

Ironstone contains some strong language

ironstone²

new writing



Black Headed Gulls by Peter J Clarke

a celebration of new writing from west lothian



Ben Lawers Snow by Bruce Davies

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editorial



West Lothian Council, Arts Services were so impressed by the wonderful response to the publication of IRONSTONE 1 that they were keen to follow up with another issue.

IRONSTONE 2 provides a showcase for local talent and gives even more West Lothian writers the opportunity to see their work in print. It's full of wonderful and imaginative poetry and stories.

There's work in English and Scots, and the imaginations of the writers range from South America to Binny Craig, from the horrors of plastic surgery to the secret lives of plants.

Selecting the pieces to include was far from easy. The editorial team had a tough task on their hands. There were over five hundred submissions and each member of the team read every submission. Hard choices had to be made. As well as publishing writers who already have a track record and deserve further exposure, we were keen to give newcomers space too. Final choices were made after much negotiation.

Once again the magazine has been further enhanced by images and artwork by local artists. We would like to thank everyone who has contributed in any way to making IRONSTONE 2 happen – the Council, arts administrators, volunteers, artists and writers.

We've had a lot of fun getting this issue together. We hope you enjoy reading it.

The Editorial Committee

Magi Gibson, Grace Cleary, Ellie Stewart and Emma Mooney

A Voice for Blue Ants

A short story by Billy Watt

All day long he'd had a feeling. He felt that he'd forgotten something important but he couldn't for the life of him remember what it was.

He took the breakfast dishes over to the sink, then made a second trip with the cans and glasses. Why two kids needed seven glasses between bedtime and breakfast time was beyond him. After washing up, he switched off the Channel 9 news and wandered through the empty house. Between shots of burning forest there had been pictures of sharks and two boys being bundled into a sheriff's car. He thought he could smell burning in the air.

Three days here and they had already turned the place into the same tip they had left behind in Scotland. He moved to touch something and then thought better of it. More than his life was worth. Grant's bed was hidden by layers of theme park detritus and his cabinet was covered in sticky cylinders of the gel and deodorant that he'd recently been cadging money for.

Sliding back the glass door, he stepped outside into the caged pool area. Crickets were knitting the faintly candied air into noise. If Florida was in flames then this blue pool didn't seem to know it. The water swung gently in the mid-afternoon breeze.

It was a decent-sized pool, long enough for someone to swim a good number of strokes but not long enough to test most people. Ever since they'd arrived he had taken to sitting out here and staring into its blue depth. He would study the geometry of the reflected mesh frame or watch the tiny rainbows that spun up when the light hit the bottom.

He was so frustrated at himself. All afternoon he had been psyching himself up to strip off and take a preliminary plunge now that there was no one about. But just when he had decided, the rednecks from the house to the right had come out whooping and hollering to mow their lawn. They were still there now.

What was there to prove? He was in a strange country surrounded by people he would never see again in his life. But the need to impress was too strong. Especially where Karen was concerned. It had been so long since those teenage trips to the baths.

"Hi, Dad. You should have seen the size of the flumes!"

Sounds, muffled, behind him. He started up guiltily and turned to meet his family, pleased to see his son's return to pre-adolescent enthusiasm. Then he turned to ask his daughter how she had got on; but she was looking out at the pool with her back to him.

"Hope you had a restful afternoon without us."

Susan's lips touched his cheek briefly before she whirled off, putting down bags and shaking out towels.

"Did your mother have a shot of the flumes?"

"Tore a hole in my crotch," Susan said matter-of-factly. "Look."

She held up her costume and waggled two fingers through the bottom. "Did I let that stop me, children? Not a bit. Second time I held the ripped part in my fist – "

"Because you were too much of a wimp to go up by yourself," Karen muttered to her brother.

"Let me finish explaining. The second time I lay down on my shoulders and hips and kept my bottom up. What I didn't know was that this makes you go a lot faster, so I shot down at a rate of knots. Grazed my knuckles as well as hitting the end with my crotch halfway up my back."

He turned to Grant but his son was mooching out to the pool.

"What was that?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Nothing."

Karen had mumbled something. As soon as he spoke, however, she shimmied off into her room.

"What was it?" he mimed.

"Nothing," she whispered. "Just asked if you'd been in the pool yet. Doesn't mean anything. Just shows she's interested in what you do."

He snorted.

"I wish you and my mother had never kept saying that thing to her."

"What thing?" she said, disingenuously.

"You know. That I could swim like a fish. It's built up expectations – "

"Of course it hasn't."

"It's the only positive thing she's said to me since adolescence kicked in four years ago. I just don't want to let her down."

"She's your daughter, for goodness sake. You don't have to worry about losing face in front of her."

She looked at him closely for a second, pursing her lips, then broke away, saying:

"Coffee. Need coffee now. The traffic on that interstate was a nightmare."

Slipping into the bedroom, he swapped his shorts for trunks and pushed back the patio door. Conveniently, the neighbours had all vanished back inside. As he stood at the side, the concrete rubbed his feet like the skin of a shark. He sat down and eased his legs into the water.

How could it be ninety flaming degrees outside and feel so cold down in the pool? It's just like the toilet seat on your arse, he told himself. Transference of heat.

He pushed his legs further down, tensing his chest muscles. Then, glancing over his shoulder, he let himself sink all the way down, gasping for a second. When he stood on the blue bottom the water almost lapped at his chin.

Checking over his shoulder again, he pushed off – then scrambled to his feet in frantic slow motion. Must be the tee shirt, he thought, breathing fast. He pushed off again, but again the water sucked at him. He half-swam, half-staggered back to the side, gulping in the sticky chlorine in heavy gasps. He was genuinely shocked. Wasn't it supposed to be like riding a bike? He stroked his stomach thoughtfully.

Tugging off his tee-shirt he launched himself at the deep end. After a few scrabbling strokes he felt his feet leave the bottom so he lunged forward. But to his amazement he fell short of the corner, grazing his toes and swallowing a mouthful of the chlorine.

You can swim like a fish, Mum says. I want to see you swimming.

He felt almost cheated. Sitting back on the side, with sweat curling around his ears, he remembered all those times at the baths twenty years ago, doing whole lengths on his back without any apparent effort. Maybe when Susan told him his belly was sticking out like a little plum she really meant that it was like a Texas watermelon.

I want to see you swimming. Both Mum and Gran say you can swim like a fish. Karen's normal attitude to him was bad enough; her disappointment was something he couldn't bear to think about.

He lifted his hand away from the cement. An ant, a line of ants, made a detour around the wet imprint of his palm.

According to Channel 9 the fires were still up on the Northeast coast. The two boys he'd seen on the news earlier had helped a girl to kill her mother; the sharks were being used to develop a cure for cancer.

His foot began to itch. He looked down and saw those ants scurry between his feet. They seemed to be blue. There was a perforated rod embedded in the yellow concrete and they were marching along beside it. As he looked more closely, he saw that there were two rows of them moving in opposite directions. Every so often one of them would pause before moving past another. It was like cats touching noses.

Getting out of the plastic seat, he followed them idly across the rim of the pool. There was a damp patch of mossy concrete where the mesh frame ended. But when he reached it, he saw them scurrying on to the next corner, where there was some sort of tufted fern growing out of pebbles. Maybe their food source. But no, they headed past it to the next corner, where there was another Jurassic plant. There they disappeared down a join in the rod.

Grant spun silently in the purple rubber ring they'd bought in town. He tried to interest him in the ants to no effect. He worked out that they seemed to be walking three-quarters of the way around the pool and then returning with – what? Moisture? Bits of plant? Insect food that was too small to see? They could do the job on a third of the energy by taking the more direct route. But, of course, they didn't have the bigger picture. Or any picture.

"Thinking deep thoughts again?"

Susan's warm face touched his.

"Another of those daft ideas?"

"What daft ideas?"

"You know. Ice cubes and suchlike."

"That was just the bourbon talking."

He had sat staring into his glass of Jack Daniels yesterday evening. The ice cubes had given him a crazy idea. He had thought how you could freeze tears, raindrops, sweat; dew from a flower, the melted drawing a kid had made on a steamy window; a sloppy kiss; and, of course, plenty of more disgusting things. He'd imagined tears held in ice cubes, which you could unfreeze, into the original feeling.

Leaning back in the plastic recliner beside him, Susan said:

"Karen's just growing up. Next year she'll probably be at Uni. She won't want to be seen anywhere with us then."

"I know she's growing up. I was an adolescent too once. It's just that ... one day there's this wee thing sitting on your knee and calling you Daddy. Then the next day she would spit in your eye as soon as say goodnight."

"You have to realise that the wee thing sitting on your knee was always a separate individual, love."

"And now Grant's going the same way," he said, lowering his voice. "Have you noticed? It seems to bring it into focus when we're all together on holiday."

"You're too proud, my love. I know it's for the best of reasons – but you seem to have this need for them to think you're special. They just need to accept you for what you are."

The door behind them slid open.

"Hello, sweetheart," Susan said.

Karen slipped into the water without a word, hardly leaving a ripple and lay back on the pink lilo. Her expression was unreadable behind the dark glasses. Then she muttered:

"Grant, you'd better not splash any water on me."

Her brother looked defiant but waited until she had looked away before flicking a fingerful. Karen took a sip of her drink and then tucked it back into the rubber can-holder.

"Neither of you in the pool yet," she sighed and then muttered something about "waste".

He watched the blue water gently popping as his children drifted on top of it. Outside the crickets were dancing their lives away.

"Go on," Susan whispered, nudging him.

"What?"

"Go in now."

"I'm not making a spectacle of myself in front of her. I told you. I seem to have forgotten how to swim. Literally."

Suddenly he remembered the reason for that feeling he'd had at the start of the day. He'd been weaving in and out of a compelling dream. In the dream he had been part of a group of friends – he couldn't remember any of them now – who were getting ready to move on to somewhere new. He couldn't recall where exactly they had been or where in particular they were headed – but there had been a deep sense of departure. Losing or keeping friends. It had been a charged moment.

He turned to tell Susan about it but her eyes were tightening, twitching as she relaxed into the low sun.

He tugged at the water like he was ripping something open. Beneath the surface his legs pistoned violently. Still he was taking forever to reach the side of the pool. Grabbing on to the cement rim, he pulled himself in the last couple of feet. Then, pushing off again, he glided to the mid-point and frogged urgently towards the shallow end. Dipping his head under the surge, he flailed like he was trapped somewhere.

Sitting back on the step, he was aware of that faint sense of burning. He was conscious of his lungs having to pull the air in and then push it back out. Behind him their bedroom window was dark. The kids' rooms were at the opposite side of the house. Karen had been on his case again during the evening. I thought you could swim like a fish. I want to see you before we go home.

Another twelve lengths, he decided, with a pause between each four. Sixteen if he wasn't too tired. Leaning forward, he arched his back and pushed off again, pummelling the water and thinking of that REM video. Night Swimming.

"Those poor people," Susan was saying.

On Channel 9 there were more evacuations, steaming charcoal trees, traffic tailbacks.

"Sure the fires are nowhere near us yet?" she asked anxiously.

"Two hours' drive away. And there's a front coming up from the south that'll push any fires back."

Outside the wind was shaking the scrubby palms like they were shaman's wands. They were having a day off the theme parks, to build up energy for three in a row starting tomorrow. Glancing into the mirror, he wondered how his lips had grown so thin without him noticing it and how those engraved hoops under the eyes, especially the left one, had crept up so unnoticed.

Grant and Karen were both in the pool, spinning around on the inflatables, and his wife had been saying something to them.

"Think I'll have my coffee out on the terrace," she said. "Can I get you a cup?"

"A bit too hot. No thanks."

Before finishing off last night, he had mastered the knack of diving violently across most of a breadth, so that he only needed two more strokes to reach the side. Could be a passable imitation of a fish. Maybe some kind of flounder. Or haddie.

"Hi, Dad," Grant said in that man to man tone he was trying to adopt. He was wearing his goggles and his hair was in rats' tails.

Karen half-turned her head and then looked away again indifferently. He decided to go for it as soon as they were both turned away. They would hear the splash and see him at the opposite side less than two milliseconds later. In fact, less than one millisecond.

Slipping his shirt off quickly, he dived straight across the surface. Blinking as the water rushed into his eyes, he thrashed with all the power he could muster. Then, having shown what surely had to be fishlike qualities – in an octopus-in-a-china-shop kind of way - he turned and pushed back more idly to the first side.

He tried to look nonchalant. But Karen had taken her shades off and he could see that he hadn't fooled her. Not one single bit.

Grant's head popped up.

"Hey, Dad, I can see your body!"

He clenched his stomach muscles instinctively. Karen put her sunglasses back on slowly and stretched back on the lilo. He felt disappointed somehow.

His hand tickled where he was resting it on the concrete. He pulled it away but he had only imagined the ants. They were still there, though, trucking along beside that perforated rod. Another week and he and his family would be gone from this place. The blue ants would just carry on with their business, however. Equally unaware of the next family. Unless, of course, they were more inclined to stamp on ants.

Stuff it. Now that he was in the water he might as well enjoy it. Getting out again with dignity would be another matter.

"Gi'es your goggles, Grant," he said, reaching out and letting the water chlorinate his chin.

There they were. His two little moments of immortality, he used to call them. Or maybe it was immorality. Maybe it was immolation.

Hooked

by Denise McGuire

SELF: It's something ... yes it is something ... a noisy, niggly something or other. Oh what is it? ... Good, it's gone, quite gone ... and it's quite flat now; flat and even. Gloriously peaceful. What now? ... Something. I should recognise it, I'm sure I should. It's nagging and pulling and nudging and beckoning me out ... Out of what, I wonder, out of what? ... Ah no, flat again, so flat ... and soft. Spacious, voluminous. Draw me in, yes, slowly, slowly, gently, caressingly. Weightlessness welcome and joyous ... the rush and the rush and the rush ... No don't pull me back. Please get your hooks away, away with them. They'll catch me and drag me out. My every desire is to submit to sublime nothingness. Don't engage! Brain, I really, really don't want you to engage, I'll cry, honestly, I will.

COUNSELLOR: That's the baby up. Come on, you'd think you'd have programmed yourself by now.

SELF: I have, I have: pillow into upright position, duvet back, legs round, stand and hover to cot.

MUMMY: Oh you're just a wee wakened up thing. Wee soul.

SELF: And gently lift.

MUMMY: Wee hungry-wungry, starvy-warving, sooky-wooky boy.

