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Lodger
by Will Napier

Fiona called me into the kitchen. Something about the way she said my name. The way she sounded when she added *Cliff, just drop what you're doing. Come here.* It wasn't urgent. Nothing to say she'd burned herself on the stove again. Wasn't anything pained about it. Just different. Excited. Like she'd found something odd, almost humorous.

'What is it?' I asked.

She was standing against the counter, holding her chin. Face red from the laughing fit. A fit so fierce her shoulders were still trembling. Her friend Jacqueline was standing at her side. They were looking out the door. Opened with the sun shining through. A cool breeze sneaking in.

'You met our new neighbour?' she asked. She didn't look up. Jacqueline was laughing again. She looked at me. Fiona kept her eyes on the lawn outside. My son Nathan passed into view. Then he was gone again. Making big steps in his Spiderman pyjamas. Sneaking up on the bad guys.

'Not yet,' I said. Fiona had a talk with the guy that morning. She came back in shouldering an instant distrust. I told her it couldn't be that bad. She assured me it was.

'He's out there smoking again.'

'Alright,' I told her. Scratching my neck I looked past her at the counter. The tray of meat for the barbeque was ready. The smell of burning briquettes let me know I was about to take centre stage. 'I guess I'll meet him then.'

'Get ready,' she said.

I squeezed between them and took the plate. Backing out they were watching me like I was going to give them the punch line to a pretty damned good joke. I smiled back. They kept laughing with the passion only women friends can attain. They broke apart trying to keep the sound down. Took separate stations holding the counter. Laughing and sharing the occasional glance. I left the house with the plate in hand. Stepped up onto the deck and headed for the barbeque.

'Daddy,' my son yelled. 'The man's gone inside.'

'Thanks for that, buddy.'

My son ran behind the lilac tree where he always thought he was hidden. The blue and red costume made him stick out like a taillight on a dark road. I set the plate on the table and lifted the lid of the grill. Knocked the briquettes apart using the long fork. The flames grew. Smoke came up in a thick burst. I stepped back when I heard the rollers of the patio doors. I swatted at the smoke. It kept rising. When it cleared my eyes were watering. A man with white hair stood on the other side of the fence.

'You must be Cliff,' he said.

'That's right,' I told him.

'Don't be alarmed that I know you. I spoke with your wife this morning.'

I shook my head and turned to the table.

'I wasn't alarmed. She told me you met already.'

'I'm Ronald,' he said. Without pause he added: 'Who's going to be eating all the food?'

'Us,' I told him. I'm not the kind of guy to get annoyed. Certainly not in the space of a few seconds. I don't offend easily. But I don't like people inviting themselves into my space. Eating my food, without me asking them to be a guest. It was probably

because Fiona had told me she didn't like the guy. Called him a freak. So my perception was set in motion.

'The boys have healthy appetites,' I said. 'And we have a friend joining us.'

'Oh, that's a lucky person then. All that food.'

He was staring hard at the ribs and the burger patties. The kebabs hadn't come out yet. What the hell kind of reaction were those going to bring? He'd be doing a quick set of diner-mathematics. Asking himself over and over how so few people could possibly eat all that food. Driving himself nuts over it.

'What's your son's name?' he asked.

I tossed a burger onto the grill. It sizzled.

'That's Nathan. He's Spiderman just now. Probably Batman before long.'

'You'll probably not see him much in a few weeks.'

I looked up at him. Frowned like I didn't understand. He must have been waiting for it.

'He'll be over here with me,' he said. 'Hanging out and having fun.'

He sucked on his cigarette and smiled with his eyes. When he blew out the smoke his shoulders were moving.

'He's usually shy,' I told him. It was better than what was going through my head:

Don't even think I'm gonna let a loser old man like you be alone with my son. Some guy I don't know better than a black hole who's renting a room off my neighbour. Not a chance, asshole.

'He usually just hangs out with me when I'm home from work,' I told him. I did my best to sound kind. Said it through a smile to sell the lines. It's what neighbours do.

'With Fiona during the day,' I said. 'Me in the evenings.'

'He'll like me,' Ronald said. He smiled with his eyes again. 'Kids always like me.'

Nathan grabbed at my leg. I looked down after placing the ribs on the grill. He was watching Ronald. He didn't look comfortable. When Nathan hides behind my legs it's for a good reason. He's got Fiona's gift for reading people. He's usually quick to smile. Easy with people. It's something that always had me worried.

'I better get the rest of the food,' I said to Nathan. 'Right, buddy?'

Nathan looked up at me and nodded his head. He was quick to return his look to Ronald.

'More food?' Ronald said.

'Like I told you. We've got a friend joining us.'

'Lucky person,' he said.

Fiona was standing just inside the door. Holding the tray of kebabs. She had an uneasy smile on her face. She took the empty plate I was holding and pushed the other at me. I took it and turned round. Walked back to the grill. Ronald was watching Nathan play in the trees. Nathan was standing on the other side where he felt he was invisible. Where he could watch Ronald without being seen.

'My, those look good,' Ronald said. 'I know I'm not getting any, but they sure do look good.'

'Yeah,' I told him. 'The butchers up the road is something else. Family run.'

He walked round Julie's glass table and sat down on one of the lawn chairs. Crossed his legs. Met my eyes through a square of the trellis sitting on top of the fence dividing out properties.

'So you work for the bank.'

'Yeah,' I told him. 'I cover a few branches.'

'How do you like it?'

'Fine. Pays the mortgage. Keeps the family fed.'

'But do you like it?' he asked again. Smiling with his mouth this time.

'It's not bad.'

‘Oh, come on!’ he yelled out. ‘Don’t give me that. You think it’s crap.’

‘No, actually I don’t.’ *Now shut your trap, asshole. The hell do you know about me?* But for some reason I found a need to convince him. ‘It’s fine. Really, it is.’

‘There’s something you’d rather do,’ he said.

‘There’s something everyone would rather do,’ I told him.

‘Then do it.’

I looked up after throwing the last of the kebabs on the grill. Saw him using two fingers to hold a cigarette. With the same two fingers he was pointing at me.

‘Just do it. Fuck your job with the bank. Go for what you want.’

‘It pays the mortgage,’ I told him. ‘That job with the bank.’

I turned and took the empty tray inside. Fiona and Jacqueline were standing in silence. Staring at me when I walked into the kitchen. All the laughter was gone.

‘The hell’s that guy’s problem?’ I asked.

‘Told you he was a freak.’

‘What was Julie thinking?’

‘I don’t know,’ Fiona said. ‘She told me a while back she was thinking about taking on a lodger. But this guy’s ...’

‘He must be driving her nuts.’

‘It’s the way he asks questions,’ Jacqueline said. She had her arms crossed over her chest.

‘Blunt,’ I said.

‘Annoying and blunt.’

‘Must be in sales,’ Fiona said.

We started laughing. We kept it down. I don’t know why, but we kept it down. Laughed like kids in the back row of the class. Laughed into our hands. Into closed lips. Watched one another turn red. Eyes water. It took some time to calm things down.

I went back to turn the food over. Julie’s back garden was empty. I breathed easy. Nathan came rushing to me. He was yelling. I dropped to my knees and let him tackle me the rest of the way. We rolled a few times. I got him down and tapped my finger against his chest.

‘I’ve got you now, buddy,’ I said.

He laughed. I stood up. He crawled away and made a noise like he was flying. Disappeared past the shed in the back of the garden. I stepped up to the grill. Heard the rollers of the patio door again. *This is getting old fast*, I thought.

‘So there’s just the one boy?’ Ronald asked.

‘What’s that?’

‘Just the one boy lives here?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘We’ve got two. The other’s having a nap. He’s still small.’

‘Two kids.’ He shook his head. ‘You always so patient with them?’

‘How’s that?’

‘I’ve seen you out with them earlier. Heard you talking to that one,’ he said pointing to Nathan who was back behind the lilac. Ronald was using this two-finger pointing technique again. This time the cigarette wasn’t lit yet. ‘You were coming out earlier.’ He paused and lit the cigarette. ‘You asked him if he’d help mow the lawn.’

‘Yeah?’

‘I couldn’t do that.’ He nodded his head. ‘Couldn’t have kids. Just too much.’

I turned the food. Ronald took a seat on the same lawn chair as before.

‘They both yours?’ he asked.

‘Both what?’

‘The kids. Are they both yours?’

I laughed. It was out of exasperation as much as genuine humour. This guy appeared to ooze irony. If he didn't shut up soon I feared I'd use the barbeque fork to see if he bled it as well.

'They are both mine. Yeah. Whose else would they be?'

He let out smoke through his mouth and nose. Shook his head.

'Never can tell nowadays.'

Nathan came running at me again. He started his usual roar. When Ronald stood and walked to the fence Nathan went quiet. He came up and took hold of my leg.

'You want to come over here and see the fish?' Ronald asked.

'Julie's already had him across,' I said. 'He's seen all of the fish there are to see.'

'Yeah?' Ronald said. He was still looking at Nathan. Smiling with his eyes and mouth now. 'How about if I come over there and we play some football? Would you like that, Nathan? Should I come over there?'

Ronald made like he was turning to go into the house. In my head I connected this motion with him leaving Julie's place. Leaving with the intention of entering my place. Or just my garden. *Not a chance in hell, fella!*

'He's going to be eating soon.' I looked down at Nathan. 'Why don't you go inside, buddy? Get mom to wash your hands, okay?'

Ronald stopped. Turned where he stood.

'You don't want me to play football, Nathan?'

'No,' I said. 'He doesn't want to play football.'

Nathan left. I turned back to the grill. Watched the food cooking. Let the smoke rise up. It pulled more wet from my eyes.

'He understand when you call him buddy?'

'Of course he does,' I said. 'He's been my kid all his life. Always called him buddy. Pal. Chief.'

'Can see how that'd confuse some kids.'

'He's got it figured out,' I said.

I left the garden. Went into the kitchen again. Fiona and Jacqueline finished with their interest in the neighbour. Jacqueline was holding Sam on her hip. He looked upset. He always looked upset when he came to from his naps. I touched his chin. He moved against Jacqueline.

'Everything ready?' Fiona asked.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Bring the rest of it out. I'll get Sam's chair.'

We went out and sat at the table. The neighbour's yard was empty. I pulled the food off the grill and set it on clean plates. Put one at each end of the table. Nathan sat across from me. He bit into a burger and laughed. He chewed with his mouth open and it didn't bother me. Fiona told Jacqueline about the gym she just joined. How she was feeling better since getting into a routine. Sam was back to normal. Trying to talk, but unable to form words. Fiona set a few pieces of sausage on his plate. He bit into them. Then threw them into the grass.

'I make you happy, daddy.'

'You do, pal,' I said. Nathan was smiling his usual white smile. Ketchup smeared round his mouth. 'You make me laugh,' I said.

The roller of the patio doors set me off again. I turned my head. Caught Fiona's eye. She bit her lip and frowned. Looked at her plate and forked something hard.

'That smells fantastic, Cliff.'

I didn't look up. With a mouthful of rib I tilted my head back and spoke:

'Really good.'

'Hope you can eat all that. Sure would be a waste.'

'We'll manage. Don't worry about it, Ronald.'

‘Who’s Sam?’ he asked.

I looked up and saw him waving his hand in the air. He was staring at my youngest son. Sam was sitting at the head of the table. Perched on a highchair. He was watching Ronald like he didn’t understand. Fiona made a grumbling noise in her throat. Same she always made when she was angry. Really pissed off, but not willing to show it.

‘You’ll know him then,’ I said. Bit into the rib with a bit more meaning.

‘Your wife introduced us earlier.’

Then why all the questions about the kids?

