



# New Writing from Scotland

A Sampler

# **New Writing**

from Scottish Book Trust's  
Writer Development Programme

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Cover photo of Nicola White by Ruth Clark.

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# Introduction

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Even though writing in Scotland across all forms and genres is very strong, no nation can afford to rest on its laurels where creative activity is concerned. Yes, we have a diverse group of writers who are contributing to world literature and who will still be read and admired in a hundred years time; but what of the next generation? In a world where getting published and then developing a readership is becoming increasingly difficult, how do we recognise, nurture, and promote new talent?

This is where our writer development programme comes in, dovetailing with the rest of the work we do to connect writer with mentor, broadcaster, agent, editor, publisher and reader. The New Writers Awards, devolved by the Scottish Arts Council to our stewardship since 2008, are at the centre of our bespoke programme, providing us with the entirely selfish pleasure of uncovering new talent while putting into place measures to inspire, support and promote these creative individuals. As you'll see here, the writers included in these pages have worked hard at their gift to give us some serious pleasure, and to generate a real excitement about their future prospects. Meanwhile the young writers included, all still at school, are quite frighteningly good too. As long as we can do our job in helping all these writers to shine and develop careers, Scottish literature in the 21st Century will continue to be nationally and internationally appreciated, as it always has been.

**Marc Lambert**

Chief Executive, Scottish Book Trust

The New Writers Awards (formerly the Scottish Arts Council New Writers Bursaries fund) offer a unique opportunity for emergent writers to refine their practice by working closely with an experienced mentor. Past awardees have noted that engaging with experienced authors and industry professionals over a concentrated period of time on a specific project has had a significant, positive impact upon their craft. Scottish Book Trust carefully create a bespoke package of mentoring and networking opportunities for successful applicants. The Scottish Arts Council is very proud to support these important awards, which afford all the diverse possibilities of a real 'creative crucible' for new writers. We hope the awards will continue to uncover and nurture the fresh literary talent which burgeons across the country.

**Gavin Wallace**

Head of Literature, Scottish Arts Council

# **New Writers**

# George Anderson

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George Anderson was born in the village of Twechar and lives in Leith. In 2008 he was a Scottish Arts Council literary resident at Cove Park in Argyll, and was Writer in Residence at Wigtown Book Festival. George decided Scotland needed some well-populated Eastern Isles to go with those in the North and West and so he is working on a collection of fantastical and mythological stories – *The Bewilderds* – set in the middle of the North Sea.

He has been published in a number of anthologies and magazines, most recently in Edinburgh University's GM Fiction collection. His short story *Tumshie Macfadgen's Bid for Ultimate Bliss* was adapted into the BAFTA-winning Tartan Short film of the same name. Readings have included Edinburgh International Book Festival, Wigtown Book Festival and Glasgow's Aye Write! Festival. He has an MLitt in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow. George has worked extensively in journalism and wildlife conservation and is currently a freelance communications consultant. His writing mentor was Allan Guthrie.

# The Salmon of Here and There, and the Eel of This and That

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An eel once met a salmon in the bay at Radgenish. A quite commonplace eel, but no ordinary salmon, for it was the fabled Salmon of Knowledge.

He would always tell you he got his knowledge a bit at a time. He was not born with it, nor did he study at the fins of a tight circle of wise salmon elders. No, he took a little piece, here and there, from all the lowliest creatures of the sea.

“Even the stupidest will have at least one insight to show for itself,” he would tell you. “And if you hoard these glimmers of cleverness from as many of the stupid as you can find, you can meld them into a great intellect like mine.”

There are some, and maybe I’m among them, who doubt you could ever get clever by mixing with fools. Even a huge number of fools. But the salmon had been telling his tale so long that if it was a lie, he had convinced even himself it was the truth. So whenever he met a new subject, he liked to cock a curious fin, and set about what he thought of as his routine. All contributions, however small, gratefully received. But despite his supposedly questing nature the salmon spent more time talking than listening during these interrogations with whelk, gurnard or periwinkle.

So it was with the eel. A quite ordinary eel, but no fool, and with questions of his own. So the garrulous salmon took little persuading to unburden himself first.

“My clan spawn in stark, stony rivers, whose unforgiving bleakness makes our mettle, but where there is little nourishing food. And so we take ourselves to sea where we can ride the tide, gorge and flourish to fat, silver glory. But we’ve earned it mind.”

The salmon is the most Calvinist of fish.

“And I expect you may wonder why we love to leap? Well, to kiss the wind, and moisten it with our spray, to hasten the rain and, better yet, snow that will melt in the spring, so my kin are lifted over rock and up river and burn to spawn.

"In mid-leap I have smelt a droplet, and batted it with my tail into the heat of the Atlantic sun. Much later I smelt the same drop as it tumbled over me in a high, brown burn. So I know it journeyed before me – to the highest mountain top where it waited out the winter, melting only so I could ride the spate.

My tail brings the torrent. It is a tail of much power. And I, as you can probably tell, am a fish of considerable wisdom."

The salmon, for diplomacy's sake, neglected to mention that a good deal of its silvery bulk was down to a diet rich in squirming elvers, that slipped over a treat, often with a satisfying final slap and whipcrack of their tails before disappearing down his maw.

*God I love it when they do that*, thought the Salmon of Knowledge as he eyed the eel's lithe flank. *This one looks like she would have an enchanting wiggle going down.*

Salmon of course, even Salmon of Knowledge, can't tell the gender of an eel. So although the eel was male, the salmon liked to think of it as an eelstress, with a beguiling dance.

The eel listened intently to the salmon, and then for his part said: "My tribe spawns deep in the faraway Sargasso in a knotted orgy of wanton abandon. Everyone is equal in the bliss."

The eel is the least Calvinist of fish.

"Our young voyage far, running up rivers, invading the very land itself, sliding across the dry soil to dip snouts in landlocked lochs where we bide our time before returning to the sea for supple, slimy sex."

The eel, for propriety's sake, left out that it often poked the river gravel for salmon eggs that burst their juices like berries, with an echo of the sea's salt tang.

*God I love it when they do that*, thought the eel as it admired the salmon's plump flanks. *My but you're a fine big lass.*

Eels, of course, can't tell the gender of a salmon. So although the Salmon of Knowledge was a cock fish, the eel liked to think of it as a hen, packed with flavoursome red jewels.

"And what is it that you eat when you are in the river?" said the salmon. "Oh, this and that," said the eel. "And what about yourself, at sea?"

"Oh, bits and bobs," said the salmon.

The salmon and the eel would argue over which had the idea first, but one of them certainly wondered aloud that, if they might come to some arrangement, then neither would have to migrate again. If one bred at sea and went inland to feed, while the other bred in rivers and journeyed to sea to fatten, then surely there was a living to be had for each if they stayed in the place they were born?

So the salmon took the notion back to his clan that if the eel could feed in freshwater then so could they. There was no need for them to make the arduous trip to sea. They could live their whole lives in the river. And the eel put to its tribe the possibility they might remain at sea for didn't the salmon find enough there to eat? No need to swim all that way to freshwater.

The salmon and the eel took to the new arrangement with excitement, and resisted the urge to travel when it came. But times soon proved hard and they could find no signs of the promised feast of bits and bobs, and this and that.

As starvation took the eel, his belly swelled with gas and he could no longer wriggle. It was sheer luck that an elver swam past his snout while he still had enough energy to make a snatch at it. It gave a whipcrack and snap before going down which made the eel pine for his own lost agility. The salmon became skinny in the river. He could no longer leap but thinness made him supple until his jaws could reach his tail, which, in a hunger trance, he tried to swallow. But just as he took a grip he glimpsed a crimson speck in the gravel. Letting go of himself he sank to the riverbed. As he took the egg in his mouth it burst with an echo of salt tang, and the salmon missed the ocean.

# Celaen Chapman

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Celaen Chapman lives and works in Glasgow. She's had stories and poetry published in Scottish anthologies, including the *Scotsman* and Orange collection, *North – New Scottish Writing*, *Cleave: New Writing by Women in Scotland*, *Let's Pretend*, an anthology of short fiction from the University of Glasgow Creative Writing MA, and *Gutter – Magazine of New Scottish Writing*. She received a New Writers Award from Scottish Book Trust in 2008 and is currently working on a novel with mentoring support from Zoe Strachan.

# Excerpt from novel

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Despite what Morgan might tell you, Laurel wasn't conceived beneath a fairy-light heart in the folds of a silk-sheeted bed. She was conceived on the ocean-coloured lino of Morgan's bedsit floor, in the attic of a pub called the Green Man. He'd tell you he inherited it, but he didn't. His great-grandfather owned it once, but not for very long, and only until the night that he tripped over outside its front door and drowned in a puddle because he'd drunk so much of his own cheap gin that he couldn't get up. His wife didn't even stay for the funeral, she took her son to live in another city in a different country, sold the pub from a distance and never returned. Apart from her son the only thing she took with her when she left was a handwritten book of recipes that she'd collected during her time in the pub kitchen; everything else was sold or thrown away because it was part of a past she no longer wanted. But if you look hard enough, you might still be able to find evidence of the few years that she lived there, if you chisel out the plaster beside the place where Morgan's bed used to be, or pull up the lino and look between the floor boards you'll probably find some of the things she left behind. One of her son's abandoned milk teeth, or the remains of the little finger she lost to one of her husband's furious tempers. The lost and un-found things are still there now, and were there then, embedded just under the skin of the building and for the short time that Morgan lived there he slept soundly in his bed because he'd never felt so at home.

Morgan first walked through the doors of the Green Man sixty years after his seven-year-old grandfather left. He propped his rucksack against the bar and showed the barman his great-grandmother's handwritten recipe book by way of introduction. He told the barman that his family had owned and managed the pub since before the railway was laid down along the back of it, before the gasworks, the cinema and the cars, since the day it was first opened as a drover's inn on the green pastured edges of the city nearly four hundred years ago.

Fourteen gins later he was offered use of the attic rent free and within a week the bar was serving *heritage furrmity* made to his great-grandmother's precise instructions: a slow cooked blend of hulled barley, cream, raisins, orange peel, sugar and allspice. The menu said that the recipe had been refined through four generations of women in the pub kitchen, until the early nineteen twenties. It didn't say that the reason it went off the menu was because the last time it was served Morgan's great-grandfather thought the raisins were tough as pieces of boot leather and he'd thrown the bowl out of the kitchen window and then taken a knife to his wife and chopped her little finger off. And it didn't say that as soon as her hand began to heal she started to poison him with a little known mushroom whose quiet side effect is to stop the liver from processing alcohol,

and that one icy night a few months later she locked him outside, underneath a sympathetic moon that dazzled him and then pulled a frozen puddle out from underneath his feet like a wet tablecloth. Morgan's great-grandfather went bump in the night while his great-grandmother turned over in her bed and went to sleep with her fingers crossed.

"Good for her," Eleanor always says. And Laurel's mother agrees, she said that if she'd been around that night, she would have arrived with a horse and carriage, a bottle of champagne, jumped down onto the sodden lump of the drowned man just to make sure he was dead, and then walked around to the back of the pub, shinned up the drainpipe, crawled through the bedroom window and collapsed onto the floor giggling. She said that when she'd caught her breath and straightened her voice out enough to speak she would have persuaded Morgan's great-grandmother to run away with her and they would have left Morgan's grandfather, carrier of the paternal gene, full of the blood that was bound to turn bad sooner or later, to clear up the mess and put daisies on his father's unmarked grave every Sunday.

But that's not what happened. Laurel's mother arrived sixty years too late and just a couple of months after Morgan, when firmity had just gone back on the menu. Bad timing. Sixty years to the day after Morgan's great-grandfather disappeared into his drunken puddle she stepped over his ghost, pushed the door open and then walked into the bar wearing yellow boots that zipped up all the way to the tops of her thighs. And even though their heels were the length and width of one of the eyeliner pencils in her coat pocket she swaggered into the room like a cowboy, slamming the door so hard behind her that the sign outside shuddered in the moonlight and scattered its rim of powdered snow onto the pavement. She was loud and bright and alive enough to wake the dead, and behind her the ghost of Morgan's shut out great-grandfather raised his bruised chin from the puddle and spat the snow from his mouth complaining that *he'd never seen the like*.

