

From Glasgow to Saturn – Issue 12

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Breadcrumbs

by Matt Leavey

They tumbled from her fingers; the wind sending them chasing after each other, eddying in circles, gathering in the cracks between patio slabs still glazed with last night's frost. Dried fragments of once-bread, dancing around her feet.

Later, they watched a film in darkness. The sky behind the houses opposite was still bruised purple, long after the sun had set. All afternoon she'd waited, but the birds had never come.

"Sorry hon, don't think they wanted your bread."

She shrugged sleepily from her end of the sofa. "Doesn't matter. Still be there tomorrow."

"Shall I open some wine?"

"Can do."

Sodium orange stained the clouds, and the sky behind faded to almost black. She sipped the sour sauvignon until drowsiness forced her upstairs. She left him watching old comedy repeats they'd seen a hundred times. Every so often she could hear him, laughing in all the same places.

In the morning, she wound the cord around the hairdryer's handle, nestled it into its basket. The grey sky seemed to have settled somewhere just above the window, as if she could have reached out and grab a handful of dank, miserable cloud.

The breadcrumbs had gone from the patio.

"Do you think sparrows have midnight snacks?"

He put his half drunk coffee on the kitchen table and fixed his tie in the mirror.

"Don't be silly." His reflection smiled at her, over his shoulder, and winked with the wrong eye.

"Where did the bread go, then?"

"I don't know. Aren't there foxes around here?"

"I suppose so."

"There you are then."

The crust broke under her fingers, pleasing the way it cracked around the multigrains, showering the bench top with seeds and flakes of oat. She scooped them all onto a plate and walked through the living room to the French windows.

He raised his eyebrow as she came back in. "You want to watch. If they get too fat, next door's Siamese'll have'em."

He still hadn't taken his tie off as he flicked through the channels on Sky, slurping the froth from a warm bottle of Stella. He never waited for the information to load, just flicked to the next channel, until he found an all night rerun of Red Dwarf. The beer smelt of sickness.

"I think I'll go and read."

"Okay. I'm just going to watch this for a bit."

"Don't be all night."

He shook his head, bottle to his lips.

It was still early; the sky hadn't faded beyond mauve, and the unwarmed street lights were still the colour of a three-bar fire. She was about to drop the blind when a scurrying flash of something tiny caught her eye. She reached for the lamp's flex, switched it off, and waited.

There it was again. Something small and fast - a mouse. It bounded and bounced over the patio, and she smiled and smiled as it picked up crumb after crumb and scurried them away.

"A mouse," she announced in the morning, "it was a mouse."

He straightened another of his ties. Full Windsor, broad and smart. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She explained about the breadcrumbs she always put out when she got home, and how she'd thought it was the birds eating it, but it wasn't. It was a mouse.

"I'll buy some traps on the way home."

"No, don't! I don't want you to."

"Why not?"

"It's sweet. It's not doing anyone any harm. Leave it alone."

He shrugged and checked his watch. "Okay. Whatever you say. I've got to go." He opened the door to the porch. "Just don't blame me when they've taken up residence in the airing cupboard."

The rain dripped from her shrivelled umbrella, plutting and pittering onto the tiled kitchen floor. The town had been quiet, so she'd taken her own time to come home from work. A seat in the coffee house for once, without having to share the table. She'd read yesterday's paper, ordered another latté. There was nothing especially to rush back for. She shook the rain from her coat and draped it on the back of a chair.

She fished the pack of hobnobs from her bag and opened them. She flicked the first with her thumb, lifted it, bit into its musty sweetness. A treat. A nice surprise. She made tea, sipping the air over it and eating another biscuit. What was the catchphrase? Once you nibble

you're nobbled? Something like that. They were his favourites rather than hers. They were better with dark chocolate, bitterness to balance out the sweetened oats.

She put her empty cup into the dishwasher, took a teatowel out of one drawer, and the marble rolling pin out of another. She wrapped the biscuits in the cloth, and gently smashed them to pieces.

Was it just one mouse? It didn't always go the same way, sometimes bounding across the flags, charging up to the biggest chunk of biscuit it could find and bounding back to the corner of the trellis. As bold as you like. Other times, it clung to the sides of the wall, cautious, reserved. Only picking the crumbs it could reach from the safety of the shadows. Surely there were two - how else could she explain it?

As the sky darkened, they both started to venture out at the same time, working together to drag the bigger pieces of bread behind the trellis, back towards their nest. She let the curtain drop.

Saturday. She rolled over, but his space had already gone cold. White morning sun glowed slantwise through the curtains, streaming in and blinding her for a moment as she drew them. She stood to one side, watched the bright specks of nothing that danced in the air. So many of them - how did they not fill your lungs and choke you?

He was pouring something out of the can. A long, slow stream of it, over the edge of the patio, into the weeds behind the trellis. He shook the empty can, droplets scattering across the flagstones, and then he walked back to the house, his careless boots crushing the biscuit pieces to powder.

Matt Leavey is a student on the taught Creative Writing PhD, and a graduate of the MLitt in Creative Writing.

Moonlight by Nikki Cameron

Tom coughed and started to drift upwards into wakefulness. The pressure in his bladder was unavoidable and he stumbled through the house to piss away the evening. As he came out of the bathroom the sound of the back door banging concentrated his awareness. ‘Are you there Fiona?’ The silence echoed back.

He went into the bedroom and stood at the window and lit a cigarette. The moon was the biggest he’d seen for a while. The light was getting into everything, highlighting the hills, the gullies and bare rock, leaving the village in the dark, pushing it even closer to the side of the loch. Tom hated the hills, especially at night. He could swear they were breathing as they sat there watching. As if they knew everything that was going on in every one of the little houses below. Knew all the secrets and lies told in dead conversations round bright hearths.

The murmur of Fiona’s voice caught Tom’s attention. She and her brother were standing by his car. She pulled his cardigan close around her as he talked at her.

Tom turned back into the dark of the room and lay down on the bed. He pulled the covers over himself and stared at the window. He could just see the top of the highest peak, the moon directly above it. The light didn’t reach this far into the room. He thought about David, his own brother. He still missed him. Time hadn’t healed.

He needed to piss again. There were some nights now he was hardly out of the bathroom and tonight it was hurting like hell. As he stood at the toilet he wondered about telling Fiona, casually as if thinking out loud that he might visit the doctor for a check up. But he knew he wouldn’t say anything, it’d sort itself.

He went back to the bedroom window. They were still standing by the car. Fiona was shaking her head and staring down at the ground. The moonlight whitened her skin to the point that she looked as if she was translucent. Tom went to the dresser and reaching in beneath the socks and underpants he pulled out a bottle of whisky. He returned to the window; she was talking now. Tom had always liked his brother in law. They'd spent a lot of together the four of them; with the children, picnics, holidays, lots of nights in the pub, but he couldn't remember the last time they'd had a conversation that lasted more than a few minutes. Tom's back started to ache and he leant against the sill. He saw David's face in his reflection in the window. The same face he'd seen the last time in the hospital; skeletal, grey, the life drained out of it.

Fiona was holding onto her brother now. She held him tight, like he was a lifeline out the dark shadows cast by the hills. He got into the car and as he drove away she looked towards the moon and then turned to the house. Tom went back to the bed, pulled the covers up around him and waited. He listened to her moving through the house. As she came into the bedroom, he closed his eyes and listened to her undress. She got under the covers and turned towards him and then away from his stillness. She'd brought cold moon air in with her and he could feel it seep across the bed towards him.

Nikki Cameron is a full-time student in the Creative Writing MLitt programme.

The Sky Lanterns **by Richie Murby**

Every Friday night, we gathered up on Float's roof, to get drunk, watch sky lanterns and talk about girls. Float was a class act, but the rest of us, we were like the beers we smuggled with us: we stuck out of our clothes at awkward angles, we clunked, no two of us the same. Mysteriously, Float seemed to prefer our company to the senior kids who had picked him out for greater things, and who clapped him on the back in the hallway and asked him to their parties. He would decline politely, shrugging and motioning towards us, his breathless gnomes. A junior kid, like Float was, was never asked to parties. It just didn't happen. And to say No! How proud we felt. But the vicarious loss, alive then in a way that I've never felt since, was pure agony. Float just shrugged.

All six of us were obsessed with the sky lanterns that summer. Nobody knew why they were there, not the government, not our parents, not us, nobody. It was great. We would have given anything to find out, we would have given anything not to find out. It all started one day in late May when my Dad came in from cutting the "goddam" grass. His breathing after the sound of the mower made me think of someone else cutting their lawns maybe ten gardens away. Then his voice came. Two or three gardens away.

