

New writing from  
Scottish Book Trust's  
Writer Development Programme  
2010/11

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# Introduction

The Scottish Book Trust Writer Development programme provides support for writers at all stages of their career. Our New Writers programme is central to this, providing a tailored package of support including mentoring and performance training. We work with a broad range of writers; this year's list includes poetry, short stories, a historical novel, travel writing as well as a dystopian thriller. Our writers have travelled from Aberdeen, Skye, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth and Uist and worked in English, Gaelic and Scots. All the writers on our programme have shown talent and the commitment needed to go on and achieve great things. The work in this sampler provides just a taste of what they have been working on over the past year, and we hope you will enjoy finding out about them as much as we have.

*Caitrin Armstrong, Writer Development Manager, Scottish Book Trust*

The New Writers' Awards (formerly the Scottish Arts Council New Writers' Bursaries scheme) offer a unique opportunity for emergent writers to refine their practice by working closely with established writers and literature professionals as mentors. Scottish Book Trust carefully creates a bespoke package of mentoring and networking opportunities for successful applicants. Engaging with experienced authors and industry professionals over a concentrated period of time, on a specific project, has had a major positive impact upon the craft, and the careers, of past awardees.

Creative Scotland is very proud to support these important awards, which afford all the diverse possibilities of a real creative crucible for new writers, and our future literature. We hope the awards will continue to uncover and nurture the fresh literary talent which continues to burgeon across the country.

*Dr Gavin Wallace, Portfolio Manager,  
Literature, Publishing and Language, Creative Scotland*

Tha còrr is dà bhliadhna on a chuir Comhairle nan Leabhraichean, an co-bhonn le Urras Leabhraichean na h-Alba, air chois an sgeama brosnachaidh Sgrìobhadairean Ùra Gàidhlig. Ann an 2012, tha e fìor mhath leithid Sandy Jones agus Maureen NicLeòid fhaicinn, a' leantainn air toradh Niall O'Gallagher agus Ishi NicIlleathain. Tha Sandy agus Maureen a' cur ris an dòchas a th' againn gum fàs sgrìobhadh Gàidhlig anns na bliadhnaichean a tha romhainn. Tha sinn toilichte taic a chur ris an sgeama.

*John Storey, Ceannard Litreachais is Foillseachaidh,  
Comhairle nan Leabhraichean*

In 2012, two years after the establishment of the New Gaelic Writers Awards, we see the emergence of two new talented authors, Maureen Macleod and Sandy Jones, following in the footsteps of Niall O'Gallagher and Ishi MacLean. Maureen and Sandy may have contrasting backgrounds, but they are united by a zeal and passion for Gaelic writing. The Gaelic Books Council is delighted to contribute to the development of the Awards.

*John Storey, Head of Literature and Publishing, the Gaelic Books Council*



New writers

## KENNETH PAUL STEPHEN

Kenneth was born in Dumfries but grew up in the east of Scotland. A graduate of Philosophy, he has been published in the national press for 15 years as a journalist and features writer and now runs a Public Relations consultancy. His short fiction explores the dreams and dilemmas of characters who inhabit the forgotten places outside of Scotland's central belt.

*Published in: New Writing Dundee, 2008; Chapman Magazine, edition 110, 2010; Leopard Magazine, 2009, 2010; Glimmer and other stories and poems, Cinnamon Press, 2010; The Scots Language Centre website, 2010*

*Awards: The David Toulmin Short Story Prize, 2010 (winner); The William Soutar Short Story Prize, 2008 (runner-up); The William Soutar Short Story Prize, 2010 (runner-up)*

# Sheep

**I** pull the sheep through the fence. I clamp two feet in one aching hand and tramp my boot onto the animal's gut in the car park, fearing all the time I'd hear an engine or a voice behind me. I get three of its hooves in my grip again and batter the van door open wider with my heel. Guiding its free leg with my arm, I swing it into darkness and close the door.

I speculate how misled we really are. We experience things, probably almost completely erroneously, all of the time. For example, there was a girl I was besotted with for four years. What I remember most was that she pinched her top lip for comfort whilst reading, usually, light fiction. I recall she stencilled her boots with two interlaced flowers and I was convinced I was in love. She showed me the result under a sky like a blood orange but she didn't show me anything else. In return for four years of my life, I can't remember a single word she said. It may have been that she never said anything to me at all. Perhaps we only ever get an essence of wisdom as it's passing us by. These are questions I have. If we are only clever in retrospect, when do we start to get things right?

It's only ever the eyes. Something about sheep's eyes. I am certain I am not misled about them, even if I am about love or other things. Bulged out half marbles. No real pupil that we may associate with, or

distinction of colour, and you wonder how they can express so much when there just seems to be vacancy.

I rest my arm on the steering wheel. The animal kicks the plywood boards behind me. How much longer can I go on without seeing a doctor about this wrist? There is a historic weakness in it from toppling a quad bike with my father when I was nine. This bone has history, like I do. I can't change what has gone before, just like I don't feel – sitting in this van – that I can stop now.

I look down at the bandage. Indiscriminate filth sits in its folds; any support it has given me has been loosened by the struggle with the sheep. I must make another. I must make it tight. I fish inside my pocket. It is there. I have been prepared enough to put the spool of bandage in my jacket. The feel of it takes me back to eyes peering through the gate this morning.

The sheep moves. I try to imagine what it might be capable of imagining. Is it afraid/sad/lonely? Have I trampled aspirations? These are daft thoughts but I would be lying if I said I didn't think about them. I feel and smell its clover breath. My mind pictures enamel ridges; miniature mountains in its mouth. I remember feeling the contours of sheep molars in Biology at school.

I tear the bandage with my teeth, arching my back to hear if the sheep is settling now. The strand of lint doesn't rip well. I wrench sideways. As I do, I feel a thread slicing gradually, horizontally, deeper into my gum. The pain is acute. My mouth fills with the taste of a leaking battery. What can I do, though? I have no free hand. If I let the bandage go, it will unwind. I jerk, jerk my mouth until the bandage severs. With my eyes watering, I tie off the wet broken end. I know the sheep has dislodged its cover. I can hear it. I protect the inside floor of the van with a thick, folded blanket. The floor paint is white but the way the grooves run, front to back, is not suited to sheep's feet. The diameter of the foot is too large. The hoof is forced

uncomfortably between the ridges but never sinks far enough to experience flatness. The sheep chip, chip away paint from metal as the van moves. If you were to lift up a corner, you would wonder how a floor could get like that; constellations of chips where feet have tried to find balance.

I look through the square opening in the wood, separating me from the ewe. I see dirty, clumpy fleece. I see movement but nothing distinguishable. Not an eye or mouth or even the tight skin by its jowls. A corner of the blanket has been ruffled. Just a corner. I am thankful for this. Maybe the animal will realise it is in its own best interests to be calm and lie still. I swivel back round in my seat and stare out towards the motionless wind turbines on the moor. My gum still pulses but the bandage has made a difference to my arm. The strain in the tendons feels deeper and more contained. I knead the area with my thumb, balling and releasing the fingers. I take a breath and turn the engine on.

We pass through Spean Bridge. A roadside board says: hot bacon rolls. The roll is painted yellow, with alarmed lines denoting either steam or stink. The slake of ketchup has been turned pink by rain. I slow the van down. God, I am starving. If this sheep keeps still enough, there is a possibility I can nip in, maybe get a couple of them bacon rolls and a *Guardian* and be back out. Some animals calm down when the engine dies. I've seen it happen, but not all do. I've known some to use the vehicle walls to scratch. Animals of questionable self-respect. Some you pick up and the wool around their arse is matted and caked with shit. You can tell by the different hues that it is shit upon old shit, like a hard paddle of crap right up the back. Must itch like nothing imaginable. It's enough to make you cowk but, as I say, I am immune to this now.

I bump the van up onto the kerb. The closer I get, the better chance

I have of seeing whether it's busy. The midweek lottery is a nightmare. The machine takes so long to dispense its disappointment. I've seen me breaking into sweats in queues, telling myself I'll never do this again, that this really has to stop. Anyone could be walking past. They might hear kicking inside the vehicle.

I switch the radio off and listen. I am not convinced the animal will hunker down but my stomach turns like Corrievreckan. I was breaking biscuits late last night and it's like my gut is flushing acid through flumes. I do my family tree in the evenings when the telly's rubbish. I draw lines where people used to be. There are broken lines all over my page and smears from dunked digestives. Through research, I am beginning to throw some life at it. I started with names and a few fragments of stories told to me by my late father. The tree cannot tell me of the day my grandmother's shoe got lodged in a cattle grid or when my fourth cousin chipped two front teeth trying to catch a rabbit. It only tells me names and, by implication, that they once lived and were connected to these other lines that also lived, in some way. For me, this is empty and insufficient. Only through stories passed down do I know that my great-aunt made hand-painted stars. That my grandad was of the belief that, if someone coughed during a prayer in church, its requests would go unheeded. My father told me that many of my distant family went missing a long time ago, cleared off the land for sheep.

At the door of the shop, I check the van. It doesn't look out of place. There are other cars bumped up at angles, further up the road. Rain begins to spit on the bonnet. Turning the handle, I curse myself. Idiot. Why park out front? It is too late. Inside, it is one of those stores where the till is not visible. It's been something else in another life. A post office. A police station. The inconvenience puts me on edge. I look across an aisle. Loaves of bread are piled high. The unnatural light hurts my eyes. Squeaking over wet linoleum, I am aware of time. I am getting

further out of eyeshot of the van and that sheep which could be trying to topple it. I spot a man and fall into line with him. He is not wearing a jacket. He has ladies' gossamer tights and four Creme Eggs. He puts a carton of milk in his basket from the upright fridge. His hand is pricked with white hairs, like someone's pulled them through his skin with a needle. I know by the easy way he walks he's local. I cut back out and dodge in to make the counter before him, hearing the fridge suck shut.

"Any of your bacon rolls left?"

The Regal King Size apron dwarfs her teenage body. I wonder why she is not at school. She disappears through a ticker tape of plastic ribbons.

"Any bacon left?"

"Who is it?"

"I don't know. Don't recognise him."

"Tell him there's two Lorne sausage."

She re-emerges through the ribbons. "There's two Lorne sausage."

"No bacon?"

"No."

My gum thrums at the thought. If the fat has gone cold, it's like chewing your way through a wallet. You need buckets of HP sauce. HP sauce, by its nature, stings damaged tissue.

"I can blast it in the microwave."

We share a moment of complicity. There's nothing to lose. Just pump radiation through it. Be hopeful.

"Go on then, 30 seconds."

It's such a small unit of time but I can't bear it. I decide against asking for a *Guardian* – it's too much hassle and I can't see where the newspapers are. I want to be gone, back to the sheep.

"There you go," she says. She looks at me apologetically, as if to wish me strength. "One-eighty."

I put a two pound coin in her hand and pick up the greasy paper bag.

“Put the change in the box.” I turn to the door; my nervous fingers poking holes in the brown wrapping.

The man circles the van.

The rain is falling heavier.

He doesn’t take his hands from his pockets, just extends his ankle and points at the wheels with his white trainer. “This yours mate?”

“Aye.”

“There’s been banging and everythin’. What’s in it?”

I laugh. I walk round the bonnet to the driver’s door, avoiding the man’s stare, and start to whistle. Buying time. He follows me. Out of the side of my glasses I can see he’s weighing me up.

“Look. What are you up to?”

I shove the key in the lock, trying to appear unaffected. Over the other side of the road, someone has stopped to watch. I wipe my glasses on my jumper and prepare my smallest voice.

“I don’t know what the vet in Inverness is going to recommend,” I say, closing my eyes and pinching my nose like a person does when clearing their sinuses. “I only got him as a pup from the paper three months ago. Newfoundland. They might suggest putting him down. I really don’t know.”

The man looks at the van again then looks at me. He screws his face up as if confused but his demeanour softens a little. He walks back round to the other side, crouching down to inspect the wheels.

“Sounds bad, what happened to it?”

“Sheared his leg this morning. Lot of blood. It wasn’t a great thing to see first thing, to be honest.”

The man nods. “Aye, I’d imagine.” He turns away and I feel my ribcage lower in my chest, sensing I’ve doused his suspicion. He turns round again.

“Look, best of luck, pal. I just thought. These days, you never know, you get all kinds of nutters. It might have been anythin’ in there.”

“Right enough,” I say.

He nods to the bag which has gone cool in my fingers. “What’s the bacon rolls like?”

“Aye, pretty good,” I say. “Fresh made.”

“They got bacon left?”

“Plenty.”

When I draw up to the garage door, I still feel jumpy. Sometimes I surprise myself how stupid I can be. I switch the light on and reverse the van in carefully. I click open the van door. The sheep cowers near the back. You would think, seeing daylight, it would sense the opportunity to run to freedom but none do. That always surprises me. They are like sheep, in that sense. I pick up a brush from the garage floor and run the handle along the walls. “Come on then, it’s time.” It scurries to the edge, frightened by the din, and jumps, its pathetic legs slipping on the straw I’ve laid out. Safely inside, I close the gate of the run and knot the rope. Up in front, it sees other animals like itself. It staggers uncertainly, looking around the walls. Only now does it seem to want to run but the chance is gone. There is nowhere for it to go. Just this garage I have customised with make-shift pens from council crash barriers. It pivots round but meets metal and me. “Come on, now.” I usher it along the feeder pen with the brush. I close the gate. It stumbles in beside the others, bleating. There is little space for it amongst the huddled flock but it barges inelegantly among chests and feet and black and white faces. I dump in a bucket of cut turnips. The springs of the garage door pop as if to snap as I bring down the handle. It’s just us.

I stand to face them. “One, two, three...” The head count is difficult. They are always jostling. Almost mounting. But for what position of advantage, I wonder? I can see there are enough of them now, though. I can see this will be the final journey. I can stop travelling the single track roads in the van and get the job done.

Buggish eyes look at me over the barrier as I get into position. Even side-on, their eyes instinctively follow me. I look at them, too, through the little glass square of the viewfinder. I try to hold everything still with shaking hands. I position my finger above the button.

And press.

The red light appears. The “Record” button sounds its telling click and the animals pull back.

It always had to be a short film, in my mind. They asked for a short history of Scotland. Something to capture identity. A sense of homecoming. I could have had a rugby crowd singing in unison in Edinburgh or a thistle or something and a drunk man looking at it. And I thought of all of that but I kept looking out my window, longing for signs of new life and all I saw was sheep, way off, and precious few people. I sat at night with my broken family tree, wanting to know where I’d come from, but there were so many lines missing. Too many of my family pushed off the land for sheep, way back, and now all scattered to the wind forever. That’s when the idea came. For each Mackinnon lost, I would take one sheep back. That would be my short film of Scotland. If I’d shot anything else, it would have been a romantic fiction.

Soon, this lot will be free and it’ll be over. I’ll push the garage door back. They won’t know what to do, at first. They will knock into each other and skitter about. Then, they’ll run. They’ll find the field and merge back into the hill. Passing tourists will take a snapshot with them in it, if they come this far. They’ll say it’s beautiful and marvel for a moment on how vast the wilderness is. Then they’ll do a three-point turn in the ferns and rev back south to the Festival.



## STEPHEN BARRETT

Stephen Barrett has been making up stories since he learned to read. His love of literature and obscure questions led to his studying English Literature and Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, where he later went on to complete a Masters degree in Romanticism, specialising in the poetry of Keats and Shelley. He returned to the University in 2010 and completed the first year course in Creative Writing: Fiction. Having completed the first draft of his novel, *The Lame God* – a story of outsiders and the power of art, spread over 2,500 years – he is currently concentrating on a full redraft of this novel as well as short story writing. Stephen is also planning a literary autobiography: a story of the unexpected trials and gifts that come with physical disability and mental illness. He lives and works in Glasgow.

*Awards: See Me Short Story Competition, 2011 (finalist)*

Extract from novel

# The Lame God

## Chapter 1



was born a cripple.

The woman who pushed me into this world would never have screamed, never let out a birth-cry. I think of that time often, seeing myself in the moments-old wet bundle of bone and skin. There is a fire and many shadows in a glowing room, light with dreams of the future. The woman who bears me is strong and dark with defiant eyes and a firm jaw. She is solid and brave and sure. She knows her duty; this is her battle, her meaning. Pushing through the blood and hot pain her teeth grind like coarse stone, but when she sees me for the first time – for the last time – she breaks down and sobs, finally weak with nine moons' wait and emptied of the weight and promise of a warrior. She turns away.

I was examined by the elders and proclaimed an abomination, then carried from the city up into the shadows of Taygetos. I was placed in a gorge called the apothetai and left to die in that pit of newborn shattered hopes; laid to gurgle, reach, and starve on the bones of the misshapen forever young. I never knew how long I lay, cradled by my true brothers and sisters, before pale hands came into the darkness and took me once more into the world, to be born again.

Thea was a Spartan woman. She always stood taller than any other woman, her head always high, her neck long and slender and straight.

Thea stretched upwards like the bough of a young tree. She was slim and straight and always the sapling. Thea was a line from the ground to the sky; she never reached far across the earth.

My first memory is of her hand – the hand that pulled me from the pit of bones. It is cool and smooth and long. It is strong and resolute and, gripping my hand tightly, it wills me forward. It leaves me no choice. I am tired and need to stop; my twisted legs knock together, grazing flesh from my knees; but the hand is pulling. I can feel the impatience of the hand. My legs are holding me back and my body is being dragged to the ground, but the hand stretches my arm from the shoulder and keeps me standing; it is strong enough to keep me moving.

Thea stood for years in the doorway, arms folded, a sentinel, alert to all the dangers of the world. She took me from the pit to the sea, where the shush of all-encircling ocean whispered me to sleep each night. I grew in a place where darkness has no space to call its own; where, in the night, the sounds of comfort are warm enough to glow. They are the sounds of sparkle. I slept to a chorus of beached waves. In a place where there is both silence and sound, both stillness and motion, my dreams before sleep promised everything; they told me I could run and jump. Their song was one in which they promised I would dance.

