovery even though we lived in suburbia. He had crazy road rage. When he drove us to our football games he would constantly tailgate other drivers, thumping the steering wheel and screaming at them to hurry the fuck up. Liam was quiet at home but in class he was obnoxious to the teachers, in the playground he would pick on easy targets to bully and on the football pitch he would dive for penalties. His parents funded his degree and gave him a weekly allowance too. He lived at home until he was twenty eight. He's now a solicitor and works for his dad's firm. He belongs to lots of clubs and societies that he thinks are exclusive when in



reality they will take anyone who will pay.

### **Karla**

Karla's dad was a mechanic and drove a van, and her mum had a really old but well maintained Mercedes Benz. Karla was confident and sassy and was one of the first of our group to lose her virginity. She once gave a boyfriend a handjob in the back of the Mercedes while her mum, oblivious, drove them to the cinema. She worked hard at school and the teachers liked her contributions to discussions because they were usually funny. She got a degree in chemical engineering and worked for a prestigious engineering firm in London for a while. She lives in a big detached house in Hempstead with the twat she married and their two small kids. Karla is able to laugh at herself and I sometimes fantasise that one day we will get together, maybe in our late-forties, once she's ditched the husband and the kids have grown up.

### **Dan**

Dan had this habit of standing or sitting too close to you. He had no concept of personal space. In the playground, in the lunch queue, at the urinals, I'd always have to ask him to move two steps away. A little further, dude. Tiny bit more. That's better. Dan's dad used to beat the shit out of Dan and his brothers when they were small enough. When Dan was seventeen he stole his dad's car, a newish Ford Focus. He didn't have a licence. Never took his test. Didn't even have lessons. One night he nabbed the keys, picked up his girlfriend Claire and drove to Maidstone. According to Claire he lost control as he approached a bridge and careened down the embankment and into the river. Dan died; Claire survived. Somehow, the car was salvaged. I saw his dad driving around in it a few months later. They did a good job repairing it, but the paint looked different. If you've ever seen the colour of the river, it looked a bit like that. Not exactly, but enough so that whenever I think of Dan, I remember that car, then I remember the river. Every day I remember that car. Every day I remember the river.

... *From Issue 1.*

Seth Crook

## Old Local Map/ New Local Map

The skerry names are relics  
of the Victorian Ordnance Survey:  
like rusted iron grips for landing,  
hammered into granite,  
not used since the steamship schedule.  
Everyone has forgotten  
*“Eilean nan Currach”, “Eilean Chormaic”*.  
I know everyone who lives in this bay.

No one can name the island  
whose name translates as  
*Island of the Fish*.

*“Eilean an Ab”*.

Who was this bishop?

*“Eilean Imheir”*.

Which Imheir left his limpet name?

Time for new titles,  
time for those who swim out  
even in October, even in underpants,  
crawl through sea-spaghetti,  
dub two-gull rocks with a touch  
of neoprene swim gloves.

*“Eilean nan Washed-Up-Yellow-Hardhat”,  
“Eilean nan New Goggles”*.

Happy days print new maps.

Anyone can name the island  
whose name translates as  
*Island of the Fish*.

... From Issue 15.

**Caroline Davies**

## **Winter Sea**

At Dymchurch the sea beats against the wall.  
In my mind I can hold the waves,  
petrify each into a solid unbroken line.

Sometimes I let the sea think  
it is moving towards the shore  
but I am in control, the sea knows this.

I make the waves white as ice,  
horizontal lines one after another  
reaching towards the black horizon.

The illusion lasts 'til I step out of my studio,  
the wind slams against my face.

*... From Issue 12.*

**Zack Davies**

## **Polestar Streetlight**

Pitchblack hawthorn subway line  
Twigs twist stiff beside me  
Antiperson serpentine  
Polestar streetlight guide me

Shadows wind at angled speed  
Set on fences skimming  
Black on black, blacked out they bleed  
Flit like lit flight, dimming  
Cobbled rootstroke stick my feet  
Hid ahead my rest  
Where lacks light too lacks there heat  
Draw me to thy breast

Make I light of milestone stiles  
Languish, shaded, shielded  
Bright your shining eye beguiles  
Where the hedgerows yielded  
Sky and earth penumbra both  
Sidewise, I recurse  
In pinhole camera undergrowth  
Eclipsing in inverse

Polestar streetlight beest my aim  
By thy glow beseeken  
Take me backways whence I came  
Shown home by your beacon.  
By your beckon, back, migrate  
The Everyroad that leads to Rome.  
Down thy well I gravitate;  
Polestar streetlight, guide me home.

*... From Issue 4.*

**Michelle Diaz**

## **When Words Become a Secret Society & You Don't Have the Passcode**

Nowadays, I keep my words tentative.  
They slow-dance like dung-beetles,  
who are, incidentally, outstanding  
planetary citizens according to *National Geographic*.  
Sometimes they get under my feet.  
I have to be careful.  
If they come out the wrong way round,  
they may get trampled or imprisoned.

In my defence –  
I was brought up on a council estate.  
Surely *that* counts for something?  
Poverty made me divergent. Luv.  
My voice is too Leeds for these times,  
with an under taste of Scarborough.  
(Have I overstepped the mark?)  
Will they come for my accent in the night?  
I keep hearing about the dawn raids  
all across Yorkshire.  
The Ee Ba Gunners.

I like the old ways.  
Stamps, A4 envelopes, Sellotape.  
I communicate through the medium  
of fountain pens.  
Weapons of mass anachronism.  
I've been pushed  
into the spirit-stealing world  
of Instant Grandmas,  
Bluebirds and X marks the spot.

Dodgy poets post pictures of me  
with a quill and a typewriter on Snapchat,  
so, I hurriedly write – *Elon Musk is a rabbit*,  
and *she took the Alexa out of her swearing liver*,  
for which I receive five hundred thumbs up,  
twelve hearts and a wow face.  
The cyber world thanks me  
for my contribution to its thinking machine.  
My soul retreats into bulimia.

... From Issue 15.

**Sarah L Dixon**

**In self-isolation**

I sent my thoughts in bubbles  
Through a third-floor window.  
When I ran out of mixture  
I searched the best proportions  
of washing-up liquid to water.  
My thoughts popped,  
puddles were frothy for a while.

I whispered words into paper planes  
and let them fly until the rain  
dampened them, stopped their flight.  
A child scooped up the sodden shape  
with a litter picker.  
Didn't listen hard enough  
to hear my words.

I lit indoor fireworks  
with my last three matches,  
wrote your name  
in the stuttering flame,  
even though I did not know it.  
You smiled then  
and waved,  
but forgot me by morning.

I bought a kalimba  
and mimicked the calls  
of donkeys and geese  
that drift through my window.  
I imagine they are talking back to me.

*... From Issue 14.*

**JS Dorothy**

## **Reasonable Adjustments**

On Friday, Sandra brings in a tin of tiny rubber chickens, the morning spent pelting mangled hens across desktops between meetings. One lands in Jeff's tea, only to be crucified with staples to the AGM minutes. Another sits atop Bradley's in-tray. They came from eBay.

Two hours in, I'm at my limit: *Shit like this*,  
I hear myself announce through ear-defenders,  
*shit like this is why the world's burning!*

A yellow body flares past my face,  
flops in the bin.

\*\*\*

I'm used to being met with silence,  
to wondering how many more autistics  
it'll take. Thunberg, Packham, McAnulty,  
those of us with offices to negotiate.

\*\*\*

Come 5 p.m., I stalk the Foss. Here, the tansy  
delivers sanctuary to its beetle: chartreuse sequin,  
jewel of York. I crouch and scramble between  
likely haunts, willingly distracted by jittery  
moths. It takes me ninety minutes to get home,  
hyperfocus on the miniscule rethreading  
the self undone by a week's work.  
I need this river to survive, I think, like air,  
and truth. My untrammelled trust that others do too,  
that change, by now, is rational.

... *From Issue 15.*

## Peddling Romance

### Prologue

We sat there, crying into each other's arms and spewing forever. I had to leave for a grassy, foreign expanse and he had to stay in the sweltering city. I realized that in the three years we had been together he had never cried in front of me. Maybe a tear or two would have nestled by his nose when his dog died, but I'd never seen him red-eyed and helpless like this.

Six days later, I met someone else.

### First Encounter

I fell in love in a Welsh charity shop a few days before my birthday. It was one of those rare sunny days and I had set out to get lunch with my new friends, but a window display on a street corner anchored me to the pavement as they walked on. A boiled-leather valise sat stoutly beside a satin gown, the sign above it read 'Upper Annie's' in orange and when I opened the tinkling door I coughed on the must. I felt the spines of cracking cloth-bound books and peeked inside the empty doll house. It was all very enchanting to me because I'd never been in a charity shop before and magic just felt appropriate. I made my way down a narrow corridor past some wellies and metal posters, and came to a bigger room with hundreds of trinkets practically pouring out of the walls. Every item had a story, the cups told of lips they kissed and the clothes of the bodies they hugged, but the one that stole my fancy stood leaning against a small shelf in the center of the room.

I was fixed on a sturdy bicycle with six gears; my silver steed just waiting to be ridden into some glorious fairy sunset. It was a handsome creature even though one of the wheels seemed to be punctured, but there was something strange about its frame. For some reason, the last owner had covered the structure with strips of double sided tape so that it looked more like a mummy or skeleton than a mode of transportation. I wondered what stories it held, stolen bike wrapped in tape for a quick escape? Lonely boy on Halloween, trick-or-treating with his skeletal metal friend? Woman whose thighs felt too cold as they grazed against the bare frame? It was perfect – I fell in love in an instant.





*'Da Lovers Innna Da Corner' by Michi Masumi*

## **Romance and Adventure**

After paying the small forty-pound fee I exited the shop beaming proudly. I couldn't ride it at first of course because of its punctured wheel, so I rolled it along to a repair shop on the Bangor high-street. If Upper Annie's was a slice of an Enid Blyton story book then this place was a page from a glossy magazine in a doctor's waiting room. Expensive racer bikes protruded from the sides, intimidating and proud, just like the manager who stood behind his fancy MacBook Pro. One look at him and I realized they weren't just selling bikes, they were selling a lifestyle.

They sold bells, and horns, and helmets, and high-vis stickers, and neon waterproof jackets and pants, and sweat-bands, and quick drying stretchy T-shirts, and those ridiculously tight short shorts. They even had special sweat-proof earphones and a kind of 'on-the-go' biker meal-paste which you could dispense through a plastic tube as you cycled. Everything screamed "Speed! Efficiency! Endurance! If you want it, give us your money you lump". We looked like a pair of Chaplinesque tramps, me with my worn backpack and scuffed shoes and the bike with its bandages.

The bikes themselves were an assortment of wild animals; sleek charcoal-coloured panthers, fanged grey wolves and big strong grizzlies all stood in a row ready to pounce at any moment. My broken old horse didn't seem as powerful as it did when I found it amongst the cookie jars in the charity shop. I asked the manager if they could service it and was given a judging look and a price. It felt odd leaving it there amongst the jungle beasts, but I had no choice so I went home and waited in painful patience for the next week or so.

When it was finally time to go back to the repair shop, I put on my most sensible shoes and swept my hair to one side trying to look my best for the occasion.

I realized then that within the first few weeks of my life in Wales I had stumbled upon a kind of weird romance. I found myself actually feeling nervous as I walked down to the shop, and had to stop and take a deep breath before going inside. All the giddy excitement that comes with a new relationship seemed to rush into my ears when I saw the tires and breaks. The skeleton tape was still wrapped around the frame, but it was strong and fixed and ready to go! I wrapped my hands along the broad handles and wheeled it out as the manager shot us a disparaging look.

I was glad to leave the horrid shop and step out into the sunshine, but was still too nervous to try it out on the road because I hadn't cycled in ages. I decided to wheel it to an empty lane and placed my foot on the pedal. It took a little wonky balancing at first but within moments I was gliding down the street with the Welsh breeze in my spine! My feet were in sync with the passing clouds in the little patch of sky I could see between the rows of buildings on either side of me. I had forgotten how much faster it was compared to walking on foot or even running, and soon I ended up on Holyhead road, a name I recognized from a Google Maps search I had done a few mornings ago.

The road ran parallel to the body of water that separated Bangor from a nearby island. I parked my bike on the pavement and looked across the strait at Anglesey, a stretch of land I had heard a lot about but never seen before. Since I had a moment of rest, I thought it would be a good idea to pull out my phone and have a look at Google Maps. I saw that if I just continued to follow the road I would end up at the suspension bridge, and just to the left of the bridge there seemed to be some sort of public garden – perfect! As I turned to set off...

\*\*\*

Dear Lisa,

I can't write this anymore, sorry. Yes, it's true, my bike has given me a sense of freedom and childhood and it's been an anchor for me when I've felt incredibly horrible. And yes, it is a lot like a romance; I was going to write this as a relationship arc, moving through all the phases from "Romance and Adventure" to "The Mundane" then "Neglect" and finally "Rediscovery". But I just can't do it. I'm too sad. I want to write honestly.

I feel like shit because a few days ago I saw my ex-boyfriend with another girl. I sat there and cried all over the boy I was currently seeing and got lipstick on his yellow jumper. I pulled him aside to tell him that I'm obviously not over my ex and that I know it's really unfair for us to carry on seeing each other. At first I thought he would be furious and have a go at me for toying with his emotions, but he was so lovely that he calmed me down and we agreed to be friends. It's wonderful that we can actually do that and he's extremely nice, but here's the thing: I just want to be in love. Not with him necessarily, just with anyone.

I'm acutely aware of the fact that no matter how mature I try

to be I'm actually just a teenager and I think about boys all the time. Sometimes I think about them so much that I forget the entire world outside and all it has to offer. Why are romantic relationships the prime subject that's reinforced in our upbringing? Of course there's the whole fairytale debate, and all the movies and TV shows and magazines and songs, but there's also the fact that most kids have this idea in their heads that families consist of a married mum and dad who are in love, and their love makes babies and then those babies grow up to fall in love and get married and have more babies and so on. This cycle is more ingrained in me than the rain cycle or my period cycle or even my own fucking bicycle that was meant to reconnect me to the outside world.

My parents weren't even married but for some reason it was always a given that when I grow up I shall one day be married to the perfect person and we'll love each other forever. I mean seriously – the idea of marriage is so strong that it transcends religion and race and all that other good stuff. I think there are probably more people out there who believe in the concept of marriage than the concept of evolution. When I ask people about it their defense always revolves around the word love; well I'd like to know why we place so much faith in a word that nobody knows how to define properly anyway. And that's what it is isn't it? Faith. Worse, it's blind faith in a word with no concrete meaning. Babies come into this world and everyone expects them to fall in love without even knowing what the word means. People follow Love like they follow God.

I don't want to be like that! I don't want to be just another romance peddler selling my wares to the next generation. I want to pour myself into art and learning and have big conversations and be a contributing member of society. I want to be a caring, knowledgeable person whom people can trust and lean on. I want to cook and ride my bike and travel and read and listen and play. I want to understand myself and my body, and I want to know how to jump into social situations as well as pull out of them when I need to. I have all these goals in my head and I try so hard to be this person but of course it's a continuous process and right now I'm nowhere near where I want to be because I'm in constant emotional turmoil about love.

This piece was meant to be about how riding my bicycle sort of replaced the indoctrination of love with a definition that is more substantial and measurable and empowering. This was a paragraph I had written:

“When I push my feet on the pedals all the other lovers strip away and I become a streaking ribbon under the fruit trees. The countless hours I’ve spent wondering if some lad is ‘into’ me, or if I’m pretty enough, or smart enough, or too pretty, or too smart, or too clingy as a girlfriend – it all washes away and in its place comes a red flush in my cheeks. I’d choose that tired, warm redness over my schoolgirl blush any day.”

Now don’t get me wrong, this and the thousand words I wrote before breaking into my rant are just as honest as the letter that follows, and perhaps if the incident with my ex hadn’t happened I would have written a beautiful essay with lots of imagery and fairytale language. But even though cycling can be an escape from petty obsession, I can’t bring myself to change my present mood and lie through the rest of the pages just because there’s a deadline. I have to be mindful of my authenticity as a writer, especially since I’m writing about myself.

One of my lecturers put it best when he was talking about weird 20th century music. He acknowledged that a lot of the music that came out in the 20th century did sound really “crappy” in comparison to Haydn and Mozart and Beethoven and what not. There was virtually never a key or tonal language and a lot of the music was mathematically generated and featured mechanical screeches with no real “form” as we know it. When we complained about having to study music that didn’t even sound like music, he said that for those musicians it was pointless to try and write like Mozart because it would have been a complete, frilly lie. It was after all around the time of WWII, so carrying on musical conventions just didn’t seem right. Of course, in terms of horribleness I’m not comparing my teenage love-sickness with the holocaust, but I now see where those 20th century musicians were coming from.

For me, the pain stems from two things. The first is simply the fact that I’m not in love at the moment and nobody loves me in a romantic way. The second, and perhaps worse, is that I can float outside of myself and recognize that I have a beautiful life with so much else to be thankful for and look forward to, but instead of feeling thankful or excited I’m almost consumed by the idea of falling and staying in love. I’m able to separate feeling and logic, but despite knowing what is logical to feel my whole being is controlled by raw emotion. So I could sit down and write out everything that’s right in my life, and I could read and paint and sing, but at the end of the day my

stomach just wants to thrash about like a washing machine to the sound of a rollercoaster named love.

Since I'm able to separate emotion and logic, I also realize that feeling this way is an important part of being my age. There is something to be said for the poetic tumultuousness of emotion that comes with adolescence. I never want to completely shield myself from feeling things and lose the ability to let myself be vulnerable in love, whatever that may mean. My hope is that I can one day find a balance between feeling with my brain and thinking with my heart. With that in mind I decided to get a tattoo on my right hip; a tattoo that symbolizes balance but also freedom and childhood joy.

It was of course, a bicycle.

... *From Issue 7.*

Jessica Jane Draper

## The Lady in the Blue Scarf

The lady in the blue scarf lures me in; the epitome of a character that has emerged directly from the navy pool of an author's spilt ink amongst endless sheets of scribbled and torn paper; the only hint of her origins coming from the liquid appearance in the silk that hangs around her shoulders. Indeed it seems anything that touches her would forever be stained. She travels past me in a manner suggesting that I, and everybody else, simply cease to exist. Walk would be the wrong word to describe her, as that would suggest a purpose or a destination; instead she merely wanders, as if she is not quite sure how she ended up here – dropped directly into the centre of a narrative and oblivious to the prologue.

She's hollow, like a porcelain doll, her movements simply a result of the puppet master concealed within the whites of the wind, tugging at strings here and there to deceive the onlookers into thinking she is an ordinary, thriving human being. Her existence wholly crafted by the spirit of a young girl who never really had the chance to grow up, trading reality for the sublime offer of forever existing within the withering spine of a fairy-tale book. The rhythmic motions of her scarf, fluttering in the breeze, mimic the motions of a metronome, hypnotising the audience dotted around Place de la Concorde, to whom her blue blur conducts nothing but a spectacular performance: shades of turquoise rippling down her shoulders in pirouetting layers and pulsing intervals, synchronised with the sprays of water expelled from the grandiloquent fountain behind her. She mirrors a masterpiece in such detail that she blends right into the background itself; brush strokes of aquamarine kissing the air behind her like debris from the hooves of a galloping stallion; melting into an antique painting that really ought to be framed in some prestigious, elderly person's hallway.

However I, like a Victorian pick-pocket, slid the key to her diary into my palm and deciphered her secret: that there is nothing pretty about that scarf at all. Its beautiful blue dye has seeped into her bloodstream, polluting the fresh red. She has since had to improvise her circulation with blue paint, becoming so cold she suffocates on the frozen breaths crystallising in her airways. At first I wondered why she doesn't just get rid of the antagonistic material, but now I understand that that would be like poisoning a part of her soul. She

couldn't dispose of it without tearing a hole in herself. That scarf is sewn into her skin through many reluctant and blunt needle points, a constant struggle throughout her life to shed this repressive coating like a snake during ecdysis. She is now an ornate patchwork quilt of all the unfortunate colours life has offered her.

As she wanders out of sight I was overcome with an urge to follow her, to devour more of the way she blends brokenness into beauty, moulding her bitter shards into a polished sculpture as though she had inhabited the traits of some high-end glass blower. Yet I opted out in fear of tripping over the sapphires of melancholy she dropped behind her like a luxury re-enactment of the Tales of Hansel and Gretel. So instead I sat, and watched, like an art enthusiast at some expensive French gallery, and slipped one of the fragile sapphires into my back pocket: a souvenir of the broken lady in blue.

... *From Issue 8.*



## Maggie Drury

### Put Off Your Maiden Blushes

*'put off your maiden blushes'* (Shakespeare: *Henry the Fifth*. Act V Scene 11)

The Cold War casts a shadow over the girls who lounge in the dusty classroom where Kate writes in a notebook fastened with multi-coloured threads *how is it to be so afflicted that your affliction afflicts others*; Kate lacks the confidence of her peers who are high performers in Chemistry and Latin, and who in the gymnasium pound like horses over the horse and shin with ease up ropes to reach the top.

Yet Kate blights their lives.

*How they squirm at their desks*, she writes.

A challenge is set — no prospect of failure, only recognition and praise for what will be a magnificent production of *Henry The Fifth*. 'Now all the youth of England are on fire' enflamed by intrigue, murder and ambition and by the plots and battles of Shakespeare's Dukes and Earls. The 'A' graders are overcome with enthusiasm and in their excitement Kate's affliction is overlooked and she is cast as the French Soldier. *This will be my opportunity*, she writes. *I must not fail*.

They (who should have voted for Macbeth) huddle like witches, Kate will struggle with words not of the English language, a mistake has been made; why does she not put off the blush that draws attention to what they cannot understand. 'The traitors are agreed', they have no choice but to rob her; the Soldier is not for Kate. Kate's dearest friend imparts the news, 'but with forced affection'.

In the French lesson it's Kate's turn to read. The 'A' graders *squirm at their desks*.

'But the French are bravely in their battles set', and Kate's voice is clear, rising and falling with no hint of mother tongue. The blushing girl is stealing their glory with an impeccable accent. No one dares to breathe. She has stepped into another's skin, quelling the fire, leaving her cheeks cool, her lips moist.

The teacher compliments her.

The conspirators' tongues are tied.

*Henry the Fifth* slips away. 'all our ranks are broke'.

Kate slides her notebook between *A Thief's Journal* and *Brave New World*. And the Cold War rolls like a long grey cloud over the room where teenage girls, wearing uniforms they have yet to grow into, sit on chairs that are a little too small, at desks that are a little too big.

yet sit and see  
minding true things by what their mockeries be'

... *From Issue 2.*

**Matt Duggan**

## **The Bleaching**

God became an octopus for the year  
erased all the colour from coral  
turning bright algae into Neptune's trees -  
bleaching our carbon sink into a black and white sea floor  
warming our blue oceans with lips of oil and boiled coves;

when my arms challenge the sea into weights of serpentine  
faces with tongues silent and talking  
they say a lot yet say nothing that stimulates -  
that's when I start to feel like Vincent Vega  
driving down a highway in *Pulp Fiction*;

every distraction is a personal fabrication  
it's as if envy and truth were a small bird -  
digitalised into a beast without any human functions;

its wings clipped by the sharp edge of dead earth -  
when arms grasp every sour refusal;  
deniers will never see clearly through glass  
though they will point out the small smears  
that block them from seeing any semblance of truth.