COUNSELLOR: Watch out for the shoes, and the bag, and those clothes, watch out for them too. Don't trip whatever you do.

SELF: I know I know.

MUMMY: Just a secywecond. I know, you want them old special milkies for a wee, special, bestest boy. Best in the whole land.

COUNSELLOR: Watch his neck when you plunge back down ... Slowly and carefully.

SELF: Just imagine it doesn't bear thinking about. All it would take would be one slip. One trip on one of those shoes. I must make sure I tidy them away tomorrow. The thought. I'd be gutted. I wouldn't believe it at first, then he'd be limp and, 'Oh God in heaven what have I done?' and I'd have to tell people and the funeral ... I couldn't go, I'd have to go. The coffin, it would be tiny and white. I'd cry. I'd tear at myself and never get over it and get old and always regret the night I wasn't careful enough sitting down and his precious little neck was so fragile and I'd tried to reverse time but it had already happened ...

COUNSELLOR: The baby is waiting ...

SELF: Right enough.

COUNSELLOR: Make sure he's comfy enough. And lean back. You know what your back's like.

MUMMY: Awe shush, bestest boy, nearly there. I know you're a wee hungry man ... this way, it's on this side silly cookie, you're turning the wrong way, wee tumshy-walla. Open your porky pies. Look at the mouth going, you're like a wee baby sparrow.

COUNSELLOR: Watch his head, don't turn it too hard.

MUMMY: The wee arms and legs, wriggling about like billy-o.

COUNSELLOR: If I hear the word 'Wee' again ...

SELF: Oh shut your face, you're only wee once.

MUMMY: That's it baby boy ... there, all for you precious angel.

SELF: Look at him guzzling away, there's nothing nicer in the world, nothing.

MUMMY: Look at you, your tiny little body, you're so lovely. Look at your tootsie wootsie wee fingers. How can they be that small? If there was more light I'd be picking the bits of fluff out from between them, yes I would, I'd be picking it out precious boy. I could keep it, keep it all, and when you're a big boy I'd say, 'See this jumper, well I knitted it from the fluff I collected from between your fingers when you were a tiny wee bab.' And you'd say, 'Och Mu-um.' And then you'd smile and say, 'Did you really?' Does your old mither talk a lot of rubbish?

COUNSELLOR: Put the cover over him!

SELF: Oh right enough.

MUMMY: There we are. You're such a little expert. Mum can only ever get one little ounchy-wounchy and look at you with your wee, precious, expert chops. Nearly done angel? Full to the gunnels? What a state, you're like a cut down drunk man with the obligatory escapee dribble ... there it goes, down the chin.

SELF: God in heaven, look what you gave to me.

MUMMY: What's going through that old brain boxer of yours? Tell me what your dreams are little man, little miracle. Is there any old bad windy-pops in them old pokes, we'll go for the up-and-over, that's it, you snuggle in, snuggle all you want.

SELF: Better now than having to get back up.

MUMMY: Oh big burpies from the wee floppy boy. Did you know that we're going to have to do the obstacle course back to your old kip ... here we go ...

COUNSELLOR: Slowly does it, don't jerk him, and mind all that crud lying about.

SELF: I'll make it a priority, there's nothing more important.

MUMMY: Down you go little one, all comfy, tuck tuck.

SELF: Skin. Soft. Unblemished.

MUMMY: It'll be all rough and stubbly one day, yes it will. And some other wee chuke somewhere, in some other wee cot right now, will scoop up your precious little heart right away. What will I do then sleepy boy? What will your old mum do then? Did you know you were awful, awful, awful precious? I'm glad you're my wee boy because you're so nice.

SELF: That's him now. Wee scone. Now bed. Sleep, take me. Pillows soft and snug, screaming for me to ensconce myself in. Yes. Two hours. Yes. The sooner I get over the better. Sleep, sleep, splendidorous sleep ... Sleep. Soft ...so light mmm light ...

COUNSELLOR: Can't hear him!

SELF: Every night!

COUSELLOR: How long will it take?

SELF: He's fine.

COUNSELLOR: Up!

SELF: The same thing ...

COUNSELLOR: For the sake of twenty seconds ...

SELF: Right! I'm resolved. Up and quietly over ...

MUMMY: You make me smile little boy.

COUNSELLOR: Ear down, a bit closer, and don't sniff or you'll wake him up.

SELF: Breathing.

COUNSELLOR: Are you sure it wasn't your own breath you heard? Hold it, hold it, keep going, right you can breath now, he's fine.

SELF: How could anyone be bad to a bab?

MUMMY: You remind me of your Granddad. He would've loved to have known you. He would've bought you meccano ... and built it himself while you watched the cartoons. Cherub.

SELF: Right, now, please, back in and get some kippy-flaming-wippy. Snug and snug and good, so warm. Will he ever know? Ever know, ever know, ever ... mmmhhh ...

The Glass Cage

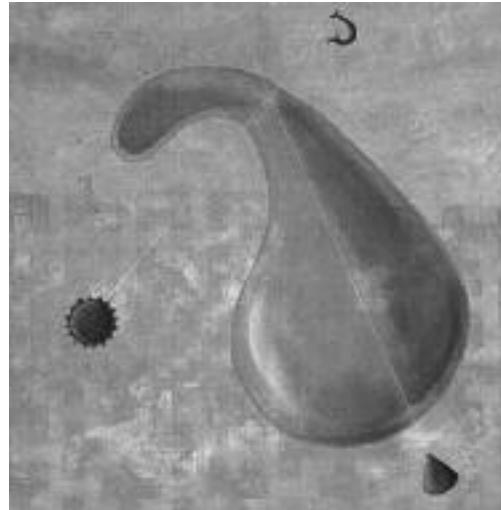
Emma Mooney

I sit beside you, unable to hold you.
Through the opening in the glass I reach to you.
My fingers trace the tangled web
That traps your tiny body.

I fight the urge to release you.
I want to lift you, hold you,
Cradle you in my arms.

I brush your cheeks
Sending you my love.

I am denied you – my newborn child.



This fragile Blue by Marion Thomson

Any Tom, Dick or Giovanni

Anice Gilland

What's it about, being me;
I'm no Tom, Dick or Giovanni
In my blood runs the salt of the sea,
From the Forth to Tuscany

Take one noisy Leghorn chicken,
Take one hand of watercress,
Take one good, fresh-caught haddock
Cook for centuries

Take one Norman nose's bloodline,
Take a lifetime on the farm,
Take a hand with throwing fishlines,
A rollercoaster of hopeful calm

See the lives of woven seating,
See the woodwork formed and carved,
Watch the beer flow freely onward
Feel the lungs of fresh air starved

See the lives of upstairs, downstairs
See them weaving o'er the loom
sitting in the dusty attic
peering tiredly through the gloom

Give a pinch of love and laughter
Make the struggle worth the while
All these lives combined th'gither
Formed into my own lifestyle

Wednesday Night, 1am

Michael Stephenson

I can't sleep tonight.

I work to pay for home; come home to hide from work.

I sit and think about this paradox –

it's like a seesaw that broke in the middle

and dumped either end in the shite.

I feel shattered

and there's an animal part of me that would curl into sleep

but some other self looks ahead to the morning, the blunt

red scrub of shaving and a half-drunk mug of tea looks ahead

to another tired night

and in the flicker of the broken light

says no.

I want to reclaim something.

I turn on the computer to write.

We sit there together: my eyes, the screen.

Buzzing and shifting.

I drink coffee, black, but feel

only numbed by its bitter darkness.

It's not happening.

I turn off the screen without saving anything.

I drag myself upstairs,

still can't sleep.

So my mind gets up,

leaves my body lying vacant

and wanders through the rooms of my life,

opening doors and sticking a head in,

never finding what it's looking for –

then comes back to bed and, settling

back into the body with an old man's groan,

notices the streetlight coming through the blinds

is casting a yellow barcode on the wall.

At the Taxi Rank

Michael Stephenson

Lights flare, fade.
Belting between two roundabouts,
boy racers throb by like a headache.

Their useless circuit
strikes a chord with me tonight:
half-drunk, I'm torn
between the taxi to your door
and a late-night cocktail
of solitude and pride.

So, I sit on the wall, look at the street,
the petrol mixing with streetlight
in pools of old rain, broken
glass scattered like yarrow stalks-

useless.

The taxi pulls up, I mumble, shrug,
and the car fills instead
with a cackle of women
whose laughter revs and pulls
away into the night.

Morning Rain

Michael Stephenson

You'd been away too long
and left my world
leaden as the winter sky,
raw as the wind.
But that first morning
after you came home
I woke to the tenderness
of your head on my arm,
lay back in the charged air
and just let the world turn.
The cloud had burst in the night
and runlets of new rain
joined each other and
wandered down the window,
taking their slow
sweet
time,
while the empty wind blustered
past and couldn't touch them.

Winter Morning I

Michael Stephenson

Outside the window,
Cobwebs traced in frozen dew.
Back to bed, honey!

Winter Morning II

Michael Stephenson

On the walk to work,
Diamonds of frost on the path -
You shine in my thoughts.

Impending storm

Kenneth W MacRae

Black storm clouds frown
Sea froth garlands the pebble shore
Strong winds flatten tussock grasses
Disturbed stones caress one another

Waves peak, tumble, spray.
Small boats nod in submission.

The dust that gathers in clumps

Brian Thomson

as we changed the sheets today
I found my lost libido
in the dust that gathers in clumps
under the bed
quivering next to an errant sock
they huddled together for a little warmth
I'd previously reported it awol, astray
missing presumed dead
(I've heard it said and I've read
that's how the solar system formed,
you know - gas, dust, odd socks
and lost libido)

The birds are silent...

Gary Jones

The birds are silent
As I watch the stars
The moon casts shadows
On the vacant cars

A thousand empty windows
That hold no light
My eyes are transfixed
On the sky at night

Not even a rustle
From the old oak tree
Which stands there oblivious
To the world and me

And as millions lie sleeping
At this unsociable time
For one stolen moment
The world is mine

Cumbrian February Landscape

Donnie MacNeill

Dry stone veins
elevated by white frost
shadows, bulge from
rough skin of
winter hillside.

Grazing sheep,
pink polka dots
on evening hillside.

My Little China Girl

A short story by Steven Prevost

The whipping sound made by the wind almost drowns out the car horn. Three short muffled blasts and, on the third, I turn around, but only just. I am in a daze thinking about her. I notice the piercing glare of the car driver whilst the lips mouth what I imagine can only be a curse of one form or another. I mouth sorry without feeling it. My thoughts are crossing another road. A road where I hold her hand and we both laugh at something that isn't funny. A place away from here where we are both glad to be with each other.

As I reach the central reservation, I pause for a clearing in the traffic. The flow of buses and cars is heavy tonight. As I wait for an opportunity to cross the second part of the road my mind goes back to our third proper date. Before we knew each other and just before she told me her secret. The rain starts with a light spit and gradually becomes heavier. Like the rattle of a distant drummer walking in my direction, I can hear the intensity of the rain increase before the shower at first wets, and then drowns my face. That's how the rain was on our third date.

When I was a young kid, my mother used to have a saying for when I sneezed: one's a wish, two's a kiss, and three's a disappointment. When I was ready to meet her at the start of our third date, disappointment was the furthest thing from my mind.

My face feels like a cold raw piece of chicken as the intensity of the rain reaches a crescendo. The heavens open monsoon style. I rub my hand across my forehead, nose then cheeks to clear the water. The pollution of the city becomes one with the heavy rainfall. Like in the steam-room of a sweaty, pungent sauna I taste the foulness in the air.

The clock at the Balmoral Hotel says fifteen after six. It is traditionally a few minutes fast, being adjacent to the train station, and I calculate that I have a wait of around twenty minutes until I see her again. I almost swim along Princes Street towards the National Gallery. The bright lights and shelter from the rain seduce me. I'm there in a few minutes and feel the indoor warmth start to dry me out almost as soon as I walk through the door.

I check my watch again. The time is only a minute on from the Balmoral clock, but that means four minutes have passed and I've now just under fifteen until I see her again. I'm due to meet her on the steps outside. The rain temporarily acts as a deterrent to keep visitor numbers down, at least for now. I take the opportunity of the quiet spell to purchase admission tickets.

I request two admission tickets and am asked which exhibition. I say I hadn't realised there was more than one and am turned off by the overly keen assistant who reminds me how little I know about culture in my own city. I listen to the ramble then ask for two Monet. Yes, both adults. No, we're not students. No, my guest is not a pensioner. No thanks, I'm not interested in the annual membership. Unlimited admission, except on Christmas day? Well that sure sounds great but I'm not an avid art lover. Yes, sure I'll take one for my guest, she may be interested. I hand over my two notes and am surprised to be told that it's not enough. I should have said we were both students. I ask if at that price Monet himself is giving the tour. Enthusiasm turns to efficiency and I am quickly dispensed with.

Two tickets later, I head back towards the inside door at the main entrance. The clock has not yet reached twenty past the hour. I inwardly sigh in disappointment, as my encounter with Assistant of the Year certainly seems to have taken longer than five minutes.

The rain outside continues unrelenting. I gaze up and down the street in search of her to arrive. I look up and down, through the pillars, and again. But she is nowhere to be seen. I check again, looking for the most beautiful girl in Edinburgh. Still no sign.

I skim through the pamphlet, which accompanies the tickets. I collect some facts to impress her with. Monet was a French impressionist painter born in the 19th century. A man whose work was admired by only a small number whilst he was alive. That changed after his death. At least he never cut off his ear but the biography indicated he also had a few mental health problems. Tonight's exhibition is hosting works from various galleries and museums around the world: Chicago, Boston, New York, London, Amsterdam, Gothenburg and Paris. So many places, I'm sure Monet only dreamed his work would end up in all of these cities. The pamphlet shows a limited few paintings of his with a little background of where they were painted. I recognise some of the more famous paintings, I muse that perhaps I recognise them from thank you cards or, in the case of the snow scenes, Christmas cards.

I check my watch again. Only five minutes have passed. I now have some facts to impress her with. The thought excites me. I feel twenty-something once more.

Slowly my watch moves to six thirty. Whilst I am excited at the thought that she is about to arrive and I'll lay my eyes on her again, there's something else. A wrenching in my stomach. Nerves. Self conscious that I say the right things and show interest in the paintings on display. The paintings she was eager to tease me with at our last liaison. So, name a Monet painting? I hear her ask. At the time, I couldn't. Well, all the reason why you should allow me to take you. I watch the door for her arrival. As I rehearse my opening compliment, I can feel the heat reach my cheeks. I imagine her walking through the door as I say you look positively radiant tonight. Although, if she walks in with soaking black hair hanging over her face I'll have to rethink my flattery strategy.