Here I grew with the strength of the taste of salt, the warmth of the summer sun, and the winds that brought exotic smells from the lands of strangers. We lived on the pungent fish heaved in by the burly, brown fishermen who always stared at me as though I belonged in the depths beneath their boats and not on land. I watched them empty their octopi and squid into the baskets of the traders and then watched the traders string them over their stalls. I watched as they dried, as their many legs stretched and sucked at the sun, dripping shining droplets still, patching the earth black where it should have been brown.

This place was quiet and busy. It was foreign and home. In our

house I could be safe, wrapped in soft wools, with only Thea and the sounds of night by the sea. And in the hot days the harbour was filled with clamour and colour. New days brought new ships and each ship brought new people.

My legs are thin and white, like bone. One of my feet is shaped like a dolphin's flipper, the other is small and round; shy, like a crab. As a child I would tumble easily to the earth, swaying in my fall like a heavy leaf. I would lie there sometimes, on the ground, waiting for the hand of a gentle god to come and lift me, until my prayers disappeared with the wind, and I dragged myself to a wall, a boulder, or a tree to pull myself up, chafing and grazing my return to the world of men.

Almost unable to stand the pain of the rocks, I scraped my knees and shins over the harsh parts of the shore, gasping with the loss of skin and the excitement of the living things in the pools of flashing light. The hot, rough stone bit my knees, but I followed the crabs as they marched over angry jellyfish smothering a rock, waiting for the white-foamed wave that would carry them home.

## Chapter 2

I saw her on the shore, the girl with the open face and skin with the warmth of earth in summer. One blue morning, as I sat upon my rock, she appeared as a speck in the distance, swaying along the stony beach from the west towards the warming sun. She was weaving slowly and without care between the water's edge, where the white foams played on her ankles, to the end of the beach; her supple feet moulding themselves on flatter rocks as though they could suck like a squid. With every few steps she would stoop and toy with what she found, sifting through the smaller pebbles. Once in a while she caressed a find with her hands, head cocked to one side, listening through her

fingers, then dropped it in a large leather satchel. As she came closer, and the light grew strong, I imagined she would see me, sitting on my chair like a jutting deformity of the rock, but she remained within herself, smiling as she placed a new discovery in her bag. She meandered a way past me without a glance, and continued along the shore.

Long after she had passed by I thought that she must turn back, as though she had just forgotten to say something. She did not, but after her disappearance she stayed inside me. For the morning and the afternoon, for the evening, and for years afterwards, her dark sweetness clamped me as solidly and gently as the tiny feet that had formed their shape onto the rocks she stepped upon. I longed for the night, that I might close my eyes and have only the sounds of the sea and a silent dream of the girl on the beach.

I saw the early colours of many mornings awaiting her return: the grey that showed no line between sea and sky, Phoebus' glorious orange tint of promise, and the blues that shifted from stone-scrubbed pale to deep-dyed rich. I sat on my rock watching the days come, feeling my shivers disappear with the stars, sitting on into high heat, waiting for the pain in my crushed legs to fade into numbness. I would not move, terrified that she would arrive when I turned my back, and stand watching me scuttle and stumble away.

She returned many days later, when the night had just begun to shuffle away and the first warmth of the morning came with a breeze from the east. I saw her appear in the distance, exactly as I had remembered, and I thought she must be a nymph, circling the beaches of the world forever, finding stones, eternally collecting the pretty and the beautiful, returning here like the moon. I held my breath as she came ever closer, and, when she was close enough that I could see the colour of her cheeks, I heard her hum a slow and strange tune.

Suddenly she stopped and turned to me. She did not look surprised

or frightened or horrified; her smile remained and she simply cocked her head to one side, as she would when finding a new stone.

“Hello,” she said.

That moment stays with me like no other, even now, into my old age. I know the salty scrape the wind brings to my face and its tug on my hair; there is a gull stretching its wings and bowing its head in the shallows of the sea; one rock in the entire shore, wet and shiny, sparkles with the promise of sunlight; and slightly silhouetted between me and the world before me this girl waits for an answer.

“Hello,” I said.

She has eyes like black earthen pools, feathered with ink lashes that sweep the air in rushes; enormous eyes that swallow light for fun, and shine it back, somehow brighter. Her face is round, its skin the smooth, perfect red-brown of very dark sand. She seems larger than before, more real, like she might be made of soft stone. She holds her satchel before her like a familiar talisman, her lips slightly parted in question. She wears a simple tunic, green, tied at the waist, and she has shining silver rings on her fingers, thick, complex and twisting.

We stayed like that, the nymph girl and the deformed boy, for a while as the sea washed into the shore and back again, like a calm hand stroking the hair of a sleeping child. The gull spread its wings one last time, beat its way noisily into the air, and screeched as it disappeared to the south. The sun grew stronger and more of the rocks on the beach began to glitter and shine.

“Why do you just sit there?” Her voice was deep and her accent was strange, the words somehow floating from her throat. She sounded like she lived with the sea.

“I was waiting for you,” I replied.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Eri.”

“I am Siah.”

I pointed to the satchel. "You collect rocks."

Siah nodded solemnly, then grinned, opening the satchel wide. "Not just rocks: shells, seaweed, starfish, sometimes bits of wood; lots of things." She sat down beside me and pulled the pieces, one by one, from the leather bag, then handed each to me, fondly running it through her fingertips first, as though she could fill the thing with generosity and have me soak it in by touch. The last was a huge flat seashell, with a fan the size of Siah's palm. It was sometimes pure white, but often a soft pink would glow from its ridges, like it was the last suggestion of cloud in the evening. When I handed it back she shook her head.

"No. You take this one." She pushed it back gently into my palms and frowned. "But you must give it to someone else. You should give it to someone who doesn't come here like we do. So they can feel what it is like."

I held the shell, facing downwards, cupped in both hands like it was sculpted there, my thumbs resting in the dark, cool curves of its back. I had been blessed and was being smiled upon; to be there, sharing my flat rock-seat, holding this beautiful thing; to be chosen by Siah as a messenger and to have her dark warmth there beside me.

She seemed satisfied and stood up again, picked up her satchel and continued the walk eastwards. When she had been gone for some time, and I could be sure she would not see me, I pulled my legs from under my body and cried out with the pain. I sat there, rubbing them hard, slapping the thin skin to take away the hot agony. When the worst of the sting had passed, I clenched the shell in my mouth as gently as I could, sucking with my lips so my teeth would not scratch it, and crawled my path away from the beach, over the least sharp of the rocks. I pulled myself to my feet on the same tree I used every day, shielded the shell in my hands and nudged my way back home, elbowing and scraping my way along the walls of the houses of strangers.

## Chapter 3

Siah said, "I know another place. I want to show you." She took my arm and helped me step carefully over the rocks. It was not long after dawn and there were long, slim fingers of cloud scratching the sky. The air was warm and damp with dew. She led me away from the sharpness of the stones, onto dusty ground where the walking hurt less, and we made our way slowly round the bay; the dark, beautiful girl and the stumbling stick-legged boy. She did not hurry or pull; her patience made her a part of me, she was my balance, the part of me that was strong. Sometimes my feet dragged through grass, its whispering roughness grazing my ankles.

Siah was always quiet, and, although I itched inside to talk, to ask and answer, her silence wrapped me like a blanket. I wanted her to tell me everything; what her family was like, why she disappeared for so long, who her gods were; but I cherished her mystery, the rich emptiness of her past. Into it I poured dreams. As I lay through the long, hot nights between her visits, I made her a princess. She walked through a thousand airy rooms in a palace of gold. She had a hundred servants who loved her as a sister. Each morning she bathed in a cool fountain, was dried slowly with the softest fabrics, and exotic oils were rubbed into her skin. I was hot when I imagined her body, the thought of it made my stomach as small and tight as a clenched fist. I imagined that, beneath her tunic, she was as smooth and cool as marble. Her body would be that of the statue of Aphrodite, curved, unbroken and pure.

I had never been to this part of the shore before; had never been this far east. We had walked for quite a while, Siah stopping sometimes when she sensed that I was losing my breath. She just stood and gazed at me with her huge dark eyes like she could read the tiredness on my face. She always regarded me with curiosity, but never with the curiosity of one who wants to know what being deformed is like. Hers were the unspoken questions of whether I liked the sea more in the

morning or the evening, or which was my favourite colour of shell. But she never asked, because, I think, she felt there would be time enough to ask such questions. We lived whole lives together in those few days of silence.

When I walk I shrink inside myself. I have no choice but to look down at my feet and will my legs to move. It takes all of my energy, whether I am being helped along or trying to walk on my own, just to step one foot in front of the other. So I did not see the change in the landscape until we stopped to rest for the final time. Siah sensed once again my need to pause and I felt the familiar squeeze on my arm as she centered my weight and held tightly so I would not fall. When I looked up I saw a new smile on her face; she no longer looked serious. I could see a spark in the shape of her mouth, and within the density of her eyes something flitted, something new, a thing that made my thighs and groin prickle. She looked over my shoulder and nodded. I turned round slowly and squinted against the glare.

The shore was so different that at first I could not tell where the difference lay. I knew the light was much brighter here, like the earth itself was also a sun, but I was so blinded at first that I thought I might still be sleeping. Heat blasted my face from every direction. When my eyes could truly see again I saw the impossible smoothness of it all for the first time and I whispered to Siah without turning around.

“There are no rocks.”

She squeezed my arm in reply.

As far as I could see there was simply sand and sea. There were no harsh tufts of grass, no stones or pools, just a vast, flat golden sand poured beside a calm sea; a sea with nothing to dash its breath against. The waves stroked the shore. I stood rooted to the ground waiting for the vision to disappear. I thought that if I stepped onto the beach the rocks might burst through the softness, having waited there all along, ready to cut their edges into the soles of my feet. Siah walked forward and took me with her.

I gasped when I stepped from the grass and onto the beach. I felt the familiar lurch in my stomach as I lost my balance and Siah shrieked and laughed as she grabbed me with her free hand. It felt unpredictable and good, my sinking into the gold, and Siah holding me there while hot sand pushed up between my toes and massaged my feet like they were forgiven for being ugly. We took a few steps towards the water, each heavy step wonderful and new, until Siah stopped and helped me sit. I sank into the heat and she sat beside me, legs crossed.

There was a breeze and I watched it play with her hair, brushing strands over her face. She did not move to smooth them away. I followed her gaze, wondering what held her attention so. All I saw was water and sky. The clouds had gone and it seemed that the world had become perfectly simple, cast in one colour and halved in two shades, bright and dark blue. I lay, warmed and shaped by the shape I cut in the sand, propped on my elbows, gazing as Siah did, and I began to see what held her. The sky remained unmoved, clean and pure, without any secrets, but the sea was changing. It was, I saw, actually a host of colour; its deeps bruised with purples and blacks; the waves rolled an impossible multitude of greys, angry, dense, and shimmering, the crests flecked with silvers and whites and sparks of orange and red. The longer I looked the more colours I found, many for which I have no name. They all glittered with life.

“Let’s go in,” Siah said.

It seemed impossible. I had never thought of it. The water was other, like a place of dreams. I had seen children splashing in the shallows near my home and I watched them with the same distant wonder that I reserved for people who walked down steps without holding anything, talking or laughing; or those who ran or jumped. They were like those who danced. When those children shrieked and splashed around in the water; it was a thrashing sort of dance and it was as finely balanced and beautiful and utterly remote to me as a bird flying.

“It will be all right,” Siah said, “I’ll be with you.”

## CAROL FARRELLY

Carol Farrelly is from Glasgow and lives and works in Edinburgh. She has a DPhil on the novels of Thomas Hardy. While an undergraduate, she spent a year waking up in beautiful Bologna in Italy. One day, she will weave her experiences there into fiction. Her current project, *This Starling Flock*, is a novel set in neutral Ireland during World War Two. Frank Casey makes a troubled homecoming to Dublin and his past life after two years in England. The novel was conceived while Carol was a student on Glasgow University's MLitt in Creative Writing. The opening chapters won her the Sceptre Prize. She had short stories published in various journals and anthologies in the UK.

*Published in:* Stand Magazine, Vol. 10 {3}; Dream Catcher Magazine 25; Algebra 4; Markings 28; Sushirexia: 32 Stories About Hunger, *Freight Design*

*Awards:* The Sceptre Prize, 2011 {winner}; The Bridport Prize {Short Story}, 2010 {shortlisted}; Asham Award, 2009 {shortlisted}; Fish Short Story Prize, 2009/10 {longlisted}

Extract from novel

# This Starling Flock

1. Dublin, Nov 1943

**F**

rank did not want to be on this journey. He felt the deck struggle beneath his feet as the engine-men slowed the pistons below and gifted him a few more moments' grace, but it was pointless. Soon Dun Laoghaire harbour would curve large around him; the scratchy outline of landmarks would thicken and darken into church spire and clock tower and terraced chimneys; his brother would shout out his name from amongst the shuffling crowd; the sodden promenade would thump against the soles of his shoes. He and Aidan would take a tram ride to their ma standing, all impatience, in the old blue doorway. Each of these things would happen once he set foot on Irish soil again. There was no retreating now. He was going home.

Frank drew in his breath, held it a moment and exhaled. He looked around at all the other passengers, all returning from their labours in England, some temporarily and some, like him, for good. All descriptions of migrant workers, making their milk and honey from Ireland's neutrality. Men and women without proper edges, gazing large-eyed towards the bay, as though they had been travelling on this ship for months. Their memories of England had long ago receded. Dark memories. Blacked-out windows, a siren wailing against the cracked green tiles of Balham Underground, the dusty heel of an old

man's shoe pressing against his ear. And light memories too. Hot churchless Sundays; laughing dance halls which glinted saxophones behind every curtained corner; Mary's silver necklace raining down upon his lips as she moved above him. Everyone else on this ship might stare ahead and pretend to forget, but Frank refused. He would never forget.

His fingers curled around the wet railing. The harbour was only a rope's throw away now. The crowd milled below, families, friends and lovers waiting for their prodigals to return, still far enough away to remain peg dolls to him a moment or two longer. Aidan remained not quite real yet, the little brother who had written him all those spidery letters tapping out their Morse code plea. Come home. Please. Save me. A message he had learned from their mother who would be at home right now, eyeing the clock, laying the special tablecloth, sweetening a rabbit stew, plumping up his pillow for the tenth time. She wouldn't come to the harbour, she had told him in her last letter. And he knew her unsaid reasons. If she came, her bones would only ache with the rheumatism of his leaving again. He would hop off the boat and jog towards her, but she would see him marching up that gangway again, a jagged white ticket hanging from his lapel, number 38. He had wondered since if that was the age he would die. Eleven years from now. The number was not random at all; the officials already knew his life's story. A ridiculous idea, of course. Learned fatalism. The creeping sense that none of his thoughts or feelings or intentions were ever quite his own. Always a pair of eyes behind his shoulder or at the end of his bed, wanting answers, right answers.

His mother wanted only the right answers. She knew he did not want this homecoming and so she waited for him in the house, avoiding the moment of arrival, not wanting to see the shocked pain in his eyes. She knew he would have stayed away forever, if the English

had allowed him the choice, if they had not insisted on either departure or conscription. A fair exchange, they told every Irishman, for two years' work and wages. Loyalty was due but Frank Casey had chosen to deny them. He had refused to wear their soldier's uniform and fight their battle: he was tired of fighting others' battles. And so, in turn, they shrugged, he had chosen his bed: he had chosen this coward Irish bed.

A rag of wind flapped against his face. The silent grey picture began to move. Voices babbled. A seagull yelped. The other passengers jostled against his shoulders. A stubbled, middle-aged man sucked a pipe. A child's sandy, mop-haired head butted against his legs. A woman puffed her lipsticked mouth into a small, round mirror. He wondered if it was worse for the homecoming women. A woman knew a different world in England; she stretched out her arms and her fingertips did not feel walls; she sat in front of her tall bedtime mirror and saw a face suddenly softer, more mobile. It was little wonder so few women returned; and they, unlike the men, had that choice. They need never return.

The railing shuddered. The men and women around him fell silent again. He tightened his grip. Ropes sprang through the air and coiled onto the pier; the boat tilted as everyone swarmed port-side. The fist inside his stomach grew stronger. A white-haired official battered the gangway into place. The waiting crowds were no longer peg-dolls. He saw curling mouths, dampening cheeks, darkening eyes, and he felt a cold sick sweat.

"Johnny!" A blonde woman cried out from the pier. "Johnny!"

All the heads on the pier turned to stare at the woman a moment: the victor. She had seen her loved one first.

Frank pushed towards the gangway, pressing against the shoulders of the plump woman in front. A young man in a smart pinstripe suit began to descend the steps. He kept his eyes fixed on the ground,

as though he did not expect a welcome. An Englishman, perhaps, a deserter come to feast on the baskets of plump cream buns, the vats of whiskey, the bricks of golden butter which the Brits imagined on every Irish dinner table. Or a native Irishman perhaps, a man who had chosen to sign up, his British uniform packed away neat and taciturn in his suitcase.

Frank grasped the gangway railing.

"It's me! Frank! It's me!" Aidan stood only a few yards below, at the bottom of the shuddering steps, waving and grinning.

Frank laughed and started down the steps. "How are you, little brother?"

"Grand. I'm absolutely grand now."

Frank set his first quiet foot on homeland. His stomach lurched. He tried to concentrate on Aidan. His little brother had beefed up since he had seen him last Christmas. All that swimming he wrote of in his letters had layered muscles into him. Seventeen years old and broader shouldered than anyone else in the family now, but he did not wear his strength well. His shoulders hunched, his hands flapped, his eyelids drooped. Aidan still imagined that all eyes followed him. There had not been enough growing-up in the time Frank had been away.

"God, but you're a sight for sore eyes," he thumped Aidan on the back. "Quite the man now, eh?"

Aidan blushed. He reached forwards and patted Frank's shoulder three times, as though confirming to himself that his brother was real. Frank laughed; he wanted both to pull his little brother closer and to push him farther away.

"Come on home," Aidan grinned, nudging Frank forwards, encouraging him to lead them through the murmuring crowd.

