

From Glasgow to Saturn ~ Issue 14

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When Bob Died

by Vicki Husband

When Bob died, Ina didn't know what to do with his leg. No one else would be able to use it. It was moulded to fit Bob, short and stocky. And it was worn out; the hinge had creaked when he sat down. It still had the shoe on the end, the matching one was burnt with his body. Ina put the leg at the back of the cupboard. Occasionally she would take it out and dust it. Eventually she phoned a local drama society to see if they wanted it but they didn't so she put it out for the bin men.

She kept the pacemaker longer. It had been removed before the cremation and given to her in a brown envelope. Occasionally she held it in her hand. Wondered at how this small object, nestling beneath his collarbone, had sustained his life for the past seven years. What had they done with those gifted years? Read a few newspapers, had a few walks, a meal out each birthday. Had sex a couple of time though she'd never really enjoyed it since his heart condition, worrying when his face turned red and the veins stuck out from his temples like branches on a winter tree. The pacemaker felt cold and mechanical in her hand so she threw it out as well.

That only left the teeth. For nineteen years he'd given her his smile with those teeth, most days. The downturn of his mouth came later when he lost his oomph. She couldn't throw the teeth out. She put them in the cabinet in front of the crystal swan, next to the blown glass sea horse.

Vicki Husband is a part-time student in the Creative Writing MLitt programme.

Engineering Works

by Mark Russell

‘Come on, ring this one.’

Des passes the directory, pointing to the name ‘Archer.’

‘Right.’ I lift the receiver. ‘Number?’ He’s silent. ‘What?’

‘Why can’t I do it?’ he whines.

‘You speak like a girl.’

‘Do not!’

‘When your bollocks drop, you can do it.’

‘My bollocks are as big as yours.’

‘Peanuts is what they are.’

He says the number slowly and I dial Mr Archer. Des starts the recording. He has a collection. He sells them. People will buy anything.

‘Hallo?’

‘Good evening, Mr Archer. My name is Harry, I’m calling on behalf of your telephone providing service which subcontracts its engineering works to my company. We seem to have a fault on this line and we wonder if you help us.’ My routine is shit hot. Des loves it when I get them to read children’s stories. He almost wet himself last week when a little old lady put her phone in a bucket of water. People will do anything.

Archer waits. I smile at Des and pinch the joint out of his mouth. ‘You’re too young to smoke,’ I whisper.

‘It won’t take a minute,’ I say. I think I’ll be a salesman when I leave school.

‘It’ll take more than a minute.’ Archer’s voice is slow, low in pitch. I gulp

and I think he hears it.

‘What?’ I say.

Archer waits. I hear his breathing. Des is loving it. He tries to take the joint but I twist his nose. Finally, Archer says, ‘I’m going to fuck you up the arse.’

Des’s mouth opens so wide you could shove a watermelon in it. Then he starts to roar with laughter. ‘Ben!’

‘Shut up, Des!’

‘Ben?’ There’s a smile in that voice.

‘What?’

‘I like boys.’

Des screams and falls over. ‘I’m going to sell a million of these!’

‘Ben?’

‘What?’ Des quickly gets up and puts the recorder to the phone.

‘When I’ve fucked your arse, I’ll fuck your mouth and come in your eyes.

When you’re lying on the ground with your pants round your ankles, I’m going to cut you open with a bread knife.’

‘This is brilliant,’ Des is counting the money in his head.

‘Then I’m going to start on Des.’

Des goes white. ‘What?’ Lights flash through the window. ‘Ben! It’s mum and dad. They’re not due home for hours!’

I give Des the joint. ‘Throw this out the window.’ Des takes it and goes.

I’m calming down. ‘I know your name, you old pervert. I know where you live.’

‘Ben?’

‘What?’

'I'll be round tomorrow. After school.' He chuckles and the line goes dead.

Des returns. I put the phone down. The key turns in the front door.

'What did he say?' Des's voice is hoarse.

'Nothing. Forget it.' I say.

As we go downstairs the phone rings. Dad answers it.

'Hello? Oh.' He sounds worried. 'Oh dear. Yes, of course. 35 Rowan Tree Close. That's right. Not at all. Thank you very much, Mr Archer.'

Mark Russell is a part-time student in the Creative Writing MLitt programme.