... *From Issue 12.*

**David Dykes**

**aubade sonnet**

who's more beautiful than you in our bed  
in the morning when your face's serene  
as a still glassy lake, your chest moving  
like heat off a bonfire  
churning devotion from my nervous system  
in soft insistent electricity  
picking up the hair on my back as  
sunlight creeps between the curtains

this afternoon we walk in the shadow  
of ivy-clad walls at some great estate

I feel young and significant,  
that the world was meant to have me in it,  
and we come back to our house still cold  
and warm our bodies with turmeric-rich soup

*... From Issue 15.*

**Michael Eades**

## **The Pools**

In the park close to where I live there are three pools. It is a normal, everyday South London park and these are artificial pools that form part of a small ornamental garden.

A sign in the garden explains its origins. 'The Rock Garden was created in 1913', it says, 'as part of the new design by the London County Council. The layout, with the water cascade flowing down one side of the entire site, was in keeping with the Edwardian fashion for informal woodland planting mixed with "exotics"'.

The pools were created in 1913 by London County Council for occult purposes, for the benefit of the community.

There are three pools, which form a sequence.

One pool is for wishing.  
One pool is for washing.  
One pool is for drowning.

This is how the sequence works.

### **The Wishing Pool**

The highest of the pools is the wishing pool. On clear mornings and on bright, moonlit nights in the spring people come here to throw loose change and tokens into the water. There is a custom, unique to South London, of throwing old copper coins and oyster shells into the pool. People throw them in, watch them sink in clear water, and make a wish.

If you come here at the right time - perhaps on Ascension Day or Rogationtide - you can witness it. A crowd gathers and begins chanting, whispering, making incantations. The surface of the pool is disturbed by strange reflections. Looking in, you can see the waters swirl and ripple. You can watch the waters turn anti-clockwise in a strange current, and flashes of fire leap up from the copper thrown in.

In the spring, by the side of a wishing pool, anything feels possible. Looking into that water, you will feel something change. In a flash, a twinkling of an eye, it will happen: your wish is granted.

## **The Washing Pool**

Next in the sequence is the washing pool. Actually, it isn't one pool at all. It is two small pools linked together, spilling down over rocks in a cascade of cool, fresh water. These date back to this park's time as a Spa, back in the nineteenth century. This is where the community come to wash. On warm days in the summer, every morning and at dusk, a procession arrives here. Women, children, older men and younger ones, too. They come here to dip hands, feet and foreheads in the cool waters.

Cautiously, reverently, with great ceremony, the community wash together in a ritual that relies on bringing their skin into contact with the mineral rich waters of South London.

These are medicinal waters, cool and clear. Every palmful is scented with flower petals and the smell of cedar. This is a place to communally wash and cleanse: a place where the current is narrow and the waters flow a little faster.

Visit here during the hottest days of summer, when the Dog Star rises in coincidence with the sun. Washing here at that time leaves a residue in the water. Warm currents wash away little fragments of life and memory. Moments of time wash away under soft hands. A little piece of yourself is left behind in the water.

## **The Drowning Pool**

The last pool is the drowning pool. This is the lowest, darkest and the deepest of the three. The pool is covered year-round by green lichen and disturbed only by the slowest currents. This is where the overflow from the other pools collects. This is the end point of the ornamental, ritual cascade.

No one knows exactly how deep it is, but a glance at the green surface tells you that this is a long drop. Immersion in this pool is a long plunge into deep, cold depth.

Every year on the eve of the Winter Solstice someone is drowned here. Paraded through the streets, wrapped in holly and dead sticks, draped in thorns and berries, they are brought here to the gardens. They are thrown into the water that is covered in lichen and dead leaves, and into that water they disappear.

They are a victim, a sacrifice of sorts, but they go into the water happily and willingly enough. The pool welcomes them, makes

it easy. It opens up and closes around them with barely a ripple – making the whole process painless and quick. Members of the community stand around, watch, and depart without saying a word.

This is a drowning pool: the easiest, swiftest pool in which to drown.

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These are the three pools of my local South London park. Three pools, which form a sequence, surrounded by exotic plants. Three pools refracting different patterns of light at different times of the year. They were built in 1913 by London County Council for occult purposes, for the benefit of the community.

One pool is for wishing.  
One pool is for washing.  
One pool is for drowning.

This is how the sequence works. This is how the year is refreshed.

... *From Issue 13.*

**Setareh Ebrahimi**

## **Graveyard Girl**

Cut by the corn  
I make a line  
for the tombs like teeth,  
leaning towards each other  
like tired lovers,  
like my own damaged  
through satanic dreams.

The angels meditate  
mostly without witness,  
still mustering some holiness and awe.  
There is an unquietness  
to their pupil-less eyes  
that make the gaze stubborn  
in case they fit  
when one looks away.

The still church  
behind the swaying, golden yield  
seems a lunatic's backdrop,  
an inoffensive slide in a procession.  
The papers said she streaked  
through the grass,  
but she doesn't know  
what it is to live like us.

Then there's the violet sea  
full of every genus of bee.  
Such surroundings make us beautiful.  
Not even love could make me relinquish  
this hard fought for,  
fragile peace.



I make myself a guardian, a ghost.  
At night the graveyards stretch for miles  
and unseen corners of town are found  
despite years of habitation.  
Exciting isolation manipulates  
either the mind or the physical world.  
The inner sanctum is preserved.

Bats fly low  
and after the main gate is locked,  
I get home via the pet cemetery,  
lit up here and there with kitsch  
in pinks and peach,  
each light an individually nurtured relic  
of humanity.

... *From Issue 6.*

**Jo Eden**

**Antimacassar**

At 4 in the afternoon, precisely,  
By the carriage clock on the mantle-piece  
A cream floral crocheted antimacassar drops  
From the wooden arm  
Of the stiff-backed sitting-room settee  
Onto the oriental rug, without a sound.

The mother jumps nervously from her perch  
By the door  
Bends with a sigh  
Plucks, places and fidgets the offending item  
Into strict symmetry with its twin.

Nets hang in a stupor at the bay window  
Not daring to let in the Sabbath sun.  
The fire in the grate is stifling.  
The room is airless. "Drafts are irritating."

Taking care not to take up too much room.  
The little girl crouches in a corner of the settle.  
She laughs too long and loud  
At something said  
Beyond her years.

Her gaze slides  
To the porcelain ballerina  
On the window ledge  
Dressed in a pale blue tutu  
Caught poised on one fragile leg.  
She notices a small jagged join  
On the dancer's outstretched arm  
Where the hand snapped off at the wrist  
And was re-attached.

She can't remember when.

Murmuring desultory small talk fades her into the background...  
She waits..  
Dreams....  
Waits...  
She wakes...  
And starts to speak...  
“The grown-ups are talking!” snaps the father.  
She cringes.

“Oh well, I forgot what I was going to say, anyway, it can’t have  
been important” she tells herself.  
And bites very hard into a pungent pilchard sandwich.  
As she forces each mouthful down her gullet,  
She has no awareness of the crumbs  
Cascading onto the patterned rug.  
“Get a plate!” says the father, “You’ll spoil the carpet.”  
She snaps shut, spinning unshared worlds inside her mind,  
in silence.

At 4.30 in the afternoon, precisely,  
By the carriage clock on the mantle-piece  
A cream floral crocheted antimacassar drops  
From the wooden arm  
Of the stiff-backed sitting-room settee  
Onto the oriental rug, without a sound.

*... From Issue 4.*

**Barry Fentiman Hall**

**Metro Beat**

Tyne blurred and teared  
From the high level  
I looked away  
To see the inside track  
Laddered and lassed  
This human train  
Of beating hearts  
Chatter about dancing  
And the old girl sits down  
Through Pelaw and Felling  
90 today she half glows  
From the last of the sun  
In this stadium of light  
Meat with eyes I hang  
My breath sticking  
On the wear  
Like a leaf in the throat  
I rise an inch and fall  
Tidal  
Regain my river feet  
Count my senses  
Tell myself  
It does not end  
Here

*... From Issue 7.*

## Caroline Fox Betts

### Between

I try not to step on the cracks in the pavement. I know it's only superstition. I learned it sometime when I was a child – a long time ago, but now I know it, it would be bad luck. It seems impossible to unlearn things. Now I try not to step on the cracks in the pavement.

*After the birth of our second son, my husband started to behave strangely...*

Paving slabs are like moments. I move from one to the next, and between moments, there are spaces. No-one ever talks about the spaces. It's as if they don't exist, but they have to for moments to be separate. I think there are caverns between moments.

*...I asked him, I said, 'What's the matter? Is there something the matter?' But he didn't answer.*

Every year, in the field next to our cottage, the farmer planted barley. When the earth was ploughed, it looked like my dad's brown corduroy. Furrows are spaces. Seeds are buried alive while they're sleeping. When they started to grow, it made the field stripy-green. My tortoise escaped into that field.

*...I asked him if he was having an affair. He hesitated and said, 'No'. He punched the wall. It left a dent in the plaster.*

Once, when I was thirteen, I was walking to the village shop, avoiding the cracks in the pavement. I knew where each one was by heart. I was walking to the village shop, when I saw the Vicar's son riding on his bike towards me. I fancied the Vicar's son, but we'd never met. I glanced up at him as he approached, but tried to keep my eyes on the pavement. As he passed, he spat. It splattered over my face. I wiped it away with my sleeve. Tears came. I didn't understand why he did it. I never told anyone.

*...I was frightened of our silence and what was in it. So I didn't ask my husband again. I waited and watched.*

Sometimes, in the bath, I slide my head under the surface and lie very still. I think about drowning, about Virginia Woolf, about unborn babies swimming in wombs like aquariums. I lie very still and hear my heart throbbing in my ears. When I was newly married, we lived in a flat in an old house. If I lay under the bathwater there, I could hear strange tapping and ringing sounds. The plumbing gurgled like the intestines of a monster. The tiles were white and cold. They had grouting between them.

*...I felt my husband was unhappy and wished I could make him another life.*

There were deneholes in the woods near our cottage. Someone told me they were deep; that they led to underground caves. I used to dream of climbing down using vines and ferns as handholds. I wanted to bring back a stalactite. *Stalactites hold on tight. Stalagmites grow below.* I didn't know about Orpheus then. Sometimes groups of climbers walked past our cottage. They had spiked boots and great loops of rope on their backs. When the foot-and-mouth came, my brother told me the farmer threw dead cows down the denehole. He said there was a dead car down there too.

*...My husband used to come back late and sit, staring at the TV with glazed, dead eyes. He was growing fat.*

When I worked in London, I travelled on the Underground. A voice on the tannoy used to say, *Mind the gap!* It made me worry. I wondered if many people had lost a foot, letting it slip into the gap. I used to stand well back behind the line of kerbing, my feet pressed tight against each other and shoes lined-up as if they were still in a window display. When I heard the train coming, I felt a cringing between my shoulders, as if something unseen were going to push me.

*...He wasn't doing any work. That's when I started to feel cross. This isn't a partnership, I thought. But I didn't say anything.*

A girl at school had a gap between her front teeth. It was a big gap and her teeth stuck out. We used to tease her. I never thought to feel sorry for her. I was just glad it wasn't me. She wore her hair in pigtails, and we called her Goofy. Madonna has a gap between her teeth, but it doesn't seem to worry her. I felt sorry for the girl with the stutter, though. Her words were all trapped in spaces.

*...I put my wedding dress in a black bin-liner and outside the front door. He walked past it for five days before the dustmen took it away. I did it out of spite. He didn't know.*

Sometimes when I read, there are words between the printed ones. I can't see them on the page, but I know they're there. I can hear them in my head. They make pictures of other things. I like those spaces. I wish I could lift the words and look under them, like lifting a paving slab to look for shiny black beetles. I can remember the place on a page where certain phrases are, but sometimes I forget the things I've said and done. A book is a special secret place. You go there alone.

*...I opened a little gift shop, so we could earn more money. I sold fringed silk scarves, hand-carved boxes and incense. I thought perhaps he'd like to work with me. Maybe he was fed-up with his job.*

On Brighton Pier the slats had gaps through which you could see the sea. I went there when I was fifteen. A boy was looking at me and I smiled at him. I walked along to the very end. When I looked in my compact, the wind had turned my lips blue. It was June. As I came back, trying not to look through the gaps, the boy stopped me and asked if I wanted a date. I'd never been with a boy before. That night, I wore pink hotpants and platform shoes. After the disco, things went too far in the back of his car. Walking home, it hurt in the place between my legs. I refused to see him ever again.

*...At a party my husband danced with a blonde woman. His hands were around her waist. Everyone was looking at me.*

In the garden of our cottage was a cast iron pump. It was old and broken. The well had been turned into a cesspit. I never walked over the lid. I couldn't imagine a worse death. A lorry used to come and pump it out. One year, some birds made a nest in the pump. They flew in and out of the spout. My father was a goldsmith. The door to his workshop was near the old pump. There was a brick path. One day, after my father left for good, I was weeding the gaps and some cabochon garnets came up with the roots.

*...I thought it was quite amusing really. She didn't know what she was getting into.*

Someone should invent a mirror that turns our image the right way round. Then we would see ourselves as others do. It's weird

that the brain corrects the eyes from seeing everything upside-down. It does it without our ever knowing. What else does our brain edit? Perhaps there are things it doesn't want us to see – things in the spaces that move between the things we see. Perhaps it protects us from something. I like to watch people in a crowd and wonder what's in the spaces between them.

*...He came home with a new car on HP. The mortgage was in arrears.*

My brother and I made a camp in the woods. We dug out a pit as deep as our height. We made a roof out of branches and dead leaves. I used to collect skeleton leaves. I wove a mat of green reeds. I used to talk about running away and living there. We made a little stove with bricks, and a chimney through the roof with an old drainpipe. We cooked chestnuts and gave ourselves bellyache. We made alcoves in the walls – stood a candle in one and a giant pinecone in the other. We didn't mean it to be a trap.

*...I was frightened to lose my home. I needed it for the children. It took such a long time to make it nice.*

I think about the floorboards in my old house. My skin and hair will still be there, trapped in cracks. When we moved there, we had to have new joists, and took the floorboards up to do it. Under them we found a silver sixpence and two black pennies stamped with Queen Victoria's head. There was a broken clay tobacco pipe too. I guess now there are pieces of Lego. And lots of pins.

*...I phoned his friend. I was crying. I said, 'I think he's having an affair.' His friend paused. I wanted him to reassure me, but he didn't. He said he'd try to find him.*

I used to run-away a lot. I missed my mum and didn't like my stepmother. No-one explained about the Eleven-plus. We had to do it in two sittings. I was in the second group. A girl came out and said to me, 'Just put dashes against everything. Then they let you out sooner.' So I did. I put dashes in all the spaces. My best friend and I thought we'd go on to the same school. That summer holiday was a real scorcher. It turned me ripe like the nuts and berries. It seemed like it would never end. I sat on the hill overlooking our cottage and listened to skylarks. I knew all the names of the wild flowers. I never saw her again.



*...Later that day, his brother called. He asked if he could come and pick up clothes.*

There's a missing curtain hook in my bedroom. In the morning, the light shines through and makes a beam. In the beam I can see dust motes flitting around each other. I used to think they were tiny fairies. I wish they were. Sometimes I lie late in bed with my hands linked behind my head. I blow at the motes. It drives them crazy. I have blue dragonflies around my lampshade.

*...When his brother came, he said my husband had been crying. I gave him his saxophone. I thought playing it might console him.*

Once, my brother and I pushed through brambles and found a clearing with a larch tree. The leaves were like hundreds of green tassels. Under the tree was a crumpled old magazine. It had pictures in it of naked women. They made my brother laugh. Some of the pages were torn out. I used to like cutting things out of magazines. I'd arrange the cut-outs on the coffee table to make stories. It made the magazine full of spaces like negative silhouettes. My brother liked pictures of cars.

*...The next morning when I woke, I was full of angry energy. My eyes in the mirror startled me. Two weeks passed and I heard nothing. I can't remember what I said to the children.*

When I walked to my school, I had to pass a big graveyard. I used to run my hand along the railings. I liked the sound. Somewhere in there was the grave of my uncle. I squeezed between bent railings and tried looking for it once. He was only a baby. My dad said he was born blue. Some of the graves were overgrown. Some of them had plastic flowers that were faded and dirty. In the churchyard were tombs like big stone boxes. There were carved skulls and gargoyles. Sometimes a lid would be dislodged. My brother dared me to look inside, but I never did.

*...After that, I took off my rings. They left a white indent in my skin.*

When I was young, and turned out the light, I jumped into bed from the farthest distance. It was because of a hand under the bed, waiting to grab my ankle. There was an upright piano in our bedroom. Its keys were like a big set of grinning teeth. I had some lessons and used to practise a lot. I'd started to compose my own tunes. One day I came back from school and it had

gone. My stepmother never told me why.

*...I moved to the other side of the bed. I slept in the space.*

When I couldn't sleep, I took my big black dog and walked through the dark streets. His paws trod soft and silent. His toes spread with his weight so there were gaps between them. He didn't mind walking on cracks. My footsteps echoed in the empty streets. When it rained, the orange streetlights shimmered like sunsets on the wet tarmac. Sometimes my dog looked up in my face as if he wanted a question answered.

*... My husband used to put his arms around me and lift me from the ground.*

Perforations make it easy to detach reply-slips. The road markings remind me of perforations. If you cross them at the wrong time, you might get posted, or find yourself in empty space. I drive as carefully as I can, and I don't tread on cracks in the pavement. An accident is when someone slips on their moment. Yes, things go wrong in spaces. Between the words that people speak are all the things they're really saying.

*...I met a man who plays 'Samba Pa-ti' on the strings of a red guitar. I think it's his heart, worn on the outside. There are no words, but I understand every phrase he plays.*

*... From Issue 13.*

**John Freeman**

## **Catching Flies**

A fruit fly perhaps it is, I'm not sure,  
though why it's floating up here in the bedroom  
where we sometimes have a biscuit with our tea  
but never any fruit, I don't know. I reach up  
and try to catch it in my hand. Suddenly  
I'm back at that one-off occasion last month  
in another country and a world away,  
when after a long day out together  
that man whom we'd all just met and that woman  
we've known for ever came to supper with us.  
We'd eaten earlier but saved them something.  
We had a general conversation about life  
and politics around that rented table.  
It was enlightening not so much about  
ideas as disclosing personality,  
nuances of our characters and psyches.  
I didn't see any flying insects then.  
But our new friend reached up once or twice  
over the home-made soup, salad and fruit,  
to catch something. Nothing was said.  
After an interval she did the same.  
That was when I knew he had impressed her.

*... From Issue 12.*

**Kate Garrett**

## **Winter ghosts at the Old Queen's Head**

She can't tell him if the pub is haunted  
(at least not by anything other than them).

This is her first time kissing him, but feels  
like the third. He bought chips after travelling

four hours to spend two with her in a bitter  
northern wind – their love a salt-cracked joy

reflected in ice. A hole in her tights above  
the knee transfixed him; he wrote in detail

how he felt about her thighs, what a small  
patch of skin under fingertips brought to life

inside, how it reanimated dead dragging desire.  
In time she sees the walk-on character she was:

a little asteroid in orbit – he couldn't accept  
she had her own source of light. Something like

Venus in the dark of morning; when longing  
is the burn of frostbite, empty shadows on a pillow.

*... From Issue 12.*

you don't deserve  
a poem written about you,  
and nobody cares how much you like the backs of girls' necks.  
i told myself  
it didn't count because i wasn't scared  
i told myself  
not to tell anyone  
because your wife would ask why and you wouldn't be able to tell her.  
i could have been the biggest mistake you've made.

\*

two girls on the bus  
are discussing being handcuffed.  
i wonder if they know  
that they are performing  
this knowledge,  
caught halfway between lust and pity.  
that feeling is something you can only pretend to know.

\*

adulthood  
is like a suit that's too big.  
it's got someone else's name stitched into it  
and it doesn't fit.  
it's too loose in the arms, and you look stupid.

\*

i dream of getting stuck in the lift with you  
or of being in your car and it breaking down  
and we have to talk to each other.  
i'm imagining an excuse to put my hand on your shoulder,  
or just for once to touch your face.

\*

you are shoving handfuls of chocolate cake into my mouth. most of it  
misses and goes everywhere. i'm tired. it's not even my birthday

\*

one day the polar ice caps will have completely melted  
without warning.  
you'll wake up and there'll be nothing left.  
it will seem very sudden even though you always knew.  
there will not have been a meeting,  
and even if there was, you wouldn't have been invited.

\*

women crowd together in groups to ward it off. it happens anyway.  
there isn't a spell that could stop it,  
not one that you'd know yet.  
this is not something you can pretend to know,  
but people talk about wearing the right clothes.  
you don't remember what you were wearing,  
so it couldn't have been that bad.

\*

in my dream, nobody comes to fix the car. we sit there until the world  
ends. water rises around us.

\*

i don't feel at home in my body  
because it's always waiting for you to come back.  
the intervening years have stopped me looking like myself.  
i want to know how your teeth feel in my mouth,  
how your name feels in my mouth.

\*

you wear the right clothes. it happens anyway

\*

i am an un-nameable, un-knowable, terrible thing.  
not your nice car parked in a bad part of town or a bank vault someone left  
unlocked.  
if i had to compare myself to something, i would say that  
my body is an archive or a country with no citizens or something else  
that isn't home,  
and your hands are an illegal settlement along my contested borders.  
but i am not a tired metaphor, i am not yours, i am not the reason you are  
doing this.

\*

i want to read you like a poem.  
your body is a poem,  
the shape of your arm when you shave in the morning,  
your knuckles,  
your stomach.  
i want to have you.

\*

you begin to wonder if there ever were polar ice caps or if you just  
made those up.

... *From Issue 11.*

**Sam Hall**

## **Snegurotchka**

It's Christmas Eve. Mummy stands looking at a piece of paper stuck to the door of the place where Grandpa lives. It's too high up for me to read, although Ms Turner at school says I'm doing brilliant with my reading. I'm cold, so I tug at Mummy's sleeve.

'What are you looking at Mummy?'

'Let's go in and see Dedushka,' she says.

I run down the corridor leading to Grandpa's door. The new lady, the pretty one, comes out, carrying a pile of sheets. She smiles at me. I like this one. I hope she stays a long time. A lot of the people who work here don't stay very long.

Mummy says, 'It's sad news about Mrs Johnson,' to the pretty lady.

The pretty lady nods, 'Da, yes... but it was peaceful and what a beautiful day to leave us, with the frost on the trees, and the gifts of tomorrow nearly here,' then she turns her head back to Grandpa who is sitting in his favourite armchair, and says something to him that Mummy and I don't understand. I'm learning Russian so I can talk better to Grandpa and he won't feel so lonely now Daddy doesn't come see him so much. I speak a few words already, but the lady and him talk so fast.

'There's going to be snow later, but that scarf looks toasty warm!' She smiles so I can see her teeth. She looks so white, I wonder if she's feeling cold. But her eyes are sparkly bright blue and her lips are red.

Grandpa isn't allowed to have a tree in his room now. Not after what Daddy called 'the incident' a few years ago. I was too little to remember, but Marya told me the fire was caused by too many lights and it was a lucky escape.

Daddy is coming for Christmas dinner tomorrow, and we are going to come and get Grandpa too. Mummy says that I can open one present tonight, Christmas Eve, but I have to wait to open the rest till Daddy and Grandpa are there. I wonder about where the presents are hiding. Mummy hasn't put the tree up yet, she said there was no time this year, but we're going to do that when we get home so that it's there tomorrow.

Mummy kisses Grandpa on the cheek, puts her coat and bag down, and gets out the parcel that she's brought for him. Whilst Grandpa tears open the brown paper, Mummy helps me to unwrap tears open the brown paper, Mummy helps me to unwrap my scarf from around my neck and unzip my coat.