Frank jostled through the hot rubble of shoulders and elbows. So many black coats, he noticed. Black coats and hats, black skirts

and shoes. All these people welcomed their loved ones home in funereal clothes. Typical, grieving Irish: they mourned even when they should celebrate. Not like the English with their Dunkirk spirit, their ready embracing of each morning and night. He pulled at the loose blue button on his jacket cuff. It was circumstance, of course, rather than nature. It was history and geography, he reminded himself. He should not play the sniffy outsider. Gift the Irish a Blitz and they too might prove as stubbornly carefree, as wisely hungry.

“Ma can’t wait to see you,” Aidan babbled in his ear.

“Likewise.”

“Likewise?” Aidan echoed.

“Yes, likewise.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t wait to see Ma either.”

“Right,” Aidan mumbled.

“What?”

“It’s a funny thing to say, though. Likewise... Is it English?”

“What?” Frank glanced over his shoulder. “Is it English? Don’t we speak English?”

Aidan started and looked to the ground. He always took offence; he always kneaded the softest words into stones, always threaded a barb into every question. “It’s just – you look different, you know. Changed. Not our Frank.”

Frank pushed on through the crowd again. He hated listening to his brother sometimes, these times when Aidan fell into mimicry, when he spoke their mother’s words instead of thinking his own. He held all the family voices inside himself: their ma’s and poor Robbie’s and their da’s, of course. It was natural, he supposed. All families echoed one another to some degree, but the tendency worried him in Aidan. The power of it, as though Aidan did not possess even the beginnings of his own voice.

Frank slowed down again, turned and waited for Aidan to draw close. “Not our Frank? What’s different about me, then?”

Aidan tilted his head. “A bit posher, maybe.”

Frank looked down at his creased shirt and the brown trousers that had not seen a bar of soap for more than two weeks.

“Posher?”

His brother’s voice was hot against his cheek now. “People said you might change.”

Their mother’s words again.

“Oh, did they now? And which people would they be?”

“Some of the neighbours.”

Frank paused. “And would that be the posh neighbours? The Doyles perhaps? Or the ordinary common neighbours?”

“Tom Doyle isn’t posh. He’s not like the rest of his family. Tom’s the best kind of fella there is.”

Frank glanced at his brother’s burning face and pressed his arm once more around his broad back. He had meant to avoid any reference to Tom for the first day or so. Aidan, so their mother wrote, missed his best friend too much; he missed him as much as he missed Frank himself, so she wrote.

“You’re right. He’s a great fella. How is he?”

Aidan shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. “He said he was fine in his last letter.”

Frank lifted his hand and squeezed the back of his brother’s neck. “Listen, I’ve not gone up in the world. Believe me. Shovelling cement and laying railtracks – it certainly doesn’t open a better class of doors to you.”

“I’m sorry,” Aidan spoke to the ground again. “I didn’t mean it in a bad way. I didn’t. Most folk around here, they still think you’re the bee’s knees. All the mothers up and down the street, they all adore you...”

Frank imagined all the mothers in his street, all the mothers except Mrs Doyle, standing on their front doorsteps, rouge rubbed heavy onto their cheeks, aprons neatly tied, awaiting his homecoming. Their arms would unfold in one sweep as they heard his footsteps. “Welcome home, lad,” they would croon. Frank Casey, they would say to one another afterwards, handsome and silver-tongued and straight as a die. He wanted to laugh. They thought he was all the clichés: all the lies women fed themselves about men; all the expectations they fed into men. They saw in him, he sometimes thought, the man his father could have been. And he could not help but feel the pull of such flattery and such tribute. In England, he had been just another Paddy, another thick-voiced profiteer. Handsome, perhaps, and charming – more charming than most – but they had known he was as knotted with desire, as cloyed with sin, as any other earth-born man. They did not romanticise over there; and he had found a relief in that.

Aidan nudged at his arm. “Ma’s made a sponge cake, you know. Big as the Christmas cake, it is. And she’s roasted a whole chicken.”

“A chicken? Really?”

Frank could not remember the last time he had tasted chicken. He smiled as he pushed again through the prickling crowd.

“Right,” he turned round to face Aidan, “let’s get home then, eh? To Ma’s glorious roast.”

Aidan grinned from ear to ear and Frank hooked his arm around his brother’s neck. He did love him so, a boy with a face too ready to unmake itself.

He took one last look at the crowd which still snaked around the harbour, all black-suited, except for one figure, the blonde woman who had called out for Johnny. She wore the bluest dress, curving blue silk, which she now crushed against her sweetheart or husband. A husband, probably – she was so intimate, so unaware of anyone else. And the

blue silk would feel skin-white to his touch. Frank rubbed his forefinger against his lower lip and watched a moment longer. It was the kind of homecoming any man would want. The woman leant her face in against the man's cheek, whispering comforts to him, her joy and her longing hot against his ear. And Frank knew the man would have his eyes closed. The lucky bastard would have closed his eyes, and the pinkest, warmest light would flicker across the backs of his eyelids.

Frank sucked at the air, turned and followed Aidan's rushing steps.

## 2.

Frank stared. This was the house that had carried him from child to man. He could not tell why it looked changed to him. The windows gleamed as they always had. His mother would have been out there yesterday with her buckets of soapy water and newspaper dusters. The front door looked like Da had painted it only last week. A royal blue. Too blue, their ma had said, when he had presented it to her one Sunday afternoon, face flushed, hands thick-veined with paint. "Too swanky, Jack. We're not living in Merrion Square." It was the garden, perhaps, that spoke the difference. The flower beds were no longer dizzy with colour, no tomato plants punctured by starlings' beaks, dripping amber juices. And a stillness puzzled the air. No voices called; no wireless hummed; his mother's piano did not reply to his father's bantering fiddle. Instead, he heard a static.

"You glad to be home?" Aidan stood next to Frank.

"Course."

Aidan pushed at the creaking gate and the front door opened. They both watched their mother appear in the doorway, her hands clasped across her waist. That was the first thing Frank noticed: her hands, poised white, against her best navy skirt and blouse. She had made

that effort for him, gone to her wardrobe that morning as though she were going to church. She would have considered the neighbours too, of course; the Doyles or the Kellys might be to-ing and fro-ing, and any decent mother should be seen in her Sunday best for her eldest son's homecoming.

"Frank!" she cried, opening her arms wide. "You're home, son!"

"Hello, Ma!" He grinned, marching towards her, willing himself to feel the joy that should be natural to a son.

"Why don't you sit in your father's old chair?" She smiled as the tray of teacups and saucers jangled in her hands.

Frank gazed down at the armchair, olive-green and threadbare, where his father used to sit every evening and Sunday afternoons, with his roll-ups and a newspaper or a library book. Da was almost two years dead and Ma still kept his chair in pride of place. He brushed his fingers against the muddy armrest and traced the little atlas of tobacco stains. She had left those stains too; she had not tried to scrub or douse them away, even though she had moaned over them so when he was alive.

"No, Ma," Frank shook his head. "I won't take Da's chair."

He walked to the other side of the fireplace, where Aidan was already sitting on one of the wooden chairs, staring at their mother. He wanted to squeeze his brother's shoulder; he knew she would never have asked Aidan to sit in Da's chair, not once in all those months he had been away.

"Have a slice of sponge cake, then." His ma's voice was low. She was trying to stay calm, but her face, he knew, would be burning. He had refused her wish. "I made it for you this morning. Isn't that right, Aidan?"

Aidan nodded. The aroma of whipped eggs and creamed butter was still baking in the air around them.

"We got extra eggs sent up from your cousins in the country. And I saved up for the jam. Raspberry jam."

“Raspberry jam,” he murmured, sitting next to Aidan.

“Ma had me checking out the window every five minutes,” Aidan laughed.

“Checking out the windows?” Frank reached forwards to take the enormous wedge of cake that his mother had sliced for him.

“You know – for the Glimmerman. We were using the gas out of hours.”

“Of course,” Frank smiled and lifted the plump sponge to his mouth. “Ireland’s new bogeyman, eh?”

He had forgotten about the Glimmerman: the phantom gas inspector who haunted the sleeping heads of all Irish children. They closed their eyes and red-hot ovens flared at them in their dreams; they saw a lilac-skinned bogeyman peeking out the oven door, waiting for a trespassing hand to strike a match. Adults winked and nudged as they spoke of him, but there was something terribly real in their mock fear. Fear that a god-like hand would snatch away their safety. And guilt, of course – folk often feel guilty about blessings unfamiliar to them.

“Do they not have the Glimmerman over in England?” Aidan asked.

Their mother, sitting on the chair next to Aidan, began to tap her foot.

“No... no, they don’t.”

The tapping quickened.

“No fuel rationing? That’s strange, eh? They ration everything else over there.” Aidan reached for his smaller slice of cake.

“How’s the sponge, Frank?” his mother asked in a loud voice.

“It’s delicious.”

“It’s grand to have you back, son. Aren’t you glad to be back?”

“Course.”

She looked across at him as though she expected him to say more. He put his plate down on the side-table and swallowed.

“I missed you all like hell.”



## SUSAN KEMP

Being long-listed for the Richard & Judy Publishing Prize in 2005 gave Susan Kemp the encouragement she needed to pursue a long-held ambition to write. She completed an MLitt in Creative Writing at Glasgow University in 2008.

Previously Kemp worked at the BBC where over a nine year period she produced, directed and wrote scripts for a wide variety of factual programmes. For the last two years Susan has been working on writing novels. She combines this with running a small pottery studio, which she describes as a great opportunity to be busy while she thinks, and teaching Film Exhibition part-time at Edinburgh University.

*Awards: Sceptre Prize, 2009 (shortlisted);  
Richard & Judy Publishing Prize, 2005 (longlisted)*

Extract from novel

# Their Tinsel Show

Prologue

August 1982

A large, bold, black initial letter 'H' with a white vertical bar in the center, serving as a decorative element for the start of the first paragraph.

He was 12 years old but he'd only just managed to get used to the idea that his mother was dead, that she wasn't just somewhere else and would come back one day. Since she'd died, four years before, he'd spent every weekend and holiday following his dad around the glen, trying to learn but feeling ignored and forgotten; until today. Today something had changed – today his dad had begun to treat him like an apprentice: the gamekeeper's lad.

The grouse shoot began on August the 12th every year – the glorious 12th – and lasted for four months. The season was broken down into shooting days, which sold to various parties in packages. The paying guests stayed in the big house and were driven into the hills every day to shoot the birds. It was the most important time in the glen's calendar and Dewar, his dad, spent every minute of every day working toward it. The glen needed the money made during these months to survive for the rest of the year, but if there weren't enough birds then the glen's reputation would be tarnished and they would struggle to find guests in future. Everything depended on it and

everything counted toward it: the sheep on the hill, the heather, the wet, the wind, the blaeberreries, the hen harriers; every little thing contributed either a negative or a positive and all of it had to be managed by Dewar.

The guests were called ‘guns’ when out on the hill. Each party stayed a week, on average, and the whole week was usually bought by one person who invited six to 10 others. For example, the boss of a London bank wanting to treat his top earners, or a nouveau-riche millionaire wanting to show off. The dynamic was always bizarre, with either the six to 10 individuals trying to impress the man at the top, or the man at the top trying desperately to impress the six to 10 others.

Each morning they would breakfast in splendour at the big house, Balvauntie. Extra staff would be hired in and the house would be buzzing with activity. After a hot buffet breakfast served from silver chafing dishes, the guns would be driven in Land Rovers to the first position, where a line of butts crested the hill. The butts were weathered planks of wood nailed together to form a wall levelled at mid-chest and behind which a gun would stand, a few yards away from the next. The beaters would already have been driven in an old army Unimog up to their starting point about two and a half hills away from the butts. They would have spread out, one beater every five yards or so, and while the guns took position they’d be lying in the heather, waiting.

At the start of the day the beaters would sing along the line. One would start with, “Day-oh.”

The next would pick it up, “De, dayayay-oh.”

And the next, “Daylight come.”

“And we wanna go home.”

“Day-oh.”

“De, dahdayay-oh.” And on it would go until they got bored. They would tell jokes the same way: one sentence at a time shouted from one beater to the next until the punchline, when, one by one, they

would crease up with laughter and struggle to pass on the final joke as the sound echoed across the hills; or they'd be smoking roll-ups and wishing the day would get going.

He'd wanted, more than anything, to be one of them. He almost burst with pride when Dewar told him that morning, his 12th birthday, to get in the Unimog and join the line.

Once the guns were in position, the beaters formed the line with their flags – old posts with squares of coloured plastic, the remains of feed-bags, tacked on. They thrashed the heather with the flags as they walked in a straight line toward the butts, driving the birds out and up and toward the guns. The men at the end of the line had to run to keep the line straight. These were always the fittest of the beaters, usually ex-army flotsam and jetsam who travelled around the country looking for whatever work was going. It was a hand-to-mouth existence but they were, in the main, people who liked to be free of all ties and who were happy as long as there was food enough to eat, a stash of tobacco in their pocket and enough cash for a dram or two. They knew the work and the environment and the glen relied on them.

The beaters in the centre of the line were students and the sons of local farm workers. They walked at a slower pace but had steeper ascents and descents to keep them working just as hard.

Dewar stood at the end of the butts, waiting for the arrival of the beating line. They dipped out of sight on the final approach and then, just before they crested the hill in front of the butts, the senior beater sounded a horn. Dewar waited for that sound, his keen eyes looking out for any sign of a beater's person, then he blew an answering horn more loudly up the line of butts. The guns were supposed to stop shooting immediately but often, so determined to impress each other, they would ignore the signal and try to bag just one more brace. That was usually the moment beaters got shot or, sometimes, it would be the next gun along. Once the boy had seen a gun shot in the face

by the man in the next butt. The man was stretchered away, swearing loudly at the culprit, and never came back again.

Dewar did his best to warn and instruct in advance and after he sounded the horn he marched up the line shouting. Sometimes the wannabes of the world couldn't care less. They didn't fear the consequences of gunshot pellets on humans because they didn't seem particularly dangerous, but Dewar knew perfectly well just how nasty a wound could be inflicted by a careless and inconsiderate aim. He'd seen eyes lost and arteries burst and many, many bloody splatters in his time. With his son in the line Dewar kept an even sharper watch. He identified the most likely to lose themselves in the shoot and kept close.

There were five drives: three before lunch, two after. The guns ate in the nearest bothy where the house staff waited with fire lit and white linen tablecloths spread on trestle tables. They ate a three-course meal with silver service and French wine while the beaters sat outside in the cold and the rain with their piecey bags filled with sandwiches they'd made in a hurry in their own bothy that morning: cheese spread with watery slices of ham pressed into the uniform slices of the white bread bought in bulk at the Co-op.

The guns had shelled out on a crate of lager for the beaters. It was expected. Sometimes it was cans of cider or beer, sometimes it was sausage rolls; very occasionally it was left to someone's wife to organise, a wife who might think a box of green apples would do the beaters good. Green apple days did not go down well. The line would slow down, maybe it wouldn't be straight, maybe no birds would rise in surprise from the heather. The guns quickly learned what was an acceptable lunchtime offering.

In previous summers the boy had stood with his father at the butts but today he took the central position and did his damndest to keep the line straight and not fall back. He became the beaters' pet. They told

him dirty jokes; they let him sip their lager; they made him run up the hills to catch up with them, as they moved from the end of one drive to the start of another, only to run off themselves as soon as he caught up before waiting further on, laughing, as he tried to catch up again. He was in his element. He belonged with a group of men, he loved it and he did well at his new role. His dad laid his hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze at the end of the day. The boy beamed.

But, no matter how much he wished it would continue forever, the summer came to an end and he prepared to start high school in Forfar. He was scared of course. This was going to be so different from the wee primary next to the kirk, and the friendly teachers he'd known since before he could remember. But he was more confident that summer, because if he'd managed to make friends with the roughest, toughest gang of hardy drifters anyone could imagine then high school kids could only be pushovers.

He got up at six on the first day of term to walk the two miles to where the school bus would pick him up. He had a fake leather satchel from the Co-op in Kirrimuir as a new school bag, and a pencil case full of new pens and rubbers and protractors. He was wearing the grey trousers and jumper which served most schools in Scotland as a uniform and could be bought for a few quid in Woolies. He was sure every other kid would be just like him.

The rain came down in sheets and he was soaked and dripping when he got onto the bus. As the heat warmed him up he began to steam and his old parka gave off the smells of country living. All the boys already on the bus were dry because either the bus came nearer their homes or their mums drove them to the stop. He no longer had a mum, and he was the only one who'd had to walk so far.

Once the slagging started there was no stopping it, and even his friends from primary joined in: "Ahm no sitten next tae that stinking jakie."

“Aye, has yer mum never tellt ye how tae wash yersel?”

“Oh that’s mingin, he smells like fish guts.”

“He disna even hae a mum, he lives in a barn.”

He protested, “I dinna live in a barn, it’s just cos Ah got a soakin.”

“Ooh, it’s just cos Ah got a soakin,” a lad at the back repeated his words with a snide undertone. He didn’t know what was meant by it. They seemed to be taking the piss out of his accent but as far as he could make out they all spoke the same.

Another copied the first one with the same snide tone, “It’s just cos Ah got a soakin.”

“Aye, it’s no cos I live in the barn wi the pigs.”

They stood up and came to where he sat. One turned to the others to perform, lifting his nostrils with his fingertips and snorting, “He’s a pig.”

“He’s a smelly fuckin pig and he lies doon in his ain shite.”

“Aye, then he rolls aboot it in and washes hisel in it.”

The slagging built to a crescendo with all the boys gathered around him. There was nothing he could say or do so he simply took off his parka, rolled it up, and put it under his arm before turning to look out of the window. He could see nothing but condensation so he made his own pictures instead. He imagined the bus crashing and him saving all the other boys just before the wreck exploded. He pictured their gratitude and their regret for being so horrible before the crash. They would invite him round to their houses for tea and their mothers would hug him tightly and feed him homemade cakes. He kept going back to the moment when the bus crashed and he saved the other boys by carrying them out one by one, as flames licked all around them.

