

From Glasgow to Saturn – Issue 13

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Unicycle Theater

by Mark McPhee

The late morning sky is a pale shroud
Blanketing the street in shade
The alley is a thoroughfare where
Grey blue birds ply their trade

Whispering leaves, breathless trees
Gossiping winds, haggling cobbles
Strewn across the lane askew
Echoes float from empty bottles

Painted walls, hollow sounds
Stoic stone, pattering rain
Careless papers caress the grounds
The boy emerges, all eyes to train

He bounds along, prop held in hands
Quickly down the quiet lane
Slips a smile to his eager fans
The birds, the trees, the walls, the rain

As he mounts a makeshift corner stage
A nervous hush fills the alley
Wondering how he will engage
Between the birth and the finale

He whirls and cycles, as if for hours
Whilst laughing, winks, and holds the crowd
Performing till his body tires
So skilled is he, they are so proud

Birds whistle while clouds rain applause
The trees, excited, stamp their feet
He takes a bow, the audience roars
He takes a fright and runs up the street

Mark McPhee wrote this poem in honor of the boy in the rain, practicing his talent.

Training Sights

by Duncan Muir

My Brother,
we took to the hill
and trained sights
together, secured
our first kill. You
could not endure
the screams.

You wanted it quick,
clean, sharp, over
before it had begun.

I was the one
intrigued by the squeal,
piercing, shrill, pitched
just within our range.

In the copse
we learned that fear
is an ear flattened
against the body.

And that terror
takes shape in the eye
before the mind.
The pupil is attentive,
a widening black sense
of what is to come.

We carried it home at dusk.
Your mood was heavy,
flesh stiffening, a body
stretched between us.

And shadows crept,
dilating the darkness,
advancing into the pockets
of our eyes.

Duncan Muir is a part-time student in the Creative Writing MLitt programme.

Window Woman

by Victoria Murphy

This morning it looked as if a dusting of flour had been sifted over the grey stone of the pavement and green of the grass beyond, but after the meandering flakes fell faster, grew larger, the ground became covered with a smooth, deep, topping of crunchy icing sugar. I'd like to be one of those laughing young things pressing their footprints into its perfection, whirling round and hurling themselves down, or gathering wet clumps to shape into a ball or pat onto a mound to sculpt.

They notice me at the window and whisper to each other. Their lips make shapes and I read them. Nobody imagines barely-breathed words can be picked up, but we deaf can see. I've understood the pleasantries spoken by the royals, the inanities spouted by politicians, the profanities spat out by the football players (though admittedly, the last aren't too difficult to decipher), and I know the children call me 'window woman'. They're right. From this house, which stands alone, I am window woman, watching silent movies of life from this bay, this curve of extra space. Some don't know what to do with these few feet, filling it with a lonely sofa, or a table topped by a vase of lilies. Some make a seat, a hidden reading spot behind the curtains. For window woman, it's where her wheelchair is parked so she may have some contact with street life, and the weather.

I see the accident from the heads that turn, the mouths that open, the rosy cheeks that pale, then the shift to the left as if the wind has swept all the people from one side of my scene to the other. They are running, in snow motion, to a small ring of children, tightly knotted like friends in a playground swapping cards or admiring a cool possession. The adults have to prise the children apart, their bodies frozen in shock, and I glimpse two little red shoes lying in the snow, toes pointing towards the sky. Just as I begin to worry, the circle breaks up. The children walk away, their faces relaxing, shouting again. A boy is left, holding a little girl with red shoes. I recognise him. He's usually there without his sister, playing football, and often glances up to see if I'm watching when he scores. She dries her eyes and then her nose with a swipe of her hand. He tilts his face down until level with hers and asks a question which brings a small smile. Once I had a big brother like that, who made everything feel better. A soldier, he died in an overseas trouble spot when he was still baby-faced. Not long after, my mother passed away from a broken heart, then my father. Inherited money pays for my care, for the rota of women who see to my physical needs.

The sky is losing light. Soon it will be time for me to be wheeled away. A carer will draw the curtains, give me supper, wash me and put me to bed where I will lay motionless until another arrives in the morning. They're meant to lift me in pairs, in case they hurt their backs and sue for compensation, but the agency is no doubt short-staffed and taking chances.

The women have different names but they all behave in the same way.

‘Morning! And how are we today? Been a good girl have you?’

Sometimes I wish they wouldn’t talk to me as if I was a child, a child who has the choice to be naughty. Other times the medication makes me impervious, turns me into a zombie, a dummy to be dressed and put in the window. On the whole, though, I’m glad when they speak to me. People often don’t bother to talk to the deaf.

The boy has set the little girl down on the snow and holds her hand before they set off. It puzzles me that such young children are by themselves. I didn’t notice the world changing. I can’t keep up with language either; the words these kids use are becoming harder to follow.

Margaret, today’s carer, is in front of me. I motion her away from the window so I can see her lips better.

‘There’s a boy at the front door. With a little girl. They want to speak to...you.’

I nod to bring them in and wonder if Margaret will tell them I’m deaf. The boy walks in, pulling the girl, his sister I presume, behind him. He must be about eight. His hair is long, falling into his eyes and curling around his neck. I’m not sure whether to speak. I know my voice sounds strange. I smile and when he smiles back, I decide to try.

‘Is she alright? Your sister?’

He nods and points to her knee. Through a tear in her trousers I can tell there’s a graze.

I point to myself and say ‘Grace’ and ask him their names.

Robbie and Tara.

With gestures, I ask him what he wants. He licks his lips, looks around the room and puts his hands in his pockets, pulls them inside out.

‘Money? To get home?’

He nods.

‘Where do you live?’

‘Other side of the park.’

He glances at Tara and I understand.

‘Where are you parents?’

Tara looks up at him, as if to find out herself.

‘At work,’ Robbie says. ‘Yes. At work.’

I decide to leave it there and ask Margaret to bring my bag. I can tell she thinks I’m a soft touch as I take two pounds out my purse and hand it to Robbie.