We continued to eat. Fiona’s conversation about the gym had died. Jacqueline was looking up from her vegetable skewers. Nathan was poking his finger into the burger bun. Sam was the only one staring at Ronald - the lodger.

‘You guys want some wine?’ Ronald asked.

‘No,’ I said, maybe a bit too sharp. Nothing neighbourly about it. ‘We’ve got wine in the house already.’

Ronald was looking at me now. Almost child-like in the way he stared.

Nathan came round the table. Hugged into my wife who was all too willing to give it back. She kissed his head.

‘It’s alright. Now go back and finish eating.’

‘Not hungry,’ Nathan said.

‘Go play,’ I told him. ‘Come back when you’re ready to finish.’

He went behind the lilac. Stayed there until we finished eating.

We cleared the table. There wasn’t much left. I played ball with Nathan while Sam scooted round the lawn in the zombie-stomp walk of his. Ronald had left the patio doors open. There was nothing to warn me when he was due out again. I let Nathan tackle me. Sam joined in. We rolled for a while. Then I heard someone speaking to me. I looked up.

‘Oh, hey, Julie,’ I said. ‘How’ve you been?’

‘Fine.’ She was smiling. Her white hair shining yellow in the sun. It was warm but she was wearing a pink cardigan over a long-sleeved turtleneck. ‘Just back from the cinema.’

‘Oh, right,’ I said and stood.

‘I take it you’ve met Ronald.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. Smiled a neighbourly smile. ‘He introduced himself earlier. We’ve been talking ever since.’

‘He has a smoking habit,’ she said.

‘So I’ve seen.’

‘You’ll probably be seeing a lot of him,’ Julie said.

I laughed. Nathan took hold of my leg.

‘Hello, Julie,’ he said.

‘Hello there, wee man.’

Nathan sneaked behind my legs and gripped my jeans.

‘How was that meal then?’ Ronald asked.

‘I didn’t see you come out,’ I said.

‘So how was the meal?’

‘Good,’ I said.

‘We’ll all have to do it some time,’ he said. Smiled with his eyes through the smoke rising from his nose. ‘Soon.’

‘We keep a busy schedule.’ I looked down at Nathan. ‘Isn’t that right, buddy? A real busy schedule.’

‘Bye, Julie,’ Nathan said as we walked back toward the house.

‘Bye, wee man,’ she said.

We were at the kitchen door.

‘That man’s in the garden,’ Nathan said.

‘I know, buddy.’

I patted his back. He ran into the house. I turned and looked at Julie. She was holding her cardigan closed. Back slumped as she looked into her pond. Counted her fish. An evening activity to make sure they’d survived another day. Ronald was at her side. Standing straight. Head swathed in a haze of smoke. He breathed another cloud into the air. With his eyes he smiled. He raised his hand and used two fingers to point at me. The cigarette melting to ash.

Extract from Grace and bud

by Nick Brooks

Synopsis

‘Grace and bud’ is the story of Grace, a fortysomething care worker from Drumchapel, and her sometime boyfriend Bud. Grace has difficulties with her eyesight, thinks of herself as lucky to have a roof over her head, worries about teenage son Vincent, who is thinking of joining the army, and looks after daughter Francis’ toddler Sean. Grace has come to the grim realisation that her current life is little more than a trap when elderly stroke sufferer Mr Ali forces her to admit what everyone else knew all along anyway: Grace can barely read or write. Helping Mr Ali re-learn how to hold a pen and paper takes Grace into a new and frightening world, one made of false starts, cul-de-sacs, and wrong turns. For Mr Ali remembers not the English he learnt as an immigrant to Glasgow decades before, but his first written language: the language of the Koran.

Grace and bud

Bud says who is that over the road who is waving. I cant make them out. Where i say. There bud tells me. By the bus stop by the health centre. Coming over the road. I can not make out who he is talking about theres too many people over there. Oh bud says she is coming over here do you know her. I cant see i tell him is it a woman i recognise a womans voice. Grace she calls grace what are you doing here. Do you know her bud says and i say yes lets wait up. Bud pulls me along by the hand and i trip on my heel and we have to stop. I have to find my shoe it is lying somewhere on the ground. I can not even make it out though. I can not even see it anywhere. Bud i say can you see my shoe i say but now he has let go my hand and i can see him going away leaving me. Well that is okay. I am okay here outside of the shopping centre.

Grace is that you the womans voice says and i look about for her.

Grace it is you i thought so. What are you doing here.

Hello annette i say. I am sorry i should of come to the group.

No no annette says. Your meant to be sunning yourself on the beach. Your meant to be in the canary isles.

I look at annette and i just say is bud there. Can you see him annette.

Who is bud annette says.

His nibs i say he has got red hair and a walking stick. He was with me. He looks like he has caught the sunburn but he just sits too close to the fire. Annette is not even saying anything so she must be just staring at me. She is out of breath and panting. She gets out her inhaler and pants on it too. She puts a hand on my shoulder to steady herself.

Thats your man is it grace. This bud character.

Yes its true i say. Can you see him for me.

Annette says there he is over by the shops he looks a bit older than you grace.

He is two year younger than myself i tell her. What can i say annette. Hes had a hard life.

Is that right annette says and shrugs in that case he doesnt look very happy.

No he isnt i tell annette. He isnt very happy hes in a rotten mood so he is. I begin to tell annette about the trip to the airport and all that and she just shakes her head and says oh thats terrible grace. Thats just a shame. What a terrible thing to happen.

I shrug. Some would think it was funny i say.

No grace. It isnt funny its terrible. Can you not get any of your money back.

Maybe i could of got some but they were already thinking i was stupid. They would of laughed at me.

No they would not grace dont say that. They would of helped. Thats what they are payed for.

Maybe. They were already going to charge extra for sending the bags back from the canary isles. When i showed them my ticket i said my eyes are not so good i can not read the ticket so well. They said did i not hear the flight called. I said not unless it was to canary isles and i didnt hear that called yet. Then they told me the plane for port adventurer the canary isles had left 40 minutes ago. I thought the ticket sayed canary isles but it didnt it said port adventurer. Port adventurer was called not canary isles. They put my lugidge on board but not me.

Oh grace annette says. Poor you. Could this bud character not of helped.

Annette wants to laugh too but she wont. Annette isnt like some people. Even if she wants to she wont.

Didnt this bud know to speak to someone annette says.

No i tell her. Bud left me at the door to the departure lounge. He was already heading back home. It was just me going.

Oh grace you should of asked someone to help you silly. You should of got someone you know to go with you.

I am still feeling about on the ground with my foot for my shoe. That foot of mine is already soaked. I have just come back from the airport and have got only espadrilles on. It is a thursday afternoon in drumchapel in february the meanest month. Or that could be january. Or another month. I am meant to be in the canary isles with my sister but instead i am here at hecla square in the rain and with the wrong shoes to boot.

Can you see my shoe annette i say. It slipped of my foot.

Here it is grace she says. She bends down and reaches for my ankle. She puts the shoe on it.

There you go cinderella annette says. You shall go to the ball.

Then she says shes sorry she didnt mean it she was just joking.

Thats all right i say. No harm done. I can go to the ball another time.

Me and annette just stand there for a while talking about what will happen to the lugidge. Where will it go. We talk about will marie be able to pick up the lugidge or will it come straight back itself.

To tell the truth im not in the mood to think about it annette i tell her. I have to phone marie and tell her im not coming and i dont know how she will take that.

She is going to be upset not to see you annette says. You havent seen her in how long has it been.

Years i say. To tell the truth i dont know how long. Not since our father died anyway.

Does this mean you will come in to the group tonight grace. Seeing as you wont be away on holiday.

I will have to think about that one annette. Is it all right maybe next week if you dont mind. Annette nods okay. Next week maybe.

Take your time grace she says. Theres no rush. I just want you to think about it she says.

I nod. I will think about it annette.

Annette is close and i can smell the perfume shes got on but I dont know the name of it. It will be a dear one if its annette. She has expensive tastes she told me. I dont ask annette what kind it is though. It would only put me in a bad mood knowing.

Okay annette says. Maybe see you next week. Do you need a hand just now.

No i tell her. Bud is about hell be in the bookies. I will be fine to get there.

Okay grace just say the word. So sorry again about the trip.

Thats okay annette.

Okay see you then.

See you annette.

Then she is away and i can breathe easy again. Just you take it easy gracie i say to myself. Just have a think about all this shenanigans. You are okay here at the centre for now. Just take your time and concentrate on what is in front of you.

So i am trying to concentrate on what is in front of me but it is so grey out that there is only more grey in front of me. Everything is so dull and dingy and the sky is hugging so close to the ground that it is hard to make much out. I would like to just shout bud come and get me but i know that is not any solution. I have to get about myself.

I stand there and wait for bud for a minute but there are too many folk there wanting by and i am in the way as usual so i squeeze my way into the bookies. Really i am hoping to find him but maybe his pal will be there bobby if bud isnt. Inside the screens are all lit up even though i cant make out whats on too well i will know what race hes bet on because of the swearing. If bud has put a bet on i will know straight away because he will start to swear like a trooper. Oh for effs sake he will say effing bee in heaven you are one nag thats about ready for the glue factory. He always says that about the glue factory then laughs like hes going to burst. He never does burst though he always stops when nobody else laughs and then gets angry.

I know its him because he will be moaning away and the other punters will have moved away a bit. Bud bothers people its his way. Even though he bothers people you can not get him to keep his voice down it is just embarrassing sometimes. Folk have to move away and you start to feel like you are taking up room that belongs to them. That is garanteed to make bud even worse because he is in no way stupid he is actually quite smart if folk would give him a chance. But it will set him off no doubt about it. Is that right bud will say think its funny do you. Think this is all a big effing joke do you. Well. Its not. It is no joke you effing so and sos. No way. You shower of effing sees what are you all staring at. Im no dafty. Bud spence is no dafty. Come on over here he will say Come on over here and ill pull that effing beard of your face. You thats right you. Im talking to you ill burst your face you effing see.

I swear to god he has sayed that. He told a man he would pull the beard of his face. That poor man was only standing. Bud is non violent though he has still got a temper. He says he would never join the army just because hes not working. I think just as well what army would have him hes way too old he would be on a pension now. Bud says the young crew are mad to join up dont they know theres a war on. I know he means vincent he is trying to get a rise out of me to make me angry.

Im only kidding doll.

Buds moods are too much even for me sometimes.

Bud says its his ginger hair. When ever he loses it he will say after that he cant help it its genetic so it is. He is rid heided and thats why he sometimes loses it big time.

It isnt true though. I am telling you. I have seen some disturbed people up at costigan house and he would in no way be out of place in there. I personally think he is skitzo.

It worries me for sean if that is the case. He is coming up for an impershonable age and he should have an older person who he can look up to. My son his uncle vincent is getting to be a young man now and to tell you the truth i can not tell the difference between that and a disturbed person.

Just then someone puts a hand on my shoulder not his pal bobby thank god. Bud. He says that you there doll you okay are you.

It was only annette you didnt have to run of i tell him. I make it sound like a row but im glad hes here. I always know he isnt far but it is dis conserting to have him run of. He gives my hand a squeeze and i ask him if hes betting.

He makes a noise a snorting. Not today he tells me. I just came in to wait for you. Skint. What did that woman want.

Just to say hello.

She was the one who came to the door before wasnt she.

Yes but it wasnt like you think.

What was it then.

Not like you think. Shes my friend.

Bud makes that snorting again and i ask what is he thinking.

Nothing he says and we leave it at that.

Still there is something nice about the bookies. It is quiet for one thing. Only the noise of the horses and the commentary. Bud only bets small sums of what we can afford. 2 or 3 pound at a time. Sometimes he is just in here because he only has two days work a week just now. I am about the same with costigan house. I am trying not to think about our situation as usual. Instead i just end up thinking about the suitcases going round and round the carousel with no body to pick them up and marie standing waiting for me all on her own.