Underneath an undone ex-army coat she was wearing a velvet dress the purple colour of a chocolate bar wrapper, and underneath that, nothing. She looked out at the inside of the bar from her huge seaweed-coloured eyes and smiled. It was what she expected. Electric candles gloamed from behind tobacco-stained shades and lit the room with the colour of stewed tea. The carpet was covered with polished disks of spat-out, walked-in, smoothed-over chewing gum and its material was worn into bald desire lines that ran from the door, around the bar, to the toilet and back. The chairs and tables were fake dark wood and greasy. The only person in the pub on the same side of the bar as her was Morgan, sitting on a high stool with his thin legs dangling, looking at her over his shoulder, through the smoke of a hand-rolled cigarette. She could smell him from where she stood, vanilla tobacco, women's perfume, and something slightly goatish that she imagined came from the backs of his ears

and the skin underneath his shirt. He had sideburns, he looked coquettish, he looked like the Green Man on the sign hanging outside. She'd never tell him that the sign was the reason she'd turned and pushed the door open, that she thought the green-eyed, green-fingered, oakleaf-coated man at the centre of the painting looked seductive. Full of sex and sap. Standing barefoot on a bed of golden acorns in a surreal forest, boughs above him heavy with gleaming horse chestnuts and the air thick with sycamore keys that flew and spun around his clear-skinned, beautiful face like dragonflies. He glowed. His eyes were the lit green colour of an aphid caught in a sunbeam. And he made her smile, so that she was smiling when she saw Morgan at the bar, wearing a green velvet jacket, the same man, drinking foamy ale from a tankard like a boy sitting in a drover's inn four hundred years ago. He'd been exactly what she expected to see. She looked away. A new fire hissed and crackled in the corner of the room and she walked over to it and sat down with her back to the bar, daring him to buy her a drink.

Morgan watched her. He held his breath until his oxygen starved heart began to beat against the inside of his eardrums. Stars pricked at the edges of the room until he opened his mouth and took a deep breath of the new air that she'd brought in with her. Her blonde hair was short and decorated with peacock feathers so that when she turned and walked away all of their shimmering turquoise eyes looked right at him from the back of her head. He blushed. He wondered what kind of drink she'd like. Not wine. Not gin.

Definitely whisky. Maybe advocaat. But she looked hungry so he ordered her a half of dark stout and a bowl of his great-grandmother's firmity. Most days it was the only thing Morgan ate. When the barman handed him the bowl he said that she looked like she was away with the fairies but Morgan didn't care. He thought she could have been a fairy, a rough one, anarchic, so that if you asked her for a wish she'd grant it by spitting fairy dust at you so hard it would rock you back on your heels before it ran down the lapel of your jacket glittering like nail varnish. He looked at the back of her coat and the fringe of her dress and he wished he could unwrap her. The barman wished him luck and Morgan took the bowl and the stout over to the fire.

When she looked up at him he flinched because her eyes were even bigger closer up and he could see himself disappearing into the dark of them. Being looked at by her made him talk in a stream. He said welcome, he said that he'd not seen her here before, she looked cold, she might like some firmity to warm her up. He sat down and put the bowl on the table between them. It steamed sweetly up towards her. He told her about his great-grandparents, that when the pub was first built it had been a drover's inn, with acres of cattle yards behind it and a blacksmith's workshop in the garden, where his grandfather had played as a boy with old horseshoes and pieces of broken sword. He said that ghosts were threaded through the building like woodworm.

It was usually enough. But she didn't say a word until Morgan told her about his great-grandfather drowning in a puddle and then she laughed, and then when he asked her if she'd seen the sign outside, she said yes, and he told her that a friend of his was an artist, and had painted the sign and used him as a model, it had only been put up the day before and he was still hung over from the celebration. She laughed and said it was funny to be hung over from being hung out on a sign and maybe that's why he looked so green, and then she leaned back against the wall and closed her mouth, smiling at herself for saying so much, but glad she had.

Then she said that her feet were fucked. She leant over and unzipped her boots, peeling them from her legs. Her heels were bleeding. She swore in an accent he'd never heard before and then she sat up, took a quarter bottle of rum from one of the pockets inside her coat and poured a generous measure into the bowl beside her. Then she took a cube of hash from another pocket, nipped off a corner with her fingernail and crumbled it in after the rum. Morgan watched her while she spooned it into her mouth. She chewed carefully. She looked like she was assessing each flavour and texture and it made him hungry.

She nipped another corner from the cube of hash and held it out to him in the middle of an open palm. He smiled, took it, put it into his mouth, chewed slowly, and swallowed.

He grimaced at the taste and she laughed.

She had a piece of resin caught between her front teeth.

His mouth was full of the taste of cat's piss and soil.

Her mouth was full of the taste of cream and barley.

They thought about the taste inside each other's mouths and then they wanted to kiss each other.

And that was the beginning.

The room began to spread out.

They drank all the rum and ate all the hash.

They sat back in their seats and stretched their legs.

The barman switched on the TV.

Two people were trying to knock each other into a swimming pool with giant cotton buds.

A stadium-sized crowd shouted support.

Laurel's mother threw her yellow boots onto the fire, and the plastic melted like candyfloss while the zips smiled up at Morgan with black teeth. He asked her if she wanted to go up to his flat and she said yes. Even with bare feet, it took less than a minute, running down a pigeon shit-spattered alley beside the pub, through a courtyard still overgrown with last summer's dead lilacs, up two flights of rusting metal stairs, and through a wooden door that had once been painted battleship blue. As soon as she stepped into Morgan's room she loved it, the roof sloped so steeply that it was only possible to stand up in the middle of it and when she did the feathers in her hair brushed against the plaster. He only had two pieces of furniture, a kitchen table with half a jar of strawberry jam on top of it and a bed that he'd made by putting a salvaged door on to legs made out of stacked up breeze blocks. He'd piled the door with woollen blankets to make a mattress and the breeze blocks still had moss on them. The floor looked more comfortable, two thirds of it was covered in ocean-coloured lino and the rest was worn pitch pine. When she looked out of the single dormer window she could see the moon shining on the railway line, the gas works, and the wasteland beyond them. It was so cold that her breath frosted in front of her while she traced her fingers around the flowered ice patterns on the inside of the glass.

Morgan kneeled beside her and lit the gas fire, his knees pressing into the pits and burn marks where coals had spilled out on the night that his great-grandmother left. Above the mantelpiece the plaster was decorated with a pencil drawing of a soldier outside Buckingham Palace, wearing a high, furred hat, holding a gun, the buttons of his jacket gleaming in the sun; next to him a woman wearing a cotton dress embroidered all over with peonies and violets, holding a parasol covered with turquoise hummingbirds. Morgan said that he found it underneath the wallpaper and wondered if his grandfather had drawn it when he was a boy. He took a bottle of aquavit from beside the fire, saying, while he poured a good measure into a mug, that it had been sailed once around the world so that the motion of the sea could refine its flavour. Then he reached into one of his pockets and gave Laurel's mother a handful of magic mushrooms and a silk purse filled with diamonds. He told her that he'd found the diamonds on a wrecked chandelier inside an abandoned mansion house in the leafiest corner of the city and he'd collected the mushrooms himself from the ruins of the walled garden beside it. She switched the light off and smiled. She didn't believe him for a second but they sat down together on the lino, drank the rest of the aquavit straight from the bottle and then fed each other magic mushrooms with their fingers. Then they lay on their backs and held the diamonds up to the algae-coated window until the green light refracted into ripples that spread out over the walls, and until Laurel's mother said that she could see angelfish flying around the switched-off light bulb like drenched moths, until Morgan said that he could see coral growing from the ceiling around them, until they took their final mouthful of mushrooms and kissed each other, and until she climbed on top of him, pinned his wrists to the lino and asked him if he wanted to swim, until he answered yes.

# Kirstin Innes

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Kirstin Innes was born in Edinburgh in 1980. She now lives in Glasgow. She's currently finishing her first novel, provisionally titled *Take Your Partners*, and works part-time as Assistant Editor for *The List* magazine.

This year her short story *Ten Years Past Angie* was published in *Gutter Magazine* and the first chapter of her novel was published in *New Writing Scotland 27*. She's also gaining a reputation as a performer of her own writing, with regular performances at Glasgow nights Discombobulate at The Arches and Manifesto at Tron Theatre, and in 2008 performed in the Speakeasy tent at the HydroConnect music festival. Kirstin also runs the literary cabaret night Bletcherheads with fellow writers Alan Bissett and Anneliese Mackintosh.

Kirstin has twice been nominated for Feature Writer of the Year at the National Magazine Awards and in 2007 won the Allen Wright Award for Excellence in Arts Journalism. Her commissioned essay 'Mark Renton's Bairns: identity and language in the post-Trainspotting novel' was recently published in *The Edinburgh Companion Guide to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, April 2007).

# Take your Partners (excerpt from novel)

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First thing to keep in mind: they will never, **ever** remember who you are. Give your name, mutter the company, and do not pause for breath.

**Hello! It's Emma from Impervious! Howyoudoinggoodyeah? I'm just phoning to check that you –**

Around you twelve singsong voices following the same script, any trace of a regional accent glossied out into PR Scots.

**Hello, can I speak to Simon –**

**Hello, can I speak to your features editor –**

**Hello can I speak to...Maureen! Hello! It's Sara from Impervious Communications! How was your weekend? Anyway –**

**Hello Keith! It's Deirdre from Impervious!**

**Craig! It's Vicky from Impervious!**

**Morna from Impervious!**

**Gemma from Impervious!**

**Karla from**

**Toni from**

**Julie**

**Nicola**

**How are you**

**How's it going?**

**How's the deadline?**

**I'm just checking that you got my email**

**Wanted to check**

**Just calling to follow up the**

You **always** send an email first.

A transaction happened while you slept, on the last-Thursday-into-the-last Friday of every month. The salary went in, the mortgage came off. The salary went in, the mortgage came off. Some of the girls bought flats with their boyfriends. Most of them had cars. The girls came and went, had come and gone and come in the six years Emma had been there, filleted off to other agencies, usually, although none of them had the account for the new city centre four-storey mall development with All Saints and Ted Baker already bought in, now did they, Toni said when Ali and Amy and Claire B all left in the same week. Emma stayed, Toni stayed. They got promoted. Communications Officers. Account Executives. *Senior* Account Executives. They began to make phone calls that deviated from the script. Toni started using her imagination, would set up publicity stunts, hire models. Emma would hear her scream down the phone at the photographers.

“*The Express* need them today, Stevie! Today! You said by two. We’ll have to think more closely about using you again if you persist in letting Impervious Communications down! It’s not just your own reputation you’ve got to worry about, eh no?”

Emma, more **diplomatic** and **friendly**, a **people person** (everyone said it, she’d put it on her CV), drifted into client relations. Her colleagues would send her the *difficult* ones, the big-money men with their worries and their arguments, the ones who’d begun to think that they could do it better, the ones with their own ideas. Like her three o’clock, sitting jittering now in the glass-fronted client liaison room across the office, one of the new girls slopping his peppermint tea into the saucer as she bent over him.

Keen, pointed little Derek Jackson, all fivefootfour of him. The minimal stubble where sideburns should be, sculpted into arrows – stilettos – slicing through cheekfat, not that he had much. Shaved head to hide the balding; expensive Japanese jeans fifteen years too young for him; five pieces of fruit a day; considered himself a *cultured* man. When he was worried he looked like a bantam. Something birdlike. Nod nod nod with the head, Adam’s apple too big for his body.

“I’m just saying Emma. I’m just saying.”

He calls you *Emma*.

“I know, Mr Jackson. I know. Still, that last reader offer in *The Express* paid off for you.”