‘Thanks,’ he says, not looking at me.

I tell them they're welcome to come back and Tara smiles for the first time. Then the two of them rush out.

I watch them walking down the front steps, Robbie holding Tara's hand, and walk up the road. Just before they're out of my vision, Robbie turns and waves.

Victoria Murphy is a Distance Learning student in the Creative Writing MLitt programme. Her previous writing credits include journalistic pieces (mainly features) and the authorised biography of an Irish politician.

The Cut of the Cloth

by John Jennett

Going by my Charlie's age, I must have been thirteen in the year that Calum tàillear came to stay. Until then my father had always dressed like a typical Hebridean crofter, pulling on clothes that already seemed to be old when they appeared from nowhere. My mother was so deft at patching things up and dyeing that she seemed to be able to make his things, and ours, last forever. When I think about it now we always seemed to live under the shadow of dad's threadbare gear, strung out to dry over the stove, where it told the story of the season. Depending on the time of year we breathed the smell of seaweed, peat, sheep or barley as it baked into his soggy hems.

The summer before Calum tàillear's visit, my father started to tuck his trousers inside his socks. This was after the Colonel who ran the white hotel on the pier called to the house and asked dad to show some of his guests out to the moorland lochs renowned for their fish. On the island my father was only ever called the breac-mòr; nicknamed after a giant trout he had poached when he was wee. It was the last time he bragged about anything, only being spared a round-trip by ferry to the Stornoway Sheriff Court when he agreed to skin the Factor's rabbits for a year as his punishment.

In most respects my father was an observant man. He helped our neighbours out with their crops or their animals just as they assisted us. Often, he would wink as he confided a tip in me; some trick he'd picked up or idea he'd had that would help us squeeze more from our own croft. One of the things he used his big hands for was notching the ears of sheep: a job the whole township relied on him for. He made the cuts using a heavy knife that was otherwise kept wrapped up in the dresser, save the day each spring when he asked me to fetch it to be blessed by the Priest. People said my father could remember a hundred, or maybe it was a thousand, different marks; each one a code to distinguish the provenance of a beast. Twice I carried for the fishing party and twice my boots sank into the bog until the heather reached inside my skirt and tickled my thighs. The fishermen were from England and spoke so loud and fast that I struggled to understand them, except to hear them address dad as "Mr Archie". He must have been formally introduced by his proper name, Eardsaidh. It meant Charlie, of course, but the Englishmen just imitated the sound of it. Even though it was wrong I liked the idea of him being called "mister". Under Mr Archie's guidance many angler's sacks grew heavy with trout and the more men my father trudged up to the brackish lochs, the more wanted to go. It wasn't long before I was kept back from school to do the jobs he no longer had time for and he started to smell of fish.

When the tourist season was over, Alasdair Posta brought a lumpy envelope to the house. After placing it on the bench my mother turned her back and carried on working at the

stove. We examined it while we waited for my father to come back from a funeral, taking turns to call out the address, admire the red flash of the stamp and study its little picture of the King. My father opened it carefully and passed it to me to be read. Mr Archie had been made an honorary member of The Wilton Fly Fishing Club by a grateful party of gentlemen who had enclosed their bright badge with a crest of a leaping fish. Later, we heard the tinkle of coins through the closed door of the room. My father emerged, declaring that he needed a jacket that would bear the weight of the badge, adding that if he was now in a club he would need to start to dress himself properly.

‘I’ll start with my head and work down,’ he said. ‘The head is where it begins for a man.’

A catalogue was ordered from Glasgow and he sent for a new bonnet, a shirt and, most impressively, a tie. We jostled to wash our hands so we could be allowed to touch it and my brother insisted it could only have been made from the skin of an eel. I thought my mother shuddered when she said the tie shimmered like a herring. We were puzzled; the only time we had seen that fish was in the brown sludge of the salty barrel that fed us on Fridays. We couldn’t sleep that night for the thought of the silvery fabric swinging somewhere in the draught and the light from the fire catching at it.

A few weeks later, just after the lochs had filled with the white swans of winter, Calum tàillear arrived. Once he had the measure of my father, the tailor set himself up in the byre. All the beasts were turned out and Mother had to milk the cow in rain and the gales so that the man could have the run of the building for as long as it would take him to make the clothes. In preparation for the journeyman, we had scrubbed out the stalls and I’d hauled creels of pale sand from the beach on my shoulders. On my mother’s instructions I scattered the sand to brighten the floor of the place he’d be working and sleeping.

The tailor laboured at the jacket and waistcoat he’d been commissioned to make, taking his dinner with us at night. With a visitor in the house, dad would take down his fiddle when we’d cleared away the dishes and start a reel with the two white collies stretched at his feet like ships at anchor and us lined up on the bench. For his part the tailor sang tight-lipped, gloomy songs that came out from the middle of this thick beard like badly played pipes and had us all scratching at our sleeves with boredom. He looked at the fire and spoke of how sorely he missed his wife when he was travelling. My father passed him the whisky glass. From our beds we heard the tailor say he had never seen finer girls and boys than the children of the breac-mòr. If a reply came it was lost in a squall that tugged at the thatch.

Sometimes, when he was supposed to be working, Calum tàillear would stand in the door of the byre and watch me lifting potatoes or threshing corn in the open. Other times he pulled his hat over his ears and walked up the track where I thought he was calling on big

Donald's family for some business. When he was gone I stole into the byre to stroke the bolts of blue and brown cloth that were propped up against the wall, letting their clean smell carry me away to the mainland or even a city. The time he caught me, Calum tàillear put the latch on the door and rattled jars of buttons with a smile, invited me to unscrew the tops and poke around inside. Asked, did I like the feel of the fastenings and the sound of a zip?

My mother must have realised I was pregnant long before I did. She caused a great commotion by spiriting me away to an "aunt" on the mainland. I was bewildered by the sudden decision and sat silently like my father when I tried again to understand her repeated insistence that the woman needed help in the house more than she: I was already behind with my work.