"Hey, something's happening to the goddam sky." I went out in my socks, expecting a weird cloud formation or something, and the smell of the cut grass, the happiest smell I know, hit me just as I saw the first one: a bright yellow ball-type thing, a second sun against the blue, blurry and swimming through the sky. And there were others too, some smaller or maybe higher, some bigger or maybe lower. Maybe a dozen. We thought maybe they were balloons but we knew they weren't.

Well, that was odd enough, and I remember the phones all went down that day. Maybe it was electrical interference of some kind. More likely everybody just called everybody and the lines got jammed up. So they went to the neighbours and said to them what little there was to say about it. Then the lines came back up, and everybody called everybody again, anyone, the cops, the doctor, the ex-wife, the guy who walked your dog on Sunday mornings.

It was a suburban pantomime of understatement; I guess people just wanted to be connected with everyone else, and pretend it could always be like this, not shy, not

lonely, no-one even having to say much or do anything. That window closed pretty quick, though, of course. How long can you forget yourself for? By June, I could see maybe a hundred from my bedroom window at any one time. By July, the sky was like water on a sunny day or a bright night, paths of light made up of uncountable points, in drifts and pools, patterns, even tides. It was weird.

Well, of course we started to speculate as soon as we got over the shock, that strange chatty silence which at first muffled our curiosity like snow in the woods. Sedgwick, my best friend, whose love of academia and of wearing his trousers too high was only redeemed in the eyes of the hip kids by an astounding array of conspiracy theories, believed, tamely by his standards, that the magnetic poles were switching. To this I said North wouldn't be just North anymore, it would be South too. I felt weirdly moved by this, and started on about how I could imagine all those electrons forming travelling parties for strength and comfort and setting off on their great migration. (I am not a scientist). Sedgwick just frowned and scribbled something on a pad, then held it up for me to read:

“Pretentious Fuck.”

You see, his mother had made him agree not to swear or say mean things to anyone, and this was his way of getting around it. We used to wind him up in various ways to try and make him break the pact but he never buckled. Once we tickled him pretty severely, and though he wet himself a tiny bit he held out. I still have the piece of paper, half-ripped up and all crumply, which he tried to curse at us with as we tickled him. The spectacle of him trying to write it was hysterical enough. But then looking at his actual attempt, the heroic futility of those squiggles, which no mortal could ever read...and Sedgwick laughed harder than anyone, if that's even possible. We all just buckled. Well some things are so funny you even get a little bit scared maybe, like vertigo, except you don't care at all. You can put a moment like that in a locket or a wallet or whatever and if you can just remember where you put it when you need it it will beat everything.

But I digress. My little brother Jed (Jedi) thought the Lanterns were jellyfish who had evolved lungs, possibly because of discarded radioactive material, or a Russian experiment. The Russian thing he got from our Dad and his buddies, I'm afraid to say. (And this was 1993.) Jedi added that these jellyfish had also acquired the ability to generate an anti-gravitational field around themselves. I asked him why

they would do that and he looked up from his Lego with an expression of patient disgust which was essentially pity.

"So they can fly. Stupidonian. I've learned it as well. How to think like a jellyfish. That's the key. But I certainly won't be showing you how to do it."

"Why's that, then?"

Jedi sighed over his space station.

"Simply because you're too stupid to understand it."

Now I couldn't rule out Jedi's musings on the any more than anyone else's, and so I just nodded thoughtfully, making sure to accidentally stand on his spaceship on my way out.

The Pastor's theory was the nearest I came to rejecting straight up, although to be honest, I just didn't like the guy, and I didn't like the way he tried to use the lanterns for his own ends. It didn't feel right to me. The idea in itself was quite appealing in a way – he believed, or claimed to believe, that the lanterns were the souls of the dead, in some great procession across the sky. Well, not the souls of all the dead, just the saved. They were Proof, he sighed, Proof at last of God's love, his concern, and even his (he'll get no capital letter from me) existence. So much for Proof being the enemy of Faith, so much for all that stuff. These souls were sent as a warning, he declared, a reminder of what was at stake in this life, a reminder to think about the future. He taught his flock to fear what was coming, while claiming he was doing the opposite, just like those e-mails I get from insurance companies. I had no love for Pastor Johnson, nor for the Church in general. It's cruel to remind those who have forgotten about death and eternity. And the truth is we don't need to talk about eternity, 'cause we ain't going to be there. And Death, same goes. And other people dying? Well, let's cross that bridge when we get there, okay?

None of these theories about the Lanterns could be verified or falsified: no zoom lens could capture an image of one with any degree of sharpness, and no-one could capture one. Even the military had failed. So of course we decided to have a try ourselves. Our method was simple and required little in the way of effort or sacrifice. We just hung out on Float's roof like always, and hoped that a lantern would drop in on us, at which point both camera and large butterfly net would be employed to put us on the cover of TIME Magazine or even Mysteries Monthly, though really we didn't care about that at all. Our primitive methods had so far yielded no success, though: they wouldn't come near us at all. We tried chanting, meditating, candles, even a big

yellow beach ball, just in case they *were* animals and in hopes they would want to make friends with it. I know it sounds crazy but it didn't seem crazy at the time. Once I even got the feeling, after a few beers I admit, that one of those lights streaming above was my Grandmother, who had died when I was ten. So I started speaking to her and even cried a tiny bit. It was pretty dumb and no-one said anything but the air went odd and I felt really stupid. Then Sedgwick dropped his beer everywhere and everyone laughed at him. It was an act of unspectacular but deep kindness; the kind of subtlety in male friendship that women don't always see.

But I digress. What I wanted to tell you about was the one time, the one single time a Lantern came down to us. All six of us were there on the roof (me, Float, Mash, Sedgwick, Bon Jovi (he came into school one day with his long hair sort of *crimped* and the name stuck, although he never tried *that* again), and Grimsby (that was just his name – his first name, would you believe). When the lantern fell or floated down, we were in the middle of attempting a classic male idiocy – specifically we were trying to lob a stone into a sturdy ceramic mug at a distance of fifteen feet. Mash had just achieved this feat to wild scenes of only partly ironic celebrations. Bon Jovi was sort of headbanging or something when I saw a yellowy glow pass over his hair, then over his startled face. It looked as if he'd spilled beer, moonlight and sunlight over himself. The Lantern was about the size of a basketball, and it was as bright as anything in the late twilight, but it didn't hurt your eyes. Not one of us could describe anything else about it afterwards. It was like the opposite of a shape, a hole in a hole, a name for something. It was about fifteen feet above us, and falling so slow like snow. Like Jedi's jellyfish, like a dreamed animal, the peace of absence, of not being - ah, but here I am grasping after descriptions. Here I am trying to close a fist right after waking up. I remember a dog barked somewhere. And I remember how it didn't break the silence, it defined it, like calling a name in a long-empty house.

Sedgwick, as the tallest of us, had been nominated as the net-holder, after a heated exchange in which I, to my shame, argued against my best friend, on the grounds that his coordination left something (a lot) to be desired. I remember saying, only half-joking: "Sedge, you're fucking clumsy, if you take the net, and screw up, I won't ever forgive you." It was a mean thing to say, even as a joke, but that's how we talked to each other then. There was an intimacy to it that politeness just doesn't allow. Besides, it had all become so important by then. I didn't see that he was just

offering to spill the beer all over again. If any of us had to fuck up, he wanted it to be him. Well, anyway, he told me to fuck off in big capital letters... with no punctuation either. Pedantic Sedgwick! I guess he was pretty livid.

I digress. The lantern is still hanging there. We are still there. Now Sedgwick holds the net up to the shape that is not a shape, the answer without any question, the question nobody answered. He scoops ever so gently at the light, like a spoon caressing food from the chin of a baby. The lantern seems to yield, to sway as if off-balance. It aches at the fork in the road, the yes or the no. And then suddenly everything has stopped moving. The lantern is quite still on the lip of the net. Sedgwick is not shaking – he is in some place beyond concentration. He looks like the man who used to go around on stilts and light the gas lamps at twilight, and we are children, who stare from darkening rooms and hear already the snuffling and scraping of creatures in the wardrobe, and who stare out at streetlights dear as mothers, strung around the throat of the city, magic lanterns, candled dreams and death deflected, death delayed until tomorrow night.

If you made a binary code picture of every thought I ever had and zoomed out a long way that moment on Float's roof is what you'd see. The moment is longer than my life and will outlast it. But it ended. It ended when the net quivered finally in Sedgwick's hands and suddenly the lantern was falling towards me and suddenly I was holding it in my hands but the *it* was changed before I could know and already had become just the dark weight of the air, leaving me blinking desperately at retinal continents, faces, flying machines, figures made of colours or made of darkness, the stains of loss that I still see whenever I look up to the light.