He had got himself a reputation on his very first day and it stayed with him. Nothing improved. He remained a smelly, skanky misfit who lived in a barn with pigs. He continued to develop his imaginative conjuring as a necessary means of survival. Once he learned the trick

it opened a door to another way of being and it served him well. Gradually he lost any real grasp on his day-to-day life and was content to imagine his future rather than build its foundations.

At first he mostly fantasised about being a rock star or a hero during a crisis: his picture would be in the papers and he would be much feted and loved by all. But he soon tired of re-running the same stories and so learned to seek out new things to nourish his fantasy world. He would buy second-hand records from the junk shop in Forfar and listen to the likes of Mozart or Monty Alexander as he went to sleep at night; imagining himself the composer or pianist. He was a constant visitor to the school library and would lose himself in novels, identifying with the hero. He would learn poetry by heart and pretend to be reciting his own work in a quiet corner of the forest, with the birds as his appreciative audience. He would go to the pictures and be the director, or read a newspaper article and become the world-renowned surgeon saving a child's life. He honed this world, perfected it, and used all his powers of creativity to embellish it. He could magic himself into any role and, ultimately, his ability to live in his imagination soaked up any real desire to prove himself, or even find out what he might actually be good at.

## THOM LAYCOCK

Born in West Yorkshire at six o'clock in the morning, Thom Laycock has been trying to get some sleep ever since. He studied Literature and Philosophy at the University of Stirling and graduated in 2003. Aside from writing Thom also plays in the cinematic post-metal band Half a Dead Bird. He has recently collaborated with photographer Chris Park on a poetry and portraiture exhibition, *Dualism*.

# continuums

this train window shows a  
world loosed into a liquid flux,  
furrows and hedgerows flow into  
wave after wave of an earth turned sea

where hilltops and towers  
are tossed like ships  
and driftwoods gather  
on the shores of towns

lakes become islands,  
sparrows, flying fish  
and strangers are swept from view  
drowned in their deep green lives.

at last I see a still centre,  
the black knife of a kestrel held  
against the sky, gathering itself  
for the cut.

it holds its shape against the sudden rain  
triangulates time and space to its will

as I attempt to now, with  
my eyes locked, the kestrel poised  
and the world falling through the train.

# the oxygen tank

how I loved you when you were asleep  
how I watched your eyelids shudder and close

your breathing deepen  
your mind estuary into a dream

on the couch with your legs over me  
your tights catching the rough skin of my hands

like electricity.

silent, except for the swell  
and fade tide of your breasts

as you recycled the air in the room.

your face so calm, free from  
animation

a figurehead on a wreck  
lit by a diver's flare

I told you everything then  
hoping it would hold you like a charm

sway you like a prayer, I wonder now  
if it didn't just wash around you

the noise of distant traffic  
or an ocean of trees

perhaps, though, something got through

but distorted –

the lead voice in a rescue party  
muffled by the snow.

## the fleet

tonight, no one is in the park but you  
and I and this cold bottle of wine  
we use to warm ourselves.

unless you count the swans  
folded up into blue light  
each cob believing itself  
the admiral of the fleet.

we tell stories about the others,  
our laughter meets, bleeds together.

when it takes you, a crease forms  
at the corner of your nose  
in a way I've never seen before

I fixate upon this particular,  
this one feature, I know, has marked you  
out, and will last me for life.

despite how much we take  
from the others:

chameleons, amorphous, selfless  
characters patch-worked  
by time and acquaintance.

when we shared a kiss  
these others joined in  
beating their wings about our heads,  
our closed eyes.

our mouths transmit all this,  
allowing people who've never met  
to love little parts of each other.

# handing over the keys

just a few months  
and already I'll never forget how it feels  
to walk in that front door

the catch of the key in the lock, distinct,  
as they all are.

your heat has bled out of the room  
your fibres tangled up in the Hoover bag  
your smell sunk into the old blue carpet.

remember all the nights I clambered drunk  
through the window and called you over  
to watch where time kept ending

in turquoise, crimson, cerise.

the white roses grown wild in the garden  
heads nodding in the rain

every element still present, touchable,  
the way you play a song in your head

hear every note, trill, vibrato.  
as though – when muted – music continued to sing out  
beneath the hand over its mouth

I feel the skin where your neck becomes your ear  
I'm touching it, here, now and

the way we replenished one another,  
each pull and thrust willing  
the other further into existence.

the way I put my fingers in your mouth  
looking for the source of your kiss.

all the scenes are separated out now  
like a half-remembered film, and  
though some keep replaying it's hard to say

precisely what was and is real, except  
for this tiny scar on my index finger  
which tells me, every time I want to know

# the conversation

they say that information, like energy, is never lost.  
I thought about that the day we took to the motorway,  
the car cutting a cube out of the rain, rain flaring  
from the back wheels in wet flames

I once towed my mum down the road with an old rope.  
she held on, steadied the wheel, rode out the downpour,  
a glimpse in the rear view; her tears the wrong way round

these strange attachments, coming undone.  
we passed through the ghost town of the scrap-yard,  
so many cars rusting together to form a single structure  
as though there had been some sort of plan.

now – then – to you and I:  
we parked on a hill-top against a horizon erased,  
at times like these it always rains. you said: ‘we need to talk’  
but because I couldn’t bear the weight of your words  
I detuned, then just switched off. static and dust.

on the dashboard lay the brittle casing of a wasp  
trapped there, and finished-off by a recent frost,  
I have no idea how long I must have spent staring at it,  
but it was still there when I closed my eyes.

they say that information, like energy, is never lost.

# tautology

I remember the goat in my  
neighbour's garden skinning the tree  
alive all down one side

hanging itself against leash and pole,  
forelegs stepping on the air,  
leech tongue molesting the strips of bark

its automatic jaw  
and the squares of its pupils  
were regular as instinct.

the goat is gone now  
its owner dead of a heart attack  
and his son – addict, escapist – slung

a rope over the rafters,  
noosed his neck, stepped  
into the slack, and that was that.

but this is this: a tree standing  
ten years bolder,  
gnarly bark grown back

to cover up the raw works  
where it bled so much sap,  
forming the shape of a door

I wouldn't dare open,  
or even knock.

## RA MARTENS

RA Martens arrived in Edinburgh from Cumbria in 1991, and has been allowed to stay. She writes stories about ex-prime ministers, mazes, worms, malevolent puddles, high tea, dentists, glamorous toilets, bullets, amateur memorial holograms, brimstone psychotherapists, the flying trapeze, summoning flies, hell, vainglorious mansion blocks, monsters, power plants, delusional medics, lies, half-truths and ill communication. Sometimes more than one at a time.

Once she's licked them into a collection, she plans to spend some time on a novel, about a man recovering from selective mutism and a childhood Oscar, whose autobiography has been written by his imaginary friend Higgs. His life takes a turn when he is befriended by a showman with an extraordinary act, who calls himself Frank Lloyd Wright.

*Published in: Structo Magazine (issue 4); Gutter Magazine (issue 5); Story Book (anthology); Wolf Girls: Dark Tales of Teeth, Claws and Lycogony, 2012*

*Awards: Unbound Press Short Fiction Award, 2011 (winner)*

Extract from novel

# Magnificent Miss M and The Copenhagen Interpretation of Insanity

**S**

he arrived on a sodden evening in 1951, when the English weather was making the whole circus depressed. There was a firm knock at the ringmaster's caravan door, and he opened it to find her on his step; a young woman in a dove-grey twin set and pearls, her hair coiffed into a stately helmet more suited to someone twice her age. Nadia, having been unable to deter the visitor, bobbed apologetically in her wake.

“Good evening, you are the leader of this circus?”

The young woman spoke in a way he had heard on the radio here, filled up and stretched out with the assumption of benign authority. It was a voice for taming lions, and husbands.

Niels unconsciously drew himself up a little, and nodded.

“To the extent that we have one.”

“I wish to join,” she said. “I will do whatever is required, and do it well. You may pay me whatever is reasonable.”

He swiftly changed his laugh to a cough as she gave him an

irritated and impatient stare. The commanding voice notwithstanding, he had never seen anyone less suited for circus life.

“My dear lady, we cannot even begin to afford anything ‘reasonable’. Surely you have taken the measure of the place?” He swept his hand in an arc, taking in the peeling paintwork and bald tyres of his caravan. Her eyes followed compliantly, and returned unbowed to meet his.

“Very well,” she said, “food and board and travel with the company until such time as a wage is viable. Where may I take my things?” A small travelling case sat at the foot of the steps by Nadia, who was shaking her head, eyes wide.

Niels knew this woman was unlikely to see out the next day. Had the circus been functioning at the level of financial stability it was to achieve just a year or so later, he probably would have attempted to send her away. But they were barely surviving, and another pair of hands willing to work for sleeping space and food was not something he could turn down, however brief or ill-starred their contribution. “Nadia, would you find –” He waited for a name.

“Miss Roberts.”

“– Miss Roberts a bed, and show her the bathing tent, please?”

Nadia opened her mouth and raised her eyebrows in silent protest, quickly rearranging her expression as the woman turned back in her direction.

“Would you be a dear and carry my case?” said Miss Roberts, and waited for her to pick it up.

As Nadia, drunk with disbelief, staggered off across the field, Miss Roberts told Niels she rose at five, and would be back at five-thirty to be informed of her duties. His limp protestations glanced off her receding back as she picked her way determinedly over the soggy ground.

Goldberg Brothers Circus was still recovering. The Brothers themselves

and many others had been lost in the German horror, and Niels had taken it upon himself after the war to return from Denmark and gather the surviving members of the company together, persuading a handful of new performers to join them. He had received a generous inheritance from his father, which covered the purchase of new animals, tents and equipment, but little else. Niels had become de facto ringmaster, a position which he gladly accepted, his ageing body no longer fit to take to the air.

That night, making his daily reassessment of what the circus could (not much) and couldn't (almost everything) afford, he suspected Miss Roberts might fall heavily into the latter category. Whatever she was running from must be terrifying indeed, to perturb a woman such as she. He had to contemplate the possibility it might come looking for her, and was relieved to remind himself she would not last.

He was not the only person who was astonished when she was still with them a week later. Miss Roberts had traded her pearls for overalls, and she carried, rigged, dismantled and more, with neither complaint nor conversation. She continued to do so throughout the following year.

One night in Bucharest, as she swept around the lion's empty cage, Miss Roberts asked Elias the tamer if he might have the time to hear her story. He concealed his delight with no little effort, nodding at the floor so as not to alarm her back into silence. She had a scarf tied over her face against the powerful stink of the big cat's urine, leaving only her eyes uncovered, and she continued to sweep as she spoke, looking away from him. Elias kept his own eyes averted so they could not betray his astonishment as she wove him a tight-lipped tale of a secret affair with the American film star Ronald Reagan, the shame of which had driven her to forge a new identity.

Elias' tongue was easily loosened by drink, and soon the delicious gossip had taken a dance in every caravan. People were disappointed, not least Elias, when she told them that no, she would not be able to get them an autograph. She had never even met Ronald Reagan; the story was simply a fabrication for her own amusement.

It was clear the company had failed a test, and Miss Roberts withdrew from them even further. If she rejected society, Niels decided, then society would have to be brought to her by stealth. He had noticed that a lack of subordinates seemed unsuited to Miss Roberts' temperament, and came upon the idea of setting her to work with the elephants. They were generous-spirited beasts, who allowed her for the most part to take charge. She remained reserved, but trod more lightly across the fields; her heart, he liked to think, weighing a little less.

After a period of being soothed by trunks, Miss Roberts developed something resembling a friendship with Irving, Niels' successor on the trapeze, who began to give her lessons in secret. Her body already strengthened by manual labour, she gradually loosened and became flexible. Niels walked in to see her flying from the bar one afternoon. He should not have been as surprised as he was: his own experience had taught him that with a will, the most extraordinary things become possible – and Miss Roberts had enough will to power a country. Within a week, he had put her in the show. She had finally revealed – not her name, but an initial: “The Magnificent Miss M” began to pull in the crowds.

By 1960, everyone was calling her “M”, but Niels preferred “Miss Roberts”. She still kept her distance from the company, and even in her scanty fringed and sequined costumes – perhaps especially in those – there was something about her that bridled at intimacy.

One almost-autumn morning in Akron, Ohio, 1962, when the leaves

had not yet turned but coats were once more being buttoned, Irving knocked on Niels' door. Niels let him in, and he took off his cap and stood for a while, twisting it in his hands. Eventually, he cleared his throat.

"What are The Falklands?" he asked.

"I've no idea," replied Niels. "Why do you ask?"

"M keeps talking about them." He paused, and rubbed at his ear. "She's acting a little strange, Boss. I mean, not like she usually does. Different."

"Go on." Niels gestured to the couch, and Irving sat. Usually, Irving's leading-man bravado inhabited a great deal more space than his body required, but here it had deserted him, and his natural dimensions appeared shrunken and small. It was not in anyone's nature to question Miss Roberts, least of all someone with whom she shared a bond of trust on which her life depended. Niels watched the man tussle with himself, tugging on his bright red ear while he struggled to speak.

"She gets these funny moods," Irving muttered, forcing the words out from between his teeth. He looked up. "It's not surprising, is it? She doesn't have a single friend here, not after 11 years – not even me. I take her life in my hands every night, and I don't even know her name." His voice caught with exasperation. "She just practices, works, talks about work and practice, and then she disappears. It's done something to her." He clammed up again, and went back to abusing his increasingly raw ear.

Niels came to sit on the couch opposite, and leaned over to pat Irving's shoulder. "She's English," he said. "They're different."

"Not that different. I've met others, and they're not all like that."

"No." Niels paused, acknowledging the truth. "Irving, what's happening?"

"Just go and talk to her, find some excuse, you'll see." Irving stood up,

relieved to have passed on his burden, and impatient to get away before it was returned. “I’ve got to go, Elias is short-handed and I said I’d help.” He stood awkwardly for a moment, and Niels supposed he should offer some reassurance. But, Irving helping Elias with the animals? Something had gravely disturbed the man, and Niels was not inclined to give assurances.

“Well, thank you for letting me know. I’ll go and see her tomorrow.”

Niels stood outside on his step for a while, listening to the circus. Someone had let Nadia put her Bobby Darin record over the speakers again, and Niels could hear it floating over the field towards him: “You must have been a beautiful bayyyyyyy-beeeee...” After a while, the ubiquitous twist music started again, and he went back inside.

The lights seemed to catch Miss Roberts’ sequins that night with more dazzle than usual as she swung across the vast distance to meet Irving’s bar, reaching out a single arm for him to catch as she let her own bar go. Her other arm returned the audience’s gasp to them with a flourish before her legs looped up and over the bar between Irving’s feet, and she swung upside-down to the roof of the tent, flipping up to stand with him as the bar came down again. There was no sign of any strain at all.

The next morning, Niels went to Miss Roberts’ caravan, carrying a copy of the agreed tour dates for the following spring. She came to the door in an outfit he’d never seen before, almost like the one she’d worn on the night she arrived, but in an imposing dark blue. The pearls were once more around her neck, and she greeted him as though she had expected his visit.

“Ah Niels, good of you to come.”

She stepped aside and waved him in. To his knowledge, he was the first visitor to this caravan, and he tried to disguise his curiosity, stealing furtive glances around the space. They yielded little information.

There were none of the vanity shots or publicity posters that adorned most performers' van walls; no trinkets, nothing. Miss Roberts took a seat, smoothing her skirt underneath her, and gestured to the banquette opposite. Niels sat.

When she spoke, it was in the voice which she had used to address him at their first meeting. Over time, this voice had been gradually sanded into something softer by the proximity of so many different tongues, until the barest trace of it remained, but now it had suddenly returned – and there was something else. It was slower, deeper, and it was stretched with the effort to both disguise and display superiority.

She was talking about impending war. He thought at first she meant Cuba; that she had somehow not heard the news that the crisis had been averted. But no, this war was over “The Falklands”, the things Irving had mentioned. He battled to get some kind of grip on what she was saying, but was confounded. It did not seem possible to interrupt her. And then she stopped, and brushed down her lapel, looking at him and through him at once, as though he were smoke.

“So you see, I simply cannot stand by whilst our people are at risk. It would not be right. It is my duty to protect their freedom.”

“Miss Roberts, I’m afraid I don’t really understand,” said Niels. “What are these ‘Falklands?’”

A shudder seemed to spread, at speed, through her whole body, for just a second. She looked at him with some confusion, and said, visibly distressed, “I’m terribly sorry; I seem to have drifted off for a second.” Reining herself in, she sat back, heaviness hanging about her shoulders. “I wonder if you could repeat what you just said.”

“The Falklands’,” said Niels, pleased to note that her voice had returned to the one he knew – if a little quieter than usual. “I haven’t ever heard of them.”

“Falklands?”

“Yes,” he paused. “You seem to be concerned about them?”

She examined her fingernails, and took a deep breath, which she held for a few seconds before releasing it, her structure collapsing a little further into itself.

“Niels, I don’t know. I think they might be islands, but I don’t know where, and I don’t know how I know that. The words just keep coming into my head. And whenever they do, I am filled with a kind of –” she searched for a word, “a kind of rage, that almost lifts me from my feet. How did you know about this?”

“You were speaking of them, Miss Roberts, just now.”

“Really?” Her eyes roved the room, searching for the memory, and she sagged a little further, before pretending to find it. “Yes, of course. Well, please don’t give it another thought. A silly matter, nothing to worry about.” She looked at her lap, and her eyes moved to take in her outfit. It seemed to frighten her. “Now, if you don’t mind, I must get changed.”

Niels returned to his caravan, and sat quietly on the sofa. He was remembering an incident long before Miss Roberts’ arrival; something he had never told anyone about, but had felt he almost might share with her just then; until she dismissed him.

In 1910, when Niels had been with Goldberg Brothers for 10 years, he had visited a fellow circus in Prague. They had recently hired a young fire-eater from Japan, and Niels watched as the boy bent back, a flaming torch ready to enter his mouth. Suddenly, the fire seemed to grow blindingly bright and devour him in a flash, leaving only an ashen shadow. Niels was consumed with guilt, as though he had somehow brought this thing about, though when he blinked the performer stood unharmed. It felt as though the air around him had been struck like a bell.

