

From Glasgow to Saturn

The University of Glasgow's Creative Writing Showcase



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Artwork by Tim Sandys <http://www.timsandys.com>
Find more of Tim's work in [100 Artists of the Male Figure: A Contemporary Anthology
of Painting, Drawing, and Sculpture](#).



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A Word from the Editors

Dear Readers,

Issue 24 was cut back to its current shape from a wealth of submissions. It seems like water, if you make a channel (in the right place) then it will be filled. We were surprised, extremely gratified and nearly overwhelmed to receive such a winter flood. Thank you.

We've tried, as best we can, to keep things simple and include not only what we liked but what stood out (our guiding principle). We want the reading experience to be strong and of deep interest. One in which the reader is buoyed along and doesn't feel at times like they maybe wading upstream and inclined to reach lazily for the remote. We want you to stay with us after all. It goes without saying there were several near misses.

All of these submissions are our highlights and in them you will find resonant and compelling voices and your own clear favourites. We are pleased to welcome the carefully crafted and revealing poems of Richie McCaffrey soon to be published by *Happenstance*; and from the prose writers that Chinese fishing hook in Gillian Bowman's dark and foreboding story will be hard to forget. But this is just the iceberg's tip!

This issue puts Alan Bissett in the box seat for the 'Quick View'. A firm *From Glasgow to Saturn* favourite (to pun his latest award winning novel *Pack Men*) and an ex-Glasgow MLitt creative writing tutor, Alan recently won the Scottish Writer of the Year award, fending off such stiff competition as Jackie Kay. We are delighted to take a slice from his writerly life.

Enjoy Christmas and the New Year and keep striving for the right ring of truth in your writing, and keep submitting.

Siobhan Staples | Megan Primrose | Paul Deaton



On the Western Ideal of Beauty

by JoAnne McKay

Sheep are woolly for a reason
this ice-bright season.

I, meanwhile, bitterly regret
shaving armpits, shins
and plucking brows,
suspecting each single
extraneous hair
would be useful, very useful,
right now.

Postcards

by Richie McCaffery

He collected postcards, old ones,
particularly from places bombed
or bulldozed, where street names
were just the hearsay of ghosts,
their stamps colourful shibboleths.
He'd vanish for days with no word
in search of those lost addresses.
Nowadays we wait for postcards
he sends second-class from the night.
They always say *wish you were here*.

Crocodile Tears

by Daniel David

He's back where he grew up. Gods know a place can change, and the kid makes allowance for that, but...still the trailer park surprises him. He sees filthy fences, dogs limping around in the dust, little girls tearing past on bikes hollering cuss words into the wind. It's no Olympus-then again, it never was, but this seems more of a climb down than he recalls. Doesn't recognise the place...not till he sees the old tree, that is.

It's a three foot tall Manchurian Elm, which means that it's a hell of a strange thing to be seeing in the middle of an Ohioan trailer park. It's common knowledge to the locals, though, that it had been planted decades ago by a band of dryads who left as soon as they arrived. Consensus was that the "hippies" had just been overawed in the presence of proper dei-scendants.

Overawed, reflects the kid, as he spies the damp patch at the foot of the tree. He sits himself down on the other side.

It's been maybe four years since he left, and back then he could sit in the tree's shade. Now the top branches poke against the back of his head, the leaves prick at his neck. He's outgrown the thing. Four years, but boys do a lot of growing in that time. He'd been twelve years old the last time he'd sat there. His arms had been bruised and his face had a long scarlet welt across it, and he was sitting there just daring himself not to cry. Even when his mom came over and sang him one of her little songs. She liked to see him cry.

So the kid's just sitting there recalling the not-so-good old days, when he gets accosted by the girls on their bikes. They've been circling for a while now, but he didn't notice until they started skimming his sneakers with their tire treads.

Cut it out, he warns them.

The reply fires back like a gunshot: or what?

But it doesn't come from the girls. It comes from a woman sitting on the steps of the neighbouring trailer. She's a gaunt-faced old witch in a string vest. The kid remembers her, vaguely. She used to be a face painter, specialising in kids' parties. She seemed to know every kind of creature living from west coast to east, and exactly how to recreate its image using a child's face for a canvas. Peacocks and panthers, jackals and jaguars. Of course, she had the divine in her blood too, and it manifested in her painting. She had to stop when parents started complaining - little Timmy's out in the yard eating the chicken feed, little

Mariah's gone to school thinking she's a zebra.

Now the kid notices that the girls on the bikes have all got orange and black stripes on their faces.

What's this, he asks the woman, your own little tigress troop?

They sure are, she calls back. And they'll rip you apart if I give the word.

Kid shrugs. He notices the dogs trailing lazily nearby, happy enough to leave the intimidating to their young masters. It had been different when he'd been living here. But then the dogs had more than a single head each in those days.

The woman asks what he's doing here. He replies that he's here to see Priam Norton. She raises an eyebrow; suddenly seems to recognise him. She calls the girls off, and they fly away on their bikes.

Kid asks if the girls are her daughters.

No, says the woman, I'm last of my line. They're courier-claret.

Kid just nods. The slang is coming back to him in spurts: *bolt boys* and *courier claret* and *sunfolk*. He asks the woman if she remembers painting his face.

She shakes her head.

You made me into a lion for my ninth birthday, he says. I was out hunting antelope for three straight nights before mom managed to wash the paint off.

She laughs. Paint don't wash *off*, sonny. Paint washes *in*.