The Lady With the Saints by Fiona Wright

The rain is warm and cleansing. Glimmering lights are mirrored all around on the drenched tarmac, the duck pond and the foggy windows. The streets are empty, save for the ducks and myself, a drenched wanderer. The water has rinsed away people as well as dust, and my lungs are full of the scent of it merging with the hot, parched ground. The Cathedral of the Sacred Family looms above the web of streets, jaggy and mountainous but at the same time so very human, broken tiles and body fluids writhing towards heaven.

As my eyes scan the spaces, the reflections and the shadows, I see a lady crouched in a shop doorway, staring out into space as the rain douses the city. Dressed in checked trousers and a shirt, short mousey hair and glasses, she has a little basket with a lid by her side. Her gaze shifts to meet me.

“Oye, que te estas mojando, maja, sienta te ha lado mío.”

I realise she’s probably right. The sky is a waterfall, and I could stand to get out of its way for a moment.

“¿Quieres usted tomar un café?”

Her pale face lights up so I go in search of a vendor and return with two steaming paper cups to take shelter. After a few moments lost in the hot bittersweet brew, I ask her what she’s doing here and her eyes flicker towards the basket. I raise an eyebrow.

She tells me that the basket contains prayers. She searches the streets and if anyone is in need, her basket will contain the incantation for the job. Lifting the lid I see lots of little faces looking back at me from a guddle of laminated cards. Saint Francis of Assisi is twittering to the birds, the baby of Prague is confident and rosy

cheeked in gilded velvet robes, the Virgin Maria and her chubby infant son bask in their own light. A young woman gazes out over a diagonal cross, almost resting on it. She is Saint Eulalia, tortured and killed by the Romans as a child for claiming her Catholic faith and now a patron saint of the great port city of Barcelona and of all sailors; a busy girl. Her soul is said to have flown from her mutilated body in the form of a dove.

My companion has a story to tell. She is bringing up her daughter alone, working many jobs to afford to educate her child. Do I think a child can grow healthy in body and mind without a father? I tell her I'm sure it happens all the time. She rummages in the pockets of a downy coat she is using to cushion her post in the doorway and produces a packet of cigarettes and a rumpled sheaf of papers.

“¿Que es eso?”

She tells me that while selling saint cards by day, by night she is a writer. Would I be so kind as to review her manuscript? I accept the cigarette she offers, although black tobacco does not agree with me, and as she lights me up the puffs of hot choking smoke catch a feather from her coat lining and they dance together for a moment. The sprawling, handwritten papers tell the tale of a man at odds with his identity who, feeling drawn to other men and to the prettier accoutrements afforded to women, has a sex change. A furious God punishes him by striking all sensation from his new sex organs, leaving him broken and repentant. I offer some encouragement, still choking on the black smoke, then put my cigarette out with a fizzle in the dregs of my coffee. I have to go; some friends are coming to take me to the mountains. I wish her well with her endeavours and squelch on my way. The rain has calmed, and beams of milky sunshine are breaking through the clouds.

By the time we set off that evening the sky has cleared, and the stars do battle with the streetlights. I am nestled in the back seat of a Landrover with the cool earthy air after the rain wafting over me, wondering at the street life of the new millennium. Painted human statues are poised in stillness amidst the riot of humanity, hats and buckets assembled for donations. One makeshift stage displays a proud golden Caesar and nearby a man and woman with a snake in a basket are playing Adam and Eve. A skinny girl with a baby on her hip is busking outside a busy restaurant, singing to vacant faces. Transsexuals work their corner of the sex trade safe zone with all their wares on display, bulging neon G-strings doing the jobs of fig leaves to keep on the right side of the law, bare silicone breasts thrusting. Again, from the tangle of light and shadow, a figure stands out. I see her again, the lady with the saints, her tired pallor only magnified by a slick of cherry red lipstick that somehow makes her face seem harder. The light cascading from the splendidly lit fountain she is leaning against shatters into a thousand narrow beams radiating from her sequined dress. She stares into darkness, scattering crumbs for the grubby pigeons that flock around her stiletto heels.

“Señora!”

I am answered only with a smoky lipsticked smile and the knowing wink of a hard-working man fallen from grace.

Anatomy by **Richard Scott Pye**

An open dissection kit lay neatly alongside the cadaver, its stainless steel instruments resting on an inner lining of red fabric. His white coat was pristine – he washed it after every dissection – and its pockets were stuffed with blue latex gloves.

- You're a keen one, aren't ye pal? Three times – four maybe – that I've seen you in here this week.

- Well, there's a lot to learn.

The cadaver lay on a steel trolley, one of a score arranged in rows across the room. A black bag, covering its head, rustled against the breeze of the air conditioning, giving an impression of breathing.

- You're on the way tae being a doctor?

He pulled on a pair of gloves. Doctor: it seemed like a foreign word.

- Only three years left now.

The thorax had been opened previously. He pulled back the ribcage on each side. The thoracic organs lay tidily in place. He removed the darkened lungs and placed them at the foot of the trolley. Nestled beneath was the heart, its arteries and veins severed already. He thought of their names - vena cava, aorta – and of a diagram he'd seen in the lab that morning. He lifted the heart from its recess.

- Careful wi' that, son.

- You're dead. Does it really matter now?

- I didnae give my body tae medical research for you tae bash up ma insides.

He held the organ in his hand; turned it over with his thumb. Necrotic scar tissue from a heart attack tainted the left ventricle: a subtle darkening of the fleshy red tissue. He smiled.

- It looks pretty bashed up already. Too many fish suppers and cigarettes?

- Not enough, pal, not enough. Forty-nine, eh? I always thought I'd make it to sixty, at least. Och, I ken I'm no fit as a fiddle, but still, I didnae expect that... One minute I'm walking down tae the shop, next thing I'm on the pavement, gasping for air, feeling like a bus just reversed over ma chest. Nasty pain, so it is. You know your body's saying 'something's not right here' when ye get pain like that."

A myocardial infarction, resulting from atherosclerotic disease... typically of the marginal branch? Or was it is the anterior interventricular? He perused the markings of the heart surface and tried to decipher their meanings. The

dark and stiff scar tissue was on the left ventricle – so was it the circumflex branch?

- Stuck wi' something pal?

His concentration was broken.

- I'd appreciate if you kept quiet. I can't think with you talking.

- And I cannae talk without you thinking - funny that eh? And it's the circumflex branch of the left coronary artery, ye know that.

He did know it: the left side of the heart worked the hardest. It all made sense. But he'd failed that exam – twice, twice – and if he failed again, he would be off the course. And the thought of failing again...

But he knew it. It all made sense.

So why couldn't he remember it all?

- Too much tae remember?

- You're distracting me.

The yellow and wrinkled hand nearest him slowly flexed into a fist; dead fingernails scraped against the steel of the trolley.

- Remember yer guitar? And mind aw the songs ye wrote in music.

Mind that feeling you got from playing tae that crowd in the school gym? What happened tae that? Ye haven't touched a guitar for ages. It's no like riding a bike, either; you cannae just pick it up and remember every little note of a song like ye played it yesterday. The longer ye leave it, the more it'll rot away, just like every ounce of ma body tissue will, every little scrap decomposing and imploding –

In his hand, the heart contracted powerfully. He dropped it onto the trolley, which rattled with its every beat.

- Just shut the fuck up.

- I've three wee girls, ye know. The youngest's only thirteen. She's gonnae grow up without having her da' tae look after her when she needs him. I worked hard ye know, tae give ma family the best chance possible, tae make sure ma wife was happy. And here you are, up on yer medical pulpit, "too many fish suppers and cig-a-rettes", preaching like yer something perfect with yer immaculate white coat and shinin' scalpel. I can see inside yer head, don't forget that. Mind your guitar? Or is there no time for anything but anatomy and physiology? Can't ye see it? Yer turning –

- (Shut up)

- clinical and cynical and you're forgettin' –

At the base of the trolley, the lungs expanded with an inwards rush of air.

- (Stop talking)

- what it actually means to be alive and to feel something that isn't fear and worry and regret and you're becoming always medicine and nothing else and always nephrons and hepatocytes and influenza –
He saw the abdominal muscles tightening beneath rigid skin. The shoulders of the cadaver rose up from the trolley.

- (I've heard enough)

- but what about people and happiness and life coming before death, what about the songs you wrote and that girl from school you never stopped thinking about until you failed that exam and forgot the world existed –

He speared his scalpel into the exposed throat of the cadaver, and everything fell back to stillness and silence. The black bag crackled in the breeze. He tore it open. That face, had he seen it before?