'Are they the right colour, *Ded?*'

‘Just what I wanted,’ he says. His voice is creakier than it used to be, and his long white beard has got even longer. He looks fondly at the slippers. ‘Like the *valenki* I had when I was little. Did they cost a lot?’

Mummy shakes her head.

‘Fetch me my wallet, Ivan,’ says Grandpa. ‘In the drawer there.’

‘No *Dedushka*,’ says Mummy. ‘They’re a gift. You can wear them at Christmas dinner.’

‘Gifts... I remember when I used to give all the children presents...’ He clutches the soft grey boots to his chest and looks off into space. He’s been doing this more and more when we visit him. Mummy and me just look at each other, not knowing what to do. Sometimes Grandpa falls asleep with his eyes open. Just when we think that must be what’s happened, and we are quietly slipping our coats back on, Grandpa coughs and looks at me.

‘You’re going so soon?’

‘You’re tired, *Ded*, you dropped off. We’ll be back tomorrow and we’ll take you to ours for Christmas dinner. Get some sleep.’

‘Vanya, I have something for you. In the bureau.’

I open the door that Grandpa points to. It is stuffed full with sparkly Christmas decorations.

‘The little box right at the back,’ says Grandpa.

I gently push the glittery tinsel and the golden glass domes aside, and see the box he means. It’s got Russian words on it and is decorated in silver and blue snowflakes. I try to read the writing... ‘Sn... sna...’

‘*Snegurotchka*; the snow maiden’ Grandpa says, ‘Get her out.’

Inside the box is the beautiful doll that used to go on the top of Grandpa’s tree when he lived in the big house with chickens in the garden.

‘Take her with you. It’ll be nice to have her watch over the family tomorrow. She deserves to get some air.’

‘That’s very kind *Dedushka*,’ says Mummy. ‘She’s a real family heirloom.’

The pretty lady is standing at the out door. She sees the box I’m carrying and waves me over. Mummy is talking to another lady about tomorrow and Grandpa not having his Christmas dinner there.

‘There she is’ says the pretty lady, ‘I haven’t seen this little one for a long time.’ She takes the box, opens the lid and looks



at Snegurotchka. She hands it back to me. 'Do you know the story of the Snow Maiden?'

I shake my head. 'One of the things she does is she helps *Ded Moroz*, you know, Grandfather Frost, to grant New Year wishes... Make a wish when you put her on your tree, it might come true...'

Mummy calls me over. The snow is coming down outside, so she makes sure my scarf is wrapped up round my ears.

When we get back home, I put the box with Snegurotchka in on the dining room table. She has curly yellow hair and blue eyes – just like the pretty lady. That lady doesn't have a sparkly crown and that lady wears the short red top and black trousers that everyone who works there wears, but if she had a long silver dress with blue snowflakes on it, I know she would look just like this doll.

I try to tell Mummy, but she's chopping vegetables ready for tomorrow's dinner. Marya is supposed to be doing her holiday homework, then helping us to decorate the tree. She is lying on her bed with her headphones on.

'Marya, Marya, I want to show you something.'

'What is it brat?' she asks.

If Mummy starts telling Marya off for calling me brat, Marya says that she meant '*moy brat*' which means 'my brother' in Russian. But I don't think that Marya is really practising her Russian.

'Come and see!'

'I'm busy, brat,' she says shutting the door.

I stand right next to it and shout 'But Grandpa gave me a doll, and she's just like the new lady who works where he lives.'

'Go away!' she shouts back.

Why won't they listen? If Daddy was here, he'd believe me. I know he would. I wish Daddy could still live here. I sit in my room till Mummy calls us downstairs.

The tree looks lovely. Marya even helps to put the last bits on – some chocolates shaped like Minions and wrapped in yellow foil that I picked out at the supermarket. There are the decorations that me and Marya have made at school out of silver foil and cardboard. I think my ones still look good, but some of Marya's are getting a bit battered now.

Mummy holds my legs as I climb up the ladder and put Snegurotchka on the top of the tree. I think she winks at me. But maybe it's just the flickering light from all the lights on the tree. I remember what the pretty lady told me and I

whisper my wish.

'What did you say Ivan?' asks Mummy.

'Nothing,' I say.

Just before I go to bed Mummy lets me choose one of the presents that she's put under the tree. I shake them all and then choose the biggest one. It's box shaped and feels heavy. It's new trainers. The ones I wanted. Just like Josh Henry at school but with different colour laces. I go to bed. I don't know how I'm going to sleep.

Usually on Christmas Day I wake up really early. Once, a few years ago I knew I definitely heard sleigh bells in the middle of the night, and I got up and looked out the window, but didn't see Santa. Daddy told me in Russia they have banned Santa and have Grandfather Frost instead, who is a good communist, and all the children have to wait until New Year to get their presents which Grandfather Frost delivers to their houses personally. I'm glad we don't have to wait. I have to text Josh to tell him about my trainers. But this year I am still fast asleep when there is a knock on my door and Daddy comes in wearing his big coat.

Is it still snowing?' I ask him.

'It's too cold for snow. Come on sleepy head, it's 10 o'clock. Do you want to come with me and get your Grandpa?'

Really I want to open my presents, but I say yes, because I want to spend as much time with Daddy as I can. When we get back Mummy has made the room look really beautiful. We usually eat our food in the kitchen, but when we were out, Marya has helped Mummy to move the ironing and piles of books and toys off the big table in the living room and has put candles on it. Whilst Daddy helps Mummy bring out the food, Grandpa sits in the armchair wearing his new *valenki*, watching me and Marya open our presents. I don't think his slippers are as cool as my new trainers but he says they remind him of being a little boy in Russia.

Mummy had to make a special trip to the shop in town to get them. It was ages since we'd been there. She bought pots of the creamy sour vegetable salad and jars of pickles. When Daddy lived here we used to eat them all the time, but we only have them now when we stay at his.

After Christmas Dinner, Grandpa sits in the armchair again, watching me and Marya play on the new console. Just before Grandpa starts snoring he asks me what I wished to Snegurotchka for, and I wonder how he knew.

Mummy is in the kitchen talking to Daddy. He said he would help her do the dishes, which I could tell she was happy about. Mummy looked really happy all day, which was nice, because she's looked sad for a long time. It's nice when they're not shouting. Daddy bought Mummy some of that perfume she likes, but I don't think she got him anything. Maybe she did, maybe that's what they're talking about.

When Daddy takes Grandpa back to his home, he kisses Mummy goodbye. He hasn't done that for ages. I look at Snegurotchka, sparkling at the top of the tree, and I know she smiles at me.

I wonder if they are getting back together. That was my wish to the snow maiden.

We go to see my other grandpa on Boxing Day. He lives a long way away, so we go in the car, and stay with him for two nights. When we get back, before we get out of the car, Mummy says she has a surprise for us inside, she won't tell us what, but we will find out in a minute.

It's Daddy! He's waiting for us! He has cooked us tea and has done the washing up! Mummy says Daddy and her are going to give it another go. Snegurotchka has granted my wish! Marya pretends she's not as happy as me, but I can tell she is.

Daddy has to go to work the next day, and Mummy takes us into town to look at the sales. She goes to the Russian shop and buys some smelly fish in a jar that Daddy likes, but that nobody else does. She gets a pot of fresh borsch and says we will drop it off to Grandpa.

Grandpa is acting weird when we see him. He calls Mummy Irina like my aunty who lives in Ipswich in the big house, then he forgets my name. He keeps looking out the window, saying 'I can't see her yet, I can't see her...'

When we go, Mummy gives the soup to the yellow haired lady, who winks at me and when she kisses me on the cheek to wish me Happy New Year, she whispers 'You made your wish then.' Her lips are so cold.

It has started snowing again, and my hat and coat is covered by the time we get to the car. Mummy looks puzzled, 'They didn't forecast any snow,' she says.

It is in the middle of the night when I hear a great big crash. I am really scared. Both Marya and me come out of our rooms, Daddy and Mummy are on the landing and Daddy goes downstairs.

'It's all right,' he shouts, 'Stormy has knocked the tree over. He's ok, just a bit scared.'

Daddy brings our little grey cat upstairs, Stormy is purring and doesn't seem too scared. 'He can sleep in your room if you like, Vanya.'

While Mummy cooks breakfast, Daddy tidies up the broken tree. I carry Stormy downstairs so that he doesn't get glass in his paws. Bits of glass bauble are all over the carpet and I can see that poor Snegurotchka's head has smashed in two. I wonder what that will do to my wish.

'We can glue her back together,' says Daddy. 'She's looked after this family for so long, it would be a shame if we didn't. Take the cat into the kitchen, the last thing we need now is a vet's bill.'

In the kitchen it's warm and smells of cooking. I sit at the small table and look into the garden, it's still snowing. I hope it settles, and that it stays for a week and we won't have to go to school!

'Do you want scrambled eggs, or beans?' Mummy asks.

We are eating beans on toast when Daddy's mobile rings. He answers it. Then he drops the phone to the floor and starts to cry. 'He's gone... your grandpa's passed away,' says Daddy. Mummy puts down her fork, gets up and hugs him. Then Marya starts to cry and then I do, and then we are all crying.

Mummy doesn't want me to go to the funeral, but Daddy does. I'm a big boy and I should have a chance to say goodbye.

It's snowing as we stand around the grave. I am trying not to cry, but Marya is holding my hand really tightly and it hurts. As we are walking back to the car it starts to snow again, and I look back and I see a man who looks like Grandpa but has a big blue coat on, holding hands with a yellow haired lady wearing the same clothes as the doll from the top of the Christmas tree. They wave at me, but before I have a chance to tell Mummy and Daddy and my sister to look, the snow starts falling hard and fast and they disappear behind a thick white curtain.

As we get into the car, cold and sad, Mummy shakes the snow off her hat and says 'They didn't forecast snow.'

... *From Issue 12.*

## **One Man and His Dog**

Walking the dog across mythlands, the bridge was closed off. Not wanting to address the question of gravity, in any of its iterations, I whistled one of those tunes that isn't really a tune, but which hints at the melodies of better times and of other times at which I've needed to draw a little bit of comfort from somewhere inside of myself. Though it was improvised, it seemed to have a pattern to it, and before long the dog joined in, harmonising around the edges like a bee around a buddleia. I didn't know the dog could whistle, but maybe the opportunity for such a demonstration had just never arisen. Feeling somewhat refreshed, we strolled beside the Styx, or maybe the Acheron, or the Ouse, like Orion and Canis Major or Tintin and Snowy; and I took photographs of sunken villages and the spires of Atlantis, while the dog eyed hares in the undergrowth, both of us whistling call-and-response riffs as if we were Asphodel's house band loosening up for the night. There are bridges between worlds as well as verses, but all we wanted was a bridge to the other side – simple stones and slabs. My mouth was dry from whistling, but by the time we reached a small cairn with a hare perched on top, the dog had started to sing. The hare told us that all bridges were closed off, but there would be a ferry shortly. There was never an option: I let the dog go, closed my eyes, and trusted to gravity, whatever it may have meant.

*... From Issue 15.*

**Maggie Harris**

**Swimming Lessons**

For Val (1926-2021)

Thirty years after we climbed into a pool  
I'm learning to swim again. My body  
is as aged now as yours was then. Here  
there is a conservatory and rain pounds  
the roof with abandon; syncopated rhythms  
as wild as the Senagalese in Folk Week  
and I want it! I want it to give you a bloody good send-off  
because I cannot go to your funeral today.

I cannot go to your funeral today  
because I am learning to breathe, I am learning  
to hold my breath under water. I am seeking  
to become weightless, fluid; to remove myself  
from tragedy 'writ in water',  
that fluidity we sought in our poetry  
where words flowed between our gathering  
of women every month for ten years.

Every month for ten years  
reading Walcott, Heaney, Maya Angelou,  
and a tabernacle of others we tried to emulate  
whilst seeking the keys to our voices. Age  
granted you the pedestal, your memories of wartime,  
of protest, your small barbs of sarcasm,  
your sympathies with Dora Marr, our pre-occupation  
with women artists, weeping women, and wine.

I'm wishing I could hold my breath long enough  
to suspend the time that's passed, to drift  
back into those first moments you stepped down  
the ladder unassisted and not as I would see you  
that last time, the zimmer frame you leaned on, your  
acerbic wit, your body trapping instead of releasing  
you into the baptism we sought, the ability to swim  
like salmon upstream.

Time flashes as fast as a kingfisher.  
I lie head back in the water, all the weeping women  
are here. The only thing missing is champagne.

*... From Issue 13.*

## Ceinwen E Cariad Haydon

### Objects in My Caravan

Did you know  
objects are bells  
tongues chime memories  
now and at the hour of our passing?  
Two china mugs  
extravagantly floral tasteless  
bought to augment the paltry supply  
at a coastal holiday let  
then brought to our hillside site  
when we were lithe enough  
to walk for miles then make love.  
My stitched textile collage  
framed and hung from a time  
before I was driven enslaved  
to writing words. Silks and cloth  
sore unthimble fingers  
made me think again  
examine drifted hours of days of life.  
Silver moon earrings  
winked eyefuls  
through their shop window  
one late afternoon in Kelso's back lane.  
Love tokens a pair bought for me  
before nights broken by snores  
meant separate sleeping arrangements  
with no way back to coupled comforts.  
Oils smeared on canvas  
picture shelved pelmet high  
a jester's stained face stares  
painted by a young man's hand  
skin scarred by burns gas exploded  
frenzied self-harm  
matches lit by madness twelve months on  
finished before he began.

Portable beach stools never used  
sit roofed on my wardrobe  
under worn suitcases  
patterned with dead flies and dust  
testament to impulsive pointlessness  
mark of my many mindless buys.  
Organic lubricant hidden in a drawer  
no longer needed though I'm still sore.  
Courvoisier limited edition  
catches sundown's glow  
rich with temptation  
bottled elegance  
and fire  
drink I've vowed I'll avoid  
for my liver's sake. Those promises  
I'll break today dream and think of you  
gone before waiting beyond my threshold  
our final endings old yet nearly new.

Did you know  
objects are bells  
tongues chime memories  
now and at the hour of our passing?

... *From Issue 10.*





*'Side by Side... The Mugs' by Michi Masumi*

**Sarah Hehir**

## **Porcelain**

Mixed by an alchemist,  
with all the prized magic  
of exotic origins:  
eggshells and the shells  
of umbilical fish.

Their own origins –  
his the lanes of Limerick,  
hers Scunthorpe's steely breath –  
have brought them to this:  
this place,  
this date.

And what they hold,  
fragile and precious,  
is the making of a marriage  
come of age

with years of infusing myths,  
inventing and reinventing  
the etching in of imperfections –  
a dizzying, crazy-making dance  
between pilfering and piracy  
and the bounty of spice and silken threads.

But now, washed by salty sea  
they stand, with sand beneath their feet  
and sky above  
and find a place,  
unglazed, unspoilt, untouched.

Beyond the shimmer of cowry shell  
and shame of dubious trades,  
there is, and always was,  
an honest clay-like love.

*... From Issue 13.*

## Aidan Hehir

### Now?

We sit.  
We eat, we talk...  
the match,  
the girls,  
the house,  
the journey back...  
You have three knives,  
two cups of tea,  
a wooden-spoon across your plate.  
You've said it twice; you've not replied.  
We talk, again,  
again we nod...  
"long-days",  
last night,  
today.  
Moving,  
packing,  
empty rooms, picture frames.  
Your yeses that mean no.  
You take a sip, and pat the dog,  
knowing, you can't say his name.  
A skip too full,  
the piles of books,  
for you for her for him,  
for "Charity".  
The rusted tools you won't throw out.  
The mound of sodden ash.  
"Loads done... loads done!" Repeat.  
We nod, you smile;  
"Alright",  
you smile,  
"... alright".  
Then you pause  
and then you say,  
"No-one knows

what's wrong with me.”  
You sigh,  
we smile.  
You pat the dog.  
We nod again.  
Both knowing,  
I can't help.  
But once...  
... but once you said,  
“Don't let me get like that...  
like him... Not him,  
like that!  
Ok?”  
“But how?”  
“... just find a way.  
You promise? Just find a way”.  
And now, I think,  
I hear,  
the you,  
from way back then,  
shouting, crying.  
You shouting,  
“Now... Now! Christ... do it now...”.

Annette Higgs

## The Consolation of Mashed Potato

*Potato*

*From Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia.*

*The potato is a starchy, tuberous crop from the perennial nightshade *Solanum tuberosum*, native to the Americas. Common or slang terms include tater, tattie, and spud.*

Earliest memories. Mouthfuls of warm mashed potato. Sensations of heat and comfort. She's being fed the mashed potato from a bowl, mouthfuls guided to her lips on a teaspoon by a brown hand. This hand is not her mother's since her mother, young and with many mouths to feed, is busy. It's not her father's since he works long shifts at the factory. It belongs to Bert, her grandfather, who's sitting at the kitchen table. The small girl, freckled and round-faced and wiry-haired, is perched in a highchair, pinned into it by a tray. Her baby face is level with Bert's old-man wrinkles. He leans towards her as he spoons the potato, making coo-ing noises in an encouraging tone. His oval face is like a brown egg; he's tawny-coloured from working on the roads. He wears a white singlet over his chest.

Bert smooths the surface of the potato in the bowl, flattening it with the back of the spoon. He draws two intersecting lines across the top, forming four quarters. He calls these paddocks. Outside the kitchen are real paddocks, in one of which potato plants grow with undistinguished flapping leaves. In the other paddocks there are cows. The child, when grown, will remember the cows but not the potato plants. Bert says she only has to eat *one paddock* of mashed potato, and he spoons this *one paddock* gradually into her mouth. She rotates her baby jaws contemplatively. She seems to enjoy the vegetable well enough. When one paddock in the bowl is eaten, Bert begins spooning another towards her lips. She looks at his face. She'll remember this changing of the rules, just as clearly as she'll remember the warm comfort of the mashed potato.

*A raw potato is 79% water, 17% carbohydrates (88% is starch), 2% protein, and contains negligible fat.*

Susan waits for Andre in the food court, next to the new noodle place where they'd agreed to meet. She flicks through her phone, checks the time again, sighs and looks up along the concourse. He's late, by fifteen minutes. No reply to her text. He does this a lot. Susan's given up berating him about it; it makes no difference and she understands that it's about power: the power of the late person over the person committed to waiting. In the food court there's the smell of food fried in dirty fat. Susan isn't fond of noodles. Should she stay?

Then Andre's face appears, shining from amongst the approaching crowd. His usual charming excuses follow. He says he craves french fries today. She buys some for herself too, knowing she won't be able to sit opposite him and resist the salty aroma. They sit at one of the food court tables and munch their fries. She tells him she grew up eating potatoes but they never tasted like this. He wants to go to a party in the inner city. She doesn't like that crowd, their creative pretentiousness, sniffing at her because she does office work, wearing their piercings like a challenge.

"Must we?"

"Please, Sue. I want to see a guy there, pick his brains about my book. There'll be wine." He grins and wheedles. "We'll only stay for an hour." They stay for three, and she gets a headache.

*Potatoes are prepared in many ways: skin-on or peeled, whole or cut up, with seasonings or without. The only requirement involves cooking to swell the starch granules.*

Her father cultivates a vegetable garden in the backyard. The family eats green peas popped from their pods, and carrots sliced into orange discs, and sometimes pumpkin. The child, resisting these vegetables, finds them hidden under the mashed potato in her bowl. It is, she learns, a particoloured bowl of tricks. She feeds herself now, pushes the invading green peas and affronting carrot-coloured circles to one side. If her mother notices, there's insistence. All vegetables are to be eaten. It's only the comforting mash that makes this possible.

In her father's vegetable garden, food grows rampant. He works long hours amongst rows of beans and silver beet and tomatoes. Sometimes he drives to the beach to gather seaweed to spread between the rows, as fertiliser. The girl and her brothers and sisters go with him in the station wagon and run onto the cold beach, windswept and empty. They race laughing

to help haul in the seaweed. At home, there are jute sacks of potatoes in the shed. Her parents call these sacks *sugar bags*. There are also sugar bags of turnips, which her mother calls *swedes*. The girl doesn't like mashed swede. True, its amber/yellow colour is brighter than potato, but it's coarse and stringy.

When she's older, the girl comes home from school to find notes from her mother instructing her to *peel the spuds for tea*. Her mother is often out in the station wagon. As the oldest child of the family, the girl has to help with the housework. She takes six or seven dark-skinned potatoes from the wire-bottomed tray in the kitchen and tumbles them into the sink. Small clods of earth stick to the skins, remnants of the underground where these potatoes matured, tuberous in the dark. Her mother says that the eyes must be gouged out of the blind potatoes. The girl finds it a laborious job.

The sugar bags in the shed are delivered once a month on the *spud truck*. "The spuds are here!" the children call. "Susie, come and get the spuds!" This truck arrives throughout the girl's childhood, each monthly visit bringing the country to the town. The spud truck belongs to her mother's Uncle Reg, a potato farmer. Bert, her grandfather, comes with Uncle Reg each month to help. The two cinnamon-coloured men in their singlets haul sugar bags of potatoes and swedes to the households of the town, their customers. When the deliveries are complete, Bert comes in to visit the family. He brings food from the country, from his wife's kitchen, packed in his Gladstone bag.

*Potatoes form part of the traditional staple, fish and chips. Roast potatoes are commonly served as part of a Sunday roast dinner. New potatoes may be cooked with mint and are often served with butter.*

As a young woman, Susan lives in the city and goes to cafés and restaurants with boyfriends. Potato (often described as *humble*) appears in many guises. Deep-fried chips from fish-and-chip shops are wrapped in newsprint paper. It soaks up the grease. In restaurants, the mashed potato is contaminated, seventies-style, with herbs or cheese. Potato skins are offered as delicacies: those peelings which she used to take from the kitchen sink to throw on the compost heap behind the shed. She learns about *gnocchi*, and *rösti*, and potato pancakes. When she has her own kitchen, she tries these variations. She enjoys

most of them. Eating the skins still seems wrong.

*Mashed potatoes form a major component of several traditional dishes, such as shepherd's pie, bubble and squeak, and bangers and mash.*

When Bert comes on the spud truck he always brings dairy butter and date scones and other delicious country offerings. The butter comes from a dairy-woman who keeps cows. The girl has seen the dairy cows, with their black and white flanks and heavy udders, and the dairy-woman squirting the warm milk.

"You can't buy this in the shops," says her mother, salivating over the dairy butter.

Her mother buys margarine for her young family; it's recommended by the health authorities. But when the dairy butter arrives, the mother and her oldest daughter, Susan, share its golden saltiness on the scones. They giggle and act as if they're going to swoon.

The date scones that Bert brings are baked by the grandmother, who has the classical name of Echo. Echo's baking is legendary in the family. When the spud truck arrives on its monthly run, a cornucopia of fresh baked items spills from the Gladstone bag: cakes and biscuits and slices, and always Echo's specialty, the famous date scones. Bert and the girl cut open the first scone together. He has a trick: the scones lie partially unwrapped in a tea towel and his hand hovers over them.

"Now which one will I choose?" he asks, teasing. The girl, even though she's older now, tenses with anticipation.

"Which one will have the most dates?"

It's impossible to judge, from their floury exteriors, which scone will reveal the largest number of juicy date pieces when sliced open. Bert, though, has an alchemical ability to judge the date-content of his wife's scones. When he chooses a plump and promising example, Susan leans forward. Bert's scone is always full of succulent dates, and the two of them cheer.

*Being a nightshade similar to tomatoes, the vegetative and fruiting parts of the potato contain the toxin solanine and are not fit for human consumption.*

After Susan and Andre marry, he does the cooking. His parents are French; he says that the *French know food*. Friends visit for



dinner parties and Andre basks in their compliments. His wide mouth grins under his moustache. He has a handsome face. He tells funny stories. Around the table the plates are elegantly filled with aromatic meals, perhaps duck in an orange sauce or *daube de boeuf* or *coq au vin*. Wine glasses swirl red with a good Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Andre's stories are often about Susan's cooking, about her old favourite, mashed potato, and about how he, Andre, the Frenchman, has *educated her palate*.