*

It's a full fifteen minutes before the kid thinks: courier-claret. *Shit*.

He checks. His wallet's still there. That's lucky. A girl with Mercury in her blood can have your wallet, phone and keys off you and have a ten foot head start without you feeling so much as a tickle on your backside. They call it the Holy Trinity. Kid flips through the wallet, just in case, and sees that the bills are still inside too. You never know with Mercury's line. They got a knack for breeding *show-offs*.

So he's managed to avoid getting robbed. Not much of a triumph for a quarter of an hour's worth of wandering.

But then the kid comes across a trailer that he recognises. The paint's all chipped and faded, but the outline of the skull's still visible on one side. He remembers with his fingertips, running them across the fur-lined windowsills.

This is the shaman's hut. No one had ever knocked here, so the kid walks straight in.

He'd expected to see the old witch doctor hunched over his kitchen stove, trying to re-jig some arcane recipe for modern times with a wok for a cauldron. Instead he sees a

handsome fella in a white coat, sitting in a chair with a ouija board balanced on his lap. The man looks baby-faced despite sporting a jagged beard, and his smile punches dimples in his cheeks.

Hi there, says the fella.

Hi yourself, says the kid. I was hoping to see the shaman.

I'm his son, says the not-shaman. Name's Marcus.

The kid don't say anything back. He just looks around.

I take it you're from these parts, says Marcus with just a touch of impatience.

Used to be, mumbles the kid. Didn't know the shaman had a son.

Him neither for the first eight years of my life, admits Marcus. But there's never been a family here that wasn't broken, sure you know that. At my clinic they call this place the refugee camp.

I'd really like to speak to the shaman, says the kid.

Then you're a day late and a dollar short, replies Marcus. Shaman's dead. Mycetism. One of his stir-fried magic potions got the better of him.

Kid's sorry to hear that.

I ain't sorry to have said it, says Marcus. Only ever met him once - came and visited me and my ma when I was little, gave me the tools of his trade as toys.

Like dreamcatchers? says the kid. He remembers the webbed charms that used to dangle over the door.

More like voodoo dolls, says Marcus. Try bringing one of *those* to Show and Tell.

Marcus explains his line of work. He comes in every few weeks to look in on the locals, but he's got a regular practice based over in Columbus.

The kid's surprised, and the words come rushing out: you treat mortals too?

Marcus's more surprised: we're all of us mortals, my friend.

Now the kid's ashamed. He looks down, murmurs something about it being his dad talking.

Well heck I know how that feels, says Marcus kindly. Shaman won't shut up even after dying. Turns out the Styx is just a fishing trip for the old coot. Just the way with Pluto's line, you know. What's yourself?

Jupiter, sighs the kid.

Marcus pauses.

There's only Priam Norton I know of that line.

Yeah.

Priam Norton only had one son.

That's me then ain't it, says the kid. He's getting mighty tired of this conversation.

I heard, says Doctor Marcus, I heard that Priam's son cries animals instead of tears.

The kid's too stunned to reply, but finally he manages a mumbled half-denial. He doesn't reject it outright, mind you. Just says he hasn't done it in a good long while.

Doctor seems interested. He's talking about "spontaneous creation" and "trait manifestation". He even throws in some fancy terminology. *Panzoic lacrimation*, he says. That's what they call a case like this. Got mentioned in some journal.

Told you, snaps the kid. I don't do that no more.

The good doctor's not giving up. He wants to at least know when the last time was.

Kid's grip lingers on the door handle. He doesn't want to speak, but his eyes drift upwards, to where the dreamcatchers had once hung.

Last time was two years ago, he says eventually. I came home late and Mom was real upset about something, I asked her what it was, and she wouldn't say at first, but in the end I got it out of her, turns out it would've been her tenth wedding anniversary that day. And I lost it. Why was she getting herself all worked up over someone she'd left behind, and left for good reason? Did she want us to go back there, is that it? Did she want more of that after all? I was screaming and she was just looking straight through me, this horrible look like she'd used when she'd caught hell off of him, like she had to shut down to cope with what she was feeling. Well I hugged her and apologised more times than I could count, and I went to bed. I couldn't sleep though; I was just lying there with my face in the pillow. I didn't realise I had been crying till I felt feathers on my forehead. I lifted my head up and saw a dove fly out from underneath. That was the last time.

Kid leaves.

*

Night comes and still no sign of Priam. Kid's been waiting on the steps outside the trailer, and the cold metal's kept him awake. His heart's beating fast, as it had been all day, but his eyelids keep giving in, and his head hurts with the effort of rousing them.

So he shuffles around in the dirt until he finds his way back to the Elm tree. He stretches himself out on the grass beneath it, props his upper back against the trunk.

Unbidden, the melody of his mother's song comes back to him. He can't remember all the words. There were so many verses that he'd lost count while listening to them - her lineage stretched in at least one direction toward Calliope - but he remembered the last one.

If ever you're feeling all alone

*Cry out a crab with a shell of stone
Then crawl inside and cry a sheep
He'll hug you while you fall asleep.*

Kid sits there and hums it to himself until he does fall asleep.

*

Manifestations of the divine tend to skip generations, they say. No one told Priam. He's standing beside the tree like a colossus, bearing down on the kid like a ship toward a drowning man. His bulk is muscle, not fat. His arms are bigger than a normal man's thighs, and his thighs are thicker than gun turrets. He's so tall that his head would scrape the doorframe, and there's that old majesty in the way he holds himself. That arrogance.