Bud i say why dont you tell me what horses are running. That would cheer us both up wouldnt it.

Sometimes i like to hear the names of the geegees. Bud calls them that. The geegees.

If you say so bud says.

Go on.

Well bud says theres my sweet lament and iron heart comrade and the one i like in this race now is called daisybuggin.

I like that i tell him. Daisybuggin. Are there any more good ones i ask him. He is leaning on the counter with the light behind him and for a minute i can see what a lanky big effing so and so bud is. He must be two foot taller than me. When i have my glasses with me i dont worry so much about a persons size. I can see their face better. But then sometimes it hits you. They are huge. Even bud is huge in here today.

Plus he can tell you all about horses and odds and the form and cheltenham and that. Bud is big on all that stuff. He is a somebody at the bookies. Even though he hardly ever wins much and never makes big bets. For a minute or two it makes me feel good to think about all the mad stuff he knows about horseracing. Not for too long though because we have to go to the call box and that will take some working out calling marie in canary isles. That will be a total nightmare even for bud. I am damned if i will ask vincent for help though. It is on my own head so be it. Bud sayed that to me when i got back to the house from the airport. Grace you are just some girl is what he says to me.

You did what.

I put my glasses in my suitcase and checked it on board of the plane.

I couldnt help it i say to bud. I put my glasses in my suitcase and my case has gone to the canary isles.

Why had i taken them of he asked me. Why had i put them together in the same bag. If you will do daft things like that it is on your own head.

It was a nice big bright departure lounge in there i told him. I wanted to wear the sunglasses you got me for the trip instead. I was going to put them away in my case again before getting aboard the plane then i had put the case through anyway. I could see well enough in the departure lounge. I am so sorry bud ive ruined your week.

You are one handful of a lassie bud says. I should never of left you on your own you are such an effing stupid so and so sometimes.

Tell me something i dont know.

I just did didnt i. I already told you he says. I am so sick of it he tells me.

So am i. So that makes us even i say.

Bud keeps reading the names of the horses to me. It is cosy in the bookies it is still dreich as anything outside. I feel like i could sit here all day but you cant smoke. Not that i want to do that i quit along time ago but bud is different. He will go through a pouch of cutters choice every other day easy. That brand has no great big lumps of timber in it he says. He says he is disdainful of other tobacos. That is another thing that will set him of he can never get any cutters choice around here. It is always scarce.

Even stevens he says. That ones on good form of late. Also one called fridita and one called a la mode. Theres one youd like in the next race.

Whats it called then. If i like the name im going to place a bet on it.

Yeller kid.

Yellow kid i ask him and he says no yellor kid thats what it says here.

Yeller kid it is then. What do i do now i ask.

Ill show you bud says its easypeasy and i say easypeasy sounds luckier than this yellor kid.

Ha ha he says. Very good.

Ha ha i say back. I amnt just a pretty face you know. Now show me how its done.

We spend a few pounds on small bets and win not a sausage but it is okay. I am used to not winning anyway. Bud of course loses it when our favourite daisybuggin comes in nowhere again. Effing heck bud says although he uses much worse words than that. Effing sees and the like. He goes of on one again and i say come on bud lets get that call out of the way i can see he will be too angry to dial in a minute. Come on bud lets call marie on canary isles then we can take it easy. We can go home and get the tea on. I am hoping mention of dinner will get him out of his mood it sometimes does. Now that he has swore of the bevy he has taken more of an interest in his belly. He has even put on a wee bit of weight and has began to worry about it. He has never been fat his whole life

he will say. Never. He has always been skinny and lanky. He could eat what he liked and not put on any weight. When he was a boy he used to eat everything he always says. Every effing thing that was put in front of him he ate it. It is an achievement of sorts i suppose.

Lets go and call marie bud i say. It will be getting dark out we should head home soon.

Might as well bud says. We are having no luck with these nags. How much are we down grace.

It is all right bud i say. It doesnt matter. We just wont do it every day that is all.

Okay doll. Lets go to the phone box.

I can hear bud clatter his walking stick down and i take his arm and we go out of the bookies. Well. It is just as dreich as it was when we came out today except now it is pitch black too. All that i can see now is big blotches of orange street lights and car headlights and then the white light upstairs and downstairs of a double decker bus stopping at the bus stop. Some people get on and of and i can tell that there are still plenty of folk about this side of the road. It is that long since i have had to go about without my glasses im not used to this.

Are you all right there doll bud says everything okay.

I am okay bud. Just dont wander of without me this time.

Aye well i just dont care for that woman he says.

Annette is fine i tell him. If it wasnt for her i would not even be working two days a week.

Bud says nothing because he knows i am telling the truth. We have about four days work between us a week and it is always hard. Bud is not even supposed to be doing that much hes supposed to be on the sick.

Bud leads me towards the phone booth on hecla avenue and i take the call money out of my purse the spare one. My other one is on the canary isles plane to port adventurer.

Did you tell this annette bud asks me.

About what i say.

About the airport. About not knowing you were going to port adventurer.

I shake my head. No i say. She knew already what happened.

Effs sake bud says. How the eff did she know.

Well. Its not so hard to work out is it. She isnt daft you know bud.

Bud opens the door to the booth. There is someone inside already using the phone and bud says can the man hurry up please the wife is needing to use it. I dont bother to say anything. I amnt his wife and he effing well knows it.

This woman will be round at our door again grace you effing dumpling. What do you think will happen then.

Now it is my turn to get annoyed. Nobody will come to the door bud. Annette isnt like that shes our friend. She helped me keep my job at costigan house she wants me to come to her thursday group as well. She would not of offered otherwise. Dont be so paranoid i tell him.

Bud says oh for effs sake he isnt being paranoid hes just looking at the effing facts in the case. How many times in the past have we had the social at our door because of this sort of a person he asks me. How many times.

It is a few i have to admit. I am about to answer him when the person gets out of the phone box. Bud squeezes me in and i stare at the dial. I can hardly even see it. You do it bud i say to him. Youre better than me i say. I will only make a mistake. He is breathing pretty heavy like he does when he is worked up or on the bevy. Go on bud i say. Pretty please. You know i will only make a hash of it like i always do. I hand the

piece of paper vincent wrote the international dialling code and maries number on to him. I can not really even make out what the numbers say so it would have been no use me even trying. Bud is effing and blinding.

Except that then he begins to dial the code for the canary isles to port adventurer. He has to try a few times and each time he hangs up and he effs and bees and sees some more. He is like a walking swear dictionary that man so he is.

Well theres a lassie talking spanish at me so i must be getting somewhere he says.

Whats she saying bud.

How the eff do i know its in effing spanish.

Are you sure its spanish. You could have dialled the wrong country.

Effs sake can you shut up a minute of course its spanish.

I am getting a bit edgy now let me speak to her let me speak i tell him and i pull at his arm anxshous that the woman wont recognise his voice and hang up. I can not face making any more international calls today and that is the truth of it.

Bud puts the receiver in my hand and i say marie is that you its your sister grace but the voice just keeps talking in that langwidge. Hello i say. Hello marie.

Its an answering machine bud says but by then i have realised.

I leave a message after the tone because it will be the same as a scottish tone i expect. I can never think of what to say to those machines so i just tell her ill call back or she can call me on vincent's mobile if he is about.

Well to tell the truth i am sort of glad marie is not in. I amnt very good at excuses and she is bound to be annoyed about the wasted flight she loaned.

Bud leads me out of the call box and we walk back over to the orange and yellow light of the shopping centre. For some reason i dont know why it is always less scary in the dark than in daytime. At least if i have bud with me. There is no way i would come down here on my own at night even with my glasses on though. I dont like the hangers about the drinkers.

Are we going straight up the house bud asks me. Or are we getting any shopping first.

Lets just go back to the house i say. Vincent will be getting fed up keeping an eye on sean plus my feet are freezing cold in these espadrilles.

Bud just mutters effing something and we go to cross over the road again.

And Then?

by Michael Schmidt

*Yet worst is the fool that foldeth his hands
and eateth his own flesh*

THOMAS KINSELLA

She was indignant when the baby came,
Indignant with the baby first of all:
The squirming, gummy brat, his awful meowing,
His red face bursting, his cold china eyes.

Then, with the clipboard obstetrician,
Lop-sided grin that said 'all's well'. It wasn't.
He listened, then didn't listen, hurried off
Shading his eyes against the small balding man

Who visited all hours, stood by the bed and held,
Cautious, his son, and might have become proud.
She was indignant with this small man most.
He stood there holding the effect and cause.

This was the ever after of her childbirth,
Putting the worst construction on whatever
It was he said or did, whoever he was, whatever,
She put it to him straight, she said it out,

How he never had to spread his legs and push
And push a baby out. He never had to lie,
Knees in the air, akimbo, while some man slowly sewed
The split the hard little head and the thrashing limbs

Had made, up. He never
Lay awake in a ward of sweating women,
Crying, wheezing, coughing, who pressed down
Devouring little jaws onto their hearts.

He never did. He never did. She was
Indignant now for ever. Did he, I wonder, did he
Stay on with her for ever? Did he stay?
How did the child grow, did the child grow up?

She was so indignant she couldn't finish the story,
She was so red, so raw, so ever after.

The Manner They Have

by Jim Ferguson

...and they think I killed their father. I did not. I had nothing to do with it. It was an unhappy coincidence, nothing more. My heart beats fast and I feel dizzy. It is not surprising as they follow me, I should say he, for more recently it has been a he and not they that follow me. Even still, being followed by him is enough to make my heart race with anxiety. The sons have said they will kill me and I believe them, there is no reason to doubt their seriousness. It is perhaps worse being followed by an individual than a crowd or even a couple. Difficulties arise about being absolutely sure I am the one being followed and the follower is not just an ordinary person who happens to be heading in the same direction as me. I know the father was murdered. I was a witness. The Police called on me and explained exactly what was what. Would I, after the detection of the culprit or culprits appear in court as a witness to the crime? I was not too keen and tried to discourage them from involving me. Little did I realise that in doing this I was throwing suspicion on myself. The case will likely be a long time in coming before the courts, given the present rate of progress; and though I have been charged with nothing, the visits from the police - and there have been many - have aroused the curiosity of the dead man's sons to such a pitch that they believe I was not merely a witness but an accomplice. I dare not speak with the sons for fear they will kill me if I try. So I have adopted a routine thus, when going for my cigarettes; I look through the letter-box down the hallway, I then look out the window down the ground, then through the letter-box again. If all is clear I step out the door onto the landing. The door is closed and locked in minimal fashion so that only one turn of the key is required; this applies to both exiting and entering this flat, one turn of the key. I do not take the lift down to ground level but open the door onto the stairs and listen for footsteps until my ears are strained. All being quiet, I move downstairs, with soft-soled shoes on my feet, listening keenly all the way. If I get to ground level without having to stop or enter another landing due to sounds on the stairs it pleases me. The rarity of such pleasure makes it all the more intense. On reaching ground level I open the door an inch and peer through into the lobby, my face squashed against the wood of the door and my right ear pressed against the concrete, my other ear listening. I am glad not to be deaf. All being quiet and clear I proceed through the lobby and out into the air, at which point I am gripped by nerves and fear and excitement, for at this moment I relinquish myself to fate and possibility and coincidence. I am, therefore, especially vigilant as coincidence has already shown me how unkind it can be. I walk rapidly in the direction of the shops, my head, eyes, moving unsystematically; yet with the passing of every four steps I should have surveyed the surrounding area, at least once for possible danger. All usually goes well, for I go quite early in the morning, though I do not go every morning. The frequency of shop visits depends on matters financial and on tobacco. I always go on giro day, every second Thursday. It is surprising how quickly the fortnights pass and I manage to function quite well considering the intensity of my fear of death. Also, I do not go to the shop nearest the block of flats I live in, but to the shops at an intermediate distance where the Post Office is located; this I consider an act of great bravery but in all honesty I go to, what is after all, the nearest Post Office. It doesn't seem to occur to my enemies to enquire of the Post Master about my comings and goings. The Post Master is an Indian of quiet and efficient disposition and not likely to give out such information lightly. He says, Good morning Mr Fisher, when I go in and this I find pleasant but not pleasant enough to keep me from looking over my shoulder. So in truth he says good morning to the back