"If there's one thing I insist on," says Andre, "it's respect for ingredients. Cooking is a sacred rite. To mash a potato is *sacrilege*." He laughs loudly.

Susan smiles with closed lips and eats the *potato au gratin*, or the *pommes de terre dauphinoise*, burying the insults with mouthfuls of buttery-cheesy potato. The flavours are golden on her tongue.

By the time their children are born, Andre is too busy to cook daily meals for the family. The first vegetable Susan feeds her little ones is mashed potato. She doesn't play the trick of the paddocks. Carrots and peas and pumpkin are offered in their own coloured dignity, not hidden in the mash. They chew with their baby teeth and seem to savour the undemanding pleasure.

*The Tattie scone is a popular Scottish dish containing potatoes.*

The first Christmas after her divorce, Susan takes the children to Christmas lunch at her mother's house. Andre will pick them up later in the day; later in the day she'll feel bereft. But for now, they're poking at the gifts under the tree and she's standing at the kitchen sink peeling spuds. Her mother is slicing parsnips and pumpkin. The turkey is in the oven, stuffed with Scarborough Fair stuffing: *parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. Remember me...*

Roasting potatoes is a different art to mashing. As with any important question, it provokes debate amongst the women in the family. To parboil? To score the white starch? To toss first in flour? Crucially—which fat to use? Goose? Duck? Or olive oil and rosemary, perhaps with garlic? For the women, the roast potato in all its many golden permutations is a joy: flavoured with herbs or lemon, soaked in meat fat or gently toasted in olive oil, drenched in a rich gravy, or savoured crisp.

"Do you remember," says Susan to her mother, "how we ate dairy butter on Echo's scones?"

Her mother's face opens with delight at the memory.

"We thought it was bad for us," she says, laughing, "but we ate it anyway."

"It probably was bad for us," says Susan, looking down at the potato peelings. It's not the dairy butter memory that brings the prickling tears.

"Probably!" laughs her mother, jolly and unnoticing. She pats her own fat stomach affectionately. "I bought goose fat for the potatoes this year," she says. "Nigella recommends it."

*Boxty pancakes are eaten throughout Ireland, although associated especially with the North, and in Irish diaspora communities; they are traditionally made with grated potatoes, soaked to loosen the starch and mixed with flour, buttermilk and baking powder.*

Susan's mashed potato acquires a certain fame in her family. Over the years she perfects the dish, develops the best wrist action for the mashing job. Later, her daughters, married and in their own kitchens, will call upon her for help, to rescue a lumpy saucepan of boiled potatoes. The real secret, she admits after a family dinner when they've poured a final glass of wine, is the butter. She recommends plenty of butter. A debate begins about the relative merits of milk or cream, but Susan insists on the butter. "Of course," she says a little sadly, "you can't get *real dairy butter* anymore."

*French fries and hash browns are commonly found in typical American fast-food burger "joints" and cafeterias.*

When Bert dies, peacefully, Susan has everyone back to her house after the funeral. She bakes date scones. Her mother sees the scones in the kitchen and a nostalgic shadow crosses her face.

"They don't look as good as Echo's."

Susan sighs. "Of course not, Mum," she says. She opens her arms to her mother and they hug. Echo died the year before.

As Bert's old friends and all his grandchildren crowd into her lounge room, Susan is in the kitchen. She's slicing open the date scones to spread them with shop-bought butter. As each floury knob falls apart under the knife she counts the pieces of date, counts her blessings, counts her memories of Bert. His

egg-brown oval face appears to her, clearly, just as she slices open a scone full of dates, full of clusters of them. It's the best of the batch.

*The potato has been an essential crop in the Andes since the pre-Columbian Era. The Moche culture from Northern Peru made ceramics from earth, water, and fire. Potatoes are represented anthropomorphically as well as naturally.*

Her adult daughters stand beside her in the kitchen and watch as she adds gob after gob of yellow butter to the potatoes. She presses and turns with a fork, fluffing up the starchy white vegetable; she splashes in milk, sprinkles a tad more sea salt from between thumb and forefinger. The heat from the boiled potatoes wafts up into their faces. The mixture transmogrifies magically, becomes smooth and creamy.

The *farmers' markets* these days, which are not run by farmers, carry varieties of potatoes displayed in generous heaps, reeking of abundance. There are often signs advising on the best potatoes for roasting or boiling or mashing. Susan doesn't bother with this superfluous advice and always looks for the great heap of dirty brown spuds. *Brushed*, the label says, but sometimes there are still clods of earth sticking to the potato skins. As far as Susan is concerned the dirtier, the better. She thrusts her hands into the heap of potatoes as she used to thrust them into the sugar bag in the shed.

*Van Gogh's 1885 painting The Potato Eaters portrays a family eating potatoes. He deliberately chose coarse and ugly models, thinking that they would be natural and unspoiled in his finished work.*

Susan's daughter dies suddenly, leaving a little one.

"Acute leukemia, they said," the distraught young widower sobs. "I can't believe she went so quickly." He can hardly raise his head.

Susan worries it was because of something she'd done, something wrong in her daughter's childhood, some *exposure*. Was it her diet, the food Susan had fed her? Andre is at the funeral; he says she's an idiot, that's diabetes, leukemia is different. Susan can't think straight and for many weeks she loses her appetite completely. When she finally begins to eat again, she puts extra butter in the mashed potato and eats it

from a bowl, sitting on the sofa with her feet curled under her.

*Potatoes were domesticated approximately 7,000–10,000 years ago.*

“I make the best mashed potato in the world,” she says to her granddaughter, teasing.

The child rolls her eyes, but is willing to accept this. She’s been fed mashed potato since she was a baby. It’s her earliest memory.

*... From Issue 11.*

**Marcia Hindson**

## **Scyphozoan Love**

Jellyfish Boy has a heart that tides see-through.  
I scavenge the flotsam he exhales to decipher dreams.  
He makes the gulls that ransack my DNA ravenous.  
I swallow his memories as though they are Smarties.  
Roll the love ones over my lips to bloom them orange.  
When he attempts to vortex, I rummage my feelings  
through his tentacles so he turns benthic under the deluge.  
I want to keep him in a jam jar with my other trinkets.  
Watch him twirl bioluminescent at night as I masturbate.  
Jellyfish Boy makes my anachronisms crest pelagic.  
I could eat him on toast with Nutella and sardines.  
He transforms my seacoal heart into mythological salt.  
And when Muir Éireann calls him back after he's done  
pulsing the estuary of my bed, I will whisper through  
forests of rhopalial, *don't swim back, don't swim back.*

*... From Issue 13.*

**Mark Holihan**

## **Camino**

(Spanish) *v.I walk; n. path, road, journey, the way*

### **1. Ablation, St Bartholomew's Hospital, London**

*"I'm afraid you will be awake  
through the procedure."*

It's only when asked to remove  
the hospital gown and lie prone  
that it becomes obvious  
you are trembling.

A crowd surrounds the gurney,  
a panel is glued to your chest,  
and you are strapped down.  
Hands place your limbs precisely,  
your leg slightly akimbo.

*"We will be going in via the  
groin artery.  
This may smart a bit."*

You feel the probe nudge its way,  
judder along inside your back, over ribs,  
and up through the heart's valves  
a 3D monitor demonstrates  
its precise movements.  
You close your eyes  
as tightly as you possibly can.

*"Don't worry,  
the heart muscle feels no pain."  
But the burning is breathtaking.  
Only after the eleventh sear and  
your gasping queries  
does the cardiologist stop.*

Unstrapped, the panel prised off,  
you are wheeled out.  
One young doctor beams with excitement,  
*"That was a once in a lifetime job.  
Never heard of anything like that one before".*  
You feel nauseous, but nod.

## 2. **Outcome**

Your heart is capricious  
after the cauterizations,  
has the rhythmic ingenuity  
of a flamenco dancer,  
fast, slow, hard, soft and stop  
for just a moment too long.  
You are left to consider the  
unimaginable distance  
to the corner shop,  
the just manageable distance  
to the bathroom and  
pause more often than you step  
as you climb the stairs.  
Most days you lie watching the sea,  
your dog snoring.  
HR comes for a visit.

It is six weeks before you can work,  
a year to learn to walk a true distance.  
On your final consultation  
the cardiologist is abrupt, dismissive,  
discharges you.  
In the carpark you are confused,  
a bit breathless as you realise  
you now have to find your own way.

*... From Issue 15.*

## Maya A Horton

### Confidential

*For Barry*

abasdmnbvndalwejfmasdna through qoqwlzfnhqlzsnwefiwav  
balsownslvalwosmzhwasclasda silence dasdlkhlafhklklaikspw  
dcvzmalasmwornvalssdkvaqoer memory adlswobvakdalskvwia  
knows aaswedhwvman its avlaskawigjlkasdkainiali in<sup>1</sup>  
direction<sup>2</sup> asdasklcvkl through alkvkasdkhwalfas the  
abyss. aswfo where<sup>3</sup> wpoa ordinarily yoyk time<sup>4</sup>  
takes its toll upon the innocent pmoz secrets<sup>5</sup>  
patterns form within erosion poqf still two stories  
there is no sense from the hard cliffs. do not climb<sup>6</sup>  
them zxyqpw their north-facing crags<sup>7</sup> are cold zqx  
and you'd<sup>8</sup> be better off alone than in such company<sup>9</sup>.  
the heathers are twisted<sup>10</sup> at the binding v of the rivers<sup>11</sup>.  
uisce. floodwater. storm-surge.<sup>12</sup> mountain roar as  
the peat turns liquid.<sup>13</sup> we, the meeting of the waters<sup>14</sup>.

WHAT THE WIND BRINGS TOGETHER

THE ROCKS TEAR APART.

<sup>1</sup>there is not only one waterfall that bounds through this tangle

<sup>2</sup>you cannot find the mountain path that way, tracing from crag to crag. it is not there. it shall be lost among the waystones

<sup>3</sup>turn your head just a little, and it shall be gone

<sup>4</sup>there in the moonlight. what remains will speak a different shape

<sup>5</sup>did you find me?

<sup>6</sup>but both waterfalls are cutting closer now, each in turn are scouring their landscapes, scraping atoms at history until gravity takes over

<sup>7</sup>we should all be astonished at what's held under lichens. they breathe in whispers, exhale torrents

<sup>8</sup>not I. not here on the moors with the great planet-rift swallowing firemist under my feet, and the far-off funereal candles lighting dreams in the foothills

<sup>9</sup>on the bridge of my tongue I still taste the songclouds of woodsmoke and icicles

<sup>10</sup>isn't all, at this point?

<sup>11</sup>one valley-slow and contemplative. the other rushing over the edge, wherever it touches an edge to find it

<sup>12</sup>the deepest snowdrift

<sup>13</sup>how can something be crystalline, and yet so turbid?

<sup>14</sup>there are deep gashes in this landscape.

... *From Issue 8.*



## Yew

I went back in the Spring when the twigs of the oak bud and the woodland smelled of stirred-up dirt and busting seed. The path was stitched in my mind, but after twenty years, it had unpicked itself. Perhaps the trees go walking, creeping every sun-cycle. Or perhaps it's just memory that shifts.

The forest darkens under the boughs of the yew tree, its broad limbs clawing for territory, staking a claim on a blue hole in the sky. Nestled in the heart of the forest, I climb its familiar branches. Teenage muscle-memory fights against ageing physiology as I haul myself into my old seat in a high fork and shrink into the yew's thick, twisted branches. I decided never to come down again, and this time I meant it.

When I lived here, I used to tell myself the same. When the house was a riot, I'd hide in the fork, recalibrating in the muffled quietness of the yew's needles, resetting. But now, you'll have to come looking for me. I hope.

*Taxus baccata* – English Yew – can live three thousand years.

Doesn't that make all our numbers seem insignificant? Thirty-two, thirty-five, seven.

Seven years together, scratched out, carved like hacking at granite with stone tools. It shouldn't take so much work. And yet my yew grows effortlessly, uninterrupted year on year. I'm no expert, but I would guess my tree is probably a thousand years old. It's barely getting started.

Your eyes, startled blue, always roll when I talk facts. *Where's the soul in numbers? Why do you always have to break things down? Who cares about percentages, survival rates, FSH levels? Numbers, numbers, numbers.*

When we first met, it was good-natured, teasing. These days, it's curdled. It sounds sour.

*Taxus baccata* – English Yew - is one of only five native evergreens.

That sort of thing drives you to distraction. *Crack through your shell of statistics and data and let the wonder of it all seep in.*

Well, would it be more your metier to point out that you are one of only five women I ever fell in love with?

My primary school teacher, Miss Juniper, wore brightly coloured cardigans and always smelled of undefined spice. She was kind back when kindness was a novelty. Quiet and steady in amongst the bustle that short-circuited my childhood brain.

Holly, my high school sweetheart, took my virginity in her bedroom one late summer evening after exams while impossibly handsome boyband members looked down on us from her walls. We were bright and fresh and full of hope. It was just as brittle and tight and steel-reinforced-tough and fine-China delicate as all teenage love was. We lasted a year.

Three was Annie. I didn't ever dare talk to the tall redhead who lived three doors up from me at University. Didn't learn her name or exchange a word until the night she grabbed me by the collar, dragged me into her dorm room and asked: "*Are you ever going to fucking do anything?*" Annie. What the hell happened to Annie? Damned if I can remember. After three years, graduating was like the unspooling of some giant whirlpool. I guess Annie and I didn't cling hard enough to each other in the maelstrom.

The last but one was the short little ball of fury that was my eldest sister. She pulled me apart growing up and I hated her. Then I had to put her back together after an arbitrary sonogram showed just what had been eating her all those years.

The needles of *Taxus baccata* – English Yew – are used to produce docetaxel, a compound used in chemotherapy.

You and I met in the hospital cafeteria. You were there because when you were three years old they pulled your rib cage open and took your heart out. Of late, I've begun to wonder if they forgot to put it back in again. Uncharitable.

It left you with a long scar that runs between your breasts and makes you leery of low-cut dresses. It isn't a nice, neat scar. You had been so young and so small that as you grew the scar twisted and stretched. There's a crack in the bark that runs up the trunk of my yew tree. It weaves left and right. It reminds me of your scar.

When we first met, all we ever did was walk. You'd tell me about your treatment and the bands you were listening to, which tended toward the heavy. You told me your heart could kill you at any moment.

But we didn't fall. Not right away. It was harder by then, fifth time around. I'd grown a little cautious. The giddiness, the urge to release the handbrake and roll downhill at a hundred miles per hour, isn't quite the same after you've crashed a few times. One takes a bit more time to work people out, to find the rough edges and see if they're the parts that'll end up cutting you. It barely begins before you start thinking about how it might end and how you'll protect your heart. So I suppose you had more reason than most to hold back.

You were dark-haired and pale-skinned as a vampire back then. Lately, you've been spending time out painting the back porch. It's south-facing. Your skin is starting to tan.

*Taxus baccata* – English Yew – are often found in churchyards, a hold-over from the Druids, who held the Yew as sacred and planted it in their places of worship.

The first time we kissed was in a churchyard. You had a way of kissing back then that left you a little breathless like you had been holding it all together in anticipation. We'd barely spoken all night. You said to call me after the funeral, that you'd been to so many by then that you knew the drill. I could talk if I wanted to. Or we could just stay silent and drink.

So that's what we did.

I walked you home past the church. Out of nowhere, a storm hit. One of those summer night storms that drop without warning. We sheltered under a tree... I didn't know about trees then, so I can't tell you what kind. I pulled you in close and our faces were wet with drips that ran down our noses and into our open mouths. Drips ran down my neck as our lips met and your body let out a sigh. But it wasn't the cold rain on my spine that made me jolt like I'd been slapped.

That was the moment you became number five. It is a moment I have tucked away at the heart of life, a joyful recollection to sustain us when things flagged.

From then on I wanted to lose myself deep within the lush forest of your life. I wanted to disappear among the thickets of blackthorn and bramble, to be scratched raw by your sharpness. You could draw blood, I wouldn't yelp. You could keep right on scratching, and I'd let you know if you ever cut deep enough to hurt. I wanted to bask in the dancing, soft light beneath the solidness of your oak tree, to let go and relax in the company of those resolute convictions.

The needles of *Taxus baccata* - English Yew - contain toxins that leach into the ground and render it inhospitable. Nothing grows underneath a yew tree.

The needle-thick canopy above me is like a Rorschach test. I look up and if the sun hits it right, it casts bat-wing shadows on the bark. I can see everything in the play of racing green, deep umber bark, light, shade.

Look, there's the bell tower in Trieste where we took our first mini-break together.

Look, there's the outline of a butterfly, a Camberwell Beauty, the same one you had tattooed on your ankle despite your doctor telling you tattoos were a bad idea. Dangers of blood poisoning. Instant death.

Look, there's the house where I lived with my old University friends. You and I slept together in the largest room, at the back, until my friends started asking about extra rent contributions and complaining about the mess you made of the bathroom.

Look, that collection of shadows and shapes there, doesn't that look like an ultrasound to you?

I opened one of your drawers the other day. I was looking for something. Tweezers, I think. Another splinter from the garden. Instead, I found a shoebox with every single test we ever took. You ever took. There must have been twenty or more. Each one a single line, another failure. Your doctor said that children were a bad idea too. If you carried to full term the strain on your heart... he needn't have worried. Barren. I don't know why you always used that word like a badge of honour.

A crow lands in the canopy above me, a shattering jar of

treacle. The sky is momentarily tarred and feathered.

*Corvus corone* – the Carrion Crow - ... no, let's stick with the yew. Otherwise, we could be here all year.

Trees slowly hollow out, just like people. Only the sapwood is alive. The outer twenty or so rings of bark. Twenty years of life and the rest just dead, inert. Yew trees have one of the hardest woods going, but with time, even this toughness starts to rot out until a cavity forms. A dead space at the centre of the tree. From my fork, I can see a small crack, an opening. I could slide down into that crack and right into the heartwood of my yew.

*Taxus baccata* – the English Yew – is, in some cultures, associated with immortality.

I wonder if I slide right into it, could I live with my yew tree for the next two thousand years? Could I learn to weather everything the world can throw at me and stay green the whole year round?

... *From Issue 15.*

## Shaun Philip Hutchings

### Bicycle

Bicycle, in black November nights.  
Past houses with ancient memory association.  
Through scary dark parks and on quiet English roads.  
Before Christmas madness.  
After the reflections of summer swims and the last Whitstable ice-cream.  
Bicycle in the black soup alley.  
Bicycle in early century worries of madmen and destructive weather.  
The large mammals doomed by believers in ancient myths.  
Bicycle with the heart singing its praises  
and hates for the unfriendly and the unfair.  
Bicycle at midnight.  
The best time.  
The good time.  
The fun.

*... From Issue 3.*

**SM Jenkin**

**Silt Up**

this far out in the estuary  
it was never going to be a fair fight  
fresh silt washes out the salty  
whore's crocodile tears  
so down I went  
through the liquid punctured hole  
like a deft pupil  
even the sharp edges of the bitch's maw  
couldn't reach me here  
the hydrophobia of the rabid  
has some uses if your skin  
lies unbroken  
so many layers down  
and my barbed tongue  
catches on passing trails of  
grey ash tapped  
from the fag end of  
St Mary's Island

and still I sink  
past shattered corpses and carbon  
dated no-named nothings  
adding rings upon rings  
we all fall down  
to the roots buried deep  
blurred daisy-chains fracture  
at this depth  
cobalt and asbestos  
crowned dancing queens  
awaiting the once and future kings  
return anointing  
our lady's fireproof future  
invictus  
untouched  
untouchable  
underwater  
under his eye

the flounders flying high on  
the grey tide like kites  
announcing by their rapid  
departure the arrival of the  
nameless  
finless and finned  
come as they would  
my eyes plucked and sucked dry  
heart chambers ransacked  
liver emptied inflamed guts wound  
down untangled and  
squeezed flat by passing mermaids  
torn and woven  
now trailing at their  
throats fresh washed scarves  
coral iridescent flare sparked  
in the reflection of their silver scales  
as they sashay away

and yet more  
gnawing at sinews until  
arms drop and hips fall  
at bubbled angles  
like mated snails at odds  
and it all settles about an empty  
cage on the river's floor  
and still they feed  
pincers pulling  
and pecking at my skull  
sharp claws  
scraping away  
the last of the  
marrow and even then  
pecking at each other  
until they tangle in my hair  
fall away impale their fat  
bellies on the  
bloodied bone teeth of the  
broken mermaid's comb



at the approach of high tide  
my cage echoes the hum of  
the Medway  
softly sings the seal wife  
tales of dancing barges  
eclipsing the rippling heavens  
clippers' rudders ripping fishing  
nets open  
softly sings the seal wife as she  
kisses fresh water into  
empty sockets  
granules of sand depositing at the  
gutter of tear ducts  
and she disappears between the flats  
and still I wait in  
the arms of the tides  
a liquid solution  
gorged on the earth's deep veins  
and veins of ore

soft falls the silt through  
my bare bones  
silken thin deposits form  
that line empty spaces  
in layers at each moon  
dragged tide  
four times daily  
build chambers full of  
stalagmites  
and stalactites  
graced by salt crystals  
glistening jewels fit to grace a  
mermaid's neck

they say water always wins

this far out in the estuary  
it was never going to be a fair fight

... *From Issue 6.*

**Philip Kane**

**Thorndike**

The marshes enter the blood, then the soul,  
the way that a wind from the river  
scythes across the flat land and will cut  
a thick coat to cold rags. Then it grows

inside you, a kind of desolation.  
Women may birth it, but men will nurture  
it within a secret womb for years,  
more years than we'll remember.

Drink may sodden it, sometimes, and yet  
it's there, a haunting that will linger  
to the grave. It had me early,  
born to the marshes as I was,

and my people scattered under tombstones  
there, or living still on lonely roads  
that ended with the river's boundary.  
There was no other place for us.

No other world I might have lived in,  
much as I sought out southern skies  
and to turn my seasons in reverse,  
only to learn I held both hemispheres

in my own soul's orbit.

*... From Issue 13.*

**Karen Kilcup**

**The Lee Bear**

Right now, the river's her only ambition.  
She does not care that she lives near  
a college town. She knows what she wants—  
the weird May heat demands relief—moving  
into new, well-watered territory regardless  
of what people think. Well-heeled  
commuters like the town, and she does too:  
cost does not concern her, the taxes  
are not too high, the traffic's not bad.  
She's plush, enjoys a view, and can afford  
to settle here, near plunge pools with trout,  
a subtle current edged with ferns, shaded  
by hemlock and oak. Despite the droughts  
the warming winters bring,  
the Little River meets her needs.  
Her shortened sleep keeps everyone awake,  
watching for her ambling bulk, waiting  
for when she helps herself to unattended hens  
or cools her fur in someone's backyard  
swimming pool. Although she's rare  
the Lee bear could happen  
almost anywhere.

*Lee, NH, June 2021*

*... From Issue 14.*

**Bill Lewis**

## **The French Poet and The Shadow of her Shadow**

A French poet once fell in love with the shadow of a woman's shadow. Yes, that's right, you heard me correctly: not the woman or her shadow but the shadow of her shadow. Poets are like that sometimes. I found this poet sleeping under marble in Montparnasse. It was too late to ask him about the woman or her shadow's shadow. A pilgrim had spelled out his name in small stones upon his bed. I believe later a song writer borrowed the shadow and put it into a great song of sad departures. The poet is gone. The song writer is gone. The woman is gone. Her shadow is gone, of course; but the shadow of her shadow? No that's still here living in his poem.

