



**the BRIDPORT PRIZE
2006**

THE BRIDPORT PRIZE

POETRY AND SHORT STORIES

JUDGES

Jane Gardam • Short stories

Lavinia Greenlaw • Poetry


*Sansom &
Company*

First published in 2006 by
SANSOM & COMPANY
81g Pembroke Road, Bristol BS8 3EA

e: info@sansomandcompany.co.uk
www.sansomandcompany.co.uk

© the contributors

ISBN 10: 1 904537 68 5
ISBN 13: 978-1-904537-68-7

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.

All rights reserved. Other than for purpose of review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior consent of the publishers.

Typeset by MFK Mendip, Frome
and printed by MPG Books, Bodmin

Contents

Story Report Jane Gardam	5
Poetry Report Lavinia Greenlaw	8
<i>Rue de Vaugirard</i> Elizabeth Dalton	10
<i>Cold Weather</i> Katharine Braddick	22
<i>Glad</i> Kerry Swash	31
<i>Feeding Time</i> Zac Barker	39
<i>Metal</i> Andrew Craigs	50
<i>The Sandwich</i> Mischa Hiller	55
<i>Phantoms</i> Annie McDowall	62
<i>Panegyric</i> Anthony Snider	73
<i>The Same Old Figurative</i> Joel M. Toledo	75
<i>she took a fall</i> Jonathan Hadwen	76
<i>Milk and Eggs</i> Isabel Ashdown	77
<i>Supermarket Girl</i> Helen Carr	78
<i>perspective</i> Claudia Daventry	79
<i>First time Mum</i> Sarah Davies	80
<i>The Light Age</i> Christopher James	81
<i>Deflations in Sad Weather</i> Cynthia Kitchen	82
<i>Invocation</i> Shaun Levin	83
<i>Waxwing Bohemians</i> Devon McC Jackson	84
<i>To Friday Evening</i> John Okrent	86
<i>99¢ dream</i> Janet Ward	88
<i>The Cliffs at Marpi</i> Greg Hrbek	89
<i>Caught</i> Deborah Willis	101
<i>Me and the Motorway</i> Gerry Ryan	112
<i>Running Around Without a God In Their Hearts</i> Jon Bauer	122
<i>Under the Table</i> Elizabeth Koch	134
<i>Turtles</i> Richard Lambert	140
Biographies	151

JANE GARDAM

Short Story Report

After the month of reading the longlist for the Bridport Prize I have great respect for those who produced it from the initial 4,800 entries. I had only to choose first, second and third prize and ten supplementary prizes yet the block of MSS that arrived by special delivery at my door looked a formidable heap.

After a worrying drought, when all the MSS seemed alike and I feared that a number of authors were attending the same creative writing class, the desert began to flower and three blossoms sprang up, one of them I felt sure might deserve the first prize. Which it won.

Ten runners-up were more difficult. There was a grim uniformity about the worlds they described. I felt that if I were a Martian I would not want to continue with any space-probe that might take me anywhere near planet earth; a place of malaise, disillusion, infidelity, malice, cowardice, madness, cruelty, marital discord, damaged children with ghastly parents, drugs, booze, child-abuse, war, massacre, suicide and scant religious faith or hope for the future. Humour was in short supply and so was beauty, human or divine, and there was little comfort or notice of the wonders of earthly landscape.

However, when I came to disregard subject matter, as I should, the clouds lifted. It is character that is at the heart of everything and it is character that is being wrestled with in most of the stories. I decided to give my judicial self a rest, live my life and see which of the characters would continue in my mind.

I will remember the girl in **Phantoms**, a successful accountant who lives for facts and logic and suddenly finds that she has become a compulsive liar inventing for herself and her arid world a populous, passionate life. I will remember the two characters in an eastern-European train in **Metal**, a story of the holocaust, simply because they live. This author is way ahead of the field in dialogue. She (I guess she?) knows how to do it and I wonder if this could be a playwright? And I shall remember the floundering, ageing woman and her young lover in **Caught** because the author sees his/her two main characters as prisms, considering their possible alternative next steps. There is a Joycean sense of depth and mystery. **Under the Table**'s wild and wicked heroine, lost

to right and wrong, streams through the story in her 'pretty car', lost to her unhappy family. **Turtles**, set in a quiet London hotel where lonely ageing men stay the night, has three characters in a cat's cradle of intrigue and despair – and all of them redeemable. **Me and the Motorway** has a dreadful heroine dear to my heart. She is a vulgar slag, the dregs of 'the north-east' where I come from. She is none too clean, size 22, living a thoroughly messy life. Failed daughter, mother, girlfriend, attended by no guardian angel ever, she has done time in prison and will do so (quite soon!) again. Yet she is curiously innocent, funny, brave and constantly astonished by life. The story tells of the day when the gods decide to give her one great bright glorious treat. **Feeding Time** is the portrait of a damaged child, now a man, who learned of child-abuse within an apparently outgoing, ordinary family. Disgust has made him crazed and cruel. The story is his mad monologue before a psychiatrist. It is accomplished, convincing and horrible. **The Sandwich** is about a familiar contemporary type: attractive, devious, irresponsible and outrageously immature. He is attending the birth of his child. Terrified and inarticulate he flies from his girlfriend in labour 'to get a sandwich' and doesn't come back. In the background an all-seeing mother-in-law.

Two on the list do not depend on character but should be mentioned. They are about cosmic tragedy. **Running Around Without a God In Their Hearts** has the widowed victim of the great tsunami taking his young daughter by the hand and introducing her about their ruined village to all the exponents of the great religions there who might possibly interest her in the notion of God. And **The Cliffs at Marpi** is the pilgrimage to death of the hundreds of women and children who threw themselves into the Pacific ocean as the horrified Americans approached by sea, to occupy their island. This one might well have won but there are limits to the short story. This is film or opera.

The three winners

Glad is an interior monologue of a seventeen-year-old girl dying in a hospice, attended by her twin sister. Two twigs on a branch. There is no trace of mawkishness. The sister quietly paints her sleeping sister's fingernails. A tired, cheap bouquet she has brought lies on the bed and fades with the girl.

Cold Weather's title is not perhaps strong enough for this powerful Greek myth of Persephone, the bringer of Spring. This is a timely tale if, as we are told, the world is careering towards the end of Light. It was a

Short Story Report

relief to read the great story again. It is always new. It was good to be with eagles and not sparrows.

The first prize, **Rue de Vaugirard**, stood out from the start. Its subject is serious: the aftermath of war. It deals with revenge, racism, insularity. Into the threadbare, scoured post-war Paris of the late 1940s step three Persephones, Californian innocents bringing back the Spring. It is their first time abroad but these bouncing, well-fed babies, full of idealism, air and space are totally fearless. They have strong views on everything (at school they were known as intellectuals because they read novels!) and they descend on a Paris pension and its terrible Madame as if they own the world. The very smell of fusty, skint, ruined Paris is here. It is reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield's **In a German Pension**, or the Canadian short story writer, Mavis Gallant, but it is much funnier. Paris rouses itself, unconquered, before the brave new world but both are full of energy, argument and fire.

LAVINIA GREENLAW

Poetry Report

The things I was looking for as I made my way through the entries were either abstract or technical: surprise, precision, imagination and risk; and a proper attentiveness to and use of cadence, lineation, enjambement, metrics, etc. Yet the word that came to me when a poem stood out was *alive*: that it was a breathing, palpable, energised, shifting creature.

There's a lot of dead poetry about. Some of it is beautifully made. There's poetry which seems to be written to reassure people who don't like poetry, who feel nervous and bored at the thought of it and are delighted to be offered something that sounds like poetry (portentiousness, complex) and yet slips down easily and settles the soul. In this age of proficiency there are poems made from creative-writing kits and those whose explosiveness is no more than a tiny fizz of domestic epiphany, like a hangover remedy dissolving in water.

A poem has to become more than that of which it is made. As Robert Lowell said, 'A poem is an event ... not the record of an event.' In that sense, it has to take on a life of its own and so, yes, has to be alive. I've dismissed poetry that is beautifully made and nothing else, but a good poem begins in the beauty of its making. I am not using 'beauty' reflexively. Beauty is a vital part of a poem in terms of harmony, grace and proportion, in the adjustments and balances that bring it into being, that make it work and give it what it needs to run itself. This has as much to do with meaning as with music. In this age of broken metre, there is often too little attention paid to the line – how it works within itself as well as in its place. Much of the intrigue of a poem lies in the way in which its lineation isolates and lights a particular word or a phrase.

I have talked about what I was looking for and what I wasn't looking for, and would now like to say something about what I found. The poems that came first, second and third were provocative. I thought: Oh I like this! But does it stand up? That's a bit risky ... Does that big word earn its place? ... It sounds good but ... Is that just being grand or romantic or does it make absolute sense? ... These line breaks, how do they add meaning? ... I like the way it subverts its own argument but what does it add up to in the end? Are there just glittery pieces all over the floor? How do they work aloud?

Poetry Report

None of the top three winners is long, but each contained enough complication to repay several re-readings, and revealed more each time. They caught my eye, drew me in, made me want to argue with them and having won me over, pleased me more than some I liked on first reading but which quickly revealed their limits and flaws.

The winner, **Panegyric**, is a poem with such a singular and coherent voice that its complexities are worn lightly. It risks collisions of concrete and abstract, actual and figurative in ways that are illuminating rather than muddying. The panegyric is traditionally a public address, the fulsome, extensive praise of a person or people, and here it is being used to praise a forcefulness which is as brutal as it is joyful, and whose logic exposes the limits of human judgement. The poem's language ranges across the full compass of such feeling, and each line is properly balanced and measured.

I'm wary of poems about writing poems, yet **The Same Old Figurative** won me over with its argument, and the way in which its voice is shaded by the clever placing and misplacing of the poem's parts. A poem should be in part a disturbance of language, and the point of that disturbance should be to reveal. This poem uses subtle shifts of meaning, agitated further by lineation and cadence, to amplify and encompass its complicated subject. It risks the Poetic with its talk of hearts and music, but does so to insist on what matters without irony or comic relief. Like **Panegyric**, it has something real to say, something hard to pin down but absolute.

The third-prize winner, **she took a fall**, is a fine example of form working in extremis in order to serve an extreme subject. It is a remarkable distillation of shock, confusion, helplessness, action and reaction. The hurly-burly of the entire emergency is caught in the fractured language and the ways in which observations and perspectives trip over one another.

I would like to thank the readers who shortlisted the poems, in particular, Sara Hudston.

FIRST PRIZE

ELIZABETH DALTON

Rue de Vaugirard

Later it was Madame's apartment they would remember – the light filtering in from the rue de Vaugirard, the fringed lampshades, the piano with its flowered Spanish shawl, the smells of cooking and musty furniture. More than the Seine or Nôtre Dame or the Louvre, this layered, redolent dimness would be Paris for them.

Pam and Emily are sharing a room with pension chez Madame. California girls used to light, air, and space, they are at first disoriented by the crepuscular gloom of Madame's apartment, with its dark corridor, its forbidden rooms, its 'objets à ne pas toucher' – painted fans, ormolu clocks, dusty china shepherdesses, lace doilies and *têtières* in profusion. Some rooms are blocked off by tea trays set lengthwise between the door-jambs, to keep the cat from escaping through the front door or falling out the window, according to Madame, but Kikou leaps nonchalantly over these barriers, which are really for Pam and Emily, who are not allowed in the salon unless invited by Madame, the kitchen except when Madame is in it, or the closet with the telephone unless Madame is there to time the call. This labyrinthine interior, with its arbitrary arrangement of free and forbidden zones, dense with Madame's past and bristling with her fetishes, seems to represent the very architecture of her soul.

Pam is tall and fair, with a big aristocratic nose and a long chin, and is often mistaken, in her camel's hair coat and plaid muffler, for an English girl. Her face radiates kindness and anxiety, a constant fear of hurting someone's feelings or making a fool of herself, expressed at critical moments in a habit of shaking her hands as if to shake off water drops.

Emily is smaller, with shaggy brown hair. In her heavy sweaters and skirts and linty knee socks, she looks like an East European, possibly a refugee from some failed revolution. Her total mutism in French makes her seem feeble-minded. In the metro she tries to practise by reading the signs half-aloud. "Réservée aux mutilés de guerre," she murmurs, not noticing the stares of other passengers. 'Jamais plus d'un litre par jour.' One day

someone dropped a small coin into her palm, and outside the toilet at the Comédie Française a woman mistook her for the attendant and gave her 25 francs.

A third friend, Aggie, has been exiled on a scholarship to the dismal city of Lyon. Pam and Emily consider her an existentialist, although they're not sure what they mean. In her senior year she had an affair with a Frenchman, a graduate student, which they think must be the reason she can actually speak French. She was very unpopular in their sorority house, where the three of them were known as intellectuals because they read novels. Aggie caused a crisis by proposing to admit Jews and Negroes, which almost everyone voted against, including Suzie Mandel and Sharon Levine, who are somehow not considered Jewish. She also demanded that the Negro maids join them at the dinner table, which the maids said they did not wish to do. Emily voted against these proposals, because, she told Pam, she was tired of Aggie bossing her around. After she lost the vote, Aggie said they were all fascists and tried to move out, but her parents wouldn't let her.

Pam and Emily agree it's better to have Aggie a few hundred kilometres away, where she can't judge them for their terrible accents, their missed classes at the Alliance, their failure to visit the Louvre every Saturday. Still, they feel that if she were in Paris, they'd see and do more. They've invited her to come for a weekend at the end of November. Madame has agreed to put a cot in their room, and has surprised them by saying she won't charge for it.

Madame is a widow with sharp black eyes, dyed black hair pulled tightly into a bun, and *palpitations de coeur*, for which she takes drops in a glass of water. A photo in the salon of a dark-haired young woman in an evening gown standing beside a grand piano, inscribed across the bottom 'Concert, Grenoble le 21 octobre 1928,' is evidence of Madame's brief career as a singer. Now she gives lessons to a few untalented pupils, whom Pam and Emily imitate by making yowling noises until one day Pam catches Madame's hurt expression. 'She must be desperate for money to listen to that,' Pam says.

They are not allowed to put more coal in the little black stove in the dining room – Madame counts the lumps in the coal box – or to turn on the lights before 5 p.m., when it's already dark. When they bathe in the strange chair-like tub, for a fee of 250 francs, they are supposed to fill only the well-like lower part where their feet go, leaving their bare bottoms freezing on the cold porcelain ledge. If the water runs too long, Madame

shouts 'Ça suffit, vous faites le Niagara!' Or she just rushes in through the flowered curtain with which she has replaced the door and turns off the faucet herself. When they complain about any of this, she accuses them of knowing nothing of life. Like all Americans, they're rich, they did not live through war and occupation.

Dinner is Madame's strong point, especially when it's boeuf bourguignon, or roast chicken dripping with golden juice, or little steaks, slightly tough but very tasty with pommes frites and puréed spinach. One day Madame was spotted coming out of the shop with the golden horse's head over the door, but she claimed she was only buying meat for Kikou. A malevolent-looking Siamese tom, Kikou jumps onto the dinner table, laps the sauce from Madame's plate, even licks butter from the dish. When Pam and Emily protest, Madame says indignantly that Kikou is cleaner than they are with all their baths. 'N'est-ce pas, mon Kikou, mon bijou?' she murmurs, draping the big beast over her shoulder like a fur piece.

They eat bravely, but sometimes their courage falters. One bite of Madame's tripes à la sauce de tomates sent Emily running from the table with her napkin over her mouth. They've come to believe that Madame cooks innards – boudins dark with blood, rognons de boeuf with the tang of urine – when she's angry with them. Or else she gives them a piece of herring and a boiled potato. The second time that happened, Pam protested. 'Pas bon, Madame,' she said, pointing to the cold grey fish. 'Nous avons faim.'

Madame replied that they know nothing of hunger. During the occupation she was always hungry, sometimes there was nothing but chestnuts, from which she tried to make bread. No milk, no cheese. Pam and Emily have beautiful teeth, she observes, unlike her daughter's. They've noticed the greyish, fragile-looking teeth of young people.

After classes, they usually meet Pam's boyfriend, who is working on his novel, at his café on Boulevard Raspail, where they order paté or ham sandwiches on crusty baguettes, with cups of thick chocolate. They have both vowed, after visiting the Turkish toilet in the back, never to eat there again, but they're always starving after classes. They simply don't use the toilet now, or if they must, they hold their breath and try not to look. They've learned to erect a mental barrier between the back of the café – the filthy hole without paper, the smeared walls, the cold water tap without soap, the single damp towel – and the delicious food in front. On days when they don't go to the café, they stop at the patisserie and buy little

quiches, or tarts with jewel-like berries on pale yellow crème patissière. Somehow, they're always hungry; the more they eat, the more they want to eat.

When they first arrived in September, the city seemed so golden, so glamorous – Nôtre Dame, the quais of the Seine, the Deux Magots, where they caught a glimpse of Sartre, just the back of a head with spiky ill-fitting hair, so they couldn't be sure. But now that it's November, the light from the overcast sky disappears earlier every day. They begin to notice how dark the buildings are, black with the soot of centuries. On the building next to theirs is a small plaque with an inscription. 'Ici est tombé le 16 août 1944 Jean-Marc Letellier, 15 ans. Mort pour la France.' Now and then a little bouquet appears on the pavement below the plaque, remaining undisturbed long after it has withered.

The war, which seems to them so long ago, is still all around them, hidden and silent. They are not completely ignorant, they know what happened to the Jews. Rick, Pam's boyfriend, is half-Jewish, and the father and brother of Aggie's French graduate student disappeared in the camps. In a little cinema near the Sorbonne, they saw a film that showed the piles of corpses, the heaps of shoes and women's hair. Sometimes they look at the people around them in the streets and shops, wondering what parts they played. Most of them, they suspect, tried to survive by seeing and knowing as little as possible. When they mention these subjects, people press their lips together and look away, as if at a faux pas. In her conversation class, Pam tried timidly to formulate a question, but the teacher, an intelligent dark-haired young woman who might or might not be Jewish, cut her off, saying 'On n'aime pas parler du passé,' one doesn't like to talk about the past.

Sometimes Madame says things that make them nervous. Nothing really bad, just a way of saying someone's a Jew – only a fact, after all. 'Petit Juif' is definitely worse. A certain shopkeeper she has a mysterious grudge against is a 'petit Juif,' a little Jew. But she speaks ill of every group, including, reassuringly, the Germans, 'les Boches,' all stupid according to her. The Russians are without exception crazy, the English always betray their friends as at Dunkerque, the Arabs are 'une race tarée,' a blemished race. One day a handsome Tunisian student lingered with Emily for a moment at the foot of the stairs, where he was seen by the concierge. That night at dinner Madame said Emily was not to bring Arabs into the building, she would not have her *locataires* gossiped about.

‘Vous êtes, vous êtes ... très préjugée, Madame,’ Pam struggled to say, but Madame looked at her uncomprehendingly.

‘I don’t think you said it right,’ said Emily.

‘At least I try to speak French,’ said Pam, ‘which is more than you do.’

With the approach of winter, the apartment is cold. When Madame drops a lump of coal into the stove the fire blazes up for a moment, but the stream of warmth soon frays out to nothing inside their bedroom, with its draughty windows overlooking the rue de Vaugirard. And yet, propped up on pillows, wrapped in blankets and the slightly sour-smelling dark green bedspreads, reading Jane Austen instead of the Maupassant assigned for class, they find the atmosphere somehow cosy. The weather is awful, their landlady is intolerable, they can’t seem to speak French, yet they’re enjoying their year in Paris.

On the last Friday in November, Aggie arrives from Lyon, looking completely different from when they last saw her in September. But after a few minutes they see that she’s still basically the same, even wearing the same grey pleated skirt she’s worn all through college, rolled up at the waist to make it look shorter. It’s just that her red hair is up in a twist and she’s wearing a lot of black eye makeup.

‘You look very ... French,’ says Pam encouragingly.

For dinner, Madame has made soupe à l’ognion, so fragrant, so richly topped with crusty bread and golden brown cheese, that they don’t mind the leftover veal for the main course. After the usual fruit and cheese, there’s a real dessert, little brown pots of silky crème caramel.

Madame seems enchanted with Aggie. ‘Vous parlez bien français, pas comme celles-là,’ she says, casting a contemptuous glance at Pam and Emily. Aggie speaks French well, she does her hair well too, she looks chic, ‘comme une Française.’

‘Aggie, you make us proud,’ says Pam, only half ironically. Emily, who thinks Aggie’s collapsing chignon and black eye makeup look tarty, says nothing. No wonder she complains of being approached in the street by men who ask her if she wants to ‘faire un petit tour.’ Meanwhile, stimulated by praise, Aggie is launching subjunctive verbs.

The next day, Aggie has a date for a drink at a café on Boulevard Montparnasse with a French student she met in September, a brilliant Normalien who has been writing seductive letters. But the afternoon begins badly, with Madame rushing in on her in the bathtub shouting about Niagara and Aggie running naked down the hallway dripping water and

yelling that Madame is completely crazy. 'Quelle emmerdeuse!' she shouts from the bedroom. Pam hopes Madame has not heard this word, which is clearly very bad, something to do with *merde*.

Then her rendez-vous turns out disappointingly. It was expected to be a prelude to dinner and a romantic evening, but the Normalien turned up with several companions, one of them apparently his girlfriend. Aggie comes back early in a furious mood.

At the dinner table, Madame's mouth is drawn into a tight line. Her parquet, she says, is ruined with water stains, and furthermore, she had been told Aggie would be dining out. The main course is a glistening white mound that looks rather like cauliflower, but shiny and gelatinous. They poke at it suspiciously and take little bites. It doesn't taste bad, in fact it doesn't taste like much of anything. 'Qu'est-ce que c'est, Madame?' Pam asks, smiling politely.

'Amourettes,' replies Madame. The three girls look at each other blankly. 'L'échine,' says Madame. Aggie says she thought *échine* meant spinal cord, but since they're eating it, it must be something else. But Madame repeats the word, pointing to the back of her neck.

'Oh, God,' mutters Emily.

'Non!' Pam pushes her plate away. 'Pas bon, Madame. We don't eat *échine*.'

'Mais c'est excellent!' says Madame indignantly. She wants to know why they won't eat spinal cord, it's a delicacy, they're worse than Jews with all their phobias.

Aggie puts down her fork. 'Qu'est-ce que vous avez dit, Madame?' she asks belligerently.

'Just ignore her,' says Emily. 'That's what we do.'

But Madame is telling Aggie how the Jews won't eat normal food because they think themselves better than everyone else. They're all the same, they think they can do whatever they want, they take what belongs to others

'C'est pas vrai, Madame!' Aggie says, her eyes blazing.

'Mais si, Mademoiselle,' says Madame. She knows this from personal experience. A 'petit Juif' took away her lace shop, he's still there, they can see him, just down the street. The Jew had had the lace shop for many years, but in 1942 he was taken away by the Germans, who let her have the shop. Then in 1945 the Jew turned up again, after everyone thought he was dead, and wanted to take the shop back. The authorities went along with him, they let him have her shop!

‘Mais pourquoi pas?’ cries Aggie. Her makeup is smudged in black circles around her eyes and her red hair sticks up in a wild frizz around her face. It wasn’t *your* shop, she says, it was *his*. ‘Did you understand all that?’ she hisses, turning to Pam and Emily. ‘Sort of,’ says Pam miserably.

Emily is picking nervously at the cheese, a handsome block of Roquefort, setting off landslides of crumbs. ‘Mais arrêtez!’ says Madame, Emily is ruining the cheese, it was very expensive. ‘Oh, pardon, Madame,’ says Emily, but then she forgets and starts chipping and nibbling again.

‘Can we please talk about something else?’ says Pam.

But Aggie is asking Madame why she thought the lace shop was hers. Madame says she ran it very well for three years, it was a good living, never before or since has she had such a *bonne affaire*. But the Jew was just like all the others, so *avare*, so greedy for money ...

‘Mais vous êtes anti-Sémite!’ Aggie splutters. ‘Vous êtes, vous êtes ... collaborateur ... collaboratrice!’

‘Pas du tout, Mademoiselle,’ says Madame calmly. She was not a collaborator, she did not denounce anyone, everyone knew who the Jew was. You Americans, she says, you don’t know them. We know them well here.

Aggie looks thoughtfully at Madame for a moment, then says she too knows them well, at least she knows one. ‘Vous ne saviez pas, Madame, que Pam est Juive?’

‘Ah, no!’ says Madame, her hand to her chest. ‘C’est pas possible!’ She turns with a look of horror to Pam, who understands with a sinking feeling that Aggie has just said that she, Pam, is Jewish. She feels herself beginning to smile foolishly.

‘Mais on ne le dirait pas.’ Madame looks at Pam in bewilderment. One would never know it, she says, with the blond hair, the blue eyes ... Perhaps *un petit quelque chose* with the nose But is Aggie sure?

Aggie nods sternly.

‘Mais je ne savais pas!’ Madame gets to her feet, clutching her chest. She would never have wanted to hurt Pam. Aggie speaks French well and Emily is a nice little girl, but Pam is truly good, even though she’s Jewish. Aggie is to tell Pam that. ‘Elle est si bonne,’ cries Madame. ‘Je suis désolée!’ Suddenly, horrifyingly, she emits a loud sob and rushes from the table.

‘Oh, dear!’ Pam is shaking her hands. ‘Oh dear, oh dear. Now she’s probably having a heart attack.’

Kikou leaps onto the table, stares at them balefully, and begins eating bits of *échine* from Madame’s plate.

‘Shoo! Down beast!’ cries Pam, waving her arms. ‘Why did you do that, Aggie?’ Her face is crumpled with distress. ‘I mean, you could have said *you were Jewish.*’

‘It wouldn’t have been such a good lesson,’ says Aggie, looking pleased. ‘She’s fond of you!’

‘Yes, but you’re leaving tomorrow, I have to *live* here,’ says Pam.

‘How can you live with an anti-Semite, a collaborator?’ cries Aggie. ‘How can you stand it here, the bathroom doesn’t even have a door!’

‘We can’t move,’ says Pam. ‘Our parents have paid till June.’ Emily stops crumbling the cheese and looks at Pam, whose face goes red. Emily knows exactly what Pam is thinking because she’s thinking it herself. Their parents pay by the month, but the idea of trudging around Paris in the rain to look at rooms is unbearably dreary. In spite of everything, they’re settled here, they’re used to it, they almost like it.

Madame is impossible, but they’re used to her too. Pam even knows how to make her laugh a little, by teasing her about Kikou getting fat. Occasionally Madame does something nice, like not charging for Aggie’s visit and making onion soup and crème caramel, two of their favourites. As for her prejudices, they don’t have enough French to argue with her, and anyway how could anyone reform her at this point? Now they just roll their eyes when she says the Vietnamese are sly or the Africans dirty. But this new information, about actually trying to keep the Jew’s shop, is different. Pam wishes desperately she hadn’t heard it.

Now Madame is sobbing behind her door and Emily is nervously breaking off more Roquefort and nibbling at the bits in her mouse-like way. ‘Please stop destroying that cheese!’ cries Pam.

The next morning the kitchen is empty. There’s a pot of coffee, a saucepan of warm milk, and bread and butter, but Madame, who usually fusses about in her old maroon silk wrapper, is absent. Aggie leaves for the Gare de Lyon. From their window they watch her walking down the street carrying her little suitcase, looking at once defiant and vulnerable in her oversized duffle coat.

‘Well, that was a strange weekend,’ says Emily.

‘Very,’ says Pam.

Fortunately, it’s Sunday, so they can hide in their room until Madame goes out for her weekly dinner at her daughter’s house in Auteuil. On Monday, however, when they come back from class, Madame beckons Pam into the salon.

‘Je veux vous demander pardon, Pam,’ she says in a trembling voice. If she had known, she would never have said ... what she said. She even has a great deal of affection for Pam, who is not like the others, ‘les autres.’ She hopes they can forget everything and go on as before.

Pam would like to ask which ‘others’ she is not like, but overwhelmed by Madame’s trembling voice and welling eyes, she finds herself smiling and repeating the only phrase that comes to mind. ‘Ça va, Madame, ça va,’ she says, backing towards the door and making little Japanese bows.

For a while, things go on as usual, but sometimes Pam catches Madame scrutinizing her with puzzled interest.

‘She’s looking at my nose,’ Pam tells Emily. ‘I can feel it.’

‘Are you ashamed of being Jewish?’ Emily asks with a smirk. ‘You always said it was so boring to be Episcopalian.’

‘I’d be delighted to be Jewish,’ says Pam, ‘except I’m not. I’m living a lie!’ she says melodramatically. ‘I can’t tell her I’m Jewish because it’s not true, and I can’t tell her I’m not because she’d think I don’t want to be. Oh why,’ she cries, shaking her hands, ‘did Aggie do this to me?’

Then on a dark and rainy day about two weeks after Aggie’s visit, Pam, having turned on the lights, is lying on the floor searching under her bed for a black sock. Suddenly the door bursts open; Madame rushes in and turns off the lights. ‘Mais vous faites la foire ici!’ she cries. Pam must think she’s having a party, who ever heard of turning on the electricity at noon?

‘God damn it!’ shouts Pam, who has banged her head on the metal bed-frame. ‘That’s it! Madame, vous êtes ... vous êtes anti-Sémite et ... et collaboratrice et’ She searches for the word and finds it, ‘... emmerdeuse!’ This sentence, the longest and most expressive she has ever uttered in French, fills her with satisfaction. Sitting on the floor holding her sock, she says calmly ‘Nous allons partir, Madame.’ They’re going to leave.

Madame looks stunned for a moment, then mutters, ‘Alors, partez.’

Emily, returning with a bag of croissants for their lunch, is horrified. ‘Oh, no,’ she wails, ‘what have you done to us?’

Emily can stay if she wants, says Pam, but personally she, Pam, can’t take another day of groping around in the dark, of falling over trays and being afraid to take a bath, of putting up with Madame’s anti-Semitism, which is even worse now that she says nothing. ‘At least she was honest before,’ says Pam. ‘Now she just stares at my nose.’

Emily claims that Pam is imagining this and anyway she could tell Madame the truth. But Pam declares she will not, Aggie would never forgive her.

‘What do you care what Aggie thinks,’ Emily grumbles. ‘She’s neurotic.’ And where are they going to go? Probably some place out in Neuilly or Vincennes, miles away from everything, with another crazy landlady. ‘She’s not that bad,’ says Emily. ‘You’re the one who always says how much she needs the money. Anyway, she didn’t kill anybody. She didn’t run a concentration camp.’

‘Oh, no?’ says Pam. ‘What do you think this place is?’

They lug their suitcases to the little hotel where Rick stayed when he first arrived. Later, as dusk deepens into darkness, they look out the window of their meagre room. By craning their necks, they can just see Madame’s building, up the street and on the other side. If they were there, the lights would be on by now, they’d be curled up on their beds wrapped in sweaters and quilts reading Austen or Trollope, or making tea on their little *réchaud* and inhaling rich oniony smells from the kitchen. At dinner-time, they go to Chez Grandmère, their Sunday restaurant, and order the cheapest thing, plain omelettes, but they can’t afford to eat there every night. They’ll have to find another room with pension.

The next day after class they scan the bulletin board, but there’s only one offer of a room for two, and it’s in the 16th arrondissement. The thought of being so far from class, from Rick, from their café, fills them with despair. They buy ham sandwiches and pastries and eat them in the hotel room sitting on their sagging beds. ‘At least there were rugs at Madame’s,’ says Emily, gazing mournfully at the splintery floor. ‘At least we didn’t have to share a filthy toilet with about ten other people.’

