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Shift Work
by Micaela Maftci

The best shift I worked with Barry was only my fifth. So soon after I started: a depressing thought. But I didn't know it was the best until it all ended, I always thought it would get better and better. I was a natural, he said, which may or may not have been true. All I know is that it came normally, as though I was not learning but remembering. It is an easy job, you might say, filling glasses. Anything with opposable thumbs could. Not quite the truth. But it fit over me nicely, and I loved it, the banging of fists and money on the counter, the endless loops of bottles going end over end over end, the bar so loud you learn to tell the names of drinks from the shapes of opened mouths, the game of guessing who wants what, the scoop of ice in the glass, digging and digging and digging. "Watch my hands," was the only advice Barry ever gave me. It may not have even been advice. It may have only been a command. His hands moved independently of the rest of him. Barry's hands had eyes and brains in them. His hands did not need each other. They may have not even liked each other. Barry fondled his till and ran his dishwasher and served his bar and still had time in his hands to pat me on the shoulder to tell me he had already made the order I was looking to start. Barry had saved his hands in the many first years of his life, folded them and crossed them and put them in his pockets, softened them and rested them up. He had let them be complacent and lazy so that when he needed them they had the spastic energy of fire trucks.

"Watch my hands," he said. Like a typist. Movement until blurring. A task for each finger. It was ridiculous. But I watched his hands, and I tried to learn. I tried to imitate, and that's where the learning came from. I felt like I was running a marathon in place every time I worked and my body thought so too and it would tell me so every morning after. There were a thousand sounds running beneath the surface roar that I loved. The beginning of the river of beer from the tap, the deep-throated rip of a beer case's flaps coming open, the muted sharp noise of a glass breaking along the lip, the full-scale shatter of it hitting the others in their bin of angles and blades. My elbow on the cash register, always in the same spot, a hitting like your head on the pillow, silent but felt. The knee to close the fridge, the hip to carry bags of ice like infants, the wrist to control the weight while the shot pours, the fingertips to scabble through the stacks of coins, the palm for two pints at once. The languages they all spoke, drunk and pretentious and hopeful and despondent and joyful, all of them thinking I spoke it too. The work of a translator. *We are polyglots*, I remember murmuring to myself on a night when I heard Barry change his personality a hundred times to match a hundred customers. Three drinks made in the time it takes the fourth to order. The man's beer poured while the woman deliberates. At the end of the night I would go to bathroom to take my shoes off and walk in place on the glorious tiles, just to feel the hardness of them against the ragged lumps of my feet, something like the most sensual massage.

"Watch my hands," he would say when I felt overwhelmed, when I asked him if it was time to close yet, when I asked him to make a drink for me so I could catch up. "Watch my fucking hands," when I was being too slow, when he was let down. "Check this out," when he delighted in running circles around me, when it was funny that I could not understand what the person in front of me was ordering and he was already behind my shoulder reaching for the bottles to make it. Always telling me to watch the hands, so much, so often that I started doing it all the time, outside of work. In the park my eyes were trained on him and his delicacy in unzipping the Ziploc, his flicking of the lighter, his nimbleness in counting the bills, the lack of superfluous movement in his treatment of the button at the waist of my pants.

The fifth day started so slow that Barry had time to become entranced in a tv show. He asked me to go get coffees without taking his eyes from the screen. I took a long time deciding what I wanted and by the time I got back there was a line-up. I don't know where they all came from. Time passed in a way unlike normal. That night, I was doing more than watching Barry's hands. I was being Barry's hands. So many times that night, dumping glasses, slamming bottles, opening a beer a second, shaking with one hand and making change with the other, I wanted to sing with glee. We were never more together than we were that night. Like a machine. The obvious image. I don't think we spoke to each other once but we were perpetually aware of the other's body, the space taken up. I knew what he was doing behind my back and I could reach behind me for the limes and avoid his arm which was coming past my face for a straw. I was flying all night. At three when he was sweeping and I was re-capping, I wanted to cry for going home. A shower of money made me want to buy another shift. There was never speed like this at home, there was never the opportunity to please anyone so quickly and easily and then have them get out of my face at the end of it.