The only time I saw my father again was in a photograph. He is outside and wearing the jacket and waistcoat made by Calum tàillear; the Wilton Fly Fishing Club badge secure on the lapel. He has the baccy pipe clenched in his teeth. It's true that when someone has their lips wrapped around something like that, you really can't tell if they are scowling or smiling. I get a warm sense of the kitchen fire as I look at the photo, my mother singing as she shapes a heavy grey dough. Then I see the shadow gusting across her face, feel the grunt of the tailor's beard and the coarse sand turning sticky on the cold floor of the byre underneath me. Dad looks older in the photo but doesn't seem to have made any more progress in dressing himself. His trousers are still stained and darned, his laces too short for his boots. He sports a fine pair of socks though, stretched over the same sturdy calves that I once trotted after over bleak moors. They are pulled up to his knees over his britches.

'Keep your clothes tucked in tight,' Peigi, he used to say. 'It's a trick to stop those blood-sucking ticks getting to your skin.'

I study his outfit for clues that might show me the season, searching for shapes in his pockets that could at least tell me what tools he's carrying.

For no reason I can think of I suddenly feel the heavy lump of the notching knife. I am carrying it through from the dresser in both hands. I set it on the bench and begin to peel the cloth from it in front of the waiting priest. The knife is as bright and clean as it should be but I catch my breath when I see an ear wrapped in the parcel. It looks as hard and brown as a dried hide but it's not from a sheep or a cow but, I'm guessing, a man. The Priest is a dark blur and I know I don't want to look up at his face. The severed ear is lacerated with holes, cuts and marks, a language that only my father could understand.

Acknowledgement

Alongside Paul Strand's photograph titled Archie MacDonald in Tir a' Mhurain [Land of Bent Grass] (Aperture, 2002 [1962]), Basil Davidson's text refers to the subject as "Mr Archie...[whose] services are greatly in demand because he knows where fish are to be found..." This is otherwise entirely a work of fiction. All characters and events are the product of the author's imagination.

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

Under a Fallen Door

by Lisa Jones

Though my watch, and the wrist it vainly shielded, are now broken, I am quite sure that this afternoon is my third spent beneath the weight of a fallen dining room door. Since the mahogany plank embraced my spine, I have been amazed by the adaptability of the human mind – a week ago I would cry at creased bed sheets, and now I am content to lie face-down in the rough carpet, inhaling old hair. With my body a home to spiders, dust mites and any rootless micro-organism that wants it, I feel useful for the first time.

Yes, it is utterly liberating to be sandwiched in such a way. No longer implicated in life's crude competition. You see, it was a very ugly set of circumstances that led to the fateful slamming three days ago. Then, I did not understand the unhappiness that gave everything around me a deadening grey tinge, and made the world seem a vast irritant. I could only express my indefinable misery through the most futile and childish gestures. Shooting birds from my window. Composing aggressive love-notes to the monarch, any monarch. Making up new cocktails from household detritus (and the contents of a fishbowl – poor guppy), giving them wildly inappropriate names and being terribly sick.

I would hold parties, to which only myself and the late Hollywood actors Clark Gable and James Cagney were invited. When my guests failed to materialise, I would feign outrage and march from the dining room to the kitchen for more cocktails, slamming the door as I went. As this was a nightly occurrence, the door naturally suffered. But decaying hinges were no concern of mine in those hideous days, when I had come to the maddening realisation of my own failure. A spectacular waste of youth. Thirty-seven years of life, and not a friend to show for it. Living off parents' wealth in the absence of a worthier sibling. Oh, horrible money!

The grim routine was thankfully disrupted by Sunday's accident. 'Bastard Gable!' I had cried as always, pounding the door forward. That night it did not close, but twirled free of its frame, waltzing me steadily into the corridor like Ginger Rogers humouring a child. We fell together, a benevolent toppling that must have looked beautiful.

Flattened, frightened and sad, I could not see my good fortune at first. It is always a difficult transition from upright autonomy to floor-level menial, as any oak tree grown for the purpose of laminate flooring will tell you. But like the pompous oak felled for its true function, I too have discovered my place in the world. It is here, under a fallen door, that I can know real worth, away from the nasty thrum of society, its false friends, empty promises, locked gates,

weak tea, and who has happiness after all? We are all of us alone, minds trapped in heads, so really what does it matter if I'm at home under my door or on some grotty little boat with you, Adrian?

Besides, I need never feel lonely in my new life, because I am not alone. I am obliged to thank my typist, Henry, both for his silent companionship and the tireless task of making sure all of my thoughts are preserved on paper. You might wonder why he does not help to free me from the wooden door which so clearly compresses my flesh; I would never ask. He is both a proud and a scrawny man, and I know that any attempt to heave the door would cause him huge embarrassment. It is important that I remain sensitive to the needs of others during this strange period. It is important, too, that Henry maintains a healthy weight while he types. I am glad that the food and drink which so often goes to waste in stories such as mine, will instead fill the deserving belly of my faithful friend. There will be no melancholy crowd of milk bottles outside my house, because dear Henry is here to drink them all.

I only hope that his kindness will extend beyond this life, and that when my inevitable asphyxiation comes he will not abandon the typewriter - if he can afford my last words the fitting conclusion, appendices and bibliography that a dead friend deserves, then perhaps the myriad disappointments of existence have not been in vain.

END

Just Smile (a dramatic monologue)

by Luke Mason

Susan, a tall, slender woman in her mid-forties, is standing by her kitchen sink washing dishes in her neat bungalow.

Shepherd's pie. That's the hardest thing to scrub off. Shepherd's bloody pie.

Pause. Susan aggressively washes the pan.

I'll have to leave it for a bit to soak. I don't want my nails getting damaged. Fifty pounds they cost me to get done. *(Turning her head)* Fifty pounds. You would think I was buying new hands for that price. I just smiled when she told me the price. I had to dip into my messages money to pay for them. I had to settle for rich teas again.