of my head. As backs of the head go, I presume mine is fine for people find no difficulty in addressing it. These mornings, Thursdays, I take full advantage of my freedom and buy my supplies of tinned beans and tinned meat; the meats being spam and corned beef, I also buy one loaf and one piece of fruit, a banana or a pear. In all I buy twelve tins of beans, six tins of spam and five tins of corned beef, plus of good supply of cigarette making materials. All this I carry in three plastic shopping bags. It is remarkable how the collection of plastic bags has built up over the months, even though I use these bags for the disposal of rubbish the collection still grows. Rubbish is something I do not like to accumulate but dispose of, down the chute each time a bag is filled. My return journey from the Post Office is somewhat taken up with the eating of the fruit, the sensitivity of my wits though, is not diminished and I survey the terrain attentively while eating the fruit, and at the same time carry the three plastic message bags. I consider this one of my greatest achievements since these dark times have descended. Nevertheless, I make my way back to the tower block, where, on my arrival I take the lift to the floor above or below my own, then make my way to my dwelling via the stairs. I go carefully but rapidly to my door and turn the key once. I shut the door behind me and put on the chain.

There is a fine view of rolling hills and town and city. It really is something to see. I go down into the town on signing on day, and on certain other occasions when the need of company becomes too great, and sometimes for no reason at all. That is a bit of worry, that little streak of going out for no reason at all. It is impossible to know when such a feeling will swoop. I accept it as being part of needing a respite from boredom. Yet, I would not say boredom is my enemy, not at all, my enemies are the sons of the dead father, the brothers. Exactly how many brothers there are I have been desperate to discover, but have had little success: this has been one of my greatest failures since that unfortunate event to which I was witness to. There are at least two brothers. I have watched them standing outside this tower block and noticed some definite similarities in their features. There are also other young folk who regularly stand about at the same location; what their relationship is to the present circumstances I can not tell, but prefer to err on the side of caution. The brothers appear to be in their twenties. I am older than they. I did not go to school in this area, nor was it ever required of me to work in this locality. So apart from the Post Master I know few people. And even to suggest I know the Post Master is to overstate the case. It will be impossible to find out exactly how many brothers there are without taking the action required to make contact with people who have lived in this area for some time. This idea I have discounted for it wouldn't be sensible for a man to follow those following him. Look at Christ. He was not a follower but a leader. I believe that this family, the family of the dead man, have lived here a very long time. Not only because of the outrage his death aroused in the community but because of the way the brothers move about. As if they are at home. They have a manner about them that lets you know this is their place. I do not look out the window too much or in too obvious a fashion for fear this provokes them. Such provocation would be foolish in the extreme and might encourage them to demolish my door with their shoulders or even a hammer. Then what choice would I have? Simply to leap or beg for mercy before they kill me. The making of such a choice being impossible with my nerves reduced to idiocy resulting in a poor advocacy of the case on behalf of myself. Irritating them to the extent that they smash the hammer through my skull due to sheer annoyance. I prepare my food on an electric ring, the front ring of the cooker, which has four in total. There are in fact two front rings and I use the right one which is furthest away from the kitchen window. I have thought of barricading myself in the bathroom. When preparing my food I open a tin of beans and deposit its contents in the pot. I open a tin of meat and chop it into little cubes. I could defend myself with the chopping knife. I don't like knives. I place the cubes of meat in the pot with the beans and heat gently

until they bubble. I stir on occasion. If bread is available I pour the hot food onto a plate which has two slices of dry bread there already. If bread is not available I eat straight from the pot. This saves on washing a plate. There has been a change in me since all these precautions have become necessary. I don't know if you'd notice it to look at me. But I feel changed. My letter writing has diminished considerably. Mostly I have little to describe in the form of letters: James, being married, has never liked to receive too many letters from me. James drinks in the Atholl Bar. His wife does not go with him to the pub. I have never seen her there. In truth I am altogether at a loss as to why a homosexual gets married. That James is a homosexual there is no doubt. I knew from the moment we met. This was not in the Atholl Bar but the Toby Jug. James is a bus inspector, or was the last time we met. It wouldn't make sense though, to equate sexuality with occupation; the reason I knew he was one of us, as it were, was because I can always tell when somebody fancies me, and James definitely fancied me. James has been quite a good lover, if a little less satisfactory as a friend. He is very bald on top. And whatever else might be said about James, it cannot be said that he is mean. He is generous. Certainly he has been generous to me. Perhaps this is because I might let on about his not being totally on the straight and narrow. I have no idea now what he does for sexual pleasure; since my absence from ordinary life these last few months has left me more or less incommunicado but for the letters. But, is my life empty now? I ask that question often of myself. What can I say. Is it mad to behave the way I have been? Over cautious! The fortnights fly by yet so little happens. I walk the rooms, pacing up and down, up and down, and counting the strides. I have embarked on the odd cleaning job, but my heart is never really in it. It is just not possible to clean heartily with all the worry about the brothers nagging away in my mind all the time. I can smoke heartily. Yes, very heartily. Worrying does not spoil my enjoyment of tobacco. In fact, I can smoke heartily and focus my worry onto the thought of a far off and prolonged process of death from cancer of the lung. I am sure that would be a better way to die than a sudden, brutal, death brought about prematurely through no fault of mine. At least with the cigarettes I am aware there is a little self murder involved. Suicide. No, is suicide not too strongly the word in this context? When the cancer comes I am sure I should want to live, like I do now. Hiding then though, will not be possible. Maybe I'll go mad with fear. Not even know my own name, let alone the name of the illness I am to die of. The main idea here is, that so long as the brothers do not kill me then my death lies somewhere far off. Strange, is it not, how long death can pervade the thoughts before God springs to mind? This might well, it always has with me, prove a very boring way of passing the time in thought. Nevertheless, I'm sure God looks on all feeble human souls with great compassion. And what gives him the right to try us? Try us, I was going to say, like common criminals, but that is too simple. I know that is too simple but what the complicated version of events is defeats me. Then there is that old business of how do we know we are made in God's image? Well, it says so in the Bible, but what about Eve: there's the boring old stalemate. Never gets me anywhere that line of thought. Think it's better to pace up and down my hallway listening for footsteps outside the door. There is no doubt about what I am doing then. My purpose is simple. I am listening for those who are coming to kill me. It has not escaped my notice either that an amount sufficient to pickle my mind, I mean alcoholic drink here, would not go amiss in the reduction of fear levels. Desperation has not yet been so great as to give that serious consideration. For I would only be putting myself in greater danger. Letting my guard down. I have never been lucky with tempting fate and would probably end up dead before being able to drink enough to enjoy an alcohol-induced release from fear. My mother was fond of a good bucket and I have not been averse to it. Truth be told, if I had no such a fondness, my predicament, as it is at present, might never have come about. There is no point

crying about it, even if I sometimes feel that way; tears can provide no light to guide me through this darkness. I wonder too at the attachment of the sons to their father, the emotional bond; it cannot be thought of as an empty thing. The routine I have adopted is a matter of life and death. I tell myself this and successfully eradicate all doubt. I could not have performed such a feat of psychological eradication in former times, but, life and death are potent forces. Look at Shakespeare. I like to pretend this present difficult situation is just ordinary; I know it is not but this is a comforting pretence and never before have I been under threat of imminent death. All manner of confessions are possible. Yet if the death threat is lifted what is the significance of such confessions? The only confessions possible for me are those pertaining to me, those which are of me. All manner of confessions are not possible, unless I make them up. Then they become sins. Lies. A good story is something I like. Take that night, the night of the murder in question; that night I was singing. Giving a performance of my favourite songs beneath the green spot-lights of Paisley Abbey. It was obvious that the boy I was with was confused. He looked worried as hell when James kept coming over, hovering at the table. And more worried still when James gave me fifty pounds, a small retainer you understand. Such an amount of money too has to bear some responsibility for the present confusions.

Yet it never could be said I have blackmailed James. There's never any prospect of my telling his wife. It is something I shall take to my grave with me. That is not a joke. Such an act of self-righteous honesty, or malign greed, is not in me. I'm sure my being out of work upset him. It is this joblessness which has disposed him to feeling philanthropic where I am concerned. The sex was, I think, satisfactory for both of us. I gave him what he wanted, he gave me what I wanted and a little extra cash besides. How that boy could believe that James gave me fifty pounds because I'd sold him a TV I'll never understand. Much as I find being mistaken for a murderer difficult to understand also. I could never have been involved in such a crime regardless of the amount of drink I'd consumed. It will all come out at the trial. That is assuming I live long enough to give my evidence. It is certainly possible that I did recognise the perpetrators at the time. I think I did, otherwise I should never have gone near. But the difference between recognising people and knowing who they are is vast. Yes, I did recognise them. I recall the moment of recognition, but as to who it was I actually recognised I do not remember. This is most distressing to the two detectives when they visit. Memory is such a fickle thing. Often the real truth of events is difficult to pin-point, and my mind is so chaotic when I'm drunk. I hope the case does come to court fairly quickly. It should given its seriousness, but I don't think I will be so lucky. It has not escaped my notice recently that all is not perhaps what it should be with the criminal justice system. The detectives do not seem as sure of themselves as perhaps they might. They asked me a question about the theft of a packet of cigarettes from a chip shop near the scene of the murder. How that event could be connected with the case in hand left me at a loss. I had to tell them I knew nothing of the theft of any cigarettes, though I did own up to having a bit of a sing-song, which they insultingly described as a disturbance of the peace. They were annoyed when I offered them a brief rendition. It is possible that this proposal was not tactful given the gravity of the situation. I was however as definite as I could be in giving them information about the perpetrators - Two men, who I recognised but did not know by name. I could not remember what they looked like, my only recollection was that of recognition, not of the identity of the recognised. This, the detectives found less than convincing. It is not surprising. I too would have difficulty in believing such a story had I not been telling the truth. They became very nasty towards me. Asked who I was protecting. It is one thing being secretive about sexual matters but murder is something of quite a different scale. Who could I be protecting? since I cannot