Two poems
by Sue Reid Sexton

Compass

Comfort me
companion
beyond
a thousand miles
when rain sifts us
both
there and
here

Commit yourself
to falling
again
and again
into the
commotion of
my bed

Commemorate
the last
trip apart
to lands
unknown
indeterminate of
origin

Concede
fly from separation
in the blinking
of a mouse
come
home

such are promises

sunlight on mid-morning
a pocket full of rice
the roads are strewn with seaweed
the police have called me twice
the blind girl did a sword-dance
the rats are in a flutter
the cars are red and green and blue
I did not hear you utter
a single, solitary word
it's only crowds with you
the doctor came, he brought his wife
and now that we are through
with pots and pans and cooking sauce
the chairs are in the garden
the sun's been on them all day long
my pet mouse ate the lardons
pink clouds are at the window now
and bed-time is upon us
my book is falling on its face
winged chariots a promise

Girls in the Hood

by Margaret Callaghan

I was never that scared of the wolf, in fact I found him quite sexy; all that chest hair escaping from his shirt and those sardonic eyes. Even in my grandmother's clothes he looked more masculine. If you know what I mean? That was only ever an experiment though. And not a particularly successful one as you will know. I read about it in *Cosmopolitan*. 'Spice up your sex lives' the article said. On reflection sleeping with a wolf should have been spice enough. The wolf wasn't too keen on the whole thing. He was worried he would look ridiculous. But I talked him out of his clothes and into hers.

And now, well, I haven't seen him for ages. He's too embarrassed to come back in case his mates see him. He says they looked like they were laughing at him. I told him wolves always look that way. I doubt he's faithful. Wolves rarely are. I daydream about him though as I trudge back and forwards to my grandmother's every day, the way he would lick my hand and glance at me to see my reaction. It gives me something to think about when my grandmother's moaning. "You don't suit red," she always says. "You should wear black, it's slimming." I'm always going to wear it though. In case he comes back.

Fucking woodcutters.

Wednesday

by Maria Di Mario

I woke up to a dozy, overslept feeling, and grey skies outside the window. I felt sad even before I remembered yesterday evening, reproachful silences broken by long and tortured explanations. I thought about him, his eyes, blue-grey like pebbles by the shore. His hair, brown curls to tangle my fingers in. His voice, like a viola, the memory of it throbbing painfully in my ears. I checked my phone. No messages. It was warm under my duvet, and the air was cold on my face, but I didn't want to stay in bed, with only my thoughts for company.

It was better in the bathroom, no window to show me the clouds outside, no bed for me to feel lonely in. I'd lifted my CD player into the hall so I could dance under the hot rain from the shower, water flicking from the ends of my hair as I shook my head, streaming down my shifting body, turning the room into a warm, steamy bubble of music and movement. I kept time, still dancing, as I soaped my body, up and down, circles of foamy music over my shoulders, down my stomach, along my legs. I rubbed the bass into my hair along with the shampoo, moisturiser and vocals gliding over my skin afterwards, high and smooth and sweet. But when I opened the bathroom door the clouds of scented steam that escaped carried my happiness with them, to vanish in the dark, chilly hall.

The sky was still overcast as I crouched naked on the bedroom floor, sifting through the piles of clean clothes. All blacks and greys. I looked wistfully at the reds and purples and greens of the dirty pile, before pulling on black pants, black tights, a grey dress, a black cardigan. I had no choice but to match the city today, colourless, dreary. In a flash of rebellion I decided to wear my red coat. It was thin, no protection against the February cold, but I felt that if I'd put on my black winter coat, the weight of it would have pressed me, through wood and plaster and concrete, straight down into the ground. But on the way up Woodlands Road I regretted it. The bitter wind sliced straight through the richly coloured material, through my wool cardigan, my cotton dress, through my goose bumped skin, tiny hairs raised in protest. My lungs turned to twin bubbles of ice, my stomach shivered, my liver iced over, my heart froze. I hunched my shoulders against it, but that only made my neck ache. The strap of my book-filled bag dug into my collarbone. The exposed skin on my face and hands stung. The bare trees of Kelvingrove Park shivered under the drab sky and the dull water of the river rushed away under grey stone bridges into a bleak future. The cold wind snatched mouthfuls of conversation and cigarette smoke away from the people I passed on Gibson Street.