The time now approaches six thirty-five and the butterflies in my stomach start a manic air dance. A mild panic builds within me that she may not turn up. I scan up and down what I can see of Princes Street. Still no sign.

Her name is Michella. She is Sicilian with olive tanned skin and a toned slim body. A cute Cleopatra style nose separates her dark brown eyes in perfect symmetry. Her Latino roots adding a magnetic lilt to her voice. And her lips, oh the thought of them. They give her an almost Marilyn Monroe style pout. A pout that lightly caressed both my cheeks two nights previous, when we said goodbye at the end of our second date. Her double kiss electrified my senses, made the hairs on my arms stand on end and caused a sudden stirring in my loins.

A noisy group of kids step out of the rotating doors to bring me back to my senses. I check my watch again. She is now ten minutes late. From what I know about her this is totally out of character. Whilst we have not yet discussed age, I guess that she is ten years my junior, so about twenty-five. I doubt that she is the kind to stand a man up, I certainly hope not. I start to replay how our last night together finished and how we arranged tonight's meeting. It was her idea that we meet so soon. I was glad she suggested tonight as I'd originally suggested Friday.

I think about her two kisses, she was the initiator of these, not I. Perhaps if she didn't turn up the reason may be that I moved too slowly and had given out signals implying I wasn't all that interested.

Then I feel the vibration of my mobile telephone. I had switched it to mute earlier so that I didn't embarrass myself by forgetting to turn it off once in the gallery.

My hand fumbles in my pocket and I quickly flip the mobile open. I see from the number that it's Michella. Something has come up, she advises. She still wants to see me tonight. Can we now meet for a meal at 8pm? She wants to see me as she has something she wants to talk about. When she asks if I'll go home or just hang about, I let it slip that I've bought the tickets already. She prefers that I don't lose out and still walk around the gallery. In that way I can tell her which of Monet's paintings I liked and those I might not like as much. I notice she says not like as much instead of dislike. It will mean that when we return next week, we'll both have seen some Monet paintings before. I suggest that I could ask for an exchange and delay seeing Monet until she is with me. She insists that I walk around the gallery, that it would mean a lot to her if I saw the paintings tonight. She wouldn't feel so guilty about being late and forcing me to miss the paintings she was so keen that I saw. Next time, we can hold hands and I can walk her around my favourites before we take in all the paintings. I reply that I like the sound of that idea, particularly the holding of hands. She laughs and I stutter that I will walk around the gallery just now, although I had used the word presently and she asks if I am the reincarnation of Walter Scott. After I remind her to call me sir, she giggles and we arrange to meet at the Balmoral restaurant. She'll telephone and make a reservation. If I'm early she suggests I go into the adjacent bar for a drink. It's owned by the hotel and there is an excellent pianist playing mellow music. I say I will and almost tell her I love her when we say goodbye.

I decide to keep her ticket even although it will not be used. If things work out I'll show her the ticket on the day I propose. I'll let her know I think her beauty exceeds even that of the best Monet painting I see tonight. I'll say the ticket is her something blue as I was blue that she was not sharing my first Monet experience.

There is a cloakroom at the top of the stairs where I put my raincoat in. I notice a tray for tips which is empty. The attendant passes me my plastic ring and says to enjoy the display. She advises that I should look out for the Water Lilies painting, that it is her favourite, and she has seen many exquisite paintings in her time in this gallery. I thank her and make a mental note to leave a tip when I pick up my coat.

The Monet exhibition is spread over four rooms. At first, I walk around the display standing only a couple of feet back from the paintings, then I realise the style requires that I stand further back to see their full effect. The snow scenes in particular have a great impact on me. I am amazed that the almost amateurish pictures when viewed up close metamorphose into perfect paintings, so vivid that they give the impression of an old photograph.

By the time I reach the end of the four rooms, I realise that it is now almost seven thirty. I return to see the Water Lilies and my favourite, The Road to Vetheuil, a painting of a French village on loan from a museum in Gothenburg. Monet had finished this piece in 1879, the year before he turned forty.

I pass through the gallery shop and buy a card of my favourite. Then I head to collect my overcoat. The attendant asks to know my best one. I tell her but point out that her favourite was a close second. How close, she asks. A photo finish I jibe as I place a coin in the no longer empty tip plate.

As I make my way outside, I am pleased that the rain has relented. The wind forces my overcoat to flap about and messes up what little hair I have. Still, Michella said the other night that she likes my rough and ready good looks. Good was the key word I took out of that.

I arrive at the Balmoral and check that Michella is not yet seated in the restaurant. I say to the waiter that she may have come in under a reservation in either of our names. He advises that the reservation has actually been made in our surname, Mr and Mrs, but that my wife is not yet here. I laugh and keep the joke going by saying that if my wife should show up early, to let her know that I'd be in the bar. He grins and nods in agreement that he'd do the same. He offers to take my overcoat whilst he points out where, at the far end of the restaurant, there is a side entrance to the bar. I use this route and, as I reach the bar, notice that the decoration in both places is similar: old, wooden but welcoming.

I order a Peroni. The bar tender serves it in a chilled glass and the thin layer of ice starts to melt almost immediately. I have always enjoyed Italian beers but I ordered this tonight so that I can show Michella that I appreciate all things Italian. I have only taken two sips from the glass when I see Michella appear at the door. Her face ignites with pleasure as she sees me. Her smile widens and holds steady. Those brown eyes look alive and stay drawn to me. She wears a tight fitting black suit that makes me think she has not been home. I stand and decide that I will greet her with a kiss on both cheeks. She slowly glides across the room. Her white blouse exhibits the clear olive complexion of her face. What beauty. My little China girl.

The next thing I feel is the grip of two hands around my shoulders. The hands are lightly shaking me. A voice asks if I am alright. I look in the direction of the voice and, instead of seeing Michella, I see a police officer. He again asks if I am okay. I reply yes, but he insists on walking me across the remainder of the road. He keeps one arm lightly around my shoulder. A light protecting arm; in no way intrusive.

At the other side he casually enquires where I've been. I tell him that I was at the Monet exhibition at the National Gallery. I ramble that I had seen the display twice before in that same Gallery and that I was making a return visit. I say that I was thinking of my wife, who'd encouraged me to take an interest in Monet paintings.

He asks where I am headed now and when I reply the Balmoral he insists that he accompanies me as I'll have to cross back over the road. I look around and see the hotel is, as he says, on the other side of the road.

This time we cross at a pedestrian crossing. He asks if my wife is staying with me. I say, sadly, no. That she had passed away last year after a long illness. An illness that she had had at the start of our courtship. He says he is sorry to hear this. I tell him briefly about the tragic illness and he tells me how one of his work colleagues had contracted the condition through a blood transfusion. I say I am sorry to hear that but don't tell him how Michella contracted it. Through diseased collagen extracted from the skin of an executed convict in China. Collagen taken without the condemned prisoner's knowledge. Taken illegally, which is why it was not tested. I would always love those Marilyn Monroe style lips. But I would have thought she was beautiful, no matter what.

As we reach the Balmoral, I thank the policeman. He asks how much longer I have in the city before I return home. This is my last night. My home is now in Sicily, I tell him. My wife was Italian or Sicilian as she used to correct me. He laughs.

Back in my room, I search through the travel bag for the card I sent Michella after our third date. She had kept this card all her life and, towards the end, showed me it for the first time. I can almost hear her voice as I recall how she told me that the card had helped ease her anguish, all those years before, when she was given the news. Up close the sad news made life not worth living, standing back in the knowledge I would be there for her had changed the view. Had given her a different perspective, a different impression of what life may hold for her.

I open the card and read the message I'd written all those years before. I will see you on Friday. I will be there to help you through this. All my love. I place today's ticket stub in the card of *The Road to Vetheuil*. Already inside the card is her unused ticket from that special day. Another memento she'd kept of our time together. I close the card, lean back and hold it next to my chest. I say out loud: one's a wish, two's a kiss but three is definitely not a disappointment.



Cafe Noir by Elaine Forrest

Wild Women

A sequence of poems by Kirsty Muir

My

Sacred to Bacchus.
Likes to be wined
and dined.
A voluptuous tart,
always entwining herself
around limbs.

Honeysuckle

Promises a taste of
sweet innocence
and oral sex.
Dangerous personality,
finds strangulation
a turn on.

Mistletoe

Enjoys a good snog,
In a semi-parasitic
kind of way.
Leaving her lover
is not an option
unless threatened
by a golden knife.

Nettle

Butterflies flock
to me.
I am their Goddess
of life and death.
Their beauty surrounds
my gentle greenness.
They caress me.
They know my worth.

Fern

She has no flower -
no obvious beauty
to the passer-by.
Only a few
stop long enough
to admire her
other qualities.

Her fronds
reach upwards
grasping for
love and hope
but they catch only
short lived interest
and inevitable sadness.

Greater stitchwort

- adder's meat -

I pluck your flower
of virginal whiteness,
count your petals - 5
I wonder how
a flower so pure
in beauty
could come to be
associated with
the writhing snake.

What secret do you hide
behind that false modesty?

Meadowsweet

Delicately dressed
in a haze of frothy blossom,
Filapendula
sweetens the meadow
with her heady fragrance.

Despite her own glorious beauty
this spurned sister of Rose
knows only ugliness.
She is so twisted
by the bitterness
in her life and leaf
she will never see her true reflection.

Peacock Brown

Sue Davies

"I couldn't have stood that brown for twenty years.'
My friend announced about my bathroom suite.
Aye browns are dull or nasty; suspect somehow
Like rowan berries black on autumn paths
And shaggy ink caps rolling in late stage:
Or sad like withered flowers and mud dried floors
Bare when locusts leave you only age.

Yet fungi also number Chanterelles:
Small Wren and Dipper live by Nethy stream
While peaty steps traverse the hag-shaped moors.

The butterfly trembled lightly, wings out, spanned,
Glowing with soft brown richness, velvet gleam,
It thrilled me into seeing brown's reflection.
Balance restored just glimpsing bright perfection.



Another Chance Meeting by Lorraine Huber

Watercolours

A Short Story by Fiona Thackeray

Manaus in a queue, in the midday heat, swatting flies. The man behind is coughing all over me - there are places I'd rather be. The woman in front scans the "Manaus Diário" leader, 'HOMICIDIO NA FLORESTA', a blurry image of small corpses beneath some trees; another shows police helicopters thrumming upriver deep into the forest. I think of Salvador's warnings, his teeth flashing - and my dreams of gold teeth floating in green water. The heavy click-thump of date stamps on postal orders echoes roundly in the eaves. My thoughts carry me back to the boat.

May's hair - strawberry blond streaked with silver - flicked upwards; freckles shaded by her famous straw hat as she sat in the stern looking back over churned white water, frothing in our wake. While I scratched and reddened in clouds of mosquitoes, she remained delicate, porcelain in white linen and khaki. I feel guilty, now, for moaning about my blossoming bites while she poured her soul into her sketches.

Her subject was the formidable Victoria Regia water lily, strung out like bloated frogspawn on the wide wash. Crinkled dinner plates of chlorophyll, reluctant to give up their secret structure to May and her tablets of colour. For days she sat in her straw-brimmed shadow, patiently constructing the stubborn curves from every angle, sweeping pencils over thick pages to the engine's unremitting drone. If she sighed in exasperation, I never heard it.

I remember how I was fooled by her delicate ways as we drank tea at Gatwick, papery fingers looped around the cup, "Milk, dear?" May was Mum's age - would she bear up in the Tropics? Then in Manaus, seeing her barter with the boat guys while I, gesticulating dumbly, failed to fend off over-attentive coconut sellers. She spoke fluent Portuguese from Institute trips with George to sketch flowering trees of São Paulo. She was an old hand.

May prowled over the boat, poking at spots of rust, jiggling loose cables. She ignored the owner's squinting look that mocked, and questioned him ruthlessly; her shrewd and steady voice belied by brittle blonde looks. Eventually she struck a deal, stepping onto the harbour side, graceful as a visiting grandee.

We loaded our stuff: bundled clothes thrown like hay bales, art materials passed as crown jewels over the muddy spit of Amazon sucking between boat and steps. The engine rumbled into life, whisking up bubbles to the water's oily surface and, coughing, took us out into the middle of the brutal green flow.

My companion seemed serene then, making herself at home on our guttering boat. She roped her hammock facing west so she might watch birds at sunset. I was kind of edgy - something about the weird ticking noises of hidden insects in the reeds, the river's false tranquillity - lazy ripples concealing murderous currents and muscular reptiles. The cook brewed afternoon coffee, and we sipped it listlessly, watching the remnants of slums peter out on the banks. May looked faintly imperious, reclining with her dainty cup and hat, and reflections dancing over her face. The captain's gruff voice in short staccato phrases interrupted our languor. May called back in melodious Portuguese, sounding like a native. Again, the captain in short serious bursts. May replied laughing, wafting her hand, 'He's worried about Indians,' she smiled, 'In Manaus they love telling stories of forest savages. I told him they always invited us to tea!'

May's leisured air was replaced by animated concentration as we opened botanical guides to plan our work. The Institute had requested a series of plates of the Victoria Regia varieties, and at various different stages of growth. The lilies were a great challenge: something elusive in their veiny flatness that May relished. My job would be to catalogue her work - in between times, sketching the riverbank vegetation: a watercolour diary of the trip for my end-of-year assignment. In the process I planned to learn all I could from the Grand Dame of botanical art.

The Post Office queue really isn't moving. An old biddy at the second booth is having trouble filling in some form. Turgid air wraps me in sweat like a spider enmeshing a fly. I wish for a fresh north wind to shake me out of my cycling thoughts.

If nights in a hammock swarmed by mosquitoes are harder on older bones, May never showed it. She rose at six each day and painted till 11.30, then after lunch again until sundown. Pages leafed to the deck in loose piles around her feet. Salvador, at the wheel, turned out to be an obliging sort, steering us to where he knew we would find dense miles of lily pads. He dropped anchor for hours wherever May requested, swinging in his hammock with one eye always on the banks, until the rubbery dinner-plate leaves had been lined and coloured many times over. The boat creaked in silty ripples, only sylvan squawks and crooning marked the passing of the day. Sometimes Salvador and May would get down the peeling little rower and slip between the green discs to slice a sub-aqueous bulb, or a pale leaf shoot only half unfurled. My book was filling up too, with the spikes and twisting greens of riverbank trees in their dense, tangled ranks.