Kid can't speak. He might of gotten bigger next to an elm tree, but now it seems like he's a ten year old boy again, cowering in front of Priam I, *Rex Deorum*.

And all that little boy can do is say, in a voice so quiet you got to strain your ears to hear it:

Mom died.

Priam just rumbles something that might be an invitation, and lurches toward his trailer, swinging the door open and disappearing inside.

The kid stands up. He's done what he came to do. He's delivered the message. And yet he finds his feet moving, following his father into the darkness.

A dirty bulb comes to life overhead, casting mottled yellow light through the room. The living area's cluttered with half-empty beer cans and bowls with dried mould clinging to the inside. A framed cross-stitch of a lightning bolt hangs on the back wall, above an old colour television. A full-length mirror takes pride of place in the room, directly across from the door.

Priam empties out the contents of a shopping bag onto the kitchen worktop. A whisky bottle, a few tins of fish, a loaf of bread. Kid tries to breathe slow. Priam opens the fridge, takes out a can of beer. Kid's breathing gets a touch quicker. Priam yawns and heaves himself over to the television, fiddling with the switch. Kid stands and waits.

At last Priam settles down into the armchair, and says:

I thought the bitch was dead already.

Oh, thinks the kid. So that's how it's gonna be. He can feel the red mist swirling. Can feel his fingers clenching up into his palm. He asks Daddy to repeat himself. And Daddy does, except with a twist:

I *hoped* that bitch was dead already.

The television stutters static, and dies. Priam hurls a cushion at it and hits the wall instead, causing the framed lightning bolt to fall from its hook and crash to the ground.

The kid's feeling pretty sore at this point, but he tries his best to tread softly. I just thought you should know, he says. That's all.

Priam bawls a couple blasphemies, takes a swig of beer.

Kid turns away and stands facing the door. That could've been it. Not much of a father-son reunion but sometimes it doesn't have to end in tears.

Except this time, it does.

Kid says, I wish that just once you might act like you give a shit.

Wish, echoes Priam. How about you go and wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up first.

We didn't leave because we were afraid of you, replies the kid. We left because you were afraid of me. You were a coward.

Well, that's that. Priam stirs from his chair. Kid braces himself, and feels something sharp prod the small of his back. He feels the hot breath in his ear, smells the alcohol on it.

Then he feels a burst of pain at the side of his face. He staggers forward, dropping to the ground and swinging his head around just in time to see his father's fist hurtling toward him. The strike makes contact with his forearm, thrown up in instinctive defense, and meets bone with an enormous *crack*.

The fight's on, and kid's losing.

Priam lands a couple more punches, and now he's getting into it. He don't care about fighting clean, he's kicking the boy on the ground, kicking him in the stomach and the groin. Then he stops and goes to get a drink.

The kid's just lying on the trailer floor, gasping for breath. He's not even trying to get up. His eyes are wide and moist.

Always with the waterworks, roars Priam from somewhere above. You're a fucking infant.

The old bastard storms back over with a bottle in his hand and smashes it against the wall. Slices it *slow* along the kid's ear. Laughs. Presses his foot down on the kid's head so the blood pools around his toes.

The kid's in pain, but that's all about to change. Because he can see his own reflection across the room in the mirror. He can see his face against the floor, can see his left eye glinting in the fractured light. And right along the bottom row of his lashes, there's a big wet golden speck.

Speck becomes a trail. A paw, a tail.
A mane.
Priam's gone awful quiet all of a sudden.
And the kid thinks: let's go, old man.



“I Found . . .”

by Kasia Boreysza

*I found a photograph among leaves on a pavement.
It peeked through the window of fallen oak feathers
at lives of strangers, passing by, rushing, wandering...
Do you think I shouldn't have picked it up?
Now stuck in my pocket the only thing it can see
Is my wallet and a brown snapped shoelace.*

Brollies

by Anna Gebbie

As the first drop darkens the pavement
I have found triumph
At the bottom of the bag.
I unfurl my victory flag
And hold it aloft;
Smile at the others following my lead.

For we are not the hooded figures
Who never broke stride:
Those people who always see it coming.
And today the forgetful and the careless
Can fall in behind us
Their ranks depleted.

Now march on, heads high,
But grasp your safety
With both hands.
For you know our luck:
It could invert at any moment
With just a gust of fate.



A Bridge: Too Far

by James Carson

The Taoiseach formed a steeple with his fingers and bowed his head in contemplation. Around the cabinet table, his colleagues waited anxiously. Finally, he looked up, resolution in his eyes.

‘The thing is, it’s a very generous offer. And Mr Beverzovsky assures us the bridge will be treated with the utmost respect.’

The Minister for Culture, who had been doing a passable imitation of a greyhound ready to spring from its trap, could no longer contain himself.

‘Respect? Taoiseach, let me get this straight: this Beverdovk... Bezervodks...’

‘Beverzovsky’, interjected the Minister for Education.

‘Well, whatever he’s called, he’s coming over to dismantle the Ha’penny Bridge, one of the great architectural symbols of Ireland, and cart it over to bloody Rostock...’

‘Vladivostok’, amended the Minister for Education

‘Wherever, and then he’s going to have it rebuilt inside a feekin’ supermarket? A national icon reduced to nothing more than a display stand for root vegetables! What sort of respect is that?’

The Minister for Finance raised a reproofing hand.

