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In Tongues

by Gabriella Jönsson

Swedish has become my secret language. None of my lovers speak it. Their monolingual tongues describe my body as if it were a performance piece. Chatty Scottish lads whose dark l's lap in every nook and cranny, reciting their peculiar poetry to the night. I find it not hard at all to stay quiet: rapt with attention, I take them in. Afterwards, as they are dressing, their gazes infallibly drawn to the diary on my desk. Their eyes flounder over the letters, but find no grip. I lie there wide open. They call me a closed book.

Country Noise

by Amy Burns

Charlotte listens for country noise. But the summertime carol of frogs and crickets is replaced by the hum of her laptop, the stop and go of buses, the automated Laundromat. Three nights ago, she awoke to a sound she thought was her father starting the tractor. She imagined him ploughing their field, persuading soil to peak and ditch. She opened her bedroom window. On the closest rooftop, two men were standing in front of a generator, watching as the machine shook violently and gave up black smoke. There was a blast and then a fire but, relatively speaking, only a small fire. It burned itself out by the time the fire department arrived. Nobody seemed bothered.

Charlotte came to the city looking for freedom. Even though she is far away from the familiar, she recognizes the way city noise sometimes comes together, as all noise must come together, in one perfectly oppressive silence.

Obruni, How are You? I'm Fine, Thank You! (chanted to white people by children in Southern Ghana)

by Jessica Parkinson

We went on a tour through women's kitchens. The guide showed us openings through woven fencing. We were widening incisions in the community cut by American Peace Corps who explained, *whites will spend money to see a Real African Village, whites like monkeys*. With their aid a traditional mud and thatch hut was built, guesthouse for the promised obruni.

The guide stood with arms wide. *Now our village is a model village. Now we feed the monkeys. Would you like to see monkeys now?* We looked up: monkeys swung into view.

We met two Americans, retracing slave routes through Ghana, later. The guide asked all the obruni to sit down for a show of fire and drummer. We sat while the two pointed at us, pointed out, *'They are obruni!'* But the drummer wouldn't play until all obruni sat, no matter what colour.

Bait

by Elinor Brown

The dark road is flanked on either side by dense birches stooping down from black heights. Mean trunks mock the night with a silver shimmer.

Distant headlights search for comfort. The warm, lonely glow throws ghastly shadows howling silently across their path and casts light in places better left in darkness.

A baby bundle lies swaddled at the roadside, meant for maternal eyes. Its infant form, a glimpse of alabaster cheek, catches her heart and she stops the car.

It is only when she has left the safety of her steel chariot that she sees a doll, wrapped in a blanket. And now it is too late.

Work to Do

by Patricia Ace

It's the loneliness that hurts the most, with him working away so much of the time. He's up in Scotland, over on the Continent, delivering, driving. But that's his job and it was when I married him, so it's no use my complaining now. At least after nine years we were blessed with Laura, so I've got some company these days, although a child's not a man; someone to talk to though on long winter nights, someone to get up for in the mornings. And when he does come home sometimes he's like a stranger, too tired to talk, his eyes glazed over like a junkie, smelling of the meat he's been shifting, black blood under his fingernails, like dirt. He stands in the shower for hours, until the hot runs to cold, piles into bed to sleep the sleep of the dead. We never make love anymore. Or if we do, it's hurried and urgent, a desperate attempt to shut out my loneliness, his terror. *What's the matter?* I mumble when he wakes in the night, the sheets drenched with sweat, stuck to his skin like a shroud. His eyes wide and staring like the animals in the abattoir. *What is it?* I coax and cajole but he never answers, retreating instead into his mute astonishment, leaving me to stew in my own juice. Then he watches TV until it's time to get up.

When he's leaving for work he packs up his kit, the tools of his trade; gaffer *comes in handy*, rope *just in case*, the big knife *for the work*, a shovel in the back for bad weather. *It can snow in Scotland in June* he tells me, although I've never seen it on the forecast myself. He likes to be prepared, he's a bit eccentric like that, a bit obsessive. But I'd never argue with him; I know my place and I like him to be happy. We haven't had a fight since Laura was born.

They found another body this morning. The missing girl from Durham, 16 she was. In a shallow grave in some woods, bound and slashed like the others. *I'm worried for Laura* I tell him. *She'll be alright* he says. *These girls are runaways, hitchers, prostitutes* he says, as if that makes their killings inevitable. Children, daughters, some of them young mothers, I think, but I wouldn't say it out loud. I don't want to make him angry, not when he's got work to do.