Back at St Martins we'd had a whistle-stop tour of the basic drawing media, feverishly experimental. Now I wallowed in watercolour, soaking up everything May told me. She showed me how flat images will be if you rush in with dark shades first. I watched colour swim into place as she painted "into the wet", her skies the colour of fish scales, areas left unpainted bringing water-scenes alive; final, inky details etched over colour in her impossibly light hand; like life, only more beautiful. She made lines bold, then delicate, and perfectly parallel with sweeps that had me despairing at my own thick-boned fingers.

We ate rice, beans and fried fish for lunch. Fruit, too, when the cook spied something good ripening. In the long evenings, I sorted and dated her work, rifling through field guides for variety and sub-species names. Salvador and the cook played cards with much shouting, and we all drank beer, chilled in the rusty fridge. I imagined May sipping Calvados at home, but she downed the beer gladly. Everything she did was dignified. She even mourned with dignity. It was 20 years of married life with George and many painting trips along the way. He had suffered for many months - an illness that wrung the life out of him before finally letting him go. I think I would have run through the streets in hysterical fury, or become a bitter old lush. May kept her chin up at the funeral and warmly thanked everyone for their kindness. So said Mum, who took the call in the front office, and went along to the wake. May was teaching again in two days. Soon after, I supposed, rather than ruminating on the harshness of life, her thoughts had turned to continuing alone in the work she'd done with George. As summer term rolled on, a notice appeared, advertising her expedition with space for a Research Assistant.

"We had dinner at the Consulate in '96." Said May, "The Halls were great friends of ours. They showed us the most fascinating albums full of tribal people.

George managed to paint a few live portraits, but the tribes are almost all gone now." She smiled, sighing. "There's a chap works for the government, bit of a maverick, trying to reach the remaining tribes – forewarn them, you know, about our strange ways, before less scrupulous types come across them. There have been some bloody clashes with loggers and so on - blundering across groups whom they don't understand." I realised what a poor substitute I must be for George as a travelling mate, with my phrasebook Portuguese and my utter ignorance of indigenous people and botany. Of course, May never gave me any sign that she might think that.

She'd reached a phase in her work where the common varieties were covered. Now she wanted the rare ones. Salvador swung the boat around, reluctantly, to enter a tributary where May travelled before with George; where two rivers meet in muddy swirls but do not mix. The pale Rio Solimoes' danced coy whirlpools between the Rio Negro's black fingers. The waters tangled but neither river would yield to blend with the other. May was received at tribal villages like an old friend, and, over campfires, daintily chewing on nameless meats; she would interrogate gap-toothed fishermen about the lilac lily and the rare yellow. Salvador shrugged grudgingly at May's requested stops; he tended to stay onboard. The heat intensified as the river threaded thinner into the forest. Shirts clung and my hammock was always sweat-damp. I slapped at mosquitoes in irritable rhythms.

"The light here is so hard". My mentor knew exactly what I meant: the sun, despite seeming distant and veiled by heavy cloud, bleached the colours out of everything. When it seemed we had passed the last habitations on earth, ready to putter upstream into oblivion, we spotted a small settlement. May thought it could be a tribal group she'd met before who had since moved. Children, splashing in the shallows, hushed as we approached and yellow butterflies spun like confetti on a whimsical breeze. We anchored in the shade of bamboo stands, and Salvador rowed with May to talk with the villagers, compact and brown. May returned with a fierce light in her eyes. Along a tiny tributary, the villagers had told her, we would find her lilies. "Our boat is too broad, though - would you mind going ahead with Salvador for a few days?" We had to deliver promised medicine to another village. Salvador tried to stop her, tried to convey something dark to her with his eyes while the tribes-people watched, unblinking. She smiled patiently at his concern. We left her drawing stick-men in the sand with the children.

Salvador frowned silently as he steered upstream. Two days took us to the village, dilapidated and silent, save for sawing cricket song. We waited with the anti-malarial at the shore. For half an hour: no movement, just the feeling of being watched. Then two young men came out, weapons tied on twine from their hips, their hair cut pudding-bowl style. They yanked their heads in interrogative motions downstream, asking Salvador to explain who we were. They were slow to remember George and May's visits. Edging forward a little, they accepted the boxes, retreating then to a mouldy longhouse. The place remained still, like a sick room. We moored there for the night, and headed back at dawn.

The sky blushed, next evening, as we neared the spot where the children and yellow butterflies had danced. I was painting out in front. The birds made a great fuss at that hour, fretting and twittering as the sun slid low. I wished May were with me, exclaiming into her binoculars. Salvador was stone-faced behind the wheel. I emptied my jar of bruise-coloured water, and went to stand by him. What

was the matter, I asked. He ignored me, bringing the speed right down. We were level with a clearing with flattened earth and the white wounds of cut stems. Salvador was breathing hard, sweat collecting in the creases of his neck. His black eyes would not meet mine, glowering under the brow bone.

I told him, "This must be where May visited last time, where the villagers used to live before." He was shaking his head slowly. The boat puttered forwards, and the cook came to the deck. They talked fast, knowing I wouldn't understand. The cook paled, blew out cheeks of air. "Are we lost? Have we come too far?" They did not answer. Doubt and dread prickled my scalp. We slugged along for half an hour or more, infinite in my sense of time. My heart beat painfully, as if I'd run up a mountain.

With a terrible lurch, the boat veered towards the right bank; the engine rasped and scraped. Salvador fought with the wheel, bringing us abruptly round. He scrambled for the rower, refusing to meet my eyes. I helped him hoist it, all the time searching his face in anger and fear. I turned to clamber down, and then saw the white linen among the reeds. Hollow and haunted, her face stared from a circle of green water.

"May! My God. Hold on!" Her eyes, squeezing from their sockets, stared past us to some hideous vision. Weed lapped at her neck, sticking there like torturer's wires. Her lips were ashen and blistered. At the landing where children and butterflies had met us before, her hat bobbed in the shallows.

Getting her on board was hell; she was rigid, all slippery with riverweed. Between the three of us, we laid her on deck. Salvador turned the hose to pass a clear trickle over her swollen lips. Green-flecked river water slid from the corner of her mouth; the cook left. I was breathing hard, as if I could breathe for her too. Salvador and I took turns at pumping her ribcage. She was stiff - and cold. My arms were rubbery-weak. Water squelched through linen, up between my fingers. Her delicate ribs felt they might crush like bird's bones under my palms, the skin of her cheeks now the horrific lilac of rare lilies. I heard the cook retching.

Salvador stopped; he pulled at the crook of my arm. He was saying, "Finished, finished." Tears slid down my face.

The journey back was unbearably silent and slow. I hardly slept, swinging next to May's empty hammock. She lay below deck, wrapped in tarpaulin, like a prize catch. The men were mute, only mosquito whines keeping me company as I stared down at the silky water churning. Her face stared back at me from between lily pads and riverweed. My questions fell, unanswered, like pebbles to the riverbed - did she have any warning that friendship had hardened into something else? What did they do with her camera, her brushes? Did she ever see her lilac lily?

Back in Manaus, the city was stewing. I sweated hours in the morgue, and afterwards the police Delegacia. Later I wait in the travel office, arranging to send May home. Then more hours, patiently explaining to the British Consul by telephone. A cocktail of plant toxins had caused asphyxiation, said the lab report. A police team were sent upriver to investigate, though Manaus' locals already had their own theories. I tried to finish May's work: rolled her drawings and copied the address of the Institute onto the label. I enclosed a note saying that she died doing what she loved best.

Finally, a flat-faced man calls me to a booth. He tapes and date stamps and tapes the poster tube over and over, his tongue pressed between his lips. He fills forms with smudgy carbon in between. It gets onto his yellow Correios-Mail shirt.

"Receipt – RECIBO, POR FAVOR," I stammer, "and insurance – SEGUROS, please, FAVOR." He nods.

By the opera house, I sip coffee at a grimy table, ignored by waiters. Flies dance among spilt sugar grains. Salvador finds me there. He sits down, uninvited, looking at his hands. In words and gestures he begins to say something.

That the Indians are bad people; that they know too much about plants, he shakes his head at these two facts. I object: they were her friends, from before. He wags his finger impatiently. The locals have heard on the grapevine, he insists, gesturing around us at the city. He points to his dental fillings - dark gold - and to his wedding ring. He is making digging motions now. Then "bang, bang," gun shots. The whole charade is lost on me. But, undeterred, he repeats it with a few words, and gradually I get it.

A gold mining crew setting up camp, deep inland: city-boys – a little jumpy. Nearby: a small tribe of native people living quietly, but a little close for comfort. When they venture out to hunt for meat, the miners lose their cool, misinterpreting the hunters' intentions. Gunfire: pre-emptory strikes are heard, drawing more villagers, armed and defensive, to the scene, heightening the city-boys' panic. Five fat fingers; Salvador's splayed hand represents the only ones to escape the bullets, the last of their kind. Five lonely forest folk arrive seeking refuge at the village where we'd left May. Eyes blaze indignation over a fire, and fish are left half-eaten as liquor mingles with fear and hatred. Fierce dancing begins and by dawn, young men are sullenly whittling wood into arrowheads, gathering and pounding potent plants, rolling the arrow-tips in deadly green paste. In this bitter new light, May, returning in the narrow boat with her straw hat and paintings, is just a symbol: a mocking reminder of rich incomers' fake solidarity with indigenous peoples, and what they will do when push comes to shove. As the villagers plus five pack up to move on, the woman in white linen is the start of retaliation for the shootings inland. Her stricken form floats whooping in the reeds. Five in the lead move silently along trails, towards the gold-miners' camp. There are friendships and friendships.

Salvador sits in silence for a long while then leaves, patting my shoulder. Tears disperse coffee grounds in the bottom of my cup, and I head for the river one last time. The brown water sloughs by, its flow unchanged by gossip and slaughter, spilled pigments and lost tribes.

Gloaming

Craig Macdonald

Gloaming.

The word feels strange leaving my mouth.
A shortbread-Stewart shorthand
howked from a Lauderized lexicon
for the kitch, comic and couthie.
After thirteen years Scots schooling
it sounds patronizing and pit oan
a token jockism from one educated to 'know better'.
But just as dreich's not drab,
the OED doesn't do it.

At sunset, the planet spins sufficiently to exclude a distant star from view.
In the gloaming, the grass glows lush luscious green,
fresh-turned clay soil shimmers like sherry by firelight.
The world, your oyster, is waiting.
You could slip in your knife and pop it open.
In that split second of flux,
you could flip it all over and start afresh.



Edinburgh by Dawn by Graham Burrows

From the Lady's Tower, Elie

John Garth Wilkinson

Yesterday
haar cloaked our sight,
 bound us in Fife,
lorn booming calls of lighthouse horns
 sounding through mist
like calls of ancient seabests
 seeking lost mates.
Evening wind puffed it back to sea,
 lost it towards Scandinavia.

Today
is all breeze-scoured
 through crystal air:
 sky cobalt and high,
 a dome of blue field
 grazed by clouds of white down,
the firth before us indigo,
 danced by sparkles of light.
A long-ranging gannet
from the sunbright
 Bass Rock,
flapping white paper
 in sunlight
before blue Lothian hills,
 is sudden
 origami spear-head
 s
 t
 o
 n
 e
 -
 d
 r
 o
 p
 p
 i
 n
 g
 Icarus,
 stabs white pebble-thunk
 wound of cream froth
 in firth's dark skin,
 vanishes,
 resurrects itself,
 Aphrodite newborn,
 the threshing silver in dagger bill
 a glinting spangle of the sea itself,
 or star fallen,
 and found.

The Forth Musketeer

Ian Comrie

Homeward bound
on motorways.
M6. M74.
Long drive
Tired eyes, numb bum
Then J13, Abington.

Country roads
bring me
to the village of Forth.

As the evening sun shines
I spy a wee man wearing
a flat cap,

our eyes meet.

From behind his specs
he big-smiles me his hello-goodbye
and flashes his alloy stick
in the air
with the panache of a musketeer.

From that moment I
wear a replica of his
Great-to-be-Alive smile
in my brain
and am wide-awake,
but my bum is still numb.

March Wind

Ian Comrie

The snell March wind girms in
ma lugs as it cleeks ma cheeks the gither,
yit oot on the braes
the mid-day sun warms the sile
on sooth laid slopes.

Lang straucht lines
sae clear tae ma een when
laid ahint the plew
noo eroded into tilth by
natures sequence
frost-
snow-
wind-
rain-
sunshine,
ready now
like the blushing bride,
to receive the seed.

Then the peeweets happen by.

They dinna dert and dive like
summer swallows, nor
soar like song-kissed larks,
they jist yoke their wings tae springtime
and spirograph the air like
nae ithers.

Tae see the coortship o' the peewet
is tae envy youth its vigour
yet staun in awe o' natures grace.
Ayewize the tear in ma een
bides unexplained
when the peeweets arrive
on the cauld March wind.

Springtime Cultivation

Ian Comrie

Big red tractor
three furrow
reversible
plough
devouring stubble
hectare
by hectare.
Gulls, rooks, starlings,
flock in noisy roister
to the feast
of worms.
Big red tractor
three furrows
reversible
plough
watched
silently
by three buzzards
who join the feast
of big red
worms.
Peeweets delight
with aerial ballet.
Song thrush
throats its notes
of love
into March morning.

One day in October

Ian Comrie

They float on the autumn wind
like weightless black sparks of movement.
Cawing rooks, chuck-chucking jackdaws
roistering from field to field
stimulated by the cauld wind
that tosses and tugs at the thorn bushes
on the banks of the Broxburn

It's like it's a game o' tigg...

As I cosy up behind
my double glazing
and marvel,
I'm dragged in my mind
out into the crunching air
that sweeps across
the sodden fields,
where drowning worms strive
for the safety of the surface
only to find a waiting beak.

If it's a game - it's murder

April Fool

A Short Story by Eric MacFarlane

Evening Advertiser Saturday 1st April 2006

A bit closer to Heaven? MARS

**1 acre plt. with des. det. dwell. hse. Latest dual action airlock.
Close to all amenities 3 1/2 bed 1es Upset price. £1000**

Well I thought it was a good idea. Until the replies came in. They all got the joke of course. Some phoned and tried to string me along while others wrote or emailed long convoluted letters about their Uncle Bertie from Betelgeuse. I had thirty-three replies, about thirty-two more than most of our adverts in the rag. Big Bill was not pleased. Wasting time. I should know better. Juvenile. And then just as the fuss died down SHE burst into my office.