They’re going to pick up more of their things that evening, after Madame’s last pupil has left. The concierge, Madame Gras, lean and stringy despite her name, is standing in her doorway in her stained apron as they come in.

‘Oui? Vous cherchez quelqu’un?’ She gives them a hostile stare, as if she’s never seen them before, then relents and pushes the *minuterie*, which goes out, as usual, in the middle of the first flight. They stumble and curse, but they’ve learned to find their way up, groping for the next button on each landing until they get to the apartment.

When the door opens they’re enveloped in the sublime odour of beef and onions simmering in red wine. Madame is wearing her blouse with the

lace collar and her garnet brooch. There is boeuf bourguignon, she says, 'Vous aimez ça, Pam, n'est-ce pas?'

'Oui, Madame.' Pam smiles and nods, asking herself why she can't ever wipe this damned smile off her face. Madame knows very well this is her favourite dish.

They can put their coats in their room, says Madame. It hasn't been rented yet, although the concierge has already heard of someone who's seeking a lodging in this desirable location.

'We should just pack our stuff and go,' Pam whispers when they get inside their room. But Emily says they can pack after dinner, she can't stand another omelette.

After the boeuf bourguignon, there's salad with endive, which Madame seldom buys because of the price, then what's left of the mangled Roquefort and a few sweet, knotty little apples. Emily asks about Madame's afternoon pupil and does a half-heart imitation. Madame asks about the hotel, which she's heard is 'sale et cher', dirty and expensive. The prospective tenants are coming tomorrow, she says, two English girls. Of course, the English can never be trusted, look at Dunkerque. She prefers Americans, but as Pam and Emily wish to leave She regrets 'le petit malentendu d'hier,' yesterday's little misunderstanding. She had heard the apartment door slam – she shakes her finger playfully at Emily – and thought they had gone out and left their light on, as they often do.

When she goes into the kitchen, Pam rolls her eyes, whispering 'What a liar!'

'That boeuf bourguignon was mighty good,' Emily whispers back. 'And did you notice, she must have put extra coal in the stove. It's kind of warm over here.' She rubs her hands in a little pool of tepid air.

Madame reappears carrying a big bowl. 'Oh, mousse au chocolat!' cries Pam in spite of herself. Madame's chocolate mousse is the most delicious thing either of them has ever eaten, different each time, tasting of coffee or rum or orange, or best of all, just of chocolate, as tonight.

'This is très, très bon, Madame,' says Emily. She finishes her portion and begins scraping little bits of chocolate from the rim of the serving bowl. Madame's fingers tighten around her spoon, but she says only that it's a pity about the English girls, because the English don't like good food, they eat only potatoes in water and things from cans. She much prefers to cook for those who appreciate 'les bonnes choses,' like Pam and Emily. Emily looks meaningfully at Pam, who is savouring each spoonful of the mousse slowly, in a trance of pleasure. As for 'cet autre petit malentendu,'

that other little misunderstanding, says Madame, she wants Pam to know that she has always respected the Jewish people. Anyway, she knows Pam is not like the others ... 'Stop!' cries Pam, shaking her hands. 'Arrêtez-vous, Madame! Je ne suis pas une Juif.' Madame's mouth drops open.

'I don't think she understands,' says Emily. 'You didn't say it right.'

'Mais je comprends très bien!' cries Madame. She always knew it, she had told her daughter, it was impossible, Pam could not be Jewish. But then why had their friend Aggie said such a thing? Is she Jewish?

Pam glares at Emily, who is stifling laughter behind her hand. 'Elle est Juive?' asks Madame, looking suspiciously at Emily. Which one of them, she wants to know, is Jewish?

'No one,' says Pam, waving her hands around. 'Pas Juif.'

Madame's face goes blank with bewilderment. 'Mais alors pourquoi?' Why, she wants to know, did Aggie say such a thing?

Pam tries to explain, grasping desperately at the fragments of French that float through her head. 'Vous, Madame, vous n'aimez pas Juifs. Pas Bien. Aggie aime Juifs.' Madame doesn't like Jews. Not good. Aggie likes Jews.

But your friend lied, says Madame, 'elle a menti.'

'Nous aussi,' says Pam stoutly, pointing to herself and Emily. 'Aimons Juifs.' They also like Jews.

'Mais ma pauvre petite Pam, elle est méchante, votre amie Aggie,' says Madame, shaking her head. Their friend Aggie is wicked.

Madame opens the little door of the stove and pokes at the coals, stirring up a red glow and a puff of warmth. Outside the windows it's pitch black and pelting rain. She spoons the rest of the mousse into their bowls. It would be very disagreeable to go out in this weather, she says.

'We could just stay tonight,' says Emily, 'and then decide tomorrow.'

'If we don't go, Aggie will forever scorn us,' says Pam. She dips her spoon into the dark velvety chocolate and raises it slowly to her mouth.

They shouldn't worry themselves too much about Aggie, says Madame. 'Cette fille ne sera jamais contente.' That girl will never be happy.

They spoon up the chocolate in silence, considering this remark. Kikou springs onto a chair, then onto the table. He gives them an arrogant stare, then lowers his dark muzzle to the bowl and begins licking up the remains of the mousse.

SECOND PRIZE

KATHARINE BRADDICK

Cold Weather

There is such a thing as being loved too much. I sound selfish, I suppose. I suppose I probably am. She tells me often enough. In early spring, usually, about three weeks after I've got home. Got back here, rather. Three weeks being the length of time that it takes for me to start getting on her nerves. I don't try to be annoying. I think it's just that it takes about that long for her to remember that I'm not good enough. I don't quite live up to her, you see, and she's quite a lot to live up to. I see her looking at me resentfully sometimes, as though I've tricked her, and I know she's thinking, was it worth it? Does she deserve all that love, the love I showed the world? And all those lives, of course. Though I'm not sure she's so worried about that, she has a rather philosophical attitude to the living and dying of humans.

And he loves me of course, in his own way. As best he can. Which is not always very well, but it is completely sincere. He wouldn't, as my mother frequently observes, have done for me what she has. Not that I asked her to do that, comb the world for me, allow thousands and millions to die while she sought me through the heavens and the earth and ultimately, of course, famously, in hell. That's a mother's love, you see. Nothing can compete with that. It's there, whether you want it or not.

Ingratitude. It's my key characteristic. No one could have wanted more than I had. There was nothing but love in our lives. Love around and all over us, great pink, sweet clouds of it, scenting our skin, its taste never out of the back of our throats. They adored her, she adored me. An endless stream of worship that flowed through her and splashed all over me. I should have been swollen with it, bloated. I should have exploded through an overfulness of love. But instead I am thin. Ungratefully so. Pale. Undernourished-looking. I should have been squashy as a putti but I am long, slender, greenish in the wrong light, the blonde not of ripened wheat (which would have been an apt tribute) but of yellowed fingernails.

What right had I to be so droopy and etiolated, when I was so loved? I

was the love of her life. Wherever she went I would be there too, to the side and slightly behind, the scent of sacrifices and perfume rich in our nostrils, petals beneath our feet, the chants and hymns wreathing through the warm air, the sun heating our heads and backs.

Sometimes they got us confused, thought I was her or we were one. There's a strong resemblance in that I look like her paler, wilting shadow. From my position I would be able to see the fabric straining very slightly over her rounder, fuller, more generous bosom and her ripe hips. I know the back of her head like the back of my hand. The glittering skein of gold, dressed elaborately and yet always with a few vine-like tendrils creeping around her rounded, pinkened cheeks. Pinkened by the heat and attention and the pleasure. And then she would turn to me, her eyes skipping over me in the brevity of her look, her left hand delicately scooping the air as though to waft me forward (which I almost might do, so insubstantial do I seem, even to myself). And they would turn their worship to me and the roar would rise, impossibly, further, and I would feel the blast of it in my face and the smoke of the burning sacrifices would get in my eyes and make them stream.

Sometimes I danced or sang. I had, after all, the benefit of an excellent education. There would be applause. I very rarely sat down. I smiled a lot. The smell of burnt lamb often stuck in my hair but gods tend to stink of barbecue so no one ever noticed. Others rarely looked at me directly. Some of the women would occasionally touch my shoulder gently (hands soft as kid, of course) with a distant expression of faint pity, scarcely discernible except that it became so familiar.

One acceptable means of escape was to slip off to the meadows and pick flowers. She liked that, it was the kind of maiden-like and graceful behaviour I was supposed to exhibit and it made such a romantic picture. Not so romantic in actuality, as it happens. The grass pricked through my linen shifts and scratched my arms and cheeks. The insects tickled and bit. It was very, very dull. Once you've picked a flower and pulled it apart there's not really much left to do. But at least I was on my own. She never minded all that scrutiny and talk, and partying. But for me the effort of being worth looking at was too much. My spine would ache, my mouth fill with the harsh taste a little like hunger that is the flavour of intense boredom.

I talk, of course, as though it was only me that was bored; but we all are in one way or another. We gods live a trivial life, for the most part, because immortality means that nothing ends up seeming to matter much. We're

the greatest nihilists of all. But it turns out that I could tolerate it less well and that is another example of my selfishness, she says. It wasn't as though it was all incense and fulfilment for her either. She drinks, of course, and who am I to blame her for that? The boredom is pernicious as a parasite, gnawing at all of us. Hence the whoring, the fighting, the murder, rape and baby-snatching. At least she only drinks.

Anyway, as you will have gathered, I was ripe for rescue. I'm not proud of it, but it was the way it was.

I'd seen him before, though never at close quarters. He's not exactly the heart and soul of the party, he lingers on the periphery with that bitter combination of loneliness and fury that I still sometimes find so poignant. He appeared, suddenly, ahead of me in the meadow, a pretty unlikely sight among the buzzing grass and nodding flowers. He glowered with shyness. His hair hung in great locks around his face and in uneven hanks down his back, dull against the black leather of his tunic that's worn to a high shine. It must have been infernally hot for him. I didn't realise he was there until I looked up at the sudden, sharp smell of him and he was standing ten feet away, staring furiously into my eyes and then flicking them away as though about to pretend he wasn't there, or I wasn't. He opened his mouth to speak, gave me a sudden, startled look; and then went. Just like that.

I assumed he hadn't wanted to find me there, that as usual I'd managed to be in the wrong place. I was always in the wrong place because there was nowhere for me to be. I always just wanted a niche. Anyway I scratched the dry grass out of my shift and went home soon after.

He came again a little while later and this time he had something to say. He came closer to me this time and I got the smell again, more strongly. Sweat and unwashed hair and used leather. No smoke, no incense. Cold smells. He had something to say. It was

'Come with me.'

And I went.

His hand was cold around mine.

It was suddenly cold, I was wrapped in cold, stiff leather, hard and uncomfortable against my skin that was still warm from the sun. There was a rushing and the pitiless hammering of the horses and I couldn't really tell which way was up. All the time there was the hard pinch of his fingers on the bones of my shoulder, through the leather. There was no resisting it. Not that I tried. I don't tend to resist, on the whole.

Cold Weather

There was a strange swallowing, as though a door was being slammed on the world and that bunged up feeling you get in your ears at altitude, and then we were in the stillness.

The stillness down there is extraordinary. There is no breeze, there has never been the smallest breath of wind. Or, I should say, the smallest breath of breath. The tiny stir of my half-hearted respiration is the only shift in that dead air. No wonder it's so stale. No plants, breathing gases gently in and out. There's only the night here, and nothing growing. Sound doesn't carry. No one would have been able to hear me scream.

Not that I did.

Do you know how long it was before I thought of my mother? Days. A week, even. I hang my head when I remember this, how it never even occurred to me to miss her, let alone think how worried she'd be. And she was, she was beside herself. They all told me when I got back, they got at me in groups and started saying it, echoing each other like a badly organised chorus.

'She was so worried – '

'Beside herself.'

'She was wailing, tearing her hair –'

'Her breast, tearing at her robes. Wailing.'

'Great clumps of hair she tore out, that beautiful hair like flax.'

'Flax. Wailing.'

And so on. Like a flock of harpies. I hang my head lower and lower. By the time I leave I look like a broken puppet.

It's not, as I occasionally try to explain, that I was enjoying myself too much. Nor was I prostrate with fear or anguish. In many ways it was like home. I had everything I could need – delicate and exquisite little bits of this and that to eat, not that I had any appetite. Dark wine to drink, metallic water, fizzing slightly on my tongue. I was comfortable. The cool was a relief. I will admit I didn't like the smell, the mustiness, but I didn't mind too much.

He was careful not to move too fast, to crowd me with his desire. He appeared once or twice a day, made some tense conversation, fists clenched and eyes darting. Then one day he said nothing at all but sat next to me, closer than he'd been before. I looked at the black hairs on the backs of his fingers. When he moved his head I got the stench of his hair. Unable to look at me he moved his hand to my thigh. It rested there cold and heavy. We both looked at it. Then, suddenly, his other hand rushed to my breast and it happened. I'd never done it before. It was all right, and quite

quick. He was heavy and his breath gasped in my ear. He jerked, with no particular rhythm and then for a moment was completely still. He rolled off and didn't look at me, just held my hand. I felt sorry for him. The next day he gave me a ring with a great uncut ruby, and stood smiling at our feet, standing close together on the stone floor. The ring was cold and heavy. It bites into the bone of my finger.

And all the time, as you probably know, she was wandering the earth, hair undone, robes rent by her own hand. Wailing and spreading the desolation of her despair wherever she went. Crops failed, cattle died. Fruit frosted on vines. In her grief she bereaved the earth. The earth froze to stone and life would not be coaxed from it. The only sound was cracking of dead leaves and bone, the hymns dried on parched and diminishing lips. The face of the earth had seen nothing like it. She scoured it with her anger and loss.

But below, we didn't notice for a long time. There was no difference in that muted, lifeless kingdom and the thinning wail of hunger couldn't be heard. Eventually I remembered to remember her, albeit in a vague sort of way. I thought about the warm sun on our hair and scent of the incense, and the hot roar of worship on my ears. I often thought about how beautiful she was. I would think about how it felt for her hair to run heavily through my fingers, warming them. The extraordinary lucence of her eyes, prised like jewels. I missed her beauty more than anything. But I never thought she would look for me. Nor did I particularly intend to stay. The non-time just trickled away. I became even dreamier than before in the tranquil sterility. It's that kind of dreaminess that can inspire slapping in my mother. I can see it would be infuriating.

But then the sense that there was something afoot began to penetrate even the smog of my listless contentment. I realised that there had been an increase in numbers. There were suddenly so many more of them, the souls, shivering in the still air like smoke in a breeze, hands held up to their cheeks in silent horror. There were so many they were beginning to press together, merge with one another at margins. They stood in cloudy groups, wavering but never moving, their screams sounding, if you strained your hearing, like one tiny collective, endless gasp. It was unsettling. I found the absence of change one of the most reassuring things about Hades. What were they all doing there?

Even then it was a while before I asked him. Partly I was hoping that the stagnance would reassert itself and I wouldn't have to. Partly I was too shy. Partly I couldn't stir myself to do it. But eventually, after one of his

daily visits, as he stood with his hand on the door looking, as he always did, as though he could hardly bear to stay and also as though he longed never to go beyond the door again, I asked him. My voice, cracked through lack of use and thin with nerves, sounded strange. I felt foolish. I couldn't remember how to say things.

'What –' I coughed and tried again. 'Are there more of them?' I asked and for a moment I wondered whether I'd said anything at all because he showed no sign of having heard me. I'd never referred to them before, nor had he. I wondered if I'd committed some crashing solecism. I didn't even know what they were called. The dead? The souls?

He turned his head, not enough to look at me but enough to see the hem of my robe and my bare feet. He often talked to my feet. I could smell him on my skin and in my saliva.

'There's a famine,' he said, and swung the door open and closed behind him before I could answer.

'What's a famine?' I asked, too late.

After that I began to wonder how long I had been away, and the beginning of a feeling came to me. A feeling like swallowing something the wrong way. It's guilt, I now realise. But then I had no word for it and wondered if the air was disagreeing with me.

I began to wonder where she thought I'd gone. I began to think I should have told her where I was going, or at least left a message. I wondered why it hadn't occurred to me to get a message to her, send one of the wraiths, though I supposed they might get blown away when they entered the moving air of the world above. And of course they couldn't make any noise. But even so, I hadn't even thought of it.

I started to fret, and to pick at my nails, a habit of mine she always hated. They bled slightly, and hurt.

Then, some time after that, I don't know how long, there was a vast, thundering crack, so loud I wondered if it was inside my own head. So loud it made my ears ring deafly and I couldn't even hear the silence of hell. When my hearing returned the first thing I could hear was shouting, a long way off. High and shrill and familiar. I don't think there's a name for what I felt then but it was something like relief and something like giving up.

At first I thought I would just wait in my room, wait until one of them decided what was going to happen and came to tell me. But then, as I stood in the centre of the room, bitten hands writhing together in front of me, my hair falling each side of my bowed head like cataracts, I saw myself for a

second as if from the outside. A girl, slight and pale. Perpetually passive, mostly speechless. A girl drawn to strength like a magnet to a lode. A girl, for the first time, with leverage.

I pulled the door open so hard it slammed against the stone and I ran through the corridors almost weightless on my bare feet. My hair rustled in my ears, my shift snapped around my knees. I ran always towards the rising and falling shrieks of my mother that crashed against the stone walls like a hailstorm. As I drew nearer I could hear also, from time to time, a low sound like stone grinding under water. That, I knew, was him.

I ran out onto the great stone shelf on which the palace stood. Near the edge, against the giddy, fatal abyss, stood Demeter. Her bright hair streamed – a good effect, given the lack of breeze, which she must have contrived in advance to create. Her arms spread, she howled at him. He stood immoveable in front of the great door, his back to me, saying nothing.

Then silence fell like a thunderclap. She had seen me.

He followed her gaze and turned slowly to me. We looked into each other. It was the second choice I had ever made.

‘No,’ I breathed, shaking my head very slightly and hearing the curtains of hair rustle. His lips curved in minutely.

She was running over the rock towards us. Her breasts shifted and heaved under her gown in a way that seemed embarrassing and rather incongruous. As she drew near I could hear her feet smacking against the rock.

‘No! No! She is mine!’ she gasped as she came near and dragged me to her. The scent of her splashed over me like sunlight and for a moment I closed my eyes and breathed her in. Her hair was in my mouth, I could no longer see him. I could hear her voice where it began in her ribs.

‘You shall not have her! You shall not keep her here!’

‘She wishes to stay.’

‘She is mine and I will take her, she belongs to me. With me.’

‘She has chosen me.’

After every sentence he uttered there was a silence, as though he deadened the sound around him.

‘She does not choose, she belongs with us above. I have stopped the earth for her!’

‘She did not ask –’

‘She doesn’t belong here, you know it.’

‘She does. She has chosen.’

‘She cannot choose!’ she bellowed, and I stepped back from her as she swelled with rage at the impertinence of him. It seemed to me that I could but I didn’t say so because the things that seemed obvious to me never seemed so obvious to her.

He was unmoved.

‘Now she knows that your world and mine exist she cannot forget either one,’ he stated, flatly.

‘She can shake this place off like a shroud.’ She does this at moments of high drama. Starts declaiming like a tragic actor. I think she may even have held one hand aloft. ‘It has not entered her.’

There was a long pause as the meaning of this sank in. I didn’t know where to look. It’s no different for me, I assure you. No one wants to talk about sex in front of her mother.

‘It has. She carries my seed within her.’

He had shut her up, which was a first. I bit my lips, hard, to hide the smirk.

I sneaked a look and her expression made me want to laugh. Her mouth hung in a silly ‘o’.

She looked like every other pushy mother who discovers her daughter’s led a secret life.

We’re not really so different, you see.

I waited for the supernova.

But she simply gave a furious puff, grabbed my hand and before I could speak, say anything to him, the rock was torn from beneath my feet and then a hissing roar of sound as though I’d burst out into the open air out of water and a lap of heat over my whole body. The sun. It was delicious. I hadn’t realised how cold I was.

The aftermath lasted days. She went on and on. She cried and yelled. I cried and yelled. She stumbled in after long sulks, smelling of drink and sour breath and draping herself on my neck, slurring her affection. Before, I could never have stood it, I’d have capitulated within hours rather than be bludgeoned with her mother-love. But now I knew there was a way out. And a way back.

What was so annoying was that she never gave me credit. She was determined that he had led me astray. That’s one of the reasons I am so obstinate about this arrangement. She needs to know I have the choice. And she does, however much she goes on about cycles of birth and death and the laws of the heavens and the function of metaphor. She knows really that I choose how we work this. I made the deal.

I'm not such a spoiled brat that I don't know I have a duty. I realise I have to be there some of the time, behind and slightly to the side. Mortals may come and go like clouds of gnats but I feel some responsibility for making sure at least some of them get a proper life span. And I know that, however maddening she is, she does need me, she does love me. She can't say it properly, she doesn't really know how to do it, but she does. She's drunk for most of the winter.

He needs me too. When I go back to that lovely cool cave he clings to me. I hold him between my legs and he judders and then weeps silently. I can feel his few tears sliding down my throat to my collar bone. I hold him between my arms and my legs and I feel a great pity for him, incongruously vulnerable to the world. He misses me terribly.

Even so I don't know, if I'm honest, that it's better this way. When I'm with him I remember the sunlight and the warmth, the delicious smell of sacrifice and the plaiting of the hymns drifting up, the sound of voices in prayer and argument and joy and misery. But then when I'm with her I long for the cool, the peace of the absence of demand. His cold hands with the black hair. The locks of his hair falling over my face.

All this love that I get. From her, from him. From them, even though they never quite remember who I am and really I'm just another aspect of her. My name, for example, is always changing. All that love and yet still, look at me. I don't know where I belong. Always in the wrong place. The guilt of it weighs on me like a lead blanket, bending my thin shoulders. My only place is somewhere indeterminate between the two of them, keeping them just far enough apart and just close enough together. The three of us held in fragile equilibrium by love and choices. Their love, my choices. I wonder what would happen if I loved as well.

THIRD PRIZE

All people want the same things: to be needed in one way or another by a small group of people. Badly needed by one or two, moderately so by a dozen others. That's the most important human requirement and that's what most of us spend our lives trying to achieve in one way or another. Everything else is a substitute.

R. F. Delderfield *Cheap Day Return*

KERRY SWASH

Glad

The white door creaks open and in she trails, her face half hidden by a bunch of red gladioli – a guilty bunch of red gladioli. She is late but she hasn't bothered hurrying, she knows I'm not going anywhere. I've been here for three weeks now and it looks like I'll be here indefinitely; they haven't allocated me the usual 13–20 day respite time (apparently my family need more of a permanent break), and they won't even give me a finite leaving date. I'm dying, that they can all admit to, but in the Hospice they're determined I do it in my own time. They assure me that no-one's after my bed; except Hannah who, not content with moving into my room at home, seems to be doing the same here. She plonks herself down on the end of it; shifting my wasted legs out of the way.

– Hey, News Flash, haven't you heard the latest? I'm dying.

She doesn't seem to notice any more. She is mad at me; for not appreciating the flowers. I am mad at her; red is not my colour and gladioli are for old people.

– You are old she reminds me. Older than her maybe, naturally as in wisdom, unfortunately as in body clock – we were 17 last birthday which is about 124 in dog years, and that's how I feel, 'Yip-Yap Rover time to roll over.' I finally manage to pull my other foot out from under her and I turn to face the wall rather than look at her cool alabaster face any more. The bed creaks painfully slowly as I make, what is for me, a major manoeuvre. Everything creaks in this place: the doors, the beds, the floors, my bones, my brain. Perhaps, because of the reverentially boring hospice quiet, every

little creak scrapes across your eardrums, hurts behind your eyes. The ‘pain-controlled’ atmosphere that keeps everyone else so calm only allows the furniture to protest – and Hannah, who with a bored groan gets back to her feet. But it’s too soon; she can’t be going already she’s only just got here. She’s such a lightweight. What has she got to go and do that’s more important? It shouldn’t even be a competition – hanging out with her mates at Bluewater, or sitting with her dying sister? I try not to catch her eye. I don’t want to see her pity or her guilt, I don’t want to see myself as she sees me, I might not let her come back.

She languishes at the window, long pale arms folded across skinny bones. I sneak a look at her. It must be the fake daylight bulbs they have in here but she almost looks worried. God forbid we’re swapping places. Her pale hair hangs across her pale face hiding her expression but I know that her eyes are begging me to let her go. ‘*Permission to leave*’? Not granted, not yet. According to the Hospice handbook it’s the greatest gift you can bestow. I’m not sure Hannah’s read her copy; she’s got it the wrong way round. Ironically enough she’s supposed to be giving me permission to let go. She never was much of a reader and she’s obviously not made it as far as Chapter 18 where it clearly says that *Only your inner circle of ultimate carers can release you to death without guilt*. If she’s not careful I’ll kick her out of the inner circle, then she’ll be sorry. I don’t know why I’m being like this, Norah says it’s normal for the bed-bound to resent others’ freedom, I never really thought of hanging out at the shopping mall as freedom; standing with the same bunch of stupid people daring each other to nick something from Topshop. It’s not my scene at all, and however boring it might be, she should be with me at a time like this. At a time like what? They don’t allow clocks in here [Chapter 3], *the monitoring of time is not conducive to a healthy atmosphere*. I didn’t know the atmosphere in here was supposed to be healthy.

— News Flash: Everybody’s dying. For a place without rules there are a lot of Hospice dos and don’ts. They do let us watch Countdown – whoopee – but they don’t let us do it. The only clue I get as to time passing is the door opening each day and a different visitor appearing, gladioli and a cheery smile optional. They’ve got me on a rota and I wish they wouldn’t bother, I don’t even like most of them and I’ve never seen the point of relatives and do-gooders.

I’ve decided to stop all the others coming now. Even Mum and Dad. I can’t avoid the look in their eyes and it’s too much for all of us. By process of elimination I’ve decided on my ‘inner circle’. I don’t mind making

Hannah suffer, it's not as if we've ever really liked each other. It's nobody's fault, we're just too different. Whatever Mum says we don't even look the same; I am dark and interesting, she is pale (blond she calls it) and pretty. It doesn't seem fair, but I got all the brains and she got all the other stuff.

When I wake up she is gone, in the end who needs permission, and the room is even darker than before. As usual a green black shadow hangs in the air. I had a choice of rooms on arriving here. The long journey down the slate grey drive and – oh lucky day – three beds had been 'recently vacated'; one near the dining room where I couldn't eat anything, one that looked out across the gardens with what the brochure described as a 'picture window' (Mum and Dad were keen on that one – something else to look at besides me) but I chose this little room at the back. I look out onto the annexe wall and it suits me better. The flat concrete barely changes colour as the day wears on, it's flaking a bit but on the whole it's reassuring. They don't get it but I don't want to see the nature of things changing, summer into autumn, the garden as a clock, time passing. I don't want to see the world turning without me in it. Norah's right. I am being selfish, but why should I be making it easier for them? At a time like this shouldn't it all be about me? I'm the smart one remember; the one who is going to achieve great things. 'Live fast and die young', only Hannah thinks that's an achievement of sorts – and besides I missed out on the first part. I've always been a bit serious. It will become the family joke – How were they able to tell Hannah and me apart? I was the one with my head in a book.

Now I've settled in and all my friends have forgotten about me, my daily companion is The Hospice Handbook. (My family obviously got a different copy, one that mentioned shopping with your mates and picture windows.) In mine it explains that my pain will be managed, my symptoms controlled, my terminal care catered for. And they promise me, in BIG LETTERS in the introduction, that they'll help me carry on being myself.

They lied.

Oh they keep the pain managed, they control the symptoms, I am interminably catered for, I'm all very comfortable, but I no longer feel like myself. How can I when all I had hoped for in life, all I was meant to be,

to do, all the dreams that I had ... well it's hard to imagine going to Uni, a first in Political Science, freedom fighter, Journalist of the Year. I had it all mapped out and it's not that the desire to do it has faded exactly, but we've all stopped pretending it's going to happen. The wall is a better reflection than the garden. Just like that the hospice door clicks shut behind you and, whatever they say, it's a dead end. Don't feel too sorry for me, it's not all bad. People are incredibly nice to me. I get flowers and chocolates however awful I am. No please or thank-yous required. And I can be a real mare but still they are all so relentlessly kind, whether I deserve it or not. I don't think it's good for me, I'm getting worse. But like all the dreams and that, whatever you're like, whatever you do, whoever you are, the slate's wiped clean and they give you a final chance. I don't grab mine with both hands. I waste more precious time being vile and belligerent (I can be a bit like Hannah sometimes). I'm fighting their kindness: 'keep it ugly, keep it real'. I don't have the energy left for a power salute. There's no-one here to see it anyway.

The red glads are beginning to rot off from the bottom upwards. No doubt she got them from the cheap bin at Tesco's. The lower blooms are already shrivelling and dying. Norah tells me I'm being negative. She points out that for every bloom that dies a new one is opening further up the stem. The opposite of death is birth. What chapter's that in? I point out to her that death will win in the end; it will chase those blooms right up to the tippety-top of the red spire until they have nowhere left to run. I count the tight velvet buds left to open, six in all, less than a week of life left. The opposite of life is? Funny that life has no opposite.

Norah-the-Snorah thinks that I should talk to someone, by which she means Father Jacobs. The hospice doesn't promote religion per se but they encourage spirituality and Norah who is a part-time nursing volunteer doesn't feel qualified. She's not a real nurse that's why. Her name tag (which doesn't call her the Snorah), calls her a Palliative Care Consultant. Which means that she doesn't know how to cure me. She shouldn't feel so bad, nobody does. She changes my bed, sits with me in the night, helps to inject me; you've got to hand it to her. But she hates it when I try and talk to her about dying.

When I wake up Hannah is back on my bed and she's holding my hands. It feels unnatural and I try to withdraw but she says they're not ready yet and I'm not to move them. Bizarrely she's doing my nails. More bizarrely I'm letting her. We've never been girly sisters. I'm not sure what day it is. I check with the gladioli. There are still six un-opened buds. It's the same

day and she's been and gone to Bluewater. She's got a whole new outfit on. I wouldn't be seen dead in a top like that, I'm totally vintage. She does a fashion twirl – as if I'm interested – while my nails finish drying. I hold them up to have a look. Goth Black. It's a good look on me – Death.

This time she slams the door when she leaves. I shouldn't be so mean to her, they'll tell her off at the desk on the way out for doing that. Nothing above a creak remember? I hope they don't ring Mum and Dad, they'll say I started it as usual, and how could I at a time like this, and Mum will cry and say we used to be such sweet little girls. Well that was before Hannah discovered short skirts and boys. I could tell her a thing or two about her not-so-sweet little Hannah. But I won't. They might not let her come back.

I'm not afraid of the dark, I'm just not really used to it and at night the annexe wall seems to bear down on the room. The first few nights Norah-the-Snorah stayed with me. But she's got 'life' to be getting on with so now I'm on my own. At least it's quieter. I try to focus on the chink around my doorway which shows the corridor to be well lit, the rectangle of dark in the middle of this bright outline threatens to fall on me until nearly dawn when the room gets light enough to cancel it out and the door becomes a door again and not a coffin lid. I must have got to sleep at some point because when I next check another flower has died and a red velvet bud is beginning to unfurl. Five left.