remember who I recognised. Now, I know it was not the victim who was familiar to me for I have seen his picture in the paper and his face was news to me. Not even in the clear light of sobriety and daylight was his face familiar. Not really much use as a witness then, for there are many men in Paisley. And many who go in pairs for an evening of drink. I do not think they could have contacted the boy for confirmation of my story. I think not, for by this time he would have told them I was the one involved in that minor incident with a packet of cigarettes at the chip shop. This would have thrown a shadow of suspicion over me and they'd have pressed me further on matters by now. Unless they know and are waiting until I am weak before they strike. Waiting until I am weary of the whole thing and they are not, for they are waiting for their prey. I had to deny the chip shop incident. You don't like to make out to people that you are a completely stupid homosexual in your mid-forties. There should be no question of my sexuality coming into this anyway. I won't allow it. I am innocent after all. It should be I who contacts the detectives to inform them of the threat hanging over me from the sons. I am held back from this as it may only heighten their interest in me. Push me up the ladder of suspects. I am aware of the prejudice people harbour, not just against me personally, but people of my sexual preference. There is no reason why I should give them ammunition to use against James and me. And all the others who have nothing to do with me or James but are also homosexual. Then there would be no way of stopping James's wife from finding out. And his children. It could ruin any chance of his enjoying life with his family. Why does a man like James want to live a heterosexual fantasy; or why should I want to live an asexual fantasy? Things do get complicated. But that is the stuff of stories. A good story is something I like. If only I could help the detectives more things might improve. I could contact them now. I could be in the paper - WITNESS NAMES KILLERS FROM FOXBAR FLAT. But that would not be proper as I understand the workings of the criminal justice system. These things are more properly heard in a court of law. I cannot help thinking that the brothers might become friendlier towards me if such a story were to appear in the local paper. So grand a thing, the lifting of suspicion and threat of death. To walk to the Post Office unconcerned about my physical safety. If only I could identify the real perpetrators I'd be safe. This is not possible. The sons think I am one of the perpetrators and there is only a strategy of avoidance to be employed. That is all. Nothing more. I am right, I know, I feel it with great sureness. They want to kill me. They think I killed their father. I do not blame them. Revenge is the way with some people and it should not be held against the sons, though they are wrong in thinking I am the one to kill. What do people do when someone they love is murdered? Do they take a life, should they not take a life, a tooth for a tooth, they have the right, haven't they? What use is religion now? All turning other cheeks, cheeky little cheeks, stuffing the mouths of whores with poisoned fruit, killing yet thou shalt not, except in situations where mitigation is possible. What do they do to an animal to make corned-beef? Is that what the sons will do to me? make me into corned-beef and eat me out of a pot and without bread, my dead edible flesh, not even laid on - on a slice of pan-loaf before being spooned from the pot, chewed and swallowed. Why cremate a body when you can cook it? The hills are green today. So green you can feel the life in them. I want to live. Take a tent up the hills and live a simple life, close to the land, make my own wine from berries. I wouldn't know one berry from another and I'd have to contact James for some hints on brewing. James has always been keen on making home-brew. I could never be bothered with it though it might be useful now. The worst that can happen is that I am killed at the hands of the sons. Two or three of them kicking into me, heavy boots on their feet, steel toe-caps even, preserve me from the steel toe-caps. I don't want them cracking my bones. I want to remain intact. Alive. I have never been keen on factory work. Never enjoyed it. All the time, since leaving school, until moving

to these flats I worked in factories. The dogs-body cum labourer. I gave up factory work when I ended up up here, in these high flats. High flats are traumatic to a person accustomed to the back-and-front-door-cottage-type house. Back when I lived in that type of house I was happy, or if not I could have been, were it not for sex. I was keen on masturbation in my teens but showed no interest in girls. But wasn't that just natural? An ordinary way to grow up in the late 1960s. My mother became very concerned that I didn't have a girlfriend when all the other boys my age did. I told her I was shy. She was kind about my shyness. I didn't tell the other part, the truth, the real story. A good story is something I like. But this was my story and not for the telling. How could I face them with it? the good Protestants; my parents. The good Protestants that they were; dead now. Listen, they think I killed their father. Listen, the sons and...

Cantsmell
From the collection 'Duck Feet'
by Lynsey Calderwood

Colin Cantwell's got nits. Evrubdy in oor class is sayin it cos he's always pure scratchin himsel. He sits in front ae me in History an ah'm scared tae lean too far forward in case any ae them leap aff his heid and ontae mine. He's got pure millions a dandruff anaw: he wears the same black jumper tae school every day an the shoulders are always coatet in it. He sits an taps the side ae his heid wi his pen till it aw faws doon lik a mini avalanche; because he's got blond hair it makes it hard tae see aw the wee nits walkin about; yi no thir there though.

Laura Kyle's gettin moved seats cos she keeps talkin. She got tolt the next time she comes in she's tae share a desk wi Colin Cantwell. Laura said she's no daein it. Ah said, Wit yi gaunny dae then. She said, Ah'll get ma ma up tae the school if ah huv tae cos ah'm no gettin papped next tae that clat bag. Ah said tae her, Dae yi not think yir over reactin a wee bit. She screwed up her face at me lik ah'd jist fartet or somethin an then she said, Wid you want tae sit next tae Cantsmell?

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Laura wis doggin History the day. We startet a new unit on Changin Public Health In the Eighteen Thirties Tae the Nineteen Thirties an the first thing we talked about wis Hygiene, an the Eighteen Sixty-six Sanitary Act. It wis dead borin cos it wis aw about water supply an the sewers an the different diseases folk used tae get in the aulden days; every time ah looked at Cantsmell he wis either pickin his heid, his ears or his nose.

*

Ah said tae Laura, D'yi think Cantsmell really has got nits. Dis a tinker's dug huv fleas. Ah said, Aye but ah thought nits only ever went tae clean hair. Laura jist laughed at me an then she said, Naw Kirsty you're right man, she said, It's no nits he's goat it's mobile dandruff.

Ah didnae know until she tolt me this, but Laura caught nits wan time when she wis a wean before she came tae stay in Renfra. The wee lassie in the next close fae her, her hail family wur laupin wi them an Laura hud tae sit next tae her in school. Laura endet up lookin lik somethin oot the concentration camps cos she'd tae got her hair aw shaved aff.

Ah wid hate tae catch nits, cos ma hair's blond an it's dead wiry lik paki curls, yi widnae be able tae see them an it wid be a pure nightmare tryin tae get rid ae them. Ah mind Nancy the nit nurse fae primary school she used tae come an inspect yir heid wi her big, mad metal comb. Ah hatet the way she always ripped half yir hair oot when she wis daein it, it wis as if she wis tryin tae dig up chunks ae yir scalp. Ah wonder if she actually enjoyed her job, ah canny imagine enubdy wantin tae be a nit nurse.

*

Ma ma wis talkin tae Cantsmell's ma in the super market the day. Ah nearly faintet tryin tae haud ma breath. When she walked away, ah said tae ma ma, Aw she wis absolutely honkin. Ma ma said, Aye did yi see the clatty fingernails she hud. Ah said, Aye. She said, D'yi no wit her job is Kirsty. Ah said, Wit. She said, She's the heid chef at a big posh hotel in Glasgow.

*

Ah don't understaun, ah said. Laura said, Well that's me decidet. Ah said, But why. Laura said, Cos ah don't want nits again. Ah canny believe your daein this aw cos ae him, ah said tae her. Laura said, Aye well yi'll jist need tae believe it willint yi.

Laura Kyle's best subject in school is History an she got the highest marks in oor class fur the prelim; she got full marks in the General exam an then a two fur her investigation an the teacher's been tryin tae convince her tae sit the Credit test in the actual Standard Grade.

Ah canny understaun why Laura's went an dropped History aw so she disnae huv tae sit next tae Colin Cantwell. Ah know he's mingin, and ah widnae be too happy about it either sittin next tae him pure scratchin his heid, but ah canny understaun why she'd want tae drop her best subject.

Ah tried tae get her tae change her mind but she widnae. Too late, she said, Ah've awready been tae see ma Guidance teacher. Ah said, But wit about aw the work yiv pit intae it that's a pure waste is it no. Ah don't care, she said. Yir talkin shite ... Ah'm no talkin shite, she said, Ma ma's been up tae the school an ah'm drappin it. Ah said, Ah don't understaun you sometimes. Well ah'm sorry Kirsty, she said, But ah happen tae hink hygiene's mair important than spazzy school work.

*

Cantsmell's ma said hullo tae me when ah wis staunin at the bus stop this mornin. Ever since that day in the super market ah keep seein her an she always talks tae me. Ah wis pure mortified cos Laura an Charlene wur wi me an Charlene kept sniffin the air an sayin, Can you smell fish, an then she'd start gigglin. Ah jist stood there kiddin on ah didnae no wit she wis talkin about but Laura wis lik that, Aye ah smell it an it's pure disgustin man. Cantsmell's ma didnae seem tae realise they meant her; she'd on a clatty cream anorak an it hud broon stains aw doon the front an her fingernails wur still boggin. After we got aff the bus, Laura turnt roon an said, Sundry should attack her wi a bar a soap man.

*

Sammy Campbell burnt Cantsmell wi a can a deodorant the day: it wis in PE an ah never actually seen it cos it wis in the boys changin rooms; yi could hear Cantsmell screamin aw the way doon the corridor though cos he sprayed it right in his eyes ; apparently he held him doon fur aboot ten minutes daein it an that's how the skin on wan side ae his face pure went intae a massive blister. Cantsmell might be mingin a BO but ah don't think he deserved that.

It's weird no seen Laura in History anymair. She's got four free periods a week noo but she has tae sit in the library an study. Apparently, when she wis there this mornin, Cantsmell's wee brother's class wur in there choosin books.

A Chocolate Cowboy
An excerpt from *More Tales from the Vampire Coast* – A Novel in Progress
by John Bolland

He wiz ay daen thon tae mi.

We wur oot bi Lexwell Drive bi then, ayont Tay Avenue an past the maisonettes on Ury Lane an doon across thon slopin green where the cooncil gang-mowers choppt up aa the crisp pokes an the dog-shite intae mush. The cuttin's hid aa rottit doon intae thi October damp bi then, couch-grass straws an stalky plantains. We wur on the tap flair o a block'a flats when he left mi - jist oot fae the smelly hoos o' some auld wifey (nae weans onyhow) an' jist a Galbraith's plastic bag o' monkey nuts an aipples, a tangerine an twa Mars bars fur oor troubles (bit Derek kept the Mars bars fur hisselt').

Ah dresst mase!'

Mary hid been too bizy screamin' at ma Dad. Same same. Same as eyewyse. Every fuckin' night (scuse ma French) - so there wiz nane o thon face-paint nor lookin oot auld curtains tae garb mi up like the mannie fae 'The Flashing Blade' or Alcan-foil and Cornflake-packet-plate tae dub me a Sir Galahad. (Ma mer's heid wiz ay mair intae Mandingo Blood an well-hung darkies onyhow).

"Tell yer faither he'll be late fur hiz work if he disnae get up!"

An Derek jist gets on wi' it. On wi' it an oot.

"Yoor nae cummin'!" he seyd.

"Derek?"

"Naw."

"Fuckin' take yer wee brither, you!" she'd sey (ay supportive ma mither ken?)

An ma Dad, he wiz still in ees scratcher. Exhaustit poor sowel.

"That's twinty past," she'd sey.

An aabby else would be oot there, roon aa the hooses guisin' ken – hence oor paltry plunderbag o monkey nuts, twa cox's pippins an a Clementine an haen tae venture oot as far is Lexwell fur even that. An come tae that it must hae been jist pervs an the inveterate lonely openin their doors bi thon time, aifter nine, when aabby else hid concludit the hale rigmarole o Halloween wiz ower fur anither year an settlit doon tae Morecambe and Wise or Doomwatch or whatever, so hauf the places didnae let oan

when Derek dranged thir buzzer or chappt the door an mebbe ye'd catch a flicker o an ee in the spyglass, the blink o a bleary Cyclops, fae folk faa even then hid rid the writin on the pebble dash (Young Young Cumbie ya bas) an fortified themselves in the middle flats (where the cunts couldnae break in thru the attick space)... but aats me fleein well aheid o masel...

We didnae leave till ma faither wiz packed oot doon the close in his Burton's raincoat (1962), tweed jaiket an a bunnet. He never shaved - I mean, why bother?. She made him up a hauf-bottle fu' o milk an' twa doorsteps o Milanda loaf wi' spam for his piece, slung him oot into the cauld dark nicht – gaun – git! Derek mindit tae see thon done. Kent fine the consequences. Derek kent. That wiz ten-tae-nine an three miles doon tae Linwood on Chainey an the auld railway track. Another written warnin'.