Keep it in the Family

by Kate Tough

Carla was a good mother. Carla loved her brood. She mashed potatoes in a kitchen with steamed-up windows. She lathered soap on small backs in the bath. She made up stories at bedtime. Carla kissed foreheads as she tucked in duvets.

“Bonnog,” she said.

“Bonnog!” came back the chorus.

“Respe mim,” she said.

“Net mel yos litcags yark!” came back the chorus.

She passed the evening in quiet activity so as not to disturb: baking bread, knitting and letting down hems. She ordered her weekly shopping on the internet.

In the morning she stirred porridge and put eggs on to boil before climbing the stairs to ruffle the hair on four sleepy heads.

“Bonnantin,” she said.

“Bonnantin,” they yawned.

“Chonter na pookle, harn! harn!” and she made her way downstairs, her row of little offspring following on.

“Melm ton oovers,” she said, and they did. While they were eating, the doorbell rang. Carla closed the kitchen door on her way to the front door.

“Lovely morning,” the man from Tesco smiled, as he handed her a crate. “Yes, yes it is. See you next week.”

She set the crate in the hall cupboard. When the children went upstairs to dress and make their beds, she took the box into the kitchen and decanted its contents into Tupperware containers and jars and freezer bags. Handwritten labels identified the contents, ‘griks’, ‘caldens’, ‘helk’, ‘casp’. She looked around, satisfied that her kitchen was free of packaging and product labels.

Setting paper and pencils out on the dining room table, Carla called up to the children, “Alme par esquel!” Warmth suffused her heart as footsteps thundered down the stairs.

Midterm break

by Ulrich Hansen

That summer it was all the papers wrote about. They had left in the morning, the canoes tied to the roof-rack. Later that day the boy had called the grandmother. He’d told her of the trees, never having seen so many and of all the lakes and of the sister being sick from driving and the parents unloading the car, sending their love. The following Monday school resumed. They had not returned. Once the details were passed on to the Swedish police they were quick at locating the car. It was almost three weeks before the canoes appeared more than hundred kilometres further north. They were held together by a slack rope half submerged in the water. It was all they found.

Wilton Street

by Martin Shannon

Our kitchen lights flicker. The noise is like a wall surrendering to the wrecker's ball. We dismiss it as builders' rubble dumped in communal bins.

Inside our hire purchase house is a home we built ourselves from first tentative date, to marriage, sleeping children and all our shared possessions.

Daylight reveals an obscenity of patterned wallpaper exposed to the elements. No stray German bomb meant for the Barracks or the BBC but a tenement gable end blitzed by cowboys. Worn carpets hang like tapestries. An unmade bed teeters on a second floor ledge. A double bass in a white case lies among the wreckage and an alarm sounds.

Departure

by Micaela Maftai

The train wasn't late, he was. Her suitcase was packed improperly for a trip alone and she knew she could never go back to the house and get all the things she'd left. Her letter had probably been found by now. While she was calculating and cursing, the doors closed at forty-seven seconds past the hour. She realized this meant she couldn't get off anymore. She sat glued to the window while the usual sounds of a train picking up speed filled the compartment. When they curved out of the station she saw him, tiny from the distance, waving his arm with a ticket in it behind the body of a railway attendant. She was so far from him she knew he wouldn't be able to tell if she was on the train or not.

Fidelity

by Kirsty Logan

Last night I did not cheat on my girlfriend.

After two bottles of wine I gained a girl and lost my jeans. We tangled in sheets and each other's hair. Flesh pressed. She was so close all I could see was her blurry eyes and the curve of her nose. She exhaled for a kiss and I asked who her favourite serial killer was. She breathed Richard Ramirez into my mouth. I slid my hands down her spine and told her that Ed Gein kept corpses' genitalia in a shoebox. I could feel my hipbones digging into her thighs as she moaned Ted Bundy conspiracy theories.

We were saying words but not hearing them. I thought of other distraction techniques: picture your own birth; which roadkill you would eat if you had to. I twisted out of the sheets and her hair, and walked away.

Ice Cream

by Sue Reid Sexton

This is how I'll do it, she tells me, the line crackly. Ice cream, she says. I'll yell it before I jump.