And then, as I grew level with a stranger, I heard words that took me to a different world, far away from the grey city streets. I slowed my pace to match his, walking a few steps behind, to listen to the music of his language. It awakened an answering song in me. Words that I hadn't spoken for years bubbled up from a deep and forgotten core, thawing my insides, smoothing my skin, heating my throat, filling my cheeks. I held them inside my mouth and was amazed at the balmy comfort they brought me, like sun warmed stones. I followed him up University Avenue. He must have sensed someone behind him for he looked over his shoulder at me, still speaking into his phone. He was thin-faced, his skin still holding a memory of sun, a shadow of stubble on his cheeks, his eyes matching mine, their shared darkness meeting in a moment of possibilities. Then I looked down, shy, and he turned away again, and by then I had reached the building, and I stopped to walk up the steps of No. 6 University Gardens. As I put my hand to the wooden door, I turned to watch him walking away, and he was

looking at me. He flashed me a smile, and then kept walking, still talking, words unfurling behind him like a bright ribbon that held sunlight, sharp and bright and hot, and colours, vivid and brought to life, warm, cloying smells that linger in the nostrils, tastes that burst like rainbows in the mouth, heat that squeezes scatters of diamonds from your skin, and so many other memories.

I pushed open the door and went inside. I tried to work for a while, but I couldn't concentrate. Eventually I gave up. I put my coat back on, shivering in anticipation of the wind, and put my things in my bag, wandering out on to the steps, wondering where to go and what to do. And then I saw it, where he had been walking, a faint, opalescent trail, hanging in the air. I walked down the steps, into it, and I could hear the echo of his words and feel the memory of sunlight on my skin. I followed the trail; I couldn't help myself. Along University Gardens, hard green shoots pushing their way through the dark earth of the small flowerbeds in front of the sandstone buildings, searching for spring. A leisurely stream of people on their way to lunch slowed my pace. Outside the union students thrust leaflets into the hands of passers-by. There was a bake sale, two shivering girls behind a table of golden cakes, brown cookies, glossy slices of caramel shortcake, dark clusters of crispy cakes. The wind blew the smell of sugar and chocolate into my face, but I ignored it as the trail shimmered before me, a promise of adventure. I passed the edge of the carpark and walked down the narrow staircase to the paved area where the bins were kept, and around on to Ashton Lane. The cobblestones were hard and uneven under my thin-soled shoes. There were women sitting outside, wrapped up in thick, coffee-coloured coats, scarves a splash of colour at their throats, cigarette smoke leaping from their lipsticked mouths and twisting into thin streamers that vanished in the air, lattes steaming gently on the rickety tables before them. I followed the trail round the corner on to Byres Road. The pavements were thick with people, but I could still see the vestiges of his language fluttering along the street, glowing faintly. They led me past the ragged song of a tramp, the sudden and profuse bloom of colour at the flower shop, the rustling gossip of the newspaper stand. They led me across the road and into a café, filled with overstuffed couches, where jazz music played under a layer of chatter, where the air was warm and coffee-scented. I walked up to the counter, not daring to look around, and ordered hot milk with cinnamon syrup. The cup was hot against my reddened, wind-stung hands as I made my way over to a table. I sat down and opened my book. I would read three pages, I promised myself, and then I would look around and see if he was there.

Just as I reached the bottom of the second page, somebody touched my shoulder. I looked up, into his face, the darkness of his eyes leaping forward to touch mine. Words buzzed and floated and bubbled inside me. Memories of the past blurred and flickered, memories of the future sprang and bloomed.

“Hello,” he said, in my language.

“Hello,” I said, in his.