Pause

The other day in the nursery I noticed Mrs Rogers had a new haircut. A kind of Princess Diana haircut, you know before that terrible crash. It was blonde, quite tall and fluffy. Ugly looking if you ask me. I just smiled. All the mothers were standing, gawping at her like a pack of orang-utans saying

'Ooh where did you get that done? Its lovely isn't it lovely Mary? Ooh I'd love one like that. How much did it cost?'

Pause

Susan delicately takes off her marigolds and folds them neatly beside the sink. She sits down at the breakfast table flicking her nails.

They didn't even bat an eyelid at my new nails. In all the years they've known me you would think they would give me a compliment for once. All that weight I lost. For nothing.

Pause

I said to Barbara who works beside me at the nursery I said

'You see that Mrs Rogers?'

She says 'Yes'

I said 'She thinks of no one but herself. Always got to be centre of attention.'

Barbara doesn't like controversy so she didn't say anything. She didn't have to. I knew she agreed with me. It's not just that Mrs Rogers though, oh no. Mrs Witherington is just the same. She always wears a different outfit when she picks up her son. I've never seen her wear the same piece of clothing twice. I wonder who she thinks she's impressing.

Pause. She looks at her arms, then her nails.

I always try to look my best but it isn't easy. I went shopping for some new clothes with my friend from this charity programme I'm involved in. Her name's Elsie and she likes me. She can't move from her wheelchair mind you but I help her when she needs the toilet or to have a little stretch. We've become best friends these past few weeks, I feel I can tell her anything. Anyway we went shopping to Marks and Spencer's because I'd just gotten paid. They have some lovely things in there. I chose a purple dress, beautiful to stroke.

Pause

Elsie didn't like it though. Started to kick up a fuss in the middle of the shop, throwing things around and screaming. I got some awful looks as I tried to control her.

'Come on now Elsie stop being silly, we'll buy you something soon.'

That didn't help though. Some silly employee came over and started to escort us out

'May I be of assistance ladies?' He says.

I just smiled and said

'No thank you.'

Pause

It just created more attention to me. I don't like being centre of attention. If I am it's always for the wrong reasons. Children asking questions to their mothers, snide comments from ignorant old men, you know.

As I started to leave and wiped the mess all over Elsie's face, I caught the eye of none other than Mrs Rogers. There she was, standing all lady-like with her Princess bloody Diana haircut. And those leather boots. Beautiful brown handbag.

Pause.

She was with all her cronies, lapping this up of course. She smiled as if she never once was bitchy about the way I dressed or my large feet... and broad shoulders.

Pause

I know she does. Any opportunity she gets when my back is turned. She loves nothing more than to slag my clothes. I just smiled as I headed towards the exit.

Blackout. Lights come up on Susan who is upstairs in a bright pink room decorated with dolls, toys and girl's clothes. She is sitting in a rocking chair in the corner of the room holding a doll.

When I'm at the nursery the children seem to take my mind off all of my troubles. They laugh at my jokes and sing along with me. Children can see past looks and love the inner beauty of a person, someone that can make them laugh, and someone that can offer unconditional love. They can drive me up the wall, make no mistake about that. But I feel like they are all my children. Even Mrs Rogers son Alex.

Pause

The other day I tried to organise a sort of tea party at my house where all the children can play and eat cakes. I told Margaret and Barbara that it would be no hassle and I already have everything prepared. The toys, the videos, the cakes, the pop.

Pause. Susan's smile is suddenly wiped away.

They didn't feel it was appropriate though. Too many questions would be asked they said. I just smiled and said

'Oh well, maybe some other time.'

But I know there won't be another time. There will never be another time for children to skip around and play in my house with my toys.

Pause. Susan holds on to her stomach and closes her eyes tightly.

My dad used to come in and say to me that I'll never be anything, and that I should get a real job like plumbing or engineering. He used to always come home at half past ten stinking of lager shouting on me and my mother to come downstairs and join him for dinner, usually consisting of a half eaten fish supper.

Pause

When we never came down he would count to three, slowly, to be sure that we were really scared. I can still hear his bellowing voice full of broken fish shout and scream,

'Dorothy!' 'Allan, get your arses down these stairs now!'

Pause

I would try and shield my mother from his drunken frenzy, but that just made him angrier. Like Barbara is always telling me,

‘You should never provoke a man when he has been drinking.’

I didn’t know that then. I was just a small child. My father was a good provider though, always made sure there was food on the table. He would even surprise my mother with gifts now and then, roses, chocolates, you know that sort of thing. That was when he was at his best. When mother was happy I was happy. I didn’t need gifts or attention. I had my mother.

Pause. Susan is back downstairs beside the kitchen sink, holding a dish.

That Shepherd’s pie still isn’t coming off. It’s amazing how stubborn dried food can be. Elsie told me that she has only ever washed a dish once in her whole life. I just presumed that was due to her Downs syndrome but I just smiled and said

‘Lucky you Elsie, it’ll keep your nails dry.’

Pause

I get jealous of Elsie sometimes. Of course she has a terrible illness but she has a great peace of mind and has had a glorious upbringing. She has never had to bury the only person she ever truly loved. Her mother still pops round to keep her company. It should be her looking after me.

Pause

I was in the nursery last week and Mrs Rogers was delighted to inform me that she is putting herself forward for the vacant nursery position.

‘I didn’t think there was a position available.’ I said to Margaret

Pause

Margaret took me through to the office, offered me a seat and a cup of tea.

‘Susan’ she says

I had a lump in my throat. I knew right there what she was going to say.

‘I have offered the position of nursery learning assistant to Mrs Rogers.’

I couldn't bear this. Just the idea of seeing her judging face analysing my every move made me panic. I even started to sweat in the office

Pause

'Would you like a drink Susan?'

'No thank you.' I said

It was bad enough that I had to see her for five minutes at the end of the day, but to have her constantly surrounding me, suffocating me.

Pause

The thought of not being able to play with my children the way I do, my way, scared me more than anything else. I felt like curling up and crying.