You call him *Mr Jackson*.

“Six months, since it opened. And not a single review.”

“I know. I know. I understand where you’re coming from.”

All those soothing little phrases, those little bits of furniture in your speech that would be lies if you thought about them too much. No, you don't know. No, you don't understand where he was coming from.

Derek Jackson owned restaurants and style bars called for baby talk, all of them. K-oko. Dada. BuU. Nuuba. Lol'lo. Glassy city centre places with hard chairs and soft porn in the toilets. Straightening-ironed staff, squelchy RnB beats that were a bit too loud for conversation, that bit too rubbish to dance to. Mr Jackson's latest enterprise was only different in that the food was completely inedible, set up as a vanity project for his girlfriend, who had done a fortnight's intensive course at a celebrity chef cook school. Emma's job, as Lol'lo's PR consultant, was to gently steer the restaurant reviewers away, murmuring lies about new menus coming soon, to generate as many reader deals and special offers to keep them coming in as she could, to suggest it as a location for any advertising companies looking to shoot alcopop commercials in (insipid stop it) generic style bars.

"*The Record* do a pie of the week. Steak pie. They get that wee whuzzizname. The footballer. They get him to review it. We do a steak pie. Steak and chorizo."

(whiny Glasgow on the vowels and foreign words. Chohreeeeeeetho. Whuzziznaaaame)

Derek Jackson wanted to be a great gastronomic entrepreneur.

"Was that wee Deeky?" Toni hissed at his retreating back, her voice too loud over the tapping of keys, the cooed **Hello!**s.

She knew it was. Wee Deeky. Who called him *Wee Deeky*? When did she earn that condescending, acid-washed familiarity with one of your clients?

Emma nodded. Emma sighed. "He's just worried about Lol'lo. Threatening to withdraw all the Jackson Group accounts. As usual. He wants the big reviewers in there."

Toni snorted. Toni held forth. "He should be worried." (nodding over at one of the faceless new girls over there like she didn't matter, which she didn't. Junior Comms Officer. Twenty two. Blonde and orange and flat),

"Charlotte took her fella in for dinner there the other day, she was just telling me. Well, she's new to the city. Doesn't know any better. She telt me he ordered the pie, right, the famous Lol'lo pie, and he only started choking. Reached into his mouth to sort himself and pulled out a big piecey clingfilm! Can you imagine the likes of *The Times* chowing down on clingfilm, eh? They'd be finished. We'd be finished!"

“I’m going to take Jimmy McKechnie in. Do a set up.”

Toni snorted again. Toni’s tones were laden.

“Oh, are you now. Another wee McKechnie special, eh?”

Toni winked. Really. Who *winked*?

These days, thinking of Toni, thinking of having to go to work and deal with Toni, caused vertigo. The swoop and dip of a fist on your intestines.

They were ages. They were both twenty-three when they started, and they got giddy on it and each other. The gloss and birl of this new world: the shops they could suddenly afford to buy from, the manicures they were expected to have, the deals struck with hairdressers, the getting your highlights done like a proper grownup and not just by your flatmate piercing holes in a shower cap, having to wear headbands to hide your green roots. No more. No more flatmates. They bought their flats, their new-smelling, new-build flats along the river within months of each other. Emma. Then Toni. Em. Tone. Loving those slingbacks, Tone! Loving that bob, Em! Fancy a wee swally afters? When they had boyfriends, they went out to dinner together, like people older than them did on the television, and their boyfriends would order eh-steak-welldone-and-chips and be uncomfortable, mumble football at each other, never last long.

And there was the work. Emma and Toni were just *better* at the work than the transitory girls. They grew big on it, big with it. Their chat was louder in the corridors. They called the journalists by their first names. They called the journalists “honey” and “babe”. They had their own mugs. They would stride out together after work and audition hairgelled boys who worked in recruitment and HR in more glassy, hard-edged bars with soft porn in the toilets, laugh behind their backs. They borrowed each others’ clothes. They bought expensive underwear. They wore Coco Mademoiselle. And those of Emma’s friends who maybe couldn’t afford the dinners and the cars and the flat and the shoes and the £8 a Manhattan, who maybe found Toni a bit much to take, gradually just skipped, turned and peeled away.

When you’re ambitious, when you’ve invested your own time in the company you work for, ground yourself up into too many late nights to ensure that a project would take. When you ensure that you’re always available, contactable at all times. When socialising is always, always networking.

When you’ve become as much a part of the company as the logo, as the name, you expect your company to reward you for that. And it does. It buys you with the luxury it expects from you. It asks more and more, and you become more and more expensive as you accommodate it. There’s only so high you can climb, though. There’s only so far two of you can go.

Toni's voice on the phone, now, talking to whoever. Insincere round the edges. Like broken glass. Like scratching.

Emma sat back. Emma picked up the phone and he answered after six rings, like he always did.

Why six? What sort of point was he trying to make with that? Why every ti-  
"McKechnie."

"McKechnie? Faulkes."

"Faulkes. Excellent."

Some of them. **Some** of them will remember who you are.

"How's the whistlestop world of tabloid journalism?"

"Tabloid? You're breaking my heart, pretty girl. We do theatre reviews and everything. When are you taking me out for dinner, torment me with more of your harsh, harsh words, eh?"

**Drop your voice an octave and honey up your words. Let your vowels liiiiinger.**

This, says Toni, laughing on a new girl induction once, this is Emma's patented sex voice. This voice is directly responsible for at least a third of Impervious clients' press cuttings at any given time. Listen well, younglings!

Cackle. Cackle.

"Funnily enough, I was just calling you about that. How you looking for Wednesdaaay? Just after work."

"Wednesday, eh? Just let me consult my diary, sweetheart. Just you wait while I -"

No paper turning, just the clicking of a mouse. Jimmy you want to say. You are not consulting your diary. You do not have a diary. You would lose it. You are flicking through gossip sites or hastily hiding porn from your colleagues. It will not even be good porn. It will be sordid, seedy, nicotine-stained porn, full of fake girls with fake nails and big round mouths moaning like birthing cows. We both know this.

"Ach. A couple of things, but nothing I won't cancel for you, my dear. Where we going? Gamba? You picked up The Chip account and no told me, have you?"

"Weeeell. Bear with me here, Jimbo."

"Faulkes. Am I not going to like the sound of this?"

“At first, no. But then you’ll overcome your (pause) ah, inhibitions, and we’ll have a thoroughly pleasant dining experience.”

“This better not be another Derek Jackson place.”

“Really, McKechnie. Your thinking. So rigid. So eearly twenty-first century.”

Oh, the oldest game. So well-worn it bores you. Should bore them both, surely?

“So. Open-minded eating next Wednesday, and maaaaaybe a wee mention in the column the week after. Sound good, fella?”

(You stupid man. You will give me what I want. You will do it again and again and again because I continue to make you believe that if you do it enough there will come a day where I will remove my clothes in your presence and penetration may occur.)

“Oh, you just try and hold me back, sweetheart. You just try.”

(You stupid girl. I consider anyone who willingly enters into your line of work to be an imbecile and a prostitute. I continue to tolerate your presence because you flatter me, provide me with free food, and allow me to imagine that penetration may occur.)

At least she was paid for it.

A Jimmy McKechnie special. A set up. Early dinner, time prearranged with the management. Better wine bought in and the manager prepped: **just a wee bit of Louis Armstrong? Just for a Wednesday night?** – flirting, wheedling, not *telling*. Making him think it was his idea. McKechnie plied with drink and eyes in the bar first of all, Emma always watching what she sipped. It wouldn’t be a review as such, so the paper could maintain its nominal integrity.

Jimmy McKechnie was a ‘food diarist’ for one of the two free newspapers read by everyone on a train or a bus or an underground. The city’s commuters inhaled his name every morning with the ink of their paper and the damp-smelling umbrellas, absorbed his opinions before they’d woken up enough to question them. Jimmy McKechnie was powerful.

And he fancied Emma. And she let him.

And if she didn’t think about it, it didn’t make her feel dirty.

# William Letford

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William Letford lives in Stirling, works as a roofer, writes short stories and poetry and is currently studying for an MLitt in Creative Writing at Glasgow University. Last year he received a New Writers Award from Scottish Book Trust and an SQA Star Award. This year he was the recipient of an Edwin Morgan Travel Bursary from the Arts Trust Scotland, which meant writing poetry while helping to restore a medieval village in the mountains of northern Italy.

# It's about the labour

---

hammurs nails

hammurs nails

hammurs nails

heh Casey did a tell ye a goat

a couple a poems published

widizthatmean

widayyemean

dizthatmeanyegetmoneyfurrir

eh naw

aw right

hammurs nails

hammurs nails

hammurs nails

# By the time we met

---

Candlelight was kind to her. Her fork seemed weightless, but seldom made the journey upwards. I suspect that she had tasted asparagus before. Conversations clashed around her and dispersed like circles on the surface of a lake. After the Shiraz, I had courage, and I said. *You must have been something when you were younger.* Quiet, so none could overhear, she touched my arm and replied. "We stumble into youth by accident, from somewhere else, and spend the rest of our lives making our way home."

# Chimney

---

sunshine workmen

work on slate roofs

above half-shadowed

streets hammers

echo against shale

dropped

from scaffold

to skip casting clouds

that billow beneath

pigeons that sweep

like the sparkle

of light against water

# Taking a headbut

---

*your pal ruffled ma hat*

i said, what? made the mistake of leaning forward  
and that was that

blood-metal darkness and the taste of brass  
the bell was rung  
i know i went somewhere  
because i had to come back

# dae ye iver wonder

---

*nae work da depressed*

tighten the belt son

*selt the belt*

door-tae-door then

*an say whit?*

gie thum the pattur

*the pattur? the pattur da? whit pattur should a gie thum?*

The fuckin roofin pattur an if ye don't know that ye shouldnae be  
in the fuckin game

# We are

---

inside the kick  
and crunch of colour  
where autumn's taken its  
dagger and opened up a vein

so the pavements aren't so grey  
our heartbeats are not so  
bleak and this kiss holds  
more than warmth  
and blood

# Ross McGregor

---

Ross was born in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire in 1975. He has lived in Glasgow and Edinburgh and has studied publishing, linguistics, and library and information studies. He currently works as a librarian at a school in Kilmarnock, where he also lives.

In 2006 Ross enrolled on a creative writing night class at Strathclyde University, which helped convince him to take his writing seriously.

After winning a New Writers Award in 2008 Ross began a mentoring partnership with the author Andrew Crumey. The mentoring experience has been extremely successful, resulting in Ross completing his first novel. The novel is a coming of age story and a family tragedy, depicting working class life in the 1980s and West of Scotland masculinity in unflinching, unsentimental prose.

Ross had a short story, *The Rowing Machine*, published on the Scottish Book Trust website in July 2009.

# The Fair Fortnight

## (excerpt from novel)

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Keith looked up his street to where the other boys lived. He glanced from the small space beneath his fringe and over his right shoulder. He was a skinny thirteen-year-old. He wore grey school trousers and a yellowing shirt hung off his hunched back. His pale blue eyes, just visible under the mousey fringe, glanced neutrally at the other boys his age. They played on their BMXs, casually criss-crossing the road of the cul-de-sac, barely bothering to do any tricks. Three pairs of white trainers and three pairs of silver-spoked wheels, all glimmering together in the sun like a slow-moving flash across the tarmac. The boys' houses were at the top of the street, curving around like a scythe at the edge of the woods. Keith lived near the bottom of the street. They clocked him walking past, but gave no sign of it.

When Keith turned the corner the boys exchanged glances. For a moment they did nothing else. Then they veered onto Strang's driveway and got off their bikes.

Before turning up into the woods, Keith peered again over his shoulder to check if anyone was behind him. He would repeat this tiny action, a flicker of the eyes, every few yards of his journey. It was the school holidays, almost the Fair Fortnight. The boys, and most of his neighbours, would go on holiday soon. The release from the constant pressure of passing them, evading them, being seen by them, was close now. He couldn't really remember what it was like to be without it. Last summer was a long time ago. Kizzie would be around too. Like him, she never went on holiday.