“Allbright’s the name. Seline Allbright.”

A weirdo, that was my first thought. In her fifties I guessed. White hair straggled untidily to her shoulders. A baggy tweed skirt and white woolly jumper. A Safeway plastic bag clutched protectively under her arm. A faint odour of sweat and baby powder wafted in with her.

“Paul Plimsol.” We shook hands. Her grip was limp and clammy. Susie gestured at me from the door and raised her eyebrows to heaven. ‘Sorry’ she mouthed.

I put on my best smile as Susie reversed out.

“Ah, did you have an appointment Mrs. Allbright?”

“An appointment?” she snapped. “No I haven’t. And it’s Miss.”

“Excuse me?” I struggled to keep smiling.

“It’s Miss Allbright if you don’t mind.”

“Ah yes of course.”

“What do you mean of course?”

“Mean? Well nothing really.”

“You said it in a funny way.”

“Honestly I didn’t mean it.” I had started to sweat.

“Miss Allbright. What property were you interested in?” I looked her straight between the eyes or at least tried to. They slid around like frogspawn in a jar.

“Does it keep good time?”

“What?”

“Does it keep good time. The clock.”

I followed her unsteady gaze to the bookcase by the door. She was looking at Bill’s carriage clock. ‘A touch of class Paul. The punters like that.’

“Yes great.” I took a deep breath. My fists were clenched tight.

“Antique is it?”

“Yes probably.” Just like the antique battery I had to replace every six months. I pushed my shoulders back and tried to smile.

“Miss Allbright. The property.”

She stared at me hard.

“Yes, the property. That’s what I came about.”

"Great." I pulled out the enquiry form. "Now if you can just tell me what you want?"

She sniffed. "Oh I know what I want all right."

"Excellent." I waited while she fumbled in her bag for a crumpled tissue and blew her nose loudly. She stared into middle distance.

"Well, can I help you?" I tapped my pen on the desk.

She looked round vaguely.

"No dear. You're very kind. It's just a cold."

My cheeks were burning.

"Can you just tell me what property you want to view." I spoke slowly enunciating each word.

"You advertised it in the paper. I expect it's sold."

"Wonderful. One of these then." I pulled out the copy of our advert.

She glanced down. "That's it, but there's no picture."

"Oh they all have pictures," I smiled. "It's policy. The client must see what they're getting."

"Well there isn't one see." She threw it back.

"I assure you Miss Allbright," I laughed. "The only property without a picture is..." The smile froze on my lips. "You don't mean..." Her head nodded vigorously.

"I thought that was all over," I said wearily.

She grabbed my hand with both of hers. "You mean you've sold it?" Her face was close to mine, her eyes unblinking.

"No, no of course we haven't sold it," I pulled my hand free.

"Thank God I'm not too late."

I stared at her agitated face, at the wrinkles round her eyes, the fuzz of hair on her upper lip. Anger boiled over.

"Look," I snarled. "Are you taking the piss?"

A puzzled look spread over her face. "No, no dear I don't do that." Then her hand came up to her mouth. "Oh! Is it important? I mean I know there's not much water and all."

"Water?" I looked at her blankly.

"Water. Up there. It must be scarce. I'm not a prude. I've done things when I've had to." She stared at me impassively.

I tightened my slack jaw muscles. What was going on. Either she was taking the mickey or she was a nutter or... All right play it your way dear.

"So you're interested in Martian real estate Miss Allbright?"

"Yes, well it's not just Mars. Actually its Andromeda. That's where they took Mam you see. But Mars will be closer won't it, that's the important thing. One small step eh? That's what he said when he stepped on the moon. I watched it you know. Live it was. I never knew it was possible until I saw your advert. To actually move to Mars you know. I'm all packed. Can you tell me more about it?"

"They took your mother to Andromeda?"

"I know dear. It's difficult to believe. I'm not surprised you sound septic. It's ever so far away. But I've seen it. It's just like a star but really it's dozens of stars all whirling round like milk in coffee. She just disappeared. One day here next day not. Nobody believed that stupid note she left. Do you have any?"

"What?"

"Coffee."

"Coffee!"

"Or tea."

"Just a moment." I got unsteadily to my feet.

Susie stared at me as I stumbled into the front office.

"I need a straightjacket Susie."

"Who for? You or her?"

"Me I think. That woman is mad. Her Mother's from Andromeda and she wants to live on Mars. Get two coffees love. No make that three I suppose she'll want one. How can I get rid of her."

"My Mum knows her. Well at least she lives in the next block. Says she's always going round muttering to herself. Here's the coffee." She pushed three mugs towards me.

I gulped down the first mug in a few mouthfuls trying desperately to think how I could get her out of my office without any unpleasantness. I didn't want Big Bill involved. When I got back she was rummaging on my desk.

I coughed. "Can I help you?"

"Just looking for a picture," she grunted showing no embarrassment.

"Of a house on Mars I suppose?"

"Yes."

I put a mug down beside her.

"I'll find it for you." I started to sort through the untidy heap she had left. There must be something I could show her. She sipped from the mug, grimacing.

"It's coffee."

"Yes."

"I asked for tea."

"You didn..." I stopped. I was shouting. I wanted to put my hands round her skinny neck.

"I'm sorry. Will it do?"

"I suppose so." She shrugged.

"Ah here we are." I pulled out a photograph. "This is it."

She looked doubtful. "It's not very Martian."

"Modern construction techniques," I said mysteriously.

"There's trees beside it."

"Irrigation. Canals you know." She nodded wisely.

"Of course. I know about them. It looks nice. Is it expensive."

"No. It's only a thousand pounds."

"I can afford that. I could take it out of the post office. It's very cheap."

"Special offer you see. Developers want to sell, get a colony going."

She nodded seriously and stood up. "I'll get the money."

"Er, there's just one snag."

She looked at me wide eyed. I tried to suppress a giggle.

"It's expensive to get there you see. NASA charge ten million pounds for the flight." I wiped tears from my eyes.

Relief spread over her face. "It's all right dear. I've got my own transport. There's no need to worry." I gaped at her.

"They left a ship you see. When they took Mam. I don't know why. I keep it in the shed. It's been there for years but I'm sure I'll be able to drive it."

I stood up and offered her my hand.

"OK, you win," I said in admiration.

"Win?" she looked genuinely puzzled.

"OK a draw then."

"You'll sort out the house?"

"Of course Miss Allbright. You send me the money and get yourself to Mars. I'll take care of everything else."

We shook hands again. "You're a very helpful young man," she said as she left the office.

With a sigh of relief I turned to the mountain of paperwork littering my desk.

"Paul, there's money in this one."

Susie handed me a battered brown envelope addressed in green ink. Inside was a bundle of postal orders. I counted them. Forty twenty-five pound postal orders. One thousand pounds. Each was made out to me in a barely visible scrawl of green ink. A scrap of paper said 'thank you'.

It had to be the Allbright woman. Two weeks since her visit and I'd almost forgotten her.

"Bloody hell, Susie what am I going to do with this."

"Take a holiday," smirked Susie. "With a friend."

"Don't be daft. This is serious." She pouted and marched out of the room.

I couldn't pay it into the firms account and I didn't want Bill to know about this. I would have to cash them. I didn't even know her address. But Susie did. That was it. Cash them and stuff the money through her letter box. That simple. I put my hands behind my head and swivelled to the window.

A jet streaked a vapour trail across a clear blue sky. Lovely day. Perhaps I could finish early this afternoon. Suddenly another trail crossed the jets at right angles. It was moving much faster, or seemed to be. It must be lower down and yet it seemed further away: a barely visible dark speck that almost instantly dwindled to nothing leaving its white trail suspended with no end. Something military I supposed.

"Susie, two cups would you doll," I shouted at the closed door.

The Tumshie's Complaint

Mary Kalugerovich

On Burns Nicht Ah jist cannae see
Whit wey the haggis has tae be
The yin that gets addressed. Here's me,
The guid auld neep
Fur flavour, an nutrition tae
Ah'm worth a haggis ony day
An no a cheep



Linlithgow Loch by Clive Watts

The Other Side

An excerpt from a novel, The Magic Spex, by John Garth Wilkinson

While playing in a dump, young Jack Spadger has found a pair of old fashioned specs that make him invisible.

One night I was playing out on my own. Well, I wasn't really playing, just wandering about invisible, and making funny noises. It wasn't dark, but it was well after teatime. There had been little groups of people going into Mrs Bumbee's house next door to us, most of them old, and most of them women. Older than Mum, but not as old as Grandma they were. Like middle-aged. And they were all wearing dark clothes: suits and dresses, things like that, like they were going to church.

I'd never been in that house. Old Mrs Bumbee lives there on her own, but sometimes her daughter Jehenna visits her for a few weeks. At night you can often hear strange noises and bangs and things. Mum and Dad always call her house *THE OTHER SIDE*. It's the other side of our house, then there's a gap, and two more houses joined, and so on. Grandma always says she's a spiritualist, whatever that is. But we're not very friendly with her. It's not that we don't speak, but... we don't even know her first name.

I'd always wanted to go in her house, because it's really part of the house I live in, just a wall between us, like other rooms, and all under the same roof. I drifted over onto her path and watched one group, a man and two ladies.

Mrs Bumbee was standing at the door wearing those long strings of beads she always wears.

- *Hello*, she said. *Come on in*.

Well, as she said *Come on in*, she looked at me. I forgot I was invisible and slipped through the door in front of the people. She sort of shivered as I went past and said *I think it'll be a good sitting tonight*.

- *We hope so*, answered the man, and they all came in after me.

- *What have I done?* I thought as I stood in her hall. *I've come in. But she did say come in.*

Her hallway was the same as ours, except at the other side of the house. Her stairs turned left at the top, ours turn right. The doors into her rooms were on the left as well. Ours are on the right. It was like there was a mirror down the middle of the house and her side was a reflection of ours. The furniture was different though.

In the front room everybody was sitting around drinking cups of tea and nibbling digestive biscuits and talking like grownups talk when they've nothing to talk about. Really boring.

Then Mrs Bumbee came in.

- *Good evening everybody*, she said. *Should we start straight away?*

The grownups murmured. One lady said

- *If you feel the time is right.*

Well, the way she said it, it sounded a bit spooky, like something was going to happen. And then Mrs Bumbee said something that amazed me.

- Yes, she said. *I can feel a presence. I think there's somebody in the room with us.*

- *Could she see me?* I went cold. I felt really nervous, standing in the corner between the piano and the wall, with a cactus plant right behind me if I moved back.

But the grownups just went and sat round a table with a heavy cloth on in the middle of the room. There were eleven of them and Mrs Bumbee who sat in a big chair at one end. Then a man drew the curtains and somebody put the lights out, except for a little blue lamp on the piano, and a candlestick with three candles at the back of the room. And I could smell a burning incense stick.

- *What were they doing???*

They all held hands, in silence. They weren't playing cards, it was too dark. Were they saying their prayers? If they were, they weren't: they were thinking them.

Mrs Bumbee started nodding, and her head fell forward, as if she was falling asleep. I was waiting for her to start snoring at any minute.

Then a woman nodded her head, and a man spoke. I froze.

- *Is there anybody there?* he asked.

They must have heard me or something. Then he said it again.

- *Is there anybody there?*

I started to sweat, and moved back. The cactus jagged me.

- *AAAH!* I said softly.

A woman gasped.

- *Is there anybody there?*

You know I can't tell a lie.

- *Yes,* I said, trembling. *I'm here in the corner.*

- *Aaah,* said a woman. *It's a little boy.*

- *Yes,* I said, quietly.

- *Come closer,* said the man. *Don't be afraid.*

So I walked nearer to the table and stood next to Mrs Bumbee. She was asleep. I thought that was terrible when she was having a party. I know what my mum says when my dad falls asleep in company after a meal and a couple of drinks.

- *Are you from the Other Side?* asked the man.

The Other Side? This part of the house was The Other Side... wait a minute. If they were The Other Side to us, then we were The Other Side to them.

They'd guessed who I was.

- *Yes,* I said, quietly. I felt like I was in Old Daddy Haddock's room for being caught running in the corridors or just breathing in assembly when I should have been quiet.

One of the other women started talking then. She was excited. Like all the rest, she had her eyes closed for some reason. Could they see me with their eyes closed? It didn't make any sense, but it didn't really matter now they knew I was here.

- *What's it like on The Other Side?*

- *It's just like here really, except everything's the other way round. Like in a mirror.*

- *How long have you been over there?* another lady asked. It was Mrs Proudfoot, Ella, from across the road, who owns the two dogs Giles and Tulloch that I'd scared that first day.

- *Since I was a baby...*

- *Ah, the poor wee soul...* somebody said.

- *And have you grown up on the Other Side?*

- *Yes.*

- *Aaah,* said the ladies.

- *Who looks after you there?*

- *Well, there's my grandma...*

- *Ah, that's nice, you've met up with someone who loves you over there...*

What was she talking about? Course they loved me. All my family loves me.

Well, some of the time...

- *How did you, er, pass over?* asked one of the men.

- *What do you mean?*

- *Do you remember first going to The Other Side?*

What did they mean? What was it to do with them anyway? And why were they interested?

- *No, not really,* I answered. *I was in my pram.*

- *Oh, the poor little soul,* said the first lady, and asked me *Are there beautiful gardens on the Other Side?*

- Well... I had to think then. I nearly said *Why don't you look out the back window for yourselves*, but it had got dark. I could tell because there was no light coming through the closed curtains. And anyway you can't see for the fence.

- *There are some nasturtiums, I said. And roses, and a wee lawn with bushes... and a rabbit hutch at the end of it... I could show you but it's gone all dark now and the fence is too high between us...*

I didn't tell them about the rusty old wheelbarrow that my mum's always on to my dad about getting rid of, because she's ashamed of it. And all the weeds.

Some of the people looked sort of puzzled, and one or two seemed a bit scared.

- *May the True Light shine between us again,* said one woman.

- *And are there lovely angels over there?* asked another.

What? What was she on about? Angels in our garden? Then I remembered: mum collects bits of pottery, all sort of nice and sweet and babyish.