“Ye comin then?”

“Bit you seyed?”

“Naw. Come on!” he seyed.

“What am ah?” Ah asked.

“Git yer cowboy outfit oan. The milky bar kid.”

“S a wanker,” Ah ay thought - bit Ah hid a waistcoat an a black felt cowboy-hat wi' white-looped braid an National Health specs. Ah hud twa Colt Peacemakers wi silvering comin aff thir swirly ornament an a plastic panel missin fae the grip on ma right haun side. Ah wiz aye a corrie-fistit-gun, slung low, auld laces cinched aboot ma thigh tae keep the fuckin things fae stickin on the draw.

“Quick,” he seyed. “Quick.” An oot afore the cow could stop us. The night.

“You stick wi me.”

The night.

“Whit'll we sing?”

“Whit can you sing?” he seyed.

“Ah know a poem. *Wee sleekit coverin tim'rous...*”

“Aye. Say that shite,” he seyed.

An Ah seyed that shite in the Lawson's lobby, the wan place in Tay Avenue thit opent tae oor knock. An then again in the damp on the doorstep in Ury Lane, while aw he seyed wiz “Sky of blue, grass of green, can I have my Halloween?”

He spottit Jonjo Regan as wi were comin doon the stair towards Lexwell. A bunch o them were sittin on the low wall ootside a close there- smokin'.

“Jonjo,” he cried, like a fox intae the night (Ah know about the night noo.)
“Jonjo!”

An mebbe a glow o fagtip waved like a firefly or a sparkler, a curvaceous acknowledging wave seyin', “ Derek ma man, whit kept ye? Come inside.”

“Whit have ye got?” Derek seyed

“A bag a nuts,” Ah seyed. “ An aipple.”

“You go back now. It's getting late.”

Bit it wisnae enough fur a left-handed gun. It wisnae enough tae recompense the humiliation o a radge outlaw dressed up like a chocolate cowboy.

“One more,” Ah seyed.

“Fuck sake, Davie!”

“No. One more.”

An so we assaultit number 47 Lexwell Drive, startin fae the tap flair (as ye dae) an sookt intae the first door thit we rappt on bi this dense smilin' smelly granny-wifey who kept us in the lobby fur ma partypeice, no biddin' us as far as the livin room in case we scoped the place, the kitsch in the china cabinet an her colour telly wi' Eric and Ernie gein themselves sunshine over again as I explain how sorry ah am thit man's dominion hiz broken nature's socialism.

“Aye, son – that wiz lovely,” - an oot comes the twa Mars bars which Derek responsibly pockets explainin thit our mum widnae want me eating thon this close tae ma bed time.

“Right enough,” the wifey lisps through her dentures.

We staun there waitin an nothing else is gonnae happen. Eric an Ernie get aa the applause an Derek’s got the Mar’s bars an Ah could beat the baith o them tae the draw but neither o them’s packin which limits ma options fairly much tae

“The Milky Bars are on me!”

If Ah had a Milky Bar tae ma name - which Ah didnae - an hauf-way doon the Chain Road at that minute (I now know) ma faither’s tipping some o the contents o the half-bottle an topping it back up fae a quarter bottle o Grouse he’s bought at the offie, a wee warmer for the cauld night ahead - an Derek is beatin his retreat as the wifey says

“Son?”

“Missus?”

“Dae ah no get a kiss?” She smiylt. She has another draw on her Benson n Hedges filter tae freshen her breath, ken , an she crouches down so I hear her knees crack an Ah take ma hauns aff the haunels o ma silver colts an step intae the space between her airms between her legs an make a dive for the crepe on her cheek - bit its her mooth, lips like worms when ye stretch them.

“Thank you,” she seyed. “Where’s your big brother gone?”

Good fuckin’ question.

He wiz naewhere tae be seen. He wisnae on Lexwell an neither wiz Jonjo. There wiz nae moon in the sky, nae stars, jist a port-wine stain disfigurement o light fae the scheme reflectit back aff the presst low pillow o damp cloud, smotherin aa wonder. Tae ma right, the hill stript doon, spilling the last row o tenements intil the dead space we ca’d the Canyon. Past the bone works an the Armitage Shanks urinal factory where ma granpa wurkt, beyond the Black Cart poisoned white wi effluent, the Presst Steel, (Linwood, Hillman, Chrysler, Peugeot – whatever cunt it wiz then) glittered like wan o they deep-sea bioluminescent come-an-get-it fish. The Chain Road linkt here tae there. That’s where ma Dad had went. Doon the Chain Road the German prisoners built for tanks. Ma faither worked in Linwood fur ten years. Constant night shift. Ah think, noo, aat’s where Ah get it fae...the night...but that’s me chaffing oan ahid again...The Chain Road tumbt aff the braes, oot o the scheme an doon towards the offie an that’s where ma faither wiz.

An tae ma left, Lexwell curved up tae curve back doon again, towards thon patch o grass behind the railings, wi the burn, the swing, the Park in the fucking Dark. An Derek.

It wisnae the Mars bars. Ah tellt masel later an fur years it wiz the Mars bars, the source o aa ma undoin, ma damnation, this malevolence. A Mars bar. An thought somehow somewhere a parent might ha sensed, it wiz their duty after all – glug glug glug - the whisky mixin wit the milk - an Mary bi the gas fire in the livin room nursing her wrath tae keep it warm – bit who fur? The dish aa dessicatit, brittle, never served.

Ah took the left hand path, turnt widdershins intil the dark, a dark fillt oot wi streetlamp brilliance aat skinkled aff the sharp conchoidal-fracture o the flints an agates, quartz o pebbledash an paintit great deep plates o shadda intae corners, back greens, coorie-doon places in amongst the middens. Jist eight, Ah kept masel tae the pavement when Ah shoulda stept atween the parkt up Vivas an Avengers, Hillman Imps. Ah shoulda strode the middle o thon night time road, well oot fae the closemouths where the danger lurkt, ma hauns hovering ower ma pistol grips - chink-chink-chink o spurs. Bit instead Ah dragged thon polly-bag o nuts along the tarmac, up an doon the kerbs, an

Ah wiz feart as Lexwell opent oot like the foul mooth o the Congo or Niger an the streetlight drew back fae the railins an there wiz jist this black o gangs an foxes thit separated where Ah wiz fae the bus shelter on the Brediland Road an the proddie church, aa gless an nae steeple, percht up on the brae.

Ah cried oot, “Derek!”

Ye sling yersel intae the night. Thons love. Even Ah kin recognise the structure undersittin. Love. Nae love o Mars bars. Love an fear. A lamb bleatin in a desolation, wunnerin how come he’s tethered tae a stake.

It wiz behind me. Ah ken that noo. Ah sensed that then. The thing behind mi.

Ah could hear their voices in the blackness doon below, bi the burn. Ah kent the structure o the space fae when it wiz light there. The bank wiz high on this side. A rope swing hung fae a sycamore tree. The rope hung straight doon an there wiz a noose tae set yer fit in bit the tree leaned ower an the arrangement ay lookt queer. Ablo the swing - mebbe fifteen, mebbe twinty feet bit seemed like forty then - a mattress jist in case an mebbe shaggin lassies in the daurk, drinking cider n British sherry. Nae Emva Cream like Mary liked. Strictly wino.

He’d be doon there bi the burn, Ah guesst. Smokin an snaffling ma fuckin Mars bar. An in-between, nae sae intimidated bi a single lonesome cowboy, things’d slither through the long grass or crouch in waitin in among the docks thit rattled teir dry seed in the wind like ju-jus.

Bit the thing wiz behind me now. The thing wiz there an if Ah’d dasht right an hirpled fast as fast up Don Drive and past Galbraiths an the Butchers an the Coopie, it’d catch me bi the garages sure enough, drag me screamin like a pounced-on hare across thon cinder grun an intae some lock-up dect wi chains an metal slabs an hatchets. It wiz a scunner that ma Dad wiz oot o earshot - bit he should ha sensed. He jist wisnae listenin. Wisnae tuned intae ma signal predicament.

It moved, close tae close, usin’ the backdoors like tunnels, vaultin the wire fences, hingin fae the drying poles like a flyin fox an nae Johnny Morris gies-a-mango charm about it.

Ah knew there wiz a gap beneath the rail. Ah lost ma pistol there. The wan wi baith the panels.

The grass an docks an willowherb were high an dry an rustled even in October’s damp. Ah wadit doon the hill toward thir voices, the exclamations o their cursin, sniggerin in triumph oer two Mars bars, gloatin in their cigarette light. They must hae been ablo the bank, bi the mattress. Ah couldnae see a light. Mebbe there wiz lassies there, Mary Kennedy or Cathy Daly. Ah couldnae see a light - even wi the streetlamp fell away an everythin jist feelin cauld wet rustle slime an slippery. Slugs had dragged themselves ower every leaf an blade o grass. Spittle burgeoned on the branches o dogs-flourish. An in thon silence o sensation and invisible colour, Ah heard it cross the fence, quite distinct – an fast – hhssst – wiz the sound it made.

“Derek!!” Ah cried. “O fuck!”

Coz then it wiz upon me, on mi like a flash, an stript mi fae ma footprints, up an awa an the grun fell far below dizzy an dizzy an turning the lamps fae the street an the skylights, the bus on the Brediland Road an the glow o twa cigarettes doon bi the burn.

Cinnabar Moth

by Angela Blacklock-Brown

He's a stranger here on these North Eastern shores,
a fearless explorer in Dracula's cloak,
flutters in on a westerly wind,
stalks his prey on St. Cyrus' dunes,
dives for the kill on the ragwort plant,
spreads his mantle, dark side out,
lays his eggs, sucks his fill.

Beasts of the earth, beasts of the air,
beware! His nectar is your drink of death.
Larvae hatch on ragwort leaves, feast on
flowers, coltsfoot and groundsel..

If you see mustard and liquorice stripes,
feast your eyes on the caterpillar moth,
but do not entice this poisonous stranger.
Grasp at your peril, this scavenger asp.

Cop

by Angela Blacklock-Brown

I met my Brooklyn Cop, not
on a downtown sidewalk, but
in the South, at an airport,
passing through security.

His caramel forehead creases
to a frown. At his bidding
I unwrap layer upon
layer of winter warmth.

Then he segues to a smile
as I bare my arms.
Once round his girth is
twice round the Empire State.

Hairy hands paw my passport.
Big Apple memories meet
Dixieland and New Orleans
somewhere beyond the Line.

Identity

by Angela Blacklock-Brown

When I arrive at the airport
it's that Dixieland, razzamatuzz, jazz approach,
'how are you doin, ma'am?'
and I hesitate before I say,
'I am good.'
maybe I should have thought of
that global melting pot and
stopped to reply in Scots,
'I'm fine, thanks.'

'Buddy, can you spare the time
to tell me why you have come
to the United States of America?
'U.S. citizens this way –
you are welcome to stay,
or welcome back to Newark.'

I'm queuing behind that line,
demarcation of the unpossessed,
not yet possessed of the street cred
to tread barefoot
onto American soil.

The camera eyeballs my retina,
green for go. I place my
right forefinger on the infra-red pad,
slide the left hand across.
Passport encoded, details
downloaded into cyberspace.
I shuffle two spaces to the customs zone.
No, the Scottish Blend will not
be tossed into the sea.
I am left pondering my own identity.

Night Sky

by Angela Blacklock-Brown

Cassiopeia winks at the Plough.
The Hubble: a star-flash tracing the arc
of the earth's tilt, reveals
the past becoming the future,
becoming the past..

From the crater of Mount Teide I gaze upwards,
to the stars, the cusp of the autumn equinox.