Once he was in the woods he sniffed the air. It was cooler there, in the shadows of the trees. He smelled chip fat from an open back door. A radio played Big Country through an open window. Gardens of his street lined the edge of the woods. Even here he had to be careful. The boys had routes into the woods through their gardens that he didn't have access to. As he trampled over the weeds and mossy grass he imagined the views others might have of him, like scenes in a film. His favourite was a long tracking shot through the roof of the trees, following his route like a surveillance device. He provided commentary: "This is me reachin the pond. There's the parky's hoose." If he sensed someone behind him, he'd picture them there on his tail, so he'd change his route. Or if he heard a noise, he'd visualise the foot that broke the twig and he'd know where they were in relation to him. He had two woods. Sometimes the woods in his head was better.

Keith stayed off the path. He was too visible there. Once he was in the long grass his mind wandered. He thought about his dad. He was in the house again today. Keith couldn't stay in while he was there. He'd sometimes sit at the kitchen table, reading the same page of the newspaper for hours. Earlier Keith passed the living room and his dad lay on the sofa asleep. He stood just inside the door and looked at his dad and he wished he hadn't. He couldn't help trying to read his face as he lay there. The image rubbed itself onto his memory and he couldn't get rid of it.

He realised he was near the old fence at the edge of Strang's garden and slowed down, ready to veer off and pass it at a wide berth. It was too late. Sid careered down the slope into Keith's path. Sid looked at Keith, unsure of what to say. He glanced back towards the garden for the other boys. Keith mumbled and tried to change direction to get past. The other boys arrived, breathless, and taking in Keith's presence.

Sid spoke as soon as the others stood by him. He was the youngest, with blond hair, see-through skin and watery eyes.

"Where you aff tae?" he said, his mouth crooked, inquiring.

"Joost up the wids," said Keith.

"You're eyways up the wids," said Sid.

"Where's yer burd, Kizzie?" said Strang.

He was the oldest by a few months. His skin shone greasy in the leaf-dappled sunlight. Fresh air whisked through his lank, thinning hair.

Sam guffawed. His insect frame juddered and bent inwards, his bare chest disappearing on itself.

Keith knew to stay calm. The worst thing was for them to end up chasing him. "She's no ma burd," he said.

"Luk et um wi his schull claise oan," said Sid. "It's the fuckin summer hoalidays ya mongo."

"Huv ye no goat any other claise?" said Strang. "Ur dis Kizzie like ye in yer schull uniform? Where's yer tie? That'd be even smerter."

Sam laughed again, hiccupping and nervous. Strang's laugh was tiny. Like the upward slant of his little mouth and the faint flutter of his stodgy cheeks. His eyes didn't change.

Keith turned around as slowly as possible. He ambled away into the overgrown pitch and putt course as if he had nothing better to do. He heard Sid say something about a fuckin weirdo. Then, in a high-pitched little girl's voice, he sang:

“Keith and Kizzie  
Up a tree  
P-U-M-P-I-N-G!”

And he danced as he repeated it, arms flailing limply. He pouted and batted his blonde lashes like an albino Betty Boop. The others laughed as they watched Keith wind his way through the long grass. They kept their eyes on him for a long time.

Keith stalked the edge of the dump slowly, watching. He was careful, even though he knew the boys wouldn't put as much effort into finding him. They were lazy. He crouched down when he saw a car pull onto the grass verge where the road into the woods ended. A man got out and opened the car boot. He took out two bin bags and heaved them into the dump. They sank there noiselessly. Keith wondered what was in them. Something light and soft. Then the man threw an old tricycle in. He got into his car without looking back and turned and drove off. The tricycle landed on its wheels. It was blue and red with a yellow seat. It looked okay; someone could use it. He had a feeling it would be gone tomorrow. He rarely saw anyone take stuff out of the dump, but they did.

He waited a while. The car was gone. He looked back for the boys. When he was sure no one was around he stepped down into the dump. His boots sank crackling into the dry grass cuttings that bordered the inside edge. He sensed his soles sinking into something softer and wetter. Keith imagined the dump consisting of lots of layers, but he didn't know what they were. His legs were sprung light and expectant. He dared himself to step onwards, no matter what might be underneath. He made his way down to the bottom, beyond the bushes that hid the dump from the houses at the edge of the estate.

He came upon his den suddenly, as if it appeared out of nowhere. He liked that feeling he got when he pulled back a branch and there it was: a little green door beneath some panels of plywood and broken kitchen units, with a smattering of leafy branches for camouflage. He eased himself in, taking one last look and listen at the outside.

Inside it was dim and cool. He shivered; the thrill of being hidden juddering through his body. He sat on the upturned crate. He had no image of himself here. He only imagined the den, the structure framing him: the edges of cupboard doors, splintered plywood, peeling layers of gloss paint, all softened by the brush of rubbery green bush leaves poking through. He liked the leaves growing into his den. It reminded him of where he was.

He began his customary check. He looked under the crate to see the tin of biscuits he was saving. His magazines were there: two tattered copies of *Hustler*, stolen from his dad's old sports bag in the hut. He scanned the walls and roof. There was no new weather damage. It always pleased him how sturdy he had made the place since he first hid here two summers ago. There was an endless supply of materials to use in the dump. When no one was around he would rake among the piles of battered junk, looking for stuff to use for the den. He started it so he'd have somewhere to go. Lately it seemed as though the den was getting deeper and further away from the woods, from his street and his house. He sat on the crate listening to the woods surrounding him, knowing that the boys were far away and imagining that no one was left apart from him. It was as if he was at the bottom of the sea. He was safe. Another shiver passed through him, calmer this time. He listened to his heartbeat slowing, satisfied that he had escaped. He closed his eyes and thought about the cigarette he was about to roll.

# Eve Thomson

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Eve Thomson was born in Perth, Scotland and took undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in drawing and painting at Edinburgh College of Art. She lived in the USA for fifteen years, taught painting at university and college level, exhibited nationally and internationally, and was the recipient of visual arts related awards and fellowships. In 2006, living and working again in Edinburgh, she began to write. Writing awards include the Harper's Bazaar/Orange Short Story Competition and Bridport Prize shortlists, with a story published in *The Bridport Prize 2008* anthology, selected by Helen Simpson. Now working on her first novel, Eve's mentor is Alan Bissett.

# Stalemate

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Tell me when to stop, when you can't take any more. When I've gone over the line. Put your fingers in your ears and hum.

But this whole thing, when you've never been there before, is like putting together an Ikea flat pack. The instructions are in Swahili. Or the diagrams don't make sense when you look at the parts. Or a really needed piece seems to have been left out, like an Allen key, or a screw that's a particularly weird screw that you can't find another of around the house. Or it's like homework where you might get points for how you work towards the answer even though the answer is wrong. Or page one is missing. Did you feel that?

One day, after school, I knocked on Adam's bedroom door. "Who is it?" said Adam. "Only me," I said. And after a silence – "What?" as in, what the hell do you want? So I went in. The two of them were languishing twin-like on the twin beds, black hair snaking over white pillows, white shirts loose and untucked, ties knotted low. A thin roll-up was squashed and smouldering in an empty glass coffee cup, the window full open in November. "Ah, Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, I presume," I said, fanning my hand across my nose. "Hello, I'm David," said David. Adam yawned and pointed at the door. As brothers do. At least mine. So I went out again. Adam doesn't share friends well. He likes them in ones. Uninterrupted. Well, you probably know.

But at the beginning of the next school year it's David and me who organize the Greek club, persuading the one teacher who's able to teach us Ancient Greek for half an hour on Fridays at lunchtime. We're a club of two. At the Societies' Fair day everyone avoids us like we have bubonic plague, the bloody flux, smallpox, syphilis. You pick. Except the Principal who says, pointing to one of our little posters, "Great idea, you two. So who's this handsome fellow?"

"Brad Pitt, you know, in *Troy*. Because I thought we might fool a few," I say.

"Oh, hahaha!" he says. And as he walks off to the Cross Stitch Society or the Fun Maths Group, I go around to the front of the table and score out the 'r' in Greek.

And for the past year, over the odd lunchtime when we we're in the same building, David and I meet at the bottom of the fire escape off the languages corridor, and he'll read something out loud, but quietly, because life's more difficult if you let it out that you're a total idiot. This last week it's been snatches of that Beckett play about the mouth. He doesn't stumble at all. It's a complete flawless monologue of things held in by this character, this woman, and suddenly let loose, in connected choppy bits. Brilliant. And it's the first time I really look at his lips, well, because what else can you look at? And I have to look away, as if I've caught him in flagrante delicto.

Then on Thursday when I'm walking to the bus he ducks under my umbrella and his hand is in my blazer pocket. I know that I'm hallucinating. I mean, it's not as if we've ever touched. We've been good friends. Just friends. And he's not the kind to stick his hand into a pocket without some kind of notice. But he has, so he obviously is – the hand is there. And the rain is going sideways. My tights are sodden and cold. There are puddles inside my Dr Martens.

"Come out to the house on Saturday?" he says.

"Just me?" I say.

"Well, yes."

"Oh. Right. Nice. Well. Ovid, *The Erotic Poems* – maybe I'll bring them." Actually, it's safe ground. It's a school text.

"Don't mention to Adam – d'you think?" he says.

And I know he means – don't mention it to Adam, or we're done for.

\*

I've been in his room once before, after school, but with Adam. Right now the dog is on the other side of the door, scratching to be let in. It's a small dog with a very neat haircut. I'm right at the edge of the bed. Don't worry. I won't go there. But my cheek is pressed into this pale blue pillow that has ruffles all round the edge, and it looks like the hired help has taken the iron in and out of each ruffle. I'm looking at the ships that run in diagonal lines over the blue carpet, at the matching nursery curtains with a frill along the pelmet, at the rain dribbling down the window panes. I'm looking at the hand-painted wallpaper of nautical flags and stencilled text: *stop carrying out your intentions and watch for my signals... keep clear of me... you may feel your way past me... I am manoeuvring with difficulty... man overboard*. There's breath on the side of my neck, a hand moving across my shoulders, down my back – pausing, pressing, like a doctor feeling for something that might be wrong – fingers brushing over my thigh, trembling. I wouldn't know this hand if it was cut off and I had to say whose it was. It has no blazer attached, no shirt cuff.

I pull his T-shirt up and over his head. And for a moment he is stuck, arms in the air, face all covered up by this white, tight stretched cotton. He's helpless. I lift up the edge of the T-shirt and kiss him on his mouth. It's easier like that, not seeing the whole of him, imagining he is not who he is. Though I have no one else in mind. He's blinded and having a job with buttons. One button breaks its thread and fires off across the room. I picture this little blue dot flying through the air, and feel its tiny thwack against the wall. Through the wall the guest bathroom is being re-done and I can hear, and can picture, because I passed it on the way, the his-and-hers sinks being dropped into this pristine ivory-coloured marble top, and can hear the plumber's mate cursing at the pipes.

“Where the hell’s this meant to go, Dougie? It disn’ae fit.”

We are cheek to cheek. His stubble is taking a layer of skin off my face. I can feel his eyelashes on my cheekbone. He has his nose in my ear. He is whispering something, and I think it’s important, but I can’t catch it. My left arm is wedged under his ribcage and is going to sleep, but this doesn’t seem the right time to say – *sorry, could you... can I just...* A loop of black hair is cutting through my view. I move it to the side and see a framed photo on the wall of rows of little smiling boys in shorts, knee socks, school ties, blazers, freshly combed hair. Wedged into the frame is a strip of photo-booth photos. He’s staring straight ahead, like you do for a passport, but there’s a hand coming from the right, finger and thumb touching his earlobe like it’s something precious, with Adam’s black-faced watch around its wrist. To the right of the photo I see two pairs of disembodied feet in a strip of wardrobe mirror. Two of the feet are wearing socks, dark blue, with yellow stripes. The socks are all wrinkled down at the ankles, and then the socked feet move and I can see joined-on white legs with black hairs. For a split second they become slabs of body parts lying out at the butcher’s, pieces you can’t place, that you move away from, that make you decide that this week is the week you turn vegetarian. And above the wardrobe there’s a booted, caped, muscular Superman garrotted by a piece of string and hanging from the yellow pleated lampshade. His blue tights have gone missing. He’s wearing those big signature red underpants pulled high up past his waist. This Superman has specs, a moustache, these long dorky sideboards, deep scarlet lips. They’ve all been drawn on in pen, really carefully. And he rolls over onto me and my view is gone.