The door to the dissection room swung open. He turned towards it.

“Mate, I cannot believe you're in here this late - again! Everybody's headed to the pub. You up for a pint?”

He nodded. After replacing the heart and lungs, he packed up his dissection kit and left.

Richard Scott Pye is an undergraduate medical student.

Storm Fishing for Souls **By John Jennett**

Mid-Atlantic levers of a storm were being pulled,
tightening the isobars and spinning them towards
where Curlews and bold Oystercatchers resolutely threaded
the field that Calum sculpted once for solemn Ploughing Matches.
Elegant beaks needled in the drills for grubs which burrowed
as the millibars descended, causing birds to trill sad pibrochs
between frantic fruitless lunges. Piping the dissonant shrill warnings -
Calum's mother would've said - foretold of someone's mourning.

His brother high on Ben Mor's heather, knifed a long-stalked stag;
cold shadows drew a seaward glance from where the grallochs slithered.
Occulting from the grey-mares' tails, sun weakened on the crags,
whilst anodyne west zephyrs stirred and white bog-cotton leaned
away from the horizon's grin, of charcoal clouds like flak.
From his eyrie he divined the portents they expressed
and saw below white-horses effervesce but not yet menace,
a distant dance with Calum's Yawl, dressed up in tan stretched canvas.

Young Angus then abandoned the eviscerated deer
held one hand to his bonnet as he faltered to a run
through bracken shoots and clinging bog the Sheilings panted near;
he shoved an unlocked, trusted door and threw inside his gun.
Unloaded he was faster, sprang a rhythm for his fear
which echoed exhortations from the Priests' persuasive lungs
that every Friday's trawling should be marketed for Church;
his pious smile converting dreams - of cash - from lipid fish.

Angus vainly searched the Croft, but only black cats curling
purred witness to the pane of the barometer's deep frown.

He hurried to the harbour where horizontal rain was scouring,
katabatic came the violent gusts from scree-tops veering down,
to beat the boats he counted in around the headland plunging,
their crews relieved to shelter wherever they were blown.
Though Calum never hove in view still Angus at the pier-head braced
as afternoon soon shaded early night-times' galey face.

Morning's sallow daybreak showed the blow had been and gone.
The fleet processed - trailed "Silver Sea" - with Angus at her tiller,
ghosting up the skerried coast, swell glassy and forlorn.
Oars creaked towards the yellow rocks where Pollack loved to linger,
and Calum had been hauling nets, when others ran before the storm.
A nephew cries - a shiplike shape's spied many fathoms under;
the boy dived deep. Returned. Bursting breath ahead of words that formed
the sight of men still borne amongst the living shoals they plundered.
Four souls drowned. Collected by the meshy purse which held their proud donation,
towards the Father's draughty roof - to save the congregation.

Historical note:

In *A School in South Uist* (Birlinn, 1964) F.G. Rea reminisces on his time as headmaster there between 1890 and 1913. This includes, not only accounts of storms and tragic loss of life at sea, but also the story of how the impoverished crofter/fishermen of Eriskay built a church and associated house for their community. What they could not construct from driftwood and other found material was funded by the proceeds of one days catch a week. To this day St Michaels has a fishing boat's prow for an Altar.

John Jennett is a full-time student in the Creative Writing MLitt programme.

Blue Eye of Siberia

By Helen McClory

Below Lake Baikal, in the gorgeous Siberia wastes, the crust of the earth is drawing apart at a fearsome rate of two centimetres a year. Does the water gush down through the chasm and rise in plumes of steam? Maybe. It has better symmetry with such returns. It's definitely cold down there, lightless. Like Mae.

I won't say we had grown up together, though that was how it seemed at the time. We went to the same Uni, lived for two years in each other's pockets; in-jokes, coffee houses, hangovers, Sunday mornings that lasted all week. I would wake to her on the window-side of my bed threading cereal hoops on floss for a necklace. Or tickling my neck with a gull feather. We were like that Frida Kahlo painting, The Two Fridas. Twin embryonic people. Sharing hearts, dresses, veins. It was all so bohemian, incestuous. Then, out of the blue, it was done. She did it in such a wild way, not vicious or malevolent, but ridding herself of me as a drowning woman would cut the rope that was dragging her under.

It was on the morning I came downstairs to my goldfish side up at the top of her tank that I first wished ill on Mae. I should say, I think I am a little on the witchy side: sometimes my thoughts come true, so I have to be careful. My physics teacher gave me straight marks in school for a whole term, simply because I wished him too. Simply because I moved my fingers over his name on my notebook. Terrible powers, I try not to think too much of anything. That's why I work with animals these days.

Now Mae had come back drunk the evening before Strawberry's death. Think her faculty party had gone out of control. She would have been pouring neat shots of golden schnapps and daring everyone within earshot to join in. In all probability she'd have pulled someone she shouldn't. The lump-nosed lecturer, or maybe even his wife. That would have been Mae's style.

It was the beginning of summer, the house was a damp-night quiet. I was still up loitering, making cup after cup of sweet lemon tea, planning to catch her when she made it through the door so we could make a new night of it. An extension of her drunken fun even in my sobriety. In the kitchen I watched an old daddy-long-legs bump itself into the ceiling light. There was a spider, too, waving

one leg from a corner: a semitranslucent beastie that looked foreign and dangerous. I tried not to, but the connection was made in my mind and the poor Daddy was doomed.

As the little white spider zipped up its prey, the kettle clicked and clouded up the window. I should say this was the night I learned about Lake Baikal. My obsessions at the time were limited to Strawberry, Mae, and Alex from my human geography tutorial.

The goldfish I liked because the minds of goldfish are very peaceful, unmagical. Mae liked me because I had made her to: She had hazel eyes, which I think are the most receptive. Lighter eyes, like my own, are less so. With hazel eyes, it's like there is a glaze on them, half melting. It is not a very scientific process though. I'm probably craving chocolate, and that's why I'm putting it like this.

The boy, I daydreamed about him when I lost concentration. He had brown eyes, so I could have tried my luck. I was not distracted often enough. Mae kept me busy, and colouring in maps and soil slices. If I had been a different person, like Mae, I would have sketched the cartography of his penis, don't you think? But you have to monitor yourself carefully, when you have what I have. I was building up to it though.

I heard the aquarium lid clattering. The tank was in the living room so when we had guests they could gawp at my pet while they listened to CD mixtapes and drank wine-and-cola.

- Mae, I asked, are you feeding Strawberry? She doesn't need any more.

- No, I am not, my love, she answered (eloquent, drunk). Dear, did you know about the existence of Lake Baikal? The blue eye of Siberia it is called. That it holds more water than all the great lakes of North America combined? That it is home to the world's only freshwater seal?

Mae was part Ukrainian, which put her in league with furs, deep snows, the samovar. I'd never been to Russia, but I was in love with *A Hero of Our Time*, and *The White Guard*. All of it mixed up together; the history of the early twentieth century and the looping borders and my exuberant love for...places I could never reach.

I went back into the living room, cup in hand. She was sprawled out, slippers, tipping vodka over the sofa. Had mascara on her teeth and her dress was riding up.

-Where did you hear that? I asked her.

-From that boy you like, Alex. Listen. Listen, I should tell you something...

It was a grimy mundane betrayal. Something I had thought of her doing in darker moments. I didn't mind. Or I don't now that it's been years and I can hardly recall his face. It had after all been my fault for thinking it, for opening the possibility. But I fizzed into tears anyway and flounced around. For show, maybe. It ended with my door slamming, she swearing or apologising in best Ukrainian.

I cried myself to sleep, but that would have been endurable like every other tiff. But in the morning the fish was dead. I smelled the water. Didn't cry. I made myself teacup after teacup (with a saucer for shaken spills) and watched Strawberry floating there in her alcohol bath.

In the end, hung-over Mae couldn't scrape together enough sorriness. We stayed on bad terms to the end of term, and another two years passed in different houses on opposite sides of our small town. We graduated, carefully ignoring one another at the ceremony. She went off to work in Moscow, a masters, then became a consultant for oil. I worked in a rescue centre. I filled my house with animals. Six more years. I thought I was happy.

Then the internet became a social tool, instead of an anti-social hidey-hole. Everyone had to be friends with everyone or be a pariah. I saw Mae's listing through another Uni correspondent I never see. You have to click a button "ask to be friends?". Heart in my mouth. I sent out my veins to hers, like little shoots into soil. In a few days she answered the message. She had grown out her curls. Her interests were left blank, her books were all textbooks on chemistry. She was married. Another photo showed her face up close. It filled my computer screen. Her eyes were still hazel. Her soft mouth tilted in that same oddly harsh way.