Ice cream? I ask. Did I hear her right? Did she say yell?

Yes, she says. Didn't I know?

Know what?

About ice cream.

You can't eat ice cream before a bungee jump. Heaven Forbid! The force will fling it and God knows where it might end up. Over you no doubt.

No, no, she says. You told me this.

Me?

Yes. You said when I was scared, having something difficult to do (she couldn't remember what) you said: think of something you like, something really nice.

We located this in space and time: Millbrae Road, the house we left when she was four. Ever since, in times of need, a cone appears to her, topped with raspberry sauce and sprinkles.

Didn't you know? she says.

Well, no, I say. I have no memory of this, and realise, too late, how stung she is. In reassurance I tell her that all her childhood, apart from this, is etched onto my mind, indelible, forever.

She is unconvinced.

You were listening! I say in sudden amazement that something said fourteen years ago had proved so useful.

Well, she says in retaliation, I was then. Not now.

Monday

by Jennifer Williams

Back at work, she felt the distance between herself and the weekend's events extending to that land of near-forgetfulness where bodies, sweat, lips, wine, cigarettes, getting ready to go out, a new dress, sun waking you on a Saturday morning seem like the flash of an advertisement for a crap but entertaining show on television.

Except for having to figure out where she could get the morning after pill with the least trouble and expense. That was on her 'to do' list for today and was interfering with her concentration at work.

Every time she saw it in red on the pad by her computer she remembered the feeling of his eyes on her, the same colour as hers, and of his soft hair on her chest as he chatted about music and films and of his plans to enter a cross-Europe rally, and of her indulging for a moment in imagining, as she tottered down his stair in her stale clothes, waiting for him in the dust of the field in Mongolia where flags of many colours waved the boys over the finish line.

Hidden Shallows,

by Margaret Callaghan

Teens

They'd fallen in love. By which they meant that they'd found someone who liked the same things about them that they liked about themselves. Wasn't it lucky that 'the one' was actually studying the same subject at the same university as them? Wasn't it amazing that their flatmates had gone to school together? It must be fate, karma, meant to be. They name-checked their way through their first date in lieu of conversations. Catcher in the Rye? The Breakfast Club? The Smiths? They warily raised the stakes. Norwegian Wood? Three Colours Red? The Cocteau Twins? Check. Check. Check. At long last they'd found someone who didn't follow the herd. The sex? Well, it was quantity rather than quality at their age, wasn't it? Alas as time went on they discovered that they were too young to settle down, they would always be friends, they would never find someone quite like each other. By which he meant that he had discovered French girls in his gap year. By which she meant that so had she.

Twenties

They'd fallen in love. By which they meant that they'd found someone drunk enough to talk to them at a boring party, this was Britain after all and people were shy, and sober enough to stand up, date rape laws on consent had changed after all. Their first date was at a gig in Camden, someone's brother, and a party in Kentish town, someone's sister. The sex was fine. Alas, as time went on they discovered that while they loved each other, they were no longer in love. By which he meant that he suspected he was punching below his weight, by which she meant that she was lunching with a guy from work who loved Norwegian Wood.

Thirties

They'd fallen in love. By which they meant that they'd found someone who didn't embarrass them at work nights out and who could be their 'plus one' at weddings. It was nice to stay in on the occasional Saturday, but not to stay in alone. Their first date was in a gastropub. Somewhere you could get a seat, you know? And hear yourself above the music? Don't we sound old! Who would have thought it? The sex? It was fine. They were old enough to say what they wanted without being embarrassed, and no one was perfect. Alas a few months later they broke up over dinner, before going on for drinks. Something was missing. By which they meant that despite experience and what their married friends said, they still believed that there had to be more. Hadn't there? There must be someone out there who liked the Breakfast Club.

Forties

They'd fallen in love. By which they meant that they'd met someone who understood the pressures of juggling elderly parents and teenage children and who was sober, solvent and straight. Their first date? They still hadn't had time to have one. The sex? Well it was quality rather than quantity at their age, wasn't it? Alas the relationship didn't last. He told her that if she didn't stop putting things down the side of the bin bag he would kill her. She told him that if he didn't stop leaving dirty ashtrays about she would kill herself. By which they meant that they'd discovered the joys of living alone.

Fifties

They'd fallen in love. No, really.