\*

Like the point in old films where they light up a cigarette and share it – well, we don’t do that. We’re leaning back on pillows, squashed side by side in his single bed, the sheet pulled up to our armpits. His ears are red. He has tucked his hair behind them, which is what he does at school when he’s working out a problem. If he had a pencil he’d be rolling it over the back of his neck while he thinks. But he doesn’t have a pencil. He doesn’t have anything, except a watch and socks. He is sliding his fingers down my arm, then up again, and it’s like someone touching you when you’re not well and your skin can’t stand the contact. And I think, let’s pretend we didn’t. I’m wondering how I can say this. But when I glance at him, and in the moment before he’s aware that I have, he looks distraught, like someone just told him that he slept with his sister. Except that he doesn’t have one.

So, to distract myself, I think about sighing and moaning. There wasn’t any, not the right kind. Perhaps you shouldn’t expect that the first time. Perhaps it comes with practice? No, don’t say. Really. No. Anyway, I’m sure it has more of a chance when you’re fully on the job, when part of you isn’t looking round the room, when there’s not a stranger on the other side of the wall screwing gold-plated fittings onto the bidet.

“Sorry about the carpet,” he says. “I think mother’s hoping I won’t grow up.”

He smiles. He shrugs. He puts two fingers to his temple and shoots himself. And while we’re lying there, a car drives into the courtyard. There’s the sound of rain drumming on a car roof, windscreen wipers at full flap, a car door flung open, packages falling.

“Damn it,” a voice says.

“Ooh Christ, Mother,” he says.

He whips his legs over the side of the bed and tries to shove them into jeans that have been all sewn up.

The car door slams and heels trip and clatter over cobbles and through puddles. There’s the yelp that a dog makes when it’s stood on.

“Sorry, sorry, Dodger darling,” the voice says.

Then what sounds like a hip, or the whole side of a person, throws itself against the back door. I look around for my knickers, but they’re nowhere in sight. I pull on my skirt, my blouse minus one button, my cable-knit tights with the feet pointing in the wrong direction, my boots. I stuff my bra into my bag.

“We shouldn’t be here, I mean, as friends – just?” I say.

“No, no, it’s okay. Friends come round. Only – you’re a girl.” I’d spotted this.

\*

We’re sitting on the carpet when she taps on the bedroom door. Between us is a chessboard, and chessmen breaking ranks, falling sideways, sitting baffled on the wrong squares.

“Check,” he says loudly. “Oh, come in, Mother.”

And as the door opens the dog shoots in. It is wet and very hyper. It smells of something decomposing. It is jumping lopsidedly, licking and limping and manically wagging its tail, like it’s saying – *oh, wow, so this is where the party was all along!* And just before it throws up with excitement, it catapults itself onto the chessboard, and the stunted pawns, bishops, kings, queens, knights and rooks, who were glum-looking to begin with, explode in all directions across the room. It’s a wreck. But it was anyway.

I never found my knickers. Sorry. Too much information. God, Mum, I can’t believe I’m telling you this.

# Tat Usher

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Tat grew up in Aberdeenshire, St Andrews and London, had a horrible time at school, studied Philosophy at Aberdeen University and has drifted aimlessly around the country ever since. She currently lives in a converted boat house by a loch in Argyll with her large herd of plastic goats. Tat works for an environmental education charity, which mainly involves discussing the habits of earthworms with primary school children. Previously she worked for many years in adult literacy. Tat has been writing obsessively – stories, poems, plays, journals, letters, ridiculously long emails – all her life. In the last few years she has been taking her writing more seriously and in 2007 she graduated with distinction from the University of East Anglia's Creative Writing MA programme. Since winning a New Writers Award last year, Tat has been focussing on finishing her first novel, *Goatman*, and has been mentored by the writer Louise Welsh. Tat has had short stories published in several magazines and anthologies and recently had a story accepted for the Scottish Shorts series on Radio 4.

# Fifty-One

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I am on number twenty-eight when I see him coming out of the trough where you're supposed to have a wash before you get in the pool but no one does because the showers are dribbly and almost cold and it stinks of chlorine and blocked drains and there are always festering plasters floating around in the water that doesn't drain away properly so everyone just gets in the pool dirty and it's that loser guy from Eastenders and he hasn't had a shower either. Not that I care. The fiery feeling has begun in my belly and it's spreading up into my chest and that's good because it means the fat is burning up and I am slowly disappearing, swimming out of the darkness into the light. Every second there is less of me and I've been pure for more than three days now since the apple after school on Thursday and this is the longest time I've ever managed it so I'm winning and I'm going to get to fifty-one and then as a prize for winning I will jump triumphantly into the diving pool.

I lift my goggles up to check that it really is the loser and it is and he's sprinting across to the lane swimming section because he's exactly as skinny and pathetic-looking in real life as he is on TV, so he's desperate to hide himself in the water. He skids in a wet patch by the Walrus's chair and almost falls but keeps on going even though he should really just give up and lie on the floor because he truly is a Born Loser so there's nothing he can do about it. I might say a prayer for him even though I don't care because it isn't his fault. Running is against the Pool Rules which are clearly displayed on a big sign by the steps but the Walrus doesn't blow his whistle, possibly because the Born Loser is on Eastenders. Petting is also against the rules and there's a picture to show what petting is which is useful because I wouldn't have known otherwise. The Born Loser is wearing a light blue rubber sock which means he has a verruca. I also have a verruca but I'm not wearing a rubber sock because I love my verruca and I think everyone should have one.

I reach the end of twenty-eight and the Born Loser is clambering into the fast lane which I don't swim in because it's always full of men who thrash about causing tidal waves and they kick you and then swear at you for getting in their way and I start on twenty-nine without having a rest because I can only have a rest when I get to thirty-one. Three girls who are in the year above me at school and have breasts are sitting on the steps in their pink swimming costumes not swimming and they've noticed that it's the loser guy from Eastenders and they're giggling and pointing and the Born Loser is thrashing his way up the fast lane in a frenzy of froth. Thrashing should be against the Pool Rules. I don't thrash, I glide and I stay underwater as much as possible in the almost silence using my blue-tinted goggles that turn everything the colour of infinity.

I pass by Dolores and though I try not to look at the other bodies because they're all jerky and wrong I can't stop myself looking at Dolores who is always there in the slow lane swimming so slowly that it's almost imperceptible in her green frilly rubber hat and matching costume that's probably about a hundred years old. I named her Dolores because it means heavy sorrow and while her head stays above the surface her huge pale legs are so heavy with sadness that they hang down low and every few seconds she gives a feeble little kick like she's trying to free herself from her own body. *Dear God please deliver Dolores.*

Twenty-nine. I swim faster and the water feels cool on my hot skin and the fire is in my legs and arms and head now so I am almost invisible inhuman heat sliding through cold and it's beautiful. I have never been so light and pure. I could keep on swimming forever or until I dissolve in the blue, nothing but silver thought energy. Thirty.

I launch myself into thirty-one a perfect arrow gliding through the shallows and the next second I'm colliding with warm skin. A huge hairy arm thumps across my chest. I've lost my breath and inhale water come up choking and retching. *Watch where you're going!* he says even though he is the one who has decided to cross the medium lane and should have looked where he was going. He stands there glaring at me. I lift up my goggles. His locker key on its green rubber bracelet has scratched my shoulder and there's a tiny trickle of blood making its way down my wet arm. I watch him duck under the rope and lunge across the slow lane in front of Dolores. My chest aches and my eyes are burning with tears and I want to howl. Shouting is against the Pool Rules but howling isn't. Twenty and three quarter lengths still to go. I pull my goggles back on and finish thirty-one.

I lean my head against the tiles and breathe and now I notice that it's gone abnormally quiet because everyone in the whole place has stopped swimming or not swimming and is staring at the Born Loser including the Walrus whose gigantic belly is so tightly squeezed into his bright yellow lifeguard T-shirt that he is not normally interested in anything except shouting at kids who break the Pool Rules. Even Dolores has ground to a halt. The Born Loser is coming towards me on the other side of the red rope swimming like there's a blood-crazed shark after him and I can see in his eyes that he's lost all hope of escape and any moment now he'll feel the shark's fangs closing over his spindly legs snapping them like dry spaghetti and dark clouds of blood will pump out of the stumps as he sinks helplessly down screaming bubbles into the water while everyone watches with empty faces. I've only seen one horror film called Halloween and this is much worse than that because it's real and I don't know what to do so I start on number thirty-two when I have only had one minute of the five minute rest period.

*Dear God please have mercy on the Born Loser from Eastenders and don't let him get hurt he can't help being weak.* Perhaps the shark will come for me when it smells the blood leaking from the scratch on my shoulder. To distract myself I think of my best friend Alison and the time last winter when we were practising being dead in the shallow end by floating face down in the water and Alison held her breath for so long that the Walrus thought she had really drowned and came lumbering in all huge and hairy and psychotically yellow and when he realised Alison wasn't dead he bellowed *Get out! You're barred!* So we got out and all week we were so proud that we were barred but we came back the next Thursday and the Walrus ignored us. Pretending to be dead is not against the Pool Rules. Thirty-three.

That was a long time ago during my childhood when I could still do things like swimming just for fun and eating chips. We always had chips after swimming on Thursday nights when it was winter and it'd be dark when we came out and the air felt so cold and clean on our warm faces and our wet hair as we crossed the road to the Chinese chip shop and then we'd put so much vinegar on our chips that the newspaper wrappers would be soggy and Alison would have a pickled onion and we'd walk slowly home swinging our swimming things in Budgen's bags. That's what happiness used to smell like – chlorine and vinegar and chips but not any more. Thirty-four.

The man with the hairy arms will soon be eating chips with loads of salt and vinegar never once realising how lucky he is or wishing he'd said sorry. I haven't seen Alison for months because I don't have the time any more and anyway she doesn't understand about calories and lengths and being pure. My mum thinks I'm with Alison at the swimming pool four nights a week and that it was Alison's idea to train for the Olympics but really she's at home watching The A Team. *Dear God let Alison not have to grow up for at least another year.*

It's Thursday night and it's December but I can't even imagine eating a chip now and I feel dizzy and weak and possibly about to drown. My legs are hanging down like Dolores's and I want to stop but I can't till forty-one it's the rules and I have to be strong.

Somehow I've inhaled water again I grab the rope coughing and gasping and sinking and maybe the shark will come for me now. I look down at the tiled floor beneath me and I see it a silent shadow sliding past waiting for the right moment to strike. I can't stop the tears coming out this time but it's OK because no one will notice. *Dear God don't let the shark get me. Please give me the strength to get to fifty-one.*

I look around for the Born Loser and see him down at the shallow end hauling himself out of the water with his legs still miraculously attached and the three girls with breasts are heading towards him giggling and nudging each other and one of them shouts *Oi! She fancies ya!* and he's trying to get past them head down trying to shove them out of the way and one of the girls shoves him back and the Walrus's whistle shrieks as the Born Loser loses his balance spidery arms grabbing at the air as he falls backwards into the pool with a smack that echoes like a gunshot.

I duck my head down under the surface and close my eyes and count to fifty-one. When I come up for air I see the Born Loser running and slipping and skidding towards the trough and the entrance to the changing rooms and though his legs have not been bitten off he's bleeding to death.