‘May I remind the Minister for Culture that Mr Beverzovsky’s substantial offer will not only enable us to repay our loan to the IMF, but will also help to lever this country out of recession?’

‘Recession, my arse!’ exclaimed the Minister for Culture, his large, round face turning crimson. ‘What about heritage? The Ha’penny Bridge has been an emblem of our capital since 1816. It was cast by the self-same corporation that built the world’s first iron bridge in...in...’

‘Ironbridge?’ suggested the Minister for Education.

‘Thank you, Lorcan, I think you’ll find I have the floor. And no mightier an organ than *USA Today* called it an unmissable icon of Dublin. Well, it won’t be unmissable if it’s not bloody there!’

The Taoiseach looked impressed. ‘Been doing your homework, have you, Michael?’

The Minister for Culture shrugged modestly.

‘Forewarned is forearmed, Taoiseach.’

‘Oh, really?’ said the Minister for Finance with a sly grin. ‘So you’ll know that it cost us a million euro to repair ten years ago, and it’s already showing signs of wear. Thirty thousand pedestrians use it every day, and we don’t have the money to start again. It’s not like the Forth Bridge, Michael.’

The Minister for Culture glared at his colleague, considering the little gobshite’s many punchable qualities.

‘Well, that sort of remark is just typical of someone from, excuse my language, Cork. If you hadn’t got a bunch of cowboys from the North to do the job maybe it would be in better condition.’

The Minister for Finance bristled. ‘Harland and Wolfe are among the finest engineering companies in the world.’

‘Yes,’ snorted the Minister for Culture, ‘but didn’t they also build the Titanic?’

The Taoiseach slapped his hand on the walnut table.

‘Gentlemen, that’s enough!’

Feeling the argument slipping from his grasp, the Minister for Culture turned to the head of the table.

‘Taoiseach...Brendan, I’m begging you to reconsider. That bridge is woven into the fabric of our city. Joyce and Beckett crossed that bridge. Roddy Doyle! Enya!’

The Taoiseach sighed. ‘I’m sorry, Michael, but as I said, it’s a very generous offer.’

The Minister for Culture stared at his leader in disbelief.

‘Well, that’s the end of auld Ireland then. If you’re going to sell off one of our cultural treasures, you may as well hock the lot. Sure, why don’t you throw in Dublin Castle and the Book of Kells while you’re at it!’

The Taoiseach didn’t say anything. He looked down and shuffled his papers.

The Minister for Culture suddenly understood the message carried by the roaring silence.

‘Jaysus Christ!’



Fragmentations

by Sean Hoath

C-oo-k-ies and c-ane sugar
caress the tribal sound of “k-“
like the breath of guitar strings
when a finger is carried briskly across them.
Can it be heard, calling quietly?

Quite a new sound in the “qu-“
though with the same canned feel.
Cans of corn, corns of cob,
cobs of quiet spiders carried across strings.

Tactile legs tiptoe over
strings of saltwater taffy,
anchored tight as vocal cords.

Finger the throat and
feel the sound
the k- breath of strings
carries quietly in the night.

Next, try to awaken the b-
slumbering,
a bear in hibernation.

Breathe.
Change finger positions.
Repeat the chorus.

F- fra- fffrag

f- fragm- agm- agm-

Try again.

Fr- fffragmen- me- men-

ment- menta- mentay- mentaw-

fragmentaw- tay- taa-

mentati-

Fragment- mentation.

Copper Sulphate

by Richie McCaffery

The only colour that stays with me from school
is the cornflower of copper sulphate.

The smoke and mirrors of acidulous partners
giving birth to a litter of brittle blue crystals.

Something was lost in that carnal fight of valences
to make this jewellery of perfect clinical blueness.

Not strong enough to be cut, worn or worked with
but the fadeless hue of all my years since.

Yu the Great

by Gillian Bowman

Fuxi Yu gently prodded the river bed with his long fish hook. Leaves and debris floated to the surface; they were all he could see through the murky water. It was a hot afternoon, and he sweated as he replaced the fish hook with a paddle and headed towards the overgrown foliage on the western bank. The tired sun wilted towards the underworld and in its place the lights of Lanzhou began to illuminate the river upstream, reflecting their life upon it. The traces of the modern world evaporated before they reached Fuxi Yu, who stayed with the quieter ones.

Underneath the leaves he began to prod again, slowly and thoroughly, until he realised he had a catch. His fish hook became tough between his steady hands, like a knife stuck through a fresh piece of pork. He knew this river. He pulled and felt its rapacious currents lick the edge of his boat as a dark, pinstriped suit emerged from the yellow murk, followed by a short neck, a balding head and a bruised face. Fuxi Yu heaved the body onto his small boat and spread him out amongst the fishing nets.

The wide nose and deep creases in the chin looked familiar to Fuxi Yu. He thought they would look quite similar, if he too were shiny, soft and vulgar.

Fuxi Yu lit a cigarette and gazed upon the reflection of the city in the water. Bodies from Lanzhou were evil; bodies of pain and loneliness. When the river swallowed them, it spat them back out. Yellow river, dirty river, only keeps the clean soul, it seeks purification and is given the pestiferous. Fuxi Yu paddled downstream with the body until he came to a small cove where the current was trapped by tall rocks. Here he slid the body into the water, beside the bodies which had now turned to clay. The silt and mud had grown on them like rust, preserving them, digesting them. Fuxi Yu hooked the dress of a young woman, once bright and floral, now the same murky yellow as her skin, and took her onto the boat. He paddled upstream hard against the flow for a mile until he reached his hut on the river bank, in the shadow of a large and insidious textile factory. Placing the girl's body on a steel trolley, he rolled her up the bank and covered her for the night.