Niels had taken flight to the circus at the age of 15, filled with an ominous sense that something was coming for him – or from him.

The brief vision of a person reduced to ashes had seemed like an announcement of this something's imminent arrival.

Another possibility now occurred to Niels. Perhaps the idea that either he or Miss Roberts had avoided anything by coming to Goldberg Brothers; the idea that one could avoid anything, could choose anything, was an illusion. What if, in fact, we made all the available choices; splitting off into more and more new selves each time a choice arose; each creating a new universe by their existence; each ever blissfully ignorant of the others? If this were true, then perhaps briefly for him – and now more deeply for Miss Roberts – something had gone awry, causing one of the other existences to intrude. He took down his atlas, and looked for The Falklands. There was no such place.

After that night's show, he returned to Miss Roberts' caravan. He would present his idea to her, and maybe it would help. The air was balmy with Indian summer breezes, and her door was ajar, so he coughed to announce his arrival. He could see her profile as she waved him in, not speaking. She was out of costume and back in the clothes of her other self.

"Miss Roberts, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt –" He didn't know what he was interrupting. "There was something I wanted to speak with you about. May I sit?" He bobbed hesitantly over the couch opposite where she sat. She didn't reply, didn't look at him.

"Yes, I'm ready," she said, and rearranged herself in her seat.

Dread leaked into him like ink into water. "Miss Roberts?" he said, miserably sure she wouldn't respond.

She was silent for a few moments, but gently inclined her head with an attentive expression. Then she spoke again, and things became worse.

"It was a danger to our ships," she said, over and over, "it was a danger to our ships." There was a long pause, and then she smiled

in a cat-like, composed way, and said with a condescending movement of her head, the smile never breaking, "I'm sorry, I forgot your name."

Niels felt he was witnessing a soul in deadly peril, and raised his voice, gripping her hand. "It's Niels, it's me! Miss Roberts, M, please –" his voice had erupted high and shrill, and he didn't know what to say next.

She smiled in blithe acceptance, withdrawing her hand, and said, "Mrs Gould." His heart reached his boots as she continued: "When orders were given to sink it, and when it was sunk, it was in an area," her smile went, her voice took on a determined, bullying air, "which was a danger to our ships."

She seemed to remove something from her lapel, and said in a cool manner to one side: "One almost pines for Mr Scargill." She stood up, reaching out to shake Niels's hand. "I wonder if Bernard got all that on video. He'll probably make me watch it tomorrow. How ghastly."

"Bernard?" said Niels, hopelessly. "Video?" As he took her hand, he felt all the strength of her trapeze grip. Miss Roberts was in there, somewhere. He would wrestle her back from this creature.



## WAYNE PRICE

Wayne Price was born and brought up in South Wales and came to Edinburgh in 1987 to begin a PhD in contemporary American fiction. He has lived and worked in Scotland ever since and now teaches Modern Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Aberdeen and is working on a collection of short stories set in South Wales during and after the miners' strike. "If You Can't See Me I Can't See You" is part of this project. He has published short stories and poetry in many journals and anthologies in the UK, Ireland and America. His debut collection of earlier short stories, *Furnace*, is due to be published by Freight Books in the spring of 2012.

*Published in:* Stand Magazine; New Writing Scotland; Poetry Wales; Edinburgh Review

*Awards:* Bridport short story, 2005 (runner-up), 2010 (second place); Fish Publishing Short Story Competition, 2006-7 (runner-up); Bridport Poetry 2007 (runner-up); Edwin Morgan International Poetry Competition, 2008 (second place); Poetry on the Lake Short Poem Prize, 2009 (winner); Poetry on the Lake Poetry Prize, 2011 (second place); The Brit Writers Awards Poetry Category, 2011 (winner); The Torbay Poetry Competition, 2011 (winner); The Troubador International Poetry Prize, 2011 (runner-up); The Yorkshire Open Poetry Competition, 2012 (winner); The Raymond Carver Short Story Prize, 2006 (shortlisted)

# If You Can't See Me I Can't See You

I

t's a bad one, she whispered.

Yes, Isaacs agreed, already fearful, though it wasn't unusual to see his grandfather, after an attack, unconscious like this. There was something about his skin, though. It was always colourless – or had been for years at least, the dust in his lungs slowly suffocating his blood – but now it had turned an ominous, stony grey, as if the anthracite he'd breathed in for decades was suddenly leaching into the cells.

The front parlour, where the narrow fold-out bed had been set up since Easter, was dusky behind the heavy brown drapes. Isaacs knew that outside, beyond the thick curtains, the early afternoon sun was blazing in a blue summer sky. Nothing of its brightness penetrated the room but the heat had found its way in, stale and crowding. He bent closer to examine his grandfather's closed, mask-like face. Flakes of dried sputum were caught in the stubble of the old man's cheeks where his grandmother must have tried to sponge it away from his lips after each coughing fit.

When did it come on? he murmured.

His grandmother moaned softly and Isaacs felt a dull sense of premonition. The night before last, she said reluctantly, a tremor of panic, or maybe nervous exhaustion, raising her voice out of its whisper.

He looked up. She was wringing her hands and wouldn't meet his eyes, fixing her stare instead on her husband's blank expression.

Christ. Has he been able to eat? Or drink?

She shook her head.

Two nights like this? he said, unable to keep the sharpness completely out of his tone.

She winced and dipped her head.

Well. Has he been able to talk at all?

A little bit. Sometimes. But he mustn't talk much, see, or he'll start coughing again, and he mustn't. Oh, she moaned quietly again.

Isaacs took a deep breath and released it slowly. The dim room seemed suddenly tiny and airless. When can the doctor come?

She didn't answer.

You haven't called him, have you?

Another low moan. He won't let me. He won't let me. I wanted to, but he won't let me, she murmured in a low, sing-song chant.

I'll call him now.

Fetch your mam. Get her first, Gwyn.

He shook his head but it was no use, he knew, and it was only a short run up the road to his own house. Alright, Nan. But then I'm phoning.

Oh, she moaned, and he took her arm and led her through to the back kitchen.

He followed the ambulance to the hospital in his grandfather's car – a noisy, temperamental Lada that threatened to stall at each traffic light. He sat sweating and cursing each time he had to nurse

the engine back up to speed in the August glare and heat. You make sure he's taken proper care of, his mother had ordered. Stay with him if he wakes up, and tell him Nan and me will be there later once I've calmed her down. She spoke angrily, as if all of it was happening because of some stupidity on his part.

His grandfather came round briefly as the nurses undressed and cleaned him, they told Isaacs later in the visiting room, but they'd had to keep the oxygen mask on his face and couldn't understand anything he'd mumbled. Before they could get him into bed he was gone. Like a light bulb, the ward sister said. His heart just couldn't stand it, she said briskly. It was dust he had, wasn't it? Terrible strain on the heart, see. She tutted. Happens week in week out. Sooner they shut the pits the better!

The first long, deep rolls of thunder began just after Isaacs pulled out from the hospital car park. The afternoon light had taken on a looming, metallic sheen and the air was ripe with a cool mineral charge. As if a blind had been drawn, the sun suddenly darkened. Waiting at the busy junction of the hospital road, Isaacs watched the headlights of approaching traffic blink awake as they approached, one car after the other, as if obeying some hidden signal. Then the first fat drops splashed onto his dusty windscreen and began drumming onto the bonnet.

By the time he nosed the car onto the main street of the village the downpour was blinding, too ferocious for the clattering wipers to offer anything more than brief glimpses of the road ahead. Indoors, he allowed himself half an hour of solitude to change into dry clothes, smoke a cigarette and watch the early evening news. Then he ran through the rain to his grandmother's house.

It was night, and still raining steadily, before his grandmother was ready to leave the body at the hospital. The two women sat close

together in the back of the car. At intervals, Isaacs glanced in the rearview mirror and saw his mother speaking in low tones, or holding a handkerchief to her mouth.

It was on the long, curving stretch of dual carriageway skirting Pontypridd that the headlights of the car behind first flared onto full beam and drew so close Isaacs had to skew the mirror before he could see again. Christ's sakes, he said, shaken.

What? his mother asked.

Got some drunk behind us, Isaacs replied. He's right up on me with his lights on full.

The car was making no attempt to pass, though the outside lane was clear. It was dangerously close now, almost touching the Lada's bumper.

She craned back to look, shielding her eyes against the glare. He's too close! she said. Gwyn! He's too close!

Well, what can I do? he half shouted over the din of the rain.

The headlights were flashing now, and Isaacs thought he could hear the horn being punched and held but the sound was tailing away from them and he couldn't be sure. He was sweating, furious and afraid. With every flash the inside of the car lit up with a stark, forensic glare and the black shadow of his mother's head fell like a solid bar dividing the dashboard.

Stupid bastard! Isaacs heard himself yelling.

Gwyn! Slow down! his mother demanded. Let him pass!

He doesn't want to pass! he snapped back. He couldn't allow himself to think about his grandmother in the seat behind. He closed his mind to whatever she must be thinking and feeling and instead found himself willing any kind of disaster on the chasing car behind. Crash and die, you bastard, he muttered to himself. Crash and fucking die!

He realised he must have been forcing the accelerator – they were travelling well above the speed limit now and the old car was

vibrating alarmingly. A long, wide goods lorry had loomed up as if from nowhere through the rain. He swung the car sideways, sickeningly, missing its back corner by inches. As if in slow motion he read the bright yellow badge on the lorry's tailgate: a cartoon of a wing mirror made to look like a human face, saying If you can't see me I can't see you. Someone had scrawled a hanging cock and balls beneath it.

Gwyn! his mother screamed.

The cabin flooded with light again. The chasing car had swung out too and was even closer than before. Reckless with fear, Isaacs cut in front of the lorry, wincing at the furious bellowing of its horn. Dimly, he was aware of movement on the seat behind him but didn't dare look. He thought his mother was saying something urgently to his grandmother, trying to calm her maybe, but he couldn't make out the words. He slowed so that there would be absolutely no room for the car to follow him in front of the truck and in a flash it was past them at last, speeding on in the outside lane, trailing a final horn blast behind it. There was a slip road very close now, he knew. Without indicating, he veered down it at the last moment and suddenly the road ahead was dark and empty again and he realised his hands were almost too wet and unsteady to grip the wheel.

Stop, his mother was pleading. For God's sake, Gwyn, just stop the car.

It's all right now, he heard himself saying, as if from somewhere outside himself. We're fine now. It's fine.

The next morning he was woken by the downstairs telephone. He let it ring, knowing that the rest of the house was empty. His mother had spent the night at his grandmother's, and he knew she would stay there for at least the next few days. He would have to call in later and face them, he supposed: there was no-one except his mother and himself to deal with the hospital and the undertakers. The thought made him

long for sleep again and he turned heavily from his back onto his side. Neither of them had spoken to him after the chase. He hadn't dared look his grandmother in the face as the two women had struggled out of the car in the rain. She'd clung to his mother and they'd disappeared into the house without a word or backward look. Oh Christ, he moaned out loud, and turned his face into the sour-smelling pillow.

When he fell asleep again he dreamed he was walking through a deserted dockyard. There were no ships, just a long promontory of concrete extending out into a shadowy bay, empty stretches of dark water on either side. Overhead, giant iron gantries loomed against a flat grey sky. Their great arms were swung inwards, towards each other, instead of out above the water, and in the dream Isaacs wondered what good they would be if ships of any kind ever docked there. His grandfather was walking with him, somewhere just behind, out of sight. The frozen machinery towering above them was something important to do with death, he understood with a feeling of complete clarity as he woke; but the more he came to his senses, watching motes of dust fall through the shaft of sunlight between the bedroom curtains, the more empty of meaning the dream became.

At 10, the telephone rang again. It would be the hospital, he guessed. He pushed the bedclothes aside and padded quickly down the stairs. It was Dyer, wondering if he was going to the White Hart that evening.

It was the usual crowd in the pub: Dyer, Chalky and two of the Rowlands boys. They began hooting and pointing as soon he pushed through the door. He bought himself a pint, ignoring the half-empty glasses they waved at him, then joined them, dragging a chair warily to the table.

Well well – if it isn't Niki fucking Lauda! King of the chequered fucking flag. Dyer's eyes were shining and dark. He was very drunk.

You dozy cunt, the younger Rowlands brother cut in, to general laughter.

Isaacs shook his head, looking from one to the other.

Last night, mun! the older brother insisted. You in that crate of shit.

Another burst of hilarity.

It was you, Isaacs said simply, and nearly lunged across the table at them, but instead took up his glass and lifted it to his mouth, his hand trembling. He could feel his neck and face reddening and it was almost painful to swallow past the sudden obstruction in his throat.

Of course it was fucking us. You were like a clockwork fucking mouse, mun. We were pissing ourselves!

We followed you from the hospital, Chalky said. He seemed more sober than the rest and he leaned forward now to talk directly to Isaacs above the taunting and crowing of the other three. We took Appleyard down to Emergency, all the way from Orgreave. Got his head bust open by the filth.

Christ, said Isaacs. How bad?

Chalky shrugged and the others began to quiet down.

Same again boys? Dyer asked, and stood up from the table. Not you, you tight Jewish cunt, he added, jabbing a stubby finger at Isaacs.

He was okay to start with, like, Chalky went on, ignoring Dyer. We bandaged him up and he stayed on the line all afternoon, fair play. But then he started puking and blacking out, so we brought him home. Hell of a trip, it was.

It's Appleyard, mun, the older Rowlands boy interrupted. The fucking truncheon'll be in a worse state than him.

Chalky grunted. Aye, he said. Anyway – to bring him round we took him to a pub a few miles from the picket and stuck his hands under the cold taps in the bogs. He was conking out every five minutes, see.

Both brothers, listening in eagerly, suddenly burst into fresh laughter.

Trouble was, said Chalky, even though the taps said cold they both ran scalding fucking hot! We didn't realise until he woke up and started howling. We didn't know what the matter was. He couldn't even talk by then, like.

Oh Christ! spluttered the younger Rowlands boy, hardly able to speak through his laughter, we thought he was turning into a fucking werewolf, mun!

Despite himself, Isaacs was laughing with them now. He sat back in his chair and felt the knot in his shoulders begin to loosen.

His hands were like big red fucking balloons by the time we realised, Chalky finished. Christ knows what the doctors'll make of it. But we got him taken in, anyway. That's when we saw you getting into the car, like, and followed you back.

Dyer returned. He set a cluster of pint glasses down and slid one to Isaacs. You been telling him about The Howling? he said to Chalky.

Aye.

The Howling! the younger Rowlands boy repeated, delighted. He slapped his thigh.

It was well past midnight when Isaacs slipped out of the lock-in and began the walk home. He was drunk, more drunk than he'd been for months when the strike had really begun to bite and made the cost of serious drinking almost impossible. It felt nostalgic to be walking the town at night again, alone. It had been a long, hard day and this was the right way to end it, he thought now, whatever grief his mother might give him tomorrow.

He turned onto the High Street. Someone had set fire to the litter bins that were fixed to lampposts along the pavement. They were burning like beacons, three of them at wide intervals, flaring in a broken line all the way down the road to the Cenotaph in the distance. The one

closest to him was nearly spent, smoking thickly, melted plastic dripping onto the slabs. A police siren started up in one of the streets behind him and he realised it was rapidly drawing closer. He ducked into an alleyway and made for the footpath running along the river. Near the fire escape of one of the High Street shops a couple were locked together against the wall. He noticed the girl's white shoes first, suspended weirdly in mid-air. Her skinny bare legs were wrapped around the much taller man's hips. He was hunched and grunting like someone being punched, grinding at her in a blind, desperate frenzy against the brickwork. You fuck off! she gasped, catching sight of Isaacs and covering her face with the back of her hand. She lashed out with a hanging foot, nearly catching him, and the small white shoe flew off and bounced against the opposite wall. Isaacs hurried by and soon he was at the river, heading for the distant lights at the bridge.

Once he was clear of the town he sat for a while on a roadside bench. He thought of Appleyard, sitting with a cracked head in the back of a crowded car, vomiting into his lap, maybe dying for all anyone knew, rattling down half the spine of England. He found the last of his cigarettes and lit it. An ambulance sped past, heading towards town. Then the night was peaceful again.

Years ago, when his great-aunt had died, he'd helped his mother clear out the cramped, end-terrace house, just a few streets away from their own. Gwyn – come and see this, she'd called down from the landing. He'd climbed the narrow staircase to join her and she'd shown him the empty wardrobe and dresser in the old spinster's bedroom, everything pulled open to view. It had seemed vaguely shocking to him; the nakedness of it all. There's nothing here, she'd said wonderingly. Look, Gwyn. She must have known it was coming and cleared everything out in secret, bit by bit. She'd shaken her head. But see, she's left one single thing in every drawer. She showed him a nail

clipper from one big, newspaper-lined carcass, and a man's comb from another. A solitary wire coat hanger dangled in the wardrobe. His mother had laid all the random objects out in a line on top of the dresser: scissors, an empty cologne bottle, an embroidered handkerchief, a thimble. The room smelled of old age and mothballs. He'd never been inside it before, though he'd often visited the house with his mother and played in the scrap of back garden while the women drank tea and talked.

His mother had sighed shakily, always a sign that she was close to tears, and Isaacs had wanted desperately to go back downstairs away from the unnerving atmosphere, but he'd known it would be somehow wrong of him to move. Isn't that strange? she'd said, more to herself than to him. She'd picked up the nail-clippers and set them back carefully in the deep, box-like drawer. What do you think? she'd asked, but he'd known she didn't expect an answer, and of course he couldn't have given one. I think, she'd said, I think it's like she was telling herself: no, it's all right, it's not really empty. This is where this lives.



## TRACEY S ROSENBERG

Tracey S Rosenberg spent her most recent birthday on Easter Island. She's given readings at the West Port Book Festival, Edinburgh Reads, and the Edinburgh International Book Festival, and was a Bright Ideas fellow at the ESRC Genomics Forum. She earned her PhD in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, writing about the late-Victorian Scottish novelist Mona Caird, and subsequently edited Caird's novel *The Wing of Azrael* for Valancourt Press. She is currently a lecturer at Edinburgh Napier University and poet-in-residence for the artificial intelligence consulting company Winterwell Associates. Her debut novel *The Girl in the Bunker*, which retells the final days in Hitler's bunker from the perspective of twelve-year-old Helga Goebbels, was published in 2011 by Cargo Publishing and became a Scottish bestseller in its first week.