Extract from Hope for Newborns

by Rodge Glass

1. Aftermath of an Attack

Our place stood between a bar and a grocers shop in the centre of the city. A sign above the door just said 'VICTORY'; underneath, in the front window, black lettering on a Union Jack background read:

THE VICTORY BARBER SHOP, MANCHESTER
PROUDLY SERVING GREAT BRITISH SCALPS SINCE
1945. PROPRIETOR, C. J. PASSMAN. COME IN FOR A
SMILE AND A SERVICE, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK.

Two windows facing the street displayed framed popular images from the First and Second World Wars, each lovingly maintained by Morta, Dad's new Lithuanian assistant, who prided herself on her ability to spray, wipe and dust surfaces more efficiently than anyone born east of the old Berlin Wall. There were hundreds of photographs for her to look after. Processions of returning soldiers riding through the streets, waving. D-Day celebrations. Women working in the munitions factories. The Queen Mum in the East End. Nothing too bloody. Underneath the pictures was a carefully scattered selection of ration books, wartime adverts – "Dig for Victory!" – and an impeccably presented set of Grandpa Harry's vintage stamps. Winston himself looked down on customers from his place above the welcome sign, photographed in a jeep in Berlin in 1945, waving at a grateful crowd. It was never mentioned that, despite his many attributes, Churchill was in no need of a haircut. And neither were many of the shaven-headed members of the front line grinning out from the surrounding photographs and newspaper cuttings on our walls.

Winston and his men covered half the space; the rest was taken up with wartime maps of the changing shape of Europe, spattered with red and black arrows pointing in all directions, and some local newspaper cuttings from the time of the Blitz, Dunkirk, VE Day. Along the left wall was a bench for customers to wait on, Grandpa Harry's old wartime jukebox featuring hundreds of hits – *We'll Meet Again*, *This is the Army Mr Jones*, *There'll Always Be an England* – and opposite were three barbers' chairs. The most important things lived above the till. The collection box for servicemen. The tips jar. The scissors. Water, gel, hair spray. Amongst these were a couple of official regiment photographs of Grandpa alongside colleagues and superiors, two of his three brothers and one of his cousins, all of whom died in service, apart from Great Uncle George, who became a General, so escaped direct bullets:

"We were a real army family," Grandpa Harry used to say, snipping at some strange head, talking via the mirror. "You know, Lewis... Britain accepted us at a time when most other places were either kicking out Jews or killing them. The least we could do was die for this country."

Today, the modern Passman family would return to see almost the same shop front that had stood there since Grandpa first cut the ribbon on opening day in front of a crowd in 1945:

"Ladies and gentlemen – welcome to the Victory Barbers," he said, to thunderous applause. "Now get inside and empty your pockets!"

Dad was still a boy then, standing by his father at the entrance as they cut the ribbon together:

“Dad,” he asked, “One day, can I have the shop?”

Grandpa looked down at his only son and said, beaming:

“Clive, this is Great Britain. You can have whatever you like.”

I wish I had been alive then – you knew where you stood with things – or at least it seemed like it. Hitler had just been defeated. The National Health Service was up and running. A Labour government had been voted into full power for the first time. We were on a roll, so we thought: an example to the rest of the world. The British were even arranging for a state to be set up, a place Jews could feel safe, something which hadn't been achieved in thousands of years. Perhaps the Jews would have felt less heat if they'd accepted the centre of the earth as a homeland, but those who knew that at the time either didn't speak up or were ignored, so the arrangement went ahead in 1948. I was a teenager before I was told we British had been in charge of Israel until then, and that maybe its inhabitants were pleased to see us leave:

“Nothing is clean,” Grandpa Harry said, whenever the subject of ‘that place’ came up.

“Sometimes you've just got to choose the least dirty option and be thankful you've got any options at all.”

These days, everything seemed dirty. Especially since my eldest brother Charles (or Chuck as he preferred to be called these days) followed in the family tradition and joined the army, in America, his new home. The brash shop front and 1940's style interior he and his twin, Philip, left five years ago, now seemed hopelessly out of date – a relic of something it was getting harder to believe really happened – a war everyone agreed was a good idea. Modern ones were messy, gory affairs. It was difficult to know who to support. I preferred the old kind. Towards the end of his life Grandpa had been trying to persuade me that all our history was equally covered in muck and spit, but, like the rest of the family, I wasn't ready to believe it yet.

We were all nervous about today. Chuck, Daisy and Tampa Bay were due in at the airport mid-afternoon, Dad said he'd drive them the short journey back to the shop, which is also our family home, and I took the afternoon off work to prepare, going back to my flat to pick up a few things, then heading round to the shop. But straight away there was a setback. Just as I was unlocking the shop three kids on bikes raced past and threw a brick through the front window. So instead of putting out streamers and balloons I spent the time before they arrived carefully covering up the big hole in the window with several layers of masking tape instead, then going out to the front of the shop, sweeping up the last of the shattered glass on the road with a dustpan and brush, still in my suit, scrambling around on my knees for overlooked shards. I was thinking about being somewhere more spectacular, but recently I always felt I was supposed to be somewhere else. Like it was some terrible mistake that I found myself wherever I was, doing whatever I was doing.

I was so exhausted from work most days that sensations of any kind seemed to pass through me with little effect. It was amazing I had the energy to talk at all, really, but occasionally I did. Usually to Anna, one of the company secretaries. Lunch hours, moments between meetings, a few minutes early morning before anyone else got in – especially over the last few months, while we'd been discussing a trip away together. Anna was part way through travelling Europe, she was impatient to move on to the next place, and couldn't understand why I was so reluctant to give up the job and go partying. We were a strange couple; hardly a couple at all. We didn't know the simplest things about each other. Sometimes I thought Anna was my girlfriend, but even that basic

detail wasn't clear: sex usually came before relationships these days, and we'd not even been close to it. We'd only kissed a couple of times.

I didn't want to ruin things by asking for clarification. It was always easier to let things go on as usual than to put questions I might not like the answers to. I spent my professional life doing that anyway, so usually I didn't even notice myself doing it. Absorbing, controlling. Absorbing, controlling. Pleasing clients. My boss. My parents. The customers and hangers-on at the Victory. I did whatever was necessary to please those around me, keep things easy. Not take any risks. A month or two ago Anna decided to make me her new pet project, and she set about transforming a stiff, proud man who acted older than his years into a carefree young one ready for good times.

"If I can't wake you up," she said, smiling confidently, "Then no one can."

But I was harder to shift than expected. I talked about wanting to travel but really the thought of leaving my desk for more than a few days made me queasy. Eventually Anna got impatient, saying she was leaving for Europe without me. That was this afternoon.

"Where are you going then?" I asked.

"Not telling you."

"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

"Well – aren't you going to tell Marcus?"

"Rule Number One," she said, brightly. "I owe no loyalty to bosses who only call me *sweetheart* because they can't remember my name."

"But you can't do that!"

"Why? What's he going to do?"

We worked on for another hour in virtual silence, punctuated only by the sound of tapping on keyboards and the occasional sigh. Then I left the office, without a word, and walked to the shop, choosing to stay smart for the arrival of the folks. Every so often it was worth reminding them that some people took me seriously.

I'd missed a bit out on the pavement: I just sighed and got the broom. Cleaned up without anger. I never quite got used to it, but the initial shock of attack was long gone. Now I kept sweeping the road, though there was nothing left to sweep, as the teenagers in school uniform passed on their way to the bus stop. Sometimes I just wanted to draw all the kids to me. Break the bad news gently. The old folks too. They all looked sad, even when they were smiling. The poster Dad had insisted on keeping in the window, "SUPPORT OUR TROOPS: BE PROUD!" had been taken clean out by the brick, and now lay on the inside of the shop, face up.

Geertje Dircks' Riposte From the Gouda Spinhuis

(On *A Woman in Bed*, c.1645 by Rembrandt

National Gallery of Scotland.)

by Stephanie Green

It's five years now, I am set to spinning,
with the insane, vagabonds and whores,
locked up in the House of Correction
on the say-so of spiteful neighbours.

You remember that picture of Sarah
peeking through the bed curtain
to see if the devil will get Tobias?
That was me. In a night-gown,

a fruit bowl, the silver bled dull,
thrust upside-down on the top of my head.
Someone from the Good Book -
makes it Art, not just me.

I've seen devils: Rembrandt
creeping into my bed. Grief for his wife
did not stop his lust, though they say I'm coarse.
His breath was strong as herrings,

his lips clamped on my mouth. Wrestling with flesh
and sweat, raving into my breasts, my neck -
turning me about and about
till I'm dizzy with it. Who was mad then?

He promises to marry me. Then his head's
turned by that slut, Hendrickje.
She's in and I'm out, but before
the skin on my fingers splits, I'll spin my revenge.

Flourish

by Karen Campbell

The thrill of the new
Of the new, of the
New
New shops and pubs and clubs and flats
All glass and steel and twinkly
And old
Old new
Facades and malls and skinny walls
Propped with girders like wir ither national drink
Crafting bank to bar and banning cars
For courtyards
and cafes
and places to be happy
and more stores than before
and so we grow and grow
and flourish as we nourish
all that old and all that new
And is it true
that
St. Thenew
Was the patron saint of shopping?

Kelvingrove

(written the day after it reopened)

by Karen Campbell

New old shimmers
Honey-scraped from dust
Soft underbelly exposed and open
For all to see.
Crammed and jiggled and higgledy-piggeled
As we shove and seethe
Pushing upwards into air
Light brightness of chequered tiles
And my face cracks into smiles
Of heartsore gladness
My city, oh my city
All is here.

Temple-calm is all a frisson
As we swarm, erupting into missions
Seeking out each new-old piece
Skirting tables, stands of Costa
Not marble now
No toys of war.
Cabinets cleaned of furry tableaux
Pachyderm unpacked.

A pause in all this glorious rolling.

Dawning watching of the unfolding.
Victoriana eviscerated
Some sacrifice of splendour
Moistness brittling dry and plastic-shiny
Even flowers glare.
Faces loom, girn
Dangle.
Parodies of art where once was peace
Cartoon bubbles lace crackled oils
Genius riven inside out
All themes
All sorts
All wrong.

Crowded, crammed they jostle
On their walls and plinths and *areas*.
Touch, don't touch
Of squint-pressed boards
Assault senses with interpretations.
Shrill butterwings at my throat
Give me back my sarcophagus.
Loose her from the squashed-in walls of new, compressed Egypt
And my sculpture
Where's my sculpture, that
Thin angry railing against the world of fists?

I push past ten hundred weans in shell suits
Traipsing after maw and paw
Wee wimmen at the Dali trying
To see where it was tore
Bespeckled, long grey earnest debate by
sectarian shrines
And foreign voices chatter
Cheek-by jowl with sublime
Impressionism pixellating colours into truth.
Gaudy-brash
I droop and swoop.
Am kissed and rise
And rise again through Glasgow Style and Queens of May
Curves round my heart and on.
And on.
Blood pumps in savage rhythm
at the Glasgowness of it all.

Sometimes in the night

by Zoë Strachan

“The museum shop and toilets will be closing in fifteen minutes.”

Parents start trying to coax children away from the goldfish.

“The museum will be closing in fifteen minutes.”

Teacups clatter in the café as the staff clears up for the day.

“You know we’re getting ready to close now?”

The attendants are polite but firm as they round up those who’ve lingered too long in entrancing corners, shooing them gently towards the lifts and stairs.

“The museum will close in five minutes.”

Security bands snap into place across bridges and pathways. The last coat, red wool with oversize buttons, is checked out of the cloakroom. Those who spend each and every one of their days in the museum, lurking in quiet spots, reading books or gazing into space, swapping benches with each chime of the clock, gather their belongings and disappear into the Edinburgh evening.