*... From Issue 8.*



*'Me Lady' by Michi Masumi*

Rei Lindemann

## Violet

They tell me roses are Red.  
Flaming, fiery hues of passion and desire; like lover's lust.  
Blue, they say, is the serenity of ocean's breeze.  
Somber sighs and summer skies: Blue.  
If you were to bask under the sun's mellow  
sanctuary, amid a field of fragrant flowers,  
it would bring dewdrop's subtle savor to your tongue;  
a sensation of warmth – a touch of Yellow.  
There's Black: a mysterious clash,  
a dusky ensemble, and a hidden hybrid of all colors.  
That's what they call me.

It was close to summer in the year 1962. I must have been in the third grade back in my hometown of Auburn, Alabama. It was a time of Black and White, of Colored and Non-Colored, and I lived behind the 'translucent' wall – a place of knowing without conception.

Colors, shades, and tints – all blurs. Even 'blurs' were a blur to me; merely empty sounds that attempted to describe a reality that I was incapable of grasping in full spectrum. They'd tell me egg yolk is Yellow, grass is Green, sand is Brown, the President is White, and I'm Black. I'd say egg yolk is runny, grass is prickly, sand is fine, the President is powerful, and I'm just me – a boy in Alabama.

That day, like every other day, I sat alone on my bench on the school field, listening to the sounds of restless chatter and balls whizzing in different directions. Loneliness didn't bother me anymore – I had grown accustomed to it – so it came as a mighty surprise when I felt a sudden thud that sent vibrations across the bench where I sat, followed by an unusually heavy presence, making the air next to me feel somewhat denser.

*Why are you always sittin' here lookin' all lonely?* she asked. It took me a while to find my voice.

*Well...* I said. *I can't see nothin'.*

*What do you mean, you can't see nothin'?* she was taken aback; after all, it wasn't the sort of answer you heard everyday.

*They tell me I'm blin',* I explained.

A strange sense of shame overtook me as I said it. As though the act of saying it out loud made my blindness more real – like an official stamp or some sort of declaration.

Not knowing what more to say to each other, we sat there not talking, quietly, for about half a minute until I felt her tap on my shoulder.

*You know, we're all Violet today. You, me, and this flower,* she half-whispered into my ear. Confused, I asked her, *what do you mean we're both Violet? Nobody ever called me Violet before... they all call me Black.*

*I mean we're both wearin' Violet today, same as this flower.* With that, she placed my right hand on her left palm where the flower rested, guiding my fingers across each petal – trying to make me see the Violet.

Her palm, damp with sweat from clutching the stem, felt warm – the type that seeped through your fingers, coursed through the blood, pounded within your heart, and lit flames to your cheeks. As we leaned in closer, her hair smelt of soap and linen – freshly washed. And if smell could be heard, the flowery aroma would have been both a tranquil chime, and an orchestral symphony playing to the quickening tempo of my heart.

If candy really did come in all colors, and fire really did glow Red, this strange sensation was like light diffracted through a ruby prism. If my blindness was a wall that stood between us, it was a wall of glass.

Her sudden presence was the first real sign of certainty in my uncertain perception of reality; my first feeling of all-knowingness; an answer to my question; clarity in obscurity; Love.

I still don't see color – Red, nor White, nor Black.

But I have seen Violet.

Violet looked like the warmth of her hand against mine;  
her presence.

Violet looked like the smell of soap, sweat,  
of freshly washed linen.

Violet looked like the sound of soft chimes,  
yet also an orchestral symphony –  
a drum against the beating of my heart.

Violet looked like a bridge between two children  
who tore down the rigid brick walls of Black and White.

Violet looked like a beacon of light, and I saw it.

... *From Issue 5.*

**DS Maolalai**

**flannery**

we walked about paris  
with naggins of whiskey  
and a fallen-on  
chorus, in call  
and response - "nip?"  
"niip" (a descending  
low note - quite  
delightful)  
and we walked,  
drunk for hours,  
through the arons and bars,  
into bookshops  
and roadside  
cafes. visited

that cemetery  
which everyone  
visits, but skipped  
past the poets  
and of course  
past jim  
morrison -  
fallon to see  
some napoleon relatives,  
the various courtiers  
and royals.

it was marvellous;  
the sun  
through the trees  
with the city,  
and was really  
quite quiet  
and it wasn't  
a tourist attraction,  
and veal cutlets afterward,  
and no-one said anything  
since in paris it's quite  
unremarkable -  
like lamb.

and fallon  
bought cigarettes,  
and I bummed



some cigarettes  
and smoked  
them since I was  
on holiday. and we got  
back to his place  
drunk and exhausted  
from walking,  
near the charlie  
hedbo massacre  
which had happened  
just a couple  
weeks before.

and we were both  
two naggins deep  
by that stage  
and some wine  
and pints of beer.  
and we'd almost  
seen catacombs  
through an unknown  
entrance, but I'd  
chickened out,  
and we'd talked to girls  
(fallon translating)  
and talked to men  
(fallon translating).

we were both  
too shy normally  
to be very  
much close,  
but I was just  
off a break-up  
and fallon  
was happy  
and we both  
like to walk  
around cities  
like paris  
and fallon knew all  
the walks best.

*... From Issue 12.*



*'The Elements of Nature' by Michi Masumi*

## Daphne Margolys

### Here

I made myself at home in the wetlands in the summer, by my river, leaving grey city behind. A little steel nest at the end of a creaky jetty, on a shanty town boatyard, with a perfect view of the castle on clear mornings. I could be pagan here, collecting bees and butterflies, with cygnet feathers in my hair. A family of swans came to me every day to be fed. Here was perfect peace.

The marsh has a sacred air, all kinds of life thrive here. Lichen, yellow and green, clothes the bark in strange finery, and when the tide is high, pools reflect from the grass the tallest of the trees.

There are a thousand rabbits, and pheasants underfoot, hunted with guns but they move so fast, the heavy footed hunters never catch a thing.

In the secret place behind the trees, a small bright meadow, I saw a fine fat fox, heavy with cubs. I sat and watched her, vivid red against lush green. She took no heed of me. The creatures are accustomed to my scent. Bees talk to me in their lazy way, they tell me of the mead of poetry.

Collecting driftwood along the shore, I take note of each jigsaw fragment scattered, coloured glass and china willow pattern, tiles and terracotta stranded in sea and river weed.

Bear with me, please, while I document these inkcaps, the daffodils bordering this place, these blackberries. Webbed emerald moss on rocks. I want to hold these memories out to you, like a child showing something special she has found.

It was a hard winter, and the sky tucked the marsh up in thick white blankets. The teasels held the snow, like crystal encrusted Christmas decorations, and robins skipped leaving sigils in their footprints. Ice flakes formed like tiny glass horse chestnut leaves. It was cosy in my little yellow nest with my foraged fire. But in the thaw, before the sap was rising, my nest was wrecked, and the turn of tide swept it away from me. I had to go back to the city.

It's holy here. Spirits of warrior monks peer from the branches and I belong. Dandelion clocks disperse time on the breeze to a woodpecker tick-tock. When I return, I can be. A creature again in eternal birdsong. Here is my temple, and here I want to sleep.

... *From Issue 3.*

**Carolyn Martin**

## **Death by Planet**

*In London in 1632, mortality statistics listed thirteen persons who had succumbed to “planet,” more than had been “murdered,” or died of “grief.”*

– Natural History, April 2003

Dear Statistics Guy,

For weeks I watched you walk through foggy London town, pen and parchment jotting down the why and wherefore I took up residence. Your one-page report was dead-right: This year I shuffled 9535 mortal coils off. You caught my major thieves – *Consumption/Fever/Infant Deaths* – as well as the rarities: one *Vomiting*, two *Lethargies*, seven *Murdered*, eleven *Grief*, and thirteen *Planet*, a nod to astrology. When those grieving left-behinds swore their relatives now constellate nightbound skies and pray to be wished-upon, you kept your head. I loved how you resorted to the Bard: *The fault...is not in our stars* – though underlings clung tight to their star-crossed maladies. I almost tousled your tired hair when you growled, *Lord, what fools these mortals be!* but settled for following you home. How comforting: a few brief candles lit, a hot cup of tea before you hunkered down to alphabetize 63 *Diseases and Casualties*. I couldn't tell you then, and dare to tell you now: in four hundred years, history will attest humans killed the planet and were killed by it. The fact is, the stage is set, the players dressed to strut their yesterdays across dying stars, signifying nothing's left of almost everything. Be what may, that's neither here nor there. Rest assured that God – or whatever you call the Infinite – appreciates a job well done and anticipates another lively report next year.

... *From Issue 15.*

**Monika R Martyn**

## **The Unreluctant Advocate**

My breath fogs up the window pane while I watch. Nothing draws a crowd like a corpse. A carcass. Regardless. Hidden behind the curtain, I've been watching them gather. They're an invasive species who leave their footprints on the pristine beach and sabotage my sanctuary. Endlessly.

They're also trespassing on my grief; even when they kick the sand to show that they mourn too. I cringe at the gall – a few people prod the carcass with their foot. Testing the body for signs of life.

Everyone snaps a picture. Eventually. Some take garish selfies of the washed-up corpse framed in the shot next to their grinning faces. On such a miserable day, the dismal light won't do anyone justice. My shoulders shrug; perplexed. My breath runs away on the cold glass. Just what is this fascination with death that keeps the population captivated? We all die.

The body's been decaying on the sand since dawn. High tide left it as a donation. Or is it a subtle message; perhaps a really loud one. It's been dead for some time. When the ocean finally pulled away sometime before dawn, it revealed the lifeless bulk on the sandbank – a dead humpback. The majestic creature's death leaves me riveted to a sense of overwhelming sadness I can't evade.

To the crowd, it is a dead whale. To me: so much more. I'll miss seeing the sleek body splash in the vast blue ocean. I'll miss the graceful breach when it frolicked in the water like a child. In those moments when the migrating pod launches itself in unison above the waterline, it will leave a void in the exquisite performance. Their elegant dance on the waves explodes the water into a myriad of bleached foam that ripples like an echo outward. They all have names, distinguishable names that no one will ever whisper – no one – but me.

I allow the curtain to close on the debacle unfolding on the beach. A gull shrieks above. Circling on the woollen sky, there are dozens more. They have spotted the corpse too. A meal. A freebie in the circle of a precarious cycle. Though they won't feed on the whale, they'll eat the trash the crowd leaves behind. To the gulls, humans mean a free ticket; despite the hefty price tag. But gulls can't do the math.

Before anyone had arrived on the scene, just as dawn winked, I had a moment alone with the dead whale. I ran my fingers over the tubercles; distinguishing freckles that mark its skin. I fought the urge to scream and lost. The stiff wind carried my grief, then gave it back. Consuming greed possesses me: that the whales somehow belong to

me. And that the beach is my turf and kingdom. That the world- I can't save it.

It's bad enough that rumours have me pegged as Nutbar; certifiable if anyone knew I silently communed with the others stricken by grief. I sent off my telepathic condolence card. Hallmarked. Their haunting wails pierce my soul: message received.

When the newspaperman sets up his tripod and snaps pictures of the scene, a new burst of rage rips through me - sensationalizing death. He interviews the speculating bystanders, shoving the tape recorder under their noses as if opinions had any bearing on the death of the whale. He doesn't care to hear what the others have to say. He's deaf to their language and blind to their grief. Within the hour, he'll knock on my door, windblown and cold. I'll offer him coffee to warm his bones and to appease my rage. I know him well enough, and, yet, not all.

Because I'm the only person who lives on the beach year-round, he'll ask me a thousand questions I don't have the answers to. Answers that only matter during a slow news week.

\*

Ten minutes later, like clockwork, he raps on my porch door. I leave him in the wind a minute too long, testing his useless windbreaker jacket. Hidden in the shadows of the dormer window upstairs, I watched him trek across the sand. Leaving his mark. Strands of his unkempt hair flail in the gale; his open jacket wildly flapping. A harsh redness colours his smooth-shaven cheeks; rain is spitting sideways on his face.

"Did you see it happen?"

I shake my head. Downcast. I've seen it happen often enough. I no longer cry - in public. He doesn't wait for my reply.

"Since you've lived here a long time, how many have you seen washed up?"

"All my life," I say. Silently, I count on my fingers and run out. The first one happened when I was four-years-old. Not an image one ever forgets - something that shapes an impressionable mind one way - or the other.

In my garden, staked in the sand, there is a cross for each one that washed ashore. A memorial to the dead, nothing else grows on the sand. It also serves to seal the conjecture about me.

He steps inside; out of the wind and doesn't wait for my invitation. His nylon coat squeaks when he passes into the warm cottage.

"What do you think caused it? Its death?"

"I'm no expert."

I lead him to the kitchen table and point to the chair. He sits. I pour the coffee. My fingers tighten into a fist and starve the urge to strangle him with my bare hands. Instead, I slide the plate of warm biscuits closer, and glare.

"Surely you have an opinion." His eyes are blue like daylight.

I do, but not one he'll ever print. He blows on the hot coffee and speculates, composing his Pulitzer.

"Human intervention," I say, taking the heavy load of the blame on my broad shoulders.

"You're not gonna run your mouth off again about plastic and human consumption?"

We've met before, under difficult circumstances, and he doesn't mention climate change. He doesn't have that kind of time this morning. He has a deadline, and I don't need the lecture.

If there is one thing I'm famous for, the reason they whisper Nutbar, it's my intense dislike for trash scattered on the beach, in the ditch. I've been an advocate for recycling long before it became fashionable; and too late to make a difference. Besides collecting trash washed up on shore, or carelessly abandoned on the beach, I thrive under confrontation.

Confronting, however, is a dangerous business. But I'm built like a whale myself. As if my heritage came from the depths of the ocean and crawled ashore. Sleek and agile. Most of my victims tuck their tails and retrieve their trash. Others, not so docile, retaliate. When I'm not looking, they throw sticks and stones.

I swallow and clasp my fingers. Why ask the question if you don't care to hear the answer? I have mine rehearsed for the performance of a lifetime. I can even visualize bowing to the applause, but I bite my tongue. My answer is long-winded. Whales die all the time. True. Thousands wash inexplicably ashore. Worldwide. Inflicted with incurable trauma and diminished feeding grounds. I daren't insult the fishing industry. Again. The shipping industry. Again. Whales die of old age. Natural enemies. Nuclear testing. Plastic. Oil spills. Oil rigs. Toxic chemicals. Deadly algae. Sonar. Weather. Sewage. Seismic airguns. Massive tankers. Follow the leader. Animals die. People die. Death is the only sure thing in life. Birth is a lottery.

Before I answer him, I take a long drink - my scripted reply pools like poison in my mouth.

"My mouth doesn't run. You've seen the netting tied to its flukes. Must be tiresome hauling such a massive body around and having your hands tied. Or should I say feet?"

"If it's not smart enough to avoid nets, then it's down to survival of

the fittest. It's how nature is intended to work."

"But we've stacked the deck. So let me ask you this. You've no feelings for the whale?"

"None. It's an ugly sight on the beach and it'll stink. And life goes on. Now that washed up toddler a few years ago that was some sad business."

I nod. It was how we met the first time. Disarmed by the sad memory, I find it impossible to argue such logic. I found the body face down. The toddler's rubber boots were full of seawater and sand. Seashells crawling in his pockets. His little face bloated and blue; his tiny fingers pruned and curled. Clutching. His young heart and lungs drowned. He couldn't swim to save his life.

"So according to you, that was survival of the fittest too? God doing some weeding?"

"Course not. Don't be stupid!"

He stuffs a biscuit in his mouth; a raisin falls on the table. I refill his cup with coffee and slide the cream. I steady myself. Ready to hurl the truth. I point toward the window in the direction of the washed-up whale.

"That's a baby on the beach too! Roughly the same age as the boy."

I watch as his eyes widen. Soften. I move in for the kill before he can say something else.

"The mother's been swimming close to shore, as they do at this time of year. She's been crying for a week, shuffling her baby in the water, mimicking its movements when it was alive. To you, it's an ugly thing, washed ashore. To its mother - the most beautiful and beloved object. Grieving as she does, as the entire pod does, I can't see how it can leave a person unshaken. Unchanged. I have it on film."

There. I spit a little with my speech. I've done it again and preached, though I don't do well with sermons. Emotion gets the best of me. I point to the machine I've set up on the table.

"Mind if I watch? The video."

"Suit yourself."

I press the button on my video player. The eight-minute footage is a collage of moments I captured and edited, endlessly filming the dance of grief. Sadly, my equipment is not sophisticated enough to capture the entire operetta that rips into my heart each time I watch. I don't speak the complicated language of the whales, yet I understand every syllable they make.

My guest is ensnared by the beauty of their graceful underwater ballet. Filmed entirely in blue. Plastic props float elegantly into the screenshot. Shopping bags dance within the rhythm of the waves to the theme song: the problem of us.



He stares, unaware that his mouth is agape. If I can win one other person over to my side; I'll have served my purpose. But my work is never done. He leans back dumbfounded and stares toward the window. His gaze drifts past the curtain toward the beached infant whale that he can only see as ingrained in his mind. Slowly, an understanding floods his face like paint spilt onto the carpet and soaking in, leaving a permanent mark and in need of replacing.

He doesn't speak, but I've already made him a copy. I'll include a long list of the plastic trash I collect each morning and log into a book. If I held shares in the massive beverage industry, I could save the world.

"Wow." He remembers to close his mouth.

He folds forward and shakes his head. The pink wind has left his cheeks.

"That's my reason, as well. Wow. Only my awakening started when I was just a kid."

"I had no idea. They're so beautiful. So loving."

"They're amazing."

"So one solitary person can make a difference. Is that what you been preaching?"

I smile. He's finally got it! One person, one small change at a time and such a simple solution. An exasperated sigh escapes from my lungs. He straightens his spine.

"How about I come in the mornings. My schedule is flexible enough. I'll be here when the sun rises. Promise."

I shake my head. I won't share my beach; there are thousands of other acres.

"Stake your own territory."

He nods and slips his arms into his jacket. I notice his blue eyes again. I know something about him after all. While he picks up his camera bag, I hold the door aside and watch him step into his boots.

Mesmerized by the foaming surf, it beckons him. A line of his footprints stamps the sand; he has been here. The tide washes them away.

... *From Issue 11.*

**Maria C McCarthy**

## **For a Rainy Day**

Margaret kept coins in coffee jars. A bit here and there, squirreled away for a rainy day. She saved change for Sonia's dinner money, so she would have the right amount on a Monday morning. And for when Jim-the-milkman collected on a Friday. Window cleaner, once a month, and for paying the man from the Pru.

Eventually, Sonia left school, United Dairies stopped their rounds due to supermarket milk, and bills got paid through the bank. But Margaret kept up her habit of collecting change in jars for a rainy day. And for an escape route, should she need it. If things got bad with Ted. Again.

She stored the jars behind a loose panel at the back of the kitchen units, in case of burglary. And in case of Ted. The one place he would never look, not being one for noticing loose panels, or for going into the kitchen, except for making tea. And a mess.

Margaret began adding notes to the coins – a fiver here, a tenner there – saved from the housekeeping and from selling at boot fairs; bits and bobs that Ted never noticed when they were there, or when they were gone. After a while, Margaret stopped emptying the jars, just screwed the lids on when they were full and pushed them a little further along the space behind the loose panel, stacked them several jars high till they scraped the bottom of the worktop that concealed them.

In the weeks following Ted's funeral, Margaret reached far into the space behind the loose panel, took out all the jars and counted the contents. A tidy sum. She dealt with coins and notes that were going out of circulation by giving them to her grandchildren. She had always given them something for their piggybanks when they visited, and cash for birthdays and Christmas, and this was just a bigger gift. Then Sonia said that vouchers were better for birthdays and Christmas, so the jars were just added to as time went on, nothing taken out.

It had always been Margaret's secret, the jars behind the loose panel. She only went to them when alone in the house, when she was sure of not being disturbed. And while she had made a will, before her memory started to play tricks on her and she

began to mistake Sonia for her mother at times, she never told a soul about the jars.

The house fetched a good price, after Margaret died. Astonishing, really, considering what she and Ted had paid for it in 1969. It needed updating, of course – new kitchen and all. That loose panel had never been fixed, yet the jars remained undiscovered. A nice little nest egg for someone, you'd think. The builders, perhaps, or the new owners. But no, they found it charming, the vintage style. They would even keep the chocolate brown bathroom suite; wouldn't change a thing.

Margaret's jars were safe. She liked to visit sometimes, when no-one was around, when she wouldn't be discovered. To take the jars out and count the notes and coins, screw on the lids and put them back. She never knew when she might need the money. For a rainy day.

*... From Issue 7.*

**Maggie Mackay**

**For the love of narwhals**

I took a swim in Arctic waters  
inside a winter dream.

I saw what seemed to be a unicorn,  
his tusk a pointed spiral,

as beautiful, as bewitching  
as a creature in some old fairy-tale.

I took a swim in Arctic waters  
inside a climate change dream.

Oil and gas drillers encroached  
like wicked stepmothers

with icy hearts, dark malevolent charms  
discombobulating with industrial booms.

I saw the narwhal chomping  
shrimp and halibut on quiet sea ice,  
white ghosts a mile below.

*... From Issue 15.*

## Rosemary McLeish

### I am a field

I am a field,  
flushing as the late summer sun  
burnishes my golden stubble.

Listen, I don't want your raptures.  
It's only a trick of the light.  
To tell the truth, I am very tired,  
and inclined to snap,  
to bicker over trifles,  
remembering the clatter and batter  
of the overnight harvester  
keeping me from my rest.

What used to take  
three men and a boy  
two weeks of solid work  
in the Indian summer sun –  
days of jokes, rivalry, beer –  
a peaceful slow harvesting,  
like a gentle massage,  
very soothing to the soul –  
now brings new meaning  
to phrases such as  
riding rough-shod  
and getting a good seeing-to.

I am a field.  
Tomorrow or the next day  
I will be stinking.  
People passing will hold their noses,  
turn their faces away from me,  
as I flinch and itch  
and blush with shame  
at the filthy chemicals  
they have sprayed on me.

Before I know it,  
in the fog of October  
or the frosty moonlight of November,  
they will come in the night  
and ravish me with their  
rattling machinery again.  
Three hours on the spreader,  
three hours on the sower,  
three hours on the harvester,  
job done.  
No more haystacks,  
no more gleaning,  
no more harvest home.

I am growing into  
a clapped-out old woman;  
and I am angry.  
I never complained before  
and now they won't listen.  
They want to wring every last ounce  
out of me, keep me fertile  
long past my use-by date.

I am a field.  
I used to be home to flowers and bees,  
I sheltered small animals,  
gave delight to sunburnt farmgirls  
drowsing in the buzzing noontimes  
amid the chitter-chatter of birds.  
I've had it with all of you humans  
and your shenanigans.  
I wish the wind would get up,  
blow as hard as it can,  
and scatter my sorry soil  
into the atmosphere,  
so nothing will grow on me,  
nothing will feed you,  
and you will find out  
that all worlds, including yours,  
come to an end.

... *From Issue 4.*

**Gordon Meade**

**Orca, Canada, 2013**

In the wild, I would normally cover  
just under one hundred miles a day;  
just think of that compared to this.

In the wild, I would normally cover  
just under one hundred miles a day;  
just think of that compared to this.  
In the wild, I would normally swim.

In the wild, I would normally cover  
just under one hundred miles a day;  
just think of that compared to this.  
In the wild, I would normally swim  
in clean water; just think of that.