*Dear God don't let the Born Loser from Eastenders suffer any more. Please let him die peacefully and float up to Heaven.* I let go of the rope and keep on swimming. I know I can do it. Thirty-five.

I am going to stay alive. Even though I'm far from forty-one. I've stopped and now I'm pulling myself up onto the edge and I almost can't believe it's happening because I am sixteen away from the end and yet I'm standing up and walking around the side of the pool past the Walrus who doesn't look at me and my legs are trembling so much it's hard to keep a straight line but I make it to the diving pool and the steps that lead to the top board and I take my goggles off and hang them on the rail and I climb up.

No one is on the platform or in the diving pool and it's so peaceful here. I look back at the main pool and I'm a million miles above that seething human soup watched over by the Walrus a fat chef who spits in it when no one is looking. Dolores is clinging to the edge at the deep end staring up at the ceiling her face like sad white uncooked dough. I wave at her but she doesn't wave back and I wonder if she somehow knows that I've cheated.

Or perhaps I've become invisible. I walk to the end of the white runway slowly one step at a time and when I get there I look down into the deep blue. I grip the edge of the board with my toes and my heart is racing because I've broken the rules. I'm here even though I haven't won staring into a square of perfect summer sky and in another moment I will rise feet-first like a fiery upside-down angel to meet it.

# Nicola White

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Nicola White grew up in Dublin and New York. She worked as a contemporary art curator and as a television and radio producer before concentrating on writing. Nicola has had several pieces of short fiction published in addition to features for newspapers and magazines.

This year Artlink Edinburgh published Nicola's commissioned audio story *Something in the Pause* and she was also shortlisted for the Mslexia Short Story Prize. In July, she was invited to Dublin to read at the Stinging Fly New Writer's Showcase. She has recently been signed by Rogers, Coleridge & White literary agency. Her mentor was Edinburgh-based agent Maggie McKernan who worked with Nicola on the final stages of her first novel.

# Working At It

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There's a ball just beside the path. A manky tennis ball – fluorescent once, greying now. How did it get out here?

I stop and scan the miles of tussocks and heather, like an idiot, like I might catch sight of someone in white reaching up for a serve. Dougie walks on. I toe the ball out from its mucky hollow and kick it along the path towards his heels. He ignores it at first, stubborn eyes held to the horizon, but I keep on knocking it ahead of him until at last some reflex flips in his head and he draws one foot back slowly then flicks the ball far up ahead, sprays of water winging from it. After that we take it in turns to kick. I know we'll be talking soon, and allow myself a smile behind his back. The rain keeps coming, but it's soft.

Dougie and I had been going out for maybe two years, but we hadn't really gotten anywhere. Going backwards, if anything. I was really trying to work at it, that's what I told my sister. She said I shouldn't have to, that love shouldn't be such a bloody effort. Maybe she's right, maybe she's just showing off.

By the time we get to the little loch the rain has gone off, but our matching Oxfam raincoats are damp through, obscure smells rising from the material.

We'd seen this spot many times from the A9, a place that looks like an arrangement in a child's drawing book of a tree, a pond and a house. Just one of each thing, set slightly apart as if to avoid overlap, but in the nothingness of the rest of the landscape they were a magnetic cluster – the oak tree wide and sheltering, the tiny loch like a pewter mirror, the house symmetrical with peeping dormers. And there's something odd about this house. It's got no garden, no path or gate, like it's been transported from somewhere else, dropped onto the grassland like a brick. The windows are opaque black, glassless.

We always said we'd come here. Today is the day. Today we've run out of every other thing we might do.

There's a small rowing boat at the lochan edge, even though three pulls would have you across to the other side.

"We could have our picnic in the boat," I say.

"What?"

"You know, floating on the loch."

"There's no oars."

“So? We’re hardly going to drift away”

“Don’t be daft.” Dougie turns his back to me, studies the house. At least we’re talking.

“You know they do this deliberately,” he says, “the estate owners. They let a house go to ruin rather than have the trouble of letting it. A house that’s probably stood here for two hundred years. Selfish bastards.”

I don’t respond. I’ve heard versions of this speech already, and I don’t disagree with him, so there’s nothing to say and there’s nothing he particularly wants me to say except perhaps *that’s so true*.

He keeps on about the crimes of landlords while trying to force the porch door, rattling at it until something behind it drops and it gives way. Meantime I’m dribbling the tennis ball up the slope to the door. “Stay” I say to the ball, rolling it into the angle between wall and ground and giving it a pat with my toe. Dougie laughs.

The house is emptied out, bleached-looking. Peeling wallpaper hangs in cones from the corners. The floor is covered in bits of glass and flakes of plaster, bird shit too. We sit side by side on the windowsill. I bring the sandwiches out of my coat pocket and Dougie takes the small flask of tea out of his.

Our sandwiches are cheap orange cheddar with Hellmans. It was the best I could do with what he had at the cottage. Back home my mother used to make the most elaborate picnics – salmon wrapped in puff pastry, meat pies with a boiled egg in the middle, perfect meringues kept safe inside a napkin-lined tin box. Things inside things. A whole shelf of the kitchen cupboard at home was given over to picnics; to plastic plates and glasses, a selection of squat and tall thermoses, tiny cruets, bundles of mustard and sauce sachets squirreled from cafés. It’s no use telling Dougie about these picnics. He’ll think I’m trying to make some kind of point about the gap between my childhood and his, the old argument of who had and who hadn’t – as if fancy eating guaranteed extra love and I somehow owe him the difference.

I don’t want to be my mother, but I don’t want life to feel this paltry either – this glum man, two pasty sandwiches in a bread wrapper. This is all I have carved for myself in this world. *A poor thing, sir, but mine own.*

“That’s a beautiful fireplace.”

He grunts agreement.

“That alcove probably had bookshelves.”

“Aye.”

“Wouldn’t it make a lovely room? Imagine a table just here, you could sit at, look out and write. I’d love a house like this.”

“They’re just going to let it fall.”

“I’d have friends come all the time. A big table outside.”

“Once the roof goes, that’s it.”

“It hasn’t gone yet. Maybe we should just ask at the estate office. No harm in asking.”

He looks at me briefly then stands up. I hear him on the stairs and manage to stop myself calling to him, shouting *Why bloody not?* Why is it so impossible to think of us living together, having friends. Maybe not under this roof, okay, but...

It took up so much of my head, always thinking of ways to get round him, how to steer him towards what I want for us. Dougie is like a knot I’m only halfway through untying.

I find him in an upstairs bedroom, holding something rust-coloured in his hand. I think it might be something nice he’s found and walk over. It’s a dead robin.

“Bastards,” says Dougie to the bird.

“Must’ve come in the window.”

The ceiling of the room is slanted and the walls panelled with narrow strips of wood, painted a flaking yellow. I go to look out the window. Shards of glass cling on in the corners of the frames. The robin could’ve got back out, easy. Across the railway track and up the hill I can see vans passing on the main road, the soft waves of engine noise making me feel suddenly sleepy. Dougie comes up behind me, and I flinch, thinking he’s going to do something stupid with the bird, but he must have got rid of it because he just puts his hands on my shoulders, kisses the side of my neck.

“I’d love a house out here, wouldn’t you?”

“Some day,” Dougie says and moves away. I make myself not say any more.

We walk around the oak tree, throw pebbles in the loch. We’ve seen it all now. I’ll think about the house later. I’ll lie in bed and let myself furnish every room.

“Let’s go down to the railway line.”

"Aren't you forgetting someone?" says Dougie and points towards the porch. I run back to the house and pick up our raggy ball, give it a kiss and call it my darling before throwing it to Dougie who heads it into the air then sets off with it at a fast skip to the railway line.

There's a break in the fence where a farm road leads over the tracks. There are no barriers, just a couple of warning signs with yellow lights on top.

A patch of blue opens in the clouds and the sun shines off the rails for a moment. Dougie puts his head to the metal, says he can hear something far off to the south.

I take some change out of my jeans pocket.

"What do you think would happen if we put a coin on the track? Do you think it would squeeze it flat?"

Dougie looks up at me.

"You serious?"

"I'll bet it'll flatten it – maybe push it right into the rail."

"It'll just flick it out of the way."

"Let's see."

There's a thick short line on the horizon, moving.

"Do trains drive on the left?"

"Don't kid about, c'mon." Dougie stands up, brushes his hands over his coat and repeats his order.

"Nessa, come on."

He never uses my name much, except as a caution. I pick my rail and put a penny on it.

"Bet you fifty pee it'll squash it."

Dougie shakes his head like a disappointed father, but comes to stand beside me at the fence as the warning lights start flashing and we watch the train grow bigger "I'm not happy about this."

"A penny can't harm a train."

"That'll be the quote in the paper, won't it? Hey? After the crash."

"Okay, I *get* it."

I stomp back to the track, watching the train out of the side of my eye. I know I've plenty of time, so I linger a little picking it up, and sure enough, he's suddenly upon me, grabbing my neck and arm hard to pull me back to the fence line, and I think we should embrace then, saved from danger, but Dougie's face is not wanting to be kissed. He's looking away from me, breathing hard, watching the train bear down.

I want to laugh as the train rattles by a full half minute later, no danger at all. The pressure of its passing is like a door slamming into us, and Dougie's shouting at me now, but I can't hear a thing over the train. I *really* want to laugh. There's never enough laughing. That's the problem with my life.

Dougie's at the side of the path now and he's bending down to pick something up and I think, it's so clear, he's going to throw a rock at me. And at the same moment that I think that, I think – *If he throws a rock at me I can leave him*. I think it in the time it takes for him to straighten up.

But it's not a rock. It's the ball, and he turns away to throw it, leaning way back and flinging it with a grunt so that it flies far and I know I'll never find it again in the rough ground. Our ball. Almost a little creature, it was, a little rehearsal of what we might have one day.

It begins to rain again on the way back. My coat is heavy with it. Dougie'll be annoyed for hours now. I wonder what we should do tomorrow.

# **Young Writers**

# Introduction

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I was the first writer I ever met – which is nowhere near as cool as it sounds. There were no writers living in the town where I grew up and no writers from exotic locations ever dared to visit my school. It was a school where you got beat-up for admitting you could read, never mind foolishly declaring you dreamed of being a writer one day.

So the journey to make that dream come true was frustrating, confusing, terrifying. Perhaps worst of all, it was solitary. The advice I needed felt a million miles away. I was never encouraged to take my writing seriously because no one around me knew how to be serious about it.

Serious encouragement has been the biggest aim of both Scottish Book Trust's Online Writer-in-Residence and the Young People's Mentoring Scheme. Young writers who joined the Writer in Residence project were the first to read exclusive short stories by some of the UK's top teen/young adult novelists. A series of creative writing podcasts fully loaded with hints, tips and advice were available both on the Scottish Book Trust website and YouTube. All this leading towards a short story competition which discovered hundreds of teenagers eager to have their fictional voices heard. Eleven of the most distinctive were chosen for publication in *The Death Predictor and Other Stories*.

Of the winners, four were chosen to take part in the Young People's Mentoring Scheme. These fortunate few have not only worked with me on developing their first novels but have also been given access to literary agents (thanks Lucy Jukes and Jenny Brown Associates), editors and publicists, even book designers (thanks Scholastic Children's Books). The biggest concern now being that all of this good advice could swamp a first-time author. But through use of the GLOW schools' intranet system they've been able to keep in contact with each other, sharing their work and building their confidence. In other words, everybody encouraging one another within a small but serious writers' network.

## **Keith Gray**

**Author, Scottish Book Trust's first Online Writer-in-Residence**

# Manakan Christie

# Fear

---

I don't want to show you the only thing I have to lose.  
The effort, the hope, the faith that goes into it  
Is too much to put out to your opinion.  
Fear of rejection. Fear of detection. Fear of perplexion  
Over what I meant at the time but now,  
Painfully trying to force your understanding and approval  
Will just feel stupid.  
The reaction I get will always be  
A little less great than I'd hoped.  
Making it guaranteed to be heartrending in that,  
The best I can do, is make you sympathetic.