He slept as best he could, though Fuxi Yu did not rest for himself but for the people in the river who still waited to be released. His joints ached from arthritis and every night they punished him.

The next day, a man and his wife waited at a distance outside his hut. Fuxi Yu waved

to them to come near but his small form seemed to frighten them, as if he were human and they animals who had forgotten how to hunt. Instead, he pulled the trolley up to them.

In this wasteland, their flesh shone like pale carnations in a dark meadow. When Fuxi Yu lifted the plastic sheet, the city man trembled.

‘Where is my Mei? She is not my daughter. This thing is not my daughter.’

‘It is five thousand Jiao for the body,’ Fuxi Yu said firmly. ‘For your daughter’s peace.’

‘Don’t be disgusting,’ said the man. ‘What should we do with it? Put it to bed? Cuddle it? Sell it to a groom?’ The man turned away and kept walking, even when his wife did not follow.

The wife said nothing. She took out of her purse a bag of Jiao and gave them to Fuxi Yu. As their hands touched, Fuxi Yu remarked on their clumsiness.

‘I suppose all you see is money.’ Her lip quivered. ‘You think corpses are gold. You found my daughter, reduced to sewage in a river, and try to sell her back to me? She was mine already. Stop and look at her! She was beautiful!’

‘She is dead. That is what I see,’ said Fuxi Yu and held out his hand to her, crooked and pitted from years of toil. ‘These used to be smooth, these used to craft the bowls in your kitchen, but now they turn only guilt and shame, touch only hideous flesh.’

His hands shook from a malady for which there was no name.

‘Demons are in my hands,’ he said, ‘as they work the devil’s work.’

Fuxi Yu heard the cry of a young boy from the river. He could not stop.

The next day Fuxi Yu scoured the river but found nothing new. As he paddled down the river, heading home, he realised he was being watched by two officials in uniform on the bank. They waved him over. He stopped a few feet from the bank and stared at them blankly.

‘Are we addressing Fuxi Yu? The man known as Yu the Great?’ one of the officials asked. They both grinned at him. Fuxi Yu’s face was unresponsive; it was as if all the intelligence inside him had switched off.

‘My name is Wulanu Yang. We are investigating the disappearance of a lawyer named Ching Lui who went missing four days ago. We suspect he may have killed himself. He became influenced by capitalist ideas and ran into debt. Perhaps you understand. If you find a balding man, of about five foot eight and large size, we would be interested in the body.’

Fuxi Yu turned his attention to the one who had not yet spoken. ‘How much will you pay?’

The man raised his eyebrows, ‘We are not paying for this service.’

Fuxi Yu knew officials like the river. Murky and overpowering but not subtle. The secrets were always close to the surface.

‘There has been no suicide from a balding man,’ said Fuxi Yu, ‘but I may have missed him. We all pay for our mistakes.’

‘Don’t be coy, those bodies don’t belong to you, neither does the money you make from them. Give us a body, and we will let you keep the money you have cheated from grieving families. Otherwise we will have to take action. Our offer is to overlook your wicked profit.’

‘But you have always done so,’ replied Fuxi Yu ‘you always overlook the wicked, like Lanzhou overlooks the river which eats its people. I own nothing but my hut and my boat. If you take them I will build another. If you take my money, then you have the price of five hundred pathetic people in your hands.’

One of the officers curled his lip. ‘Why do they pay you for a dead body?’

‘So the bodies don’t float onto the beach downstream. That is what will happen to Ching soon, if he is in this river.’

‘Did your son’s body end up on the beach?’

Fuxi Yu lit a cigarette, staring at the officer above his cupped hands.

‘No, my son was never found. I am still searching for him.’ The hunched fisherman, who had only moments ago been shaking under some strange rheumatism, now became still. The intelligence flooded back into his face, and the blank eyes refocused. Deep beneath his broken frame, the officers glimpsed a spark of the clever porcelain sculptor who had once sold his pots in Lanzhou.

‘I would pay anything for my son’s body but you will pay nothing for that lawyer. I cannot stop the floods, but I can give back what they stole. You will never see Ching unless you pay me.’

Rising up from the Yellow River, Fuxi Yu thought he glimpsed the small form of a boy. Slowly, he paddled out to it and crouched in his boat watching, as the cormorants settled on the boat’s prow. The officers remained on the bank for a while, before growing bored by the man’s indissoluble resolution. They left to write another letter in the city.

Bare

by Louis Pilard

We were lying back and watching
the clouds blooming and withering
a cool gust shivering over shrinking skin
around our bare arms and legs
and that smell of dried grass and sneezes
and midges and wasps tumbling around.
The plastic sparked us with electric shocks
and we rolled and bounced seeing the sky fall
and escape, fall and escape. Then under your breath
just before turning and closing your eyes you whispered
that thing that stuck in my head.
That we are all the way up here in the north
where it snows at silly times
in the middle of spring even
and the rest of the world thinks
that we spend our lives gazing
through windows at the rain.
But today we are lying in the heat
of the rare sun split red through the branches
living a secret life.
No one knows that we are here
at the top of the world
watching the deep blue of the sky fly
away from us. And in a way
it's like we don't exist at all.