We started a correspondence, timorously factual at first, then whimsical, then totally free. Almost old times. We were writing twice, three times a day. She was lonely, living in six months of dark beside an oil refinery in Siberia. I thought it sounded exotic, the shoot of flame from the iron, the stillness of the lake. Her

husband was not a witty man, which I read as *he drinks then I throw dinner plates*. She wrote to me about another man, very prim and wide-eyed she said he was, possessing something like my way of moving. She would always say things like that. It put ideas in my head. Of course, she slept with him, and in four months broke his heart. I hadn't planned, exactly, for what came next.

Things became desperate: She was pregnant and not for telling her husband. I can't remember my council, probably, get over it and be truthful, you easy bitch, get the next flight here, I'll set you up with something. One night she called me up—I don't know how she found my number, I'd not given it out. I could hear her lick her lips on the other end of the phone, and ice cracking from her voice condensing on the night air.

She said, bastard, he's a bastard. He knows, he hit me, I can't get out of this. Husband or lover, it wasn't clear. On and on she went, pouring it out like blood. He doesn't want a divorce, he wants to break me. That was the last thing she said. Yes, that's how it should be, I thought.

I saw everything clearly. Mae the fly. Stepping in blind but willing. She wanted drama, at the heart of it. She wanted to be beaten down. To die of a cold and punishing life. She wanted me to vindicate these choices.

-Oh Mae, I said, Mae, do you love me? Just silence. Then dumb sobbing. Or laughing, I don't know. I hung up the phone.

Lake Baikal is the deepest lake in the world, and she, from all coincidences, was living on its shore. 7km of sediment at the bottom, and below that a trench in the crust, yawning open a little more each year. You can get all the information you need on the internet. I found out the Transiberian runs around the lake. It must be a beautiful journey.

For a long time after the call there was no news. I kept looking at her page on the social forum; months and months of stasis. I met lots of animals in that time, and named the weakest ones Mae. I sent love to them until they grew strong again and were rehomed. I was Mother Teresa of kittens and three legged dogs, until my internet-only friend wrote to me, in fact posted the message on my wall for all to see: Mae had drowned herself in Lake Baikal.

I looked up page after page of trivia on the lake. You might like to do that, it's very interesting. The playwright Alexander Vampilov drowned there on his birthday during a fishing trip. The water and surrounding land might be ruined in ten years. seepage from the planned oil pipes. Soil creep. Perhaps it was better then for Mae not to help things run towards that.

Sometimes after a long stretch of link clicking and fact finding, I turn away, and I see a train shooting along the rail-line in a snowbound country. In my mind it has to be a steam train, leaving a trail behind it. It gives off one of those low melancholy whistles as though calling to more of its kind to follow. The tracks head to the shore, carry on out over the ice, then down into the dark, still, pristine water. Just visible are submerged mountains replete with icelocked pines and hanging valleys. There are no lights anywhere...no, in one window of the longest carriage, there's Mae; I see her sleeping face, her breathing slight against the glass. Little pink fish are trying and trying to break in.

Helen McClory is currently in her writing-up year of the Creative Writing PhD at Glasgow.

Ferry
by Sam Tongue

The ferry has brought me this far,
slow, rocking gently on its patches

of salt-rust, its broad bellyful of cars.
Cormorants are drying their wings

like dark angels resting from the hunt;
humpback mountains fall over

themselves to fill the horizon,
dusted with snow and ancient

words that have turned to dry bracken,
or are caught, mirrored in the loch's dark shimmer,

reflections of how this place was once thought into being,
strange and somehow familiar, guessed at, untamed.

Later, along the wet coast road,
I watch seals blubber themselves onto boulders,

heavy on bellyfuls of fish, and envy them their balance,
the way they rock gently on the point between two worlds.

Sam Tongue is a PhD student at the Centre for Literature, Theology and the Arts, looking at how poets and writers rewrite and revision biblical texts as a mode of interpretation. He holds a master's in Creative Writing from the University of Exeter and has been published in Maquette, The Exeter Flying Post, and Succour.

Finley Alone by Gary McGhee

NEBRASKA, 1867

Speed being of the essence, Finley Quinn lugged his light pack over his good shoulder and with his remaining hand patted his satchel, confirming the presence of the heavy sheaf of weathered documents. He hurried toward the back of the train, slowing just once to offer a curt nod to the ticket seller, who was almost inclined to ask if all was quite fine. Quinn's appearance – he was dressed in smart but well worn clothes, peered out from a prematurely aged and sharp face, and his left arm was missing from immediately above the elbow – did not itself impress the ticket seller (the poor, veterans, and poor veterans being a sizeable portion of the Union-Pacific railroad's passengers), but his harried, darting expression suggested that something was very wrong. But before the man's vague inklings became a robust suspicion, Finley had disappeared, into the next carriage, and from the ticket seller's mind forever.

He needed a place to jump from – jogging past cabins of blurred heads he prayed for the appearance of a platform or opening, while at the same time certain he would have to settle for getting killed pushing himself out one of the small windows. Presently, he could not care less - so long as he escaped the train.

Finley soon reached the end of the passenger carriages. A door, padlocked and painted a final black, presented itself. He cursed with loud and particular colour. Peering down the dark train, he weighed his options. He did not think he could remain on board. Even together, a false name, dyed hair and an inconsistent adopted accent only went so far, particularly when your arm was conspicuously absent. He was used, after two years, to dealing without it, but it made things damn difficult. That woman had kept looking at him; her husband had kept questioning him. He had excused himself – “Lavatory” – but if they had previously been simply suspicious they would now know... But knowing that he *must* leave made it no easier to work out *how* he was going to go about it. Picking the lock would take too long, and there were far too many people to risk going back through the frontward carriages. Finley despaired.

Suddenly, the train juddered. As if in heavenly answer to Finley's desperate problem, a tiny window next to him – more a porthole – broke from its hinge and clattered open. The Nebraska plains looked in on him, passing by at twenty-five miles an hour, and Finley grimaced back. Wishing he had invested in a bottle of whisky, or at least some cigarettes, he wasted no time. The window was too small for him to fit through while wearing his backpack: he took it and the important satchel off. They would have to go before him – good. No chance of losing his nerve with the documents' recovery providing an incentive.

He swung the bags underhand. In a perfect arc, they passed out into the great unknown. It was time to leave.

“Hurm.” It was hard to swallow the instinctive anticipation of impending pain.

Gripping the oily edge, Finley vaulted out with an awkward thrust. Dusk was spun over him, then under, then over again before he was tumbled into a (beautifully placed) patch of long grass. He lay there for a moment, staring up at the violet clouds, his thoughts briefly buffeted out from his brain. Base fear returned to him with a shot, and he stumbled up to retrieve the satchel with the documents. Too much had been lost to keep them safe. Finley lurched toward their presumed location, dizzily, tripping into dirt trenches hidden under the grass. The Great West was opened around him, its empty grandeur laid out in its immensity, but immediately he took no notice. His backpack appeared – in its flight from the train it had opened, but his water, his bread, his maps, remained safe within. The satchel, despite having been thrown with the pack, was absent. As sense proper returned to Finley, his panic grew, and as his wits gathered so did its strength. He dropped his supplies and searched around, traipsing like a torn scarecrow being carried about in a strong wind.

Finding it some tense moments later, Finley swore with relief, laughed giddily, and dropped to the ground with a dusty thud. The satchel was heavier than his backpack, and so had travelled less distance, crashing to earth in the dry trench by the railroad tracks. The clasps of the satchel had held fast, but now Finley, as was his entrenched habit, opened it to glance through the old sheaf of papers carried within. All its sections – the strange maps, the indecipherable designs, the Latin records – looked to be present and correct. All having went as planned, Finley took a swig of water as reward.

The Union-Pacific engine (and its too-inquisitive passengers) was now some miles in the distance, a black shape in the twilight. There was no wind this evening, so its steam trail lingered for a long time in its wake, a white, serpentine ghost. When it hooted and disappeared over the horizon an hour later it took civilization with it, and Finley was left alone.

With the light fading, Finley fumbled for his map of the transcontinental railroad's route. He produced it, and struck a match. Under the weak light, and spying looks to the horizon in search of potential landmarks, he tried to work his position. The train had stopped at Omaha at eight o'clock that morning: if it had continued at an average speed of about thirty miles an hour that meant he would be... What was the time now? He glanced at his watch. The face had been cracked... But! That had likely happened in his fall from the train. The locked hands said that it was a quarter to nine. So he was... His finger traced along the transcontinental line and stopped in a paper white wilderness.

He looked around. His calculations seemed to check out.