- *Yes, there are two on the mantelpiece with blue robes on, and one on the telly dressed in white, next to Little Bo-Peep and one of her lambs.*

Then there was a sort of silence for a while. It was like nobody seemed to know what to say. Was it because I'd said telly instead of television? I'm always getting a row for that.

Still nobody knew what to say. Then the first man, like he was taking charge, asked

- *Do you have a message for anybody present?*

As it happened, I did. My dad had been over to see Mrs Proudfoot just after tea, but she hadn't been back from wherever she was.

- *Yes, I've a message for Ella Proudfoot...*

Mrs Proudfoot gasped and put her hand to her mouth. Another woman quickly grabbed it again.

- *Don't break the ring!*

What did she mean? I thought I was in the middle of a bunch of loonies by now, asking all these stupid questions, and everything. What sort of game were they playing? Ring-a-Ring-o'-Roses in the dark? I was getting a bit scared too, but I had to tell her once I'd started.

- *We found your Mabel down by the river.* Mabel was Mrs Proudfoot's cat.

Her mouth opened, and I thought she was going to start crying.

- *She's alright, I said, and she's not in any pain now. She's sleeping. She was caught in a rabbit snare. We're looking after her for you. My dad says he'll drop her into your house later on tonight.*

I thought Mrs Proudfoot might have been grateful that we were looking after her daft old cat for her. What do you think she did? Did she smile and say *Thanks*,

Jack, you're a good lad, here's a pound? Did she nothing!

She screamed the loudest scream I've ever heard and put both hands up to her ears so she couldn't hear it and everybody else could. Talk about selfish.

- You've broken the ring!!

Then Mrs Bumbee snorted like a pig, started moaning, and woke up as if she'd suddenly realised there were people there. Some party!

Everybody started talking at once. That was enough for me. I jumped back, and knocked the blue lamp off the piano. I didn't mean to. It was an accident. The glass smashed, and the light went out. Mrs Proudfoot screamed again, even louder.

I grabbed the door and pulled it open, and a draught came in and blew out all the candles, and that made more women start screaming in the pitch dark.

So I cleared off down the hall, but I couldn't see where I was going, and I tripped over the umbrella-stand, sending umbrellas and walking-sticks rattling all over the floor. Then I opened the front door and the wind came in, didn't it? All the inside doors in the house slammed shut and I dashed out banging the front door straight after for good measure. There were dogs barking all over the place, and half the street were at their windows.

All the women in the house were screaming now, and the men were shouting too. Talk about the dogs? They were barking mad as well. One of them was calling on Jesus Christ to save them from the Powers of Darkness.

I whipped my glasses off, and stuffed them in my pocket. I was still shaking.

Spiritualist? Must be another word for lunatic, I thought.

I went home.



Stewart McPherson

The Tooth Fairy

Emma Mooney

The dim, yellow glow from the bedside lamp
Shows a child asleep in his bed.
His warm, winter quilt keeps the monsters out
And the nightmares which all children dread.

The soft, gentle breeze from her tiny wings
Does nothing to waken this boy.
He dreams of his kite soaring up with the wind
Way up high, for all to enjoy.

She stops, gently lifts his blue pillow slip
From beneath she seeks out her treasure.
She replaces his tooth with a silver coin
And imagines his face filled with pleasure.

As the fairy flies off through the inky sky
The full moon glowing bright.
She tosses his tooth to the heavens above
And a new star twinkles tonight.



Morocco by Marion Thomson

Fear

A short story by Lorna Whyte

The spit hit my face, and she saw it. Her eyes came off me for a split second and followed it to my cheek, a minute gob. There was more to come. Her eyes narrowed as she brought more of the bile that was her life to her thick cracked lips, turned it into words and used them as missiles. The vile words were a physical assault. I could smell the stale cigarette smoke and food that was visibly rotting on what was left of her teeth. She's a big woman, 5ft 10 or 11 and heavy, fat mostly, her girth coming from under her chin, a huge shapeless thing. Her clothes are dingy and lifeless, no shape, they don't seem to start or finish anywhere as if they've grown along with her smelly body. Her fat arms are flaying about, large podgy hands skiff close to my face, not touching me, but close, so close I can feel the air move. My mind is calm, I know not to listen to the words that spew from her mouth, if I get caught up with listening, I'll stop thinking. And I need to think... and breathe. Remember to breathe - for fucks sake breathe.

The door is about three feet away, at the other side of the door are people and she won't be keen to attack with witnesses, any odd movement will betray my fear and could provoke an assault. There's a knot low in my belly. When she shouted in my face, a dribble of pee landed on my knickers, if I pee myself I'm finished, I'm fucking finished.

"I'm so sorry Mrs Adams, I didn't mean to offend you, would you like to come into the flat so we can work this out". Hopefully inviting her into what she thinks is my home will make her feel special. Oh, it's working; her eyes have lightened a bit, just a wee bit.

Mmm - She's thinking now. She's thinking- if she walks through that door with me and into the flat past the others, the others that are waiting patiently on the far side of the door, listening to every word, anticipating the outcome, she'll think she's won, something intangible, but she'll have won it none the less. I can see her walking tall behind me, sneering at the back of my head, drawing out the victory, demonstrating her dominance. Who the fuck cares, as long as I get through the door.

My tone is soft and submissive, and as I'm talking my arm is slowly coming out from my side, I just need to reach the handle, it's a bit too far, I need to take a step, so I keep her eyes locked with mine as I gently move forward, my legs are weak but my hand is on the door handle.

I turn slightly, talking quietly as I open the door.

Tunnel Vision

A short story by Alan Gardner

It had been no different a morning than yesterday. He had gotten up, showered and shaved. He'd hurriedly drunk his first coffee of the day, which was as it always was by the time he reached it, lukewarm. Mike Clarke rarely thought about how mundane his existence was. He never considered it routine. It just was. Each day was simply another to get through. He had no higher ambition or hidden talent, just a life to get on with. That morning dawned deceptively; it hid the cruelty and the turmoil to come.

Mike arrived at Waverley Station after parking his car in his usual spot, a perk of starting so early. In less than half an hour the station would be teeming with life. He never thought about them much; it wasn't in him to think about who they were, how they lived, where they were going, or why. It was just his job to get them there, not that he really even thought about it that way either. He just drove the train. It wasn't a job he had wanted when he grew up. In fact he couldn't really remember what he had wanted to be. Astronaut probably. Train driver was some other child's dream, not his. He didn't mind, he'd had worse jobs in his working life.

After half an hour with a newspaper and a cup of coffee - hot this time - he walked along platform 15. He stopped just by the open door, nodded to the carriage cleaner who was getting off, and sat down in the cab. He always seemed to be waiting for a conductor. This time a new face which apparently had the name Alan attached to it. There was a little small talk. Alan had only been on the job for a month.

The 06:55 drew out of the station at 07:01. Mike was used to it but it was one of those things, which irritated him. One morning an irate passenger had stormed into his cab demanding to know why he had just been sitting there for the last ten minutes, and if he actually had any plans to get moving. "Waiting for the conductor mate," was all he could really say, but it had come across as indifference, and this had angered the passenger further. An unfortunate incident which occurred every now and then. The public can be a volatile cargo. The passenger could do little except storm off, fury vented, muttering something about a joke. It was no joke to Mike. He had pride in his professionalism; something he felt wasn't always matched by his colleagues.

He made up the lost time and reached Linlithgow by 07:17, just two minutes late. He reached Glasgow Queen Street on time. Looking back at that morning four weeks later he remembered smiling to himself that he'd still gotten there on schedule. It was the last time he could remember smiling.

The return journey to Edinburgh continued in that same routine manner his life followed in general. Until just after he departed from Polmont. He remembered seeing a young girl and her mother waving to the train as he passed. He did not see the look of disappointment in the little girl's face, or hear her mother say that she didn't understand why nobody waved back anymore. Then he saw another face, his face as it fell so suddenly beneath the window, beneath his feet, beneath his wheels. In the seconds that followed he felt that he was outside of himself looking on, a passenger on his own train. He saw his hands

moving; he felt the train slow. But there was something more; it was as if there was someone else there too.

It happened so quickly, not how most would imagine. Time did not slow. It was horribly fast. But not so fast that he missed the eyes. The eyes, which looked straight into his as, they fell. He felt sick; he felt the cold coffee curdle in his belly. There was very little that he could tell the police when they arrived. He didn't mention the eyes. The next time he saw them was in the newspaper; they had belonged to Graham Morton, a 35-year-old accountant. He had left behind a wife and two young boys when he jumped to his death under the 07:25 Glasgow/Edinburgh train. The police had ruled out any suspicious circumstances. The family was shocked and saddened, they had no explanation why Graham had chosen to take his own life.

Mike Clarke didn't know it then as he folded up the newspaper, but there was a reason. A very good reason, one which he now unwittingly carried somewhere in a dormant corner of his mind. It would not stay dormant for very long. Mike had not returned to work since the morning of the incident. He had been offered counselling and time off. Counselling meant very little to him, he had nothing to say. He knew that it wasn't his fault. There was no guilt on his part, and he did not want to acknowledge the horror, which was lurking. Something had begun to stir. It all came down to those eyes, which had looked into his. He gladly took the time off. Two or three weeks and he would be fine.

By the end of his fourth week things were rapidly getting worse. So bad that he took up the offer on counselling after all. He sat in the plush waiting room on a dull Tuesday afternoon, already wishing he hadn't come. What could he tell them? How could they help? A problem shared was a problem doubled to Mike.

He had expected an elderly and wise gentleman in a white coat, who would sit sternly, takes notes, and then simply prescribe him something. Dr. William White was barely in his mid-twenties, tall, thin, and dark. He was friendly and relaxed. He shook Mike's hand with a smile, an ever present smile which quickly began to irritate him. Mike had nothing to smile about, and a smile, especially one which he felt false somehow, could only go so far. It could not chase the demons away.

There was an uncomfortable silence while Dr. White looked through his notes. Finally he spoke. "Okay Mike I want you to tell me about that morning. From the beginning. Take your time."

Mike sighed. He looked up at the ceiling and began. "It was just like any other morning, I suppose." Mike was slowly overcome by feelings of helpless bitterness and anger. He looked Dr. White in the eye but couldn't hold it for long.

"It wasn't like any other morning."

"Take your time Mike."

Mike went over the events leading up to the moment when the body fell. He paused.

"The eyes, his eyes looked right into me. There was something terrible in them. I didn't really know it then but ... that something is now in me ..."

"What do you mean 'in you'?"

"I don't want to talk about this any more."

"Mike, I'm not here to judge you. I'm just here to listen."

"There was something wrong with that man."

"The man who ... jumped?"

"He wasn't really a man somehow."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. You didn't see it. He just wasn't a man, he wasn't human anymore. I'm sure he must have been once. Maybe part of him was still there; maybe that was why he jumped. To get away from ..."

The uncomfortable silence returned. Dr. White was no longer smiling. Mike looked at the floor, his sweaty hands gripped tightly together. When he looked up Dr. White was studying him with a mixture of confusion and empathy. Neither helped.

"What was it you think the man was trying to get away from?"

"It's not what I think. I know."

"You think he was possessed in some way, and now you are too?"

"No. Not possessed. He was being eaten alive from the inside out. Now it's eating me alive."

"What is Mike?"

"I can't really describe it. It's like a parasite. A demonic parasite. I feel it growing inside me. My soul has cancer."

"Post traumatic stress disorder an ..."

"It's not post traumatic stress! It's not what happened, it's what is happening. I don't have nightmares or flashbacks, or anything like that. This is constantly with me, and it's getting worse. I can feel what it's thinking. I know what it can do."

"You have to calm down, try to relax."

"How can I relax? It's taking over. I'll end up just like him. I know why he jumped. It was the only way he could escape. Not just that. He was trying to kill it."

"Why?"

Mike wanted to take the pen from Dr. White's hand and plunge it into his eye. He had visions of plucking the eye from its socket and swallowing it.

"Because this has been going on for a long time. Decades at least."

"What makes you think that?"

"I told you already. I know. I can see what it has done, and I can feel it. It takes pleasure from it. From spite, hatred, and suffering. It is so arrogant because it knows that we can do nothing about it, and it goes about its work undetected. Unknown, and unstoppable."

"And this thing goes from person to person just by looking into someone's eyes?"

"It's not as simple as that. I think it can only happen in the moments before death."

"Why then if the man who jumped was trying to stop it would he look into your eyes?"

"What is it that you can't grasp here? He didn't. It did."

"I see."

"No. I don't think you do. It is collecting fear and pain. I'm just another resource."

Dr. White scribbled something on the sheet. "Mike, I have to be honest with you, this is beyond my ability to help. I'm going to refer you to ..."

Mike reached the door before Dr. White could finish. He sat in his car and cried, hardly noticing that the cloud had given way to a glorious sun. But even that could not warm him. He was cold to his marrow. There was nothing left. He knew what he had to do, but to do it properly was the problem.

There was a way. Mike still had the will, but he knew it would not be his own for much longer. As he sat in the bath he thought about how his life had turned out. He had made little imprint on the world. How ironic that when his moment came he would not be recognized. He would be written off as insane, a tragic accident which had simply claimed another life. People would glance over his picture as they drank their coffee, or beer, as they smoked their cigarettes and chatted happily amongst themselves about nothing in particular.

As he looked at the razor's edge he could feel the struggle going on within. But it was not yet powerful enough to stop him. For once it was caught in a weakened state. Mike smiled for the first time since that morning.

Hazel Jennings' shift began like every other. She was always running late, always in a state of anxiety. There was barely time to get out the door. When the call came it was a different story. She was calm, collected, and above all professional. She loved being a paramedic. When she arrived at the house the

police were already there. When she saw him lying in the thickly reddened water she knew that they were too late. All she could do was give him some comfort at the end.

"You'll be all right." She quickly wrapped bandages around both wrists. She looked into his eyes and smiled.



Therese Mullen

Waukrif

Keith Tait

Ye ken whit yon craw said tae me?
"I seen the Christ's Nativity,
But I am bleck, an' sair tae see.

It wis a bow-house, mirk an' bare,
An' mony fowk were gaithert there,
A dammisht stillness filt the air.

Ye ken whit yon craw said tae me?
"I seen him neist at Gaililee,
They say he mad a blinman see."

The auld craw winnert wi' his eye:
"I saw a ruid agin the sky,
I saw the Maister bleed an' die,

He cam tae save the Warl' o' Men,
A lammie tae a wullcat's den
We shallna' see his sib again."

He hid a spatch o' fedders, white,
Upon his breist, an unco' sight,
He mizzled aff intae the night.