Flower Press

by Richie McCaffery

When times got really bad
you tightened the screws
on your childhood flower press
as if to squeeze out the last
scents of your youth's essence.

I had never seen the blossoms
you laid to rest in shrouds
of blotting paper because you
wound it tighter than layers
of fossil clotted rock.

Were they rare or everywhere
like endless chains of daisies?
I dreamt I opened it to find
stains like Rorschach ink blots,
the garden abloom in darkness.

The Cold Fire

by A K Bruty

There were two sofas in our living room, one on either side of the open fire. I sat on what had become 'my' sofa. My sofa, on my side of the room, was sprinkled with things: a container of silver beads that I wanted to sew onto my green scarf; the magazines from last week's Sundays that I'd never got around to reading; a half-eaten pack of soft mints and a red and pink Mongolian wool blanket, bought from one of those shops where everything smells of incense.

The other sofa, your sofa, on the opposite side of the room, was bare, tidy, just as you liked it.

You came out of the kitchen carrying my paper bag, the contents of which I had bought that afternoon. You were also carrying the scissors. You sat down on your sofa. You took the metre of dark purple silk out of the paper bag and ceremoniously laid it onto the table in front of you. Your fingertips smoothed down the creases until there were no ripples or ridges left in the lavish material. Then you cut the silk into tiny pieces.

'Oh,' I said.

'Yes,' you replied.

'Really?' I said. 'Is that really how you feel?'

'That's how I've been feeling for a long time.'

You gathered up the ruined bits of material and held them for a moment above the fire, then you let go. We watched as the slivers of silk danced dangerously over the hot coals. They bubbled up and then melted into the glow of the fire. When there was no trace of them left, you went back to sit on your sofa.

Most of our evenings had begun to feel cold. You and I, sitting in our living room with the heating turned up high and a huge crackling fire. Chilly. I suppose that's why I'd bought the silk. Its vibrant purple had looked warm and inviting, like the colours in that old Turkish Delight advert. The one where a beautiful woman reclines onto the desert sand and there is talk about being full of Eastern promise. I'm fairly sure that's a euphemism.

I told you that I bought the silk because I wanted to make a cushion out of it, I didn't mention the advert. The reference would have been too low-brow for you. You would have probably You Tubed it, and then we'd have had to talk about the exploitative nature of sexualised advertising. I'd already bought something frivolous that you knew I'd never

actually use. To then mention a confectionary product with such a high content of sugar, and no discernable nutritional value, would have been too much. So I didn't mention it and we sat on different sides of the room, whilst the hissing of the fire hovered around us.

I wanted to put the telly on and forget about what you'd just done. But, I stopped myself because I knew one of those lengthy subtitled Scandinavian police dramas (that I hate and you love) was on. And last time we were too quiet for comfort and I put the telly on, you called me unimaginative. I presumed that the comment was related to the television, but I couldn't be sure.

'How was your day?' I said. It was all I had.

'Interesting.'

'Really? Did you sell a house?'

'No. But, a new house came onto the market. I had to do a viewing, it made me think about us.'

'The house?'

'Yes. Well, it was just one of the rooms in the house actually.'

'Oh, that's nice.'

'No. No, in actual fact it wasn't nice at all.'

'Wasn't it a nice room?'

'It was a lovely room, upon first glance.'

'Oh, that's ni...'

'I've already said it wasn't nice, it was far from nice. This room seemed to have a real purpose to it.'

'Don't most rooms in most houses have a purpose?'

'Not like this. It was a music room, a whole room just for music.'

Then you described the room to me. There had been a piano and a piano stool. The removable top of the wooden piano stool was covered in a brown fabric that had mini mustard-coloured pianos on it. The wall that surrounded the fireplace had been decorated with cream wallpaper, and the wallpaper had been embossed with large treble clefs. Two huge bookshelves completely covered one of the high-ceilinged walls. All that was on the shelves were music books, not one stray cookery book, or a European city guidebook - just sheet music and books about music. On one wall there were two wooden picture frames; one contained a portrait of Mozart, the other was a photograph of a full orchestra taken from the viewpoint of a conductor just about to call his musicians into action.

‘So, anything non-musical would have looked out of place in the music room?’ I said, as I watched the smoke from the fire rush up the chimney.

‘You are starting to see the point,’ you said, picking up the bag that the silk had come in and crumpling it into a small tight ball. The bag had a white-daisy print on it. It looked like you were crushing flowers, just for the fun of it.

‘I’m not sure that I am. Seeing the point, I mean.’

‘Well, I was just telling you about our problem.’ You looked down at the creases that you had crunched onto the daisies. Something that was new a few hours ago looked tired and worn.

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Like you said, anything not related to music wouldn’t have fitted into this room - it just wouldn’t have looked right,’ you prompted, like it was a revelation. ‘The piano, the wallpaper, the violin...’

‘That’s the first I’ve heard about a violin.’

You threw the paper bag into the fire. The paper didn’t produce an instant effect like the thin silk had. It smouldered stubbornly, like it didn’t want to give in.

I didn’t move. I just sat on my sofa and looked into the fire. The fine-tipped muscles in each of my temples twisted together to form two large knots, one on either side of my head. The knots each sent smaller fists of pain scurrying along my forehead. I reached for the blanket, pulled it onto my lap and started to pick at its woollen bobbles.

‘I’ll try one more time,’ you said.

‘Right,’ I said.

‘Well, I had this really strong feeling.’

‘Okay.’