*Published in:* New Writing Scotland; The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA); Starry Rhymes: 85 Years of Allen Ginsberg; The Frogmore Papers; Poetry Scotland; Drey; Northwords Now; The Yale Journal of the Humanities in Medicine; The Human Genre Project; Haiku Scotland; Chapman Magazine

*Awards:* Hannah Frank Poetry Competition, 2010 (shortlisted); Canterbury Festival Poet of the Year, 2010 (shortlisted); Frogmore Prize, 2010 (shortlisted); Yeovil Prize 2009 (highly commended by Carol Ann Duffy)

# Chill

I pray against his body in half-crisp  
dawns, claim him within stone walls of an old  
monastery impervious to brisk  
French winds. I bow to kiss him through my cold,  
ever-damp hair, nuzzle him in barren rooms  
once paced by infidels who scorned at priests.  
We wear two sweaters each as we shiver through  
an endless winter of ten below, at least.

I've tried, for centuries it seems, to heat  
this single cell where penitents once blazed.  
Him, and my vows, I've kept in my retreat.

Disrobed, with all my heresies erased,  
I step outside. Stars gleam like frozen lace.  
He is not here. The wind blows warm and sweet.

# Unsent

I'm kneeling  
the tiles are blurred  
I am writing so you understand  
this isn't because of you  
I don't want to be the sort of girl  
pathetic, as if I couldn't live  
quite happily  
I'm not worth  
too brittle and petty  
uncaringly volatile  
don't blame  
I sicken even myself  
I'm writing along the side of the tub  
by touch  
warm and reassuring  
even you  
can't soften me  
trying to be that woman you love  
even in disgust  
if you knelt  
your hands still clean  
murmuring  
your splendid voice  
it will ease  
you almost make me believe it will  
be well

# Ward B

She's just entering Ward B – *please, not him*,  
 but he's pulling crisps from the vending machine,  
 his hair slicked back as if he's come from a swim.  
 She gives him a little shrug. *Yes, it's me.*

He moves away from the vending machine,  
 as if offering the bag of crisps to her.  
 She smiles, gives a little shrug. *Yes, it's me.*  
 She wants to pretend she's a visitor.

As if offering the bag of crisps to her  
 he starts to put out his hands, then stops.  
 She can't pretend she's a visitor  
 so she sidles past, letting her smile drop.

He starts to put out his hands. She stops,  
 gives her name at the desk, takes a seat.  
 When she sidles past, letting her smile drop,  
 he nods to himself. She waits for him to leave.

He walks to the desk, not taking a seat,  
 talks briefly to the nurse, who seems to know him.  
 He nods to himself, but he doesn't leave.  
 He enters Ward B. *Oh God, please, not him.*

# Lovesong

What I crave most is your pine-tar scent,  
 sturdy as a freshly polished mast, and the way  
 you sway and snap like canvas in high winds.  
 I found my sea legs fast  
 but every time you pointed to a crow's nest  
 I hugged the ropes as I climbed, and they scorched me.  
 At times, in a battering of wind, I clung,  
 fingers and ankles and mesh entwined  
 head and sky tumbling like a mad compass.

I still can't tell what I see here.  
 I grieved so deeply, a wave carried me off –  
 I was either washed ashore, or lost at sea.  
 You never missed me.

In the near-constant pummel of the rain  
 I tread your perimeters again, weave through your decks laid with  
 folding chairs  
 I could sit on, like any paying guest.  
 In my soles I feel how easily I slip along the mud,  
 soothing where you splintered me.  
 I remain upright.

Ships sail on. There is no port I can offer  
 that will make you snap the telescope shut,  
 turn to your newest mate, and say,  
 this direction is the only way.

# Genderclusterfuck

An orifice doesn't have sex.

It's just a hole, after all. Its scent can be powdered old lady lavender or an ascerbic mint so manly it makes your balls drop even if you don't have any.

Hair is liquid desire – flowing through your hands, or shaved nubbles down to the wood

with flecks round the edges.

You have two strong legs; who minds what's between them?

(But show it proud if you like – don't let me tell you how to feel.)

Career, hobbies, who prefers to be dominant or invaded,

whether you show annoyance by a solid right hook

or a rolling of the eyes, all your choice.

Nothing is worthy of disgust.

But I must say, in my experience,

lipstick is always a plus.

# Miracles

The saints, I've read, perform them every day.  
Some soar on angel wings, while others blaze  
translucent in worship. Frequently, they  
hear petitions of devout humility  
and bountifully shower rewards for prayer:  
a cold lover returns, infants shriek in glee.  
They coax even celestial bodies –  
at their request, the sun cavorts in ecstasy.

You cannot move the stars, love, but your touch  
revives the dead. You have angelic faith,  
and blessed tolerance of a savage grouch  
who earns neither salvation nor your grace.  
Within my book of saints, merciful boy,  
you are inscribed; *the miracle of joy*.





# Sgrìobhadairean Gàidhlig

[Gaelic writers]

## MAUREEN NICLEÒID

À Nis ann an Eilean Leòdhais, tha Maureen NicLeòid an-diugh a' fuireach ann an Glaschu agus ag obair don BhBC an sin. Nuair a chuir i seachad bliadhna a' siubhal ann an 2007/08, sgrìobh i leabhar mun turas. Bhon uair sin, tha i cuideachd air siubhal air feadh Chanada airson dà mhìos, a' sireadh cuid de na liuthad chàirdean a th' aice ann, a' faighinn blasad air an t-seòrsa saoghail a th' aca agus a' faicinn a bheil iad fhathast a' faireachdainn ceangal sam bith le Alba. A rèir am fàilte a chaidh a chur oirre 's iad a tha! Tha i an-dràst' ag obair air leabhar mun turas sin cuideachd.

From Ness on the Isle of Lewis, Maureen Macleod now lives in Glasgow where she works for the BBC. After spending a year travelling in 2007/08 she decided to write a book about the trip. She recently travelled across Canada, trying to meet up with as many relatives as possible to find out about their lives and to see whether they felt any connection to Scotland. Judging by their hospitality, they most certainly do! She is currently working on a book about that trip.

*Published in: Nic Dhòmhnail, J. (ed.) – 'Dh'fhalbh sin, 's thàinig seo', pp35–42, Saorsa, Inverness: Clàr 2011 [This is a short story published in the Ùr-Sgeul title, Saorsa]*

# Turas-Rèile: Moscow gu Yekaterinburg

*During the summer of 2007, I embarked on a grown-up gap year, starting in Moscow and finishing in New York. I took the Trans-Mongolian train to Beijing, stopping in various places along the way, learning lots as I went. In Russia, I learnt the futility of smiling at strangers. In Mongolia, I found staying in the countryside to be one of the most peaceful experiences imaginable, and in China I was told that I have too much fat around my organs. This section is about a visit to Yekaterinburg in Russia. I had never heard of the city until I started researching my trip, but won't be forgetting it in a hurry after my first foray to a Russian nightclub, witnessing the local obsession with wearing sunglasses at night, and having my picture taken with one foot in Europe and the other in Asia.*

# C

han urrainn dhut a dhol fada sam bith air an tràna seo gun mothachadh dha na *providnizas*. 'S iadsan an fheadhainn a bhios a' coimhead às ar dèidh air na trànaichean. Tha iad mar air-hostesses, ach càirdeil, còir, bàidheil? 'S iad nach eil! Tha e an urra riuthasan rudan a chumail ann an òrdugh, agus ma tha thu airson do bheatha a bhith buan b' fheàrr dhut a h-uile càil a chumail air dòigh mus tig iad às do dhèidh! Nuair a ràinig mi Moscow an toiseach,

rinn mi mearachd ann a bhith a' feuchainn ri fiamh-ghàire a dhèanamh ri daoine. Bidh Ruiseanaich a' coimhead ort mar gu bheil rudeigin ceàrr ort ma nì thu gàire riutha. Chan eil mi a-nise a' bodraigeadh feuchainn ri gàire a dhèanamh ris na *providnitzas* oir bhiodh eagal orm gum feuchadh iad ri mo sgiùrsadh far na trèana!

B' e aon de na rudan a bha mi fhìn a' coimhead air adhart ris gu mòr, 's e a bhith a' stad aig na stèiseanan beaga air an t-slighe – uaireannan airson mionaid, uaireannan dà mhionaid, uaireannan suas gu leth-uair a thìde. Tha na stèiseanan seo làn bhoireannaich a' creic rudan. Na seanmhairean, neo na *babushkas* mar a chanar riutha, agus iad a' creic a h-uile càil air an smaoinich thu bho lusan, deoch-làidir, biadh, glainneachan, flùraichean, fiù 's beathaichean stuffed! Mar bhuidheann, tha sinn a' dol a-mach turas ma seach aig na stèiseanan, an-còmhnaidh a' dèanamh cinnteach gu bheil dithis a' coimhead às dèidh ar bagannan. Fhad 's a tha sinn taobh a-muigh na trèana, feumaidh co-dhiù aon shùil a bhith againn air na *providnitzas* fad na h-ùine. Chan eil e idir soilleir dè cho fada 's a bhios sinn nar stad, agus aig gach stèisean bidh iad nan seasamh aig dorsan na trèana is ag èigheach nuair a tha an t-àm ann tilleadh air bòrd. 'S e an triop agamsa a th' ann a dhol a-mach, agus tha mi a' gabhail an cothrom am fìor bheagan Ruiseanais a th' agam a chleachdadh:

*Privyet* – Hallo

*Strolka?* – Dè a' phrìs a tha seo?

*Spasiba* – Mòran taing

Agus le sin, tha mi a' coiseachd air falbh le botal bùrn. Bhiodh e furasta gu leòr a bhith air a cheannach gun facal Ruiseanais a chleachdadh, ach tha mi a' smaoinichadh gu robh blas na b' fheàrr bhon bhùrn às dèidh na h-oidhirp ud a dhèanamh!

Sia uairean fichead an dèidh Moscow fhàgail, tha sinn a' ruighinn Yekaterinburg agus feumaidh mi aideachadh nach robh mi riamh air cluinntinn mun bhaile mus do thòisich mi a' rannsachadh turas-rèile

an Trans-Mongolian. 'S e prìomh-bhaile sgìre nan Urals a th' ann an Yekaterinburg, agus chaidh a stèidheachadh an toiseach ann an 1723. Aig àm an Dàrna Cogaidh, chaidh tòrr fhactaraidhean a ghluasad dhan sgìr' bho Taobh Siar na Ruis air sgàth 's gu robh an luchd-riaghlaidh den bheachd nach biodh iad ann an uimhir de chunnart ann an àite cho iomallach. A chionn 's gu robh grunn fhactaraidhean a' dèanamh stuth dhan arm agus goireasan-dìon dhan dùthaich, bha e air a thoirmeasg do luchd-turais, neo do neach sam bith à dùthchannan cèin, tadhal ann fad iomadach bliadhna. B' ann an 1991 a chaidh an casg a thogail. Nam shùilean-sa, tha Yekaterinburg a' coimhead tòrr nas Ruiseanach na bha Moscow, agus a' faireachdainn na bu mhiosa dheth. Far nach robh ach BMWs agus Mercedes air na sràidean an teis-meadhan Mhoscaw, a' comharrachadh beairteas ùr na Ruis, an seo, sa chumantas, 's e seann Lada-an a tha ri fhaicinn – seann Lada-an air a bheil coltas nach fhaigheadh iad gu sìorraidh tro MOT.

Tha an taigh-òsta againn sìmplidh ach chan e ostail a th' ann agus, nas cudromaiche, chan eil gluasad sam bith ann fhad 's a tha mi nam chadal! Tha rud inntinneach mu dheidhinn cuid de thaighean-òsta na Ruis – anns a h-uile trannta, tha boireannaich a' cumail sùil air na tha dol. Tha e dìreach mar gu bheil na *providnitsas* air tighinn còmhla rinn far na trèana, agus tha e duilich dèanamh a-mach a bheil iad ann airson sùil a chumail oirnn neo airson ar cuideachadh. Tha an fheadhainn seo, ge-tà, a' tairgse seirbheis nach fhaigh thu bho na *providnitsas* – airson 320 rouble, tha aon dhiubh a' dol a dhèanamh nigheadaireachd dhomh.

'S ann air Oidhche Haoine a tha sinn a' ruighinn, agus dè b' fheàrr airson blas fhaighinn air cò ris a tha baile coltach na dhol a-mach ann air Oidhche Haoine? Tha e a' cur iongnadh mòr orm cluinntinn gur e bàr Albannach, Gordon's, aon de na prìomh 'hotspots' a th' ann an Yekaterinburg. Tha sinn a' feuchainn ann, ach gu mì-fhortanach, thèid ar tionndadh air falbh seach gu bheil cuid den fheadhainn

sa bhuidheann a' coimhead nas òige na còig bliadhna thar fhichead. Mar sin, chan eil càil a dh'fhios agam dè an coltas a th' air fir Ruiseanach le fèilidhean orra, oir, a rèir choltais, sin an t-aodach-obrach a bhios orra ann an Gordon's!

Tha mi a' faighinn seachad air an tàmuilt sin, ge-tà, nuair a thèid sinn dhan chlub-oidhche, Parking. Tha an t-ainm sin air seach gun urrainn dha daoine na càraichean aca a' pharcadh a-staigh am broinn a' chlub fhèin, is an uair sin faodaidh tu dannsa mun cuairt air na càraichean. Tha mi a' creidsinn mura bheil àite-suidhe ri fhaighinn, gum faod thu dìreach suidhe anns a' chàr! Chan e sin an aon rud àraid mu dheidhinn a' chlub seo. Thèid sinn a dhèanamh beagan dannsa agus chan urrainn dhuinn gun a bhith a' faireachdainn gu math diofraichte bho na dannsairean eile oir tha glainneachan-grèine air tòrr de mhuinntir Yekaterinburg. Airson iomadach bliadhna bha buaidh a' Mhafia gu math làidir an seo, agus bha amannan fuilteach anns a' bhaile gus an d' fhuair na h-ùghdarrasan smachd air an t-suidheachadh. Tha na làithean sin seachad, ach cha shaoileadh tu sin leis an àireamh de dhaoine a tha a' dol mun cuairt le glainneachan-grèine, agus a-nochd ann am Parking tha mi mar gum bithinn air mo chuariteachadh le gangsters.

Às dèidh blas fhaighinn air na bhios a' dol sa bhaile air Oidhche Haoine, an ath mhadainn tha sinn a' dol sgrìob a dh'fhaicinn Yekaterinburg ri solas an latha. Ged a tha còrr air 1.2 millean neach a' fuireach ann, tha am baile gu math sàmhach airson madainn Disathairne – 's dòcha gu bheil daoine a' gabhail air an socair fhathast ma bha iad ann an clubaichean leithid Parking a-raoir! 'S e Marina ainm an neach-iùil a tha gar toirt timcheall a' bhaile, agus chan eil i idir ga fhaighinn furasta mo thuigsinn. Tha i ag ràdh gu bheil mi a' bruidhinn fada ro luath! Chan eil mise den bheachd gu bheil 'S iongantach mur e am blas math Niseach a th' air mo chainnt is coireach. Tha mi a' dèanamh oidhirp gabhail air mo shocair ged

nach eil e idir a' faireachdainn nàdarrach. Nam biodh a h-uile duine a' bruidhinn cho slaodach 's a tha mise an-dràsta, cha bhiodh tòrr a' tachairt!

Ann an Yekaterinburg ann an 1918, chaidh Teaghlach Rìoghail na Ruis, an teaghlach Romanov – sin an dàrna Tsar Nicholas, a bhean agus a' chlann aca – a mhurt leis na *Bolsheviks*. Tha Marina a' cur air dòigh minibus gus ar toirt gu àite air a bheil Ganina Yama, sia cilemeatair deug mu thuath air a' bhaile. B' ann an sin a chaidh cuirp an teaghlach Romanov fhàgail, agus tha e air fhaicinn mar àite cois-rigte leis an Eaglais Orthodox.

Chaidh Monastery of the Holy Martyrs a thogail a dh'aona ghnothaich mar chuimhneachan air an Teaghlach Rìoghail. 'S ann am meadhan coille a tha e agus tha e air leth sìtheil. Mun cuairt, tha tòrr obair-togail a' dol – tha an Eaglais Orthodox a' togail grunn eaglaisean an seo, gach tè na cuimhneachain air aon den teaghlach Romanov a chaill am beatha. Tha iad brèagha a-staigh nam broinn, agus làn de Ruiseanaich agus luchd-turais eadar-nàiseanta. Feumaidh na boireannaich uile beannagan agus sgiortaichean a chuir oirnn mas fhaigh sinn a-steach annta. Tha na h-eaglaisean fhèin air an dèanamh à fiodh agus thathas a' cleachdadh seann sgilean airson an togail, a' ciallachadh, mar eisimpleir, nach eil tarragan air an cleachdadh. Tha i àlainn an seo, ach tha faireachdainn iargalta san àite. Gach taobh a sheallas tu, tha croisean Orthodox ri fhaicinn agus tha sin air a mheasgachadh le dealbhan de na Romanovs, dealbhan de dhaoine a tha air tadhal an seo, agus dealbhan de thaistealaichean a bhios a' tachairt gach bliadhna bho meadhan Yekaterinburg gu ruige Ganina Yama airson urram a shealltainn don teaghlach.