According to the map, western Nebraska was largely empty. A few towns and settlements were marked out here and there. A place called Imperial looked to be the closest, ninety miles south or so from the railroad, near the southern edge of the state. After there, no sign of civilization was drawn on the map – Wyoming and Colorado were unmarked and undefined, places of mystery to 'dream gloriously over'. Beyond those states, the map was bordered, ended. Finley intended to make for that wilderness yonder – there he would disappear; safeguarding those documents over which so much had been fought and suffered. And he would reach this mysterious haven via Imperial.

He looked around. Ragged hills rose up from the southern horizon, looking like a long, discarded jawbone, dark purple against the faded yellow sky. Finley prayed he was looking at Scotts' Bluff – those hills were the only break in the otherwise ruling featurelessness of the plains, and the map had Scotts' Bluff fifty miles north of Imperial, between the town and his assumed position. And those hills looked to be forty miles distant. Finley folded up his map. Toward (what he hoped was) Scotts' Bluff he would go.

Finley had spent much of the previous day sleeping on the train, and so walked all through the night. When the sun finally sank the heavens had cleared, and he traversed the plains under a cloudless blue night. Now and then a light breeze would pick up, and the starlight would ripple as though on water across the waving grass. Wary of snakes and cougars, Finley walked with a stick (found by the railroad, and likely a former pick-axe shaft) held tightly in his hand, but he met no living thing that night. When morning broke, he was pleased to see that the hills, now considerably larger, had begun to look very like the little graphic of Scotts' Bluff on his map. He stopped to breakfast as the sun spilt over the east, a slight meal of bread, water and dried fruit.

The day was hot and bright when it arrived, but through the heat, Finley was moved by the huge beauty of this new world. Three white clouds were flecked alone upon the deep sky; wide nature prospered green from his feet to the horizon. Untouched it was, pristine. Primeval, somehow, and wonderful. Free. Out here, memories of the smoke and oil of his Glasgow home seemed as though recalled from someone else's life.

Around midday, a herd of mustangs approached, turned in his direction, and galloped over him. Not for the first time, Finley thought he had died. When he returned to sense he was laughing maniacally, drunk with mad life. Having toyed with him, the horses were now distant shapes on the plains, powering across the wild green. Once he had watched them fade off, Quinn returned reluctantly to reality, and made sure to check his satchel.

With dusk descending, Scotts' Bluff (Finley had read the map right) was still several miles distant. It sat in front of him, solid and close. But Finley was beginning to tire. He had not slept since the previous afternoon, and his energy had left him with the daylight. A few hours before – dinner time in decent places – his pilgrim feet had took him out of the fields and into a great area of dust and rocks. Black bushes, wiry and fruitless, were clumped all around this place. Insects chirped constantly in the background. At one point, an arms-length from where he walked, Finley saw a feathered bullet strike down from nowhere to strangle a rabbit it must have spied hiding from thousands of metres above. An instant of air rending, a single pathetic cry, and the eagle had returned to the air, its dying prey clutched in its talons. In the instant before it returned to the air the bird's gold eye caught Finley's. *This is a dangerous place*, Finley heard the eye saying, *badly suited for rest*.

“Good point,” Finley acquiesced warily, as the triumphant speck flew off.

He sagged against a rock a half an hour later. It was hard to see now, and Scotts Bluff, impressive and black in the dusk, had not gotten much closer. Up there, he reminded himself, he could sleep. On the dead rock, not in this badland of dust and waiting life.

The thought of sleep fired him up. Finley began to entertain thoughts of a last gasp charge across the remaining miles... Lying back and looking up at the unfurling stars, Finley raised his flask and splashed water across his face.

He was instantly shot to his feet by a shrill hiss, venomous and close. It spat again, even louder, a satanic cry of malice. The black serpent gleamed in the dusk, its sightless head raised to where Finley's skull had rested seconds before. It was coiled, immense, between him and his whacking stick. The hiss came again, issuing from a pink mouth that opened and closed like a rusty hinge, revealing bulging sacs of poison. The snake's skin was wrinkled, and its scabbed brow glowered over dried out eye-sockets. On some rational level, Finley reasoned the snake would probably kill him – but if it did, it would not live long enough to enjoy the fact. It was dehydrated to the point of half-death. His pouring water had maddened it into a last try for endurance.

The insects fell silent, as though they all watched from the twisted bushes. Finley and the snake were both fixed in place, staring one another down. The snake hissed again, this time low and quiet, as though it were warning him. It probably was.

Strangely fearless, as if that part of his instinct had been shocked into failure, Finley raised his left foot. He meant to creep round and retrieve his weapon. The snake perceived. Its body uncoiled, preparing to strike, and Finley stopped where he was. He needed a new plan.

Faster than Finley could see, the snake sprang for his oblivious neck, sailing like a missile through the quiet twilight. And that was when Finley's mysterious saviour made his entrance.

An arm snapped from the air, grabbing hold of the snake's tail. It threw the snake behind itself, like a whip, and then cast it forward, quick as lightning. Finley saw the serpent straightened up at the end of the man's limb, and then it was gone, disappeared into the wide night. The direct danger gone, Finley felt his heart start beating again.

This stranger made a pantomime of watching his throw – Finley saw his eyes follow the snake's arc across the wilderness. Or rather, the snake's predicted flight – he doubted even a man with perfect eyes could see much at present, and this man had a pair of round glasses sitting on his long nose. He was dressed in a smart gold suit, and his black shoes gleamed like the snake had done. He looked a stranger here - as if he had just walked out from the middle of a city.

A few seconds passed with Finley's ragged breathing the only sound, as the man's gaze fell to land on the ground several hundred metres away. Happy, he span round.

“Quite a throw, eh friend?” Finley discerned a sallow, smirking face. The man's glasses flashed brightly with each syllable.

“Aye, eh, yeah,” Finley said, remembering to cover his accent in his shocked relief. He laughed jovially, very wary. “Thank you. I reckon I owe you my life. If you hadn’t appeared when you did-”

The man laughed, revealing a mouth of very white, very crooked teeth. His brown hair, sticking out from under a worn fedora, was freed loose. He seemed unaware of the incredible oddness of his presence.

“Well, we who wander in the wilderness must take care of one another. Can we call ourselves decent if we drop decency in indecent places?”

“Absolutely not,” said Finley, whose instinct it was to answer in the way most likely to win him friends.

“Absolutely...” the man trailed off, pleased at the affirmation of his credo. His way of speaking was strange – was it French accented? He spoke slow and well, like an actor performing favourite lines; his tongue seeming to relish every syllable. “What’s your name son?”

“Thomas Fry,” Finley lied, attempting to mimic the accent of a North Carolinian he had once known.

“Mr. Fry,” said the man, extending his black-gloved right hand, “Ogden CaVort.”

Finley, lacking his left, had to offer his right hand, necessitating a switching on CaVort’s part. CaVort offered a flashing grin of apology.

“Mr CaVort.” Taking his hand away, Finley automatically checked his satchel. The documents were still there. CaVort noticed this. He patted his own satchel, a battered leather thing, and turned his face away. The moonlight caught the twin circles of his spectacles, and when he next spoke to Finley, his head looked like a skull with silver hollows.

“What’s your business out here Fry? It’s a dangerous place – as I’m sure you appreciate.”

Finley shrugged, trying to think up a good lie. Did he need to lie? The man had saved his life. He had stepped out of the dusk and saved him from a snake.

Ultimately, the lingering pause forced Finley to speak. What he ended up telling CaVort was more or less completely true.

“I’m making for Imperial – left the train a few days ago. ‘About another day’s walk, over those bluffs.” He pointed toward the shadowy hills. CaVort’s glasses kept shining.

“Then our meeting was even more fortunate than I thought. I’m making for Imperial too.” In the darkness, Finley raised a questioning brow. He would not have thought the slight movement visible, but CaVort seemed to answer it. “I trade in books.” He touched his satchel again, indicating he considered the matter explained.

Finley, unnerved by everything else about the man, dwelt little on his vague explanation. CaVort's sudden appearance was like the entrance of a character in a dream; a bizarre solution to a deadly obstacle. But CaVort had remained in this night-time world of waking, composed before Finley of flesh, cotton, leather... His presence would have to be suffered. But if he had just stepped into existence (he looked as if he had stepped onto the plains from an office, which was impossible, so Finley did not think it unreasonable to wonder if he might be a new thing altogether) there was no telling what his motives might be, and no telling who he might be working for. In any case, Finley had already, within minutes of meeting him, fallen part way under his influence. CaVort wanted no more questions asked, and so however bright Finley's curiosity now burnt - and burn brightly it did - a ghostly inhibition kept him from pursuing answers. The man had an unnatural power.