She's not coming. They've brought and taken away my lunch, I can't really handle solids any more but it doesn't stop them trying. The shadow on the wall is already green black; a reminder that despite the sunny day a winter night is coming. She should have been here by now. When the door finally does open I can hear the Countdown music drifting along the corridor. Norah is relieved to see her, apparently I'm not having a good day, I haven't spoken for 24 hours. It doesn't seem to bother Hannah who isn't the chatty sort, at least not with me. She sits down on the bed and begins to unpack her makeup bag, she takes my hand and without saying a word either begins to remove the dark-lord of nail varnish. I smile to myself, making sure she doesn't see and before I know it I am asleep.

Mum and Dad decide not to wake me. Norah reminds them that our main goal now should be ensuring my remaining life is of the highest possible quality, so – in this instance – I'm best left unconscious. We all love Norah. She's been assigned to them for later, she's already on their side not mine

and that's not fair; the hospice provides all kinds of supportive care options for them after I'm gone. What will I get?

I expect they wish I'd hurry up and get on with it so they can begin the grieving process properly. I bet Mum has skipped ahead in *The Handbook* and is secretly looking forward to heading up the Community Bereavement Project while Dad deals with the 'Missing Me' chapter by getting bladdered at the golf club and sleeping with that awful Dora from next door – again. I'm not sure what Hannah will do, the Hospice offers an art therapy workshop for kids, to help express their grief, but the only thing that Hannah likes to paint is her nails and besides she's not really a kid anymore.

Having missed Mum and Dad I'm doubly miffed when Norah says that Hannah has gone to school and will be back at lunchtime. I don't understand how she can be so selfish. I only have four days left.

Three more buds – Norah points out cheerfully not understanding the import. Just like that I lose a day. I ask her to help me sit up. I want to be awake when Hannah comes. If she's only got half an hour to spare I'd better make the most of it. The hospice has decided it's time me and my inner circle 'talked' about 'what's going to happen'. They offered to do it, but I think it's down to me. After all it's my blood which will cool, my bowels which will release. That's putting it politely. I can't bear to think of Hannah's smirk.

Funny way to spend your lunch-hour, learning to signpost death. I ask her where her lunchbox is and she looks at me as if I'm mad, which is a change to as if I'm dying.

– No-one eats lunch, remember the skinny look is in. Oh the luxury of choosing not to eat. My waist is non-existent. I am pleased to be keeping up with fashion even from my hospice bed. Despite my best intentions I fall asleep before her half hour is up. She is exhausting company today; monosyllabic and incapable of a conversation that doesn't involve shrugging her shoulders.

– How does she feel about me dying? Shrug. She doesn't know. She's even less inspiring than Father Jacobs. She doesn't want to talk about it. Norah says she's just moody like all teenagers (she doesn't mean me – I'm no longer counted as a teenager, the 124 dog years have cured me of all that) but she's all I have left now, hardly an inner circle more like a thin black line, so I resolve to be nicer to her.

The music from Countdown heralds her arrival, not the theme tune she'd choose for herself I'm sure, still it's enough to wake me up, except I haven't been sleeping just staring at the wall. I feel so weak I wonder if it's time for the bestowing of the Great Gift but it seems she's only brought a can of coke with her. She's getting to know her way around the place, fleecing the drinks machine, nicking ciggies off the nurses, she's settling in. Pity I'll be moving on soon, I've never seen so much of her. She has her feet curled up in the new cream armchair the hospice has provided. Finally I have the bed to myself. It's one of those sleek designer chairs with no back legs which means she can bounce slightly up and down on it with her weight balanced right. She used to do that on my bed. I miss the weight of her there. It makes me feel seasick watching her bounce from a distance and I have to try to find the rhythm visually, because until we are in harmony I can't rest. It's not easy she keeps changing the beat. I nod my head slowly in time and my eyeballs bang in their sockets. I want her to stay still but she can't, she's quite animated for once. Apparently she's been given some time off school, 'special extenuating circumstances' – well, I've been called worse – and it's like she's been given an early birthday present; which is all she'll get from me. I suppose I could send Norah out for something but what would be the point? I won't be here next week to give it to her. Perhaps I should leave her something of mine behind, something to remember me by. I'll have a root through my bedside locker, see if there's anything in there I don't want.

She wants my watch; the French one with the malachite strap. I love that watch. I've not been allowed to wear it in here. She's obviously already thought it through. Cow. What's she got for me? A few mouldy glads! Funnily enough I've got quite dependent on them and their whole 'count-down to death' thing. I think knowing how little time is left has helped me; I'm being nicer to her. She actually smiles when I manage to drink my tea and playfully flicks my arm when she takes back the empty mug. It instantly raises a bruise which she spends the rest of the visit quietly massaging with her fingers – duly painted death black nails. It's not a good look on her either. I kiss her goodnight and she lets me.

Much to her relief the bruise has gone by the next day – two buds remaining – and she doesn't look like she's slept very well. I tell her she has magic hands and ask her if she could have a go on my other arm. I undo my cardi and the sight of all the bruises makes her even paler than usual. I thought that would revolt her, the sight of my deflated veins and threadless skin. But she sits by me on the bed and, starting at my wrists,

she begins to gently massage the yellow black marks. Her nails are ruby red today. I hate red. She knows I hate red. I want mine the same. She won't do it, says I'll only complain about it afterwards. To be honest, and I've thought about this a lot, I'm not sure there is going to be an afterwards.

It's as dark as it gets now, the shadow from the wall is cast right across the bed: a heavy green-black blanket. But someone has left a lamp on and I can see Hannah quite clearly in the white designer chair. I am puzzled as to why she's here in the night. She's rocked herself to sleep, I can tell that much by the pain in my eyeballs, and her long hair is pushed back from her face. Now I can see things clearly, she is not a pale imitation of me, she's more than pretty, she is herself and she's here with me. I look at her for the longest time. My little sister, only by a few minutes as she always reminds me. But those few minutes have been a lifetime between us. I wish they hadn't. I reach out my hand to her, but I don't want her to wake up. I see with surprise that my fingernails are bright ruby red. Is this the great gift?

I turn to the gladioli. It must be tomorrow already and I've all but missed my last day; the final bud has opened and the spire has petered out. By the time it is light there will be nowhere left to run. The vase will be emptied and the flowers will be taken away.

But do you know what?

I'm glad.

ZAC BARKER

Feeding Time

Last session, you mentioned a trip, the Doctor said, reading from a thick file on the table. She had blond hair, blue eyes and a mole on her right cheek that Charley Adams sometimes fixated on. The trip to Disney World? he asked. Yes. Tell me what happened. My great aunt and uncle took us. Drove a Jeep Wagoneer, red, faux wood panelling. Just like John Candy's in *The Great Outdoors*. That was a great film. Remember, when the bears climb on the hood, bouncing like kids on their parents' bed. Then he drives away with the bears still on top. You said us, they took us. Is that you and your brother? He thought, No, me and the friggin Duke of Argyle. Stupid cow. Just look in the file, doesn't it have all the answers? Yes, my brother and I. Why Disney World? We hadn't been out of state much, south to Myrtle Beach a few times, but they wanted to show us around, take a road trip. Amos loved going places where no one knew him. Auntie Alma always said he was a born traveller. Plus, he liked driving his Jeep. A road eater, powerful, tall and wide, enough room we never argued over who was on whose side of the backseat. I tried to buy it once, after the old man died. Asked her how much she'd take for it. She never used it, could barely touch the pedals and still see over the dash, it just sat in the garage. Can you tell me what happened that summer? she asked. I loved that car. Amos took care of it right, meticulous about servicing on time, washed and waxed every week – it was a peach. Can we talk about – But she figured I wanted it for free, like by asking I thought she'd say No sweetie, how could I expect you to pay for it, I'm old, never drive it, I have the Buick anyway and I know you love it, so just take it. The next day she went to the car lot and sold it to that sneaky old bastard Sammy, who she trusted because he went to church every Sunday – not her church of course, she'd never go to church with a black. She got fifteen hundred bucks. I mean, it was worth at least five grand; that's what he sold it for.

Charley, the Doctor said, keeping her cool, playing Ms. Professional. Let's try to remember why we're here, ok? Silence. Tell me about the trip. Start at the beginning. I would like you to tell me everything you can remember about it. Charley looked over the table at her, pen poised over her notebook while he reached for the pack of Marlboros, the chain links of his manacles rattling and scraping across the table-top. He shook one

from the pack and lit up with a match, crossed his legs, rested his elbows on his knee, took a drag, a long, thirsty pull, held it in his lungs then blew a cloud of smoke at the doctor's folder.

Summer, 1984. Seven o'clock sharp and Amos gunned it down I-95, for once not towing the Air Stream, thinking See if we can make it under nine hours, find a hotel outside Orlando. Bored, Charley made faces at other cars as they passed but got zero reaction. Boring bastards, he wanted acknowledgement. He watched, disappointed but eager to try it on a yellow Volkswagen, stickers on the bumper, windows rolled down. Thumbs stuck in his nostrils, giving them the pig snout look. The sun-kissed, shaggy haired passenger cracked up, pointed and yelled something Charley couldn't understand. What are you laughing at? Norman asked, distracted from his comic book. Nothing. He watched the road once more, cooling it with the faces out the window because he noticed Auntie Alma adjust the vanity mirror on the flipside of her sun visor so she could keep an eye on him.

When they crossed the state line into South Carolina Charley knew because of the giant water tower fashioned and painted as a peach. Look boys, it's the Big Peach, Amos said. Norman looked up from *Adventure Comics*. Alma kept knitting a sweater which Charley hoped wasn't his next Christmas present. You know what that means? Amos asked. Soon they would stop at one of the road-side fruit stands that proclaimed on sloppy hand-painted signs Fresh Watermelons And Peaches For Sale.

Look look look, there's one, Charley squealed so Amos pulled over. They walked towards a slinky old black man dressed in faded blue overalls who sat on the tailgate of his rusty orange Chevrolet truck. He opened his mouth to speak but was drowned out by rapid-fire horn blasts. All heads turned to the road in time to see a yellow Volkswagen putter by with a pale white ass sticking out the window.

Well, some people, Alma said covering her heart with both hands. Charley tried to stifle his outburst as his aunt shot death-ray eyes at him.

Back in the Wagoneer. Don't you dare eat that peach right here in the car, Alma warned as Amos, hand squirming in the bag on his lap, tested the peaches for ripeness. But this one's just right. Ripe but still young and firm. You know I love them that way. Well, you'll make a mess with that juice all over yourself. It's not me that's got to drive to Florida with sticky fingers, mister.

Amos bit into the peach; nectar dribbled down his chin, coated his fingers. It's just a little snack, he said, it'll keep me going until we find a

McDonald's for lunch. The mention of McDonald's, the promise of burgers and fries for lunch brought smiles. Anyways, he said after slurping the last morsel of fruit into his mouth, I'll just wipe my hands on any old piece of trash I find in the backseat. He reached one arm behind, made a deep monster grumble, like the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*, which he knew was their favourite scary movie, and groped for a thigh, leg, a foot, whatever he could get his hands on as the boys pulled their knees to their chests, enjoying the Sticky Fingers Game before Alma let loose. Stop acting like a child and drive with both hands on the wheel. I swear someday you'll get in a wreck and kill someone. Oh lord, look at that speed. Amos, you better slow this thing down. Amos put his hands on the wheel but didn't slow down. Alma watched the red needle on the speedometer remain in its place, hovering near eighty, but kept quiet and went back to her sneering and knitting. Charley watched the road, the cars as they passed, and fell asleep.

As the Wagoneer approached Savannah the roadside scenery changed from farmland to Scotchman gas stations strip malls pawn shops and car lots, tall billboards and sign posts thrusting skyward like masts of ships mired in stagnant harbour. Then, peering down over the rest like it was a Spanish galleon moving out to sea, a huge yellow M on a red background – the Golden Arches. Mickey D's, Mickey D's Norman said pointing over Amos's shoulder out the windshield so that he could not miss it. Lunchtime fellas, whacha say? Amos asked the car. Norman, Alma said, sit back in your seat and put your seatbelt on this instant. She was talking into her mirror, the reflection of her eyes fixed on him as he sprang back into the cushiony seat and clicked his belt closed.

The Wagoneer pulled into the parking lot. The boys strained at their lap belts like race horses chomping their bits, anxious for release from cramped dark stalls onto a wide open track. Amos hadn't pulled the emergency brake before they pounced. Charley had wobbly car legs but tried to keep up, racing to be first in the door, first to order and get their food. Norman through the door, Charley right behind; they took places in separate lines, eyeing each other, drag racers at a stoplight, inching forward. Alma joined behind Charley while a lady ahead complained about her food. You put mayo on my Big Mac. I said no mayo. It's not mayo; it's special sauce. But that's just pink mayonnaise. I want another, no mayo this time.

Norman advanced. Charley, nervous, scanning, weighing his options, rocking from one foot to the other. Stop squirming, child. Alma petting her

curls, making sure their protective crust of hairspray held strong against the head rest. She said to Norman, What are you doing? Come here so we order together. She snapped her fingers, indicated a square of tile directly in front of her feet. Norman gave in, joined the losing line. Charley gloated. Norman silenced him with a knuckle-punched kidney.

Where's Uncle Amos, Norman asked. You know how he gets. He's out there checking the tyres and oil in the car. He said he wanted us to order him a – Charley blurted their order at a teenager behind the counter. She looked like a confused Labrador retriever, vacant eyes asking for pity. One Fisherman's fillet with extra tartar sauce, coffee and a Hot Apple Pie. I want a cheeseburger Happy Meal, no pickle, and strawberry milkshake. He wants Six Piece Chicken McNuggets, large Coke and a Hot Caramel Sundae. With nuts, Norman said. He'll have a small coke, please, Alma said. But I can drink a whole large. I don't care; you'll want to pee every five miles. Amos doesn't mind, he'll pull over and I can go on the side of the road so it won't take any time, promise. I will not sit by while you expose yourself to everyone in God's green earth. She opened her purse and asked for a hamburger, small fry and small coke please. Game over. Charley grinned at his defeated brother and got another knuckle-punched kidney.

They sat in a booth and shucked crinkly, wax-paper wrappers. Wash your little hands before you eat. They're probably filthy, Alma said as she fingered a greasy hot French fry. Go on. By the time you're back Amos will be here and we can all eat together. She crunched into a fry, biting off no more than an eighth, chewing while they slunk off to the toilets. Charley whizzed in the short, child-sized urinal while Norman washed his hands in the sink, flicked the water in Charley's eyes and said in a Bugs Bunny voice So long, sucker and pushed the door open just as Amos was coming in. Hey there soldier, Amos said, holding his hands like they were pistols and poking Norman in the belly and sides while he made machine-gun sounds. Rat-a-tat-a-tat. Norman cracked up and retreated to the table, arms shielding his mid-section from further attacks. Amos leaned over the washbasin. The door swung open. Charley stopped mid-zip, his fly hanging open. A man, his face lobster-red, stood blocking the doorway, long, greasy blond hair pinned back by sunglasses sitting on top of his head. He wore flip flops, stained Bermuda shorts and a blue short-sleeve shirt un-buttoned to his hairy belly, deeply suntanned. You son of a bitch you goddamned sonofabitch I swear to god. He staggered forward, sandals flapping against his heels. Charley shrunk back into one of the stalls. Amos

Feeding Time

did too, almost slipped and grabbed the enclosure's doorframe for balance. The red-faced man lunged slamming the adjoining stall's door across Amos's knuckles, holding it closed, stepping closer to Amos who tried to pull his crushed hand free.

You mutherfucking sonofabitch if you come near my little girl again I'll slice you open like a baitfish

His white-knuckled fist inches from Amos's face.

You hear me? I'll cut you open and feed you to the sharks

YOU PIECE OF SHIT

I'LL FEED YOU TO THE SHARKS

Charley cowered, paralysed, could do nothing but watch the man's face and his blood-shot eyes that didn't blink but bored into his memory as the pupils shimmered and tears dropped down his cheeks.

He let go of the door took a step backwards and Amos feebly cradled his smashed hand. I'll feed you to the fucking sharks

Then he ran out the door and Charley listened from the grimy bathroom floor as the door swung shut, the flip-flop sound dying away. Amos rubbed his hand, flexed his fingers.

It's ok now Charley.

What was wrong with that man? What did he mean?

I don't know son. I think he must have been drunk. Come on, let's wash your hands and get out of here, Amos said, helping the boy up and walking him to the sink. Charley let the warm water run out the faucet onto his hands looking all the time in the mirror at Amos's sweaty pale face as he caressed his injured hand.

Charley came back from the bathroom, sat and looked at his french-fried potatoes. What happened? Norman asked. We heard yelling and that man came running out of there. Alma pecked at her burger, one hand resting in her lap. Chewing chewing chewing.

Charley saw the man slamming the door on Amos's hand, and watched again in his mind the tears fall from his eyes.

i'll feed you to the sharks

I don't know what was going on, the damned fool was drunk to hog heaven Amos said. Alma said Well that's why I always say to leave that liquor alone Amos, you know it makes a man act the fool in public.

Amos sipped his coffee. His colour did not quite return, even after lunch when they motored towards Disney World. Alma knitted an entire sleeve; Norman read *Batman*, *Superman* and *Kamandi: Last Boy on Earth*. Charley watched the other cars and saw people reading, sleeping, singing,

crying and sitting quietly not saying a word, maybe listening to the radio or thinking about something really important. When the sun dropped Norman turned on his tiny reading lamp and Charley's window turned into a mirror. His reflection was eerie: cheekbones highlighted, the lower part of his face cast in shadows, eye sockets deep and black. When the illusion was shattered by the passing lights of other cars, the reflection changed in his mind, turned into the red-faced man, long natty hair pinned to the sides of his head while he held the door closed on Amos's hand. Amos trying to shrink away but was caught. Charley was scared, the man was crying, was he scared? And Uncle Amos, with his white face, he didn't fight back. Why not use his free hand to break the drunken man's nose, show him not to act the fool, throw him to the ground and kick and kick and kick instead of being scared.

They pulled up to a hotel. Amos left the engine running while he went through the finger-smearred glass door that said in large red letters Front Desk Souvenirs and smaller red letters threatened Check-out 9:00 a.m. The parking lot was nearly full of big cars, Caprice Classics, Lincolns, Ford vans and station wagons, but not another Wagoneer. Is that a waterslide, fellas? Amos asked. Charley and Norman craned their necks to see, yes, there, visible over the pool's wooden fence – a blue plastic slide. They swung into a parking spot. Got lucky, Amos said, it's right in front of our room.

Amos, Charley and Norman unloaded the luggage, mostly Alma's, from the car, not leaving a single item behind, because as Alma said, They'll steal anything they see lying around. She sat on the bed directing the baggage handlers like a conductor steers an orchestra, pointing with her knitting needle to the precise location.

All done, Amos said. I'm tired, Norman said. I don't wanna nap, Charley said, standing in the doorway, watching their new neighbours unload a white Cadillac. He wanted out of the room. How about we go and get your mama a postcard? Ok, Charley said, his foot already out the door. Alma, bring us back some dinner, maybe some sandwiches? Please? I'm awful sore from driving all day.

They walked past the pool where Charley heard but couldn't see other children splashing, squealing, cannon-balling each other but he knew Alma wouldn't let him swim this late at night. She tugged him past the pool enclosure, around the corner toward the souvenir shop. He wasn't sure if the buzz he heard came from the mosquitoes or the street lights. It was still warm, the humid Florida air smelled different, not sweet like Myrtle Beach – almost like a closet that's been shut for a very long time.

Feeding Time

They talked of Disney World; he asked if they could go on Space Mountain. She said maybe, we'll see, not the Yes of course he'd hoped for. She told him about the Epcott Center's educational rides, asked him didn't he want to go on those rides too? They don't sound much fun, he said. Hush up child, she said, gripped his hand and dragged him along to the shop, where he bought a souvenir Confederate flag because it was like the picture the Dukes of Hazzard had on their car, then went on a walk to find dinner.

Back to the room. Charley could hear the shower running and Norman lay in bed, red-faced and crying. Alma asked him What's wrong, what's the matter sweetie but he never answered just wiped his tears with the back of his hand and lay curled in a ball half covered by the blankets and pushed her away with his elbow when she tried to comfort him when Amos came out of the bathroom wearing his pyjamas, towelling what was left of his grey hair. Charley thought he looked different without his glasses on; his face was longer, his eyes small, sunken black dots. He's just a little homesick is all, Amos said. Isn't that it Norman? Do you miss mommy? Well Amos, maybe we should give their mama a call. No. I mean, you know how much more expensive it is from the hotel phone. Tomorrow we'll find a pay phone.

We brought you some supper. There was a nice little restaurant just up the road. Thank you honey. Amos gave Alma a kiss on the cheek, unwrapped his sandwich and ate. Boy, I am starved. You know, it's been a long day and driving really works up an appetite. He talked and ate at the same time, Alma cringing as she watched the food roll around in his mouth. Norman, are you hungry? You want some dinner little fella?

Norman stared at the wall and said NO. I'll feed you. Come on now, you need to eat something; it's been a long time since McDonald's. Amos touched his shoulder and held the sandwich parcel in his face and Charley watched feeling queasy.

feed you to the sharks

holding the sandwich in that hand, the one showing a purple bruise. if you touch my little girl

Take the sandwich son, your aunt went through the trouble of getting it and paid for it and I'll be damned if you don't eat it.

Norman rolled onto his belly, face swallowed by the pillow. I DON'T WANT IT LEAVE ME ALONE

Charley saw his brother acting so strange, was puzzled; they'd been away from mom so many times all those summers spent at Alma's sitting

on the back porch shooting at birds and squirrels with the air rifle – it was Charley who would cry, I want Mommy, at night in bed, and Norman would crawl over and hug him and tell him it will be ok we'll see Mommy soon don't worry little brother. But now he did not know what to do or say or feel. So he stood quiet.

Fine, Amos said, calming his voice, lowering the tone but with a hard edge. If he doesn't want it, then I'll eat it, he said, still chewing. Oh look, it's turkey on rye. And, is that? it's sauerkraut and Swiss cheese and mayonnaise. It's your favourite Norman. And the crusts cut off too, just the way you like it. Mmmm, he said closing his eyes and smelling it. He crammed it in his mouth, smacked his lips, said Oh I can see why it's your favourite, it's delicious. Amos ate, dropping crumbs on the child's head, still face down, his back and chest heaving, pillow muffled sobs. Alma, from now on I want all my sandwiches just like this one, he said, licked mayo off his fingers, swallowed the last mouthful, walked to the sink and ran a cup of water from the tap. Auntie Alma sat down and began knitting the sweater's second arm. Nearly finished now, she said. Charley, do you want to go brush your teeth and get ready for bed?

That night Charley had a dream. He stood in line, under an archway. A hand-painted sign said Pirates of the Caribbean. Huey, Dewey and Louie waddled by, ten-foot tall cartoon ducks on peg legs, wearing eye patches, holding swords and quacking Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me. The line moved forward, he stepped over the threshold, was alone on a fishing pier. At the other end fishermen wrestled their catch over the railing, something big, dark. Purple storm clouds closed in. Cold wind. Rain. Waves crashed on pylons, swaying, planks under his feet bending, nails working loose no longer holding the pier together. Scared. Run ashore, warmth, safety in Alma's silver Air Stream? No, drawn towards the group cutting at their catch with shiny knives. Their voices carried, soft whispers, *Feeding time, boy*. There he was, Red Faced Man, hair alive in the wind, blinking heavy rain out of his eyes *feed him* and Charley saw the frothy water below chummed with bloody intestines, bowels, teeming with angry dorsal fins. *Run*. A wave broke high, crashed over the railings, rattled the remaining nails free. He watched the pier collapse. Disintegrate. He fell with it. Into the ocean, under the surface, rows of teeth gnashing human flesh.

In the morning they loaded the Wagoneer. Amos cornered Charley while loaded down with baggage. Rat-a-tat-a-tat Rat-a-tat-a-tat poking his fingers at Charley's unguarded flanks so he squirmed and ran to the car.

Feeding Time

Stop fooling around Amos, and let's get going, Alma said from the front seat.

By the time they got to the Disney World parking lot she was knitting the sleeves onto the body of the sweater. Nearly done, she said, and stuffed the materials into her purse. They walked to the shuttle that took them to the monorail which they rode to Main Street, USA.

They wandered, rode It's a Small World, which only Alma enjoyed. In Tomorrowland they zipped around a miniature freeway in cars that ran on tracks which looked more fun than they actually were. Finally Alma let the boys ride Space Mountain. Charley was worried. Norman barely talked all day. He figured it was left over from last night, but they'd been excited for months about this very ride and Norman wasn't enjoying it, which made him feel guilty for having fun. Norman was acting very strange, didn't laugh when Uncle Amos gave him a wet willy; he became angry, looked like he might cry. (Scene: Toontown, Ext. Mickey's Country House. Standing in garden, in patch of over-sized, Mickey-shaped pumpkins.) Charley: Why didn't you like Space Mountain? Norman: It was ok. Charley: You didn't even yell at the steep scary parts, you just sat there. Norman: Leave me alone. Charley: Fine. Norman: Fine. Charley: OK. Norman: OK. Charley: I'll leave you alone. Norman: Good. Charley: Good. (Norman slugs Charley in gut, winding him. Tubby middle-aged mother shows concern). Tubby: You should be ashamed. (Norman kicks ear off a pumpkin. Exit stage right.)

Charley was mad all through the Haunted Mansion but at lunch Norman gave him his caramel apple so he forgot about it and asked if they could ride Big Thunder Mountain. Alma said No, look at that line, it'll take all day. Wouldn't you rather see the Swiss Family Robinson tree house instead? when Norman suddenly asked Can we go to Tom Sawyers Island? Well, I guess so, she said looking at the island across the Rivers of America. May Charley and I go by ourselves? I promise I'll look after him. I'm not sure, she said thinking of last summer when Norman took Charley to the swimming pool, introduced him to every one as his little sister Charlene, punctured his water wings and threw him off the high dive. Amos said Let 'em go. I'm tired anyway; we could sit at Pecos Bill's Café, have a coke and you can knit. What could go wrong?

On the island they found a bunch of kids who'd also negotiated some time by themselves. They organised a game of hide-and-seek. Norman came alive so even though Charley was the youngest and worst at hiding he relaxed and had fun. It got late, the others left; Charley thought they

should go too. Norman said No, let's go back down to the caves and explore. We only went for a little while, remember, you were too scared to hide by yourself so we snuck back up to the fort instead. Charley's unsure. Come on, you know when we go back she'll make us climb the stupid Swiss Family Tree. You hated that movie. Charley decided he was right so they went into the underground caves, walked around then took a rest by the wishing well. Norman threw a pebble at a stalactite. It ricocheted into the darkness, echoing. I want to go home, Norman said. I thought you wanted to come down here. I hate Uncle Amos. What do you mean? He –. Norman's voice strained. I just –. Choked, started to cry.

Charley didn't know what to do so said You're just homesick, that's all. Suddenly Norman was yelling NO I'M NOT FUCKING HOMESICK heaving sobbing shaking and Charley was scared, more than at Space Mountain or the night before at the hotel or when Red Face Man said come near my little girl again I'll slice you open like a baitfish

Charley wanted to find Uncle Amos. He'd help, he thought. He was confused, his big brother was more upset than ever, more than when dad moved away, more than when Boots was run over by a truck and he didn't know how to make Norman stop crying now, by himself, if Mom couldn't do it either of the other times.

Auntie Alma and Uncle Amos are probably worried.

Norman flew at Charley roaring clawing like a wounded starving rat fighting for its life pushing him to the ground. Charley's head crunching against the wishing well as he fell and Norman jumped on top pinning him, beating him in the head chest face neck chest screaming I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I FUCKINGHATE YOU until blood and swelling shut Charley's eyes for him he felt Norman get to his feet and kick his kidneys legs arms face throat Charley rolled into a ball, on his side curled like an unborn child crying screaming asking his brother to please stop I won't get them I'll leave you alone I won't tell him where you are you can stay right here

i'll never tell

please stop

but Norman kicked harder. Charley's back throbbled and burned his cracked ribs dug into his chest like a hot needle cutting deeper with every breath

I'LL KILL YOU MUTHERFUCKER I FUCKINGHATE YOU *feed you feed you feed touch my daughter*

I'll fucking kill you, Norman sobbed until Charley stopped listening. The pain in his chest eased. His throbbing cheek and pulverized nose – he

Feeding Time

forgot, they disappeared and the boards came loose under his feet
wind shook the pier apart and a dark ocean swallowed little Charley up.

Heh Heh Heh, Charley Adams laughed as he reached across the table again. He wanted another cigarette to kill his craving, to let him stop thinking, for five minutes, how badly he wanted another smoke. Would you like to tell me what happened next? How badly did your brother beat you? the Doctor asked. Month of traction for my broken femur, sewed my intestines back together, re-attached my retina with a laser, he said and cracked his knuckles. Plus, he split my colon in two. Couple years of fun toilet time. He lit up, crossed his legs, rested his elbows on a knee.

And what happened to your brother? Norman? They dragged him away to the boy's home right off. Gave him someone to talk to – someone like you, who helped him sort all his problems out. Then he came home.

And how long before he raped you the first time?

Two months.

How did that make you feel? she asked from behind her note book.

Silence

Do you believe that has anything to do with you being here today?

Silence

Anything to do with your crimes?

Silence

Do you blame your uncle?

Are you angry with your brother? His eyes burned like the coal on the end of his Marlboro as he sucked it down to the filter and flicked it at the floor.

Are you angry Charley?

Well Doctor, there is one thing I'm angry about; how could she sell the Wagoneer to that slimy old nigger Sammy?

Heh Heh Heh

ANDREW CRAIGS

Metal

He has on a ripped shirt under a respectable, if cheap jacket. He humbles down the carriage like the ancient mariner, stopping and glaring at one in three before moving on.

‘Dovolte mi?’ he asks, flapping his hand at the empty bench opposite me. May I?

‘Ano, prosím,’ I answer, reluctantly.

He stares at me, uncertain.

‘Nemecki?’ he asks with a sort of halfways sneer. Germans are not popular in this part of Europe. My northern English accent unfortunately often gives people the impression that I am one when I mumble my broken Czech or Hungarian.

‘Anglicky,’ I reply, watching as he smiles and relaxes a little.

‘Ah, good, I speak English passing well. Is this seat taken, please?’

I shake my head no and smile.

‘Děkuji,’ he says.

‘Prosím,’ I reply.

He smiles again, more broadly this time, and settles into the seat opposite with all the grace of a wardrobe falling down a flight of stairs. The train wheels squeal and spark as we shunt back onto the main line. He pulls out a newspaper and begins reading while I watch him furtively.

‘You’re looking at my shirt,’ he says, without looking up.

‘Er ... yes.’

‘I have been to Budapest. I said once I would never go there again. For my son I broke this promise.’

‘Your son lives there?’

‘My son died there. This morning I buried him. Now I can finish never going back there.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be, he was a shit.’

‘And your shirt?’

‘My son was a shit, but he was a Jewish shit, and I am his good Jewish father.’ I look blank. ‘We tear our shirts in grief and we wear them in our mourning. Let the world see how our hearts are torn.’

‘But if you aren’t grieving ...’

‘Perhaps I grieve for what might have been.’

‘You said you had vowed never to return ...’