Pause

But I didn't. I got up from my seat and brushed my blouse and simply said

'Fantastic. Another pair of hands to help us around here.' As I forced out a laugh.

Pause

I walked out of the office smiling as best I could. Mrs Rogers was standing there, laughing with her cronies. She turned around analysing me and said

'I'll look forward to working with you Susan.'

I've never been so ashamed of myself. I felt disgusted with my appearance. I started to have flashbacks to school where I would constantly be teased about my appearance and desires.

Pause

I walked out of 'Jelly Tots' choking back the tears. I knew I couldn't work there again. I handed in my resignation the following week.

Pause

At least they couldn't hurt me anymore I thought.

Pause

I've applied for several other jobs, learning assistant, store manager of ASDA. Even check out assistant. Nothing.

Pause

The thought of life without my children scares me. Knowing I will never be able to hear their laughs or wipe their tears makes me so depressed I don't know what I'll do.

Pause

Just smile I suppose.

(listen)
By Erik Fuhrer

my body is too small to build a river from
your smile too far to build a star

therefore:

red river black
shudder of flies

what is the time cold
shudder of teeth

blue around the lip of
the curve of
the stroke of light across from

hope:

glass too fogged to see through
thread too small to crochet a moon

Erik Fuhrer is an MLitt student in Modernities at the University of Glasgow.

Kat's Eyes by Alex Cannon

The sun shimmered in the light against the long, golden curls of Daniel Price. He felt relaxed on the roof-top restaurant as he slowly and thoughtfully made his way through a large bowl of banana porridge. Having finished his meal, he took a drink of water, picked up his pen and turned his attention toward his journal.

This morning as I glance up from my pen I am blessed with the most magnificent, beautiful and tranquil of surroundings. To my right I look upon the Manahara River resembling a falling, golden ribbon, as it snakes its way through the lush green Kathmandu valley. A simple turn of my head and my gaze rests over the medieval town, Bhaktapur. A wonderfully preserved town built by the architecturally brilliant Newari people nearly five hundred years ago. The town's harmonious blend of wood, mud-brick and copper sparkles in the soft, hazy light. Pagoda roofs dominate the town's skyline. It is extraordinarily beautiful.

Finally, as I lift my head from these murmurings I stare directly into the eyes of Nepal's oldest Vaishanava site, the temple of Changu Narayan. The women of the village, dressed all in red, are making their way towards the temple, for today is Tiese, a holy day that sees the Hindu women of Nepal spending the day in prayer and fastation.

Daniel put his pen down, took a sip of his water, leant back in his chair and wondered whether or not fastation was really a word.

A tall man; Danny's body was broad and hairy and his legs strong and thick. Ten weeks in the Nepalese sunshine had turned his skin a dusty brown and his hair a golden blonde. His eyes were a deep blue, and they sparkled like sapphire diamonds as if holding an intimate secret. He was a strikingly handsome man with the chiselled features that would have one time been enough to win a man a starring role in a cigarette advert.

On this particular morning Danny's legs, thick and strong though they were, felt tired and heavy. They were covered in cuts, scratches and dark, congealed marks that had been left behind by parasitic leeches.

Five nights had passed since he had ventured from the familiar bright city lights into the wilderness, the unknown, this place of wondrous adventure. He had cycled out the city armed only with a map, rain jacket, a few bags of nuts and one hell of a sense of adventure.

Mountain Biking was his most fervent of passions. But, damn, these last few days had

been tough. Much of the terrain had been the toughest he had ever dared to challenge, and that wasn't the half of it. He had got hopelessly lost on more than one occasion. He had endured monsoon rains and monstrous ascents. Then there was the dangerous descents with those damn faltering brakes. And the leeches! Oh, the leeches. He still winced at the thought. One afternoon the monsoon unleashed its full fury onto poor Danny and the single track he had been riding transformed, in no time at all, into a waterfall. And, well, leeches they love nothing more than finding unsuspecting, unclothed legs passing through their natural habitat. Eventually Danny was forced to concede he must take shelter from Ms Nature, and upon finding a large overhanging tree, he done just that. And, it was just then that he noticed his crawling legs. Oh, his crawling legs! He still twitched and itched at the thought. There had been at least thirty, forty or even fifty of the parasitic bastards suckling greedily at his blood.

Now though, surrounded with tranquil serenity he was in a different world. He was the only guest staying at the Hill View Resort Hotel. Indeed, as far as he was aware apart from the kindly, white-toothed, grey-haired proprietor he was the only soul in the building. He had not seen another white face – including his own reflection- for nearly three days. This, he told himself, is what real travelling is all about. This is the real Nepal. The drunken drudgery and debauchery of Kathmandu, which he had so eagerly indulged in seemed a million miles from here. In reality it lay a mere eighteen kilometres to the east.

Laboriously he pushed back his chair and stiff-leggedly he clambered down the stairs towards his room. Packing his bags slowly, for he was in no rush today, he began to map out a plan for the day. He was returning to Kathmandu earlier than anticipated. This was in part due to the undeniable tiredness that had ambushed him, but the deciding factor in the decision had been purely financial.

The sources of Danny's exorbitant student loan and overdraft were nearing exhaustion. The bike, a hard-tailed G.T Avalanche, was costing him nine hundred rupees a day. With over three weeks left in the country Danny still harboured a pulsating desire to reach Everest Base Camp, however the daunting shadow of financial reality had started to creep over him. He had rent to pay not two days after arriving home in Glasgow and finances had ever increasingly started to prey on his mind.

It was nine o'clock and Danny's ripped and ragged bag was packed. He happily paid

the four-hundred and fifty rupee bill, which for two meals and a bed he considered entirely reasonable. Upon venturing outside to unlock his bike he audibly sighed and visibly frowned at noticing the back tyre of his bike looking redundantly flat. It must have happened when he was riding the steep and stony final stretch the previous day. “Ach, well no biggie.” He spoke aloud to himself.

Fifteen minutes later and the wheel had been removed and replaced with a fresh, new inner tube inserted.