"So Mr. Fry," CaVort then said, "Shall we carry on together?" He turned to face Finley, revealing his eyes to the youth. They were cool and grey. "It makes sense for those on the same road to combine forces, particularly in these inhospitable places."

"Aye. Yes. Yes." Finley shook himself out of a daze. He did not like or trust this man. But the fact of the matter was that he could not lose him out here. He was tired and crippled. CaVort, despite looking a good decade or two older, seemed refreshed and strong. Finley pointed to Scotts' Bluff. "I mean to camp up there tonight."

"A sound notion," said CaVort. "Few things slither or stalk through those old hills. And two pairs of eyes are always better than one."

Beneath the indifferent stars, Finley nodded to the mysterious stranger. CaVort smiled back, still totally separate from the world around him, and said, amiably "Let's go then."

After the pair had moved away, the crickets began chirping again.

They talked little as they walked. At the beginning they traded some information about one another's background, Finley telling CaVort a pack of lies and CaVort being opaque enough with his stories to not to need to lie. The strange man came from 'not far north from here', he had 'taken his business to the road long ago' and he had fought in the war but did not care to remember 'if I fought for the Union or the Confederacy.' This last remark invited further inquiry, but Finley felt unable to do more than cast CaVort a questioning look. CaVort kept silent, unwilling to further elucidate this time.

Finley took care to make sure his lies were firmly of the ordinary variety. He was not a Scotsman looking to hide in the United States - he was a North Carolinian, a veteran of the Civil War who had been blown up at Wyse Fork in '65, and who was now heading westwards to rendezvous with friends already out there. If CaVort was looking for Finley Quinn, Thomas Fry gave him little to ruminate on; though perhaps the former's weariness risked the continuity of his alter-ego's past.

When they arrived at the base of the bluffs, a grey wall of rock, CaVort pulled out a silver pocket watch and announced that it was exactly midnight. Before them, a narrow cleft in the rock face revealed a stone slope that, while steep, had enough protrusions and holes in its surface to be climbed. The moon hung straight above, cutting the cleft into a halved valley of silver stone and black shadows.

“Will you be able to climb?” CaVort asked. Finley pretended to further size it up.

“I doubt I’ll have a problem. You go first though. If I fall down, it’d be best not to take you with me.” He did not want CaVort out of his sight while on a rock face.

“That’s courteous of you. But I have a rope.” He produced a wound up line from his sleeve, like a lazy magician. “I shall reach the top, and throw it down for you.”

“No thank you,” said Finley, then reiterating, “I shouldn’t have a problem”. He’d be damned if he was going to so literally put his life in CaVort’s hands.

“Fair enough,” said CaVort, sounding amused.

They entered the dry tunnel, CaVort leading the way. As they walked he was quickly swallowed up by the darkness, walking a few more steps to reappear as if born from the moonlight. When they came to the stone slope, CaVort began ascending it like a slow spider. With regular deliberation, he would push his weight up from a foothold with great languor, moving his hand to a new hold only when he was certain it would serve to further his progress. He did not grope for grip – he would see a hold, assess it, and if he reached for it, it would hold him, regardless of how flimsy it looked to Finley below.

Contrary to what he had said (and hoped), the climb proved a problem for Finley. The first few metres, ascending through the shadows pooled at the slope’s base, were but steep stairs, and caused little difficulty. But then, already a good way up, Finley had to balance on slim ledges not wider than the length of his fingers, protrusions that had been cracked out of the bluff by the centuries. He pulled forward, but only with incredible care. Falling from this height would shatter his bones. CaVort, almost at the top, was a distant shape. Puffs of dust, disturbed by his passage, crumbled down and made Finley’s eyes water. Finley would have shouted, but, hugging the stone close enough that he tasted it, he worried the required intake of air would push him from the rock.

CaVort disappeared from Finley’s sight onto the plateau above, leaving Finley alone and unable to move. He cursed his injury. His hand gripped a slight ledge firmly, but he could not get higher without moving his feet. He did not believe his right arm could support his entire weight when he was weighed down with his pack and the documents. The documents! Thinking of them compelled him to check they were still in his satchel. He could feel their weight, but CaVort could have employed some switching-trick...

He sweated, and his grip gave. He groped for a hold, but his fingers only scraped over the rough stone. And then, as they are so given to do, the bad situation worsened. His satchel strap, loosened from its place over his shoulder by the desperate groping of his

arm, slipped and fell, stopping to rest in the nook of his elbow. Finley could only keep his balance by staying utterly still. Everything was silent – the universe itself bated its breath, waiting him for him to fall.

Then there was a sound. A light scraping, as if something was brushing against the rock. Finley slowly turned his head, reminded of the snake – and it almost was. A rope, black under the night, swung at his right.

“Grab the rope son!” called a faraway voice.

Twenty metres or so above, Ogden CaVort watched keenly as the young man below tentatively shifted his satchel back towards his shoulder. Only once his bag was secure did Finley reach out for CaVort’s rope. Though no light presently struck them, CaVort’s glasses flashed perversely. His leather bag moved at his feet.

A quarter of an hour later Finley, having walked up on belay, fell thankfully to the ground on the edge of a wide, flat plateau. Ogden CaVort looked up at the dome of stars, winding up his rope and smoking a cigarette.

“Jesus,” panted Finley. Then, genuinely, “Am I lucky you were here. Thank you.”

CaVort smiled. “Don’t think of it. Decent men in indecent places.”

Finley staggered to his feet. “Aye. Yeah. But in all seriousness,” and he extended his weary arm, “Thank you.” CaVort took it, shook the offered hand and smiled, the bristles of his unshaven face moving up to his cheekbones. His mind turned on this question – What could be in this ‘Thomas Fry’s’ satchel that was so important to the boy he was willing to risk his life to keep it? CaVort had a good inkling, and, grinning his grin, darkly designed to confirm his suspicion.

Finley fell asleep instantly that night, his wariness of CaVort forgotten in his exhaustion and gratitude toward the man. He lay by the shelter of a rocky mound on top of a woollen poncho, cradling his satchel in the nook of his arm and dreaming of his home and friends. In the world of his thoughts he was no longer wandering, and he slept for an hour content and at peace. A familiar spitting hiss threw him awake.

In the darkness under the mound Finley’s eyes sprang open, unseen. The fear of the snake locking him still, he made out a close black figure forcing something into its bag. CaVort, shaking with rage, shushed his writhing pet and clasped it away. He stayed by Finley for a moment, regarding him coolly as though considering another move. Finley prepared to kick the villain’s legs away and flee, but before he could CaVort moved off, silently gliding to lie on his own makeshift bed. In the moonlight, Finley could see that CaVort did not sleep - his eyes, fixed open, stared toward Finley. During the rest of that long night, Finley would frequently wonder if CaVort saw him staring back.

CaVort closed his eyes when the new day began to break. Finley did not shift though, not yet – he could not believe his enemy was truly asleep. Putting on his satchel, he clambered to stand and wandered over behind a rock to piss. The view was

beautiful. The sun had not yet risen, but its light already touched the sky above the eastern horizon. From this high gallery all of Nebraska seemed rolled out before him. Looking south, an expanse of green fields, broken here and there with trees, stretched out to the very horizon. And there a tiny village glinted. Imperial. Finishing up, Finley hoped he would live to reach it. He had a plan, but its success was subject to chance and several loose assumptions being proven right. When he returned to the camp, CaVort was standing, looking refreshed and eager.

“Ready to set off?” he asked, his amiability transparent. Each man knew the other was on to him.

“You bet,” said Finley, tired and grim.

They made for the southern end of the plateau. Finley kept his distance from CaVort, keeping to his enemy’s right (CaVort’s bag lay against his left side) and never taking his eyes off of him. CaVort, secure in his power over this cripple, was happy to let Finley do so. They came to a rocky hillside. Precipitous falls lay around its top, but a narrow way of dry dirt slowly descended and ran for about a mile to the fields below. Finley took out his water flask, readying himself for a struggle, and peered down.

CaVort rushed him. Finley tried to side-step the attack, but underestimated CaVort’s devilish speed. He would have toppled from the edge, but CaVort wanted the documents, and they remained fast over Finley’s shoulder. To that end, CaVort pinned Finley to the ground, holding him there before standing on his arm. CaVort, his face bent for dark business, bowed to the ground and picked up a large, sharp-edged stone. Finley, the pressure on his arm agonising, grasped for his flask.