War

Mohammed Farooq

What is a war, my friend?
Will it cause the world to end?
It is the fault of crazy people who act
With war - and not verbal tact.

The creators of war, I will name but a few -
Napoleon and Stalin, and Hitler too -
They sat back and watched the people fight,
Blood and guts - oh what a sight!

The loss of many innocent lives,
The mourning of many mothers and wives,
The loss of property and the loss of land,
Oh God! Where do I look? Where do I stand?

Do I take part in this bloody war?
What is all this fighting for?
No one seems to know for sure
Especially the rich who are now poor.

WAR – an evil deed
Armies gathered with haste and speed
The moneys spent on war could feed
Countless people in their hour of need

So heed my warning, my friends and foes,
Heed not the madmen, whose trumpet blows,
Hold your right hand in front of you
And shake your opponent's hand -
Be he Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Jew.

St. Andra

Mary Kalugerovich

St. Rule, he traitt yer relics here
An buried them among us
But wi religion's many woes,
The seeds o hatred that it sows,
Folk pit tae death wi fire and sword
A' in the name o Christ the Lord,
He couldae left them whaur they wur
Fur a' the guid it brung us

The Little Guy

Scott Stoddart

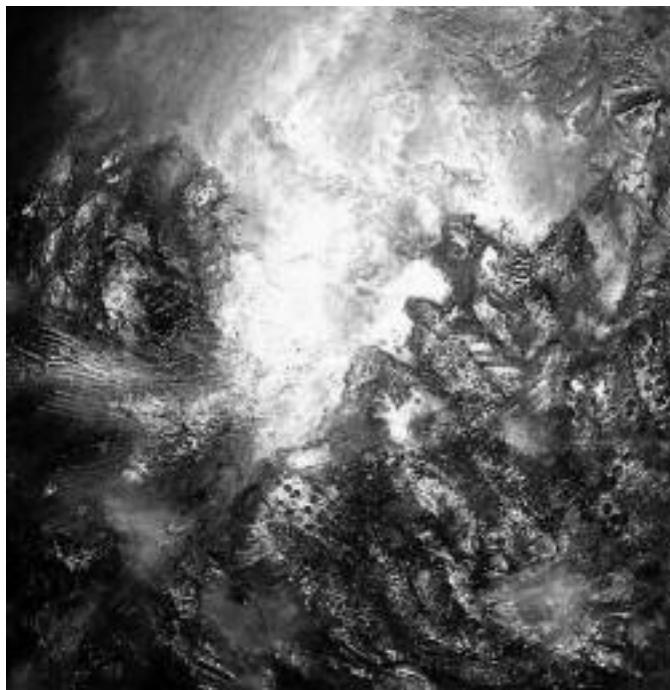
A big blue ball floats through space
On it lives the human race
You'd think they'd realise something was wrong
When the magnificent polar bear was almost gone
But businessmen only care about the dollar and the pound
Not if their children's children will still be around
What can we do, you and I, the little guy
Just complain quietly and wait to die
A big blue ball floats through space
On it once lived the human race

and I just shake my head

Brian Thomson

agnostics can be found
sat astride the transparent wall
that separates the punters
rolling naked in heaven's clover
from the massed ranks of atheists
who are naturally surprised
but know their place
their necks are craned
as they file past the gates
enquiring gazes are met
with friendly shouts and waves
acquaintances are recognised
eyebrows are raised
and quizzical half-smiles
are etched on each and every face

and I just shake my head
almost imperceptibly
and move on with the rest



Reflections by Lorraine Huber

George's Adventure

A short story by John Bathgate

George had never really felt he was very good at anything, but this was different. This was his big chance, he thought, as he took the fishing rod from its case. This rod and reel had belonged to his father, and he had watched him so often casting a fine line of flies far out across the river, and then as they floated downstream, a slight flick of the wrist, and out came a glistening brown trout, writhing in the air as he carried it smoothly to his net.

And now it was his turn. At fifty-four, a father himself, though neither of his two sons had shown any interest in trout fishing, he had gradually given it up too, and the rods had lain unused for these past twenty years or more.

He continued assembling the rod, bringing his finger down the side of his nose, and then rubbing a film of skin wax onto the end of each rod piece, before slotting it home into the socket of the next piece – an old trick taught to him by his father to make it easy to release the pieces again when taking the rod down.

This fishing competition was a very special one. Not only was there prize money, but it would also be filmed for a TV documentary, and it was on the river he knew so well from those days with his father.

His mind drifted back to those long summer evenings, clear skies at the beginning of twilight, and suddenly he could see his father in his jacket and green waders making his way up the far bank, calling across:

“Is anything rising there?”

He remembered that one night, as he looked down into a deep pool from a high bank there it was – a monster brown trout, swimming in circles as it fed unhurriedly in the clear water.

“Down there Dad” he had shouted excitedly, and watched spell-bound as his father expertly cast over the fish, the flies landing lightly on the surface, and gently drifted across the pool. The big trout had no hesitation – it took to the fly and the line jerked taut. In a few moments it was lying gasping on the bank, the hook removed.

“It’s a beauty, Dad.”

“Yes, the best fish I’ve seen on this stretch for a long time. Should we keep it?”

“Why don’t we give him another chance for a few more adventures before he’s done?”

“OK, let me put him back.”

He remembered the dignity in that proud body in his hands as he gently returned it to the water, and with a flick of its tail it was gone.

That was forty years ago now, and yet it was as vivid as day to him.

Forty years, and so little accomplished it seemed to him. An unremarkable life, not unhappy, yet strangely unfulfilled with nothing to distinguish him from the crowd and that left him with emptiness in his stomach. Friends had done so much better, just been more successful with their lives somehow. The fishing competition was at least a chance to show he was better at something than the others before drifting off into oblivion.

He took his entry card, and made his way to his position on the riverbank for the morning session. He smiled quietly inside as he saw that it was almost exactly at the spot from where he had called to his father about that giant old trout, though today the river was a torrent, deep and fast flowing in heavy flood.

The first couple of hours were uneventful, and he decided to change the fly he was using. As he turned to open the fishing bag he was suddenly aware of the ground trembling beneath him, and in a flash he was tumbling down the bank as earth and stones cascaded into the river. He knew what was happening, but was powerless to stop himself as he splashed heavily into the water, and was immediately carried downstream in the strong current. Of course, he thought, his mind racing, the bank had been eroded underneath and with his weight had collapsed. And now he was in trouble! Never a strong swimmer at the best of times, here he was weighted down with heavy clothing and boots, and struggling to keep his head above the water. The water swirled around his head, and he went down, striking his head on a rock as he was swept along.

It was very quiet down here he noticed now, despite the rushing waters, and his panic subsided. Then he saw them ahead in the murk, an old man and a huge trout seated on a flat rock on the riverbed, apparently having a conversation. As he neared them they turned, and looked at each other in amazement.

"Help me!" he choked.

The old man turned back unhurriedly to his companion:

"Should we keep him?"

"Oh no," said the fish, "Why don't we give him another chance for a few more adventures before he's done?"

With that the old man lunged towards him, catching his arms, and with the fish pushing behind they reached the bank, and he lay there gasping, exhausted. A little crowd gathered round him, and somebody reached a hand behind his head to help him sit up. The lens of a TV camera poked through the onlookers.

"Are you alright George?" he heard a voice say from somewhere far away.
"That banking was a death trap!"

"Oh, yes," said George, "I'm alright. Better than I've been in years!"

Empty Glen

(An epitaph to the Clearances)

Donnie MacNeill

The day sits heavy on the
brackened shoulders of the glen.
A melancholy breeze hums
Gaelic airs through tangled
brambles, heavy in their blackness
and ruffles incense from
marsh-bound meadowsweet.

A plaintive curlew pipes a shrill
lament that echoes eerie
notes round the mossy mounds
of scattered stones, leached
lifeless by nature's tears.
Once they stood proud and
breathed in air of beast and men;
then the clearing torches came
with threatening shout and
heavy thud of hoof.

The rush-thatched roof
danced with greedy flames
that sent anguish skywards
in smoky funeral pyres
of old ways, and old days.
The sheep came and did not care
to gaze on all the desolation,
but bent their profitable heads
in perennial perpetual graze.

Their bleating has long gone;
the grass grows long as memories
of those shipped on angry seas
to lands far from this home.
All that remains is sadness
lost in the hazy mists of time
that trap their ghosts in perpetuity
within this empty glen

Storm Clearing, North Uist

By Ellie Stewart

Scolpaig

Griminish Point is Huge.
In the bay, the water creaks.

Vallay Strand

Skim of turquoise
over white sand.

Angus

A flap of yellow oilskins.

Dead Lamb

Head tucked, swan-like
in the corner of the field.
Summer arrived on the back of the storm.
A little
too late.

Domestic Bliss

Baby in the kitchen
trying to roll;
seal-like.

Domestic Gale Warning

A good drying day might also be
the perfect day to sail away.

Squint Teeth

By Ellie Stewart

Road End

Lochskipport is full of midges and
stumps of the old pier rot like teeth.

Vikings

The children on the bus souk lollipops, eat fudge to
a grassy knoll behind the machair where
pegs shoogle in sockets, mark
long dead, a boat perhaps, buried in the sand.

The quiet girl whose mother drinks
grinds molars at the back as
skerries appear and disappear on the horizon.

Trisomy 21

She flops beside me.
Very much here.

Milk teeth will appear erratically, they said.

Haskeir Eagach west northwest.
Five gorgeous stacks
erupt in the setting sun.

Cat People

Extract from Jack Scamp, a novel by Hamish Macfarlane

LONDON

Post-preen, Soda returns from the bathroom wearing blue cotton pyjamas decorated with pink sheep.

Billy lies on his back, counting wolves in an effort to stay awake, so he can think about Fern.

Soda slides into bed and says, 'So what did the doc say about your leg?'

Billy remembers the lie. 'Clean bill of health.'

'Really?' Soda asks, unsatisfied with such a pat ending. 'He didn't refer you to a leg-specialist or something?'

'Nope.'

'Back on your bike tomorrow, then?'

'I don't think so. I'll try walking. Less stressful.'

'You're stressed?'

'Little bit.'

'Restaurant stressing you out?'

'No. Never.'

Soda giggles. 'Hoser,' she says, from the old country, then, from further back still, 'HÇn zi. So what have you got to be stressed about?'

'Fudge knows,' Billy says, looking genuinely baffled.

Soda smiles and says, 'Can I ask you something?'

'Yeah,' Billy says.

'Something personal.'

Billy says, 'Everything's personal.'

Soda shakes her head.

'I want to ask Jeff but there's no way, and you're the next best thing. And maybe you don't even think of it as an issue, so if I don't ask and I'm always wondering about it and you don't even have a problem with it, then it is kinda like I've wasted this big opportunity to ask a guy about it, you know?'

Billy opens his eyes and puts his hands behind his head. It must be one hell of a question. 'Fire away.'

Soda wrinkles her nose. 'I can't, I'm all nervous now.'

'Probably for the best,' says Billy.

'How so?'

'Some things,' Billy says, 'aren't supposed to be talked about. No big deal.'

'I guess you're right,' Soda says. Without her makeup, in sheepish pyjamas, hands folded on top of the duvet, Soda looks much too young to be in bed with. Dark chocolate eyes, button nose and that trick of a mouth, oh, she must be twelve, she must be a slip of a girl. At times like this, Billy is tempted to offer her a glass of milk; he's minded to open up a bedtime story. Yes, the only thing missing is a velveteen rabbit, but truth is, Soda's baby doll (her wawa, sent with Soda to London by her mother) stays in her own room, never makes it through to Billy's bed.

And it's over, time for sleep, a chance for Billy to revisit his latest Fern fantasy, except Soda says, 'I was in Asda today and I was noticing all the things I don't buy. Chocolate fingers, canned fruit, cat food.'

Billy yawns. 'Interesting.'

'All that cat food. There's a whole aisle of it. There's food for young cats, old cats, fat cats, outdoor cats, cats with hairballs, and I get to wondering, why don't I have a cat? I look at all the different flavours and brands, eh, and I think, cool to have a cat, you know?'

'Cool,' Billy says softly. He turns onto his side, away from Soda, and starts counting cats.

'It's like everyone I know has one except me, like it's one of those things you're supposed to do. Graduate, get a job, get a Jeff, get a flat, get a cat.'

'In that order?' Billy murmurs. Eyes shut, he is surrounded by felines.

Soda sits up, making the bed squeak, and says, 'All these people buying food for their cats. I'm standing there, looking at young people, old people, rich cat-people, poor cat-people, the whole low-fat spread.'

'Sounds like a tense consumer moment,' says Billy.

'I saw this girl,' Soda stage whispers, as if revealing a terrible secret, 'younger than me, buying cat food. It can't be right, to be so far behind the pack.'

Billy has lost count. He opens his eyes. 'Maybe, Soda, just maybe, you should get a cat. Normally I'd say no pets before marriage, but for you and Jeff I'm willing to make an exception.'

'Well sure, Billy, I'm running straight outta time here. Wedding shower's just around the corner, then there's the wedding and as soon as Jeff and I cut the cake they're going to be asking, all of them, 'So, where's your cat?' or 'Cat on the way?' and I won't have one, and whenever a bunch of people talk about their cats I won't have anything to say and even though they won't mention it, they'll be thinking, 'yeah, there's that thing, that cat-less freak.'

Soda's voice is rising, straining at the leash.

Wide-awake, Billy turns over and looks up at her. 'So do you want to get a cat?'

'I never got it before.' Soda pushes away the duvet and rubs her stomach. At first Billy thinks she's drawing attention to the sheep, but then he realises that Soda is going beyond the cotton, into herself. 'Now I know I have this huge hole inside of me, this gaping, windswept Grand Canyon in my life where a living thing should be.'

Billy sits up, resigned to a potential long haul. He pecks Soda on the cheek, as if she's grazed her knee, as if he can kiss it all better. He says, 'Soda, we're still talking about cats, right?'

Soda sniffs, thinking it through. 'Expensive though. It's not just food. There's vaccinations, toys. And you'll always be worrying about them. Even when they're adults, adult cats, you'll still be wondering where they are and what they're up to.'

'It's a big commitment,' Billy says softly. He strokes Soda's hair away from her forehead. 'You told Jeff about this?'