Two Poems

By Joyce Alexander Henderson

The Flittin

haulf-wey atween Pitcairn and the ferm at Wemyss
twa cairts stapped at the Auld Hoose
(aye kennin Baldy Houston cid see them fae the Manse)
the men tethered the beasts,
disappeared ahint a bush fir a pish
then in the door fir a dram an a blether
leavin the wives an the bairns tae huddle thegither
in the cauld hirst nicht.
wan wife, thinkin o' her dinner,
dints her heid tae the body o' her cairt, sez
a've got a deid pig thonder
hin ye? sez her neibor,
her thochts somewhor else aw thegither -
a've got a deid bairn on mine.

Returning to Belfast to visit my niece

I went there for love in nineteen eighty one
to live in an attic
overlooking the Laggan.

He'd said nothing about hunger strikes,
tanks in the streets,
armoured police jeeps,
lanterns swinging in the dark road ahead -
jumpy soldiers at the driver's window -
routine body searches, car bombs,
the religious divide at the Bot and the Egg.

At Purdysburn Hospital I lived
in the nurse's home,
nowhere near the Laggan
(he lived with his mum – *it's cheaper.*)
Some of my patients had had lobotomies -
when I took them to the coffee shop
three of them made a bid for freedom.

On Saturday I returned to Belfast for love.

Extract from an Unfinished Novel

by Kirsty Logan

What I need is an eerie, sprawling forest, through which I must battle beasts external and internal, to reach the chicken-legged hut at the centre. Or a marble temple at the top of the tallest mountain, surrounded by dragons, full of silent monks with shadowed eyes. Or a labyrinth with a minotaur often heard but never seen, whom I must defeat with a sacred sword before discovering the truth hidden in its guts. I read every leaflet in the Tourist Office, but Glasgow doesn't seem to have any of these things.

Instead I ride trains and buses, watching the world slide past the window like a cinema reel. That guy in the hat must be the hero, that tall girl his love interest. The girl in the pink coat is the best friend, and the guy with the moustache provides comic relief. That frowning man must be the villain, and that – there! – is where the climax will occur: the bar shoot-out, the walk around the skyscraper's edge, the struggle over a pool of ravenous sharks. I am the extra you can only spot at the edges of the widescreen version.

I sit in cafes and drink endless cups of tea – tiny china cups that empty in a gulp, huge mugs that need two hands to hold. I eat iced cakes topped with smarties, giant floury scones fat with raisins, cheesecakes so dense I have a two-hour sugar rush. I stare out of windows, at table-tops, at front pages of newspapers. Flyers on the walls advertise book groups, knitting clubs, kung-fu classes. I could do that. I could curl my hair, dust off my Jane Austens, and discuss literature with like-minded ladies. I could wear stencilled t-shirts, get some vintage spectacles, and spend Tuesday evenings stitching and bitching. I could tie up my hair, practice deep breathing, and kick some arse.

I could be any of those girls.

I could be all of them.

I swallow my tea and write down the phone numbers on the flyers.

The streetlights come on, and I realise my stomach is unhappy. I search out my favourite Japanese place – down the alley, up the stairs, behind the curtain. The entrance is flanked by fish tanks, lit up with neon as bright as Vegas. The dazzled fish lurk back into their castle. I slide onto a bench, slurp my noodles, and decide who to be.

The girl in the corner looks happy: she's laughing at her boyfriend's jokes between bites of tempura. Her skin is shiny and she needs to pluck her eyebrows, but she doesn't seem to care. When she smiles, she looks perfect. Maybe I could be her: eat tempura, ignore my eyebrows, and smile a lot.

The woman at the next table is spit-curlled, arch-browed, pale-cheeked. She sips her miso silently, reading a small black paperback. The rings on her fingers click when she picks up her chopsticks. I could be her: eat delicately, wear rings, and smile less.

I stare into my bowl. Fat noodles twirl around lumps of tofu, strips of carrot glow too brightly. I'm not hungry. I look at the smiling girl and the unsmiling girl, and my stomach growls. I push my bowl away and lie my head down on the table.