‘Promised, not vowed.’

‘Promised never to return. Did you live there once?’

‘Lived there, loved there, died there. Now my son has done the same.’

‘Why did you leave?’

He stares at me.

‘How old do I look to you?’

‘Sixty-five, seventy or so.’

‘Seventy-eight, thank you for the compliment. And you know already I am Jewish?’

‘Yes.’

It is a conversation that does not need to be finished. It grows hotter in the compartment and we sit in silence a while.

The ticket collector comes by and frowns at the old man, who smiles openly back at him. When the uniform moves through to the next carriage he grins openly at me. Belatedly, we exchange names and introductory pleasantries.

He asks what I had been doing in Budapest and I explain I am studying the theatre of Eastern Europe, and how things will change after the breakdown of the communist states. We talk a little about this and he seemed interested in the subject, and in art in general.

‘Did you visit the Synagogue there?’ he asks. ‘In Budapest?’

‘Yes.’

‘I hadn’t been for a long time. I went back to see the willow in the courtyard. Did you see it?’

‘The silver sculpture? No,’ I lie. ‘There were too many people there. I didn’t want to intrude.’ He looks at me, knowing I am not telling the truth. But I find it hard to describe my reaction to it and know it would be even harder with this man in front of me. ‘I’ve heard it’s very beautiful and sad.’

‘Beautiful means you didn’t understand it. It’s not beautiful, or sad; it’s something that squeezes your heart like a chicken’s neck on a butcher’s block.’

The willow stood in the courtyard of the synagogue, long branches of pure silver holding silver slivers of leaves, which could be individually commissioned and placed on the branches, each one bearing the name of a Jewish person who had died during the war. When the wind moved the branches it made a sound that made your soul itch.

‘Have you put any leaves on ... ?’

In answer to the question he was obviously awaiting, he pulls out a photograph. It shows a long branch with each of the leaves clearly visible, reflecting a watery sun.

‘Which one is ... ?’

He starts at the end, pointing to the first leaf of silver.

‘My mother,’ his finger moves, ‘my father,’ move, ‘my wife,’ move, ‘our daughter,’ move, ‘my grandmother, uncle, brother, sister, sister, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin, cousin, cousin, cousin ...’

Sixty-eight names. Sixty-eight sets of dates, too close together.

‘I plan to buy more, when I can, but they are not so cheap.’

We are pulling into a station and a rattling din pursues the familiar shout of Pivo! down the platform.

‘May I buy you a beer?’ I ask.

‘That would be nice, most ... appreciated, thank you.’

I lean out of the window and buy a dozen bottles of the ice-cold beer from the man with the shopping trolley. We crack one each and he raises his in toast.

‘L’chaim,’ he says.

‘Cheers.’

We talk for a little, about work, about theatre, about families. He becomes quieter, daydreaming.

A storm flickers over the broad valley. Lightning strikes nearby the train, leaving a sour metallic smell and taste in the compartment. Not much further. I ask about the mother of his son.

‘Kdo ... ? Who?’

‘Your wife. Did you love her?’

‘Yes, I loved my wife. She was the woman I loved, so we became husband and wife.’

‘Do you have any other children who survived?’

‘We had no children, only my daughter who died as a baby.’

‘But ... your son.’

‘Was born by another woman I happened to marry later.’

He pulls out another photograph. Black and white and badly cropped and creased. Two pretty young women with their arms around a man in a suit, who stands between them. They gaze squintingly, happily, into the sun that must have been over the photographer’s shoulder.

He points to the one on the left. She wears a pale dress, with flowers embroidered onto it, and lace-up boots. Her hair is dark, frizzy and barely controlled under a pale scarf.

‘This is my wife. This is the woman I loved.’

‘She looks lovely.’

‘She was.’

The face of the man in the middle is blurred, rubbed away, an indistinct smudge.

‘Who is that?’ I ask.

He looks hard at the photograph, brow creased in thought, as if trying to remember.

‘It’s me,’ he finally replies.

‘Why is it ... ?’

‘When I went looking for her, after what happened, I would hold my thumb over my face. I didn’t want them to look at me any more. I wanted them to look at her. I wanted them to *look* at her. I wanted to see if they remembered, and to make sure they remembered afterwards. I made them look, even if they didn’t know.’

‘Did you find her?’

‘Ten years I walked, looking for her. Still I look at faces. Try to pick her out in a crowd. She was my wife. She was the woman I loved. The woman I love.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said again.

‘Don’t be. You can waste a whole journey, a whole life, being sorry. I have lived a life in which I knew love, and then the opposite of love.’

He paused. I suddenly wanted to fill the silence.

‘Hate, you mean?’

‘No, stupid! Do you know nothing? Hate gives you the opportunity to take part – treats you as some kind of human being. Acknowledges you. The opposite of love is ... to wilfully forget, to be wilfully forgotten, invisible, dead and alive and unknown. It is a dangerous thing to do to people. More dangerous than hate.’

‘More dangerous?’

‘Yes. Look. Rozumím ... understand. If you hate someone they will live on in your heart as long as anyone you ever loved, perhaps longer. They leave a gap where there used to be a person. A person shaped gap that will not fit anyone else. But to give people the opposite of love. You destroy them. Because when they die – these people leave only a gap where there used to be a gap, and people will fill that gap with all kind of manner of terrible things.’

‘Oh.’

We are slowing into my station. I pull down my bag, pull on my jacket

and half note that it has started to pour down outside. The lightning still flickers.

Instead, 'Look at this again.' he says and holds out the photograph of his wife. I smile uncertainly.

'Look at it.'

I do. Her crinkled eyes. The smile half there at the corners of her mouth. Her slender arm invisible behind a faceless man.

'Remember her face.' His voice grows quieter, quieter, quieter. 'Her smile. Her lovely, lovely smile. Think about wakening to that smile. Think about how it feels to be only ever seeing that smile when you go to sleep. Think about why you would want to waken ever again. Think of her way of always laughing in such serious times. It could make a man so angry with her. Think about whether you would have loved her or hated her. But I promise you this. You will think about her. You will never give with her the opposite of love, this woman you never met.'

MISCHA HILLER

The Sandwich

I rang the hospital when Sharon told me to. Sharon said it was time, that the contractions were closer together. I could hear her gasping and breathing in the other room.

‘Ooh yes! it’s happening,’ she said loudly. I closed the door so I could hear the midwife on the phone. The midwife said we should come to the hospital. I went back in to Sharon. She was leaning forward in our only armchair, her legs apart, holding her belly as she leant forward like it might drop to the floor.

‘They say we should go in,’ I said. She nodded, breathing out like she said they’d taught her in those classes. I hadn’t been to any of the classes, I’d told Sharon I had to work a double-shift on those nights, to earn more money now the baby was coming. Her eyes held mine and she looked alien to me, like she was possessed by something, which in a way she was. When her contractions were finished we got into the car. I carried the bag she had prepared. It was an old car, what people called a rust-bucket, what Sharon’s mother called a death-trap.

‘You’ll need a safer car with the baby,’ she’d said, like I could just go out and buy a new car. Like safety only became an issue if you had a baby in the car, like adults didn’t matter. It started sure enough, but the noise was loud for so late at night because the exhaust was knackered. I supposed that I should drive more carefully than usual, like the baby was already with us in the car. There was a baby-seat in the back, one I’d bought off a neighbour who had no use for it any more. Sharon had said it still smelled of their baby and had spent an hour scrubbing and disinfecting it. It was the same with the second-hand pram we’d bought. Sharon was disappointed with the things I bought; I could see it in her smile when I brought them home. Disappointed because she wanted the best for the baby, and the best, in her eyes, and her mother’s, meant brand new. Like the baby would know what was brand new and what wasn’t. It was the only way I could get ready for it, by getting it these things. Her mother had, to her credit, bought a new cot for us, it sat waiting at the bottom of our bed. You had to turn sideways to get past it because it was so big, and our room so small. With its bars it was like a little prison for babies.

I drove through empty streets and Sharon started her puffing again, trying to lean forward in the seat against the seatbelt. We drove past the small empty railway station, the closed supermarket, dark pubs. We passed a restaurant and I knew I was hungry. I must have said something out loud.

‘You should have brought sandwiches,’ Sharon said, when she’d finished her puffing. Taking sandwiches would be like going to work.

‘I’m sure they’ll have something there,’ I said.

‘I want you to stay with me,’ she said. Her mother had offered to come to the birth but she didn’t look at me when she said it, even though I was in the room, and I knew she thought I couldn’t hack it.

‘I’ll be there,’ I’d said. ‘You don’t need to come.’ Her mother had continued to look at Sharon as if I hadn’t spoken but Sharon had said that we’d be fine, that maybe she could be at home when we got back from the hospital.

I parked as near to the entrance of the hospital as possible and then we had to wait as the pains hit Sharon again and she did her breathing thing. I looked at the lights on in the maternity hospital, all they did was deliver babies. It was like a baby factory, like there weren’t enough people in the world already. Everyone, including Sharon, wanted their own. A pregnant woman was standing at the entrance smoking a cigarette.

‘Look at her, she’s pregnant and she’s smoking,’ I said. But Sharon had her hands on the dashboard and wasn’t looking. When the pains passed I took her bag and went round to open the door for her. She heaved herself out. She’d put on weight since getting pregnant. Not just baby weight but extra weight that showed in her face. She stood for a moment with a hand on her back. We walked to the entrance and the woman who was smoking stared at us. Sharon gave the woman and her belly a look and made a big show of waving the smoke away as we passed. There wasn’t much smoke and Sharon was acting like the woman was murdering her baby. Her own baby and Sharon’s. Maybe she was, but in these situations you either say something or ignore it. Sharon’s mother was good like that, she could make a noise or curl her lip a certain way at something you said and you knew she thought badly of you. If you asked her what was wrong she would shrug and shake her head like she didn’t know what you meant and then give you a look as if to wonder why you were so aggressive. You could tell that the woman smoking didn’t care what we thought and that if Sharon had said something she would have sworn at her. She was looking at Sharon like she’d never seen a pregnant woman before.

Inside the hospital it was neon bright and very clean. There was a midwife waiting inside and I gave her Sharon's name and she said she was expecting us. She offered Sharon a wheelchair. It was not a wheelchair that handicapped people push themselves around in but one you see patients being wheeled about hospital in, even if they aren't really sick. I pushed Sharon and we followed the midwife who was asking Sharon about her contractions. She looked too young to be a midwife. She had flat shoes on and lots of clips to keep her blonde hair in place. She smiled a lot at Sharon. I tried to catch her eye but she didn't look at me. We took a lift up one floor. We went into a delivery room and Sharon was asked to put on a hospital gown and get on the bed.

'The midwife will be in to do an examination,' the midwife said.

'I thought you were the midwife,' I said, smiling at her.

'I'm just a trainee,' she said. She still wouldn't look at me properly, she just glanced at me. She left and Sharon started to get undressed. I stood at the window and looked out. I could see our car parked down below; we looked right over the car park. I looked at the few other cars parked down there. Sharon was moaning behind me so I turned round. She was holding onto the back of the chair and leaning over. I went over and she grabbed my hand.

'Oh God it hurts,' she said. Her robe was undone because she hadn't finished doing it up before the pain struck. She was naked underneath apart from some thick socks. Her belly was big and stretched and marked with a crisscross of veins. Her breasts had swelled up, and they had not been small to start with. In the last few weeks she had started to take them out when I least expected it and then hold them up to my face.

'Bet you've never seen tits like these,' she'd say. It was not a sexy thing she was doing: it was funny and we both cracked up, even after the fourth or fifth time she'd done it. Sometimes though, she'd take them out and study them in the mirror. They were big and veiny and heavy-looking. Sometimes in bed I liked to weigh them in my hands and stick my face next to them. They smelled familiar, like I don't know what. Once I tried to suck on the enlarged nipples but she'd smacked me away.

'That's for the baby,' she'd said. She was laughing but the smack was hard.

I did up the robe for her and then the pain passed. She sat on the bed panting.

'It's going to be alright, isn't it?' she said.

'Of course it's going to be alright. People have babies all the time.'

‘I mean afterwards. When we get home,’ she said, and her bottom lip trembled. I sat next to her and took her hand and wanted to tell her the truth but then the door opened and an older midwife came in followed by the trainee. This time I pretty much ignored her so she didn’t get a chance to ignore me. The proper midwife was much older and had creased skin between her upper lip and nostrils. She was matter-of-fact but nice with it. She held a chart open in her hands. Sharon’s name was on the front.

‘Hop on the bed, dear, let’s have a look at you,’ she said. She put on some latex gloves and sat on a stool at the bottom of the bed. She told Sharon to move her bottom to the edge of the bed and spread her legs. The midwife pushed Sharon’s thighs further apart until Sharon was lying wide open. The midwife and the trainee looked between Sharon’s legs and the midwife put her hand there. I went to the window and looked onto the car park. A man was walking out between the cars and I tried to guess which car he was going to. He was dressed in a suit and carried a briefcase. I wondered whether he had been working late and whether he was a doctor. Maybe his wife had just had a baby. A man like that would be married, not like me and Sharon. The lights on a sports car flashed as he approached it. I couldn’t see what make it was in the dark, maybe a Porsche. When he got in and switched the lights on I could see it was a Porsche by the shape of the lights. The midwife was talking about how dilated Sharon was. I went back to the bed.

‘You must be the father,’ she said to me. I nodded. The trainee was smiling at me now. She was pretty and slim and had a nice smile. Sharon started to groan again and I took her hand.

‘It may be better if you squat up rather than lie down,’ the midwife said to her. ‘I’ll be popping in and out to see how you’re getting on, but you’ve got a while yet.’

They left the room and Sharon was sweating from the pain. She used to be as thin as that trainee midwife before she got pregnant. We used to have some fun together. I suppose that was how it happened really, because we had such fun and sometimes forgot to be careful. If we forgot we didn’t worry about it too much because what can you do? Then one time she’d told me she was late and she looked terrified even though she’d been late before and that’s all she had been, late. She said this time was different, that a woman could tell. Then she told her mother and her mother told her she should see a doctor, ‘just to discuss her options’. Her mother had looked at me as if I had done it on purpose. I wanted to tell her what her daughter was like, just to shock her, but I didn’t. I knew that it was not my

fault alone. Sharon told me later, when she'd decided to keep the baby against her mother's advice, that her mother had said that I would be no good as a father. I'd asked Sharon what she thought and she'd started crying and I'd held onto her until she stopped.

'You are the father,' she'd said, and kissed me and then before I could tell her what I thought about it she had started to take her clothes off. We were in the kitchen and it looked out onto the small garden, but that was Sharon, she didn't care if anyone saw us. That's what I couldn't tell her mother. 'At least now we don't have to worry about contraception,' she'd said, lying face down over the table. When the baby started showing though, all that had stopped. It was all about the baby from then on. Her mother had started to visit more often and I started to do more double-shifts, partly to stay away, partly to show Sharon and her mother that I was a responsible person. Sometimes I did do a double-shift, to buy the baby stuff, but sometimes I sat in the cinema or the pub. I only drank vodka in the pub so they couldn't smell it on me when I got home.

In the delivery room she started having more pain. She had forgotten the breathing now and was just moaning. I reminded her about the breathing.

'Why don't you have the baby,' she said. She looked hateful but I knew she was just in pain. I waited, I didn't know what to do to help.

'I need to phone your mother,' I said. 'I need to tell her you are here.' She was rocking back and forth and grabbing my hand, squeezing it hard. Then it passed and she just looked tired.

'Yes, you should phone her.' I went outside and saw the trainee midwife at a central desk. She was writing something into a folder as I walked up to her.

She smiled at me but it was a careful smile. I asked her where the pay-phone was. She pointed down the hall. I could see from her name badge that she was called Kate.

'Have you been working here long, Kate?' I asked. She put her hand to her badge as if her name was something she had to hide.

'Just six months,' she said, and got back to her writing. I walked to the phone and dialled the number written on a piece of paper in my wallet. Sharon had put it there four weeks ago, 'just in case'.

'Hello, it's me,' I said, when she picked up the phone.

'What's happened?' she said. She knew that I would not ring unless something had happened to Sharon.

'Nothing's happened,' I said. 'She's started having the baby.'

'How far gone is she?' she asked. I did not know what that meant.

‘She’s having contractions and they are getting closer together.’ I looked down the hall at Kate: her uniform couldn’t really hide her shape.

‘You shouldn’t leave her alone,’ she said. ‘She isn’t that strong.’

‘I’ve just come out to tell you we are here,’ I said. ‘I’m going straight back.’

‘Call me as soon as you have news,’ she said. I put the handset back and thought that it was funny that we never used each other’s names. Kate was not there as I walked passed the desk to the delivery room. She was in the room with Sharon and the midwife. They ignored me as I went in, the midwife was doing another examination. She pulled the gloves off and put them into a yellow bin.

‘It’ll be a while yet, Sharon dear.’ She looked at me. ‘Maybe you should get yourself something to eat while you can. You’ll be needed later on.’ Her badge said ‘Mary’. When they left I asked Sharon if she was happy for me to go and eat something. I did feel an emptiness in my stomach.

‘After the next contraction,’ she said. I sat on the bed with her. I wiped her brow with a tissue from the pack she had brought in her bag. When the pain came she made a face like she’d tasted something horrible.

‘Oh God!’ she said. She knelt on the bed and guided my hands to her back. ‘Rub, rub, rub!’ she said. I rubbed her back and she moaned but it was not like I’d heard her moan before. I didn’t like hearing it. After a couple of minutes it was over and I gave her some water from the covered jug that came with the room.

‘I’ll just get a sandwich and bring it back,’ I said.

‘I told you to make some.’ I moved her damp hair back from her face.

‘I won’t be long. I’ll tell the midwife to come in.’ She looked tired and nodded, trying to make herself comfortable with the pillows at her back. I punched them into place and kissed her on the forehead. At least she didn’t seem scared any more. I put on my jacket and went out into the hall.

Kate was at the desk, talking on the phone. I waited for her to finish. She was telling someone that the hospital couldn’t give out that sort of information to just anyone. She put the phone back and checked the clips in her hair.

‘Would you mind looking in on Sharon. I’m just going to get a sandwich.’ She looked at my jacket.

‘OK,’ she said, then added, ‘There is a machine downstairs.’ I nodded and walked to the stairs. I remembered passing the vending machine as we came in. I could hear screaming from one of the other delivery rooms. I walked quickly down the stairs and was on the level we had come in at.

I found the machine in the deserted reception area. There was nothing in the machine but crisps and chocolate bars. There were empty spaces where the sandwiches had been. I really wanted a sandwich; it was too much, the gnawing in my stomach. I looked through the doors into the car park and saw that it was already getting light. I went through the doors and felt the chill you get just before dawn. I walked to our car, looking up at the window where I had stood earlier looking down at the cars.

I got into the driver's seat and started the engine, put the heating on. The exhaust rattled and throbbed noisily in the silence. I looked up to the window. I thought maybe Sharon would hear the car and look out the window but nothing broke the rectangle of light. I wanted her to look out of the window but at the same time I didn't want her to. I put the car into reverse gear and turned round to look through the back window. I could see the baby-seat in the back, scrubbed and clean but worn from three years of its previous occupant. I pulled out, put the car into first gear and drove out of the car park. I was looking for a sandwich.

I parked at the railway station and went in and looked for a vending machine. There was nothing; you'd think they would have them at a railway station, even a small one like this. I sat down in the ticket office, I was the only person there. The counters were all closed. I looked at the electronic timetable on the wall. The first train of the day was in half an hour. I should be getting back to the hospital, Sharon would be worried. I hoped that Kate was in with Sharon, they would probably get along. Kate would look after Sharon, I was sure. A man came into the station wheeling a large suitcase behind him. He nodded at me and I nodded back. I went to a payphone and took the number out of my wallet but I had no change for the phone. The man who had come in with the suitcase was smoking a cigarette and watching me. I went up to him.

'Have you got change?' I asked, offering him a note. He pulled out a wallet on a chain and opened a zippered pocket in it.

Sharon's mother picked up on the second ring. A train started coming into the station as she did.

'What's that noise?' she asked. She always asked the wrong questions.

'I think you should go to the hospital,' I said. The noise of the train got worse as it squealed to a stop.

'What is that noise? Is everything alright?' I wanted to say sorry. I wanted to say all kinds of things – but I would not tell her that she was right about me.

'Go to the hospital,' I said. 'Sharon needs you now.'

ANNIE McDOWALL

Phantoms

I don't know why I said it.

'I'm really sorry I'm late,' I said. 'My daughter broke her leg this morning. Falling out of a tree. She broke her leg. This morning.'

This is what I said as I stumbled, breathless, into the large, windowless room on the fifth floor. Thirteen pairs of eyes turned towards me in a mix of irritation at the disturbance and smugness at their own punctuality. I told this group of strangers that I was late because my daughter had fallen out of a tree and broken her leg. The thing is, you see, I have neither a tree nor a daughter. I have never had a daughter. I have sometimes thought it would be nice to have one: a girl to teach and love and watch grow into something rare and beautiful; but it wasn't to be and barring a series of miracles, never would be. I haven't got a son either, just in case you were wondering. No man, you see.

At tea break, a woman came up to me. She wore an expression that I did not immediately recognise. Sympathy? No, I know that one. Complicity. That was it, her smile was complicit. It said, *you and I share something*. I had never met her before. We both must have worked in finance, for this was a course on the latest accounting conventions; but accounts people don't usually approach each other with complicity glinting in their eyes. I shovelled two spoons of sugar into my coffee and stirred it vigorously, watching the swirling black liquid intently.

'How old is she?' asked the stranger.

'Who?'

'Your daughter, the one who's broken her leg. How old is she?'

'Um ... twelve. Yes, she's twelve. She was twelve last birthday. In January. Her twelfth birthday was in January.'

'Twelve! A difficult age!' Complicity oozed from her. It felt as odd to me as eating a dish made with foods that do not normally go together. Fillet of wild sea bass with citrus risotto and fennel sorbet had been on the works Christmas dinner menu. Why would you have sorbet with fish?

'My eldest is at university now, thank God, but the youngest is eleven. Do you have any others?' She was standing closer to me than was comfortable.

‘Twin boys.’ I felt hot. The room was stuffy. It smelled of coffee and cheap, chemical perfume. Someone brushed past smelling of fresh air and cigarette smoke. I was sweating under my bra.

‘My, you’ve got your hands full!’ she said. ‘How old are they?’

‘Ten. They’ve just turned ten.’

‘So you’ll be thinking of secondary transfer, then?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Secondary transfer. Changing schools. Which schools do they go to?’

I didn’t know the names of my local schools.

‘Oh ... they don’t. I mean, we – that is, my partner and I, we educate them at home.’

‘Oh!’ She looked taken aback, as if she didn’t know whether to smile in admiration or frown at my – no, our – unorthodox approach to child rearing. She busied her mouth with a digestive biscuit. I watched crumbs drop from her mouth and fingers to the floor. Someone would have to clean up her mess.

‘We thought it best,’ I added, enjoying being a we rather than an I. I had long ago decided that if I ever had children, which was unlikely, as everything about children, from conception to adolescence, scared me witless, I would never subject them to the horrors of school.

She had gone a little pale and I wondered if she regretted having started this conversation. I felt less scared. It was quite exciting, inventing this family for myself.

I looked at the woman properly for the first time. She was taller than me, about five six. She wore conventional court shoes, a navy skirt in a man-made material, a blouse with loud green and yellow geometrical shapes. Short, bluntly cropped dark hair striped with grey. Three whiskers sprouted from her chin. Her name badge said she was Coral Pearson.

The tutor called us all together and we resumed our seats for the next session. It was to do with a complex new tax allowance system. Normally I love things like that: complicated formulae that require a mathematical and highly organised mind in order to apply them; but my mind drifted. What would I cook Claudia and the boys (so far nameless) for their tea? What did my partner do for a living? He had rather wild blonde hair and wore chinos and soft cotton shirts that smelled of clean male body. Maybe he was a lecturer in something exotic and fascinating like anthropology. A university lecturer somewhere cutting edge like the School of Oriental and African Studies. I had always wanted to go there. Going to North London

Polytechnic to study accounting had made perfect sense at the time. I had been eighteen. I excelled at maths and loved, to the point of needing, detail, predictability, logic; and yet, a small part of me had yearned to learn something strange and useless; something about other lives and times and places.

The tutor handed out a sheaf of papers and said that it was time for lunch. I hated training course lunch times. You had to eat standing up in front of everyone, bits of soggy quiche and egg sandwich got ground into the carpet by shiny networking shoes, and you either made conversation with people in whom you had no interest, or you stood alone outside the little pairs and trios and quartets, feeling conspicuously odd. If I was quick, I could slip out and no-one would notice. I took my coat from the stand in the corner.

‘Aren’t you having lunch, Brenda?’ It was Coral Pearson.

‘I have to pop out,’ I said, arms struggling into coat sleeves.

‘Shall I keep you a plate?’

‘No, it’s fine, I’m not really hungry.’

‘Got to check up on Claudia?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Your daughter. Claudia. The one with the broken leg!’

‘Oh! Yes, of course. I have to check on Claudia.’

I headed for the door and temporary freedom. I breathed deeply as the building door swished shut behind me. The south London streets were crowded with people. Jamaican rhythms pounded from the cut price Reggae shop. A street stall displayed lychees and mangos, huge avocados and hirsute yams. A preacher with a microphone shouted out promises of redemption and threats of hellfire as hoards of sinners skirted around him, going about their profane business. I stopped in front of a shop selling teenage clothing. Claudia would look lovely in that, I thought, looking at a turquoise skinny rib top and seeing it hugging her soft young body. I went inside, picked up the top, felt its artificial silkiness. Before I could stop myself, I’d taken it to the till, handed over five pounds ninety nine pence, counting out the pennies, and was leaving the shop carrying a blue plastic bag. What would Ewan say? There! He had a name at last. Ewan, like the actor, the handsome blonde one who had his head down the loo in *Trainspotting*. He would say, *how can you buy clothes that are produced by slave labour in far eastern sweat shops?* And I would feel ashamed, but defend myself by

saying *It just looked so perfect for Claudia*. I adore him, but I do stand my ground.

I got back to the training centre just in time for the afternoon session. Coral smiled at me complicitly.

‘How’s she doing, then?’

‘She’s fine. I bought her a top.’

‘That’ll cheer her up.’

The tutor gave us a case study. It involved real numbers, and so I enjoyed it and of course got the right answer.

‘Well done Brenda,’ said the tutor, and I wished that she hadn’t said anything, because everyone looked at me. Still, I had at least redeemed myself from my late entrance that morning. I thought about cooking that night. Ewan would want something healthy with tofu and brown rice. Claudia would refuse to eat any starch and would stir the tofu and broccoli around her plate listlessly. The boys would clamour for pizza and fizzy drinks and I would give them the former but not the latter. I would nibble at vegetables and have a glass of wine. Ewan would wash up and then go and strum on his guitar. On his way out of the kitchen he would hug me and kiss my neck, and I would know that the night held the promise of deeper pleasures. In the meantime, I would curl up with *Middlemarch*.

I’ve never read *Middlemarch*. I feel that there is a large gap in my human experience. I promise myself that I will read George Eliot’s classic before I’m fifty. I’ve never known the deeper pleasures of sex, either. Of course I’ve had sex, but it has been, on the whole, rather disappointing. Messy. Dead end and unfulfilling. Sex just didn’t seem worth the trouble after I turned thirty seven, and that was more than ten years ago. The men with whom I had had affairs – there were three – didn’t stay around for long. None of them loved me. We filled a gap for each other for a while, much as fast food does when you’re faint with hunger, the promise of relief turning out to be a wholly unpleasant and unsatisfactory experience that, with the benefit of hindsight, you would have been better without. It would be nice to experience the sex of books and films, sensual sex that brings every nerve ending to life, that rockets you to another plane of existence. I think it would be perfect with Ewan. With him, I shouldn’t mind the mess so much.

Tea break again. Why did people feel the need to refuel every two hours?

‘Any news from home?’

It was Coral again. What was it about me that kept her coming back?

‘No, nothing,’ I said, wondering whether she was going to start spluttering digestive biscuit crumbs over the floor again.

‘If you don’t mind me asking, what’s your husband’s name?’

‘My husband’s name?’

‘Yes. I’m interested in couples and their names. Sometimes they just seem to go together and sometimes you’re not surprised when they get divorced. My husband’s Brian. Brian and Coral. You see? It goes. B and C. Brian and Coral, Coral and Brian. It just sounds right, do you see what I mean? But when my friend Phyllis married a chap called Ben, I knew it wouldn’t last. And it didn’t. Divorced after a year and a half. So you’re Brenda, and your husband’s ...?’

She was mad. I’d never met anyone like her before.

‘Ewan. His name’s Ewan. Like the actor. The one with his head down the loo in Trainspotting.’

‘That’s nice. Ewan. Ewan and Brenda. Brenda and Ewan. Hmm ... I wouldn’t have put them together, but they’re quite nice really, aren’t they?’

I could see her working out how long it would be before we divorced, Ewan and me. I wanted to tell her that we weren’t married, we just lived together, but then the tutor signalled that it was time for our final session.

At five o’clock the course ended. I gathered my papers together in the order in which they had been presented, slipped them into my briefcase and went to get my coat. Coral Pearson waved goodbye and strode out of the door. I thought about the long evening that stretched ahead of me. Maybe I’d have a quiet evening in with a bowl of soup. Maybe I’d go to the Wigmore Hall, hear some chamber music and see who came to sit down next to me. You never knew who you might meet.

‘Brenda, you’ve forgotten your shopping.’

‘Shopping?’ The tutor handed me a blue carrier bag. I couldn’t remember buying anything.

‘No, sorry, it’s not mine,’ I said.

I walked back past the stalls and the shops. Men with long poles were dragging down metal shutters, throwing a uniform curtain of defensive anonymity up and down the high street. The preacher was putting away his microphone and bible. An over-ripe mango rotted in the gutter. I tried not to think about the life I didn’t have, the children that had only lived fleetingly in my imagination, and the man who, if he

did exist, wouldn't look twice at someone like me. I stuck my hands in my pockets, feeling around for my travel card. Went to cross the road. That's when I felt a thud in my back and was flung up, along, down, my arm hitting the tarmac with a jolt of pain, head meeting hard wet ground with a thick and sickening crack. It was dark. At first it seemed quiet, and then I heard car horns and people shouting. I smelled diesel and wet tarmac, tasted soupy metallic salt. Then there was nothing. Nothing but a flash of dreams. A tree; a girl; a blue carrier bag; columns of numbers marching across a cinema screen. A voice calling my name, *Brenda, Brenda, Brenda* and a sickness swirling from head to belly. The voice grew louder, *Brenda, Brenda, come on now Brenda, wake up*. The sickness was not a dream. Neither was the voice. The voice was coarse, it grated, it was too close. *Brenda, Brenda*. I wanted to tell it to go away but my mouth wouldn't open. I wanted them to turn the lights off, they were too bright. Everything hurt. Most of all the voice hurt.

'Brenda, wake up now. Oh dear, it's not been your day, has it? What with Claudia and now you. How can we get hold of Ewan, dear?'

Now I remembered to whom the voice belonged. It was Coral Pearson from the course. 'Turn the lights off.' My voice seemed to come from somewhere, someone else, escaping my throat in a whisper.

'Oh Brenda, thank God! You're back in the land of the living! You've had a nasty accident, dear!'