Às dèidh sin, tha sinn a' dol a shealltainn air an àite far a bheil mòr-thìrean na Roinn Eòrpa agus Àisia a' tighinn còmhla. Tha sinn a' stad ann airson dà mhionaid agus chan eil sinn fiù 's a' faighinn a-mach às a' mhinibus. Tha sinn an uair sin air ar toirt chun na crìch eile

a tha a' comharrachadh oir nam mòr-thìrean! B' e a' chiad fhear dhan deach sinn a' chrìoch oifigeil, ach bho chionn beagan bhliadhnaichean cho-dhùin na h-ùghdarrasan a' chrìoch a ghluasad gus am biodh e na b' fhaisge air Yekaterinburg agus na b' fhasa do luchd-turais faighinn ann. Bha an t-seann chrìoch dà fhichead cilemeatair air falbh bhon a' bhaile, ach chan eil am fear ùr ach seachd cilemeatair deug air falbh. Chan eil mi buileach cinnteach a bheil mi a' dol leis an seo, a' gluasad crìochan mar a thogras iad fhèin – chan fhaigheadh iad às leis an Leòdhas!

Uill, ma bha an t-seann chrìoch a' coimhead mar talamh bàn gun diù aig duine dha, chan ann mar sin a tha a' chrìoch ùr. Tha mu dà cheud neach an seo, a' mhòr-chuid dhiubh mar phàirt de bhuidheann bainnse, oir air an latha mòr aca 's toigh le càraidean tighinn an seo a thogail an dealbhan. Tha a' chrìoch seo ri taobh rathad mòr agus tha tòrr de na làraidhean agus na càraichean a' sèideadh an conacagan riutha 's iad a' dol seachad. Tha gach neach anns a' bhuidheann againne a' gabhail turas mu seach a' seasamh ann an àite sònraichte far a bheil an loidhne a tha a' comharrachadh na crìche eadar dà mhòr-thìr. Le aon chas san Roinn Eòrpa agus a' chas eile ann an Àisia, tha sinn uile ag iarraidh dealbh den t-suidheachadh àraid seo! Tha sinn mothachail nach fhaod sinn cus ùine a thoirt a' seasamh an sin a' smaoinichadh air an annas seo, ge-tà, oir tha sinn air ar cuairteachadh le muinntir na bainnse a tha uile ag iarraidh seasamh nar làraich airson dealbhan a ghlacadh le camara.

Tha na h-ùghdarrasan air sùim airgid nach beag a chosg airson an àite seo a dhèanamh tarraingeach do luchd-turais agus càraidean a tha air ùr-phòsadh. Chan eil buaidh an airgid seo uabhasach follaiseach fhathast ach anns na bliadhnaichean ri thighinn tha taighean-tasgaidh, àiteachan-bìdh Eòrpach agus Àisianach, bùithtean agus carraighean-cuimhne gu bhith air gach taobh den chrìoch. Air an t-slighe air ais gu Yekaterinburg, tha Marina ag innse dhuinn gur

e a' chrìoch oifigeil eadar an dà mhòr-thìr a tha san dàrna àite cuideachd oir bha an loidhne air a leantainn bhon chiad chrìoch. Tha luchd-saidheans air seo a dhearbhadh, tha i ag ràdh. Oh uill, tha sin ceart gu leòr, ma-tha – chan eil mi tuilleadh a' faireachdainn gun deach ar mealladh!

Ann na beagan uairean a thìde a tha air fhàgail againn an seo, tha Marina a' moladh dhuinn cuairt a ghabhail timcheall air meadhan a' bhaile. Chan e baile brèagha a th' ann an Yekaterinburg – tha e làn de sheann togalaichean agus factaraidhean. 'S ann aig stèisean trèanaichean fo thalamh a tha sinn a' tòiseachadh ach chan eil samhla aige ri aon de stèiseanan mìorbhaileach Moscow. Gu fortanach, tha na h-àiteachan eile far a bheil Marina gar toirt nas inntinniche! Tha sinn a' dol cuairt gu margaid ionadail far a bheil cuimhneachain gu leòr rin ceannach, mar doilichean Ruiseanach, lèintean-t agus truinnsearan le ainm a' bhaile. Tha i a' sealltainn dhuinn aon de phrìomh shràidean Yekaterinburg, Sràid Lenin, ach dh'fhaodadh nach bi an t-ainm sin air a dh'aithghearr. B' ann an Yekaterinburg a rugadh agus a thogadh Boris Yeltsin, Ceann-suidhe connspaideach na Ruis bho 1991 gu 1999, agus air sgàth 's gun do bhàsaich e ann an 2007, thathas a' beachdachadh air ainm na sràid atharrachadh gu Sràid Yeltsin.

Tha mi a' creidsinn gur ann a chionn 's gu robh sinn a-muigh an oidhche a-raoir agus air a bhith trang an-diugh an t-adhbhar a tha sinn uile a' fàs rud beag sgèith agus dranndanach. Tha an t-uisge a' tòiseachadh, agus tha Marina gar stiùireadh gu bàr air a bheil CCCP far a bheil partaidh mòr a' comharrachadh ceann-bliadhna an àite gu bhith an oidhche sin fhèin. Chan eil iad fosgailte. Chan eil fhios agam dè tha Marina ag ràdh ris an luchd-obrach, ach tha iad gar leigeil a-steach agus gheibh sinn deoch-làidir – fiù 's champagne – agus blasadan-bìdh an-asgaidh! Abair gu bheil sin a' cur spionnadh annainn!

Nuair a bha sinn air Marina a choinneachadh an toiseach is sinn air an t-slighe gu biadh, bha càr dubh a' nochdadh an-dràsta 's a-rithist,

agus dh'innis Marina dhuinn gur e an leannan ùr aice a bh' ann. Chan eil fhios agam an ann a' cumail sùil oirne neo oirrese a bha e. A-rèir choltais, chleachd Marina a bhith ag obair mar dhannsair ann am Parking ach chuir esan stad air an sin. An-diugh, tha e a' nochdadh a-rithist bho àm gu àm. 'S dòcha gu bheil Yekaterinburg nas coltaiche ri Steòrnabhagh na bha mi a' smaoinichadh, le fireannaich òga a' dèanamh cuairtean air a' bhaile nan càraichean fad' na h-ùine.

Tha an sgìre seo gu lèir eadar dà mhòr-thìr, ach ged a tha Yekaterinburg gu h-oifigeil ann an Àisia tha e gu math follaiseach gur ann chun na Roinn Eòrpa a tha na ginealaichean ùra a' coimhead. Tha Marina na h-eisimpleir den seo agus i làn cheistean mu dheidhinn na dùthchannan às an tàinig sinne. 'S e an rud as motha a th' air a h-aire, ge-tà, gu bheil i a' dol a Lunnainn san t-Samhain, agus tha i airson faighinn a-mach dè an seòrsa aodaich a bhios air muinntir an àite. Dhan òigridh an seo, tha Lunnainn a' faireachdainn mar saoghal eile. Tha agus Moscow, a tha sia uairean fichead air falbh air trèana. Tha Marina ag innse dhuinn gu bheil daoine an seo a' faireachdainn air an iomall agus gu bheil e duilich faighinn air falbh à Yekaterinburg. Tha mi a' faireachdainn ciontach leis cho furasta 's a tha e dhòmhsa 's a' chòrr dhen bhuidheann dìreach leum air trèana agus teicheadh. Tha an t-àite dha-rìribh a' faireachdainn fad' air falbh is mar baile a tha glaiste air falbh bhon t-saoghal. Cha bhi mi ann an cabhaig tilleadh agus tha mi a' coimhead air adhart ri leantainn orm le slighe an Trans-Mongolian.

Dh'aontaich a h-uile duine againn gu robh sinn air fada cus biadh a cheannach mus deach sinn air an trèana ann am Moscow, ach chan eil sin a' cur stad oirnn bho bhith a' dèanamh an aon rud a-rithist ann an Yekaterinburg. An turas seo, tha sinn gu bhith air an trèana airson dà latha, agus gu dearbha cha bhi an t-acras oirnn!



## SANDY NICDHÒMHNAILL JONES

Thòisich Sandy a' sgrìobhadh bàrdachd Ghàidhlig an dèidh dhi tòiseachadh air a' chànain ionnsachadh, is cheumnaich i bho Sabhal Mòr Ostaig ann an 2010. Leis gu bheil i a-nis aig ìre fileanta, tha i a' leasachadh a stoidhle fhèin agus a' sireadh a guth sa Ghàidhlig. 'S e seinneadair a th' innte cuideachd, agus bidh i tric a' gabhail pàirt ann am farpaisean a' Mhòid Nàiseanta Rìoghail.

Le ùidh ann am bàrdachd fad a beatha, tha Sandy air deannan dhàin a sgrìobhadh sa Bheurla, agus air bàrdachd eadar-theangachadh o chànain eile. Tha i air a beò-ghlacadh leis an dùbhlain an lùib a bhith a' cleachdadh structairean thraidiseanta, gu sònraichte ann an òrain.

Tha Sandy an-dràsta ag obrachadh air cruinneachadh bàrdachd fo stiùir Aonghais Dhuibh MhicNeacail.

Sandy began writing Gaelic poetry while learning the language, and graduated from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in 2010. Having acquired fluency and increasing stylistic identity in Gaelic, she is now developing her own 'voice'. She is also a Gaelic singer and regularly competes at the Royal National Mod.

With a lifelong interest in poetry, Sandy has previously written many poems in English and translated verse from other languages. She is fascinated with the challenges of using different metric and rhyme structures, especially in the form of traditional song.

Sandy is currently working on a collection of poetry under the mentorship of Aonghas 'Dubh' MacNeacail.

*Awards: The Royal National Mod Òran Ùr (New Gaelic Song), 2004 and 2009 (winner), 2007, 2008 and 2010 (2nd); Bàrdachd (New Gaelic Poetry), 2009 (2nd), 2010 and 2011 (3rd)*

# Crodh Goilf Aisgernis

*The machair (coastal sand-dunes) at Askernish in South Uist is exceptionally beautiful undulating terrain, on which the celebrated golf-course designer 'Old' Tom Morris created a nine-hole course in 1891. It is, however, also communal grazing land for the crofting community, and their cattle and the golfers have co-existed amicably for many years. Recently, the golf course was redeveloped and expanded into an 18-hole course under the auspices of the community buy-out of the Uist and Eriskay lands. This led to some tensions over encroachment into communal grazing. This tongue-in-cheek piece of poetry is a whimsical flight of fancy about the cattle acquiring golfing prowess and caddying skills, in order to ingratiate themselves with the wealthy golfing tourists – but the cattle have the last laugh for their native wit, even temper and knowledge of the terrain.*

Machair àlainn Aisgernis

a mhothaich Seann Tom Morris ann an 1891  
le innleachd tuill is buill a' tighinn a-steach air,  
is sùil gheur air cumadh-tìre: dìreach ion raon goilf.

Cruinn-leum air adhart thar linn:

le faram is moit thèid  
seann raon goilf chadalach Aisgernis a leudachadh.

Ach ged a gheibh an crodh a rugadh ann  
cead fuireach air raon goilf (ma tha iad modhail)  
agus fiù 's cumail feur na machrach ithe

fhuair na croitearan rabhadh cruaidh gun an crodh  
buairesas a chur air na goilfearan air thuras  
is iadsan a' phàigheadh an deagh sgillinn  
gus na tuill àlainn eachdraidheil a chluich.

Crodh bochd Uibhisteach, an cridhe nan slugan,  
a' tionnsgain gu clis cleasan ùra snog glic  
mar mhearaiche a' toirt tlachd don luchd-turais:

dh'ionnsaich an crodh caman is ball a làimhseachadh  
gu h-ealanta aotrom; cluichidh iad fhèin  
gu tric toll-aon-bhuille, lorgaidh iad fiù 's  
buill chailte sa 'rough', gan tional is tilleadh  
gu beulach-beusach do na coigrich beartach liobasta.

Am biodh Seann Tom toilichte, mòr às an fheabhas seo  
neo an tuiteadh uamhann air? An dùsgadh e san uaigh?

Bidh crodh Aisgernis a' cnuasachadh air a' cheist,  
is a' cnàmhadh na cìr, gu cian nan cian,  
na filidhean fialaidh feur-itheach fionnairidh.

# Na Fir Chlis

*I conceived this poem while browsing in Gaelic folklore about the Northern Lights. In Fr Allan Macdonald's Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay, I found a description of the Northern Lights – the 'nimble ones' or 'suddenly-darting ones' – as the angels who had been cast from heaven and were falling thence, when God stayed his own hand, leaving them forever suspended in the sky, fighting one another, spilling blood that appears the next day as red lichen on the stones, a presage of bad weather or worse evil to come, with their cries sometimes heard echoing on earth by those attuned to such things.*

Bha mise sa Chnoc-Sìth' o chunnaic mi thu 'n-dè  
 'S tha aithris neo-àbhaist' ri cuir ann an sgeul  
 Mu na h-ainglean mallaichte, mur b' è gràs Dhè;  
 Na Fir Chlis, na loisgich, a theab tuiteam on speur.

Chaidh teine san àil' a' lasadh gu geur  
 Le dealanach, sradagan, losgadh is leus.  
 Dhòirt na Fir Chlis fuil theth às gach fèith,  
 'S nochd am manadh air olc: crotal-ruadh air na slèibh.

Chithear mar mhallachd aig èirigh na grèin'  
 Fuil nan sàr-mhillidh, is fianais an creuchd:  
 Ach bheir blàr nan clis-threun ùr-fhadadh is dèin'  
 Do bhàrdachd nam filidh air sgrìobhadh fo 'n seun.

Ach is mairg do dhream le dà-shealladh mar gheas  
 Oir cluinnear gu sìorraidh mac-talla is èigh  
 Nam Fir Chlis, leth-uilc, a' milleadh 's an cleas  
 'S cha tig a chaoidh iochd orr', le cuireadh bhon eug.



Young writers

## TABITHA KANE

Tabitha Kane was born in Dundee in July of 1996, sometime around lunchtime, which probably explains a lot. She likes writing about many things, including but not limited to dystopian futures, steampunk odysseys and odd historical dramas. When she isn't writing, she spends most of her time doing ordinary geeky teenager things like watching box-sets of old TV series, doodling and reading about whatever takes her fancy. A pair of headphones forms the umbilical cord by which she is attached to her iPod, on which she listens to good bands like The Cure and The Clash and also sometimes, secretly, to Katy Perry and the soundtrack of *Grease*. She's currently studying a variety of subjects at school, but hopes to become a lawyer or a programmer so no matter which way this writing lark goes she'll still be able to eat expensive biscuits.

## Extract from novel

## Chapter 1

“**Y**ou really don’t have to do this!”

Brooster had to shout for his voice to carry against the noise of the storm. The wind was high, not just whistling but roaring, and the Thames was battering the walls of its concrete prison, crack after resounding crack. The rain was coming down now with nothing less than pure vengeance. Brooster had to spit an acrid mouthful of it out.

The projectile water splashed one of the men carrying him. The man growled and hit him, hard. Brooster felt something distressing happen in his jaw, but put it out of his mind. He had more pressing worries than minor fractures.

His coat would drag him down. The thought was crystal clear and relentless. The grubby old coat would drag him down. First thing he ought to do, take it off.

As though that would make any difference.

“You could just let me go!” He tried again, trying to suppress quivers of panic. The reality of his situation was sinking in. He could hear the river now, louder, his own heartbeat. They were close. It was really going to happen.

“Come on guys! I didn’t take that much! Not enough to kill a guy over, surely?”

“We’re not going to kill you,” the leading man called out, with a voice that had taken sincerity out back and kicked its head in.

“Really?”

“No. But the river might.” He chuckled.

Brooster made himself laugh along.

“Ha, yeah, funny. Very funny, that joke. Very clever.”

“Kid?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

Brooster did as he was told. He always did what he was told when knives were in the vicinity of his neck. That tendency was partly how he had got into this mess in the first place.

The group halted. The leader shouted something Brooster didn’t catch, and a second later he hit the ground. Everywhere he looked now, there was water. Water in the sky, in his eyes. Water pooling on concrete next to the dark water of the river. It was like being blind.

A pair of hands gripped Brooster’s shoulders. They hoisted him to his feet. He was pressed towards the edge, teetering over the drop, as below the seething river cried for blood. Brooster grasped at his last chance.

“Can’t we just put this behind us – I mean, I’d do anything! Give me a chance, I can pay you back! Please?”

But he knew it was hopeless. The men surrounding Brooster belonged to Knuckles Neil. Neil had a fortune in every pocket and a slim moustache of white powder glued to his upper lip. You couldn’t get caught stealing from a man like Neil and expect an indulgence like mercy.

The hands gave Brooster a firm shove. He stumbled forwards and the ground disappeared under his feet.

The river howled in victory and surged up to greet him.

He couldn't die. Surely he couldn't die.

Breaching the surface was like hitting concrete. The blow was crippling, forcing all the air out of his lungs.

It wasn't going to happen.

He fought with all his strength, but with horror he realised that it wasn't going to be enough. The water clung to him, and the damn coat was in league with it. They choked him and broke him. They pulled him down.

He couldn't die.

But he couldn't breathe. There was no air.

He could see the rain-battered surface, tried to reach out and touch it, but couldn't. The current beat his thin arm away like a twig, and it seemed that the harder he fought the less headway he made, until he was sure he was dragging himself downwards not up.

He couldn't die.

But he was so tired.

Maybe, finally, it was time to stop running.

He closed his eyes, the last of his breath escaping in a sigh.

He just wanted to sleep. More than anything else.

Brooster hadn't had a decent sleep in a very long time.

## Chapter 2

It was night in central New London, an hour after curfew. The last drops of the day's rain had long since fallen, forming puddles all across the steel and concrete landscape, capturing the silvery light of the moon and casting an eerie glow over the empty city.

Everything was still but the shadows, which flickered as clouds drifted across the sky above. Occasionally a gust of cold wind, the creak

of metal or the soft splash of a stray drip of water would disrupt the silence and the still, and the world would hold its breath... and let it go. Slowly, so as not to disrupt the night guard.

The river sliced through the city of New London like an open wound. Slowly, it was calming. The waves were gentle now, giving only idle threats of escape. Occasionally a few would come together and rush the wall, throwing over a splash of water, or a piece of debris.

Brooster had woken up bruised and broken on the concrete, casually thrown up by the Thames. Shivering racked his body, and it hurt to swallow, blink or breathe. Outwardly he was soaking and inwardly he was cursing.