In the wild, I would normally cover  
just under one hundred miles a day;  
just think of that compared to this.  
In the wild, I would normally swim  
in clean water; just think of that  
compared to this. In the wild, I would.

In the wild, I would normally cover  
just under one hundred miles a day;  
just think of that compared to this.  
In the wild, I would normally swim  
in clean water; just think of that  
compared to this. In the wild, I would  
normally be a member of a pod.

In the wild, I would normally cover  
just under one hundred miles a day;  
just think of that compared to this.  
In the wild, I would normally swim  
in clean water; just think of that  
compared to this. In the wild, I would  
normally be a member of a pod;  
just think of that compared to this.

*... From Issue 7.*

## Bruach Mhor

### The Pipefish Trumpet Face

(for syngnathinae everywhere)

It rises from Sea Lace strands,  
seems uninterested in escape.  
The straighter kin of the Seadragon,  
the Seahorse, the Landtrumpet,  
*Give us a tune*, I mutter,  
though the mouthpiece of my snorkel.

At night, in my dry cosiness,  
I picture it hovering by my bed,  
rising from exposed pillow feathers,  
staring at my eyelids and wondering:  
*What can I play for this oddbod,*  
*oddbed creature?*  
*What strange music does it bob to?*

... *From Issue 14.*



*London, July 15, 2009*

London was never one of those cities that I was burning to visit. It had always seemed crowded, dirty, kind of harsh, and overwhelming. When I got there it seemed crowded, dirty, kind of harsh, and overwhelming. I loved British music, literature, the general sensibility, but for whatever reason—maybe it was the extreme trip planning—I couldn't get the hang of things. I'd navigated around cities a few times before—Madrid, Paris, Montreal—and although I'd sometimes screw up, I usually found my way. In London I just felt out of it. I'd chart my path the night before or during breakfast, and then get lost about eight times. The Tube felt stifling, the escalators vertiginous. I had to talk myself through the long, steep rides, telling myself that they would be over soon and that I was not actually falling backwards.

While getting lost and searching for quiet places to sit and study my map, I considered the telephone numbers in my backpack. About a half dozen guys had answered my "Strictly Platonic Craigslist" ad about being in town for a few days. I wasn't really looking to hang out, but just to touch base with a local for non-touristy things to do. A few responses were barely intelligible, probably bots. The only two I considered meeting were those I had answered in Chicago before I left. I made tentative plans for the 15th—the evening that I arrived—with the one who seemed younger and more fun, seemed to know what was happening in the city.

On the first day, I managed to zombie through a few museums and a play (half-price tickets to Hamlet), plus a short meeting with a friend of a friend in Marylebone. As Jude Law shivered on stage under fake snow for his "to be or not to be" speech—only the highlight of the masterpiece—I struggled to stay awake. My fellow viewers crumpled their candy and snacks as if we were viewing *The Terminator* instead of the Brooding Dane. I thought Brits were supposed to be reserved and polite? Even though Law seemed bored, Hamlet was sacred stuff.

I'd exchanged a few emails with one of the guys so far—all to my alias—Allison Higgins, who "worked in publishing," and remained a much bubblier version of myself.

I had agreed to meet CL #1 for coffee tonight but couldn't imagine how I'd begin to make conversation with anyone. Most likely, he was married, the bad kind of perverted, or both. I was too jet-lagged to even make pleasantries so the only reasonable choice seemed to be to send him a text and cancel. Looking at his picture again I realized he was even kind of cute, but after the last few years I was swearing off all of it—the insipid matchy-match profiles, canned conversations and

attempts to disguise my flaws. I sent an apologetic note about not feeling well and headed back to my hotel.

I'd just returned from the matinee and dinner when the phone rang in my room. It was some guy, saying something about Allison. I was too tired to remember I was supposed to be Allison.

"I've discovered that your real name isn't Allison..." The woman at the front desk had transferred the call, somehow to my room. What luck. I think I was the only American.

"Well then, if you're traveling with an alias we'll have to meet," he said, his voice certain and enveloping, like the weight of a new leather jacket.

"If Allison isn't your real name then we have to meet," he repeated again. I guess I'd been too dumbstruck to respond. Shit. A rescheduler!

"Wait—how did you know where I was staying?" I asked, remembering to be Wary Solo Traveler Girl.

"You mentioned it in your last email," he said. "Unfortunately I just received your text right as I was getting off the train at Charing Cross."

Oh, I was a terrible person. And stupid! I couldn't remember mentioning where I was staying, and quickly calculated the chances of my ending up in the Thames.

But he didn't seem creepy.

"Well maybe you're right," I said. "Maybe we should meet."

*London, July 16*

I tried to get into Allison mode making my way around St. Catherine's Dock, but felt dizzy and unhinged. I kept opening my umbrella, then closing it. Did I need it? Rain seemed to spit sideways, the chill especially sharp along the river, and then no rain, just a persistent, windy gray.

Colin—I think he was using his real name—had picked a Starbuck's, which I thought was kind of unoriginal, but I didn't know London well enough to name a spot. The café was right on the water, and didn't look anything like a Starbuck's but more like a house boat.

When I walked in—ten minutes late after getting on the wrong train—I spotted someone who looked like him, very short hair, tall, bushy eyebrows and pale skin, surrounded by blonde, blue-eyed female tourists from Canada.

"If you have an entire extra day to do a trip outside London," he was telling his audience, "go to Greenwich." He sounded not only confident but kind. The tourists were not satisfied. One seemed to swoon a little.

He shot me a mock-weary grin and the world's most subtle eye-roll. I felt like I was in line to meet a diplomat. When we finally sat down and chatted a bit I found out that CL #1 was intrigued by my picture because I was wearing "sensible

footwear.” He also worked at a school, doing IT. He traveled a lot and was planning a trip to Germany. He explained his presence on CL as an interest in meeting other travelers. Basics covered, and hoping I was making some sense with my still lagging brain, we strolled out into the dusk to the Queen’s Walk.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

Of course the real question was whether or not we’d part and never see each other again or continue walking.

He looked up, his lips slightly open but no words, as if the answer might be encrypted in the darkening clouds. I often saw the same looks on the faces of the kids I taught—brilliant, creative kids who often paused on the verge of speech. I knew instinctively that he struggled in some way with speech and thought. This might be a very awkward meal.

And yet. There was something, some sense of ease with his presence.

“I can always eat,” he said, brushing his stomach slightly with his palm.

Colin, as I knew him, seemed to have few questions for me. I became the appointed conversation manager, but that was alright. After dinner, we strolled near the Royal Festival Hall, as huge, lush sycamore trees swished above us, shadows drifting over the sidewalk.

The trunks had been wrapped in red paper with white polka dots—an art installation by Yayoi Kusama, an artist I loved. One day, as a little girl, polka dots had suddenly appeared on everything she saw. Instead of destroying her though, she made incredible worlds from her vision.

“I know this artist’s work,” I said, walking over to look at the dots. People had written inside them, some the size of tea cups, declaring things like “Peace, London, July, 2009,” or “Miriam & Stephen, true love always.”

Walking along the Thames, lit only by the old gas lights and the shimmering reflection of the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben, the pubs announced last call. We ducked inside the nearest one, the floor slippery with spilled beer. We squeezed in an order, surrounded by young people trying to get drunk enough to forget their fears, or to stop from remembering them too soon. I sipped a weak gin and tonic and Colin balanced his ale on our way to try and find a seat. The pub’s doors opened to the cool breezes of the river but the roar of the packed crowd made conversation rough. Dirty dishes sat unbussed on all available tables, so we cleared one ourselves and sat with the wet, sticky table between us, the scent of greasy pub food in our nostrils.

“So—“ I hollered, “have you had any long term girlfriends?”  
... *From Issue 1.*

We are sitting on a train. You and I. Heading in one direction in unison, but you are facing backwards and I am facing it head on.

You are trusting of the Universe's will. I must however, be prepared for what could come.

I must see it as it comes, plan accordingly, plan for what probably won't happen. But, if it did I have a plan. These are our differing personalities.

So as you sit with cerulean light adorning you from a computer screen, I sit watching you.

You tell of political news that is news to me because it is not. Names of MPs and secretaries, people who for a brief moment of my life exist.

These names and laws and opinions will sit at the back of my head. All the while I will continue on, but at times I am sure they will pop up.

I will think of you and the white face painted blue. Thinking of how you taught me all these names. You the master and I the pupil.

Green melding into other colours of the countryside as we zip down to the seaside.

Hove? Hove a word that perplexes me. Origins of nautical yesteryears. Heave, ho, heave, hove?

Muscular seafarers battling storms and crushing waves, pulling ropes and maneuvering sails, praying that Neptune will be forgiving.

Bright city on the coast, but today it is not bright. Grey, shades of grey painted over regent glory.

I remember it in yellows and bright blues. I remember heat adorning us. Do you remember that?

Do you remember our room of whites and crystals, worn floorboards and the ermined blanket? I remember it all.

I am a stranger in this place. I wait for you. I wait thinking words and dreaming you in metaphor.

Come back to me now. Come back and let us make memories for just this day. Heave, ho, heave, hove.

Yes, I remember it now. I am the boat and you the seafarer. Steering us evermore off into the distance.

... *From Issue 4.*

**Caleb Parkin**

## **The Channel**

The BBC are pointing a mic at a rubber dinghy  
full of men – who shout they’re from Syria,  
cheerfully, like it’s a fishing trip, a day out.

The man from the BBC points his mic at them  
with its foam mask, to protect sound quality  
from incursions of abrasive sea winds:

*choppy out here, he says,  
they’re bailing out water, he says,  
coast guard informed, he says.*

In my right hand, I feel that microphone’s  
on /off button, its plastic and steel; the foam  
embrace of the lifejacket over my shoulders.

On the boat, one of the young men dips  
a hand in the waves, each time the boat lifts,  
at every crest. His fingertips in North Sea water:

English Channel / La Manche water; this water  
that wouldn’t know anyone’s names; this water  
I cannot imagine, brisk and sudden, on fingertips.

*... From Issue 12.*

**Ruth Payne**

## **The Artist And The Wasp**

There was an artist who worked extremely hard. She looked after her children and taught people how to draw egg boxes and play the guitar. Every day, after all her other chores were done, she would sit at the table in her window and make fabulous creations out of paper – things that no-one would believe possible.

One early summer's day, a passing wasp flew in at her window, intrigued by what it saw going on there. This wasp was slightly more curious than many other wasps, although it is a little-known fact that all wasps have a highly developed aesthetic sensibility and often find their curiosity piqued by the actions of other creatures, humans especially, being the diverse and strange species that we are.

So this particular wasp found itself fascinated by the artist's work and every day, after all its other chores were done, it would return to watch the progress of the remarkable artworks coming into being under the diligent fingers of the artist.

It was a warm and pleasant summer and the artist would leave her window open all day to let the balmy air circulate through her house and close it at night so that her children wouldn't get a chill. Every late afternoon, the wasp would fly in through the open window and sit on the ledge or buzz lazily at the windowpanes, watching the artist work.

The artist started to make a beautiful paper cup. Not any paper cup, but a paper cup that was cut, curled and exquisitely drawn to resemble exactly a cheap, white plastic vessel, the kind one is handed half-full of warm wine at office parties and such. The wasp thought that this was the most beautiful thing it had ever seen and resolved to try and make its own paper cup, which it hoped would be as lovely as the one the artist was so carefully making. In its small chest there kindled the spark of a burning creative desire.

One day the wasp flew in at the window and was once again lost in contemplation of the artist's work. It went into a creative reverie, wondering how it was to make its own wonderful paper cup. It came to suddenly with the grinding thump of the sash window being closed and the catch turned. It became most distressed, knowing that it had to return to its own nest to rest



*'Springtime' by Michi Masumi*

at night, so that it could be up bright and early to work with the other wasps first thing in the morning. The large and ancient oak tree in which its colony lived needed each and every wasp to keep the population of tiny bugs and aphids at the correct level for everything in that mighty microcosm to remain in balance.

By morning the wasp was overtired and terribly anxious after a night of no sleep, imagining the worry it was causing all the other wasps at home. By the time the artist settled down to work in the afternoon, the wasp was beside itself, exhausted and confused, having banged its head a hundred times on the window in its desperate desire to return home. The artist had opened the window as usual. But the poor bedraggled wasp no longer had the energy nor wit to know which way was out. The artist saw the wasp and how tired and battered it looked. She gently picked up the white plastic cup she used as a model for her work and put it over the wasp, against the window, then slid a pristine white piece of paper between the cup and windowpane, taking pains not to damage any of the wasp's delicate legs. Then she carefully carried cup, paper and wasp outside and placed the whole arrangement under the ledge of the back step, being sure to take the paper off the top of the cup and lay it on its side so the wasp wasn't trapped once again. She put a thimble of strawberry jam next to the cup, in easy reach, before returning indoors to continue her work.

The poor weary wasp dipped its dainty proboscis into the strawberry jam and delicately sucked its fill. After a few minutes, it was much recovered and flew back to the nest in the oak tree. The wasp had much to explain about how it had accidentally spent the night inside the artist's house. However, it now harboured a fully formed, secret, burning creative desire, not to be shared with any of the other wasps. A plan that it hugged inside itself and determined it would realise.

For the rest of that warm summer, the wasp would complete all the communal work with its family in the oak tree colony in the morning. It would then fly to the back step of the artist's house to work on its masterpiece. The artist would sometimes notice the wasp buzzing busily to and fro from the garden to the back step, but let it continue with its work, as she got on with hers.

The wasp made countless journeys from the old stump of an apple tree, felled in an autumnal gale many years before, to the shade of the doorstep ledge, unnoticed by all save the artist



when she stretched and looked up from her work. Her children ran in and out of the house, dressed as cowboys and sea creatures, splashing cold drinks and ice cream hither and thither, but the wasp was safe in its artistic toils under the ledge of the back door.

One mid-September afternoon, the children were at school and the artist settled down to work as usual, when she noticed the wasp seated on her windowsill, regarding her with a steady gaze. When she had satisfied herself that the wasp was definitely looking straight at her and trying to gain her attention, rather than that she was imagining things, she followed the wasp through the back door. She knelt down to see where the wasp had vanished under the doorstep. What she saw made her gasp with surprise and admiration: the little wasp had steadily chewed up minute mouthfuls of apple wood, mixed it with saliva and lined the plastic beaker with its own wasp-made paper.

Under the watchful eyes of the insect, the artist picked up the receptacle and gently rolled and squeezed it until the exquisite paper cup inside was released and revealed. Perfect in every detail, the chewed paper-pulp had picked up every contour of the white plastic container. The layers of pale golden-white colour were a wonder to behold.

The artist and the wasp went back inside the house. The artist reverently placed the wasp's astonishing creation next to her own *tromp l'oeil* paper cup. They both hovered (in their own ways, of course), breathless with excitement and pleasure. What a fabulous achievement!

The double sculpture was shown in a beautiful gallery that October, called Oakapple Studios. The artist attended the opening with the wasp nestled carefully on her shoulder. Their joint exhibit enchanted every visitor, although many would not believe it to be truly the collaboration of human and wasp, assuming it to be an eccentric quirk of the artist to claim it so.

As the artist drove home from the gallery, the wasp dozed fitfully on her shoulder. Once inside it disentangled its little feet from her best jumper and slowly buzzed down to the table in the window. There it settled. The artist wondered why it did not fly back home to its colony in the oak tree, but left it in peace and went to bed, leaving the window open half an inch, just in case the wasp changed its mind.

The following afternoon, the artist took a cup of tea and sat at her table. As she went to put the mug down, she noticed the

wasp, curled peacefully in an empty glass ink bottle. The artist looked closer and realized that the wasp had died in the night, having fulfilled its burning creative desire. She tenderly put the lid on the ink bottle and stood the little jar on her sunny windowsill. And there it stands, still, by the table in the window, next to the masterpiece that it had made with the artist, between two perfectly wrought paper cups.

... *From Issue 6.*

Diana Powell

### **‘Water, Earth, Stone.’**

*She’s been lying in the water for too long, now. After a while, it does things to you. In the bay, she watched the idling swimmers, their skin rucked and pallid as a shark’s gills. Once, further out, deeper, she came upon a graveyard of ships, a trawl of bones, whiter still, nothing left for the fish, for the slow dissolution of flesh. She stayed with them for some time.*

*Another bay, then the lull of the estuary, until the storm. The waves pushed her inland, up the river to here, wherever ‘here’ was. A shallow stretch of water, beneath a bank, some trees, a house. A crossing place, ‘for luck’. Yes, fords were good. It was the right place to come to rest. And yes, she decides she’s had enough, now. The swimmers, the disjointed skeletons – none of them can imagine what it is to be her. A single cone of the speleothem, the painstaking gestation of an anthozoan reef – all nothing to her. Too long.*

*So... now... It is time.*

*The woman comes every day. Out of the house, down to the stream, standing, staring at the water. She watches through the flotsam tangled over her eyes. Old, she thinks they’d call her, but, really, no more than a grain of sand. Not quite a crone, but no mother, either, and certainly no maiden; sap-sucked, some might say. Still, she’ll do.*

Mair has been looking at the stone for a week now. A reddish, egg-shaped boulder, a foot, perhaps, high, lying just beneath the surface of the ford, the water purling round it. There is a space below the arched fronds of her *Dicksonia Antarctica*, asking for something, a focal point. The stone would be perfect.

‘But can I lift it?’

Once upon a time, Bill did the heavy work in the garden. Once upon a time, she talked to Bill. Now there is only her.

Her hand kneads the muscle in her lower back.

But still, she wants it. Today, she will try.

She puts on her boots and wades in.

Her hands reach around the rock, the gnarl of each finger-joint seeking a matching cleft in its surface. She judges the heft, then firms her heels into the silt, and braces her back. And pulls.

And now she is sitting in the water, the stone clutched to her

chest. She smiles – perhaps not as useless as some have said.

There! In its place, it looks exactly as she pictured it. She smiles again.

She pulls away some of the twigs and mud. More depressions and ridges. It could be a face. Perhaps it is a face, yes, there are two eyes, with a misshapen hollow beneath them... the nose, eaten away by time, the sea. A stone head. She has heard of such things in the island to the north, and across the sea, but not here, just as red sandstone isn't from here. Iron oxide, she remembers, though the old tales said it was blood. It's good to think it has come to her from afar – a 'given'. She has always liked 'givens' for her garden. Now, she has this one. Female, she decides, because the weeds she leaves hanging on the sides resemble long hair. 'Welcome to Ty Nant,' she says.

'Another acer, perhaps? Snake-bark?'

There is a flat, paved area beneath the fernery, where Mair has her morning cup of tea if the sun is shining. And a digestive or two.

'I'm thinking,' she would tell Bill, whenever he found her like this, and said she was being lazy again.

'Planning what to do next.'

It was true. It's what she's doing now, only she's saying the words out loud. Anyone who came along at this moment might think she's talking to the head. Why not? What does it matter if the words are in her mind, or coming out of her mouth, spoken to an absent husband, or to a piece of stone?

'For autumn colour. And spring bulbs beneath it. Yes.'

'And, maybe... another fern, a Dryopteris, just below you, so that you are peeping through it...'

'... a younger woman, much younger, little more than a girl, really. He said... didn't love me any more... she had so much more vitality... interested in him... all I was interested in was the garden...let my looks go...never wanted to do anything... nothing in common any more...hadn't for years... and sex... well...'

Mair doesn't know when her conversation with the head changed from garden-planning to telling her about Bill. One day, it was a new bed for the roses, the next the end of her marriage. In America, she'd be seeing a shrink; a counsellor, here. Her G.P. had suggested one, but the waiting-list was so long. He gave her pills instead. So, if it helps her... And she likes the silence of the head, the way it doesn't judge, because

it surprised her the way people (and not just Bill) blamed her, even though she was the wronged party.

And soon, it isn't just the breakdown of her marriage, but the marriage itself, going back to Day One, the wedding... then beyond, to her childhood.

'I don't know what it was. I never had any friends. Of course, I was overweight, and wore glasses and braces...so the other children made fun of me, called me names. And I was an only child, I didn't know how... they said I told tales, was sly, and spoilt... I don't think that was true... just that I...

It was the same when we came here. I had the garden and Bill, but couldn't seem to make friends. Then Bill went.'

The words spill from her mouth, on and on. And Mair isn't so lonely any more.

She knows as soon as she steps out of the door. She feels the scent of the garden, as much as her mind knows its paths, beds, plants. Someone has been here in the night. Not the fox, nor the badgers. People. And yes, just down from the upper terrace, she sees the print of feet in the dew of the grass, leading to the fernery. Bare feet. The steps gather in the lawn below, muddling together there, and on the wall she finds the stubs of candles, some bread-crumbs, bay leaves taken from the laurel hedge.

'Has somebody visited you?' she asks, looking up at the head. A different head. She has always preferred her garden ornaments weathered – 'the patina of age', she liked to say. Now the lichen, the moss, the weeds she had left in place have been cleaned away. She sees what she has never seen before, full lips with a hole between them, the stare of the eyes, one bigger than the other, below bulging lids – a look she doesn't like at all. It follows her as she gathers up the litter and heads for the house. She won't have her cup of tea outside today.

How did these people – whoever they are – discover the head? She hasn't told anyone about it. There is no-one she speaks to, except the post-mistress once a week, and their conversation is no more than the weather. Yes, the other side of the stream is open, and occasionally she sees walkers there. But it would be difficult to decipher vague features in a stone from that distance. Yet, somehow, they have found it out.

They come every moonlit night, now. She hears them first, a sough of a breeze through the bushes.

Then, from the bedroom window, she sees them, shrouded shapes flitting in the shadows, then gathering around the stone. First, they dance, then kneel before it, as if in worship. And then they begin to chant, low, fluting tones, until they fall silent, and another voice begins. No words, no more than a thin whistle of a broken reed. She knows the words are coming from the lips of the head.

‘They’re not doing any harm,’ she supposes. ‘Perhaps I should just leave them...’ she thinks, until the morning she goes out, and finds her seedlings trampled, branches of her saplings snapped, the bark of the tree-fern hacked away, as if to make more room. She cries, then.

At the next full moon, she waits for them among the trees, watches them come up the edge of the stream. A group of women – young women, the gloss of their long hair, the glow of their skin catching the silver light. They sway in front of the head, arms raised high, their bodies curving easily. Then they curtsey, make their offerings and their song begins.

Mair steps out of the shadows. The words are ready inside her head. Trespass. Damage. Police. She will say them all.

Hearing her, they all turn towards her. And laugh.

And then they speak. ‘Old,’ they snigger. ‘Haggard. Crabbed. Dried up. Dried up and spat out. Unwanted, unloved. Cast aside. Fri-gid!’

How do they know these things, she wonders?

‘Sneak, tittle-tattler, slob, creep, lickspittle, brat. Fat Brat.’

No-one knows these things about her, no-one around here. Only the stone...

She clamps her hands to her ears, and rushes back inside.

Mair doesn’t want the head in her garden any more. She doesn’t talk to it any more, and she doesn’t like the way it looks at her, as she works at her planting, its lentoid eyes following her wherever she is, so that she never escapes. More and more, she stays in the area closest to the house, but even there, she has that hollow in the pit of her stomach, the rise of the hairs on her neck. And she doesn’t want those girls, who still come whenever the night is clear, who have paid no attention to her threats... but did she say anything? She can’t seem to remember.

She will get rid of it, she decides. It's easy to move, after all. She'll put it back in the water, face down. And then, when the river is in flood again, it will be carried out to sea, back where it came from, perhaps. Far from here, from her.

She bends to pick it up, not readying herself this time. Ooff! She stumbles backwards with the first pull, the stone unmoved. Perhaps the roots of the ferns have tangled around it, fastening it into the earth. She fetches her trowel and digs down. It will be easier now.