I opened my eyes. Her bosom was almost in my face, the loud green and yellow blouse a ghastly sight.

'You're in hospital, Brenda. They say you'll be all right. But I didn't know how to let Ewan know what had happened. I couldn't find anything in your bag to tell me how to contact him and the children.'

'There is no Ewan. There are no children.' My voice sounded strange, tongue drunkenly groping around the words.

'It's that nasty bang on the head. Fancy a bus going into you like that! You're lucky that you only suffered a broken arm and mild concussion. Oh, and they say you've lost a tooth, dear. But you can't have forgotten your lovely family! Let me have his number and I'll ring him for you.'

'He doesn't exist. They don't exist. I made them up.'

'No you didn't. Remember Claudia fell out of the tree this morning? And the top you bought her?'

'I made them up.'

'I'll go and get the nurse for you. Maybe that bang on the head is worse than they thought.'

I wished with all my heart that Coral Pearson had never entered my life. I wished that she had disappeared for good when we'd said goodbye at five o'clock. I had started my day with a harmless, ludicrous lie, and now I was faced with a loud, messy, interfering woman intent on exposing me for the fraud that I had become.

Moments later she strode back in, a large nurse by her side.

'Hello Brenda, I see you're awake then,' said the nurse. Her voice was big and soft.

'Your friend says you can't remember your husband's phone number. Come now, tell me where you keep it.'

'She's not my friend. I don't know her. I don't like her. I don't have a husband.'

'Darlin', you've had a nasty accident and you're not thinking straight,' said the nurse as she twiddled with a valve on a long plastic tube that disappeared into my hand.

'She was fine earlier.' Coral was still here. 'She was telling me all about her family and how there are three kids and she and her husband who's called Ewan teach them at home. It's not right, if you ask me, keeping children away from school, but then it's none of my business.'

'Just tell me how to find your husband, darlin',' coaxed the nurse. Her large hips swung slightly as she adjusted my pillow. She smelled spicy and warm and I wanted to hide under her apron.

'I don't have a husband. I lied to this woman this morning. There's just me. I live alone.'

'She's got twin boys,' said Coral.

'No boys. No girl. No husband. I'm sorry. I lied. I was late. Please go away. I feel very sick.'

'Concussion. Must be concussion,' said Coral.

'Maybe you should go now,' said the nurse, my angel in an apron. After Coral had left, the nurse said to me,

'Now you tell me what's going on. Where's your husband? Let me call him for you.'

'I keep telling you. There isn't a husband. I made him up. Please can I go home?'

'People don't make up things like that, now, do they? What happened? Did you have a row this morning?'

I didn't answer. There was no point. This morning, when I lied to people, they believed me. Now, when I was telling the truth, no-one believed me. I closed my eyes against the harsh strip lights,

my ears against the hushed and urgent hospital hubbub. Escaped into sleep.

When I woke up, it was night time and there was a man in a doctor's jacket standing at the bottom of the bed. Around him was a group of very young looking people in white coats several sizes too big. They all carried notebooks. They were looking at me with a mixture of fear and curiosity. The main man spoke.

'Patient hit by a bus this evening. Presented as delusional. Claimed not to have a family, although her friend assured us that she had a husband and three children. X-rays showed concussion not bad enough to cause amnesia. What next?'

'See if there's psychosis present?' replied an earnest looking boy with livid acne.

'And how would we do that?'

'Request a psychiatric assessment?' suggested a slight Asian girl with neat short hair.

'Correct. We will refer her to Mr Winsham-Jones and ask him for his assessment. Let's move on now to the next case.'

And with that, the great man and his entourage left. They hadn't asked me a single thing. They didn't ask me for my views on having or not having a family. The last time I'd had a psychiatric assessment I'd ended up in a unit for anorexic teenagers and been force-fed stodge for six weeks. I'd been fourteen years old. I wondered if I still knew how to play the game, how to give them what they wanted in return for my freedom. I felt icy with fear. I had to get away. The nurse ambled up to my bed carrying a small paper cup and a glass of water.

'Take these darlin', and they'll help you to sleep.'

'I don't want to sleep,' I said. 'Is my friend still here?'

'No, she went off a few hours ago, but she said she'd be back.'

'Could you call her for me? I remember everything now. I'm perfectly fine and I just need her to take me home.'

'I'll call her, darlin', but I don't know if the doctor will sign you off. I'm going now, this is the end of my shift, so you take care now and make sure you rest up.'

Like a refugee, I could not be choosy about whom I trusted to help me get out of danger and to a safer place. The most important thing, the only thing, was to get out and to escape the psychiatric assessment. Coral was my

passport, my only chance. I would have to wait until the morning. Hope that Coral was still intent on rescuing me and reuniting me with my family.

She had changed her blouse. Today's was as loud as yesterday's, but this time in fuchsia pink with silver stripes. She strode over to the bed.

'How are you Brenda? Did you sleep? I've been so worried about you! Have you remembered about Ewan yet?'

'Yes! Yes, I'm feeling so much better. I feel very silly. Thank you for looking after me. I'm ready to go home now. Do you think you could take me?'

'Can't Ewan come to get you?'

'No! That's why I feel so silly. You see, he's away on business. He lectures in anthropology, and he's actually in the Amazon region at the moment. Impossible to get hold of. No mobile signal. No e-mail. They're camping so no hotel phone either.'

'Why did you say that you'd made him up?'

'To be very honest, Coral, I think I was angry with Ewan for not being there for me yesterday. It's not that he doesn't really exist, it's *as if* he doesn't exist when he's away for these long trips. And the children were going to my mother's anyway. So do you think you could take me home?'

'I'll go and talk to the nurse in charge.'

I took a deep breath as I watched my ticket to freedom approach the nursing station. I prayed for the first time in years. Please God, let Coral get me out of here. Please God, I need to go home. Please. I'll be good. I'll eat my dinner. I won't lie again. Please. Let me go. I watched as Coral gesticulated to a new nurse, and then as the nurse flicked through a file, frowning. She said something to Coral, and Coral said something back and nodded. Then the nurse answered a ringing phone and Coral turned to walk back to my bed.

'She said wait until after the ward round.'

'How long will that be?'

'The doctor should be here any time now.'

I checked to see that the way was clear for me to leave. They'd taken the drip out of my arm. There were no sides to the bed. My right arm was plastered. I needed to try out my legs.

'I'm going to the loo,' I said.

I swivelled my legs around until they dangled over the side of the bed. I used my good arm to lever myself down. Every muscle screamed at me, but I ignored them. I was good at mind over matter.

‘Well, that wasn’t too bad at all,’ I said brightly to Coral, as I returned from my trek.

Smiling was agony.

Coral nodded her approval. There was a flurry by the door, and last night’s doctor strode into the ward, accompanied by a different group of students. He stopped at two beds before he came to mine. I had to get this right. I sat up straight and alert. As he approached my bed, I said,

‘Good morning, doctor.’

‘Good morning Miss ... er ... Mrs ... ’

‘Brenda. Just call me Brenda.’

He turned to the group.

‘Patient brought in yesterday after road accident. Appeared delusional. Amnesia found not to be due to concussion. Referred for psychiatric assessment.’

‘I’m fine now,’ I butted in. ‘Must have been the shock yesterday, but I’m ready to go home now.’

‘And have you remembered about your husband and children?’

‘Oh, yes. Ewan’s away on a field trip – he’s an anthropologist, you see; and the children were with my mother last night. We’re all fine. I’d just like to go home and rest now. This is my friend Coral. She’ll take me home.’

Coral nodded obligingly.

‘I’m sure you need this bed and I’m fine, I’m really fine. I need to feed my cat. She’ll wonder where I am.’ Please God, please.

‘Glad to see you’ve made such a good recovery.’ And with that, he and his entourage were off. Thank you, God.

Coral waited outside the curtains that I’d drawn around the bed as I yanked off the hospital gown and struggled into yesterday’s clothes. I hated putting on dirty clothes, and mine were much the worse for having encountered the underside of a bus. Still, all this was unimportant. I just needed to get home. My arm was plastered but my fingers were free. I drew back the curtains.

‘Well, I say! Haven’t you done well! I’ve got the car outside. We’ll have you home in a jiffy.’

We were walking across the hospital car park.

‘Where do you live?’ asked Coral. My next challenge would be to stop her from finding out exactly where I lived. She was my means of escape, that was all. Once she’d got me away from the hospital, I never wanted to see her again.

‘Kennington. John Ruskin Street. It would be very kind of you to drop me on the corner of the road – I’ll need to pick up some cat food.’

‘Oh no, I’ll need to come and see you settled down, make sure you’re ok.’

‘No, really, I’ll be fine.’

‘I wouldn’t hear of it. Now you just let me take care of you, especially with Ewan away.’

We’d left the hospital and were at the Elephant and Castle.

‘Which exit is it?’ she asked. People always got confused at the Elephant’s multiple roundabouts. You could intend to go to Vauxhall and find yourself hurtling down to Kent if you weren’t careful.

‘This one.’ As she swerved into Walworth Road, I took a deep breath. The lights changed to red. She slowed the car. This was my chance.

‘This is fine. Thank you so much,’ I said as I opened the door.

‘But ...’ Coral looked stunned as I hauled my body out of her car.

‘Thank you. You’re a life saver. Hope we’ll meet again.’ At the last minute, I grabbed my briefcase. Didn’t want to leave any evidence in her car.

‘But you’re not home yet ...’

‘You’ve been marvellous. Thank you so much. Goodbye.’

Coral’s face stared after me. A combination of fear, hurt and total lack of comprehension unmasked her: behind her no-nonsense capability, her only-trying-to-help practicality, she had been looking for a new friend, and I had eluded her. She could never in a million years have been a friend of mine.

The lights changed to amber and then green. Cars behind Coral hooted. I slammed shut the door and hobbled towards the pink shopping centre. My little flat was only five minutes away. I limped across the estate, climbed my stairs, turned the key in the lock, stepped inside and locked the door. Put the safety chain in place. Utter silence. Finally, just me. I can’t stand cats.

FIRST PRIZE

ANTHONY SNIDER

Panegyric

Praise to the red-bellied woodpecker
its chipping after grubs, and the grubs
snug in their oak-boled tower

Praise to the brown-headed cowbird
her cunning interjection
into nests of diligence

Praise to the rape of the squirrel
the thin twigs on which she escapes
the males shouldering each other
along the shivering limb

Praise to the snow that breaks her fall
and the next tree in which the act is repeated

Praise to the urge for orgy in us all
the communal wish to sow our seed
to broadcast and rejoice in the planting

Praise to the tiny militants
ants holding other ants in thrall
the vanguard forces of honeybees
pillaging the next hive's honey
and stinging their queen to death

Praise disease winnowing our numbers
so that we may swell again

Anthony Snider

Praise the mosquito
for vectoring both
small pain and large scale epidemic

Praise to Henry David Thoreau
and all the bobble-headed romantics
safe men of New England
soft men of the Lake Country
chartered engravers of London
holding nature aloft as a sun

Praise their rejection of reason
the way we speak fences
around our exhausted fields

SECOND PRIZE

JOEL M. TOLEDO

The Same Old Figurative

Yes, the world is strange, riddled with difficult sciences
and random magic. But there are compensations, things we do

perceive: the high cries and erratic spirals of sparrows,
the sky gray and now giving in to the regular rain.

Still we insist on meaning, that common consolation
that, now and then, makes for beauty. Or disaster.

Listen. The new figures are simply those of birds,
the whole notes of their flightless bodies now snagged

on the many scales of the city. And it's just some thunder,
the usual humming of wires. It is only in its breaking

that the rain gives itself away. So come now and assemble
with the weather, notice the water gathering on your cupped

and extended hands – familiar and wet and meaningless.
You are merely being cleansed. Bare instead

the scarred heart; notice how its wild human music
makes such sense. Come, the divining

can wait.

Let us examine the wreckage.

THIRD PRIZE

JONATHAN HADWEN

she took a fall

she took a fall,
full of hips gone crackling out-of-time-like,
bang bam bash she was grounded and cried
but the TV didn't know what to do
so she waited and there was pain i know there was pain
she waited
and some time we came and said the you-all-rights and the fussing calls
and hospital smells of hops and wheat
where there were sisters and that was all gone shouting at each other,
smashing some years out
over a bedside near the nurses who didn't know what
so went running and bloods were jumping into brains and out old reds
in legs and boiling and bashing
it all to stop.

ISABEL ASHDOWN

Milk and Eggs

The rusting bus paused in leafy lanes,
as the girl on the top deck looked up –
curious of new company.

Gradually he appeared,
rising up from the stairwell,
his black head misshapen and swollen.

Like a great melted Easter egg
it hung around dark eyes
that spoke of captive intelligence.

Startled, the tender girl
was pricked with shame
and she averted her flinching gaze.

Years later, in spring-time,
she passed him on the street
as she carried milk and eggs.

He walked towards her
alone, casual in jeans –
his ordinary hands loose in pockets.

Now, her shy eyes smiled into his.
And as he cradled her look
Her heart swelled.

HELEN CARR

Supermarket Girl

Jam tarts 19p for six
I see her mother first
looking considering
metallic reflections
striplights and trolleys
the occasional clash
19p for six no frills
and her children
running on past
cakes and cakes and all
the glittering foil wrapped
sweetness
then I see hear the
eldest the daughter
calling back Mum Mum
back along an aisle
an aisle of years
Mum look at these
birthday cakes eyes shining
coated and coloured
look look at these
iced iced iced delight
eyes shine screens flicker
she walked into my
supermarket heart.
Angels with swords
I invoke
angels with swords
and everything of beauty
at her feet
and birthday cakes
and birthday cakes

CLAUDIA DAVENTRY

perspective

There are days when I am so
clumsy I step into the street and I
knock over trucks with my hip

without noticing. Days when you are
not there. Days when I feel
the weight of love with none of its

levity, when I am watching your
solo flight as you shake me,
in a shower of mercury droplets, free

and feather out your span from tip to tip
spiralling up into the ether
where the spot that is me, miles below

stands in its clogs
and wonders, dully,
what happened to the binoculars.

SARAH DAVIES

First time Mum

Morning has its ceremony
in the kingdom:

drink cold tea, used to fake-age royal documents
and document royal age, cup by cup our days.
Wish to smoke a cigarette, stubbed out in carpet slippers
on compacted mud of grounds; feed my girl
for little girl she is
not liking her face cleaned before she's fed.
Her skin perfect nevertheless
and her hair dark.

Trespass, in carpet slippers, into the garden,
wish smoke a cigarette. The animals gambol
to be fed. They are forgotten since my girl
came, her hair dark. The house is built
on pressed comfort mud. Drink tea
before it cools and cold my feet in carpet slippers.
Twenty measures daily of the stuff,
wine in cups for Queen
of the kingdom of indoors.

The little girl she is, her skin perfect
clean before she's dirty, then cleaned again.
After a drink of cold tea, sediment Nile colour:
how the days are rivered. Outside, hope cigarette
extinguished on the stony mud with ice.
Our days, our slippy days. Her hair
silk, shiny: darkest like, all perfect.
Nevertheless – her face is clean for morning.

CHRISTOPHER JAMES

The Light Age

In the badly drawn world, when England
was as plump as a summer marrow; when Essex
changed places with Kent and no one much cared,
the shape of things were not what mattered most.
Scotland was squeezed between finger and thumb;
Eire was a flattened gourd. When the possibility
of dragons had not entirely been ruled out
we made our way from Berwick to Canterbury
in under a month; our forecasters cast their
eyes across the heavens and feared the worst:
a dark future of science and order; of lands
that would not shift and rivers that refused to bend.
We held out our hands as the dragons took flight,
catching the sapphires they shook from their scales.

CYNTHIA KITCHEN

Deflations in Sad Weather

It was a week of kestrel rain
and wind swooping on the smallest of us,
suffering the flung leaves.

We stepped across chaotic branches,
stumbled by rocks and salt marsh.
The heavens' pourings fell

portentous on our anoraks and hoods.
This might be a sign to save us
from something infinitely worse.

And then we saw them on the cliff path,
punctured still, with trailing silver strings.
Their first brilliance now a mortal blue,
touched by mud and circumstance.

SHAUN LEVIN

Invocation

Answer me when I call you, fucking muse. I'm stuck here, outside all narratives. You quit long before I did, split from me into another's bed, living like an uncaged lion on babies and rabbits.

I sleep in a landscape, hoping for epiphanies as instant as Newton's. How long will I have to keep going – scorned and ignored – relying on the vanity of self-loathing?

I've had enough of the first person singular; I can't keep dragging it around like this. If Sisyphus had pulled the rock up the mountain at the end of a rope, couldn't he then have tied it to the summit?

I am free of awe and free of sin and out of touch with my Self. All my offerings happen in the bedroom. I trust no-one, no matter what they say, even if it is all good. Let's face it: I owe you nothing; it's been years since I had any light from you.

Fucking muse, wake me at any hour of the night. I'm the one who sleeps with reams of blue parchment and a pen of gold ink at his bedside.

DEVON McC JACKSON

Waxwing Bohemians

Look
A Bohemian Waxwing
These waxing Bohemians
Waxwinged & lax these
Bohemians
Laxing
These laxing Bohemians
Waxing & waning &
Waning & wanting
These sad little waxlings
These blackened Bohemians
All whackish & black
These Bohemians lacking for
Lacking in wanting &
Lacking in wax
Wanting for wings
Wings made of wax
Waxing for the moon
Waning in the sun
Wanting to wane in the mooning of the sun
Winging it
Singing it
Singing in wax
These sad little waxlings
These startled bewinged things
These starlings these nightlings
These starlings in wax
These fat waxy stars
These stars that wax black
Waxing & wanting & weeping for love
Weeping for love & weeping & waiting &
Waiting for their waxing
These starlinged little waxlings
Wanting & waning only for those stars

Waxwing Bohemians

Only for that love
Only for the love of those Bohemian stars
Those starless black stars who've been waxed of their wings
The Bohemian stars
Those waxwing Bohemians still waxing with love

JOHN OKRENT

To Friday Evening

There is nothing in the world like a Friday evening.
Not even a tall stack of pancakes, not even a fresh pot
of coffee, not even a new-born baby, not even a very cold and very dry
Martini is like a Friday evening.
No! Being alive on a Friday evening and free on the earth is like nothing
else in the world. Especially if spring has just arrived and you are driving
home to someone you love, someone who has had you on her mind all
day, but who has also had many other things on her mind – like the neck
of her horse, her secret swimming hole,
the sounds she’s drawn from the men in her life,
her body as bow-string,
new potatoes,
red wine.
But back to the driving home to her:
you are driving home to her,
and it is early on Friday evening, and your windows are opened wide,
and the youngest of all spring air is rushing through and bathing you like
a soft, gentle river
– too gentle for lust, too soft for restraint –
and you are this close to crying out loud:
‘How fresh and clean! The young Spring air!’
but feel you’ve grown too old for such exclamations.
Yet we grow young again on Friday evening!
Yes! And you are driving through the hills now and
the woman of the hills is arching her back, which makes her breasts look
especially nice
and you think to yourself: *We long for the weekend so much
that it comes.*
And not only that! Now it is sprawled out before you, whispering, or
simply demanding, in a firm and
self-possessed voice, ‘Take me! love me! I am yours and yours alone!’
The wide-hipped and large breasted weekend,
the weekend, so salty and game. Good God! Tell me
you don’t want to take a flying leap on top of her! Go on!

To Friday Evening

Leap from the gleaming edge of Friday evening –
that hero-making, heart-breaking cliff. Friday evening!
Loaded as a woman's chest of drawers, and yet as light
as her breezy glance your way. Friday evening,
I give myself to you completely.
If you swallow me whole,
I won't mind.

JANET WARD

99¢ dream

do you see any booths
along 8th avenue
where a woman can go in
and have a poem read to her
by a man – a man, say, with
a voice like a slide trombone,
partial to e.e.cummings and the sonnets,
whose siren song stirs the ancient trickle?
and then, under the small hands of the rain,
surrendering erstwhile obligation to god and country,
she, too, could ascend the mount, breathe summer fruit,
taste the kingdom oysters, and, back on the neon street,
straighten her skirt, and never have to tell a soul.

GREG HRBEK

The Cliffs at Marpi

The only possible decision. If the worst comes to pass – if the Americans land and are not stopped at the water's edge but push the army back to the central spine of mountains – Kimiko will take the children and walk north through Talafofo and Banadero to Marpi Point.

She has never been to the cliffs (which stand far to the north, a long way from the cane fields and the mill), but she still remembers her one sight of them, gained from the deck of the ship that carried her here. Five years ago now. Winter, 1939. The vessel had been called the *Saipan Maru*, and had transported nearly one hundred people like herself, her husband, and their very young son across a thousand miles of ocean, southward, to this strange and wonderful colony. The morning of their arrival had been bright, dazzling. Kimiko stood on deck as they coasted through the lagoon, over water of other-worldly colour; and she saw, off to the north, a wall of rock, dark as a storm cloud, very dark.

Okinawa, too, had its rocky heights. But she had never really seen those, not like this: from an offshore distance that made the giant mass look unreal, misleadingly small. She had never seen anything (she realizes now, looking back) in quite this way. For the first time in her life, it was as though *she* was the large thing, the great thing.

They have been walking for a day now. The going is slow because the children are young and getting increasingly hungry. And the summer heat is tremendous. They have seen older people on the road, infirm people losing their balance, overwhelmed by the sun. They have also seen dead bodies. Some give an impression of peaceful sleep; others seem to have been torn apart, picked apart by wild animals.

Her oldest is six.

The boy stares at these figures. Stops and stares. She has to pull him away.

The decision was mutual, made by them both. By Ryuji and Kimiko. Husband and wife, father and mother. They have three children. A son, six; a daughter, four; and the baby, not yet one. She knows she agreed to this,

and has known for some time (since her husband's conscription six months ago) that, if the time came to go to Marpi, she would have to take the children there by herself. However, now that they're on their way, the idea seems to have no natural relation to her. On the road, there are moments when she can't remember where the idea came from and when she even forgets what it is. They are walking to nowhere in particular, merely walking. Then the thunderclap of an exploding artillery shell will shock her back into full awareness; her breath will stop in her throat, as if hands are seizing her there, wrapping a rope of hemp around her neck and pulling, tight. Suddenly, she's the one standing still, and it's one of the children who takes her hand and tugs.

To them, the cliffs mean refuge. This is not a misconception. She has not lied to her children. She has told them they will all be safer in Marpi. Beyond the reach of the Americans. This is the truth.

The invaders have been here for a week now. They were not stopped on the beaches. They've pushed the defence forces back to the mountains. Now Kimiko and many others are crossing these mountains, moving north. Not only company people like herself, not only Okinawans. But Japanese, Chamorros, Kanakas. It's strange how in the jungle, on the road to Marpi, they all seem the same somehow. Difficult to tell apart. As if in fear they've all shed an outer skin and lost the characteristics that made them who they were, made some superior to others.

Certainly, to the Americans they are all equal. Kimiko knows the enemy will see no distinctions, make no exceptions. They will rape and torture regardless of race, social standing, age. Stories of their cruelty have been circulating for years, ever since the war began; but in the past few months, the stories have proliferated and grown terrifyingly dark. The Americans have brought terror across the ocean, possessed one island after another like some ancient evil spirit. For a long time, she didn't believe they could make it this far, this close to her home. No one did. But now they're here, on the other side of this very mountain! And that, she reminds herself, is why she is taking her children to Marpi. Kimiko has never laid eyes on an American. She must see to it that none of them ever does.

They spend the first night in a cave, the jungle outside lighting up with flashes of man-made light. There are others with them, how many she's not sure; and she's not sure who they are. No one speaks. She can't see her own hand in front of her face. Tomorrow, it should be possible to reach the railway tracks which snake around the island's northern perimeter and can

be followed all the way to the cliffs. The trains stopped moving sugar weeks ago. Nearly all the cane fields have been burned, set afire from the air. The mill has been destroyed in the same manner. But if the northern tracks are still passable, maybe a train will come to carry them on flatcars the rest of the distance. If not, she's not sure how she will make it so far with a baby in her arms, this infant whom she has hardly let go of since morning. He is not a weightless child. He has his father's build. The muscles in her arms feel frayed. She could probably lay him down now on the dirt floor without waking him. But she doesn't. Only once today did she set him down (to wipe him clean with some leaves), and this simple separation caused her to reel with dizziness, with a violent sensation of falling, spinning through space – as if without him as ballast, she couldn't keep her world steady.

Kimiko and Ryuji are both Okinawans. They have understood since childhood that they are second-class citizens, not true Japanese. Backward, lazy, poor. From farms whose crops never seemed to come to anything. Growing up, they dreamed of Nan'yō. Green islands with names like Ponape, Kusiae, Saipan. In Kimiko's imagination, the islands were paradise, jewels strung across the ocean. To Ryuji, they were this and more. It was his idea, after they married, to apply for work with Nan'yō Kōhatsu. They presented their paperwork (copies of the family registers, certificates of good health) and were offered third-class passage on a cargo-liner, six hectares of land, money for agricultural tools, living expenses for the first year of their contract. It was all too good to be true!

Weeks later, they boarded a spectacular vessel, newly built and weighing over four-thousand tons – a floating city with luxurious staterooms, a cocktail bar, library, movie theatre. Their own accommodations, of course, were small and austere (tatami matting, an oilskin-covered table), and they weren't allowed in the theatre; but for both of them it was enough to be near these things, to be part of the world they existed in. At night in the dark, as the ship steamed effortlessly through the sea, Kimiko's mind would fill with visions of everything happening on the decks above her, and her heart overflowed with strange emotions. She wasn't just a villager any more. She was a colonist, an adventurer, a seed carrying over the ocean.

It wouldn't be easy, this new life. The company's recruitment officers had made that very clear. Long months of labour in the fields, in a climate that could wither the spirit, in isolation that could unhinge the mind. But

she felt a desire, almost romantic, for the coming labours and hardships, which she imagined would be like the hardships of childbirth, pains that would give way to an indescribable happiness.

Nan'yō!

In the dark on the tatami mat, she would hear the noise of a party coming from another third-class cabin. Someone plucking the cheap strings of a *sanshin*, drunken people singing some foolish love song. No wonder they were looked down upon. Kimiko and Ryuji agreed, they wanted nothing to do with this old way of life. In Nan'yō, they were going to become Japanese. And years from now when they returned home on this ship, they would move freely through the higher decks, sleeping in a state-room panelled with dark wood, basking in the moon-like glow of a samurai film. That is, if they cared to return home at all.

Before sunrise, they are walking again. The baby in her arms; one child at her left, the other at her right. The younger, the girl, can't keep up. She cries. Asks, again and again, to be carried like the baby.

By noon, they still haven't reached the tracks. They've eaten nothing since yesterday afternoon. The fighting, which they've been hearing all morning to the south, is getting fiercer, louder, closer. It's not just the sound of small arms fire and rockets, but the awful blasts from the naval vessels offshore. The shelling is coming from the east now, which means the bombs are passing overhead, moving faster than anything she has ever seen, their iron bodies flashing with sun before they collide with the mountain, the highest point on the island, throwing up storms of rock and smoke.

Meanwhile, Kimiko stands in the road with her children, quarrelling. Her daughter won't budge from a sitting position in the dirt. Her son wants to find his father. Find him. As if he's hiding from the boy, the way he would sometimes hide in the cane, calling out: 'Kenji!'

She hasn't seen Ryuji for two weeks.

His regiment had been assigned to the airfield in the south, which by now has almost certainly been lost.

An hour later, at a junction (where another road runs west, to the shore where the invasion began), they meet a family with an ox-cart. Chamorros. On their way to a farm in Talafofo. The man leads the animal; a woman and a child ride in the cart; and another child, probably eight months along, rides inside the woman.

The Cliffs at Marpi

There isn't any space, but they make some. They share fruit, taro, coconut milk. Like many of the *tōmin*, they speak Japanese. Better than Kimiko. They grew up with the language, of course they're fluent. Still, there's something unfair, very wrong about this. They ask her where she is going.

Marpi.

The answer seems to worry them. From the moment she saw them, they have looked scared; now they look scared for her. The man shakes his head. The woman says no, you stay at the farm, there's an underground shelter already dug. Kimiko says nothing. Then, finding her manners, bows her head. Despite her anger, she bows; and she reminds herself that these people are savages, good but ignorant. They don't understand. As she falls asleep sitting up, baby at her breast, she thinks: These foolish *tōmin*! Don't they care what will happen to them, don't they care about their children? Kimiko noticed, as soon as she climbed into the cart, a small statue of a Christian goddess. Blue robe; hands folded together; band of light encircling her head. All their churches destroyed (as her own shrines have been destroyed), yet they go on believing their gods will somehow protect them – and they look at her as though she's the one with strange and disturbing ideas.

When she wakes up, flat out on the ground, she thinks she's in the cane field. She must've fainted in the heat. She actually smiles, thinking of what her husband will say when she tells him she fainted. Nan'yō is no place for idlers and weaklings. It only lasts an instant, this floating in time. Then she remembers the baby. He was in her arms, is no longer. Standing up abruptly causes the road to pitch and she falls back down. Only now can Kimiko really see what's in front of her. The bloody remains of the ox; a wheel of the cart, burning; her oldest sitting in the road with blood-wet hair, blinking his eyes. She stands again, more carefully this time. Looks behind her. In a tangle of ferns and vines, she sees the other two. The girl cradling the baby, the baby crying. She can barely hear him. His voice is the small high whine of a mosquito. As for the continuing explosions, they might be nothing but distant waves crashing on sand. Her ears are numb, the world is nearly silent; and recalling a silent film they once saw in town – crying suddenly at the thought that she will never watch another moving picture, never feel the trade winds again, never see the flame trees bloom in spring – she walks unsteadily forward. Takes the baby in her arms. Takes her daughter's hand, and leads her out to where her brother is still

sitting, staring as if in a trance. When Kimiko reaches him, she finally sees what he sees, which has been hidden from her by the wreckage of the cart and the body of the ox. The pregnant woman lying motionless in the dirt, her belly torn open and one arm of the baby reaching out, grasping at thin air. There are two men, two white-skinned soldiers, kneeling there with her. Americans. Kimiko doesn't move. Her feet are like roots. The soldiers don't appear to have guns or swords. And they don't seem to see her. One is motioning down the road, south; the other is shaking his head and holding his hand out, demanding something. Suddenly, she comes to her senses. Her boy won't stand up, or can't. So she grips his wrist and drags him across the road. She never takes her eyes off the men. What she sees is this: the one handing the other a knife, the knife cutting into the woman's stomach. They cut into her like she's some kind of animal. Kimiko can hardly breathe now. The road is tilting again as she muscles her children into the jungle. Leaf by leaf, the foliage obscures her view, but before the road slips from sight she glimpses the tiny infant being raised up from its mother, the umbilical cord uncoiling, the bloody knife.

She shouldn't return to the road, but there's nothing else to do. The jungle is impassable. They fight their way through the vines and underbrush for a hundred metres, then find their way back. To the south she expects to see tanks, men in green uniforms. Nothing yet. Maybe another hour of daylight. Perhaps the enemy won't come much farther today. But they'll have to hurry.

She runs.

This is how she gets the children moving. By scaring them into thinking she'll leave them behind. Already, she's unsure of what she just witnessed. She doesn't know what the Americans were doing with that knife. Can't say why, for what purpose, they were removing the baby.