A Conversation Between Friends

by Euan McClymont

Andy and Angela sat on the bed. Across from them, the early morning light streamed in through the window, illuminating the clutter of objects strewn across the floor. Small piles of books, and sheets of paper cluttered with notes, mingled in amongst the heaps of clothes.

Andy turned towards Angela and began to speak.

‘Jeez-o, look at the time, I’d better be getting home soon. Thanks for letting me stay so late, we’ve got through a fair amount.’

‘Don’t worry about it, I was wanting to get a good go at it. I think I revise best with other people. Bit irritating Louise showing up in the middle like that though, I mean it was nice to see her again, but, bad timing.’

‘Yeah I don’t think I’ve seen her in ages, good to get the chance to catch up, she’s getting on well with things eh?’

‘Seems that way yeah’.

There was another pause in the conversation. It was Angela who began things again, in a quieter tone.

‘Hey... I hope you don’t mind me asking... how do you feel about Louise these days?’

‘Well I mean I’d like to think of her as a good friend, but that’s it really... I mean, it was only ever a crush really, it could never have worked.’

‘I hope things are ok for you then, it’s not something that’s, getting you down?’

Andy chuckled slightly, ‘Oh no, things are good, I’ve.. hah. I’ve found someone else I’m pretty keen on but I want to wait a while and play it safe, ‘cause she’s a bit special. Knowing me I’ll probably find some way to make a meal of things though.’

‘Ooooh, good for you, how do you mean she’s special though?’

‘Dunno, just is.’

‘Ach that’s s such a boy answer’

There was another break in the conversation. Andy stared hard towards the light from the window for a moment.

‘Well alright, alright, I’m not too used to talking about these kind of things. I suppose what I mean is that I find myself thinking about her again and again, and it puts a smile on my face. And I feel like I’ve got to know lots about all the different sides of her, which is unusual for me, with girls I like I usually stay at a distance and admire the image.’

Angela now had on something of a smile.

‘Awww man, that’s quite sweet, sounds like you’ve got the starts of a friendship there if things don’t work out.’

‘But that’s sort of the problem, we already do get on quite well, we’re seeing a lot of each other, so I’m not sure how to come out and say it.’

‘Trust you to choose a friend!’

Andy laughed again. ‘Well you know me, I couldn’t make it easy, could I?’

A small frown seemed to cross Angela’s face.

‘Well I mean, have you had any indication from her that she’s interested in starting something with you.’

‘I dunno, I think she’s at the stage of wanting to find someone new, but I can’t say whether she’s attracted to me, she’s not given me anything to go on.’

‘I’ve got to say, if you’re not sure, then it’s maybe best not to say anything, then perhaps there’s the chance of something developing between you further down the line, when you know each other better.’

‘Yeah, I suppose you’re right, I’ve just been being selfish about my feelings as usual’

‘Hey don’t be daft, it’s not a question about being selfish, they’re your feelings and there’s nothing wrong with you having them, but I’m just saying that if you can’t be sure, it’s best to keep them back, that way you can avoid any awkwardness for *both* of you.’

Andy leaned back, and grinned for a moment.

‘You’re so sensible Angela, why couldn’t I have met you sooner? You’re..., you’re just fantastic, you know that?’

Angela cringed slightly.

‘Don’t be daft!’

‘I mean it, you’ve changed me a lot’

‘Well thanks, but don’t go on and make me big-headed about it, it’s just how I am I suppose.’

She shuffled and half-rose from the bed, and glanced up again at the window.

‘Awww jeeze, can’t believe how light it is out there already, scary stuff. We’ve been properly on the go.’

‘It’s been me keeping you up blethering away, sorry. I really am going to go home now, promise.’

Angela chuckled. ‘Let me show you out.’

The two of them rose from the bed and walked slowly over towards the door.

Angela went through first, then Andy followed and gingerly closed it behind her. As the door clicked shut, the morning sunlight had risen so that it shone directly on one of the abandoned textbooks. Opened up to about halfway through, it had now been left lying face down, the pages snapped around the spine.