The Edge

by Gordon Jenkins

It's rock, for the last hundred feet or so. Bracken, heather, a few boulders scattered on the slopes below that. On the climb he watched the burn sparkle in the sunlight, like the track of a tear on the mountain's face. Even here, standing well back from the edge, he can see the far shore where the water narrows between the steep walls of the glen. A few puffy clouds are drifting by, mirrored in the still surface. He smiles and the knot in his stomach unwinds a little.

He dares to eye the edge again. The knot tightens. Damn.

He'll not fall – the rock is solid, his boots secure, his experience long. It's not about falling. It's about flying.

When he stands right on an edge, looking out above the landscape, he feels as if there's nothing below his boots. He's a hundred feet above the heather, swooping down the line of the burn and out over the glassy loch. He's an eagle, soaring on the updrafts.

What would the eagle do, standing on that edge, surveying its territory? How could it resist spreading its wings and dropping off, catching the air, gliding and wheeling among the peaks? It wouldn't even hesitate.

For so long, he loved to feel the eagle. He stood on countless edges to let his mind wing its way down to the loch shores. He imagined sensing the shape of the land in the movements of the air, mastering the currents over a bealach, pivoting on a wing tip and falling into the next glen.

But the eagle in him can sense the climber too. It can feel his boots and the pack, heavy on his back. They tie the man to the ground and the bird feels trapped. Now, when he stands on the edges, it is wild and desperate to escape. The sky tumbles around him as the eagle swoops and dives. It wants to show him the freedom of falling through the wind. He is afraid that, one day, he will go with it. No way back.

For the climber, there is only one way off the mountain. He glares now at the edge. His heart beats high in his throat. He steps up to stand on the eagle's perch. He feels it eye him for a second, then unfold its wings and drop into the void. The heather hurtles up to fill his view, then falls away as the sky rolls and pitches. His boots stand secure.

Respite

by John Jennett

Since she tucked it in amongst the smell of soil and lilies, she's been wondering if the church was such a good choice, how long the baby will scream for. She runs until she can't hear it, then walks quickly home to her daughter. Like borrowed shoes, her hips and thighs don't seem to fit, her jeans sponging something warm that she thinks will mark them. She can't stop pinching at her palm, screwing her nails into the place that feels bruised by the baby's lips where she muffled its cries.

'Boy,' she'd said earlier to her father, lifting the bloody towel as proof and trying not to smile with relief.

'Get rid of it,' he'd said, making the glow from his cigarette flare.

She'd looked up then and seen his cement eyes feed for too long on Laura, drawn up in the chair.

She has been home for an hour and the news bulletins are layering up on the ceiling, the damp patches billowing with each of her father's heavy steps overhead. The radio's presence in the windowless room is agreed until the newborn is found, Laura sleeping next to her in the stained bed, brokered safe.

She hears Dad coughing upstairs, a toilet flushing and water rushing in the pipes. The thin sheets are blotting the milk that leaks from her and she twists the corners of the cheap fabric in her fist. She thinks there could be a week of respite whilst her body is too seeping and raw for his taste. Seven blank days before the door-handle will dip into the room and send her free hand to bury Laura in the quilt again, a whimper for every recoil of the springs.

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

Morning has Broken

by Andrew Fullwood

BEEP! BEEP! BEE...The shrill nagging of the alarm clock at the side of her bed was cut short, its work barely begun. Eyes still closed against the day she sensed a movement in the room around her and was almost stirred by her surprise before she realised it was him.

“Cup of tea for you love.....No need to rush I’ve walked the dog already.”

Usually she relied on the alarm to annoy her in the morning before she stole an extra few minutes in bed with the snooze button. Then she was up and out into the new day with the dog for a brisk wake-up-walk round the park before breakfast. Today the strange shortness of the alarm and the tea were an unwelcome kindness.

“Thanks. That’s nice.”

The words were said but she lay still, on her side with her back to the alarm clock, her face half hidden in fold of the pillow hiding her irritation.

His shift at the factory used to start at six and he still couldn’t adjust to not going. His body clock refused to accept redundancy. Some mornings he would lay there listening to the sound of her sleeping. He had always been able to wake for work without disturbing her and feeling the warmth from her body and the sound of her breathing was a pleasure he’d always given himself before slipping quietly out into the cold dark morning to start the day. Now the pleasure was gone. Gone the day the credit crunch closed the factory. His life, his hope, eking away slowly, just as the redundancy money seeped out of the bank and was never replenished.