There’s more bustle now, all of a sudden, an occasional raised voice or trickle of laughter as the doors are locked and the lights switched off. Swift feet rattle up stairs, past the Flodden wall where one voice leaps above the others in song, punctuated by giggles:

“The flowers of the forest are a’ wede awa”.

A man heads across the road to Sandy Bell’s for a pint of IPA and to share the things he knows with other drinkers, interested and not. A woman is tempted into a glass of dry white with friends in Negociant’s, though she’d planned an early bath and bed. Car headlights dazzle through scraps of hair, and people flow towards the Meadows, towards the town. Alone and in clusters, the front of house staff pass through Bristo Port and scatter into the city.

Curators sigh and power down their computers, put proposals and reports aside for the evening. One woman wraps her hand round a bolt from the Forth railway bridge and squeezes, another polishes a small resin block in which an undulating polychaete is frozen. One after the other they emerge from behind doors marked Private and pad down the red-carpeted stairs, blinking at the darkness of the museum corridors.

When the last person has gone home, when the alarms have been set and the staff entrance sealed, the museum breathes a sigh of relief and settles in its foundations, nudging up against the middens of the old town, the dropped coins and butchers’ bones. A fish leaps clean out the water, turns a graceful arc and splashes back down. After a while the first tentative, twitching whiskers of a mouse edge out from below a case in which a silver hoard dully glows.

It isn’t until after midnight that a new noise begins on Level 3. A persistent click; some piece of machinery trying to catch. The mice pause, look around, decide there’s nothing amiss and scurry along the hems of the cabinets, nosing towards any tasty scraps which have dropped from visitor’s bags or pockets.

Thunk.

The noise resonates through the silence, and this time the mice scatter. Click. Creak. Clunk. Thud. Another creak as the mechanism warms. A soaring moment then another clunk. A whoosh like far away wind in the eaves. Thud.

Slowly building again to click, creak, clunk, thud.

The alert spreads through the gallery, reflections plummet down the darkened glass of the cases, a tremor of impact shivers through the floor. The Newcomen engine is cranking up, remembering, pumping water from a non-existent colliery deep in the

bowels of the museum. Corridors and stores fade into ladders and levels, and deep down underground shadowy men chip away at a seam of sparkling black coal.

Dredging for water that isn't there, the engine heaves up stories instead.

Clunk.

Creak.

Thud.

Tallie whechars flicker in the dim, projecting a magic lantern show of scenes. The museum has levels just like a mine; it twists and turns into tunnels and hollows, rich lodes in each one.

In Dunbartonshire, a woman shoulders a creel of peat and begins the weary trek home. As her feet squelch in the boggy ground Jean looks toward the fermtoun and tries hard to imagine another way to live. But her daughter Annie has a fire roaring up the chimney of the cruck-framed house, and soon Jean's feet are drying and her bones growing warm. If she knew at that moment a salmon was writhing on a leister, earmarked for dinner, she'd feel happier still. Annie has just learned to operate the spinning wheel, and though she's a great deal slower than her mother she keeps at it, slowly teasing the wool they've gathered into yarn.

Clunk, thud, goes the engine, and pictures are drawn from further north and further east, halfway to Shetland, where it's getting too dark to see by firelight. The click of knitting needles on Fair Isle ceases for the evening. Stockings and bunnets and scarves are laid carefully aside. Since the Prince wore a pullover on the golf course nimble fingers have been blistering as they rise to the demand from the stylish southern crowd, looking for complements to their plus fours and Oxford bags.

Clunk, thud, goes the engine, through firedamp and roof falls and noble pit ponies, and all the while the miners chip away. "You're pissing up my leg", Davy shouts over the din, answering a bellow from a workmate along the tunnel. "Close the pit? With this amount of coal?" The reek of cordite fills the air.

Clunk, thud.

Out at sea, over on St Kilda, Richard Kearton watches as Finlay Gillies lays a horsehair trap along the crest of a craggy rock. The puffins are canny, they circle overhead under finally curiosity gets the better of one. He alights, starts pecking at the rope. When he tries to fly away he can't, one foot is snagged in a noose. His wings flap, attracting another bird, then another, until the rope is a seething mass of squawking, squabbling puffins, each blaming the next for their own misfortune. So that he can photograph the event, Richard's brother Cherry is secured by a rope, also fashioned from horsehair, though there haven't been any horses on the island for many years now. Such ropes are vital heirlooms, but when Finlay goes to collect his flapping prize he skims the rock in stocking soles, without looking down at the choppy waters below. Richard makes notes in his book, Cherry's camera shutter clicks and releases, and if either of them wonder for how much longer men – and women, for didn't Martin Martin record that one woman snared 127 puffins in just three hours on Stac Lee? - will trap birds in this way, in this brutal place, they refrain from mentioning it, even to each other.

"Just think," Cherry says year later, "No music, no play."

Clunk, thud, goes the Newcomen engine, clunk, thud.

He only stole bread to stop from starving, and surely to cling to survival without causing injury to others is man's moral right? With a hideous sizzle of flesh, a mark the size of a sixpence is branded on the forehead of Alexander Steuart. Despite this, and the heavy collar fastened around his neck, his brush with the gallows has left him glad to be alive. Whether he'll feel the same a year – or ten – from now remains to be seen. Lying in the dark, his lungs full of dust, back crooked against a two-legged stool as he tries to get purchase on his holing pick, he might well wish he was dead rather than a serf.

Clunk, thud, goes the engine, clunk, thud. It's 1984, and techniques have improved since Steuart's day, but no laughter rings out 3000 feet under the Lothian soil. The strike is coming for sure, and no priest will venture down in the cage to give the pits the last rites.

Clunk, thud. "I am come home sir," says the Bonnie Prince as his first footsteps tramp an unfamiliar seed into the Hebridean soil. A month later he toys with his fine new canteen of cutlery, untwists the cork from the neck of a bottle and sniffs it, wondering how long this tour of the Highlands will take. Letting his thoughts drift forward into a fantasy of kingship. But the bindweed tangling along the shore of Eriskay will prove more lasting than the excitement of the Forty-Five. In the blink of an eye Culloden's been and gone, and Carolina Oliphant is crafting a lament for her namesake, hoping it'll cheer her father and grandfather, old Jacobites the pair:

"Sweet the lav'rock's note and lang,
Lilting wildly up the glen;
And aye the o'ver world o'he sang
Will ye no' come back again?"

Sparked by the engine, a new noise bounces around Level 3, echoing off pillars and ceiling. A bolt popping free from a girder and clattering over the pale limestone floor as Victoria's train whisks her across the Tay, the bridge weakening a fraction more under her trunks full of tartans and plaids. Six months later, more bolts than one fly out and seventy five people plummet down with the train. The girder screams and warps at the memory of the day the bridge collapsed.

Clunk. Thud.

At Glenfield and Kennedy, a man dips a fine brush in enamel paint and sketches a swan and cygnets onto a display water meter. Thinking of fishing, of afternoons spent on the bank of the Irvine, of how when the weather improves he'll walk there with his son, telling him of flies and lures. He adds ripples of cooling water, a few swaying reeds.

Clunk, thud goes the engine, and over in Glasgow, the silhouette of luxury flats fades and time shifts back to the middle of the nineteenth century. Seven men sweat as they guide a heavy shaft for the Great Eastern under the massive steam hammer at Lancefield Forge. The piston falls once more, clunk, thud, and the Countess of Dundonald graciously accepts a silver casket and ivory hammer from a representative of Fairfield's, not quite sure where she'll put them but mildly gratified nonetheless. HMS Cochrane slides out into the Clyde, primed for the Great War and destined to survive the Battle of Jutland only to be wrecked two years later in the homelier waters of the Mersey.

Clunk, thud.

At North Ronaldsay the light twinkles and flips, eight radiating beams sweeping round the horizon in their own unique pattern. The highest land-based lighthouse in Britain, in 1998 it'll work alone, automated.

"Lighthouses, eh?" the young Stevenson says, passing by the Bell Rock. "I've seen enough lighthouses on this jaunt to last me a lifetime. But I'll warrant I can dream up a tale of high adventure set on the open seas."

One chill September morning at Kinnaird, an adventure for boys takes shape, and Robert Louis's father proves the biggest boy of all. "Flint's old ship was named the 'Walrus!'" he cries, and his son is pleased to concur.

Clunk, thud. The Comet eases out of Leith en route to London. Emigrants and adventurers wave goodbye to Greenock and Dundee, seeking new lives and new fortunes in New Zealand and Canada. Ranges are fed and clothes put through the mangle. At crossroads and village halls, in parks and town squares, war memorials blossom all over the land.

It's halfway through the night now, the dead hours. Darker stories approach, ones which would send a shiver down Alexander Steuart's aching spine. The swoop of the piston mirrors that of the Maiden as it cleaves some poor hapless soul's head from his shoulders. The next swoop conjures up another execution, less smooth, less clean. Mary's lapdog cowers under her skirts, his yelp unnoticed as his mistress slumps to the floor.

"Sweet Jesus," she's heard to whisper, but it takes another blow to sever her neck, another still to slice through the last bit of gristle. Henry Grey, Earl of Kent, fastidiously notes that, "the blooddye cloathes, the blockke, & what soever els bluddye was burned, in the chimneye fyer". Lucky then for little Geddon, that when he's finally wrenched from his mistress he's whisked off to be washed, so imbrued with her blood is he.

Tireless - clunk, thud - the engine keeps on, forcing up deeper, more distant stories. It's check mate on Lewis, the white king tips over. A penannular brooch dazzles as it's pinned to the breast of a cloak for the first time. A drunk man scrambles onto the back of a long-suffering pony for the hundredth time.

A Roman shyly hands a gift to a Scots woman, whose father was a Viking. She turns the pot over to see the letters he's written, listens as he explains what they signify. She's suspicious, but reckons that even if it's a spell, it's one she wouldn't mind falling under. Love Me, I Love You.

Sharp flint lodges in a man's spine and he crumples in the long grass. Cain's history won't be written for another six thousand years, but this is no accident. An arrow fired through experiment rather than malice, a warped quest for knowledge, a tragic "what if?"

Down, much lower down, the first pines take root in the north, the first oaks in the south.

Thud, clunk, thud, clunk, emotions surge through the building, pulses of fear and joy and hate and love. Boredom is there too, of course it is, and resignation, but the Newcomen engine sifts through it all, casting up glittering fragments on the tide of murky water. The memories which give the exhibits meaning, the people who once stained them with sweat and blood and tears, with the warmth of hope and the chill of despair.

All through the night the engine thuds, until dawn breaks and the last reverberation echoes against stone and glass. Slowly the levels fade again, history freeze frames on pedestals and behind glass, and the museum is still. The mice conduct their last reconnaissance before the cleaners come in, and a little later the Bristo Port entrance reopens.

One man has a skip in his step, for he found a captive audience of tourists keen to hear his tales of resurrectionists and other ghouls. One woman drags her heels and curses another late night. At nine o'clock the Tower entrance admits a group of early visitors, eager and fresh. Behind them a familiar face, a man plodding up to level 5, a quiet corner seat in which to read his book. Before long children are screaming through Hawthornden Court on their way to see the Maiden. Hearts beat a fraction faster as visitors twirl around to follow the declaration of Arbroath. And sometimes, just sometimes, a person stands with her nose pressed against a display, and before she knows what's happening the light changes and the noise of the museum fades. Some tiny invisible key inside her springs the case wide open, and just for a second, she steps forward and into the past.

At 3.30pm a man in a blue boiler suit will press the button which starts the Newcomen engine. And with a somnambulant thud, the piston will begin to rise and fall, rise and fall.