But still she can't move it. She tugs, and pushes, but it's no good. She gets her spade, and digs deeper into the ground. Still it doesn't budge, not even an inch.

So she kneels down against it, her arms hugging it close, and pulls again.

*She's had enough of this woman, now. First, her endless prattle, her constant moaning, her fussing with the growing things in the earth, her objections to the rites, which she shouldn't have seen.*

*And this spot where she placed her... The maidens need water for their incantations. She needs to be closer. She'll do it now. And ... yes, free!*

*Together, they fall down, down, towards the stream. And then she stops, and the woman's head knocks against her. Blood to blood. Into the water the foolish old crone goes, while she fixes herself upright, on the shallow bank. Perfect. She looks down at the water. There is no sign of the woman, Mair, she thinks she was called.*

She's been lying in the water too long now. Too long to rise again. At first there was something peaceful about it, after the struggle. Her body was taken along by the flow, held up, rested. At least that's how it seemed. But then she reached the estuary, and felt herself grow heavy. Down, down.

She's in the open sea now, fatter than she's ever been. And so pale. Soon, the fish come, and begin to nibble at the soft parts of her. Soon, she'll be nothing but bone, whiter still. As hard as stone.

*... From Issue 11.*

## Stunt man

There is a corner of a building where stunt men set up shop and sell fake suicides. They know to leap into the noiseless jungle far above the streets, and tumble like ragdolls without so much as a scratch. They melt into the sewage before anyone can notice their acrobatic mischief, and everyone is too frantic about the calamity to realise the body is gone: several pools of crowds form and every participant thinks the body is located at the feet of another throng, too dense to press through to. There is a helpless desperation to see the body, people buzzing frantically as if beholding it would reanimate the crumpled loss.

I pretended to be too dignified to seek out the body, and stayed around the pipelines with all the other intellectuals. I exercised reserved meditation and even suspiciously cornered the premises in case a culprit was slipping away with the aid of a diversion. I did not realise that it was not a murder, but a transaction.

With all my apprehensions, I could not help gulping and reaching for my throat in a renewed appreciation for my dear life. The sirens were wailing mothers and the streets were burning. People felt smacked. Even those that lingered coolly as if they'd seen a leap such as this one before. Everyone melted into the ground and fossilised with the event like a torched volcanic city. The building was a deathly protrusion upon the planet.

Curtailing our curiosity at the lacking stench of metallic blood, the leaping ninja that made thus a fool of us all was skirting the grimy network below our feet. He preferred to resign himself from our pathetic stupor, and focus on his deft movements, skimming through the unwalked channels like something inhuman. There was the faint murmur of commotion above his head, distant laments obscured by the concrete. But he focused on the neverending obstacles ahead, the cracks and pipes that in obstructing his path allowed him to fly; precious enemies. Boundless energy. Nothing could put a lid on his ferocity, the eloquence of his flight. And yet he had energy to spare, on some muffled whim, to have the desire to cry. Suppressing this debilitating urge, he spun himself with ever increasing vigour.

Nobody realises what he is capable of, no one stands in awe of him, indeed he is necessarily invisible. His agility feeds on the



tragedy of his exclusion, and so he renounces all human incentive, driven only by the ancient insistence that once drew deep roars out of the illiterate depths of our ancestors.

That was when it struck me, that a great hoax; a great injustice had been committed. I mused and inspected – determined to be the exception of the mockery. Suddenly I bounded off, running like a lunatic, led by the pulse of the beating ground that mourned like a ghost sending voiceless, desperate clues about the whereabouts of the cause of its death. I grinned, as much as one can grin under such circumstances, as I was gaining on him. Beneath me he struggled to escape my determined chase. My steps unnerved him and I grew delighted. We ran, one on top of the other. The way the ground shook beneath; the way the air between his body and the surrounding sewage pipes vibrated and whistled, narrated his flight. There was no reserve. Every gesture was meant. No matter that I was preying on him, he extended himself in his dance, not giving up the fluidity and flair of his leaps.

I began to fall in love with the person running beneath me. It was slowing me down even, compelled as I was to take stock of what he was doing down there, then speeding up just to remain witness to this incredible ability.

I grew tired. I was overcome with admiration. What did he think of my yearning steps? I wished to fall upon the ground, lying flat upon it, dissolving through it. But I had to keep up. My impression was that of incredulity. What was this absolutely impossible creature? I hoped my steps would turn meek and implore him to slow down and greet me. But He only sped up, infuriated. I almost bumped into a fire hydrant. I had run through several puddles in which swam the specimens of urban life, and which now tried to adapt to their relocation upon my trouser leg. I sucked in my stomach and risked a sideways spring between two unacquainted pedestrians trying to overtake each other. It was after ruining a street performance, and being chased by enforcers of justice who assumed I was pickpocketing, that I turned a corner and abruptly felt him burst into flames beneath me. I knew then that I would never love again. It was short-lived, but lacked for nothing.

... *From Issue 3.*

**Sam Rapp**

**The Nearing**

The weekend is here, the days yearned for  
The ice cold, days old  
From many snow dropped tears resting on rain  
Frozen blocks of white and blue clear ice  
Fallen onto broken trees  
The rickety old farm truck  
Home now to feeding ducks  
The silence of the well where water once flowed  
The old mill crumbs left from baking bread  
The congregated iron, fallen  
Once strong, now broken  
With rust on the bone  
The slice of you I had  
The pain on your face  
Your flesh covered sins  
Where flowers now grow  
Mixed with the moss on the hills  
Where feet trodden in mud flats, tore  
You nearing  
Yearning of memories gone  
My treasured photo burnt  
But I see your silhouette in my mind  
As I waved you on

*... From Issue 4.*

**Connor Sansby**

## **Gin & Teardrops**

She tastes like gin and teardrops.  
It's not a matter of the heart,  
It's about the space around it.  
She's fertile soil, where memories grow  
Like weeds in her past.

Sometimes, she prays for her eyes to be taken  
So she can see the void she feels inside.  
On quiet nights she can hear the echo,  
Blossoming in her ribcage and up her throat.  
Choking her with the roots she outgrew

Those nights, where the sun never sets  
And strangers bellow Dionysian rhetoric  
Below her window,  
She is glad to lose herself in the sounds below,  
the sounds of home and unknown,  
The sound of someone lost in the wordless and unexplainable  
Of hope and hopeless, escape and entrenchment.

They are family like she never knew  
Brothers and sisters who fear the dark  
But cannot close their curtains to the eternal sun  
That beckons her to stretch her petals

*... From Issue 5.*

**Derek Sellen**

## **Arcade**

The light switched across their images,  
Jayne to Jane to Ava to Rita and back  
until it stopped on one. I bet on Ava every time  
because she smiled on me and all seven-year-old gamblers,  
caressed me in ways I didn't yet understand.

Ava the farm-girl,  
transformed to goddess,  
southern drawl to crystal honey,  
rustic frock to the one-strap black dress in 'The Killers'.

Hard-drinking,  
hard-swearing,  
hard-marrying Ava,  
applauding her lover in the plaza de toros,  
shooting the streetlights out on a bender with Sinatra.

Ava the bruised,  
aborting her child for the sake of her contract,  
battered by George C Scott at the Beverley Hills Hotel.

Ava the ageing, finally forsaken.

Ava the beauty,  
the one I adhered to. Capricious and ruthless,  
the machine cascaded pennies on rare occasions.  
It was years before I saw a film of hers – the eyes,  
the lips, the cheekbones, the mesh of dark hair,  
as they had been in the flash-and-glitter  
of the Margate arcade.

Note: there used to be a machine in a Margate arcade where you won a pay-out if you chose the right Hollywood 'screen goddess'. An image of Ava Gardner was one choice.

*... From Issue 8.*

## **Dental Hygiene**

It is one-fifteen, Monday morning. I have been thinking a lot lately about tooth decay.

Is there too much sugar in my diet? Sometimes my teeth hurt, it makes me think of tooth decay, like maybe I have tooth decay. They only hurt a little though.

I would go to the Dentist but I don't think that it's serious. I don't have tooth decay. I have nice teeth. My mother always used to say what nice teeth you have. Such a lovely smile.

Are you out there, somewhere? Has it been as hard for you as it has been for me? I hope it has. No I don't. If I could make it so that nothing bad would ever happen to you, then I would. Even though you are a selfish, nasty prick who isn't nearly as clever as you think you are.

I don't think about you these days. I am happy and I am in control. I don't waste time dredging up my past and agonising over things that happened years ago.

Last time I checked, I could go a whole minute without breathing. Sixty seconds at least. Pretty cool right? I've lost a little weight. I gained a lot of weight before I lost it so really nothing's changed.

I am happy and I am in control.

I have trouble sleeping. I get enough hours but the hours are wrong. Three-to-thirteen, thirteen-to-six. That could mean I have ASPD which means Alternative Sleep Pattern Disorder which I googled online. It means you sleep in the day and wake up at night. I don't know what to do about that honestly I just go with it.

The minimum amount of hours of sleep you need is eight hours, so they say.

I'm not going to sleep tonight. What would be the point? I have to wake up at eight for work anyway. I'd have to be up in six-and-a-half hours. It's easier to stay up. That way I won't sleep in. I don't want to be late again.

I'll grab an energy drink from the corner-shop on the walk to work. I can go another day without a shower. I have still some

cologne left. I have deodorant.

My hair is short. It won't look greasy. I can wear a hat.

The thing I worry about most, when I think of you, is that you will be more successful than I am. I wonder if you're better at this than me. Have you been published yet? What are you working on, right now? You might have written a novel. I have friends who have written novels. I don't care about their novels, they can write as many novels as they like because it won't change who I am. I don't want to be better than them. I want to be better than you.

I worry that one day I'll be looking in a bookshop and I'll see your name on the cover of some book, and I will shrink into myself and never find my way back out again.

It's taken years to carve the centre of myself away and fill it with productive, clever things. All the books I've read and can't remember. Names of writers. Reference material. I don't read as much as I ought to. I'm bad at writing.

In my head, you're very good at writing, and it comes easily every time you try. That's because I hate you and I want you to succeed so that I can be bitter.

Whenever I try to write, I choke up like there's something sharp stuck in my throat. I can't form sentences, or think of the right words. Everything just tapers off and ends up sounding shit. I try to think of ideas for stories.

I have so many names and places and little anecdotes. I don't have any stories. I had one, once, and it was alright, I suppose. I've gone and used it all up now. I'm not good at writing.

It would make me feel so much better if I thought that it was hard for you as well. It would make me feel fucking brilliant if you were shit, or washed up completely. If I found out you were dead, I'd probably kill myself.

We were never competitive. That was what I loved the most about you. We never had to compete with one another. I never had to lose to you. I keep dreading the day I'll hear your name, or read something you wrote.

I'm petty and cruel. I haven't changed at all.

Two-twenty-four now. Five hours and forty-six minutes.

I have a dream. I'm on the bus and my teeth fall out. They rattle around in the metal tray where I'm supposed to put my money. The Bus-driver looks up at me and says, hey you can't pay with that or that's not legal tender, or something. An old woman behind me taps her cane.

'Give me a fucking minute love my teeth all just fell out.'

Knowing that you can't dream when you're awake, I figure out I must've fallen asleep. Not good. What time is it now? Late for work. Bad. Disappointing.

My phone is out of battery. I don't have a clock. I'll need to let my phone recharge before I can tell the time. I'm too reliant on my phone. When I go out I sometimes leave my phone at home but I don't mean to. It's like a missing limb.

I have a hard time holding conversations without having my phone to look at. I get bored easily and struggle to concentrate. I'm cut off when I have it. I'm cut off when I don't have it.

I don't go out much anyway. I keep a charger with me, so my phone won't die. A long, thin, grey umbilical cord with a flat, square tip. Attaching me to the wall, keeping me connected.

I used to think that you were such an insufferable cunt. Really just the worst. It helped that lots of people seemed to agree with me. You were smarter than most people and you lacked the good sense to pretend otherwise. People don't like it when they're stupid, have you learned that yet? Have you found someone who makes you feel stupid?

I have, and I love her. I wish everything was as easy as loving her.

The truth is that you weren't as bad back then as I believed you to be. The more I came to hate myself in all the years that followed, the more I understood that you were not to blame for all the things that happened.

I was the one who wanted to suffer. I was the one who wanted to fight. I never listened to people when they talked, I just sat quietly, waiting for my turn to complain. I was a lonely virgin, and I wanted to fuck somebody. I'm happy now though. I am happy and I am in control.

I feel like I'm about to cry.

I have tooth pain but I'm not sure if it's really there. Sometimes I think I might be in pain or maybe it's just something else that I mistake for pain. Perhaps it isn't pain, perhaps it's something else. Sensations I cannot identify caused by something happening inside me. Moving parts. People are basically machines.

I'll clean my teeth though just in case. Better safe than sorry, that's what Mother always said. I have an electric toothbrush. The brush bit needs replacing. Blood in your spit means gum disease.

Not much blood. Clean them once again to be on the safe side.

More blood. Clean them again. I forget to clean my teeth sometimes.

\*

I think it all started to change when I came to University. Not straight away. Do you remember our friends? They might still be your friends. I used to message them all the time. Especially the girls. Especially when drunk.

I never thought of myself as pathetic, not until I realised I was an alcoholic. Even later, when I couldn't go a day without a joint, and I would dig between the sofa cushions desperate for that one lost bag of weed, I never thought I was a loser.

Drinking brought it home to me. In hindsight, I mean. At the time I felt fantastic. I used to beg for money off my parents, drink a bottle of Jack Daniels a day.

The most embarrassing thing about that, I think, was that I was drinking Jack Daniels. It's not even fucking nice, and how utterly predictable. The 'babies first' of drinking problems; bourbon.

Part of me wishes I'd stayed there, in that haze, but I didn't. I had to wake up and suffer. She was coming for me.

I am happy now though, really. It might not seem like it but I'm doing better. I don't drink as much and I hardly even smoke pot. I probably masturbate more than I ought to. Nobody's perfect. What am I supposed to do, castrate myself? I just want to enjoy being alive sometimes.

When I moved into the shared house, I couldn't be wasted all the time. Plus, this was when people started asking me what I'd been writing and expecting me to answer. My parents would say things like, "hey have you been doing any writing lately?" I would tell them yeah of course, been doing loads of writing.

Lying, in my opinion, is not about convincing other people of something that isn't true. It's about convincing yourself that lying is necessary, that it is justified.

I'd tell my room mates I was going to buy weed in and they'd say to me, "hey didn't you just buy some weed in yesterday?" I'd tell them how me and Jake smoked all that last night during a *Jurassic Park* marathon. We're having an *Indiana Jones* marathon today, except we're not going to skip *the Crystal Skull* so we're definitely going to need more weed.

Once you can convince yourself that everything you do is necessary, nothing can hurt you.

I wonder if you'd understand that. I wonder if you'd think that



I was weak. I am, but people don't seem to see it. People think that I am funny, and therefore, that I must have some kind of incredible ability to shrug things off, or take them in my stride.

I don't know why we equate a sense of humour with some kind of strength of character. All the people that I know who make me laugh are walking human disasters, and no one makes me laugh as much as me.

Maybe no one thinks that I am strong because I'm funny. Maybe no one thinks I'm funny. Maybe no one thinks anyone is strong because they're funny. Maybe no one really appreciates anything and we're all walking round, asleep and dreaming about being important.

When my phone switches on again, I am going to see my manager has called me several times. The time then will be fourteen-thirty-seven. Just one hour and twenty-three minutes left of my shift.

My manager will be disappointed.

She's the one who kick started the whole thing. I was showering one day, and thinking about how cool she was. She's funny, she has such a great taste in music. She's beautiful too, but I don't feel intimidated by her. We're friends and I would never jeopardise that. I appreciate her friendship and I love her so much.

In that moment I realised I was madly, horribly in love with her. I think I must've had a panic attack. I distinctly remember having to sit down in the shower and slow my heart rate. It wasn't everything I'd hoped true love would be.

I felt like I might be sick. The meagre scraps of life that made sense to me were all about to tear themselves apart. I tried to rationalise things. I couldn't really love her, I probably just wanted to fuck her. Like all modern men, I struggle to tell those things apart. It wasn't love. I'd never loved anybody really. I'd only ever possessed people, or wanted to possess them.

I didn't want to be with her though. I didn't want her to be with me. I was fat, and ugly. I'd built up a severe dependence on weed and alcohol. I'd never had a friend I hadn't managed to alienate.

But I loved her. So deeply and sincerely that it made me want to kill myself. I loved her, she was perfect. She was wonderful, so genuinely wonderful. Worst of all I felt like she might like me too, at least she thought I was her friend, and certainly she wouldn't ever judge me on appearances alone. She might love

me, or be capable of loving me one day.

Likewise, I was more than capable of turning her into a bitter and resentful bitch. We both know that I've done it before.

So I did the only thing I could. I started climbing up the wall of the shower, until I reached the ceiling. Then, I found a little crack, like a hairline fracture in the corner of the ceiling, and I forced my way through it until I'd disappeared completely.

On the other side was damp darkness. I could hear the shower running beneath me. I was still clinging to the wall. My fingers hurt. I kept on climbing.

Naked, dripping wet and fucking freezing cold. I climbed up the side of a wall I could not see. The higher I climbed, the more I came to see. I climbed over the bodies of the many versions of myself who'd tried to make this climb before. I climbed over mountains of porn and empty bottles of Jack Daniels. I struggled across the sharp, rigid surface of my own memories, and I just tried so hard to keep going, and to never go back.

Eventually I reached what felt like the top. It was warmer there, and I wasn't naked any more. The climb had taken me approximately seven months. Possibly longer. I'd lost a little weight. My hair wasn't such a rat's nest.

It hadn't been a wall, it was a tower. A single, lonely tower of black stone that I had dragged myself up the side of.

I was hungry, but there was nothing to eat, or drink. There was nothing at all up here. I looked out over a slate grey horizon and thought well done.

Well done indeed. The view was spectacular. Miles of empty space. There were angry blue clouds boiling up beneath me. I could see the sudden bursts of light that told me somewhere, far below, there was a storm raging.

Beneath those storm clouds, I guessed, was the mountain of detritus I had given myself over to, the bodies of my former selves. The bathroom where I had been showering, all those months ago. I wondered what had happened to her, the girl I loved.

She was of course still down there. Then again, so was the widely accepted reality of things, and yet another version of myself. The me who didn't make the climb, or hadn't made it yet. I didn't like that version of myself. I much preferred the version of me that was here, stood at the top of the tower, staring down at a storm I needn't suffer. I was hungry though.

I climbed back down. Back into the moment, right before she changed things. I went back, and experienced the slow and

awful struggle towards being a good man. In many ways I'd made the climb before. In many ways, I never truly had. I'm still climbing now.

It took me three minutes and forty-seven seconds to climb back down, back through the crack in the ceiling and back into my head, through the tear ducts in the corners of my eyes.

I've cleaned my teeth three times now. My phone is finally charging. It gives a little buzz. The screen lights up. My manager has called me seven times.

*... From Issue 6.*

**Mary Anne Smith Sellen**

**After George Braque: Still Life With Guitar (1935)**

Was it a stroke of genius, to temper titanium white into the opacity of bone, then to mute, in cool grey, the jagged edges of the rosette, and in so doing draw the eye to the burr-hole, and its dark red rose?

Maybe this was just a ghost-note played unconsciously to those upstroke frets, tying together light and shade like sutures, relieving pressure, swinging the gaze round to the heat of vermillion, then sliding away through stains of crimson, ochre, umber.

This might be the scene from an ancient embalming – canopic jars with tools for organ removal, fresh blood and grey matter, and finally the grace-note of a newly mummified subject, prepared for the slow movement to the afterlife.

There's a loose suggestion of a cloth, smoothly draped, on which objects have been either arranged carefully or discarded, carelessly. A hurriedly improvised still life, perhaps? Still life, but still alive – still capable of tremolo breaths. Before the curtains, he waits. He will take encore, after encore.

*... From Issue 6.*



*'The Lonely Guitar' by Michi Masumi*

**Phil Smith**

## **Untitled**

Approaching, stratforwardly, the tree in the centre of a forest of comparisons and as you liking,

On all the paths, he was always sensing the great forces, with one in order only, sparking

And holding him sprawled all across the gap between the books and glances of the house.

The covenant hidden beneath the floor meaning space was not to him like wooden boards,

But more a global battle between the Latin masses and older mysteries with property swords.

He understood the bright bandied prattle of rough elders as the code of those betrayed;

He stayed its hands with a balancing trick, liturgy thick with metaphors and easy cast of line,

Angling for purchase in a storm, fathoms down where clever folk mistake demon rapine for noble savagery

And fools used 'witch' to address sisters on a battlefield where, homeless, Lear went odd like God,

And the lovely Amazons were defeated, Hippolyta spliced by force. Against this purple backdrop,

Some summer lovers defined their feelings for each other and the things in the trees spoke back.

Now, standing before an indulgent oak, surrendering his cloak and dagger to industry and civil war,

He sentences his phrases, works are sent for gilding, and with senses tricked and reeling, he trips

And falling forward on his knees, taps symbols with a regular foot, and pleads no need for pleading.

*... From Issue 2.*

**Roy Smith**

## **Shakespeare RIP 2016**

(Words stolen from the star man and purple prose for the end of days)

An airless revolution of flirty demanding savages, whose blood-sucking, dog-weary eyes, featureless, scream into the afterworld as they listen to the ruminations of their deaths-head taste messiah. From his throne the glutton beats his chest spouting sanctimonious voodoo at his adoring butterflies. There will be no compromise, his pride grinds with barefaced pageantry towards their idle-headed gaze, preaching frugality with a hint of madcap hate. Theirs is a sunken hope, one of trucks and pocket castles, of a tranquil bluebird fairy-land threatened by arch-villains and inevitable juvenile impermanence. They shy away from change, at loggerheads with the weird and vulnerable, hooked on malignant bile that aims its bombs and hoodie control soldiers at the slugabed and epileptic thousands who drain their precious freedom. Their revelation is obscene, sold by a swishy lawman for his own gratification. They are blind and over-credulous to his foppish charm, their beloved sits high on a broken seesaw laughing at the insanity of his own crass ego ticket.

A gnarled delinquent, woke to the devices of the yelping fiend, screws his concrete ass, dauntless in the face of intimidation and trembling, he castigates the heaving mass of mousy, low-key cavemen. For a moment they are halted in their lacklustre belief, bedazzled by this zany dude. A dirty bodied lion, radiant with his own sounds. They behold him in fascination, colourful trash, an unmitigated freak to be silenced and swept away. Advancing, keen to even the score, a surge of wrecks first surround him, then the wave pours over and the high-skinny-needle-rocket-boy is overwhelmed, useless. Dragged on his stomach to their auspicious father, the boy shrinks, saddened and heartsore at the crowd's addiction to the copper-nosed beast. He sees their empty smiles as they hang him live on stage, spot lights catching his tardy chase, kicking out the last of his angry strange, until swinging cold they cut him down.

Aroused by the smell of blood at dusk and lit by the fumes of remorseless spleen, they conjoin in a party of sex and pressure, lustrous matter, pendulous de-frocked fools moving in a seamy affair of death and fucking. The rich and their women, the married and their lovers, young and old keeping on, keeping on. Besmirched by their abandonment, the hideous ambassador reaches out and grabs his share of flesh to take down to the basement and devour. This uprising is cancelled, but you'll be able to read about it in the magazines and papers. A dove lands upon the fallen boy's cheek. It sits there kind of funny and begins to peck at his bulging eye. Carry on.

... *From Issue 2.*



## Spreken

### Underneath

Who's that trip-trapping across my bridge?