# Pass over me. Pass me over

---

The sun, the trees  
The dappled back of my neck  
The atmosphere concealed  
Inside ten words  
That can only be admired once.

# Cat

---

Her cat wasn't like the other cats, which is why she made him. Her soft little fingers pulled apart bits of pieces and began to roll them up into shapes and soften them with the heat of her palms. When she had finished, the cat looked at her and she looked at him and scratched the back of her hand.

The cat said he would like a biscuit, so she gave him one and watched while the wet from his lips soaked into the biscuit and made its edges dark and soggy until the next bite was taken. The cat finished carefully and then looked up again. His mouth made a line that joined up to his small pink nose in the middle. This made it look like he was smiling. He was not, he was staring.

The cat asked for a jacket so that he could go outside. She found him one and he slipped it on. The jacket was corduroy and looked like brown crêpe paper. The cat rubbed the lines in the jacket very slowly, then reached out and took her hand. They went outside, the cat walking like a sock filled with sand.

The cat asked her if she knew it was dark and she tipped her head forward in acknowledgement. The cat looked up at the dark and breathed out. He did not breathe in again, only stopped breathing out at some point. Then the cat asked for a piece of dark. She picked up a glass jar from the ground and took off its lid. Then she put the lid back on again and held up the jar. The cat stared, then exclaimed that it was dark in the jar so that was fine. He took it and tucked it under his arm. The rim of the jar rubbed against the jacket and made a zippy sound.

The cat looked up and asked for liquorice. She gave him a little and he ate it quickly, winding it around his tongue and into his mouth. Then he returned his gaze to the dark ahead.

The two padded back inside. The cat lifted his leg onto the step and brought it down on powdered dark. He fell forwards. In one quick movement he thumped to the floor. She could see the back of his furry head and his elongated body on the floor. The jar had broken and she did not like this. She disassembled the cat and squashed the soft dark pieces in her fingers. She pushed them together and twisted the clump. And the dark rose from the shattered jar around her.

# Charlotte Gordon

# Squirm

---

It is dark and warm. The fur of my siblings is soft and comforting, and I can hear my sister's heart as the side of my snout rests against her coat. I can smell my mother. But I can't see her anywhere. She must have gone outside. What a perfect excuse...

I creep over my sisters' sleeping bodies, towards the tunnel leading out of our cosy den. Adventure. Light. Air. Water. All are within inches of my quivering nose as I taste the light breeze. The water is higher than it was last time. It is rippling up the slippery, muddy slide which leads down to the river. Cautiously, my head emerges from the den. Slowly, slowly; I must always check for danger as I am leaving. That's what mother does.

The light glints. I freeze. The ends of my long, long whiskers don't though – they keep trembling, and so the light keeps twinkling off them. I want to catch the light. I want to hold it. I want to watch it squirm in my paws. I stay still. I focus on my prey. I pounce!

Losing my balance, I skid down the mudslide on my back, splashing into the water with an embarrassing lack of grace.

Shafts of light pierce the surface, sparkling off the bubbles streaming from my thick fur. The sunlight is refracted by the ripples in the water. Concentric circles of light and dark flee away from me. The dark patches capture my interest as they scatter. The light stays to fight in an imposing wall, broken only by the shadowy figures flying through it. I choose a new target. The shadows. They skim away from me in fear. But I'm not going to let them go. I'm going to catch them.

They sweep away from me, those shadows, as I pursue them through the drowsy river. They hide under pebbles, fading from my view. But they can't escape me. Diving down to the bottom, I tuck my paws around a pebble and flip it over. No shadow. Bother.

I progress to another stone. It's bigger. Maybe more than one shadow is hiding under here. I push as hard as I can, and the rock rolls over. Small, darting figures skim from under it. Shadows! I snatch one eagerly, and hold it in my paws as I swim up to the surface.

I emerge with a splash. The low sun glistens mischievously off the gentle waves of the river. It catches the tiny fragments of light and water thrown up by the rapids not far away. I flick my attention away from all of this, intent on studying the shadow in my paws. It has little feelers and waving legs. Before I can examine it any further, the cheeky critter slips out of my grasp and disappears into the patterns thrown down into the river by the dancing waves and the sparkling sunlight. I dive after it, leaving only a string of bubbles behind me. The ripples and the shadows team up against me once more, creating those circles which dance away so very enticingly. I am tempted, but something else catches my eye. Another shadow – a bigger one this time – which has the nerve to be sitting right in the middle of my mother’s river!

Advancing with all the intimidation I can muster, I prepare to scare it off. But then I recognise the shape. Not my mother, not a shadow... a fish. A big fish, too – almost bigger than me. A salmon, is it? Yes. A salmon. One fish you never try to scare away. You try to tempt it closer..

Surfacing with barely a ripple, I take a big, deep breath, then submerge. The salmon is still there. It turns to face me. We both freeze. Suddenly it seems much bigger than before, and much, much, *much* more ferocious. It’s going to eat me alive!

Then, unexpectedly, it turns and scoots away. Bewildered momentarily, I realise that *it* is afraid of *me*!

I dart after it, thinking how pleased mother will be if I catch a salmon. I can just see the flick of its tail disappearing behind a rock, the flicker of a fin vanishing into a clump of weed.

There it is. In the big, clear pool where the water is almost perfectly still and swirls only gently under the bridge. The salmon is sitting there, waiting to be caught. He thinks he’s safe, he does. He’s wrong.

I begin to stalk him, creeping closer and closer under the water, hiding behind whatever cover I can find, when suddenly – splash! In a huge flurry of white bubbles and sparkling waves, the salmon is gone. I surface in a sea of confusion. And there is my mother – pulling the glistening salmon ashore to my sisters, and calling for me. I paddle over to them, suddenly realising how hungry I am.

As we eat, I sense someone behind me, and turn. There, up on the bridge, is a little human girl, watching us in fascination. She smiles in enchantment, as curious about me as I am about her. She has large, brown eyes, just like my sisters. Those eyes gaze intently, watching our every move. I look straight back at her, cocking my head at her strange, furless face. There is something on top of her head which most humans don't have. A strange something, made of dried grass, which shades her from the sun.

Suddenly, her eyes glint, catching the light reflected by the river. I freeze. The two bright sparks dance in the shadow of her face. I am enchanted by them. I want to *hold* them... I want to watch them *squirm* in my paws...

# Katie Hart

# Four Bullets

---

You'd think, when you've got a 9mm handgun in your back pocket and you're walking through a busy corridor, that people would notice, right? Not if you're dorky Damon Matthews they don't. If you're Damon Matthews people just walk on by, maybe give you a push or a shove but they never look at what's in your back pocket, 'cos who cares if dorky Damon's got a gun, it's not like he'd use it... would he?

The thing about high school is that once you've been given a label it sticks like superglue. I'm a dork; Jacob Smith, my best friend from childhood, is a jock; my sister Charlotte is a Goth. These labels determine the next five years of your life. 'Cos I'm a dork, it's OK for jocks like Jacob to torture me. But I'll get my revenge.

I have Spanish first but I'm not going. Instead I walk straight past the class and out the main door. Next to the bench where all the addicts get their fix (it wasn't built for this purpose; Oakview High is messed up but not that messed up), is the electrical box which controls the lighting for the school. Kind of a stupid place to put it if you ask me, but no one ever does. I unscrew the screws and the metal door swings open. I pull the gun out of my back pocket and fire the first of my four bullets right in the centre of the box. There is a deafening bang. It's time to view my handiwork. The whole school is in darkness. Phase one complete. Phase two – find Jacob. You see I have four bullets for a reason. This isn't a random killing spree and I'm not like those psychos you read about. I have a plan. One bullet for the electrical box, another for a dramatic warning shot before I use the third to shoot Jacob Smith and the fourth... that's just in case things go wrong.

Jacob Smith was my best friend all through school until we got to Oakview High. Jacob was sporty and popular and I was not. He pretty much ditched me the first day of freshman year and joined the jocks. He settled pretty quickly and soon he, Chase Crawford and Nathan Jones were the three most respected and feared guys in school. If this wasn't bad enough the three of them took great delight in making my life miserable, stuffing me in lockers, tripping me up in the cafeteria, the usual stuff. It's like Jacob has forgotten he has come over to my house nearly every day since we were eight to play GI Joe in my backyard. Now Chase and Nathan, who are in the year above us, are the only GI Joes on his mind. My high school experience should be made into a handbook for freshmen, *How Not To Do High School* or *How To Be The Biggest Dork In School* or maybe even *How To Get Revenge*. I turn a corner and I'm met by the principal, holding a torch.

“Damon Matthews, get back to class, no students allowed out of class during a power cut!”

“Uh, yeah sorry sir, I’m just trying to get back there, I was, eh, at the, um, bathroom.”

I’m a fantastic liar, those years of telling my mother my day at school was fine have really paid off.

“OK, son but careful. It’s not safe in the dark.”

“Sure... thanks... sir.”

I walk quickly away attempting to cover the handgun with my backpack but he doesn’t go away, I know ‘cos his torch is still shining behind me. I panic slightly and duck into the first class I see, hoping it might be empty. I walk straight in on a class of seniors.

“Can I help you?” It’s Mr Baher, my German teacher from last year.

“Uh, sorry, I must have walked into the wrong class,” I lie, desperate to get out of there. We then engage in the usual chitchat you always get from your old teachers, “How’s senior year?” “What college are you going to?” Then suddenly there is a shriek from the back of the class.

“Ohmygod, that kid has a gun!” Chaos ensues. Mr Baher stands up abruptly and shuffles out from behind his desk. The seniors shriek and start to rush to the back of the class. Before I can even really think about what I am doing my gun is out of my back pocket, in my hands and pointed at them.

“Shut up, shut up, I mean it! I’ll shoot if you don’t stop shouting.” What am I doing?

“You heard him class, stay quiet, do as he says” Mr Baher has gone really pale; he is absolutely terrified of me. Pretty much everyone has stopped shrieking; except this one girl in an Oakview Eagles cheerleading outfit, who is sobbing uncontrollably. I walk over to her and grab her arm. I am not going to hurt her, I just want to scare her, but she screams really loud. I put my hand over her mouth and drag her to the front of the class.

“Dude, let her go. Seriously, let her go.” I recognise the voice as that of Chase Crawford. This cheerleader is his girlfriend. I saw them together the other day when I was buying the gun. I’ve heard they’re pretty serious. Talk about sweet revenge. If I can’t get Jacob, I’ll get Chase.

“Make me,” I say, twirling the gun in my hand like a baton as sort of a reminder I have it; like they can forget.

“What has she done?” Another cheerleader pipes up.

“Look, enough talking from you, I didn’t come here for a social event.”

“Why are you here?”

I do warn them. I fire a shot into the ceiling without even thinking. It stops them talking. They just stare, wide-eyed for a while. But the class upstairs don’t. They scream and scream and suddenly we hear frantic footsteps out in the corridor. I run over to the door and quickly lock it.

The cheerleader is curled up in a ball on the floor. I pull her up again, tightening my grip on her arm. The door knob is shaking and people outside are shouting at us to open up. I feel the cool metal of the trigger on my finger. I don’t have much time. I pull the cheerleader up close, so close that I can feel her throbbing pulse against me. I am not supposed to hurt her. I’m only here to hurt Jacob. But it is too late, there is no going back. This isn’t kindergarten; I won’t say sorry and get a time out. I’m eighteen, is that old enough to go to prison? And those people outside will get in soon and then...

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

I bring the gun up to her chest. Silent tears roll down her flushed cheeks. She shakes her head.

“Don’t.” The word escapes her mouth in a half whisper.

“Please, don’t,” says Chase. He has this weird look in his eyes. It has worked. I squeeze the trigger and watch as the girl falls limply into my arms. The colour drains from her face and her blood spatters on my shirt, but I don’t even notice. It’s more the fact that she’s so limp. Like a ragdoll slipping out of a young child’s hands, I let her slump to the ground. There is a scream from her friend, the other cheerleader, who runs over and cradles the girl’s lifeless body in her arms. Mr Baher walks towards the crying cheerleader and puts his arm around her. He looks at me.