It was just his luck they were smart. Just his luck they found him, just his luck they were next to the river at the time. He had always distrusted his luck, and now it was trying to kill him.

But he was alive. Years of hunger pains and bruises made it all too easy to ignore a little fracture and a bit of cold. He was alive. That meant he had survived, and could keep on surviving, if he only played his remaining cards right.

Survival was Brooster's main talent and only hobby. When you got down to it, was simple. All you needed for survival, even in the very worst of situations, was a plan.

"It's just another gang," Brooster muttered to himself as he climbed the ancient ladder up from the abandoned jetty where he had been deposited. "Another big, powerful gang that wants you dead. Relate it to something you're familiar with. The government," he repeated, trying to make the words real, "is just another gang."

The words sounded cold and hollow. Brooster had never been a talented liar.

He peeked warily over the edge, half expecting to feel a bullet drive into his skull and topple him backwards into oblivion. He was so tense that every whisper of the wind felt like a death sentence.

In fact, the street was empty and still.

Not daring to miss a chance, Brooster pulled himself up and over, tired muscles complaining loudly at the abuse. For an excruciating moment he crouched there in the open, bathed in moonlight. Then, like a moth to flame, he darted into the nearest shard of darkness. With the moon so high in the sky, the massive buildings cast narrow shadows. Barely enough to hide a person, but enough all the same.

Footsteps broke the silence.

They grew closer, and Brooster made fast friends with the ground. Like a moving skyscraper, a faceless tower of grey leather and black armour, the guard came around the corner. It paused, so close that he could have reached out and touched its boots. He didn't. He hardly even breathed. The guard gave the empty street a long, sweeping look.

It was then that Brooster noticed the glittering trail of water that marked the ground. Nausea rose up in him, the sickly taste of distilled panic. The guard's helmeted head swivelled around in another searching gaze. Brooster nearly choked. It would notice, he was sure, and indeed for a moment it seemed to bristle. Slowly, it reached for its gun, and Brooster was certain the game was up. Then it relaxed. The apparition moved on, footsteps turning all too slowly from earthquakes to echoes.

It felt like a long time before Brooster could breathe again. His heart was racing, and he wanted nothing more than to start running and never, ever stop. The outer districts might have their problems, but at least you could always run. There was always a crowd to get lost in or somewhere to hide.

Here, grey buildings and grey streets stretched on in front of him, all the way to the horizon. It was going to be a long night, if he was lucky. And, his inner pessimist reminded him, a very short one if he wasn't.

Brooster dragged himself to his feet. With a tense kind of resignation he peered around the corner. Then he crossed quickly to the next building, the next shadow.

This one was even thinner, and he had to press himself closer to the building in return. The cold burnt the bare skin of his cheek. Moving along, he brushed the tattered government posters clinging to the wall;

HARD WORK IS EVERY CITIZEN'S OBLIGATION

And,

PRAYER IS DISSENT.

Cautiously, he stepped out into the moonlight. For a moment, everything seemed calm. Then, a panicked shout. A symphony of gunshots rattling off the walls. An explosion, scorching down the street.

The blast threw him into the air. He hit the ground with a sick smack and rolled. Instantly his head began to pound. Sound disappeared, and flashing lights flailed wildly in front of his eyes. He could taste blood and dust and the burning heat.

All he knew for certain was that he was in the open, and he couldn't move. Even flinching brought hot tears to his eyes. For the second time that night, Brooster was convinced he was going to die.

"Tratting shit," he swore quietly.

Suddenly, strong hands he couldn't fight lifted him and eased him up against a wall. Brooster blinked rapidly. His senses threw themselves back together. The last piece fell into place as a tall man, gangly and wildly red-headed, pressed a bundle into his arms.

"So here we go!" said the man. His smile was panicked, and his eyes looked trapped. "I can't thank you enough. And I'm so sorry. Just follow me, and when the time comes... you'll know what to do. Remember, it's Agent 42, remember? Agent 42." He grinned desperately. Then he ran.

The dust, the noise and the madness seemed to follow him, tailed off by about twenty night guards. They ran past the stunned Brooster, visors down and weapons charged.

Then he was alone. The suddenly still air hung heavy with leftover heat. Scraps of flaming paper clung to a wall plastered with black dust.

Brooster could taste soot and blood. He looked at the fabric weight in his arms.

It was a coat, and it was yellow.

## **MAEVE MATHESON**

Maeve Matheson was born in Hackney in October 1994, and moved to a rural area on the Isle of Skye when she was eight years old, where she is in her last year of school. She is studying English, History and French at school and enjoys Morrissey and reading.

# Yesterdaze; or, Ulric Revolting

**W**

e live in separate worlds now, thought the peasant of the princess: hers was a world of radiance, and his a world of darkness. The light always shone on her table. Sumptuous food lay like a treasure of edible jewels on the cranberry velvet; she laughed; and the goblets winked, the ruby red capon glistened. The crackling on the roast pork was like amber. He didn't even have a platter for his blackened bread – the only thing Ulric had in plenty was liquor. He had flagons, barrels and pewter pitchers brimming with heather ale, elderberry wine and his very own mulberry mead. His stall swarmed with thirsty customers, but he was lost in dismal reflection.

A nearby Viking had clearly lost a game on his Gameboy; he howled, dropped his foam sword and his plastic helmet fell off. To his left, a Victorian urchin chatted up a nun; to his right, Anne Boleyn, clad in her red spandex and nylon ruff, seemed to be having a rather loud argument with someone on the other end of her mobile phone.

His reverie was disturbed.

“You,” the peasant droned as he doled out beer. “You’re being beheaded in five minutes, aren’t you?”

She cast a bored look in his direction, cupped the phone and hissed,

“What, already? – Yeah, sorry... back to work... I’m on the block again... talk later, yeah? Bye...”

Still dissatisfied, the peasant sighed and hammered the table. Painted faces looked up from plastic cups.

“I’m sorry, but could you all just leave and go back to your own eras?”

This was no mishap with a time machine.

This was Yesterdaze, the travelling history re-enactment fair (“It’s Just Historical!” screamed the garish posters that plastered windows, lamp posts and toilet cubicles). It was only the most historically inaccurate renaissance festival in the country.

If it had ever been a gentle and nostalgic step back into the past, it certainly wasn’t now. At best, gaudy and tawdry and at worst, mildly offensive, it was a money-guzzling funfair. If you had been silly enough to expect a delightful-yet-educational and authentic-but-inoffensive evening, you would be in for a massive disappointment. From the vulgar flashing lights and painted wooden castles, to the screaming children running amok with glow-in-the-dark thumbscrews and swords. In short, it was a businessman’s dream and a historian’s nightmare. At Yesterdaze, you could have your picture taken with an unusually sanguine Henry VIII. You could eat as much as you liked at Princess Guinevere’s medieval banquet, stroll down a disease-ridden Victorian boulevard, or sample the virtual tortures of the traitors in the Tower. And then there was Ulric the Peasant’s Bubonic Bar: “Drown your sorrows! Drink yourself to Black Death!”

From April to September, the festival swarmed through the British countryside like the plague that had ravaged it so long ago. It trundled down lonely country lanes, creeping through empty fields, moors and purple crofts and filling them with flashy tents and gaudy flags, paper cups and neon glitter.

Until May, life had been sweet for Guinevere and Ulric, but by July,

there was a decidedly sour taste to their relationship. Guinevere had suggested that Ulric was too fond of his mulberry mead, and in anger, he had implied that she clearly shared a similar enthusiasm for her cream pies. She started edging her banquet away from his bar until she was only just within slanging match distance.

As they swept through sun-yellowed fields to lush green meadows, the long, pink summer days began to bleed into one another, no beginning and no end; each green hill and every winding stream seemed no different as they edged from one side of the country to the other. Every day, there was the same flock of faceless people. Without Guinevere, there was no punctuation to his day.

Guinevere, or so the plastic nameplate pinned to the front of her sparkly Lurex robe would have you believe. Ulric knew better; she was only Tracey, just as he was only Steve. She was no princess, but even in a cardboard crown and plastic jewels, she was a woman of mythic beauty – well, sort of. Her hair came out of a bottle, as did the overwhelming majority of her face; but he remembered the crow's feet that edged her eyes; the tell-tale sign of a well-seasoned smiler. That smile! People clustered around her for its radiating warmth. She had a smile for everyone, thought Ulric, everyone except me.

It must be a unanimously held thought that the last fortnight of August is one of the most dismal two weeks of the entire year – at least for summer-lovers. The vivacity of summer has packed up and left suddenly one night with no warning; without even a goodbye note or a farewell kiss. You knew the end was inevitable, but this knowledge does not soothe the pain of her leaving. But traces of her presence linger still and torture you – her warmth hangs around in the weeks following her departure, but this warmth has not the airy, clear sweetness of July.

A familiar and detested figure appeared from the door of one of the caravans that were parked behind the stalls, decked in a plastic suit

of white armour. It was young Lancelot (or James) from the Mediaeval Pie Company. On his shoulder he bore a tempting tray of steaming, boulder-like pies, his flaxen hair rippling crisply to his shoulder. There was the odd jibe and occasional taunt, but he only smirked; their words deflected off his armour.

Ulric's mournful eyes had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the crew. All had their pearls of wisdom to bestow upon him.

"Do cheer up," said Queen Victoria.

Oh, good heavens, he thought.

"Still a bit miserable over Tracey, are you?" a unicorn had asked him, nodding knowingly over his pint of beer. "It'll be alright, you know."

"Plenty of fish in the sea," said a dragon.

"No one liked her anyway," chipped in a leprechaun. There was a mumble of agreement. They all nodded.

Henry VIII helpfully reassured him that Lancelot's hair was "a bit girly, let's be honest"; and Anne Boleyn noted that "she really has put on weight, hasn't she?" and that "he isn't even that handsome."

Jack the Ripper insisted he keep his chin up and added that "she's not worth it"; a group of Norman knights drunkenly informed him that Lancelot was a "prat with a stupid haircut" and "definitely, definitely a step down from you"; Mary Queen of Scots kept fluttering her eyelashes at him – and it was universally agreed upon that she was "a bit old for you, mate."

But still he couldn't stop his eyes from straying over to Guinevere's banquet. Their table was rich not only in food too beautiful to eat, but in laughter, smiles and light. Standing in the shadow of wizened trees was the table of the poor, of the peasants, of disease, of the Great Plague. He suddenly felt the deep injustice of mediaeval society: to have two worlds living side by side – a tiny one of castles and silks and lutes and gammon; and another, far vaster one of cold cottages and muddy fingernails and empty stomachs and gruelling hard work

and oozing pustules. I am a peasant, thought Ulric mawkishly – I'm suffering from a poverty of love.

He couldn't stop looking over his tankard to the table of the rich: it hurt him to do so, to watch her so untroubled, so oblivious to his sad eyes, but it was a strange craving. With a jolt, he watched Lancelot share a joke with Guinevere, a joke lost on his ears. His veins were now pulsating with the foul poison of jealousy, coursing through his body. It was a feeling which physically pained him, shook his hands and knees, tore his nerves apart. He wondered if the other peasants with their prosthetic pustules could hear the shriek of his mind; it was a shriek so ear-splitting that it woke the terrible beast that lay dormant within him. The beast which slumbers within everyone. Far more dangerous than any mediaeval fire-breathing dragon.

Fuelled by the copious mead consumed that evening, the feverish yelps and cackles of the crowd, the flashing glow-sticks and the music that made him feel lonely; this beast crushed the voice of reason, which whimpered fruitlessly as Ulric stormed over to the table of the rich. Had the crowd, the music hushed? All he could hear was the shrieking in his head. He made his first move towards destruction: he picked up two duck's eggs.

He considered their pearly shells: beautiful things. But before he knew it, the orange gloop was blossoming from periwinkle shell shards and dribbling onto the cranberry velvet below. The faces of his tormentors were inscrutable. Pity? Derision? The beast growled.

Roast capons were given flight. Salad greens fluttered in the sky like green feathers before landing in hair. For a split second, the beef stew painted the sky before raining down upon heads and tables. Turnips and carrots ricocheted off shoulders and ears, and then studded the grass. The glistening roast pork skidded down the length of the wine-soaked velvet. Peas rattled like bullets. There were screams as forks were narrowly dodged.

With a final flourish, Ulric grasped the biggest sun-like pie with the golden crust: this was the centrepiece, the object around which all food orbited, and thrust it down upon the grass. An explosion of pink innards ensued. Syrupy juices sank down into the earth.

The crowd was puzzled. They stared down at the crime scene. They tried to make sense of this. Juice trickled down into one of Lancelot's bewildered eyes.

Guinevere picked a carrot out of her hair and turned to one of her ladies in waiting. "And you wonder why I left him?"



## **CHLOE PATON**

Chloe Paton, aged 14, lives in Edinburgh and goes to James Gillespie's High School. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing and wasting time on the internet. She is currently writing a novel about an ordinary young woman who gets on a bus which is hijacked by gangsters.

## Extract from novel

“M

iss Halon, I’m Susan Stobbart. Thank you for seeing me.”

“Oh, well,” I say, forcing a smile. “You hardly gave me much choice.” The choices being come here, to Interpol, or try to outrun eight fully armed men. It had been far too early in the morning for the latter.

“Before we start, Miss Halon,” she says, clicking her pen. “Did you ever meet James Millar?”

I ignore the leap in my stomach. “No, I’ve never met him.”

“Or contacted him in any way?”

“Nope.”

James Millar... A face floats the the top of my mind. Blue eyes, thin nose, light freckles. It wasn’t James’s face, but then, James doesn’t have a face.

“On to his acquaintance, Henry Lykke. I need you to confirm that you have met him...”

Maybe I should tell her. It would solve all her problems, all my... It would prove I’m no longer with him. If I said...

“...Travelled with him, assisted him... attacked police... in fact... many laws...” She sneers at me.

I’ve known her 10 seconds and already she is curling her lip like I’m wasting her precious time.

She didn't even say hello.

Maybe I won't tell her.

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I did all those things." I force another smile and stare straight back at her. "Oh, I'm sorry, did I interrupt you?"

She stays silent for a moment, peering down her nose with obvious contempt. Then she pulls out a voice recorder.

"Perhaps you would rather tell me in your own words what happened."

"Shall I start from the beginning?"

"Please."

For some twisted reason her cold glare only makes me smile harder.

"It was... two weeks ago," I say. "Monday morning. I was late for my usual bus at 10 past eight..."

It's one of those bizarre, bright sunny days with no clouds in the sky, and up there it looks so peaceful and warm. Down here it's freezing, windy and I'm surrounded by overflowing green bins that stink of cabbage.

I've got longer to wait, too, seeing as I was late. It's quiet, waiting for the bus all alone when normally I'm surrounded by a gaggle of primary children, but I'm late so often the silence is becoming normal.

A man walks by me, checks the bus times and joins me on the wall. All he's wearing is a t-shirt. It makes me shiver just looking at him. He gives me a little "how you doin'?" nod, a smile which I don't return in time.

The bus smells different when I climb on. Almost overpowering, the smell is washed out the doors before I can place it. Cigarette smoke? Possibly. Whatever it is gets me thinking of uni.

It's almost empty, just four other men scattered around the bus. My

eyes meet with a man sitting at the back, but he looks away quickly and disappears behind his newspaper.

It almost looks like he shares a glance with the other three. Like I say, almost.

The guy from the bus stop got on behind me and stands not far from my seat at the front, swaying on the ceiling handles when the bus starts moving.

As the busy streets trail by all I can think about is the stack of paperwork that's sitting on my desk. I'm sure Judy will have added to it by the time I get there.

Maybe Brian will get lunch from that Chinese place again. It's all I've got to look forward to.

"Bit quiet."

I start at the American voice, glancing up at the guy who boarded the bus with me. He nods towards the back.

I look back and see the same four guys, all staring out their window. "Is this normal?"

Again the dry, American voice. What's he so interested in?

"I don't know," I say. "Probably. I never pay attention."

He murmurs something and starts rummaging around in his rucksack.

Is this normal? I look behind me again. No, it's not; I've never been on a bus so silent.

"Heads up!"

I don't turn round in time and a packet of Hula Hoops bounces off my forehead and onto my lap.

"What the hell?"

"You were meant to catch those." He smiles at me, a nice smile, but I'm not in the mood for niceties.

"Oh. My bad," I quip, then throw them back at him.

"Hey," he moves closer. "Sorry, I didn't mean to attack you with my lunch. Not the best of introductions."

You can say that again.

“What I should have done was said ‘would you be so kind as to hold a few things for me? I left something important at the bottom’. And then you would reply...”

“...Yeah, sure.”

Most of what he hands me from his rucksack is rubbish, the sort of things that fill my bag: balled up bits of paper, old magazines, pens by the handful. I slide it all onto the seat next to me while he adds more things – food, some bottles, books.

I’m about to turn back to the window when he adds the final thing. *And Then There Were None*, by Agatha Christie. It has the same cover as my one at home, the cream background with 10 silhouettes. It’s newer looking, not like my heavily creased and coffee-stained version. I reach for it.

“I love this –”

He’s turned his back on me, rummaging around in the bottom of his bag. As I open my mouth he twists back round, pulling out...

“A gun.”

“Yes?”

“Well, I thought he was pointing it at me, but it was pointed behind me, and when I looked back...”

The guy at the back has thrown his newspaper aside and is standing up, joining the other three who are already on their feet. One by one they start pulling guns out of their pockets.

... What... Is... Happening...

With a steady hand, the guy with the rucksack pulls the trigger on his gun, releasing a bang and a bullet that’s too fast for me to see. From the ground, I hear him shoot again and again, joined by gunshots from the other men that reverberate in the small space.

“Excuse me,” Susan Stobbart interrupts. “Why were you on the ground?”

“What?” I ask, my mind still on the memory.

“You say you were on the floor –”

“Oh, right. To be honest, I’m not really sure. I think...” I was on the seat, and then... Pressure on my shoulder. “...Henry forced me down. Just a little nudge, which I went with. To get me out of the way.” To keep me safe.

“So he was shooting the four people behind you? And they were shooting back?”

“Yes.”

“And you?”

“I was on the floor, when for some reason I look up...”

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