He moved round the bed and parted the curtain letting in the grey morning light.

“It looks like rain and there’s a cold wind. I’ll run you to work, if you’d like?”

Still lying in bed she tensed but hid her grimace by stretching and sitting up.

She tried to hide her resentment at his intrusion into her morning but; but it was hard.

He was always there she knew he missed his life at work, not just the money but his mates as well, perhaps them even more than the money. But he was always there and the mornings were her time.

“No need to bother yourself. The walk wakes me up and I like the paper on the bus.”

“If you’re sure love?”

He paused, waiting for her to change her mind but she just shook her head and smiled.

“I’m fine walking thanks.”

“I’ll go and put your toast on.”

He turned and left the bedroom. When she heard his footsteps on the stairs she slipped out of bed and walked through to the bathroom pouring the tea in the sink before sitting down to empty her bladder.

Ten Minutes

by Jill Creighton

Dr Cruikshank had told her to set aside ten minutes each evening for meditation. Dr Cruikshank said it would empty her mind of worries and help her relax before bed time.

Ellen moved the standard lamp over to the window, lit the tea light and placed it at the corner of her lounge.

You try and create a peaceful sanctuary, when you live in a pokey flat, she said to Dr Cruikshank's face, which beamed from the CD cover.

Ellen sat cross legged on a cushion, leaned forward and pressed play.

-During the next ten minutes all tension and stress will leave your body. Allow your body to form an unbroken circle of peace. Relax.

Ellen wriggled. Her legs were cramping, her left breast was itchy and the pressure on her tail bone was painful. She pressed pause and reached for a second cushion.

-Take a deep breath in, then slowly... release. Feel all worries disappear as you exhale. If a thought pops up just imagine that it's sitting on a pink cloud. Let it float by. Relax.

Why had she eaten that second Walnut Whip. She didn't need it. Greedy cow.

-Now imagine a white light full of love is entering your body through the top of your head. Relax

The weight had crept up since he'd left. She couldn't get into that size 14 skirt the other day. Mind you, Zara stuff is designed for small-boned Spanish skelfs.

-Breathe in. And out. In and out. You are at peace. Relax.

I bet David isn't forking out a fortune on counselling. Why would he when he's got Debbie, from Marketing, to listen to his constant whingeing.

I'm starting to think Dr Cruikshank's a quack. Four hundred quid and I'm not feeling any better.

- Remember if a thought pops into your mind, just let it float by on that pink cloud. Relax.

I gave up everything to go to Dubai with him and he leaves me for a 23-year-old. All he did was work while I stewed at home with no one to talk to, except the cleaner whose English was limited to 'tea' and 'bleach'.

-You are now at one with the world. Let love emanate from you.

What a selfish prick. Half the equity won't keep me long. And how am I meant to get a job. I've lost all my contacts, the economy's fucked and half of Glasgow has been made redundant.

-You should now be in a perfect state of relaxation.

Ellen tuned in to the twinkly twanky porn music which had replaced Dr Cruikshank's mellifluous voice and tried to concentrate.

Hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Ellen exhaled.

She'd never meet anyone else. Who'd want a financially fucked, emotionally wrecked, size 14 large boned, 36 years old....I suppose that guy in the job centre was a bit flirty, but his squint was off-putting.

-Now open your eyes slowly and relish the feeling of inner peace.

Jill Creighton is a part-time Creative Writing M Litt student, who is too busy doing things to listen to relaxation tapes.

The Crossing

by Sarah Ward

I stand at the crossing by the university and wait for the green man. Most of the time, men are alright. I like the ways they're different. The way they like to know stuff, and their sense of humour, which can be funny, or sometimes weird. But I don't need one telling me when to cross the road.

I could say to the woman stood next to me, Why did I bother with all that studying which gave me principles I can't live up to when I spend my days wiping shit and snot and making dinners and cleaning floors and breaking up fights, I wake up every morning expecting equality only to be disappointed because it only exists in people's heads, plus it's impossible to get a decent job once you've got kids in tow? But I keep quiet, because I don't want to be a moany bitch.