'Say I want to go away for the weekend, who'll take care of the cat? Maybe we'll want to take a trip someplace...' She pauses, glances shyly at Billy. 'Hey, I know you don't go away, exactly, but say you wanted to and so did I, but we can't because the cat will need feeding, kitty litter. And you have to talk to them and play with them; you can't just be nice when you feel like it. It's a major responsibility and I'm not sure I'm ready for that. Do you think I'm being selfish?'

And to be straight with you, I'm not so sure I like cats all that much. They seem kinda sneaky and snooty to me. But everyone likes cats! Does not liking

cats, does that make me a bad person?'

Billy dives into the opening. 'Actually, I have a cat-related secret to tell you. In the interests of full business disclosure.' He pauses, then says, 'I'm allergic.'

'Really?'

'Sure. A cat just has to look at me the wrong way and I get this vicious rash, all red and blistery.'

'Yikes,' Soda says. 'Is it sore?'

'It's dinosore,' Billy says solemnly.

'Yikes!'

Billy says, 'It's not for life or anything. Just the next year or so, probably until you and Jeff find your own place. Then I'll be fine. If you get a cat after that, I can visit, no problem.'

'So there's light at the end of the kitty-door,' says Soda with her special half-smile.

'Definitely. But until I'm better with this, if anyone asks why you don't have a cat, you can tell them I refuse to have one in the flat, House Rules. Then you'll be in the clear.'

'Billy. You always know just the right thing to say. Thanks, Boss.'

'Don't mention it.'

Soda lies back down, curling into a ball. 'Shoot, I'm sleepy. Turn off the light.'

'I can't begin to tell you how much it's your turn to do that.'

'I'm too tired,' Soda says, and then yawns theatrically.

Billy groans. He gets out of bed, walks over to the light-switch and flicks on the dark. He pads carefully back to bed, negotiating unseen terrors.

'My hero.' Soda's voice is muffled beneath the duvet when she says, 'You really need to get a bed-side lamp.'

'Better get a bed-side table to put it on first.'

Soda gives a snort of laughter.

Billy smiles in the dark. Then his thoughts switch over to Fern, and to whether she likes cats, and when she'd like them, and where and how many, and he listens to Soda's breathing slow down, aware of his own stiffening shoulders and warm palms, certain that he isn't getting to sleep any time soon.

Silver Darlins and Black Diamonds

Anice Gilland

They rode the swells and troughs intae the night
Crawled on their bellies wi' only candlelight
But the fire in their herts kept them oan the trail
Tae feed their weans, they dared not fail

At Polkemmet where the men fell
Sinking shafts and digging roads
The Dardanelles destroyed them all
Wi' each and every load
And in Whitburn when ye pass by
Ye can smell the pit stench still
Their closing doon served up a bitter pill

At the time when their were Garvies
Throughout auld Bon'ess toon
The boats were set for Russia
And the Baltic ports aroon'
Did they ever think tae see a time
When the fishing widna be
And the trawlermen jist couldnae pit to sea?

So these working men who's lives were filled
With herrin', dross and damp
Will fade intae legend, lit by a sepia lamp
An' oor children will wonder
How it ever came tae be
That Scotland was supported
By pit props and the sea

Note: "Garvies" – a nickname for Bo'nessians. Garvies were the local name given to tiny herring and sprats landed in Bo'ness and salted and exported to Russia and the Baltic "Dardanelles" – the nickname for the pit because its opening coincided with the World War campaign and also because of the number of lives lost sinking its shafts and digging the road.

The Reid and the White

to commemorate the Burngrange Disaster 10/1/1947

A Gilland

Coorie in noo, bonnie laddie,
Haud yer wheesht and gaun tae sleep
Daddy slumbers 'manst the shale there
Blae has birriet him sae deep

Men were working in the cuddy
Some were howkin' in the dook
Lads were chaffin' wi' the benchers
Ithers daffin' at the stoop

Desperate miners lay aside him
Pals th'gither tae the end
After-damp had filled the "3" dook
Nae air tae tak them through the pend

Twenty-six weans loast their faithers
Eleeven wives tint men ablow
The cauld snaw whipped aroon the pit heid
As they focht that hell below

15 lives tae licht yer lamps
15 lives tae gild the lilies
15 lives o' comrades true
15 for want o' Tilleys



5 Sisters by Heather Macnish

Ghosts

Donnie MacNeill

Their skins were ghostly white
In the light of roaring fire, when
ingrained subterranean
grime was swabbed
by once-soft hands into
the old zinc tub filled by
black kettle from black grate.
The hour was late as days
were long in clammy heat
and claustrophobic dark
of man made hell beneath
the rich West Lothian soil.

Sunday was just what it said,
the day when clean-scrubbed
heads could see the light of day,
the other world, less sweet,
a million miles away, lay
in wait beneath their feet.
They lived their freedom through
pampered 'doos' that fluttered free
in clear, clean air their lungs
knew little of. Their every
cough brought blackness from
the depths to smirch the land
of rowan, gorse and birch.

Precious few lived to dandle
grand-bairns on their knees, and
few of these grew old enough to
understand the future lay not in
their hands, but in the gift of men
who wore hats instead of caps
and whose white-enamelled baths
were filled with water piped
hot from bright polished taps.

Now they are gone, but the legacy
lives on in man-made hills
that pock the land, and
subterranean shafts, worked
by ghosts of long forgotten
souls who made West Lothian.

Binny Craig

June Sharp

Binny Craig,
Volcanic hill,
Forever in my eye.
As I walk the ancient cattle path,
And heave a passive sigh.

Different light,
Dark as night
Rising from the haar,
Binny Craig is watching still
A landscape, from afar.

Sun in East,
Rain from West,
Falling on the track.
Rainbow forms as in the past,
Borne on Binny's back.

Horses then,
Tractor now,
Plough the fertile soil.
Sheep and cattle munch on grass.
The Craig will mind their toil.

Binny Craig,
Guardian rock
Faced the test of years,
Regarding farming centuries,
Disasters, laughter, tears.

Leave the town
Leave the farm
Memories will remain
Of Binny Craig still looking on
Observing joy and pain.

I Hear The Echo Of Many Voices

Ian Comrie

Hello,
you who drive with such hurry
across this county
where I was born

Hey!
you've been given motorways
that dissect this county
for your convenience.

But
while you are whizzing ever which way
across this land
know this –

in West Lothian
miners mined many
underground acres
miners sweated
miners died

The Five Sisters are not art,
they contain the breaths of every
miner who picked up his
lamp and shovel
to harvest the shale

In the tunnels in the earth beneath your wheels
are roots
I'll never see again
nor will you who're always
driving so fast
to somewhere.

biographical notes

John Bathgate writes stories for pleasure.

Ian Comrie has worked all his life with horses. He has had poems published in various anthologies and is presently preparing his - as yet untitled - first collection for release.

Sue Davies is a nurse. She works in a local care centre with frail elderly people suffering from dementia.

Mohammed Farooq has been writing poetry for over 20 years. Some have been for fun or for family weddings. He uses his poetry to express his feelings and experiences. Read more on his website www.mfarooq.com

Alan Gardner is 33 years old and lives in West Lothian with his wife and eight year old son. He recently graduated from Queen Margaret University with a degree in Media & Cultural Studies.

Anice Gilland is chair of the West Lothian Songwriters, and Almond Valley Folk Club. She started writing poetry at school. Her more recent work is often used for song lyrics.

Gary Jones is a 32-year-old scaffolder from Broxburn. He has been writing poetry since the age of 14, and until recently has never tried to get his work published.

Mary Kalugerovich, now a senior citizen, has been writing light verse all her adult life. For the past few years she has been a member of Quill Poetry Group.

Craig Macdonald, ex-journalist turned corporate wage-slave, lives in Mid Calder with his family. He is currently studying for an English degree and writes when he can.

Eric McFarlane writes fiction. He particularly enjoys comedy and has had several short stories published in small press magazines. He has written 1.5 novels and is trying to reach 1.75.

Hamish MacFarlane was born in 1972 and currently lives with his wife in Broxburn. He is the author of a novel, Threeply (Aspire). Cat People is taken from a novel-in-progress.

Denise McGuire is a mother. She has an honours degree in literature, and a PHD in Psychology. Over the past few years she has appeared in Diverse Attractions at the Edinburgh Festival.

Donnie MacNeill is a member of the Quill (West Lothian) Poetry Group and has had modest success in having some of his work published. Despite this, he persists in writing poetry!

Kenneth W MacRae is a poet and writer. His work has been broadcast on BBC Scotland, published in papers and magazines. He publishes his work in booklets on his computer. He is a retired tree surgeon, aged 78.

Emma Mooney is a primary school teacher with a young family. She writes poetry and stories.

Kirsty Muir, originally an Ayrshire lass, moved to West Lothian in the early 90s. A countryside Ranger for many years but more recently a creative arts provider with the NHS.

Steven Prevost is a management accountant who lives in Livingston and works in Edinburgh. This is his first short story to be published, preceded by three poems featured in national anthologies.

June Sharp lives in Uphall and writes freelance magazine articles. Some spare time is used to write novels, short stories and poetry, using the history of West Lothian as inspiration.

Michael Stephenson lives in Bathgate and works, happily, as a teacher. He's been writing poetry for about a year and his first publication was in Poetry Scotland in Summer 2007.

Ellie Stewart survived Inveralmond Community School in the Eighties. She is now a teacher, a mother and a writer. She lives in Bathgate with her husband and three young daughters.

Scott Stoddart is thirty six and lives in Fauldhouse with his wife and two young children. He started writing almost two years ago and this is his first published work.

Keith Tait is a 57 year old retired teacher who now drives a minibus for Acredale day centre and helps out in libraries. He writes poetry to relax.

Fiona Thackeray has published work in the Macallan/Scotland on Sunday 'Shorts' anthologies, The Guardian International and Woman's Own magazine. She grew up in Kirkliston and now lives in Perthshire.

Brian Thomson, a.k.a. 'old sarge', is afflicted by inspiration... this condition manifests itself in the production of what he calls writing and music... some people call it something else... more: <http://www.freewebs.com/oldsarge/>

Billy Watt is principal teacher of English at Broxburn Academy. He has published collections of poetry and fiction and his work has appeared in many magazines and anthologies.

John Garth Wilkinson. Little is known of JGW except that he has recently retired from teaching after thirty-odd years and promises to try harder next term.

Lorna Whyte is Edinburgh born; this is her first publication. She worked in homeless hostels all over Scotland and has an affinity with alcoholics and drug addicts. She had a desire to write about some of her experiences.

Graham Burrows is a professional artist who works mainly in watercolour and is particularly inspired by landscapes and nature. He accepts commissions and tutors.

Heather MacNeish is a self employed artist, working primarily on portraiture. She also likes to paint historical places and buildings, revelling in the detail.

Lorraine G Huber is an established, full time artist, working in a distinctive, abstract style. Her works are currently in international collections from Belgium to the USA. www.abstractloft.com

Peter J Clarke specialises in wildlife photography from the United Kingdom covering a wide range of subjects from dramatic landscapes and seascapes to plants and animal behaviour. His passion is for the wild places in Britain where humankind's hand is barely, if ever, noticeable.

Clive Watts paints out of curiosity, to see what the result will be, and compulsion, because not painting makes him unhappy. He believes that his best work comes from an emotion-driven, uncritical approach.

Elaine Forrest likes to explore and hates to be pigeonholed but admits her first love is painting. Her work goes in different directions depending on her personal response to the world.

Marion Thomson (nee Curle) is a studio painter working on commissions of single works, murals and arts projects. She also enjoys running workshops for adults and children.

Therese Mullen is an amateur artist who loves to paint, fascinated by landscapes and watercolour she has been painting in a variety of media for over 20 years. She accepts commissions.

Stewart McPherson graduated from Gray's School of Art in 2000. Inspired by abstract expressionism he paints in a variety of styles specialising in acrylic and oil painting. He accepts commissions and tutors.

Bruce Davies. Welsh born Bruce Davies has been an active mountaineer since 1971. Originally inspired by his early climbs and the play of light on the horizon, he produces photographs and sculptures that capture the essence of the landscape.

opportunities for creative writers in west lothian

Whether for the beginner or the more experienced, the amateur or the professional, there's a range of provision that can be accessed in West Lothian.

Bo'ness and Linlithgow Writers Workshop

Adult writing group for all ages interested in creative writing for leisure and publications.

Contact: Bill Robertson - Tel: 01506 843581

email: wilrob@onetel.com

Meets fortnightly on Tuesdays in Bo'ness. (Sept-May).

Broxburn Family Centre Creative Writing

Friendly, supportive group, all abilities from beginners.

Contact: Muriel Thrussel at Broxburn Family Centre - Tel: 01506 857158

Meets Fridays 9.30-11.30am. Limited crèche places may be available.

Quill (West Lothian)

A forum for writing, reading and discussing poetry. Open to everyone of a poetic disposition.

Very informal and lots of fun.

Contact: Donnie Macneill - Tel: 01506 431389

email: wlquill@yahoo.com

Meets every second Monday at Bathgate Community Centre 7-9pm.

West Lothian Writers

Group meets to discuss work in progress in a friendly environment. Occasional guest writer.

Suitable for writers of all abilities.

Contact: Susan Anderson - Tel: 01506 430810

Meets fortnightly at South Barn, Nether Dechmont Farm, Deans, Livingston on a Tuesday.

Alternative contact Eric McFarlane on 01506 654189.

www.wlw.org.uk

Writers Inc. (Writing Group)

Writing group open to everyone. All aspects of writing catered for. Have you a story to tell? New members welcome.

Contact: Linda - Tel: 01506 430513

Meets on Thursdays 7-9pm at Livingston Rugby Club, Craigshill, Livingston.

Writers Umbrella

The Writing Club that comes to you. We offer a warm welcome to anyone with an interest in writing from established authors to those trying their hand for the first time. Members receive a bi-monthly newsletter packed with information about the world of writing.

Regular features include information about publishing opportunities, current competitions, hints and tips - plus there is always a bit of fun. Members also have access to our "First Draft" initiative, an editorial and comment service for new writers. In addition there is a Writers' Umbrella web-site where more info is published between newsletters.

For a free copy of the current newsletter contact Barbara.

Contact: Barbara Hammond - Tel: 01324 570445

email: barbara@ladysgate.freeserve.co.uk

Scottish Poetry Library

The Scottish Poetry Library is a national resource, offering free reference and lending service.

See the SPL website for further information.

Contact: Lorna Irvine - Tel: 0131 5572876

email: education@spl.org.uk

web: www.spl.org.uk

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