A pair of heels in a hurry,  
smart suit,  
but furrowed brow and blistered heel.  
Time is not her friend today,  
wish away these last few hours  
to wine and fireside.

Wellies and wheels,  
trainers trail behind,  
catching the slipstream of boundless energy.  
Wearied days lead to restless nights,  
treasure these moments of noise and movement,  
for between bedtime and breakfast there is nothing.

Thick soled black boots,  
slow thud of uneven step,  
gentle clink of chain and buckle.  
Armour plated image, carefully created,  
hides a reality that cannot ask her  
if she'd like to go for a drink.

Smart dress shoes,  
well worn but shining,  
shuffling steadily homeward.  
No-one but the cat now awaits his arrival,  
warm silk slip around the shins,  
soft-sound relief at his return.

Down here in the still,  
troll's eye view alters perception.  
Dull concrete slabs are but the needles  
that knit all threads together.  
Plain design the canvas  
for life to daub its colours upon.

... *From Issue 3.*

## Zoe Stegosaurus

### Flesh And The Mirror

“The one about flesh,” you tell me. I hadn’t figured it out at the time. Your scalpel depresses the taut skin before sinking deep into the first incision, so sharp it doesn’t sting. “Do you still... I mean, do you – do you think there’s anything between you?” The eyes are kind, wide, forgiving. Crimson dribbles darkly from under the blade in vertical lines. Dismiss the suggestion, lean back into the warehouse couch. Eyes far away. Concede, eventually, “It’s hard to tell.”

I’ll wonder for days if this is the planting or just the watering of the weed that now chokes the plot. Whether an extract of its sap could cure an unnamed condition.

You grip my hand with a pressure that says I’m here and I care. Present simple, hesitant, testing a new language in your wrist. She pierces the thin skin inside my upper arm; the needle slides inside. Am not scared, but that hurts more than expected. Much more. As I gasp, your fingers press my palm, eyes interrogate my face: Am I doing this right? I admire the closeness you are capable of that day, grateful it can be targeted where it’s most needed. Does seem an effort – I am so unused to receiving it – as if you hoped to convince me it was real. I drink it in thirstily, savour its rarity. Do not think of this again till now.

Like when you grab me round the waist from behind as the crowd begins to mosh. I love it, but then and every remembrance since is etched with an exigent doubt. Wasn’t it just to, to stop me getting hurt? Is that love? Is there a difference? Or to avoid your own frustration in a hot hospital waiting room?

And I learn slowly to associate this tenderness with pain or the risk of it. Only at a price, like when you were a child.

That it was unnatural to you came through. Then when I read about the intimacy in the plane crash, I recognised it instantly, ruefully. Wondered a little if I’d ever get to crash a plane with you again.

Here I am naked to the bone. Terrified. And this is the time, my nervous system, my conditionings assure me, this is the time you’ll comfort me with body heat.

... *From Issue 4.*

**JJ Steinfeld**

**But I Will Listen**

Even if God  
spoke to me clearly and slowly  
enunciating more carefully  
than the rattling of the earth  
or celestial explosions  
beautiful to some  
frightening to those  
running from the randomness  
of erasure  
from time, place, the lips of storytellers  
when lovers dissolve  
into less than faint memories  
even if God  
sent me a report  
and I will read it over and over  
by good reading light  
doesn't mean I'd get it right  
doesn't mean I'd get it at all  
but I will listen  
my ear to the past  
like a fool  
in love with  
the virtue of foolishness  
in times of madness.

*... From Issue 12.*



*'The Companion' by Michi Masumi*

## The Parable of Three Dogs

Rex is a gun dog.  
For thirty thousand pounds,  
you can hire him, and the whole caboodle,  
for a day's hunting, a little treat for eight of your mates.  
He'll trample the heather,  
and retrieve still warm grouse in his soft mouth.  
Rex eats top dollar kibble with the rest of the pack,  
and once had an emergency visit from the vet  
to remove some splinters of pheasant bones stuck in his throat.

Ruby is a pet, a super pooch.  
She poops on the pavement,  
and her family scoop it up in scented, pastel, plastic bags.  
She gets shoved off the sofa, but jumps back up.  
(*Bad Girl, Ruby!* they say, patting her).  
Ruby eats Pedigree Chum, delivered weekly,  
with the groceries, licks out yogurt pots, hoovers up biscuit crumbs.  
When she goes for her vaccinations,  
she's a *Good Girl* for the vet.

Scamp is a street dog.  
Cardboard is the only carpet he knows.  
He exchanges body heat with his owner,  
and they flinch when passing feet pause.  
Scamp eats his half share of binned burgers,  
abandoned sandwiches; slurps slops from cardboard cups.  
When the RSPCA outreach worker comes  
to prize him from the body bag he's guarding  
he barely has the strength to growl.

... *From Issue 9.*

Jessica Taggart Rose

## CRACK

### Over

With an almighty                   CRACK,  
clap like thunder                    directly overhead  
or how it must sound if  
a jumbo jet backfires,            lightning struck.

The trunk stood           a moment  
upright - as if            in shock - then,  
s l o w l y,                with creaks  
from 100,000                floorboards,  
it began                   to pull  
ripping, tearing,           - sinew by sinew -  
an unnatural               prying    apart in  
splinter-sharp              s-t-a-c-c-a-t-o.

All at once the

### weight

was too much it  
u  
p  
e  
n  
d  
e  
d, spearing                dead branch fingers  
into soft earth.  
Perpetually                stuck  
grey, weathered

suddenly it ends.

... From Issue 9.

**Sarah Tait**

**Van Gogh's Ear**

Perhaps he didn't like what he heard –  
the whispers,  
hisses inside the shell, circling, snickering.

Perhaps he held it there too long,  
the Cowry,  
trapped by wishes and its exotic promising,  
fooled by the seashell's gape,  
mimic of an ocean's insanity.

Perhaps it was then his hope was dashed,  
long before a fat boy clutched a conch,  
sound rising like the laughing drowned,  
bubbling.

Light slicing through the deeps, glittering,  
dancing on whirlpooling eddies, splintering.

Sun glinting on a knife edge.

*... From Issue 11 .*

**Jonathan Terranova**

## **The Body Electric**

One finger tip falls,  
As does the heart  
Upon skin that makes I a man:  
Insane,  
again

You sense a spirit trapped  
Beneath animal bones  
When my deep brown eyes  
Unfold in your glare  
And so my anxious hands  
Are magnetised upon  
The flesh that erodes  
All sense of rational  
Logical  
Sensible  
All things that  
an apathetic society  
Demands us to to  
Abide by as pawns

I am a wild maniac  
Beneath the linen  
White as snow  
We stain it in our sins  
Until the morning comes  
And then we do it again



But if this is sin,  
Then why when I erupt  
And she takes hold of my all  
Do I wish to  
Lie in ecstasy on her breast?  
To the scent that takes me back  
To the seasons that all  
Variably resemble her  
Her autumn scarves  
Her winter skin  
Her spring like step  
Her summer heart

All seasons I fall for her again  
And so  
...

If this is sin  
Then I must love to sin  
Because it's the only time  
I've felt truth within  
And I assume  
That life was shaped  
By fate  
For in my heart I feel  
That

I belong to her.  
In love and hate.

... *From Issue 3.*

Neil M Thorne

## The Debt Collector's Story

It was by no means a noble profession, but the Debt Collector enjoyed his job. It earned him a fearsome reputation, which he used well to his advantage and in his time, had heard all the reasons why payment could not be made.

Like anyone in this world he worked for others and so saw no reason why people could not make ends meet. Secretly though, he enjoyed this power and delighted in seeing their fear at his arrival.

Just that morning, after seeing a family evicted from their home, he was asked to take on a round of additional cases. It was easy going and took him late into the evening until eventually there was only one final collection to be made.

The notes read she was always trouble and true to form, once the door was opened, the excuses freely followed. With work hours reduced and an unexpected bill she could barely afford to feed herself, let alone make payment as promised.

He was unsympathetic and warned that with such a poor record the bailiffs would not be held off long. It was usually enough to make them cough up, but on this occasion, she truly had nothing and so he prepared, almost with relish, to put that mark against her name.

Wait! Now desperate she asked whether there was anything else he could possibly want instead, and to this he just smiled. It was often the last resort of a woman with no other choice and many others would naturally take advantage of such an offer, but this was not his way. He placed no judgement on however she chose to make money, just so long as she paid.

The suggestion however offended, which left him confused for beyond in her meagre apartment there was nothing of material wealth that would even amount to a single payment, and so he asked, what else could she pay with?

A story, she offered, to which he just laughed, for how could that even hope to suffice, but amused by the idea instead asked, what sort of story? A journey, she told, into lands unknown, against odds mighty and all in the hope of love and salvation.

This intrigued the Debt Collector, for no one had ever offered a thing quite like it, but even so, what if, after all was told, he felt it was not worth the sum owed. Then, she hoped, he would show the same mercy any good person might give a desperate soul, to which he just smirked and said nothing other than for her to tell the story.

She told the tale of a man in search of the love he wronged, which all sounded tiresome, but he gave her the chance to make a fool of herself. This traveller found himself in a strange town where everyone was lost and living at the limits of life. There, he was offered a wish, which despite being a trap was a hard thing to refuse.

The Debt Collector had never been one for silly tales but soon found himself caught up in the strange adventure. The Traveller nearly fell to temptation but found the strength within to resist and in doing so saved those trapped souls who needed release.

What came next? A question that warranted only a smile in return, adding she would be willing to tell more if her circumstances hadn't changed by their next meeting. He was tempted to say no, but she had kept her side of the bargain and he did want to hear more.

Long after leaving her behind that story remained with him and all throughout the following week it distracted his thoughts as he went about his work. When it finally came time to return it was almost a relief to find she was still in no position to pay.

Never before had he contemplated doing anything of such a nature and if it were ever discovered then it would not bode well for him. The Debt Collector was certain however that he could get away with it, for there were ways of hiding such things.

The Traveller had moved along in his journey, though was still no closer to finding his love. He arrived at a town that thrived on the trade of human life and was disgusted by all he saw and wanted to stop it. However, it was all operated within the limits of the law he once helped create. He could do nothing and moved on, feeling hollow and broken.

She had kept her part and so again did not make payment, and this was how things continued. Over the following weeks and months, he would arrive to find she still could not pay and so received the next part of the story in recompense.

The path the Traveller walked was by no means easy and the stories told were often not happy, but this appealed to the Debt Collector. In a way it mirrored life and so did not pander to childish fantasy.

All during this time he and the woman never became close, she never invited him in, or even asked his name. This was purely a business arrangement, but even so, she one day asked what would happen once the story came to an end. Then, for her sake, he hoped she would once more be in a position to repay her debt with money.

They would always go through the same pretence, he would ask for what was due and in turn, she would tell him more, until a day came when all that changed. Instead of saying 'no', she offered what had been left wanting so long.

She denied him the rest of her story and for weeks was ready, waiting with money in hand. It plagued his thoughts and threatened to drive him mad. Eventually, he could stand no more and found himself back at her door, demanding to know how the story ended, but she refused him.

He could pay, an offer to which she just laughed. Anything! A most desperate plea was issued. Anything? Came the question in return, giving the barest of hopes, before she asked him to write off her debt completely.

That, however, was not within his power and so she told him that unless he was willing to take it on himself, he would never know the end. He hesitated, but ultimately it was just too much to bear, and so agreed.

She was surprised, maybe not expecting him to act as he did but despite his word on the matter, was not prepared to trust and so the debt was signed over officially before the last steps of that long journey were told.

After walking that endless road, the Traveller found the love he so terribly wronged, but though finding the forgiveness he so desperately sought, she was ultimately lost to him. The journey had made him into who he needed to be, but the path that lay ahead was his alone.

The Debt Collector was broken, for it was not the end he had hoped for, but then rarely does a story ever go the way we want or desire it, and with it finally done, the woman told him to leave and closed the door.

Now a Debt Collector cannot be indebted himself, it opens up the position to question and, no longer above reproach, he found himself without work for the first time in his life. It was never a job that had made him rich and with the reputation he once so willingly encouraged, no one was prepared to help.

His debts mounted up, spiralling out of control until at last, he understood what it was like to be on the other side, with desperate pleas falling upon unsympathetic ears, until there was nothing left to give, nothing but a story.

... *From Issue 13.*

## Janus

I heard this story once of a young boy who came off his motorbike and smashed his face to crumbs. They took him to a local cottage hospital, where the nurse insisted she could fix his face on the spot, rather than sending him to a cosmetic surgeon. With needle and thread she sat over his shattered self, stitching it back into human form, hour after hour, while the boy whimpered softly in his chemical sleep. At 5pm, with half his face repaired, the other half a shattered, bloody mess, cheekbone exposed, mouth a butcher's cut, she laid down her needle. And said: my shift's over now. I'm going home. Left her replacement, a younger nurse, less confident, less cavalier, to pick up the threads and try to replicate the work in mirror image, a macabre jigsaw. What sort of person would do that?

I don't judge her. Quite envy her commitment to her home life. The selfish are always alluring. Perhaps that's why I recalled her story as I lay on my beautician's couch, a corpse on a slab, hair scraped back, rigid with pain, listening to the whirr of a laser machine. Doubtless she'd wince at being described as a beautician. Her name badge read Alison – Aesthetician. Alison had been a midwife, but found the NHS made greater demands of her even than rich middle-aged women.

"Sorry, is it uncomfortable?" She doesn't wait for an answer. She's dealing with my wrinkles, acne scarring, age spots, sagging, thread veins, sun damage, all the problems you didn't know you had, until you sank into her comfy leatherette couch and had them explained to you, complete with price list.

I murmured a polite, British denial, lips clenched against the light.

How long would it hurt to have your face smashed to crumbs? Did his mother recognise him? Did she weep as she stroked the war zone that was his face? Much loved, much imagined, our children's faces, the faces we love, and how we mourn when their memory fades. Our own, less so, usually. Our deficiencies speak for us.

That photograph of us (us!) taken at Emma's party. Him, delicious, young, handsome, dressed as if he'd just staggered dishevelled from a Vogue shoot, the blonde on his left plainly drooling. Me? A pock-marked sow with a staved in face, which narrates a story I no longer want told. Nothing so exciting as a car crash, unless you count one conducted over forty years. That's him, that's me; in a bid to stay us, I've handed over enough cash to secure a month's cruise, and

surrendered my face to needles, light beams, chemicals, God knows what else, I couldn't take it all in, signed the consent form more in despair than hope.

He's older than me, actually. Only just, but no one would know it. Before me he lived a life of adventure and joy and delight, I assume; I fear to ask, but that's the story his face tells. Mine speaks a different language. Those hours carefully ordered to ward off those other hours. Book clubs, church committees, running the children to parties and music lessons, waiting outside while life happened despite me. Sour, haggard, disappointed. That cannot be the story he traces with his finger. I want it scrubbed clean, erased. To begin and end with this new narrative. The friend of the friend who said, you two should meet, and the gasp when I saw him, the sudden, scarce remembered ache; the stunned joy, the incredulity, when he seemed to want me back.

No, not incredulity. Love contains its own surety. It informs and glorifies the world with an energy which, like a drug, becomes a necessity. That hunger for another creates a sensation so overwhelming that you believe it must be perceptible, that you carry it on your skin like perfume. That yearning for a touch that isn't just any touch but the touch, from one human, only one, the only one in the world that will do, the one who can meet your hunger and sate it with a single finger, drawn across your lips.

I gasp at the thought and Alison tuts. "Relax. Nearly there. Use your breathing." Don't think of him. Think of the mashed up teenage boy. How his girlfriend must have felt, for of course he would have a girlfriend; people partner off all the time, as if it were easy. Kissing the scars, running her fingers over the raised welts, murmuring of course I still love you, of course you're still beautiful, you'll always be beautiful, your beauty can't ever be broken or change, not to me, not to me, it's still you. I could weep imagining it, although Alison would crucify me. So much simpler to pity strangers.

Where once I wanted anyone, any damn body, now of all the bodies on the planet I only want one. And this is meant to be progress?

I can still taste him on my tongue. The kiss goodbye at the station, the jokey pleading that he should come home to me safe, in one piece, in any shape, actually; only come back. Hope hurts as despair never could. They say we struggle to remember pain: perhaps love works similarly. I brace, defiant, against the grinding blinding tools. "Am I hurting you?" Face stabbed with a million tiny needles, squeezed eyes tight shut against the dreadful possibility of a careless hand. Am I hurting you? No more than fear. No more.

... *From Issue 12.*

**Joe Williams**

## **Royal Visit to Headingley Stadium**

What do you do?

    said the prince to the groundsman

who thought

    What a bloody stupid question,  
given I'm sat on a lawnmower, which  
you've just watched me drive from one  
side of the field to the other

but said

    I'm the resident artist here, and  
I'm making a picture there on the grass,  
that might not seem like anything much,  
but when it's done it should look grand,  
though not from here, you see it's made  
in a way that means it can only be seen  
from space

and the prince said

    It's great to have art in sport,  
how very nice to meet you

    but thought

What a waste of time and money

and the groundsman thought

    the same.

*... From Issue 10.*



*'Edinburgh Market Stop' by Michi Masumi*



**Cameron Williamson**

## **If this land were a sea**

To the left and below the men have abandoned their vehicles for the woods with their guns. While squatting to examine the breaking pressure of chalk, shots start to fall across the length of the woodland. Following the established track downwards, the shattering sounds fall on anxious ears that now begin to register the tribalistic calls. Calls made in ways far exceeding their purpose of unconcealing and frightening birds. Feeble efforts are made to record their cries and responding shots while in retreat from the hillside.

'Do you see anything?'

A windmill to the west, a fox skirts a hedgerow plunging into the thorny shadows. A siren calls over the distance to the next embankment. The brittle echo of a train across the shuntings, or a shooting range filling the gap. A dog answers indifferently.

'You can't go any further down there. You used to be able to cross, but now...'  
gesturing with an arm to the submerged fields lying below the embankment. The fences are bone-like, bleached by light and sharpened at both ends. Between these wooden limbs the ground is edged with a milky sediment; the heavy liquid forming a patchwork of unsubstantial territories of sodden ground tending toward river bed.

Just keep your eyes to the ground, ignore the fences, the dykes filled with reeds moving in tremulous chorus, the glimmering blade of water at the mouth of the river. It is imperative that you keep your sight fixed on the ground before your footfall. The water lies across everything, churned with the sediment and grass to disguise its depth. If it weren't for the colour you could walk straight off into the body of it; a sharp jolt and the blood tilting in the skull would be the only signs that you'd made such an unfortunate mistake.

The tide tightens its grip through the cleft of the river, causing the strained surface to move in a coagulated writhing; becoming overcome by the weight of the sea's motion, it directs a gaze away from its end along a new reversed trajectory. Sight is now drawn towards the two falcons dancing in the side wind, pursuing a pigeon into fatal impact on the grass of the embankment. One plucks feathers from the underbelly, ignorant to its partner's ridicule by a passing crow, pursuing the comparatively small falcon until the crow's attention seeps elsewhere.

Gulls rise and crest over one another rippling their wings from the backwash, as others rise over to fill the fore wave, chanting from their encampment within winter floodwaters, in time to the clatter of stones

being pulled back from the shore. Three bends in the river and a small flock of starlings have replaced the presence of the gulls; their wings are beating frivolously, yet making no sound at this distance against the wind. They need not converse as they maintain a following distance to the figure edging along the embankment. With eyes still too wary to lift from the carved impression of a path in the sodden mud, to admire the complexity of their presence among reed beds amongst pylons. The starlings maintain a seemingly graceful serpentine tumbling throughout the duration of gusts, while I am left to stumble when pulled into a bow to strike this figure hunched against the cold.

Through height comes orientation, remember this. Between the far hills you can see its whitened blade, indistinguishable to the sky except for the fine wrinkles plucked out of the surface. Keep this blade to your side and you'll never lose your way. Facing it points the glare too close to your sight, it becomes the destination, a softened line of longing, navigating now by what will always be distant, will always defeat your longing before giving way.

The wind that pours from it has pulled my body into a submissive curve along the top of the Down, pulling my hair taught into my eyes and mouth; so that I am forced into a constant cycle of reclaiming composure and being humorously overwhelmed instantly. Its sound is a pulsating mass punctuated by sporadic lulls, tripping the rhythm of my strides with its contorted motion. With hearing obstructed, the plunge of the crows becomes all the more sudden and fearful, as they twist from a glide to fall into a stream that robs silence and bearing and safety; expelling them out amongst the recesses of the Downs, where the currents can fall to lower fields inland.

Bodies stumble into one another. The gulls rise and fall amid flooded pools; starlings tumble gracefully while following my path from the fields; the head of the tide pushes the sediment laden river in great billowing movements against its will; sheep are forced to move across the corners of fields by man and dog.

What is it to attempt to trace the arc of these motions through walking, always stepping across some unnoticeable source. Cement the failure by completing the circumference without understanding the reasoning behind such an action. Returning again and again, to repeat the walk Woolf never could draw to a close, remaining an ever fading fractal. This replication only disguising the failure of having to turn away slowly, in a jagged arc across hill and field robbed of light. Forced to head back, there below, to the grey fire continuing to cut through the valley, drunk with the thickening of dusk.

... *From Issue 1.*

**Our thanks to all the writers who have appeared in every issue.**

**In this issue, you have been reading:**

Jane Ayres / Roberta Beauregarde / Louisa Campbell / Joseph Clegg / Kitty Coles / Sara Collie / Mark Connors / Emily Cotterill / David Cramer Smith / Seth Crook / Caroline Davies / Zack Davies / Michelle Diaz / Sarah L Dixon / JS Dorothy / Dot / Jessica Jane Draper / Maggie Drury / Matt Duggan / David Dykes / Michael Eades / Setareh Ebrahimi / Jo Eden / Barry Fentiman Hall / Caroline Fox Betts / John Freeman / Kate Garrett / Bethany Goodwill / Sam Hall / Oz Hardwick / Maggie Harris / Ceinwen E Cariad Haydon / Sarah Hehir / Aidan Hehir / Annette Higgs / Marcia Hindson / Mark Holihan / Maya A Horton / TK Howell / Shaun Philip Hutchings / SM Jenkin / Philip Kane / Karen Kilcup / Bill Lewis / Rei Lindemann / DS Maolalai / Daphne Margolys / Carolyn Martin / Monika R Martyn / Maria C McCarthy / Maggie McKay / Rosemary McLeish / Gordon Meade / Bruach Mhor / Tara Moyle / Andrés Odorica / Caleb Parkin / Ruth Payne / Diana Powell / Katarina Rankovic / Sam Rapp / Connor Sansby / Derek Sellen / Niall Shepherd / Mary Anne Smith Sellen / Phil Smith / Roy Smith / Spreken / Zoe Stegosaurus / JJ Steinfeld / Hannah Stone / Jessica Taggart Rose / Sarah Tait / Jonathan Terranova / Neil M Thorne / Melissa Todd / Joe Williams / Cameron Williamson



**Our thanks to all the artists who have been featured in every issue.**

**This issue's artwork is by Michi Masumi:**

As a photographer and artist, I work within the genres of Portraits, Fine Art, Still Life and Floral, specialising in Black aesthetics and marginalised communities. My work explores an intricate tapestry of identity, culture and human experience. Drawing inspiration from the Old Masters, I employ a diverse array of mediums - including painting, sculpture, fashion, and film. My approach blends classical techniques with contemporary innovations, creating emotionally compelling pieces that resonate deeply with audiences. Storytelling is central to my art, serving as a conduit for viewers to engage with and contemplate new perspectives. Continuously pushing the boundaries of expression, I invite you to join me on a voyage of artistic discovery, offering fresh insights into our shared human condition.

[www.michimasumi.co.uk](http://www.michimasumi.co.uk)