Three hours later and Danny, standing astride his bike on one pedal, wheeled into The Himalayan Bike Store. He was back in the frenetic centre of Kathmandu, Thamel, the beating heart of tourist Nepal.

Stepping outside of Hostel Potala, his budget accommodation for the evening, Danny remembered how he had felt when he had first arrived on these chaotic streets.

Stepping out of the taxi the place had fizzed with activity. Everywhere people were vying for the starry eyed Danny’s attention; tuks tuks, taxis and rickshaws, hostels and hotels, trekking, rafting and bungee jumping, weed, hash, coke and women. He had been offered them all before he had reached his hotel at the end of the street. To Danny, an adventurous, thrill-seeking, life-loving young man with a bulging wallet Kathmandu was a glittering apparition of a shady Shangri-la.

He laughed quietly at himself, at how different he felt now. He walked with an ambivalence carried by seasoned travellers. Nothing was new to him now. Everything he was being offered he had already done – including the drugs and the women. He dismissed eager punter after punter with a nonchalantly firm wave of the hand.

Danny was at a loose end for the evening, with an empty wallet the place felt a little flat. Tomorrow morning at six-thirty he would be on a flight to Lukla, from where he had planned an eighteen day trek to Everest base camp, where he would spend a night at an altitude of nearly five and a half thousand meters high. That, he was thoroughly looking forward, but tonight, with scarcely enough money to justify buying himself a beer, he was at a loss as of what to do.

Danny meandered through the busy streets, until he finally found himself staring at a computer screen in a brightly lit, air conditioned internet cafe. Not a single computer was free. The room was filled with fellow travellers. People from all over the world, all here in Kathmandu, all doing the same thing, keeping in touch with the various worlds that they have chosen to leave behind.

He scrolled down his inbox. There were messages from his Mum, several friends and

around a dozen junk mails. And one from Kat.

Katharina, a twenty-one year old Londoner who had changed his life. Maybe for a short time or maybe for a long time, only time will tell. From the moment they met Danny knew that he had met someone special; slender figure, luscious, beautiful brunette hair complemented with fiery red streaks and the largest most beautiful twinkling, starry, magical eyes that Danny had ever looked into. Their eyes had met over a crowded bar, and her full red lips had smiled shyly with a salacious glint; inviting, enticing and irresistible. With a childish enthusiasm Danny approached her, his usual charismatic confidence deserted him. He was nervous as a cat. He just knew there was something about this girl.

Her smile was contagious. Her laugh was infectious. She made him laugh in a way that no one had ever done, sensibly, childishly, shyly and outlandishly. Their eyes just met and their minds just clicked. By the end of the night Danny, raw and emotional, was in love.

He clicked open the e-mail

Danny Bhoy,

Just a little word. I think I might have forgot to say it. I think you're incredible. Boat-stealing in South America next? Never stop dreaming. We can do anything.

Kitty xxxx

After that first night the young couple had talked and travelled, shared and slept, loved and laughed their way through the world together. Their love had been sudden and tremendous, and Danny had only been spat out of its whirlwind when she had flown home. Flown home, back to her life. It was a life that Danny knew everything and nothing about. They had been inseparable for six weeks. They had been the best six weeks of the young Danny's life.

In the airport he had promised her everything

"I promise you cutey, we're going to do it all, this is just the start, we're going to see it, to do it, to live it all" He had promised her the world smiling stoically into her watering eyes.

"I love you" She had whispered before turning and disappearing into the crowd and

into a life that was worlds away to Danny now.

Without care or caution he typed his reply in less than a half minute.

Cutey Kat

Ever hitched the length of the Americas? As exciting as Bonnie n' Clyde. As in love as Romeo an' Juliet. They'll write books about us babe.

Your Bhoy xxxxx

He smiled at what he had written. With an unblinking confidence he felt it to be true. Before logging off he replied to his Mums and mates e-mails, saying the same thing in pretty much every one, and logged on to football365.com to catch up on the football news from back home

"Fuck" He seethed. Some people in the cafe let their eyes glance sideways at the outburst. Rangers had beaten Celtic four-two at Parkhead in the first old firm of the season. "Dirty Bastards" he muttered to himself. Danny was an Aberdeen fan, just like his old man, but when it came to the Old Firm divide there was only one side of the city he stood on. He had played for Celtic Boys Club for a year when he was twelve.

The timer on the bottom right of his screen read forty-five minutes. He logged off owing thirty-five rupees.

He stepped into the now dark, starry night and with nowhere else to go and nothing else to do he decided to head back to his hostel and read his book, Alasdair Gray's Lanark. He checked his watch as he walked 19:06. And then a voice from a light in the darkness irreversibly altered his plans for the evening.

"Hey Danny", it was Bobby, an affable and helpful Nepali that Billy had befriended during his first week in the city. He was sitting exactly where the pair had first met, outside his place of work, an expensive jewellery shop owned by his brother.

All those weeks ago Danny and Bobby had shared a cup of tea and swapped phone numbers in the intention of meeting up at a later date for a stronger drink. Much to Danny's amusement Bobby had introduced himself as such upon discovering that

Danny was from Scotland. Danny felt a pang of guilt induced regret that he had never called him for that stronger drink.

“Hey Bobby.” Bobby held around ten to fifteen year experience over the twenty year old William “How’s it going my old friend. It’s good to see you again”

“Yes, yes. Take a seat” Bobby patted the space on the concrete step next to where he was sitting. Danny obligingly took a seat “So, tell me did you get to go your mountain biking trip then.” Bobby enquired. He was mildly surprised that Bobby had remembered his throw away comment that he hoped to get a bike at some point during his stay. He was less surprised however when Bobby put a hand on his thigh. Intimate physical contact between male friends is a common expression of platonic friendship in Nepal, where homosexuality is illegal. It is not, however, something that Danny was ever able to become entirely comfortable with. Bobby, acutely aware of this, removed his hand jocularly laughing to himself

The two friends talked incessantly, and any passer by looking in would have naturally assumed that the pair were long term friends. Over the last ten weeks this was not an uncommon situation for Danny to find himself in. For if there is one thing that you can say about Daniel Pryce it is that he is a people person. Ebullient and gregarious by nature, he has the sort of magnetic personality that can instantly win him friends for life. True to form after around ten minutes of chatter Bobby offered Danny a cup of tea and asked him if he would care to join him for a seat in his shop.