By nightfall, they have reached another junction, turned east toward the sound of waves, and discovered an isolated cove, sandy, walled by volcanic rock. The ocean is violent here, not safe for bathing, but she manages to wash the dirt and blood off everyone. Her oldest is the only one with a real injury. A gash on the crown of his head which bleeds a lot, but appears to be superficial. Impossibly, they're all whole. Kimiko can't decide how she feels about this. Part of her wants to give thanks to every spirit she can think of, another part wonders if being spared is actually a form of punishment.

The Cliffs at Marpi

The children lie down on the sand. Kimiko can't sleep. She watches the sky, and as it turns dark yet quick with stars, the confusion in her mind only deepens. She must admit, a confusion has been there all along, ever since she and her husband first discussed what to do if things got very bad.

He had his uniform by then, his longsword and pistol. It was a winter evening – the trade winds blowing, the air almost cool – when he told her what the men in his regiment were saying. The defeat at Kwajalein had been more severe than anyone knew. Same with Truk. Soon, Ryuji said, the devil will be here. And we won't be able to stop him either. We won't win. She thought then about the convoys that had been leaving for weeks already, taking colonists home. One of them had been torpedoed before it even got out of the archipelago. But even if they were willing to take such a risk, they could never get on one of those ships. Not enough money; and the company had only given them one-way tickets.

Kenji had come out of the house then, wanting to know what they were talking about. Nothing, Kenji-san. They sent the boy back in, but a trace of him seemed to remain; and the rest of their conversation was as awkward and indirect as if they were trying to discuss, in front of the child, some matter unfit for his ears. Her husband talked about being strong. The importance of not succumbing, not surrendering. Don't forget, Kimiko. How far from home we came, how hard we worked to change and improve ourselves. We can't let all that effort come to nothing. We can't let it end in dishonour. The sugar cane moved in the wind. The whole field trembling and trying to hush him, and she too trembling, like a cherry blossom losing its hold on leaf and bark, soon to fall fluttering to the ground.

And all night she can't stop thinking of the woman. She drops off into sleep, but keeps seeing her body in the road and the baby's hand reaching out of it. She isn't sure if she's dreaming or thinking when she sees herself in the road, dead, and her own baby in white hands.

Then her eyes are open.

The ocean breathing heavy. The stars still shining over her.

Finally, the tracks. A single set, narrow-gauge, built to transport harvested cane to the refineries in the south. Here, at the railway's northern end, there's a kind of station-house, deserted now; a toy-like steam engine and a lot of empty flatcars which seem to be waiting for the farmers to come with their crop. Kimiko has never been so far north. But she's heard about this land, which is flat and plentiful, far from town but near to the railway.

She thought that every green thing had been burned up in the aerial bombings. Everything lost forever. But there's colour here!

Along the tracks, flowers bloom. Butterflies wheel through the air. Birds call and dart from the brush. As they walk, they can see emerald cane fields, savannahs of swordgrass stretching off to blue water. They break off stalks of cane and suck the juice. The fighting is off to the west, on the other side of the ridge, which seems tall and mighty enough to keep the war away from here forever. She knows it won't. Their world is curling up and blackening like paper in a fire. The flames just haven't reached this place yet.

But she can't understand how it's come to this. She remembers, so clearly, the day she started believing in victory. Two years ago now. A brilliant winter day. An automobile driving down the town's main street of crushed coral; a voice, amplified by a loudspeaker, announcing the incredible news. *The American fleet destroyed!* All at once, that bright white way was full of people – shopkeepers, postmen and policemen, housewives with parasols, maids, schoolchildren, government officials in smart white uniforms, cane farmers – shouting and cheering. A celebration two days long. Fireworks painting the night sky. Saké for everyone. Sweet wine to make your head spin and give you the eyes of a diviner. How bright the future was going to be. What a happy destiny, it seemed, to be living here and now – at this momentous time, under this everlasting flag.

To be Japanese in Nan'yō.

And to be American. What does that mean? To drop bombs day and night, set whole worlds on fire, sink passenger ships at sea, capture women and children and cut them to pieces, cut babies out of their dead mothers. Why? Cut them out and then what? Then what?

They're close now. Tomorrow, after one more night, they'll be at the cliffs – and on this last night, while the sky above the ridge pulses with yellow-orange light, her dreams are of falling. She wakes with a start, her body hitting the ground as if she'd been levitating in her sleep, the impact forcing the breath from her lungs. Her first impulse is to check on the children, as if they've fallen with her and might be injured, or worse. This happens three times. Each time, she finds her daughter and baby asleep, her older son awake, watching her in the light from the distant fires.

In the past few days, Kenji has changed somehow. Maybe it's just her imagination, but with every mile walked his face seems to gain

The Cliffs at Marpi

complexity, like a face being carved from wood. The closer they get to Marpi, the more suspicious he seems of why they're going there. At certain moments, like now – deep in this field of swordgrass, in this ghostly glow – he seems to be asking of Kimiko a wordless question, one he doesn't fully understand and doesn't want the answer to. In a whisper, she tells him to sleep. No sooner does he obediently shut his eyes than she regrets giving the instruction. All of a sudden, her heart is beating very urgently. There's a day she's thinking of, so long ago now. Before Nan'yō. Kenji's first birthday, when they offered him on a tray (according to a silly outmoded ritual) four objects. An abacus counter, a coin, a plate of food, and a pencil. Nobody took the ceremony or its portents very seriously, but the whole family groaned when her son chose the pencil. Oh, a poet! Better have another son quick, Kimiko. Better have two to make up for this daydreamer.

The next day, they discover a piece of paper on the tracks. Kenji sees it first, picks it up, and reads silently. He's only six, but understands Japanese as well as any of them, speaks it without a trace of rustic accent.

Life saving leaflet.

Kimiko can see these characters, the largest boldest ones, from a few feet away; but for a few moments, she has no idea what they could possibly mean. When she tries to take the object into her own hands, the boy says *he* found it. He walks away from her, staring at this thing. She's not sure why (it hardly seems reasonable under the circumstances), but his defiance makes her angry.

Kenji, give me that.

No. It's mine.

Kenji.

No.

She almost voices an old threat. When your father hears about this. When he gets back from the field, back from town, the railway, the mill. But of course there's no field any more, no mill, no town. She has known, for some time now, that all these things are gone. Still, she feels a shock, not unlike the one she felt the other day when she woke up and found the ox-cart burning and couldn't keep her balance, couldn't hear, couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Next thing she knows, the leaflet is in her hands and her son is down on the tracks. She has never struck him before. Her hand stings from the contact, and her eyes burn as they range over the writing. *Come slowly*

toward the American line. Good treatment will be accorded. Do not approach American lines at night. Food, clothing, medical treatment. Come one by one. Come slowly with hands raised high above your head and carry only this leaflet. There's a long moment before she starts tearing it to pieces, a long look south, back the way they came – and a picture in her mind, unreal as a dream, of everything returning to normal, all of them together again, starting over.

She is not thinking clearly. She shouldn't have torn up the leaflet. Never should've hit her son. It's noon, not long after the making of these mistakes, when they hear the train. Heavy mechanical breathing. Dark smoke over the palm trees, then the little black locomotive. The flatcars are loaded with people. Civilians and soldiers. Almost all of them Japanese, Okinawan. Climbing onto the end car, Kimiko can't stop herself from hopefully scanning the faces of the soldiers.

The train is not moving fast. Why then does it seem to her to be out of control? Not crawling on a flat plain, but hurtling down some impossible gradient.

Suddenly, she is thinking of a song that, for a time last year, she hadn't been able to get out of her head. She would hear it on the radio in the company store, or floating through the windows of the company club where some clerk or manager was always playing it on a phonograph. *We are ready, just like blooming flowers that will fall/Let's fall beautifully for our country.*

The song. The leaflet. A mother in the road and a tiny fist reaching out of her. Even if they were helping, even if they were saving its life, then what? Now nurse it, raise its parents from the dead, bring the fields back to life.

There is more than one place to jump from. The cliff at the island's northern point, which drops straight into the ocean; and the one farther inland, the endpoint of the mountain spine, which is infinitely higher and drops off not onto water, but onto rock. The train is going to the point. It's almost there when the other cliff comes into view. Some people on the train gesture wildly, others look away. To Kimiko, who just stares, the distant falling people really do look like flower blossoms. The way their kimonos unfold in the wind. As the train comes to a stop (just short of the airfield, where the tracks have been mangled by bombing), a soldier climbs on top of the locomotive and starts giving instructions. Kimiko

The Cliffs at Marpi

doesn't seem to hear him; but as she gets down from the flatcar, his words are echoing in her ears. *Better to be a crushed jewel*. His is not the only voice. Another, amplified by a loudspeaker, is saying something different. *Do not throw away your invaluable life for such a lie*. This other voice. Japanese, but not truly. The pronunciation is poor, the accent foreign. Inferior to her own, as her own has always been inferior.

There's nothing real about the voice, just as there's nothing real about this place, these last few square metres before deadly air into which families are jumping; also huddling together and pulling the pins of grenades, but mostly pushing one another off the cliff. Not real. Not the end of a war, not the end of the world. More like the far end of a dream. In the dream, Kimiko stands on the landing strip. Baby in her arms; daughter hugging one leg; first-born son holding her hand and then, without warning, releasing it. He doesn't even look up, doesn't look at her before he starts running. Her impulse, naturally, is to run after him, to call for him, though she realises as she lets him go towards that foreign voice and its promises of humane treatment that the only reason she wants to stop him is to say good-bye. What's wrong with her? What kind of mother is she? Insofar as she is asking herself anything, she is asking herself these questions as she finds the superhuman strength to lift her daughter into one arm while shifting the baby into the other. She carries the children closer to the edge. Down below, bodies are being rocked by the waves, carried slowly into deeper water. Also getting caught up in conflicting white surges and going nowhere. A cloud moves over the sun. The wind, a faint one coming off the ocean, seems cold against her wet skin. If they survive the fall and continue to feel, the water too will be very cold. Nearby, a family is forming an orderly line. The youngest child in the front, closest to the edge. It happens fast. One after another they disappear.

Kimiko stares at the empty space they leave behind. For a few moments, there are no gunshots, no grenades exploding, no one screaming. Only that enemy voice, echoing off the rocks of the point, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

Making promises.

She doesn't know what to believe any more. But she let Kenji go. Let him go as if she loved him differently, less or more than these two still in her arms. Suddenly, tears are streaming down her face. How foolish it all was, from the very start! To think this place could belong to them. As she

Greg Hrbek

tries to get her breath, she can't help feeling that she always knew better. Nothing could stay so green. Now, she too promises something. To hold both of them all the way down. She says this to her daughter. I'll hold both of you, I won't let you go. But once they start falling, she can't keep her grip. The girl is torn away as the ocean overturns and night seems all at once to fall in the middle of day, all the stars falling with them, and finally the only thing left to the mother is the baby.

DEBORAH WILLIS

Caught

There's more than one way it could go. Outside the office there might be the shuffle of shoes on waxed floor: students to office hours or professors to the photocopier. Inside, light through the drapes, unvacuumed carpet, stacks of lab books. There might be a half-empty coffee cup that leaves a ring on the desk, an unbuttoned shirt. A kiss and the boy's hand where the wife's leg hinges to her hip. Then the way she can't undo his belt and the way he takes her hand, shows her. The wife's weight against the lip of the desk, and the boy's mouth on her neck. There's no knock at the door, only a turn of the knob. There's the husband.

Or maybe not. Instead, the door is closed and there's the sound of others passing, but the wife's shirt is buttoned and the boy's complex belt is buckled. The wife and the boy don't touch but maybe, as a joke, they've switched seats. The boy laughs because the wife – with some grey in her hair, and those angular shoulders – is too elegant for that chair.

The boy sits straight, his hand to his chin in mock-professorial thought. 'Do you walk the dog, or does he?'

'This chair is awful.' The wife presses her back into it.

'Seriously. I can't imagine you in that big house. Who mows the lawn? Who does the dishes?'

'I walk the dog. I take her out before teaching.' The wife is thinking about his knees, cupping them in her hands.

'I want to picture you.' The boy leans toward her, his elbows on his thighs. 'What time do you wake up?'

'At six. Liam wakes me before he leaves.'

'Liam. Superman.'

'Ben and I eat cereal. Sometimes toaster waffles. He gets ready for school on his own now, so I have time to walk Tasha.'

'I don't even get into bed until two or three in the morning.'

'I wish you could meet Tash. You'd like her.'

'I bet he's handsome even at five in the morning. I bet he wears a tie.'

'Is that ridiculous – that I think you would like our dog?'

So when the husband turns the knob and opens the door, this is all he sees: a young man in the wrong chair and the wife with her hands tucked

under her knees. The boy's wide-set eyes and the wife turning her head. Maybe the husband stands in the doorway, car keys gripped in his fist, and says to himself: this is nothing. Or maybe he recognizes that look in his wife's eyes, that blur. And he's a smart man – he knows talking can be more intimate than kissing, kissing more intimate than fucking. Maybe he stands in the doorway and says to himself: this could be anything.

Maybe the husband speaks to the boy: 'I don't think we've met' or 'I should introduce myself.'

'I was just leaving.' The boy stands, grabs his denim jacket and brushes past the husband, through the doorway.

'I got off earlier than usual.' The husband leans against a filing cabinet. 'What's the matter?'

'I didn't expect you.'

'Who was that?'

'A student.' She sips the cold coffee. Lying is easier than expected. 'How did you get off early? A hospital doesn't need doctors?'

'I thought we could pick Ben up together.' He takes a book off her shelf and flips it open. He squints at diagrams of a mackerel's jaw. 'This stuff is so weird.'

'No weirder than humans,' says the wife. They have this conversation so often it has become one of their jokes. 'Imagine what fish would say if they studied our jaws, our lungs, our behaviour.'

'You tell me, professor. What would they say?' The husband winks at her. 'You look nice, by the way. That's a nice sweater.'

The wife pauses, her coat on one arm. Would he normally say that?

'Grab your stuff.' The husband jingles the keys in his hand. 'We're going to be late.'

Maybe the wife and the husband walk down the hallway, along the waxed floor, without talking. They cut through the campus gardens to the parking lot and the wife thinks of the boy, how she met him on a warm, blinding day like this one. Salmon were spawning in Goldstream, and she was there with three graduate students and her son, who had a day off school. She noticed the boy because he was alone. He snapped photographs of fish slipping through water, gulls and dippers lunging at them. He wore a hooded sweatshirt with fraying sleeves, corduroys that dragged in the mud, scuffed boots. The wife watched him wander along the side of the stream,

Caught

jump from rock to rock, and she couldn't keep her eyes off him. His casual walk, his focus.

The boy caught her staring a few times. This woman in hiking boots and a waterproof jacket. This woman who, he had overheard, knew the Latin names of fish, plants, birds. This woman who must be fifteen, twenty years older than him: small lines around her eyes, her mouth. He could see her straight shoulders through the jacket and he imagined she'd spent much of her life outside. Her dark hair reflected the sun and the boy would have liked a shot of that.

The wife wandered away from where her students did counts. Would her son grow up to be like that boy, clear-eyed and quiet? Probably not. He might grow to be calmer, become as reasonable as his father, but he'd always be chatty. Where was her son, anyway? The wife looked to her students, who knelt over the water's bank. Not there. And he wasn't further downstream. Or in the cabin they used for maps and equipment. She'd only turned away for a second.

Then the boy aimed his camera upriver, past her, and she followed the lens' gaze over her shoulder. There. Her son's pants were wet to his knees and he balanced on a rock in the middle of the river. A salmon had died on that rock, or had been pushed there by the current, and the son smacked a stick against the fish's body. He raised it over his head, smashed it down, and watched the huge, limp muscle shake.

'Ben!' The wife ran toward him. 'Ben, what are you doing?'

The son stared at her, the stick in his hand. 'It's dead anyway.'

'Get off of there. Right now.'

He jumped into the water and splashed to the bank. 'It's dead anyway, Mom.'

'I said if you came to work with me, you had to behave.' The wife gripped his shoulders. 'The water could have been deep there, Ben. You have to be careful.'

'I had my eye on him. He was fine.'

The wife turned and saw the boy, who crouched and snapped a picture of the rock.

'Thanks.' She squeezed water from her son's jeans. 'He's going through a bit of a stage right now.'

'It'll make a good photo.' The boy took another picture of the broken skin along the fish's side. 'Do you work here?'

'No, at the university. In biology.' The wife pointed to the three students with their clipboards and rubber boots. 'My research is on Coho salmon, so we're out here observing most days.'

The boy brushed hair from his eyes. ‘Coho?’

‘They’re the ones with green heads and red sides,’ said the son, tearing his arm from his mother’s hand. ‘Bright red, like apples.’

‘What’s this one?’ The boy pointed to the fish on the rock.

‘That’s a Chum salmon,’ said the son, and kicked water at it. ‘You can tell because it’s white.’

‘He’s been paying attention.’ The boy smiled at him, showing crowded teeth.

‘It’s less common to see Coho up here – Ben, stop that. Part of my job is to figure out why Coho stay away.’ Was she using her professor voice? The boy looked into the clear water, and it was hard to tell if he was listening. ‘I think there are simply too many fish in this river. Coho tend to spawn beneath logs or under overhanging banks. They’re shy, secretive.’

‘As soon as they spawn, they die,’ said the son, his eyes wide. This detail had made him want to spend the day at Goldstream.

‘A death-wish,’ said the boy.

‘Not really.’ The wife waved her hand to indicate the fish, insects, water – the whole system. ‘It’s just the way the cycle works. It’s perfectly natural.’

The boy smiled, but not at the son this time. At her. ‘Seems reasonable, I guess.’ Then he turned away and held his camera to his face. Across the narrow river, an eagle lifted a mangled fish into the air. He shot, caught it.

Maybe it’s an ordinary evening: the husband and wife prepare dinner, tuck their son into bed, wash and dry the dinner plates. The wife sits cross-legged at the kitchen table, as she does every night. And the husband pours the wine, as he does every night: half a glass each. Maybe the husband is calm about it, cool.

‘So this boy. How long have you known him?’

‘What boy?’

‘Come on, Wendy.’ The husband swirls the red around in his glass. ‘Just tell me why.’

‘Why what?’

‘Please don’t treat me like an idiot.’ His voice remains even. ‘You have a husband, a son. How can you justify this?’

The wife lifts her glass, tilts too much wine into her mouth, swallows. She shifts in her chair. ‘The Indo-Pacific wrasse.’

‘Fish? For god’s sake, Wendy.’

‘They’re beautiful, with swirls of blue in the scales. And they’re polygynic.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Not monogamous.’

‘Of course.’

‘They live in schools of about ten females to one male.’

The husband pushes his wine away. ‘How many lovers do you have?’

‘Just listen.’ The wife leans across the table. ‘The females have a pecking order that determines breeding access to the male. If the alpha female dies, for instance, the next biggest female takes on her role and everyone moves up a step.’

‘I don’t get it. Who’s the male in this scenario? Who’s the female?’

‘Would you believe me if I said I’m torn?’ She reaches for his hand but doesn’t touch it. ‘If I said I’m crazy about him, and I still want you?’

‘Not really.’ The husband leans away from her. ‘Explain this fish thing.’

‘What’s fascinating is what happens if the male is removed.’ The wife sits on her knees. ‘Within an hour, the alpha female starts to court the other females. And within two weeks, she develops functional testes.’

‘Your boyfriend is actually a girl?’

‘I’m saying, if those fish can be functional – happy – acting one way and also acting another, oppositional way, it might be the same for us.’

‘You think you’re more evolved or something? Because you can switch your affections?’

‘It just seems to me there must be more than one possibility. I’m not saying that justifies it.’

‘None of this makes sense.’

‘I’m sorry, Liam.’

‘Your analogy doesn’t make sense.’

Maybe the boy is handy: he can fix an overheating engine, repair broken VCRs, explain the inside of a toaster. He collects old alarm clocks, the kind with metal bells like ears attached to their round faces. He even once took apart his camera, inspected each mechanism, then put it back together. The wife thought at first he was practical, the kind of guy who would eventually build a workshop in his garage. Now she knows better. He appreciates machines for how graceful they are, how pure: click and whir. Though he wouldn’t put it that way. He would simply say that he rents his apartment because it has an extra half-bath he uses as a darkroom,

and a fan from the 1940s. He likes the old copper blades, the way they cut through the kitchen air.

And he likes the wife because when he brought her to his apartment to give her some prints, when he unlocked the door, flipped on the light, forgot to hang her coat, and showed her the fan – the wife didn't shrug, didn't laugh. She stood and looked at the ceiling for nearly a minute. This was before they had touched.

'That fan is great,' she said, and rocked from toes to heels. Then the boy took her hand, held it. She watched the fan's slow spin without coming closer, without moving away. She heard her own breath. Then, as an experiment, she pulled her hand from his and touched his lower back. Underneath his shirt, her fingers on his spine.

Maybe the husband doesn't mention it, lets it go. He and the wife prepare dinner, tuck their son into bed, wash and dry the dinner plates. Half a glass each, and they sleep beside each other, their legs touching. He wakes at five a.m., and the wife hears the alarm's buzz, the water as he showers. She gets up an hour later and goes to her office until 3:30, when she walks her son home from school. She points out birds, explains the genius of the arbutus, and lets her son hop in puddles.

When they arrive home at 4:15, the husband is sleeping off whatever injuries and tragedies he saw in Emerg. He's on top of the blankets, in sweatpants and a t-shirt, and the wife and son crawl into bed with him. The room is cool because the husband likes the window open, and the son burrows under the blanket, snuggles into the wife. She's between her child and her husband and she feels warm, feels held. The dog jumps onto the bed and settles against the son as he retells stories he already told on the way home – about an eraser fight he started, about a pillbug his classmate brought to school. He exaggerates even more for his father, and the husband tells stories too. Makes his day sound easy.

'A woman came in who broke her ankle two weeks ago. It only occurred to her today to come to the hospital about it.'

'Didn't she know it was broken?' The son bangs his legs on the mattress, jolting the bed. 'Didn't it hurt?'

'She was so cheerful. She said she just didn't think it was serious – not until her foot swelled so much she couldn't stretch her tights over it.'

The wife looks at the hair on her husband's arm, the one he has thrown over her stomach. She thinks to herself: everything is fine. Everything will be fine.

Caught

‘She sounds stupid.’ The son thumps the bed.

‘Ben.’ The wife holds his shoulder. ‘Enough.’

‘I don’t think she was stupid,’ says the husband. ‘Just hopeful. Optimistic.’

‘What does that mean? Optimistic?’ Ben pulls at the dog’s ears. ‘Tash? Are you asleep, Tash?’

The wife runs her fingers along her husband’s forearm.

‘Optimistic?’ He pulls his hand away and rolls from the bed. ‘I guess it means she’s stupid.’

Maybe the boy arrives at the wife’s office the following Tuesday, as he always does. He walks in and shuts the door with his boot. ‘So. He’s not a bad looking guy.’

‘You probably shouldn’t be here.’

‘And he’s very tall.’ The boy points to a framed photograph of the wife, the husband and the son that hangs on the wall. ‘That picture doesn’t do him justice.’

‘Stop looking at that.’ The wife is embarrassed by the quality of the photo: sun glares in the three faces and they squint into it, watery-eyed, overexposed. ‘You shouldn’t be here. What if he stops by again?’

‘You don’t often see forty-something guys who are that athletic.’

‘He rides his bike to work every day, and works in the yard on weekends.’ The wife covers her face. ‘He’s so – maybe “upright” is the word. This kind of thing –’

‘This sordid affair?’

‘It would be so foreign to him.’

‘I hate to admit it, but I think the guy could beat me up. I think he’s stronger than me.’

She can’t help but smile. ‘You’d make up for it in speed.’

‘Is that a comment on my lovemaking?’ The boy drops to his knees in front of her. ‘I’m already feeling young, inexperienced.’

‘I mean it. You can’t be here.’

‘Hey.’ The boy kisses her wrist. ‘Don’t say that.’

‘I’m sorry, Jamie.’ Out the window, students weave through the stand of sequoia, going from building to building, class to class.

‘You’re serious.’ He turns her to face him. ‘I’ll leave if you want me to. If that’s what you really want.’

The wife studies his eyes – lichen-green. She touches his hair. His face. ‘You know, I bet you’re right. I bet he could beat you up.’

The boy kisses under her eyes. 'He's practically Harrison Ford.'

She undoes the top button of his shirt and he slides his hand along the seam of her pants.

'I must have a death-wish,' he says, and her zipper is undone.

'Seems reasonable.' Her hand against his chest. 'Perfectly natural.'

Maybe the wife continues to meet the boy in her office every Tuesday afternoon and continues to sleep beside her husband every night. And in between she marks lab exams, teaches classes. Classes on the Caribbean bluehead, for example. They begin life as small yellow fish, with short fins. But at any time, they can trade their shimmering yellow scales for the more threatening blue head, black-and-white midbody, and green posterior. This way, the fish can spawn up to 100 times per day and defend their territory. It sounds unimaginable, but it's simple. They're just like us, she explains to her students, and wipes chalk from her hands. They just do what they have to do.

Maybe the wife starts to imagine a life with this boy. She imagines living in his apartment: low ceilings, little daylight, photographs hung like laundry from a string in the bathroom. She imagines being there when he comes home from art school, his eyes tired, his black book-bag cutting into his shoulder. She imagines it as a quiet existence, disordered but also precise, like the boy's experiments in the darkroom.

In her real life, the wife and the husband alternate making dinner and doing dishes each night. They hire a young woman – one of the wife's students – to dust their furniture, scrub their bathroom, and vacuum their floors once a week. Ben is allowed to watch half an hour of television every evening. At night, the wife and the husband share a drink and whisper to each other across the table. In bed, the husband's breath tastes of red wine and toothpaste.

It is nothing like the boy's chaos. The first time the wife walked into his apartment, there were days of dishes hardened in the sink. Egg yolks stuck to a pan, ketchup skin on a plate. The bathroom: towels on the floor, mildew along the tub. And what does it matter? thought the wife, as the boy kissed her that first time. Let the dishes sit on the counter. Let the bacteria flourish. She ran her hands tentatively up his arms. She hadn't forgotten about her husband, not at all. She could hear his voice – you're being ridiculous, Wendy, idiotic. But the boy had one hand on her back, one in her hair, and he pulled her against his mouth. This boy who smelled

Caught

like sand and something else, something chemical. This boy who had stood in the kitchen and listened to her talk nervously about birds – the difference between a Pelagic and a Double-crested cormorant – then kissed her, stopped her mid-sentence. This boy who made her feel she was twenty again. Made her feel ridiculous, yes, idiotic. Made her feel crazy and awkward and wild.

But still, there are things she would miss. Her husband across the table from her, sleepy-eyed, or in the yard, his shirt off as he rakes the leaves from the Garry oak. And the house: the sunny entranceway and the rhododendrons in the garden. Her son's room: yellow paint on the wall, the big window, toys on the floor, the shelf of brightly-coloured books. Her son.

But maybe, if she moved into the boy's apartment, the son could come too. He would love it. No one would tell him to tidy his room. No one would tell him to brush his teeth. The wife and the boy would let him order pizza. They would let him drink pop. They would let him go to sleep when he was tired and wake when he was rested. Because how could they – the wife and the boy – how could they justify rules? What right would they have to tell someone what to do? Not only would they let the son watch television all night, but he would learn how a television worked. The boy would sit with him on the floor – that dingy carpet – and show him the insides of the small, black-and-white set. The two of them would spend an afternoon taking the television apart and putting it back together like a puzzle. Then they would move the rabbit-ears around so the son could watch the screen disintegrate and rebuild itself. Nothing would be forbidden, nothing hidden. All the complexities: red wire, green.

Maybe the wife continues to meet the boy in her office every Tuesday and continues to sleep beside her husband every night. In between she marks lab exams, teaches classes. Maybe this becomes, like everything else, routine.

Maybe the husband is calm about it, cool.

'And you can go to your Indo-Pacific wrasse.' He drinks the last of his wine. 'He seems like a nice enough kid.'

The wife watches light reflect off her glass. 'Is that what you really want?'

‘I need a break. I need to think this through.’ When he stands, his chair scrapes along the linoleum. ‘And Ben will stay here with me.’

The wife feels stiff, feels caught. She can hardly breathe.

The husband dumps the rest of her wine in the sink. Then he rinses their glasses, as he does every night, so the red won’t stain the bottom.

Maybe she buzzes the boy’s apartment. ‘It’s me.’

‘I’ll come down.’

The wife puts her forehead to the window as he takes the stairs two at a time and when he opens the door, she says, ‘He wants time to himself.’

The boy lets her press into him, dig her nails into his back.

‘Time.’ She feels his t-shirt against her cheek. ‘It could mean anything.’

‘Maybe he’ll think it over and he’ll be okay with it.’

‘He’ll never be okay with it.’

‘Are you sure?’ The boy holds her, one palm on the back of her head. ‘For one thing, you don’t know what he’s been doing.’

‘He hasn’t been doing anything.’ The wife lifts her face. ‘I would know.’

‘I’m sure he doesn’t mean it. I’m sure if you went home, he wouldn’t turn you away. Would he?’

‘Can we go upstairs?’

‘Did you tell him you were coming here?’

‘Jamie, please?’

‘We can’t go up there right now.’ The boy wipes away hair that sticks to the wife’s wet face. ‘Sara’s over.’

The ex-girlfriend. The ex-girlfriend who doesn’t eat meat, or drink, or do drugs. That’s how they met, at a ‘dry’ party, where her band was playing. She’s sweet, the boy said when the wife noticed the picture on his wall. Then he shrugged.

‘She just dropped by, Wendy. It’s nothing.’

‘Okay.’ The wife nods, because there isn’t much else to say. ‘Okay.’

Whether she gets away with it, or not. Whether she stays with him, or not. Maybe it doesn’t matter – or at least, sometimes it doesn’t matter. What matters is this: for years the wife has studied Coho salmon – their intricate bone structure, their fussy habits – and finally, she understands them. And not just their sneaking around, or their risk-all sex. All of it: gestation, survival, then that mad drive upriver, toward desire and toward – away from – they don’t know what. Now she gets it. But only briefly, and only sometimes, like when she suddenly thinks of the boy’s quick smile, his

Caught

naked hip. Maybe she'll be colouring in a book with her son, or standing in front of her grad class, and she thinks: I get it. I understand Coho salmon. She wants to tell this to her students, but how can she? To those young, focused faces? They would think she was crazy, or drunk. She lifts her hands, drops them. I get it, she wants to say: we're alive. This is called being alive.

Maybe the boy doesn't arrive at the wife's office the following Tuesday, as he always does. Maybe, instead, the wife finds a photograph slipped under her door: an eagle holding a fish in its talons. Sun glinting off the scales. The bird is half in, half out of the frame. A blur of feathers, flight.

Maybe there's a moment when no one says a word. No one moves. The boy in the leather chair, the wife with her hands tucked under her knees. After she has turned her head but before the husband speaks, before the boy stands. Light through the drapes, unvacuumed carpet, stacks of lab books. A half-empty coffee cup that leaves a ring on the desk. And a pause, one second when they are still. The wife, the husband, the boy. There's more than one way it could go.

GERRY RYAN

Me and the Motorway

‘Start walking, fat lass,’ a bloke shouted out the tranny van. I could see his mate laughing in the driver’s seat as they pegged it past me down the sliproad. I probably wasn’t hitching right, cos no one stopped. Whenever something came round the corner from the fuel area I held out me thumb and proper cringed, like it would get burnt or something. I felt dead embarrassed but if it hadn’t been the middle of pigging winter I would’ve taken me tracky top off to show a bit of skin. Then I might not’ve ended up stood there all after’ like a head the ball.