‘It felt like, if I’d have put something that wasn’t related to music into that room, well, it just would have been really wrong somehow.’

‘You’re probably right.’

‘Thank you for proving my point.’ You moved onto the floor and relaxed your back against the bottom of the sofa. But your body must have suddenly felt heavy, because you hunched yourself forwards, hugging the tops of your knees to your chest.

‘You’re welcome,’ I said.

‘It’s not a sodding compliment,’ you said quietly. ‘I felt like, if I had taken a non-musical plant pot and put it in the music room, then it would have burnt a hole in the carpet.’

‘I believe that most plant pots are non-musical in nature,’ I said.

You ignored me and carried on. 'It would have burnt a hole in the carpet and then, from those tiny sings, a fire would start and the fire would spread like...'

'Like wild-fire.'

'If you like. It would have spread, the house would have burnt down and there would be nothing left but a shadowy ash that would eventually get blown away by the wind.'

'And all from something being somewhere that it didn't belong?'

'Yes.'

'Because some things just don't belong together, no matter how hard they try?'

'Yes.'

'Did you really see a room like that today?'

You made your strong voice into a whisper that I could barely hear. You moved your arms from around your legs and put the palms of your hands flat onto the floor.

'No, no I didn't,' you said.

We used to always sit together, on the same side of the room. When we were first together we burned our own proud fire; an unstoppable warmth. Lana and Abby; joined at the hip and joined at the lip - that's what you used to say. That's what you used to whisper softly into my ear. Two years later and your whispering contained only insidious digs or near silent responses to my stupid questions.

At first, our joining of one and one to make two was triumphant. We were the only people to ever have come up with the answer to that complicated sum. Look how clever we were to have found each other. Me and her, she and me; we wrapped our bodies around each other, tucking and meshing ourselves tightly together. Not separate, not apart; together and whole.

We walked slowly at first, our emotions on probation; each of us scared that our feelings might not be mirrored. But that didn't last for long. You said that we were a perfect combination. I balanced you out, made you look at things differently. I didn't overthink, or waste time turning things over like you did. You liked my simplicity. That used to be a compliment.

You used to say that I reminded you of a bird flying through the sky, gliding and twittering away as if I had nothing else to do but enjoy life. You made me feel that it was such a wonderful thing just to be me.

You, on the other hand, were the opposite of a bird flying freely through the sky. I must have been so much weaker than I thought because, instead of me making you freer, you

made me shrink into captivity.

My lack of worry about our aspartame or monosodium glutamate intake began to seem reckless to you. When we'd only been together for a month, you felt liberated when I said that we didn't need to go food shopping because I had lots of Pot Noodles in the cupboard and a litre of Coke chilling in the fridge. But soon you said that I had a blatant disregard not only for my health, but for yours as well.

Last month, you said, 'Opera, we should go to the opera.' You were pulling at your earlobe when you said this. Then you started scratching the back of your neck, that's how I knew it was a test.

'Opera?' I said. 'Why would you suggest that?'

'I can pay for the tickets,' you said, just to make sure I had my daily reminder that you earned more than I did.

'Do my feelings on the matter have any bearing at all?'

'You can't be a philistine all your life, you know,' you said.

I said nothing. Instead I thought about our first Christmas, and how we went to the beach together early on Boxing Day morning. We walked over miles of deserted winter sand and every grain of it was ours. The clouds were flurries of piped-pink icing. We decided that this must be what the cold skies of Iceland looked like, and agreed that we should go as soon as possible to see if we were right.

Then I looked back at you, and you were still talking about going to see an opera that you wanted me to hate. I sighed because it took less energy than trying to find impossible words.

'At least when we were first together you were willing to give new things a try,' you dug at me.

And I said nothing again, because the conversation had already reached your preferred conclusion. Maybe you were right. Maybe it's all about the trying; trying to find just the tiniest fracture of light, just the smallest little crack that could have helped our eyes adjust to each other. Trying is good. Trying gets people through.

'Is trying meant to be so exhausting?' I said. What I really wanted to tell you was *I don't think it should be so tiring, because I've used so much energy trying that I've been too weak to move for far too long.*

'How about *La Traviata*?' you said. 'I'll get the tickets tomorrow.'

I looked at the cold gap between your sofa and my sofa. Then I looked at the ceiling and

wondered when we had stopped seeing the sky.

‘We never did go to Iceland,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Iceland. We never did go.’

Your facial expression had given up trying to hide irritation. ‘What the hell do you want from there? Don’t you eat enough crap as it is?’

‘I meant Bjork Iceland, not Kerry Katona Iceland.’

‘It’s Stacey Solomon now, isn’t it?’ you snapped. Then you stood up and marched over to the fire. You pulled the fireguard back and threw a large log on top of the coals. Dancing red flames turned to smoke under the weight of the wood.

It was hard to tell if you were upset at yourself for not remembering that winter’s day on the beach, or just annoyed for inadvertently admitting that you knew who Stacey Solomon was. You stood and looked at the fire, your back facing the rest of the room.

Our difference was no longer stuffed full of intrigue and wonderment. It no longer felt freeing to see the landscape from someone else’s eyeline. Our number of one became lonely: not fat and crammed full of two people, but light, shadowy, unable to stand up tall and strong against the wind.

The knot of muscle tips in my temples started to unwind, leaving the pain in my head barely noticeable. I realised how hot the room had become. I pushed the blanket off my lap. It was suddenly difficult to breathe in that wordless heat.