The lights change, and I see a man stepping out from the opposite kerb. He is as distinct to me as if I had run my hands over him. He's dressed in jeans, loose but not baggy. The skin of his neck is flushed from the exertion of his walk. Strands of hair are stuck to his temples with sweat. His hand is clenched around the strap of his bag. I stop halfway and say, Hey, do you want to help me stage a political protest? He raises his eyebrows. What do I have to do? You have to think of an act that symbolises women's freedom, I say.

What ... here on the crossing?

Yeah. You can do what you like, but I'm not helping you. You have to do it by yourself, as a gesture on behalf of mankind.

OK. I'll give it a go, he says, and drops his bag.

After a while, he looks up at me. What d'you reckon?

Not bad, I say. It's definitely one of the better things you could do.

Then the cars are starting to honk their horns in a big queue of traffic with everyone's in a hurry to get somewhere because they're late and it's all because of this woman who's on the crossing and jesus christ what the *fuck* does she think she's doing?

Thanks, I say to my friend, I feel much better.

Has it worked? he asks me.

I look around. It's a green man again and people are crossing the road.

I don't know, I say. It's a start.

Sarah Ward is a part-time student in the Creative Writing MLitt programme.

A word to the beginner

by Kathrine Sowerby

Everybody is standing in a field in that roaring, terrible countryside, clapping their hands in unison. You are in a house at the top of a mountain with a headache the colour of sunshine. Yesterday evening, worn out from running, you threw heavy bags into the vibrating rooms of the forgotten house and escaped by falling asleep.

An aggressive thirst wakes you in the morning after ten silent hours shut away behind closed eyes. You make breakfast. The view from the kitchen is a bridge separating a lump and a shape and you sit quietly playing hide-and-seek with the tip of your finger and a dot on the wall.

You sit there, looking around for tomorrow, building a castle of words. Clever, sincere words that rhyme. You think of dressing but you are stuck in one place, a magnet pulling you towards fear, and the temperature in your shoulders climbs up to the fire in your forehead. Irritation spreads its wings and dives, like a bullet, to the bottom of the sea that is your consciousness. Doubt is the obstruction threatening the despair to remain, biting you with the last word.

You hear waves beating land miles away and, breathing out, take hold of concentration. Slowly, steadily you feed the dry fountain with your strength, washing away disturbances and worries drop by drop, until something brilliant. A soothing glow that mirrors something luminous, vast, something you need.

You are walking through a blue-green forest, soft pink blossom blowing into old apple trees. Their trunks are purple on the windward side and sloping down. They are healthy but almost scentless.

Another fifteen minutes. Keep your eyes half open. Allow time for the

waterfall to thaw, to warm up slightly in the sunshine. Then wash your face and hands thoroughly, with cold water.

Half an hour later, your mind rotates and opens up the door, but you stay in, touching all the things you want with the soles of your feet.

Ashes

by Nikki Cameron

From the burning house, in which everything else was lost, she saved the family photo album. As she lay dying of her burns, the album was pressed into the hands of her children. Afterwards, they sat together to look at the pictures and found that there were none of her.

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

Dead Drunk

by Harry McDonald

Dawn. Crushing headache. Blind drunk again. Throat raw, senses blunted. Where the fuck was he? Somebody's flat, obviously, but whose, where? Sunshine needed its way through the curtains. He turned away from it, eyeballed the room. The half-light threw a veil over everything, blurring purpose. He waded in the alcohol polluted shallows of his memory. He was in the Club – no big fucking surprise there, then. He'd had a few and was at the bar... and that girl. Yeah, the girl with the long, straight, black hair: he spilt his drink. He apologised to her, offered to buy her another one and they got chatting. Real automatic chemistry right away, the kind you only get once in a blue moon. Turned out she hailed from his neck of the woods from way back when. Then jump-cut to jackets and leaving the Club on legs none too steady. Then what... then what... think... what, kissing, yeah kissing... oh so sweet? He pawed at the bones of the memory still partly buried. It was here in this flat those kisses, touches happened. He'd not experienced the like before with a woman. Then it stopped, she drew away, rejected him. Discarded like a used tissue, he raged. The memory now mirrored that rage. Erupted in his head anew. Hands crushing her neck. Her breath emptying. Her body. Close.