There was a canny few fellas who went past in proper smart motors like Beamers and Mercs. I would’ve loved one of them to stop and pick me up with a dead good-looking lad with a hellish job driving to London. There was stacks of wagons and some of the drivers honked or waved but most of them didn’t even look at me. Old people went past in massive saloons like Primeras and looked at me like I was robbing a shop or something so I stuck me vees up at them. Whenever someone went past with kids, the kids turned and stared at me out the back window and I got the feeling their mams or dads were tutting at me. So I stuck me vees up at them an all.

The light was getting dingy now and the lights over the sliproad back to the M1 started glowing like cheap headlights and still no one was stopping. I’d been there hours. It was Rockall Services, I remember that cos me Da always used to say ‘I haven’t got Rockall’ whenever I asked him for money. He was a proper drinker. That’s why he never used to have Rockall.

At first, when my lad dicked off, I’d thought I could get to the front street or a bus stop and walked behind Macdonald’s, but there was just bins and metal railings. Through a gap all I could see was fields. I’d thought Rockall was a town but it wasn’t.

Now it was darker, I started thinking about robbing a car. I didn’t know how to hot wire one but I could follow someone inside and nick their keys. I used to knock about with some lasses at Stanley and we’d go through the town and rob bags up Northumberland Street. Not mugging people, we’d just wait till they put their bag down, distract them, then grab it. It’s easier with a few of yous but I’ve done it on me own once and it was all right. Got done later on for credit card fraud like.

I'd never been down south before but Shaun'd said Milton Keynes was junction 14 or 15 on this motorway so it wasn't like I could get lost or owt. He'd be dead surprised if I turned up at Milton Keynes after he'd chucked me out the car in the middle of nowhere. Even though I didn't want to go there. That's why he'd hoyed me out with me bag with me life in it: cos I was whingeing. If we had to leave the Northeast, I wanted to go to London but Shaun didn't know anyone in London, he only knew people in Milton Keynes. I wanted to go to London and train to be a secretary. I'd never had a job before but years ago I'd done the first year of a secretarial course at tech and done canny well. If I hadn't got pregnant in the second year I'd have got a national diploma and I wouldn't have started stealing and I wouldn't have ended up in New Hall for two years. They went and took the bairn off me when she was two anyway, cos I couldn't cope. I was gutted; but that was five year ago so most of the time it never bothered me now.

I got butterflies when I thought about nicking a car. Didn't warm me up like. I pulled me sod-off massive bag onto me shoulder and started walking back up the sliproad towards the car park, and then a wagon come round the corner from the BP garage. It was proper chugging on its diesel and it stank, not just off the fumes, it smelt like shite a bit too. I could see its wooden panelling and guessed it was a horsebox. I stuck me thumb out but it carried on; fair enough, I was past caring. But then it beeped its horn, the hazards went on and it pulled up. For a moment I thought maybe they hadn't pulled up for me but then the passenger door opened so I did a half trot to show I was keen in case they changed their mind. I realised I could never've robbed some keys and nicked off with a bag like a corpse to carry.

There was this lass inside about my age straightening herself up after leaning over to open the door for me. Jesus, it was high up.

'Where you off?' she said without smiling or owt.

'Milton Keynes?'

She pulled a face and said, 'I'll take you as far as Leicester if you want?'

I nodded even though Leicester could've been in Wales for all I knew. I couldn't get the bag up on me own so she had to lean over and pull from her end to help. I felt crap. Then I found the little step to climb up on and managed to pull meself into the seat even though me legs were knacking us cos they were dead stiff and cold and me hands were really numb. It took three goes to shut me door properly but the lass never said nowt she just set herself away driving down the sliproad. She was wearing a

Michelin cap and one of them puffa bodywarmers over a polo neck and I could see her wellies under the sliproad lights. I was boiling as soon as I shut the door and thought she must be sweating like a pig wearing all that. I took me coat off and wondered if I should put me seat belt on, but I couldn't see where to click it in so I didn't bother.

'Cold night isn't it?' she said. 'You must be frozen.' She had a dead boring voice. She sounded thick. 'Do you live in Milton Keynes?'

'No,' I said.

'So where're you from?'

'Newcastle.' Near enough and at least people have heard of Newcastle. Unlike Stanley. Bloody hell, I thought. If she goes any slower on this sliproad we'll be going backwards. But no one would let her in. The roads were packed. Swarms of taillights shone up the lanes as far as I could see and every so often brake lights flashed like cartoon characters going 'eek' with their hair standing on end. With white headlights pouring down the other way and indicators exploding in orange here, there and everywhere, it looked mint. I loved it. I'd never been on a motorway in the dark – not when it was this busy anyhow. And not when I wasn't off me head.

Someone flashed her in; we got swallowed up into the lights and noise, and rumbled along like a big fat bumblebee.

'So how come you're off to Milton Keynes?'

'I've got a new job.'

'Have you? Doing what?'

'Secretary for a big company.'

'Which one?'

Her MasterCard was on the dash. 'MasterCard,' I said.

'And you're hitching there?'

I felt a massive prickle behind my eyes and wanted to punch her lights out. 'Me car broke down.' Cheeky, nebbly cow.

'And you've just left it? Aren't you in the AA?'

'Me husband's coming down to collect it but I couldn't wait cos I'm starting tomorrow,' I said, quite liking the idea of having a husband. 'Anyhow, I love hitching.'

'Can't you get a hire car?'

'No,' I said and left it at that.

We were crawling in the slow lane now and everyone was piling up together with all the drivers leaning on their hands; elbows on the doors. She'd stopped taties from the Mondeo in front and I thought everyone'd probably get narked with her for wasting space.

‘Don’t you get scared hitchhiking?’ she said.

‘Nur, not really. It’s canny exciting. You don’t know where you’ll end up and you meet new people and that.’

She kept looking at me even when I’d finished talking and it gave me the creeps. Anyway, I thought, what was I on about? Never hitched before in me life.

‘What do they call you?’ she asked after ages.

‘Ali,’ I said. I’ve always wanted to be called Ali.

‘I’m Kate,’ she said. ‘How long have you been married?’

I thought, eh? And then I remembered me lies. ‘Nearly five year.’

‘Isn’t your husband moving down to Milton Keynes?’

‘Yeah, we’re just selling the house so he has to hang on a bit.’

‘What does he do?’

‘He’s an accountant.’

God this was excellent. I could be anyone, say anything. Who cared?

‘Have you got any kids?’

‘One,’ I said. ‘Have you?’ She went a bit weird and then just shook her head. I liked the way she’d pulled her ponytail through the gap at the back of her cap. Looked dead good.

‘Are you married?’

‘Separated,’ she said. ‘As of this morning. When I decided I’d finally had enough.’

‘Cool.’

‘Everything I own is in this wagon now.’

‘Cool.’

‘Well, it’s his really, I suppose,’ she said. ‘I’ve never earned a penny in my life.’

The huge electronic signs were flashing and said: ‘Accident ahead 40,’ in amber and I thought we might get wrong for going too slow. I’m joking. When we edged underneath the sign I kept staring up at it and the words disappeared so I thought the traffic jam would finish. It didn’t though. When we got round the bend all you could see up the hill was stopped solid red taillights, but I wasn’t chewed. The longer we were stuck, the longer it’d be before I was out on me arse in Leicester. Wherever the bloody bollocks nora Leicester was.

God, I was knackered.

‘Said on the radio there’s four people dead,’ she said. ‘Traffic’s stuck back up to junction 35 and it happened hours ago.’

They’d have woke up that morning like any day, with no idea they’d be

dead by tea time. She didn't seem that bothered. Apart from the fact it stuffed up her journey. Now I could see they'd blocked off our lane up ahead. 'I think you have to move over,' I said to her.

'Great,' she said sounding like she was angry with me. She put her indicator on and watched in her wing mirror.

Me phone started ringing, well, going: 'Answer the effing phone you Geordie slapper'. We'd had a right laugh recording it but it totally didn't sound funny inside that horsebox. I rejected the call, cos it was Danny's name on the screen – Shaun's mate in Milton Keynes – and, as we crawled along, I pulled the back off the phone and took me SIM card out.

'Can I open the window a bit?' I said. I was still roasting.

'Yeh, course you can.'

I opened it and slipped the SIM card out the gap. I don't think she noticed.

We were stopped now; chugging on the spot with the indicator sounding like it was extra narked.

'This is terrible isn't it?' she said.

'Aye.'

You could see the accident up ahead: blue and red lights flashing and mangled metal glinting under the lights. The stench of smoke and fuel started creeping into the cab and I got mad waves inside me thinking it could've been Shaun in the accident. The horsebox eventually got into the middle lane and I cupped me hand around me eyes so I couldn't see the crashed cars when we edged past. So I would never know.

'Oh my God,' the lass kept saying. I wouldn't look though. Soon as we got past, that was it. No more hold up, we were off, fleeing down the motorway.

'Makes everything seem pointless when you can die that easily, doesn't it?' she said. I just looked at her. She never said nowt for ages after that and I went off on one watching the road. I totally forgot about her till she opened her gob again. 'Do you ever wish you could disappear?' she said. 'Start again from scratch, and be someone else?' She was freaking me out a bit. 'Suppose you can do that when you're hitching.'

'Aye,' I said. Shut your face man, I thought. Me eyes felt itchy and me lids were caving in so I slumped against the door and let me eyes close. It felt lush, like I was cabbaged on puff, I was so knackered. She was still whingeing on about not wanting any of it and needing a new identity but the rumbling got further and further away and even though I could feel a bit of slaver down me cheek, I couldn't move. Everything blurred up and

I felt like I was just a rumbling curled up in someone's mouth when they were yawning. I started dreaming that me bairn was a horse galloping away and that I was too drunk to do anything about it except try to pretend I was sober.

Thud, thud, thud. I was half awake and the rumbling had stopped. A car door slammed somewhere, mumbly speaking, a distant hum. The thud came and went and I remembered the horsebox and opened me eyes proper. We were at the services and the lass wasn't in the driver's seat.

I realised the thudding was the horses and me belly flipped like mad thinking there was something wrong or that the buggers'd kick through the wagon. I lit meself a tab. I only had two left in the box and I didn't have no money but I was dying for a one so I couldn't help it. I didn't have a clue what to do. I was busting for the toilet but I thought she might dick off without me if I went. I could see the doors to the services and I watched them thinking she'd come out any minute. Her MasterCard was still on the dash and I thought that was a bit weird; and there was a bit of paper on the dash on the driver's side. It said: j21, O 1st ×, L, 200m, R, travellers, L, 3rd R – stud. I opened the glovebox and her handbag was shoved inside it. I checked the entrance again; still no sign of her, so I pulled the bag out and opened it. Her phone was in it – proper nice phone too. Her purse was there. It was a Dolce and Gabbana purse and it was bulging. When I opened it, it was full of receipts; there was forty odd quid in it an all like and a couple of bankcards. 'Sara Monaghan,' they said on the front. Kate eh? Lying cow. There was a few packets of chut and some spray, which I tested, which stank, and a lip balm. When I flipped opened the phone, it said *Insert SIM*. I took a tenner out the purse for tabs, snaffled a bit of chut and put everything else back like it was before. Me belly was going ballistic.

The clock in the cab said 22.37 and rush hour seemed a long time ago. Looking for the clock, I seen the keys dangling from the ignition and noticed the door wasn't shut right. If the keys were there I could take them and go to the bogs without having to worry about being left. So I did.

While I was there I had a good look around but couldn't see her anywhere. They were mopping up in Burger King; the Coffee Stop had a couple of blokes in and that was it. The shops were shut, the bogs were empty and half the lights were out. It reminded me of being seventeen again, back wrecked from clubs at three a.m. to get sweet tea and fresh orange at the local services – Birtley Café we used to call it. Used to be

packed out, everyone knowing everyone and everyone off their heads, someone blasting music out, people skinning up. It was better without people.

I walked back outside and over to the garage to buy tabs through the slot in the window. God, it was freezing; blowing a gale and icy and full of noise. Me hands were getting numb again and me lugs were stinging. I could see the horsebox sat there in darkness and it gave me another lurch in me guts. Where the shite was she?

Me main concern was the thudding. If I'd dared open the ramp at the back I could've checked the horses. I started thinking that she'd killed herself and that she might be dead in the back with her horses. She'd been moany and weird enough. I wasn't convinced like. Me next concern was driving the bugger. The biggest thing I'd ever driven was a Berlingo.

I thought I was hellish getting in it, proper top banana, and I hoped people were watching. I turned the key in the ignition to test it and the whole thing growled to life. The thudding went mental but I left the engine on thinking the lass might come back if she heard it. To be fair, like, I think I knew by then that she wasn't coming back and that I had to decide what to do. So I decided I might as well do one.

I got me last tab out the old box, sparked it up, and then managed to pull away in the wagon by extra pressing me foot on the gas and not panicking about the kangarooness. I jerked across a line of parking spaces then realised I needed lights. They were on the left. When I got it into second it helped but you still could've made cheese in the back. I hoyed me tab out cos I needed all me focus on driving then wished I hadn't cos I didn't know how I'd light another one. But oh my God I cannot tell you what a rush it was tanking off into the night with credit cards and money. I know my lad always used to say you can run away into the night but then morning'll always come, but I didn't think about the morning coming. I'd never, ever been out of the Northeast; never ever been out of Stanley on me own, apart from when I went to jail, so this was like a trip in space. I was having the time of me life.

I wasn't pulling up for the give way signs and lines, basically cos I didn't see them till I was over them. Just past the garage, an Asda lorry skimmed me wing mirror and I nearly lost it. The whole thing stalled, rocked and then even the handbrake slipped. Thud, twatting thud again. I was passed meself. Got it going again like and went round a bushy corner to the sliproad.

At first I thought it was another bush with a bin liner stuck on it, but it

was the Michelin cap that made me realise it was her. She had her thumb stuck out and looking at her made me swerve that way a bit, so I jerked the steering away. I would've stopped an all but then she put her thumb down, turned away and hid her face. The cheeky cow had me bag; I hadn't even noticed it was gone. I didn't know what the crack was but I had this rush in me head and went for it, I closed me eyes and swung onto the motorway, expecting to hit something, but it was all right, I was away.

By now the roads were canny dead, but God I was still extra panicking – it felt like driving a double decker or something – and I started feeling cold in me belly, thinking it must be a trick. Like a video camera was on me. Part of me was thinking what a howl it'd be turning up in Milton Keynes with a wagon. But that was only a tiny part of me. I stayed in the slow lane, going canny and kept both hands on the wheel at ten to two, but then, aw lad, I thought, here we go: there was a car with blue lights going behind. Unmarked police.

I tell you what, right, I been in a load of cars and had the police try and stop us, and you don't ever pull over, but this time I did. I was too knacked up in me head to argue. Let them take the stupid wagon off me. Anyhow, she'd nicked me bag, hadn't she? What was I supposed to do?

I sat there on the hard shoulder with the coppers behind, their full beam right in me wing mirrors and I thought they were waiting for me to do something, like get out with me hands up. But I suppose they must've been doing a plate check. The copper came to the door so I wound me window down. Well, I say copper, he was just wearing normal clothes, no uniform or owt.

'All right, love?' he said and showed me his card. 'Where you off to?'

'Have I done something wrong?' Cut to the chase, I thought.

'No, no,' he said and smiled. 'Or have you?'

'What you stopping me for?'

'Routine, that's all. Nothing to worry about. Where you going?'

I thought he'd just get me out the wagon and arrest me and sort everything out but he didn't and I didn't know what to say and he was being dead nice as well. The police were always usually horrible to me. Oh man, I couldn't believe it, I started filling up. I went bright red and wiped me eyes. 'Sorry,' I said.

He stood there staring up at me, which made me keep crying. He was canny good looking and seemed really kind. 'Are you on your way home?' he said. His voice had gone soft.

I shook my head and said: 'Milton Keynes,' then pressed me fingers into

me eyes to stop them crying. I think I'd just realised there was no point going to Milton Keynes.

'It's all right, love. I have this effect on a lot of people,' he said. 'If I were you, I'd stop at the next services and have a break. You got horses in the back?' I nodded and there were a couple of thuds to prove it and he smiled: 'You better get off, then.'

'Do you not want to check the wagon?' God, I sounded like a kid. My voice had gone proper whiney. The copper glanced to his side and I saw in the wing mirror his mate had nipped round with a torch and checked the tyres and stuff. His mate nodded at him.

'Looks fine,' he said. 'You get yourself off and take care.' He winked as well, couldn't believe it. 'Goodnight,' he said and then they both went back to their car. Think it was a Passat.

That was it then, the wagon hadn't been reported stolen. Didn't know if I was pleased about that or not. One thing I knew was being Sara Monaghan and driving her wooden panelled horsebox got you treated better than if you were just me. I know I was blubbing but I didn't feel sad or owt. Just different.

I wondered how Sara Monaghan was getting on being me – Kelly Cooper with a bag of size 22 clothes and no wonga. Good luck to her. I picked up the MasterCard. Sara Monaghan? Aye. Why not? For a start, I'd follow the directions on the dash. See what happened, take it from there. If it all went tits up, it all went tits up. If not, champion.

When I got to junction 21 I felt canny gutted to get off the motorway. You know how you feel getting off a ride at the shows when you're a bairn? I loved the song on the radio an all, but it didn't sound as good once I was off the M1.

The directions were spot on like, and where it said 'stud' on the paper, there was a signpost saying Milford Stud at the bottom of a dirt track. Stud? Didn't have a clue what it was but I juddered along the track to a gate with a yellow Horsecatch sign. My heart was going like the clappers but I got out and opened the gate and just as I was gonna get back in the wagon, dogs started barking, a big white light went on and I could see a shadowy figure walking towards me. The shadow turned out to be a wifey around fifty. 'Sara?' she said.

'Hiya.'

She shook my hand. 'I'm Alison,' she said. 'We spoke on the phone.' I nodded, thinking: Ha, she didn't even know Sara. It was mad like; I didn't have a clue what I was doing there. 'Right, then,' she said. 'Follow me

round in the wagon and I'll get the girls off and into their boxes. Thanks for letting me know you'd be so late; you must be exhausted; I'll get you a cup of tea in a minute. Terrible accident, I believe?'

Do you know the best thing? I didn't even have to do owt. When I got into her stableyard, she got the ramp down herself, and took the two horses off the wagon, on her own, one at a time. I liked the bangs and clatterings as the horses come down the ramp, and I was over the moon that they were still in one piece.

Actually that wasn't the best thing, the best thing was: she took me into an office behind the stables and counted out four and a half grand to pay me for the horses. What a hoot. And then, when I was leaving, she came running behind the wagon, waving. I stopped without really thinking about it. Obviously if I'd thought about it, I would've legged it. I wound the window down.

'Sara,' she said and laughed. 'I nearly forgot about the transport, sorry.' She only went and give me another two hundred lovely quid. And asked if that was right! I didn't know what to do with me face.

I found me way back to the M1 and did a proper: 'Yee ha!' holler, pounding down the sliproad. This was it for me now like. Me and the motorway for as long as I could blag it. And with nearly five grand and a horsebox, I could blag it for a very long time. She'd forgotten the tea and I was gasping so I decided I'd stop at the next services. They had showers and everything at motorway services. Who ever needed to arrive anywhere?

JON BAUER

Running Around Without a God In Their Hearts

Subodh felt different today. He'd woken, as he usually did, to the sound of the Mosque and lay facing 'Mecca', at least the space in his bed where she used to be. 'My Mecca' he'd called her. He wanted to put his hand there on the wrinkled sheet where she used to sleep.

But despite that familiar sadness, he *did* feel different today. Probably because of yesterday, he decided. He sat up quickly from his thoughts and walked on the warm, tiled floor to the bathroom. Mallwella was watching cartoons downstairs, Subodh could hear the TV, and a spoon on the side of her cereal bowl.

He showered, remembering their walk from school yesterday. She'd held his hand, her warm grip giving him solace as they'd wandered through the markets and the men hollering prices and bargains. They'd gestured with respect to the young girl at his side; Madam would want some of these spices, surely. What about this to fragrance Madam's hair?

Then there had been the ascetics – both of them sitting in the dust, their skin the colour of the richest coffee beneath a generous sprinkling of filth and sores. They were loitering with loin cloths gathered just barely around their tiny bottoms, one of them rocking in the Lotus position in front of his wooden bowl. There were a few shrivelled jasmine flowers in it and a small brown coin. The other watched them pass, his eyes clouded blue-white with cataracts. Cataracts that followed Mallwella more than they watched her father. She skipped along in her white school uniform but when she saw the man staring, she stopped skipping; her thumb finding her mouth, her body moving closer to Subodh.

She'd glanced round at them after a while, just before turning the corner. 'Papa?'

'Yes Mally,' he'd said, 'what is it?'

'Those men, are they poor?'

'They've renounced pleasure. As ascetics, they're trying to find enlightenment by giving up the search for happiness. They only eat what people give them, they don't sleep in comfortable beds like we do, and they don't watch cartoons like some of us do, despite being *nine and a half years old*.'

‘Well a boy at school told me that we’re poor because we aren’t Hindu. And he said that without religion, even one of the bad ones, you can’t be happy.’

Subodh didn’t comment on this for a time, but Mally had to speed up a little to keep pace. She jogged after him and held his hand again.

‘And what did you say to the boy when he said such a thing?’ Subodh asked eventually.

‘I told him that there was no such thing as a good religion, like you told me Papa.’

Subodh stopped. ‘Did I say that?’ he said, his furry eyebrows raised at her.

Mally’s head was looking down at her feet. She nodded. ‘And you said that Moma was religious and look what it did for her.’ She was drawing a little arc in the dust with one of her sandals. After a moment she said, ‘But you told me that those men back there do it to give up the search for happiness ...’ Her head dropped even lower. Subodh noticed some little wisps of curly black hair under her ponytail. He waited.

‘Papa?’ she said.

‘What is it blossom?’

‘Since Moma’s gone, have *we* given up the search for happiness?’

As he came down the stairs Subodh heard the channel change on the TV, the bedlam of a cartoon replaced by the news – the Sri Lankan Minister for Internal Affairs was looking at them over his half-rimmed spectacles.

‘What’s the matter, no cartoons on this morning?’ Subodh ruffled her hair as he walked past. Mally was sat, near swallowed by his big armchair; she shrugged at him. ‘And why are you wearing your uniform, didn’t we agree on our important mission for today?’ he said.

She shrugged again, her bottom lip protruding slightly. She tilted her head to an angle; a perfect little finger fiddling with a button on the remote control. ‘I wondered if you meant it,’ she said. ‘How you’d feel today.’

He took the rice and a pot of curry from the fridge. ‘I’m looking forward to our important mission,’ he said.

She grinned from ear to ear, stubbing out the TV and running upstairs, calling to him that she was going to change then.

He heard her singing something from her bedroom. He smiled, clumping some rice into a bolus and then taking some dhal with it into his mouth – his mucky hand hovering above the tablecloth as he chewed slowly. There were two other chairs at the table, one of them was pushed entirely in, out of the way.

After breakfast they stood near the front door while he did her hair for her; holding the brush in his armpit as he made a plait. Her head rocked gently as he moved one clump over another.

‘So what are you bringing on our mission then?’ he said. ‘You’re my personal pupil today.’

‘I’m bringing my Baby Nikon and, erm,’ she was smiling slightly at the attention, ‘and I think that’s it.’

‘Are you bringing *these*,’ he asked as he pinched her earlobe quickly. She giggled and hopped once on her feet.

‘Yees!’ she said, pushing her hand into the giving mound of his belly.

‘And what *is* our important mission, my little tree frog?’ He accentuated the nickname and blinked at her.

She smiled and then spoke as if quoting from a text book, ‘To understand and assimilate the benefits and any drawbacks of the religions.’

‘Assimilate,’ he said, rubbing her arm just below the shoulder. ‘Now go and get yourself a notebook and pen!’ He was smiling. ‘How can you be a good pupil without those?’ She ran up the stairs. ‘And don’t forget your ears!’ he called after her.

‘Pardon?’ she said, stopping on the stairs. He started to repeat himself and then raised his eyes, she giggled and ran on up to her room singing, ‘Defeated, defeated!’

They were like an island in a torrent, the city rushing around them. Little people in their school uniforms scrutinising Mally, and Bajajs clouding the air as their two-stroke engines raced along the road. Cars beeped and white-shirted people cycled past them on their way to factories and prayers.

Mally and Subodh walked past the international school and the American embassy, round the corner, and there was the synagogue standing on its little footprint next to an elaborate fig tree. Subodh bought Mally a tepid yoghurt drink from a hawker and they sat under the fig and looked at the Star of David and the Hebrew writing clinging to the building.

‘This is the only synagogue in the whole of Sri Lanka, Mally. Our country probably has more religions than most, living more harmoniously than most but there are barely any Jewish people here.’

‘Because of the World War?’

‘Well, there were about six million of them killed then, I think. But no, that isn’t why. It doesn’t matter why; I just want to show you a little about it. Maybe you’ll be Jewish at the end of the day,’ he said, smiling. ‘They don’t eat pork.’

‘Like the Muslims!’ she said.

‘And the Hindus. Jews don’t eat any animal that doesn’t have a cloven – a split hoof. Like a cow has, or a goat. And Jewish families spend twenty-four hours together – on the Sabbath. And they’re not allowed to create or break anything during that time. Which means no turning on a light, lighting a candle or even tearing toilet paper.’ He looked at her seriously, she smiled and then wriggled a bit next to him.

‘Women are boss in their culture,’ he said. ‘Hygiene and rules are so strict that the woman naturally forms the hinge of it all, and if your mother isn’t Jewish, you aren’t Jewish.’

‘So I can’t be Jewish then? It’s not a religion but a country or something?’ Her legs were swinging back and forth with their white socks on.

He looked up at the fig tree and rubbed his beard. ‘Well, you’ve stumbled across something there that causes a lot of trouble. They don’t have a home, not really, they’re sort of on someone else’s land right now. Don’t say that to anyone else. But I think their struggle for a home is what’s made them more than a religion. Judaism is the religion but the Jews are a people spread all over the world, like most religions. But unlike most religions too. And they’re supposed to be the chosen race – according to the Old Testament a man called Abraham fathered all the people.’

‘But that means we’re *all* Jewish,’ she said, frowning.

‘I didn’t say today would make sense,’ he said, and took up frowning too.

They were walking away from the synagogue, squinting in the sun.

‘Why do they lock it up Papa, what if you need God suddenly?’

‘I suppose people steal things. You’ll see why when we get to the next one. There’s lots of money in religion.’

They flagged down a Bajaj and were soon racing through the dirty streets. Subodh sat sweating gently in the heat and looking at his face in the driver’s side mirror. Then his gaze was drawn to his wedding ring. Mally noticed and took his hand, looking away from the embrace and holding onto the Bajaj with her other.

He looked at Kali – carved, painted and stuck to the dashboard with something. She held items in her elegant arms, all four of them. Subodh looked at the driver, his face concentrating on the road, flowers hanging from around his rear view mirror.

‘No need to go to an Ashram now,’ Subodh said quietly to his daughter and nodded towards the driver. She looked at him and then blushed and shook her head quickly.

‘Excuse me, driver,’ Subodh said but the driver pulled over thinking he’d gone the wrong way or missed something. They parked at the side of the road, the engine running and cars sliding past them.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean for you to stop,’ Subodh said. ‘My daughter here is nine –’ He received an elbow in the ribs. ‘And a half. I’ve decided it’s time to properly introduce her to religion. I’m running a bit late I suppose but I think she’s old enough now to make up her own mind.’ The driver said nothing. ‘Perhaps you’d like the chance to introduce this venerable little person to your religion?’

‘Oh no sir, I’m not a good Hindu,’ he said, his head bobbing slightly, apologetically, on his neck. ‘I set a very, very bad example.’

‘Aren’t you religious then?’ Mally asked, sinking a little in her seat, her hands pressed flat on either side of her bare legs.

‘Oh yes, indeed I am very religious. We have always been Hindu, it is my heritage. And it is the best religion, I think,’ he said, his eyes flicking cautiously to Subodh.

‘Why?’ Mally said.

‘Well, it is one of the oldest, and we respect life more than any other, except perhaps the Buddhists but they are not a very powerful religion, look at what happens to them in Tibet – the Chinese and these things. You need to fight for what it is you believe. And we think life is very important, worth fighting for, very much.’

‘But that’s how people get killed, isn’t it?’ Mally said. ‘From the fighting.’ And she looked up at her father and he in turn at the driver, deflecting the question to him. A car hooted as it went round them.

‘It is a crazy world, this world. With so many pressures and conflicts and differences, we have to be strong otherwise our religion will become just like all the others. Already my children are wanting things that are outside our ways. This country is harder even than Western ones, it is this *melting pot*. Not an easy place for a Hindu.’ He looked like they’d understand but Subodh just gazed at him levelly; Mally was wearing a little frown.

‘You really should visit an ashram,’ the driver said, becoming animated, ‘rather than this, *church*.’

‘Mally?’ Subodh said, turning to his daughter who was looking at the statue on the dashboard.

Her head sunk towards her shoulders a little. ‘I’d like to go to the church first,’ she said, blushing up at her father. He sat back and looked out the side of the little vehicle, waiting for the driver to take the instruction.

Once they'd arrived, Subodh handed the driver a few notes and stood doggedly waiting for his small amount of change.

'I hope today goes well,' the driver said at a conspiring volume. 'We can't have our children running around without a god in their hearts, *whichever* god it is.' And he slapped Subodh on the arm and laughed as if he'd said something hilarious. Subodh and Mally walked slowly away, Mally carrying her bag of items.

'Nice to meet you little one,' the driver called after her. 'Choose carefully,' he added as an afterthought, his hand cupped around his mouth.

They reached the church and headed for its grounds first. 'I didn't like him,' Mally said.

'Why ever not!' Subodh said, smiling at her.

She sat and thought for a time, looking up at the church built as if it belonged in a village in England. 'He made me feel wrong.'

Subodh crossed one leg over the other and folded his arms at the same time. They were sitting on a bench under a jacaranda tree; gravestones were gathered around them like an audience. He looked at them and fell into staring.

'Why aren't you religious Papa? Moma was, wasn't she?'

He crossed his legs the other way and summoned samosas from Mally. She lifted them from her bag, wrapped in a glistening paper towel.

'She was quite religious,' he said, 'but not in that holy kind of way. She was a humanitarian, a good person like all religions want you to be, in their way. For your mother, religion was about kindness, carrying other people along with you in life.'

Mally looked seriously into the distance as her father talked; a slither of curried pea clinging to his beard.

'I was never as religious as your mum but she inspired me to live more in my heart and soul rather than just my mind,' he said. 'We spend so much time in our minds, you know how serious Papa can be.' And he smiled at her, hopefully. She didn't disappoint him.

'You aren't too serious Papa,' she said 'except when I'm wanting to be a little girl.' She was quite serious but Subodh chuckled, as if his love for her was tickling him, making him happy.

'Have I been putting the weight of my world on your shoulders this last year?' he said eventually.

'I want to talk about Moma, then I think I can get on with our mission,' she said, waiting for him to go on.