“You’re a good kid, Damon, you don’t need to do this.”

I open my mouth to reply to this but as I do three armed cops burst through the door. They point their guns at me; I hold mine in my hands. My heart pounds hard against my chest. The cop is walking slowly towards me. I have planned for this. I have my fourth bullet, just in case. I pull the gun up to my temple, the metal pressing hard against me. For the first time today there is silence. I pull the trigger.

# Mathias Sean Lord

# Alone

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The loud clicking noises issuing from the keyboards, like millions of tiny insects running for their life, were drowned by the sudden chiming of a large clock set in the far corner of the cramped office space.

The clicking ceased abruptly, as if the insects had all fled down a large hole in the grey, tiled floor.

Every one of the workers in the office rose from their computers and were now putting on coats and scarves, chatting loudly all the while.

Only one person did not jump to his feet when the clock struck.

Jerome had been counting down the last few minutes, dreading the time when the clock would chime five. The woman on Jerome's left was talking over him, speaking animatedly to the man on his right of her many plans for the weekend. Jerome sat sweating, praying that they would not ask him what he was doing over the next two days. They didn't. No one ever did...

Jerome waited for the office to clear out, before rising slowly from his chair. His large stomach knocked against the desk, making him lose his balance. He grabbed the chair and stood, panting slightly. Looking back at him reflected in the computer screen was a large man with chocolate-coloured skin, dressed in a light blue shirt, the latter damp with sweat. There was no smile upon his round, fat face. His eyes were sad and lonely: two islands, alone in the vast ocean that was the world, which they gazed upon with fear. Jerome packed his tiny briefcase and awkwardly pulled on his massive coat, his breath still unsteady.

He was always the last to leave the office on a Friday. He dreaded the time when he would be asked about his plans for the weekend. If someone ever bothered to ask, or talk to him at all, he would lie and say he was going to spend his free days with friends, friends he did not have.

Out in the street Jerome walked slowly, his heavy breath steaming in the winter cold. His eyes darted around suspiciously, fearing the sight of someone's derisive gaze, staring at him, Jerome, the loneliest man on earth.

Jerome would go home, then take a trip into McDonalds and order three burgers and a large plate of chips – drowning it all in ketchup. The young girl who took his order would always look over his shoulder to see how many he was ordering for, and Jerome would always mumble, "Just for one..." He sat at the very back of the dining area, away from the windows and the children who pointed and stared. Afterwards he would waddle across the street to the cinema.

Jerome loved the movies; they were so much better than the life he led. If the film was sad, he would cry, because he knew the feeling only too well. If it was a happy film, he would cry, because his life could never be as good. He also loved the darkness that enveloped the theatre. Here at least no one would stare at him and whisper. Jerome always sat in the back row. If it was full he would choose another movie lest the kids behind him would pelt him with popcorn and laugh at his huge mass sagging into the neighbouring seat. He always came early to make sure of a seat, and always the man selling tickets would ask, "Just the one, sir?" and every time Jerome would answer,

"Just the one..."

Some of the saddest movies he watched were not the ones where others cried, but the ones where they laughed and smiled.

Jerome would laugh at the jokes and smile, but tears trickled from his dark eyes all the same.

When the other people left the cinema, talking loudly and discussing the movie, he sat in his chair, eating his popcorn with extra butter, watching the credits roll on the screen, deep in thought about what he had just seen. After an entire life of near solitude and shyness, Jerome had seen his fair share of films, and knew much about them. His dream was to leave his dead-end job as an accountant, to escape his tidy desk and the unease he felt working there, and rise in his company to become a film critic. But he never dared apply, fearing his co-workers would scorn him.

Jerome sat in the cinema until the cleaners came in, before forcing himself to leave. If he felt like it, he would watch a second movie, because he dreaded the time when he would have to leave the warmth of the building and go home to his cold flat, where he sat all alone, waiting for Monday to arrive.

Although he was safe in his home, he was also lonely. The only noises that broke the silence were the sound of the TV, Jerome's only loyal friend.

Each time he left the safety of his flat seemed like a monstrous journey. The world outside was too big and too fast for him. Just crossing the street felt like crossing a river full of crocodiles, who took the shape of staring children, sneering young men, and women who cast him haughty looks of disgust. It was especially the latter of the three that destroyed him and ruined his almost non-existent self-confidence.

Apart from his dream of being a movie critic, Jerome dreamt of having friends he could laugh with, and who would not laugh at him. He wanted to meet a girl who did not cringe at the sight of him, but cared for him and liked him as he was.

Winter wore on. Christmas films appeared in the cinemas and McDonalds set up a suitably seasonal menu. But this did not lift Jerome's spirits. He dreaded this happy celebration more than any other time of the year. Christmas was a time of joy, a time spent with friends and family. Jerome had no friends or family.

Soon people were discussing holiday plans, and even Jerome, could not escape questions. In addition, the firm's yearly Christmas party was approaching fast. Jerome had never been to one. Even after ten years at his job, he still felt unwanted and shunned. It was far better, he convinced himself, to sit at home with a bottle of Coke and a bag of chips, watching a good film while he snuggled up under his blanket, hugging his cushion.

As November ended, Jerome took to leaving the office as fast as he could, and avoiding others in the lunch breaks. Posters announcing the party seemed to pop up everywhere, like scarlet flyers with the sole purpose of reminding Jerome how alone he was.

In one of his lunch breaks, Jerome stood at the notice where you wrote your name if you wanted to attend the party. He gazed unseeing at the long list. A young girl walked up to him, took out a pen, and signed her name. She turned to him and smiled widely. Jerome just stared at her.

She was rather pale, with dark hair and twinkling hazel eyes that caught him in a suffocating embrace. He watched stunned, as she crossed back to her desk again and began writing on her computer. He had never seen the girl before.

After ten years at the company Jerome knew who all the workers were; although he didn't know them in person, he was a good observer. The girl he had just met was unknown to him. Assuming she must be new, he turned to the list and searched for her name.

*Mia.*

It was short, but incredibly beautiful to him. For a long time he just gazed upon her untidy scrawl, written in bright red ink in contrast to the sea of humble blue surrounding it.

That afternoon, when everyone was packing up, Mia once again walked over to Jerome, who was still at his desk, trying to make his massive form smaller.

“Hi,” she said. “You going to the party?”

“No,” he managed to stutter.

“Why not?” she frowned. Jerome shrugged.

“Come on, it’ll be fun!” and with that she strode off, pulling on a bright red coat.

The next day Jerome walked passed the list of partygoers, just to see Mia’s name again. He located it, shining as bright as ever in that sparkling red ink. There was a new name, however, also added in red ink. It was at the very bottom and read: *Jerome*.

“I put your name up.”

He turned to see Mia watching him.

A strange feeling filled Jerome as he turned and walked to his desk, an uncertain smile glowing upon his face.

\*

Street lamps cast their beams on Jerome, where he walked along the pavement, his boots crunching in the newly fallen snow. His shadow was enormous: a stain of black depression upon the pure and joyful snow.

Jerome was anxious. Sweat trickled down his back. Over the years, he had developed this uncomfortable reaction to stress and embarrassment. Tonight he was heading for The Wizardry, where his company usually held their Christmas party. It was a restaurant he often walked by on his way to McDonalds – its smells wafting towards him like tempting spirits inviting him inside with their delicious odours. Jerome would stop and gaze at the diners sitting within the fashionable restaurant, wishing he could join them and be an equal. But his wages wouldn’t afford him that choice. Only once had he eaten there, sitting at the very back, working his way quietly through a delicious steak. Afterwards Jerome had gone to an IMAX cinema nearby and watched a movie. It had been one of his better days that year.

It had been his birthday.

Now he stood, once again, in front of the lavish building with spotless windows, through which he could see a crowd already assembling. Jerome put his hand on the doorknob, ready to push, but moved no further. His breathing quickened and beads of perspiration began to gather on his brow. Fear and nerves gripped him, preventing him from seeing anything but his outline in the sparkling window: a fat, lonely man with only his dreams for company. Jerome’s eyes began to water, and he was about to turn away, when someone approached the place where he stood. It was a middle-aged man whom Jerome knew only by name. Alex strode towards him. He was the senior film critic at Jerome’s firm, and a good-natured person as far as he knew.

“Bloody slippery, isn’t it?” Alex grinned at Jerome’s unmoving figure. “So, are we going inside? This cold is giving me the heebie-jeebies!” And without another word, he led Jerome through the door and into the warmth beyond.

A blur of sound and movement threatened to overwhelm him as he was thrust into the chaos of bodies and chatter.

“You came!” a welcoming voice erupted from within the mass of people. Mia stepped forward and gave Jerome a brief hug.

“You two can get seats over there, next to me, if you like.” She indicated two empty chairs on the far side of the table. Alex smiled and led Jerome forward once again.

Jerome was nervous over the prospect of sitting down to a dinner with other people he would have to talk to. However, after he had been poured a glass of wine by a smiling waitress and had his plate filled, he felt less uneasy and even stopped sweating.

“So, Jerome, I hear from your colleagues that you watch a lot of movies?” Alex was speaking to him. Jerome flushed and began sweating again. Did they know? Did they all know about his life?

“I... I watch... a bit, yes...” Jerome stammered.

“Excellent! You must tell me what you thought of the new Batman film! Straight sixes and a possible Oscar nomination – not bad for an action film, eh?”

Without knowing he was doing it, Jerome had soon lapsed into a long discussion about old and new movies – all his fears forgotten.

After Jerome’s particularly long and reflective confession of his views on *The Shawshank Redemption* and its fellow *The Green Mile*, Alex sat quite still, just gazing at Jerome. A few of the other employees were also paying attention. Jerome, who had forgotten himself completely, suddenly returned to reality. He grew warm and anxiety seeped through him. His nervous shaking had just started up when Alex said, “Ever considered a career as a film critic, Jerome?” Jerome actually dropped his fork on the floor, but he did not notice. His watery eyes were fixed on Alex as if he was God incarnate.

“Tell you what – you try it out for a while, see what you think, and if you like it you can have the job. There’s a vacancy now anyhow... that is if you want to, of course?”

“I...” Jerome just gaped.

“Of course he wants to!” Mia winked at him and turned to the others.

“Merry Christmas everyone!”

A week later Jerome was standing by the ticket office at his local cinema. "Ticket for one, sir?" the man inquired.

"No," said Jerome, as a dark haired woman emerged from the ladies and walked to stand beside him. "For two." The ticket seller stared at Mia before returning his attention to Jerome. "Back row?"

"No," smiled Jerome. "Front row – reserved seats for the critic."

Jerome sat grinning and throwing glances at Mia all the way through the film. It was a simple and joyful one, but still the best Jerome had ever been to.

After it had finished they went to McDonalds – Mia ordering a burger and some fries, Jerome grabbing a bowl of apples in cinnamon. The two of them sat by the window, Mia talking away, Jerome chewing at his apples and smiling broadly as he had never smiled before.

On the crispy night of New Year's Eve, Jerome was walking along the bustling main street, his back arched, his breathing steady, and a smile curling his lips. He was heading for Alex's place, where he, for the first time since his childhood, would be spending New Year's Eve with friends. Jerome picked up his new cell phone and scrolled down his contact list – it was short, but at least it now existed. He found Mia's name and pressed the call button.

"Hello?" her cheerful voice crackled in his ear. For a while he was still, just listening to her breathing.

"Who is it?" she sounded uncertain.

"Jerome."

"Oh, hi! Hurry up – the turkey's getting cold and Alex is stressing over the pudding." Again, Jerome let her wonderful voice glide through his eardrums, savouring every tone. Now he had a friend to laugh with, and a girl who smiled at him and cared for him.

Grinning to himself, as he now did every day, Jerome strode off down the street, embracing the New Year, a happy man, no longer alone.

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