I put the container of beads and my soft mints into the pockets of my jeans. I gathered up my blanket and my green scarf and stood up. You didn’t turn around. I looked at the fire. I looked at your back. I looked at the ceiling. I needed to see the sky. I walked out of the room. I left the magazines on the sofa. If you didn’t want them, you’d have to throw them away yourself.



Breathe

by Jane Hartshorn

The sky was a deep seething
Bottomless blue
And the white tiles,
The white-limbed lounge,
And the glass doors
Were hot to the touch.
A melon was being sliced inside
And the sound of the knife
On the chopping board
Split the silence in two;
Opened a narrow corridor
In the breathless blue
In which I writhed
Like an eel in shallow water.



Full Scottish

by Ellie Stewart

Whit you haen the day, Ken?

Yer usual square sausage,

tea and toast?

Naw Hen, naw

The day

Ah'll hae

yer champagne breakfast.

What book / books are next to your bed?

For research: *Life of the Spider* by John Crompton; *We in Scotland: Thatcherism in a Cold Climate* by Robert Torrance; and *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience, Class and Form* by John McGrath. For pleasure: *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World* by Barbara Ehrenreich; *This Road is Red* by Alison Irvine; and *Life! Death! Prizes!* by Stephen May.

Best moment in your writing career (to date!)?

Winning Scottish Writer of the Year 2011 at the Glenfiddich Spirit of Scotland Awards. I was up against Jackie Kay, Denise Mina and Julia Donaldson, so was frankly amazed. It was a nice thing to come at the end of several years of very hard work.

Best piece of writerly advice you care to share?

From the poet, Norman MacCaig: a writer's journey is 'the long haul towards lucidity.' Firstly, he's right in that it's a long haul. Secondly, being cryptic and elliptical and allusive and elusive is, almost always, bollocks. As Thom Yorke also put it, 'just cos you feel it doesn't mean it's there.' Worth bearing in mind.

Thank you Alan!

If there's a writer you would like to see featured in a future *Quick View* then contact us at fromglasgowtosaturn@glasgow.ac.uk (just remember that writers featured in *The Quick View* must have an association of some kind with Glasgow University).

Author Biographies

Kasia Boreysza came to live in Glasgow in 2008, after spending previous years of her life in her homeland, Poland, and Sweden and Germany. During the day she works as a renewable energy engineer, exploring nature's vast reserves of energy. The evening time is when she can devote herself to writing, music and climbing. Since coming to Glasgow she has been exploring writing prose and poetry in English, which for her is one of the most exciting ways to truly get to know and love the language.

Gillian Catriona Bowman is a fourth year undergraduate, studying English Literature and Mathematics at Glasgow University. She completed her creative writing dissertation in third year and now spends her time learning about the laws of physics and then making up her own. She believes it is important for a writer to see through a stranger's perspective. When she watches the sky, the home of her imagination, it makes her realise what a small perspective she is. Her new blog <http://theruinedmaid.com/> will soon be posting work of her short stories, poems and novels.

A K Bruty is two months into studying the MLitt in Creative Writing at Glasgow University via distance learning. She chose to study at Glasgow mainly because she wouldn't feel comfortable studying anywhere it didn't rain every day like it does in her hometown of Swansea. She has been widely published and is a part-time supermodel. She is currently seeking a therapist who specialises in counselling compulsive liars.

James Carson is from Glasgow and works in the library and information sector. James has been writing on and off for many years and has enjoyed some success in writing competitions. He is a regular contributor to the Glasgow Writing Group and in September began an MLitt in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow.

Daniel David graduated in June with an Honours degree in Law. He is still attempting to get a life which will not involve that degree or any of the dubious skills he has acquired during the last four years.

Anna Gebbie is currently a first year Modern Languages student at Glasgow University. She is originally from Edinburgh, and lived there until this year.

Jane Hartshorn graduated from Glasgow University in 2009, and since this milestone has spent a great deal of time manning posts. This stationary pursuit has compelled her to imagine scenarios which extend beyond the length of her own arm. She co-edits the online writing blog *Our Penniless Write*.

Sean Hoath was born in Calgary, Canada and the long, cold winters of his home shaped how he reflected upon the world around him. His move to Glasgow soon expanded this reflection and he is now adapting from constant snow to constant rain. Currently a second year studying medicine at the University of Glasgow, Sean's workload constantly distracts him from any form of creative productivity, but he tries, perhaps with a good deal of futility, to write when he can.

Richie McCaffery, born 1986, has previously had poems accepted by *The Rialto*, *Stand*, *The Dark Horse*, *The Manhattan Review*, *The North*, *Iota*, *Smiths Knoll* and many others. His first pamphlet is due out from *HappenStance Press* in March 2012 and will launch at *StAnza* the same month. He has just finished a stint as a Hawthornden fellow and is a Carnegie scholar here at Glasgow University, researching the Scottish poetry of WW2 towards a PhD in Scottish Literature.

JoAnne McKay JoAnne McKay was born to a slaughtering family in Romford, Essex and subsequently joined the police. She now lives in a small Dumfriesshire village where she combines motherhood, work and a Masters degree with mixed success. Her second pamphlet, *Venti*, was runner-up in the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award 2011.

Louis Pilard is in a band called Kama Sutra Hara Kiri. He has dreams about old women on motorcycles on revenge missions.

Ellie Stewart writes poetry and drama. She lives in Bathgate with her husband and 3 daughters. She likes poems that have massive beaks and big, clawed feet.