Before pouring two cups of tea Bobby excused himself to make a quick phone call from his mobile. It was a short call. Danny had no idea, or interest, in what was discussed during the call. The conversation was in Nepali.

The tea was hot and sweet as they conversed amicably. Danny told him about his mountain biking and about the leeches; Bobby told Danny about his brother, Nabine, who owned the shop and often visited Scotland. Danny told him how just last week he had abseiled down a hundred foot waterfall; Bobby had told him about his brother who flew all over the world on business. Danny was about to tell Bobby about how he had met the girl of his dreams, fallen in love and that his life had been changed forever, but he was interrupted. Bobby introduced his brother, Nabine.

Nabine’s appearance epitomized that of a successful and serious business-man. He was turned out in a smart yellow shirt that was tucked firmly and creaselessly into the top of his belt and stylish business-like trousers and shoes. The slim, rimless spectacles that perched on top of his rotund nose seemed only to enlarge his large,

brown and benevolent eyes that bristled with intent and intelligence.

Nabine, older than his brother, was as warm and affectionate to his guest as his brother had been, but there was something different about him. He possessed an air of seriousness, of intent, that his brother did not.

As they talked it occurred to Danny that Nabine appeared to be looking at him in a peculiar fashion. It was almost as if he was trying to weigh up the young man, to judge him. Danny couldn't help but feel that Nabine was looking at him like an antique dealer might look at an old, dusty piece of furniture; scrutinising it, tentatively trying to decide whether the piece is a worthless knock-off or a priceless Chipperdale. Nabine sat back and stroked his hairless chin. He allowed himself a little smile. Then, in one swift movement he plucked a pen from behind his ear and leant forward ever so slightly towards Danny

“Now, Danny, my friend. I spend some time each year in Scotland, and England, on business. And I'm always looking for new people to work with me.”

A spontaneous smile spreads across Danny's face, which he immediately tried to suppress. “Well, just as it happens I'm a bit put out on the auld money front at the minute, and could very well be interested in working with you.” It had already occurred to Danny, who had rent due two days after his arrival back in Glasgow and who this evening could afford a beer, that he would be in dire need of employment when he got home.

The idea of working for a prosperous Nepali jeweller most certainly holds a certain amount of exotic appeal.

“So, what kind of work is it that I would be doing for you?”

“We'll, first of all”. There was a seductive glint in Nabine's eye as he spoke “Let, me explain' you the fundamentals of business”. Fastidiously and efficiently Nabine went to work speaking in clear, well enunciated English. He never had to pause for thought. It was a slick, competent and well-rehearsed performance.

“Well, let us say, hypothetically, that you receive five-thousand pounds for working for me. Then I would of course receive substantially more. Say, four or five times more than what you make. This is, of course, only natural. I am your employer. You will be working for me.”

Young Danny was dazzled. It had started to dawn on him that this was no normal job interview that he had found himself in the midst of.

“I shall not keep you in suspense any longer. And, I shall explain everything to you so

please listen carefully.” Never in his life had Danny listened as intently and carefully as he did over the next ten minutes. He was entirely captivated in the web of words that were weaved before him.

Nabine was no longer just a man. He was an opportunity. He was a risk. He was everything that Danny loved about life. And his offer was irresistible.

“Now, as you know, I own this small shop, but this is not my real business. Or my main business I should say. You see my main business is travelling overseas and selling my exported stones; France, Holland, Germany, London and Scotland. I usually travel just before Christmas, as this is the best time to sell. You see, though, the Government of Nepal puts a limitation on the amount of stones that they allow me to export each year. That limit currently stands at eighty-five thousand of your British pounds. This restriction is, of course, potentially limiting to my business”.

Nabine glanced up from the A4 sheet of paper that he had jotted some figures on and looked Danny in the eye. Below where their eyes met the figures 85,000 and 20,000 inconspicuously stared up at them. Danny’s heartbeat increased significantly. The secrecy, the daring, the intrigue and the mystery of it all combined to send a fine electric, current of excitement through his body.

“That is where you, I hope, my friend, are able to help us.” He glanced briefly at his brother before continuing. “You see my limit is eighty-five thousand. The limit that you can take home on your tourist visa is twenty-thousand pounds worth”. The clouds of confusion that had hung over Danny’s mind began slowly to lift. It was now all so clear to him. He knew just what his role as Nabine’s employee would be.

Over the next thirty minutes the two men, wrapped up in their own little world, discussed and dissected every minute detail of the enticing invitation. The deal was that Danny would ‘buy’ fifteen-thousand pounds worth of jewels from Nabine; however, and this is the clever part, no money would ever change hands between the pair. They would, of course, take every chance to ensure that the stones would look as if they had been legitimately purchased. Just in case any official figure should stick his nose inside their paperwork The package would then be sent from the DHL office in Kathmandu to their counter-part in Glasgow. Danny would then simply have to collect the package from his local DHL office at a prearranged date and time. Then he would wait.

Nabine and Danny would keep in touch over the passing weeks. The Nepali jeweller hoped to arrive in Scotland some time early in December. The pair would then simply

arrange to rendezvous anywhere in Glasgow and go for lunch. Danny would at some point during their lunch hand Nabine the package with the stones in it and in return Nabine would pass him the value of the Nepali worth of the stones. Fifteen-thousand pounds. Fifteen-thousand pounds. In cash.

Danny's heart raced. The prospect of fifteen-thousand pounds made him wet his lips. His mind raced with his heart. He couldn't help but dream. Dream about what he could do with fifteen-thousand pounds, where he could go, where he and Kat could go. He smiled for a moment as he pictured her wearing a particularly eye-catching, dazzling blue sapphire necklace that was on display just behind Nabine. He thought of fucking her as she wore it.