“I wasn’t planning on killing you to begin with Quinn,” explained CaVort, explaining himself with disdain. “In fact, when I found you, I thought I’d need you alive.” He waved his fingers, talking with his hands. “I’d need to find out, from you, where you’d hid the maps. But you, you fucking fool, you went and opted to *actually carry them on you!*”

Finley grabbed his flask. CaVort stood against the dawn, Satan outlined before Heaven.

“You can’t begin to believe how much easier you’ve made my job son. And don’t think I’m not grateful,” CaVort sighed, and then leaned down close. His sweet breath stank. “But I’m still going to bash your brains in.”

He held the rock high to strike, and for a tiny moment the pressure on Finley’s arm was eased. Quinn used that window to kick, and CaVort was felled, grunting. Rising up, Finley splashed water on CaVort’s surprised face and grabbed hold of the villain’s leather bag. He undid the clasps. CaVort stood up, livid but anticipating triumph. Directly Finley swung the bag open, and its hissing contents were launched to fly their owner.

CaVort’s serpent, starved and dehydrated, wrapped itself around its tyrannical master’s neck. It snapped and bit at his face, its drinking of the precious water more

and more mingled with blood as it writhed. CaVort's hands pulled at its body, but the dying snake's desperate strength defeated him. He stepped back, too far – for a moment he wavered on the brink, his eyes raised in fear toward the rising sun. Then he and the snake disappeared over the precipice, gone forever.

For an hour Finley Quinn remained on the plateau, enjoying the peace and the cool morning air. He reached Imperial that night, and the following morning had vanished into the great west.

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The Hot and Happy Chips by Arthur Ker

She is totally oblivious to the chaos she's creating, and stands in the narrow entrance surveying the makeshift auditorium at her leisure. Behind her the press of bodies is backed up to the foot of the escalator from the ground floor. The dyed black hair and dead pan make-up create an odd impression, she's managed, somehow, to look vulnerable and terrifying at the same time. Her panda eyes sweep along the derelict front row and she marches to a seat just to the left of the centre aisle. When she turns to sit down there's something really bizarre going on at the back of her head, a weird geometric pattern. Looking closer you can see that she's pulled her hair into four little ponytails. It's half an inch of grey roots exposed at all the partings that is creating the effect.

She's sitting almost knee to knee with the writer when he arrives on the tiny stage. He is a lot older, and balder, than his photograph which the bookshop staff have displayed poster size on the wall behind him.

All through his talk she takes copious notes. If she carries on like that she'll have the entire thing down word for word. She nods her head in furious agreement with all his key points and when he touches on anything unfamiliar she becomes transfixed – visibly trembling with attentiveness. The writer is painfully aware of her, but he avoids eye contact, instinct tells him that if he succumbs for a second to her overreaction he'll lose his thread. At the end, before he has even finished his invitation for questions, her hand is up.

She angles herself so that she can address the audience and him at the same time.

'Ah've done lots a different things in ma life. Ah've done acting, an improvisation, an stand up, an warm ups for other acts in clubs an things. An a lot of it is just oot ma

own heid, made up on the spur of the moment. An when ah was wee, playing wi the other weans in the back court, ah was aye telling stories. Ah used to have them aw like that . . .’

Here she demonstrates her acting skills by cupping her chin in her hand and doing a gawping-mouthed impression of a spellbound child. The audience must be stunned by its accuracy, judging by the row upon row of blank faces.

‘An when ah was at school ah used to love writing stories. But you never got any encouragement fae the teachers. Just wee bitchy comments in red ink pulling ye up for yer spelling an yer grammar. Ah remember ah wrote a brilliant story once, aw about ma dad when he came back to us. An at the end of the story ah wrote how ma dad sent me oot for chips for us aw, an that ah walked back fae the chip shop cradlin’ the hot an happy chips. An the bitch of a teacher wrote in big red letters – **you can’t have happy chips.**’

The writer seizes his chance. ‘Oh but you can,’ he says, and looks about to expand on this notion of happy chips in that dreamy, rambling way that writers’ love. He’s too slow. He’s left gaping-mouthed like a goldfish.

‘But the thing is ah’ve had these stories runnin’ aroond in ma heid for years an ah just cannae get them on to paper. It’s what you were talking aboot earlier. The tone. Ah just cannae get that right, an it’s driving me mad. How can ah no write it?, ’cause as you’ll have noticed ah’m a great talker.’

She stops, but the writer isn’t sure if this is just for dramatic effect and waits till he’s certain that she’s finished. The tension in the audience is palpable.

‘Well . . .’, behind the calm expression you get the idea his brain is whirring away like a computer on start up trying to process some response to all this, ‘it all depends on the effect you want.’

‘Ah just want it to be bloody brilliant.’ This is followed by a piercing shriek of laughter that sends a genteel titter through the audience.

The writer freezes. He’s sensed, quite rightly, that he is no match for this polished crowd pleaser.

‘You have a natural way with words . . .’ He thinks he can smarm her.

‘Ah’ve got a big gob you mean.’ This is delivered straight to the audience and gets a hearty laugh. She’s decided they’re a double act. Any second now she might join him on the tiny stage. The writer’s eyes and mouth tighten – he’s made a snap decision.

‘The six rules of writing,’ he announces in a nervous staccato. He’s dropped the casual, meandering approach. He raises his index finger in the air.

‘One, write crap, and lots of it,’ he tells us, hammering home his point like some demented trade fair demonstrator.

‘Nae problem,’ his comedy partner confesses, and gets another laugh.

‘New writer’s need to write a lot to exercise the writing muscles,’ he persists. ‘The first version is always crap. Your job as a writer is to dig the story out of all that crap.’

‘It’s hard, though, when yer up to yer neck in it.’

The audience is loving it now. There is even a smattering of applause for that one. The writer is forced to acknowledge the contribution with an appreciative smile. He’s learning the ropes fast.

‘Two’, he shouts, and up goes another finger, ‘steal and copy’.

For this one she turns to the audience and puts her hand over her mouth in an expression of mock horror. The writer misses this and can’t understand the gales of laughter. He soldiers on, baffled.

‘If you love a writer do what they do, but for your own time. Write the kind of

book that you want to read.'

'But ah want to write the kind of book they'll want to read,' she pipes up and sweeps her arm over the audience, taking us for a tiny portion of her future vast readership.

'That, hopefully, will be a natural corollary,' says the writer.

She mouths the word 'corollary' to herself and pulls a dumb-cluck expression that has the audience in fits.

'Three', he shouts, 'KISS.' He lets this hang in the air for a while.

She leers at the audience and puckers her lips.

'Keep it simple, stupid,' he explains.

She pretends to take this personally and looks suitably subdued.

'Four', bawls the writer, and up goes a third finger, 'install a sure-fire bullshit detector.'

'Bloody thing wid be burning hot wi over work if ye fitted it on me.'

The room erupts. There are cheers and whistles and the people at the back stamp their feet. The writer is forced to join in the general applause while she gets to her feet and does little curtseys to all sides of the room.

'Five,' offers the writer with wilting conviction, 'cut, cut, cut. Overwrite at first . . . just get . . . it . . . all . . . down . . . and then cut back later . . . Take out all the ornamental description . . . and unnecessary narrative . . . and you're left with the story.'

She has him spooked. He keeps waiting for her to jump in, but she just sits there like a demure little angel. It's psychological warfare.

'Six,' he says, with obvious relief, 'buy a dog.'

She appears stumped by this one too, and when he sees she isn't going to interrupt

he gets into his stride.

‘Take the dog for walks and talk to it. Make it your character. Interrogate the dog about its age, what it works at, what it likes and what it dislikes. Build up the character that way.’

She’s suddenly transported back to primary school, her hand shoots straight up and she snaps her fingers.

The writer raises one eyebrow, quizzically.

‘Ah know exactly what you mean. Ah had this story and ah could’nae decide who should be the narrator. Ah tried every character in it: the mother, the father, the boy, the lassie, the social worker, the polis man, the parole officer. In the end, ah decided to use the wee boy’s white mouse. An ah described everything as the wee mouse would see it through the bars of its cage, while it was on its wee wheel an that. An ah used tae pretend that ah carried the wee mouse about in ma handbag. An ah used tae talk to it in the supermarket an at the bus stop. An see sometimes when it was hard going getting ideas ah got right stroppy with the wee bugger. You should have seen some of the looks ah got.’

In the deathly hush that follows the writer twice opens his mouth to say something and the words desert him, his eyes plead for deliverance. The audience are on the edges of their seats. Eventually some wag up the back comes to his rescue. ‘Turn round, Doll,’ he shouts ‘and see the bloody looks you’re getting now.’

The audience erupts and she turns round laughing like a hyena. ‘Aye, got yous aw going there,’ she shouts over the uproar.

The only one not laughing is the writer.

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