The daring of it all. The danger, the thrill, the secrecy and the romance of it all simply appealed to Danny on every level of his soul.

He was never in a position to say no.

To ensure that the transaction appeared as authentic as possible it would be necessary that Nabine took a photo-copy of Danny's passport and bankcard. They would also need to swipe his card so they could print out a receipt. The transaction had to look genuine.

Doubt swept over Danny. His unwavering enthusiasm washed away like a footprint on a beach. He was only too aware that he could be in the process of getting sucked into a convincing vacuum of deceit. He perspired freely. Despite the doubt and the fear the excitement and the thrill of this murky world, meant that only one outcome was ever possible. Danny was not afraid. The danger only added to it all. The money was the goal, the reward, the reason. The danger was the game.

Danny looked at his watch 19:42. 'I'm in'

His bankcard was swiped and a receipt printed out. His passport and bankcard were photocopied.

Danny followed Bobby and Nabine through the streets of Kathmandu. The night was dark and the streets were alive. Nabine was carrying a brown envelope containing ten thousand pounds of sapphires, rubies and emeralds. In six weeks time Danny would sign for and collect the same envelope in a DHL office somewhere in Glasgow. He would have to find out where. His heart still raced. It made him feel like he was travelling faster than he was. The world outside of Nabine, Bobby and the envelope

was a blur. Nothing existed but the moment.

At the DHL office Danny was required to fill out several forms. He was signing his name at the bottom of the first form when they were plunged into darkness. The lights had went out. Danny looked at his watch; it was eight o'clock. It was not uncommon for Kathmandu to experience a power cut around this time. Danny knew this, but, fuck, did it add to it all. Danny took a deep breath allowed himself a little smile and, with the aid of a torch, filled out the rest of the form.

It was done.

“We must celebrate our friendship now” announced Nabine once they were out of the office and on there way back to the shop. “I hope ours is a partnership that will thrive for years to come. You are welcome back to Nepal any time my friend. We must now come back to our shop and we will have food and drink to celebrate Scotland and Nepal. A friendship. A partnership.”

At the shop the three of them enjoyed plates of dhal baat and glasses of kukurhi, Nepali rum. Well fed and well-oiled the time was right for Danny to leave. He recalled his Father telling him once that a man must always know when the time is right to leave. It was funny him remembering his old mans words now. He hadn't thought about him in weeks.

“Well, I thank you both very much for your hospitality now gentlemen, but I think I should be getting back to my hotel now. I have an early bus in the morning.” Danny stood up “Nabine I thoroughly look forward to meeting you in Scotland and returning your generosity. I'm sure you'll love haggis. And I'll make sure I have a nice whisky in.” Nabine stood up and shook Danny's hand, placing his left hand on top of his right as he did so. This is a traditional sign of sincerity in Nepal. Danny had read so in his guide book. He certainly hoped that the two men in front of him were sincere, and that he would indeed eat haggis and drink whisky with Nabine.

‘Now, my friend, please e-mail us when you get to Pokhara and we will keep in touch over the coming weeks before I come to Scotland.’

Danny's head was spinning. His pulse had slowed but it his mind continued to race. A new world had been opened to him. It was as if he was walking through the streets of Kathmandu for the first time. Fifteen-thousand pounds. Once more he could feel the opportunities and excitement that surrounded him. What if this really was only the start of something much greater? The night air fizzed and crackled. The streets were

alive. Fifteen-thousands pounds. Yes. Where am I going? Danny smiled a wide exuberant unreserved smile. He didn't know. This could be done every year; the start of a partnership Nabine had said. Earlier he couldn't afford a beer, but now he couldn't resist one. He had earned it. Men who illegally smuggle diamonds don't simply head back to their hotel rooms for early nights. No, they spend nights in bars in exotic cities, all over the world. Just waiting to see where the night and where chance will take them.

Auschwitz-Birkenau, May 2008

by Norrie Dunsmore

Here you can still see:

the sinister, snaking railway-line
with its single, low platform (arrivals only);
the gate which promises, with perfect cynicism,
ARBEIT MACHT FREI;
the spindly, wooden guard towers
hunched like hungry vultures;
the double fence of electrified wire;
two fixed gallows;
the solid, almost homely, barrack blocks;
a handful of wooden huts
(one crowded with high-density sloping bunks)
and, as far as the eye can see,
the brick foundations of countless others;
inside, behind glass screens,
piles of clothes, shoes, spectacles and human hair,
the banal residues of stolen lives;
along the walls, photographs of the dead
with names and dates of execution;
outside again, the exploded ruins
of the gas chambers and furnaces,
like a sated, sleeping crocodile

What you cannot see:

the terror, the hunger;
the brutality, the torture;
the continuous, gassing murder and cremation;
the heroism, the self-denial, the survival at all costs;
the bitter deaths and the welcome deaths

Footnote:

It is not true, as some sentimentalists insist,
that birds no longer sing in these lost lands:
high among the birch and pine trees,
which press around the perimeter like gaunt, reluctant witnesses,
they *do* reprise their immemorially familiar hymns,
but today in tones unmistakably ironic

Train to East Kilbride on a Thursday morning in January

By Christopher M.J. Boyd

It splatters down.
Accordion rubber with a
Punch-fist sized hole
In the crease, in the gully –
Drain of a font of a modern sort,
Blessing the travellers
Who, frustrated, squeeze by
Happy in their dry damnation
Stepping from carriage
To carriage; one
By
One, like initiates to
Some strange religion of the
Commute processing to
Drum-beat chants of
Thuk-a-tadum, thuk-a-tadum
Thuk-a-tadum, and prayer
Bells of splitter-splatter
Drowned out by the
Ring-tone of a mobile phone.
Too Loud voices in
Too-crowded spaces of
Armpits and elbows,
Noses and Newspapers,
All ignoring the blessing as
It splatters down.