He sighed. 'Yes, your question. She was religious, it's true. And she

helped me rediscover it in some ways. But since she was – since she died, I’ve not found much faith in anything, apart from my daughter.’ And he pinched her juicy earlobe for good measure, looking for the solace of her smile. Mally looked up at him, serious.

‘I’ve thought at times,’ he said, looking down at his feet, ‘that it would have been better if she’d died of a terrible disease, suffered for a year or more, been nursed by us and *then* slipped away. But to be snatched like that, at Christmas, to be rinsed from a train by the hand of God. Washed away from us in a giant, brown wave. That’s so much harder. And it doesn’t just kill a person, it kills faith too.’

Mally sniffed and put her largely untouched samosa down on the bench beside her. ‘Well,’ she said, and puffed out her chest, ‘I think that believing is all we have. And I think Moma is still with me, I can feel her sometimes. I *like* thinking of her in Heaven. And maybe believing is what must help other people who’ve lost someone or a leg or they are in trouble, sad. Everything would be too difficult if it was all just the news and school and green vegetables.’ She frowned. ‘I’ll never be an asnesic or someone who gives up on being happy.’ Mally looked up at the tears welling in Subodh’s eyes and fell into him, her thumb finding her mouth for a moment. ‘I miss her,’ she said into his side, ‘and I want her to come back *right now*.’

Her head wobbled a bit against Subodh as a little grief tumbled gently out of him, like some slippage on a steep, shale hill. He put the remaining knuckle of his samosa down beside him and brought his hankie up to his breaking face. Mally flung her arms around him then, squinting her eyes shut and burying them in his white shirt as it went up and down – she gripped onto his sadness and wished little child thoughts that it would go away, that Papa wouldn’t get washed away too.

‘We both want her back, blossom. We both do.’ He said it very quietly and wrapped her up in his arms.

They sat like that for quite a while, among the gravestones and the blunt point they made about life. Gravestones that were softening slowly under the elements, with lichen obscuring their words – the few words that were left to mark whole lifetimes.

It wasn’t far to the temple. Subodh was tired; he walked slowly, his face blotchy from the tears.

‘We didn’t go into the Catholic church, papa,’ Mally said walking ahead of him a little, her plait bouncing in the sun, her head up.

He sighed. ‘You wouldn’t have liked it in there.’ She stopped until he

caught up and then took his hand, falling into step beside him and skipping once to bring her left leg in time with his.

‘Why not?’

‘Oh I don’t know!’ he said with lazy seriousness, tired of analysing what it was he didn’t like about religion. ‘It’s all gold and gaudy in there anyway, not your cup of chocolate at all. All sin and repentance. And judgement. *They* wouldn’t let you watch cartoons,’ he said, a glimmer of a smile crossing his face. Mally looked back at the spire making its point to the city.

‘Where do they get all their gold from?’ she said.

‘The poor people, blossom,’ he said, accelerating and pulling her by the hand through the traffic and then down a side street.

Mally and Subodh were stood in the Buddhist temple, wriggling their bare feet. There was a pregnancy to the air, a stillness. The curved roof of the temple arced above them like the sky obscured by it. And the scent of sandalwood met them despite the perfection of the trail of smoke rising, undisturbed, into the roof space. Subodh was lost in that smoke, feeling an unfamiliar sensation of stillness inside himself.

‘Papa,’ Mally said, tugging him from his mind.

‘Hello,’ said a monk dressed in saffron robes, ‘I wondered if I could be of use to you both. I’ve not seen you here before.’

‘Oh no, we’ve no need to trouble you, I’m just taking Mally here on a fact-finding mission. I thought it time we talked about the question of faith, religions.’

‘We’ve been to a church and a synagogue and we met a Hindu man.’ Mally said, trusting the monk with their secret mission.

The monk folded his arms, losing his hands amongst his gown, his face animating with the ups and downs of what she was telling him. ‘Does that mean you’d like me to tell you a little of Buddhism?’ he said. Mally looked up at her father who raised his eyebrows as if to say: ‘Don’t look at me’.

The three of them were sat outside like envoys from differing opinions, taking shade under a tree and its creeping shadow.

‘Our way or dharma, if you like,’ the monk said, ‘is something less individual, less about you and I but about all people, all animals. You won’t find any classical worship here. But like all religions, there is much attention to lifestyle and treating those around you with respect. And a great deal of philosophy. It’s not all about sitting under a tree with our eyes closed, and shaving our heads.’ He leant in close to Mally as he said this, grinning at her and causing her to wriggle with pleasure. Subodh smiled as

a spectator in the interaction but as the monk spoke, his eyes often gazed at Subodh.

‘A lot of suffering comes from a very simple problem – that we grasp at life, at our identity, our relationships. Everything deserts us; people, our bodies, even time is constantly deserting us. Life is change, nothing is permanent and yet as people, we live in a constant struggle against life as it exists. Resisting its very changing. You see, Mally,’ and then the monk looked at Subodh quickly, ‘nothing stays the same, the clock moves, the seasons, you grow taller, older. We work at life as a Buddhist, trying to let it be, to let it go. Not to step away from life but to step away from what we want it to be. We try to live close to the way things actually are, at that exact moment. Never lost in the moment, but *being* with it.’ He took a long breath. ‘You don’t need to do anything to have faith, if you first accept whatever actually occurs, and then go on in the spirit with which you wish to live your life.’

Subodh was transfixed by what he was saying whereas Mally was more intrigued, it seemed, by the monk himself. Her mouth was open, unwittingly moving a little along with his words.

The monk looked directly at Subodh then and said, ‘We say that if you are going in the right direction then all you need to do, is keep going.’

Subodh nodded very slowly at him, his eyes focused somewhere between them.

The monk watched the girl and her father walking away together, the sun turning its back on a reddening day. He bowed slightly at them and walked in the other direction, his sandals kicking up a little dust as he went. And then he was rummaging quickly in his robes, his hand eventually coming back out holding something that was giving off a tuneful noise. He pressed it and put it to his ear, chatting enthusiastically into it as he turned down a side street. Some children ran out from the street he’d entered, chasing an old football and screeching at one another, their tongues protruding from their lips as if they were chasing a big round bhaji.

A little Koran dangled in the cockpit of the Bajaj. Subodh sat in the back holding onto the iron roof support and its flaking paint. Mally was curled up beside him, sleeping in the folds of his belly, her bag lying open and showing the unused notebook and a pen with a wobbling plastic goblin perched on its end. The Bajaj driver kept contemplating Subodh in the mirror. Subodh knew some conversation was coming and

turned his head away, leaning it on the vibrating vehicle and feigning sleep.

‘Have you had a productive day, sir?’ the man said.

Subodh sighed and opened an eyelid. The Bajaj driver was showing him his teeth and a twinkle in his eye. ‘Yes thank you.’ Subodh fidgeted gently and then closed his eyes again.

‘That is very good sir. What is it that you have been doing if I can ask such a thing?’

Subodh opened his eyes and the Bajaj driver showed him more of his teeth and wobbled his head slightly on his neck. Subodh looked down at his daughter’s pen and the goblin on its spring. ‘I took my daughter on an exploration of religion,’ he said, wearing his most bored expression.

At this statement the driver sat up straighter, in deference to the topic. ‘Well that is just marvellous! Tell me, are you Muslim?’ he added, hopefully.

‘No. If I were anything, I would be Buddhist.’ And Subodh expressed this last word in a way that made it sharper – hoping it would offend the Muslim that way.

‘Very good, meaning your daughter is also Buddhist no?’ the driver said, intending to continue but Subodh interrupted – ‘No, she hasn’t decided yet. She’s her own person.’ He hoped the matter would rest there.

‘Very good sir. I personally, if you don’t mind my telling you, think that all religions are everyone’s religions. We are all together in life are we not?’ And he showed his teeth and a benevolent pair of eyes. ‘My family has always been Muslim,’ he continued, ‘but truth be told, my faith is *in* family. And I try as hard as I can to have as big a family as possible. Not in the way sir may be thinking, I like to *make* a big family too,’ he said and then laughed with gusto, his throat issuing uncanny sounds that made Mally fidget in her sleep. ‘But by having a big family ...’ he lurched at the handlebars suddenly, steering around a double parked Bajaj being emptied of oranges – as he passed it he blasted his little horn repeatedly and shouted at the driver; waved a fist.

‘Excuse me sir,’ he continued eventually, ‘I was saying about one big family. I am thinking of faith in family, one big happy group – all peoples, all religions. EVERYBODY!’ And to make his point, he threw his hands upwards. The Bajaj veered towards a grotty kerb and his hands came quickly back to right it. He looked nervously in the mirror for a second, repentant. ‘I try very, very hard to have as big a family as possible. Even

you sir, are family to me.’ And he proffered those teeth again, a hand moving to his chest.

Subodh fidgeted and then said, ‘Well that sounds admirable. I’ve neglected the worship of my family of late, a little.’

‘Yes, well Tsunami reminded us all, yes?’ said the driver, leaning towards his rear-view mirror.

Subodh turned his head to the shops rushing by.

‘I lost much money, property,’ the driver added.

‘We all did,’ Subodh said to the blurring streets.

As Subodh carried her away, Mally looked over his shoulder and gave the driver a little smile. He grinned broadly at her and then left in a puff of blue smoke; the sound of the two-stroke engine shrinking into the distance. Mally and Subodh were lost then into the darkness of the house, the front door closed.

Crickets and cicadas filled the silence left by the Bajaj’s hubbub. A firefly skitted across the front of the house, looking as if it was just barely staying airborne. And then, a few minutes later, the same Bajaj was coming up the road again, its revs signifying the utmost urgency. It cut a wide arc outside the house, a blue cloud spreading out from the u-turn like a ripple. The driver hopped out of the vehicle and headed up the drive. He knocked stoutly on the front door and then took a step back and did his hair with his empty hand. Insects created a fuss around the outside light hanging from the porch ceiling above him.

Subodh opened the door and blinked at the driver. ‘Yes?’ Subodh said sternly and then thought better and softened his face. He had the round, plastic lid of an ice-cream container in his hand.

‘Sir’s daughter left her things in my taxi. I am returning them.’ The Bajaj driver lifted the bag and his lips in unison, showing those teeth of his and Mally’s bag; the goblin on the end of the pen poking just shy of the open zip.

Subodh smiled at the driver, ‘That’s very good of you to come back,’ he said. ‘Let me get you something from my wallet,’ and he turned to head into the house.

‘No sir!’ said the driver, quietening his voice as Subodh came immediately back. ‘We are one big happy family are we not?’ and he spread his arms apart, grinning. For a second Subodh was frightened he was going to receive a hug from the stranger, he leant away a little.

‘It’s starting Papa! It’s starting!’ Mally’s voice came excitedly over the sound of *Looney Tunes*.

Subodh looked briefly over his shoulder and then back at the teeth and open arms in front of him. He grinned at the man and then stepped quickly forward and did hug him. The driver's eyes ogled at the wall over Subodh's shoulder, his arms still outstretched in their simple gesture. Then he resigned himself and closed them around this stranger who had ridden in his taxi. Mally renewed her plea and just as quickly as he had been embraced, the driver was left in front of a closed door, the insects head-butting the light bulb shining above his head.

He turned, eventually, and jogged down the steps. The suspension of his Bajaj creaking as he got into it. And then it was issuing a cacophony of oil and petrol, and unravelling a blue vapour trail up the road.

ELIZABETH KOCH

Under the Table

My mother rolled down the windows and opened the sunroof as we gunned it to the airport to pick up Papa who'd been gone so long we knew him as a ringing phone, a voice full of missing us. Seamus sat in back, seatbelt tight across his tiger print pajama top. He had a plastic snake in his mouth and was chewing on its tail.

A station wagon pulled up on Mom's side, rasping and rattling with rocks caught in the engine. Its wood panels were scratched like someone with claws had fought to keep hold for a long, long time before dropping beneath the back wheel.

The station wagon kept up with us. Two boys sat in front. They were shirtless with dusty tans and strong arms like they lifted a lot of things. The wind whipped their curls crazy, filled the car with feathers. The guy in back was big and lumpy and slept with a baseball cap over his face. Wrappers and little bits of paper blew around his head. The way our cars lined up, window for window, you'd think we weren't moving at all.

The closest boy, the one in passenger, he said something to the driver and nodded in Mom's direction. He was beautiful, coated in mist like the men at the car wash, the freckled ones who whipped each other with towels. He hiked up on the doorframe and stuck his head out the window. He squinted in the white hot sun. 'Hey, lady!' he shouted, his hair blowing sideways. 'Where you goin' in your fancy car?'

My mother looked straight ahead, pretended not to hear, but I saw her smile.

The boy ducked back inside, and their car dropped behind us. Mom patted my knee. 'College kids.' She rolled her eyes.

I nodded.

She let her arm drop out the window.

The station wagon pulled up again and the boy smiled, teeth gleaming, smooth and white and fake-like. 'Hello, Gorgeous!' She glanced over this time. He motioned to our car. 'Wanna swap?'

She spat hair from her mouth. 'Come again?'

He stretched his top half out the window. Wind beat against his chest, his nipples dark as Band-aids. 'I said – *wanna swap?*'

'Swap what?'

‘Pull over!’ he laughed.

Mom laughed too and shook her head no, but our car was slowing. Seamus whimpered in the back seat. He dropped his rubber snake and lifted his chin towards the wind and the morning sun, eyes blinking, cheeks blooming with hives.

The light was red so we waited, ugly car and pretty car waiting side by side. The boy in passenger drummed the doorframe like he was listening to music, only there wasn’t any music – just the sound of engines humming, a throbbing that stuck in my neck and tickled so bad I wanted to slap the dashboard and sob about nothing.

‘Mom,’ I whispered. I was worried she’d feel sorry for the boys in their peeling brown station wagon, grubby as a dead tree, and let them have our shiny blue car. I took her hand off the steering wheel and held it to my forehead so she’d know how sick I felt. ‘*Mom.*’

But she was looking at the boys now. And the boys – they stared.

My mother had the kind of body strangers wanted to touch. Breasts like fat birds swaying on a telephone wire, the tiniest ribcage you ever saw. Hips that disappeared down grocery store aisles, and later, when she came back to find you, hugs your stomach fell through.

Her fingernails were sharp and red and she carried iceberg lettuce like something precious. She sat it on the cutting board and came down hard, chop-chopping so your ears buzzed and your teeth went soft and you couldn’t believe that shredded pile of leaves was ever called a head.

What happened at night, when Papa came home, is that she wouldn’t look up from the cutting board. Seamus and I, we’d be hiding beneath the table with my Barbies. This is how Barbie walks, I’d say as the back door opened, these are the skirts she wears and how she takes them off. ‘Papa’s home!’ he’d shout, but I was teaching my brother how Ken must kneel before Barbie, and if his knees wouldn’t bend then he must throw himself in cereal crumbs and dog hair and let her walk along his spine, dig her heels in his buttcrack. This is what Ken must do if he knew what was good for him.

Papa’s shoes clacked down the hallway on the way to the kitchen and Mom sucked in air until her lips went white. She took pecans from the freezer and dumped them on the chopping board, cutting so fast dust clouds rose from her fingertips. The plastic bag sat on the counter, ripped through the middle, sweating.

‘Fee fie fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman!’

Seamus thwacked Ken against the ground. The doll's face dented. 'Gimme,' I said, but Seamus shoved my hand and kept right on playing, like a face didn't matter much anyway.

Papa's shoes were getting closer. They were square-toed and brown and moved up and down like the Pop-a-Weasel at Monty's Arcade. I wanted to pound them with my fists.

The shoes stopped at the table. Seamus scowled at them.

An upside-down head appeared, the chin grey and scratchy. 'Papa's hungry!' the head said.

I snatched Ken from Seamus' hands, hid the doll behind my back.

Papa turned right-side up and held out his arms. The skin beneath his eyes melted down his cheeks. He was a sad old clown squatted there, arms spread wide like he'd take anyone who came to him. I crawled out from under the table and dragged Seamus with me, Seamus with his feet not working. I held Seamus like my Blankie, close to my hip.

Papa scooped us up, one in each arm, and made fart noises on our cheeks – loud, messy kisses that I hurried to wipe off. Seamus squirmed and tried to slip down Papa's legs, but Papa wouldn't let go. He carried us to the sink, to the chopping area. Mom didn't look up.

'Watcha cookin', Angry Lady?' he asked, and Mom jumped like she'd been snapped with a rubber band. She ground her jaw and turned her face toward the window, breathed in the clean white light. Then the chopping began again.

Papa stood on tip-toe, peeked into the mixing bowl. 'Would you look at that. Pie tonight, kids!'

'Fat chance,' Mom said.

'Aw, Monkey, you're such a tease.'

She dropped the knife and tore open a cereal box. She turned the box over so the bowl tipped and tiny brown twigs spilled across the countertop.

'Christ, Toni – let up on the fibre! You trying to blow me?' Papa clutched his stomach with the hand that was holding me, and I sank to the ground. He looked huge up there, carrying my brother like an animal he'd shot in the woods. 'I'd like to retain a little something, if you don't mind.'

She looked at his belly. 'You retain plenty.'

'Hey – I'm cuddly.'

'You're fat,' she said, and smiled a little. She reached for the empty pecan bag. The bag was wet and when she shook it, her soft parts jiggled.

Papa's eyes widened. He let Seamus slip and lunged at Mom like they were playing tag – he stretched out his arm and yanked her back to him.

She squealed and tried to pull away, but he whirled her around and wrapped his hands around her waist. He picked her up and threw her over his shoulder and spanked her bottom. She laughed and laughed and kicked the air near his face, her hair swishing back and forth, shiny as Barbie's when I rolled the doll between my palms.

'I'm not fat!'

'Okay, okay ...'

'Say it!'

'You're not fat!' she said with her face in his shirt. 'You're a beanpole, a hat rack, a chopstick of a man!'

He put her down and she leaned against the counter, pink-cheeked and breathless. She tilted her head and smoothed back her hair. Papa watched her. His lips parted, and hers did, too, but he didn't say anything. He just smiled and pushed her nose with his finger. Honk honk.

Her eyes went squinty, and she shoved him like he'd hurt her. She turned back to the counter and picked up the knife and began chopping again as if nothing had happened, as if Papa the clown had fallen through a hole in the ground, as if he'd never been there at all.

The spotlight hung on a wire and bobbed in the Kansas wind. The boy in front rested his chin in his hands. He looked at Mom nice, smiling with no teeth.

'We have a proposal,' he said, and the light changed. The station wagon lurched and the boy slipped sideways, hit his head on the door frame. He ducked back inside and hammered the driver with his fists. The fat one in back sat up from his nap. He swatted the two of them with his hat, but the boys kept pounding and pounding. I hoped they'd mash each other soft as Play-Doh.

Mom started driving, but the boys shouted after us. 'Wait, wait – pull over!' There were other cars now, all pushed up behind us, so Mom swerved and parked on a wide stretch of sand. There was nothing but grass on this side of the road, nothing but grass and a skinny tree growing crooked out of the ground. The station wagon sputtered and rolled so close I worried our door handles would link.

'Hey,' the boy said.

'Hello,' Mom said.

'We were thinking.' He draped his arm out the window, petted the side of his car. 'How about dropping off the kids at the pool? Boomer'll watch after 'em.' He nodded to the big guy in back. 'Boomer's great with kids.'

Boomer scowled. Boomer was pale and huge like he'd been working on his weight for years, but he didn't seem like a man. He wore Zink on his nose, pink as lipstick. He called the boys *pricks* and kicked their seats. He lobbed wadded hamburger wrappers at their heads.

A green towel hit Boomer in the chest. 'Lighten up, you ass.'

'I'm the ass? That's classic.'

My mother laughed, and the one in passenger laughed, too. He reached through the sunlight and dust and grabbed my mother's door frame, like he wanted to pull us closer. 'Boomer's a lifeguard at the Club.'

'Really?'

'Lucky me,' Boomer said. He took off his hat and ducked down and when he sat up again, he was holding a Burger King crown. He slipped the crown on his head, sat back, and crossed his arms. They squished against his chest like pillows.

The light changed, but nobody cared about the light any more.

Mom moved her hands around the steering wheel. Her palms were careful, stroking it up and down, rubbing the bumps so gently I wanted to bite her. I wanted to sink my teeth in her flesh so she bled. I wanted her to grip my braid and yank back my head and look me hard in the face so she remembered the one who belonged to her.

The boy, the one hanging out the window, the pretty one – he smiled so wide I saw his tongue.

She turned to me with sparkling eyes. 'You kids want to swim?' Her hair lifted like a flame through the sun roof, and when I looked up I saw the moon. It looked so faded and dingy up there in the bright blue sky, so awkward and unhappy. I didn't know why it was out. The boys danced around in their seats, high-fiving while Boomer stuck his middle finger in the air between them.

I glanced back at Seamus, who was yanking on his seatbelt. He glared at me like it was my fault he'd been trapped there so long. I was mad, too. That's why I said it. 'Okay,' I said. 'We'll swim.'

She shut her eyes and rested her head against the chair back. She sat there so long, not moving, that I thought she'd forgotten about the pool. I thought she'd wake up from her nap, say good-bye to the boys, and drive us to the airport like she was supposed to.

'Your mother loves you,' she whispered. The words played like a song in my head.

That afternoon the phone rang and rang. Seamus and I hid with the dogs

beneath the kitchen table. When Papa slipped through the back door, he hung up his blazer and the hangers chimed. He dropped his briefcase in the briefcase chair and walked down the hallway with the note that Boomer had taped to our garage door. Papa looked at the words on the paper crown, then glanced around the room. When he saw us he waved slowly, with pinched eyebrows, like he wasn't sure we were the kids he thought we were. He unbuttoned his cuffs and pulled his tie loose. He frowned at the ceiling.

'Toni?' His voice so soft I could barely hear him.

He went upstairs and came back down and sat on the couch beside our table. He was sweating so he took off his tie and his shirt and bunched them up in his hands. He smelled like an airplane, like burnt matches and tin foil. Seamus and I shivered beneath the table, beneath our sunburns, our eyes so puffed and itchy there was nothing to do but rub them.

The phone rang. Papa looked at it, but he didn't move. The phone rang and rang and the dogs started howling, and the inside of my head went empty, but Papa just sat there.

The ringing stopped. When it started again it sounded like a siren, like a storm warning, and maybe that's why Papa stood. Maybe that's why he picked up the phone and squeezed it so hard his arms shook, why he yanked the cord out of the wall and bounced the whole thing against the carpet.

He sighed, and his shoulders sagged. He pushed his hand through his hair, stepped backwards and lowered himself into his T.V. chair. He flicked on the television and watched men with silver canes walk over green hills.

When his chin hit his chest I crawled out from under the table and crossed the room. I grabbed the phone and took it back to the place where Seamus and I hid. I let my little brother put his head in my lap, and we waited for the ringing to begin again.

RICHARD LAMBERT

Turtles

I met Peter Skitkin in the lift of the Burlington Hotel, Bloomsbury. Not by accident. I had been watching him for some time. Everything about him rumbled: suit, hair, tie; life. Later, I discovered this rumbledness went as far as his thinking, which was liable to disconnected jumps as if the mind's surface had undergone a kink. He would be conversing normally then reach some fold in the material of his thought and be thrown entirely. You could see it, this momentary confusion. His small eyes over drooping pouches (how much exactly did those pouches hold?), blinking. For my part, I never faltered, and eventually he would return and we would continue as before.

But I wanted to know the source of this exhausted appearance and residence in a drab hotel, a man of apparent wealth and steady employment, so I rode the lift with him, remarked on the coldness of the weather, and introduced myself. I said I was going for a drink later, and might see him in the hotel bar. He was non-committal, but later turned up for the drink.

He was staying in the Burlington because his wife had left him. Over that evening and subsequent evenings, I learned more. What you must do is listen, prompt, and learn. This is something I have always been good at.

After she left, he did too, because he could not bear the house: it was where they had lived for fifteen years (*lived* Peter said, as if this emphasis gave the word its true meaning). Simply walking into a room disturbed a memory, invoked pain. He took a London train. The wind sub-zero in high, sunless ravines. One holdall and a zippered suit-bag.

A solicitor, he had progressed to a fair height in one of the big five: a ledge with pigeons overlooking St Paul's. The end was like a physical blow. Here he had been, moving through life, long hours for the company – a company man –, when this thing happened, this thing which wiped him out, left him with a blankness somewhere in him, that small judder which visibly slowed him. I sympathised – who isn't acquainted with loss? – but it didn't stop me from delving further.

The end of his marriage had certain effects. He had, in the last few weeks, also lost out on the partnership he'd been hoping for. When he told me this, I addressed the subject of his marriage head-on. We were in the

bar. Peter had returned from work carrying a document case which weighed him down like Willy Loman. He hadn't eaten, his eyes were narrow with tiredness, the pouches dark. It was meant to be pre-dinner drinks, but we stayed all evening. I was his confessor.

He had met his wife-to-be at a wedding sixteen years ago. It turned out they took trains at different times on the same line. Peter changed his commute ('Hello again, what a coincidence.') and that was how they began. But they went for the relationship as if they were salvaging something from their own lives, not with regard for each other. Each divorced once. The physical like a gun going off, a small explosion. And Peter still felt that: you could see it when he spoke of her, in his exhausted eyes, within the fury atop his bar stool. This wide, black-haired man seemed to be burning, loss some bitter aphrodisiac.

I advised him: 'You have to let go.' Peter Skitkin grasped the bar edge with his short pudgy hands which usually held pencils, and looked as if he would break it if he could. His eyes bulged. Consumed. That is the word. And this, I must admit, is what interested me. Old, I can remember no such passion in my own life. Some passing pleasure, yes. Some passing loss. But this? Peter Skitkin leaned over, face unshaved, hair wild, breath enveloping me with a day's coffees and an evening's brandies, and said: 'What is there to let go?'

And there I had it. My in. My opening. And I took it, quietly, leisurely, in sympathy: a wife. I hesitate even to mention her name. But I will mention it. Lisa. Lisa: that name he must have repeated so often to himself it became part of him, and which was still part of him now but a place of pain. Lisa. I said it several times and I could see it was annoying him. Lisa. Then I mentioned the partnership he'd lost. These are the things, the visible occasions of failure. These are things you have to be reminded of, so that:

'What you need is something new. For example, I have been invited to invest in a property development. You need something like that. Something new. Somewhere to place your energies. Is there anything you can invest yourself in?'

After he had gone – the heavy document case needed to be got through that night – I ordered a tonic water and went to a bar table. I put my glass on a napkin, took out my notebook and reviewed my notes.

It was not only that he was broken with sorrow, hunched by it, his fat hands wanting to tear himself apart, maybe lift a rib or two out of his chest to get at his lungs. No. That relentless gravity, the heavy body, the slow

pace, these weren't manifestations only of sorrow. What Peter was experiencing was despair, the loss of hope, which is something I have never experienced because I never sat at that table, played that particular game. But the pertinent point here is that a man without hope is a perfect mark, because what else does he have left to lose?

The next time we met, I asked if he had a photograph of Lisa. We were at a window table in the bar. Peter's expression changed. There is something slightly thuggish about Peter – he is swarthy and squat – and at the mention of a photograph he looked defensive, angered: a little brutal. We considered each other a few moments. I felt embarrassed. 'I don't know why I ask. She interests me,' I said.

Why does human involvement have to come into it, into the business of working a mark? Peter was still studying me. It was a rare moment of openness for us, me a habitual liar, him a lawyer at the onset of despair. We had exposed each other somehow. 'I have a photo in my room,' he said finally.

So easily given up, this image of the woman he still loved. I felt a throb of contempt as Peter stood to get the photo. Why would a person do this to himself? I saw more of the marriage's failure in that desire to retrieve her photo than in anything he had told me so far. There was something childish, clinging in this.

I examined my contempt while I waited. Was contempt for Peter something Lisa had experienced? I took a sip of brandy.

Actually I dislike photographs. I am interested in live performance, not its record. This is a consequence of my profession: a record of my activities would lead to disaster. But, and here it is: I am old, and I see there is no record of my life. And I have lived a long time. But in the present tense, without regard for the past – what is that past? – and pretty soon I will be walking offstage. Perhaps it was this concern, at the back of my mind, a consideration of things of permanence that made me ask to see the photograph. Or, connected to this, perhaps I was thinking of passion (this thing I have rarely known). What was this emotion that could bring a man to his knees? Perhaps I wanted to see how this had happened; I knew it was Peter Skitkin who had done this to himself, that it was something in him, not in Lisa, which had caused this agony, this desire to shrink life to the minimum, to live in a hotel room, day-by-day, week-by-week, no consideration of the future. Or, more precisely, perhaps it was this: I wanted to see the detail, the record, of how passion had brought this man into these

desperate straits. Or perhaps it was simply that I wanted to work the mark a little more.

Peter returned holding the photograph protectively against his suit jacket. He rolls a little as he walks, and now he was up on the balls of his feet, hope in that upwards spring. When he sat, he was still for a while, as if he had something precious he was about to give away. Which is exactly what he did.

Lisa. A good-looking woman. A wide face. Smiling. A narrow chin across a wide jaw, and because she was smiling the chin looked triangular. Long hair, gold, some brown. Curled a little at the ends. But too heavy, fell over her face. Lank. The plumpness under the chin accentuated. She was looking across her shoulder towards the camera. It was outside, a bright day; her eyes were narrowed with laughter. The jacket was red, an outdoor walking jacket.

Happiness. This is what people look for, isn't it?

'Very good at cooking,' Peter said.

Would a man destroy himself like this in a hotel's emptiness, allow himself to be destroyed, on the basis of someone's culinary skills?

'Anything at all.' Then his eyes wandered. 'She is a happy person. Can be a happy person. We have a garden.' He blinked. That kink in thought. A silence. 'Had a garden. I built a terrace. We back onto a railway. We ... had a bench. And one year I built a summer-house. Not a conservatory. A summer house. White wood. Polygonal.'

Yes, I could see him building, see the competent hands picking up nails, angling chisels, the concentration, while Lisa went away from him slowly, through years. Perhaps it was not love, what occasioned his grief. Perhaps it was simply change, the removal, the absence of physical proximity. What is love, I wondered, later, after the evening had finished, and I had given more details of the business investment ('they want cash: thirty grand'). Is it simply what our bodies want? Is it simply that day-to-day existence with another? The need for company.

Over the next week, I unfolded the story of the property deal, here and there, in bits and pieces: a narrative for Peter. Those involved were not entirely on the level, I told him. But nothing dangerous. And I learned more about Lisa. I could not get enough. The woman was enthralling.

She moved on a different trajectory from Peter, had a different tempo. They had different philosophies: hers involved risk, excitement, the glittering world. And the attachments she wanted were with as much of

the world as she could get: new places, a galaxy of acquaintances, travel, friendships, adventure: Peter her companion in these. But all this centrifugal force and all Peter wanted was to hunker down, security (the house), routine, the years to go by slowly. His psyche calcifying, hers an atom flying. I do not believe I have been so close to such normalcy, mundanity, the ordinariness of life: a life of weekend breaks, careers, pensions, holidays; of love gone wrong, of cross-purposes; of kindness, evidently, on both sides; on the sheer incompatibility of these two ordinary people.

I found myself excited in the mornings at the prospect of a drink with Peter, of a meal. I dressed for the occasions, bought new shirts, a new tie. Hummed songs to myself before leaving in the evening; was disappointed if Peter had to work late or was too tired to meet. I was fascinated now, wanted details. Wanted to know what kind of kitchen equipment they used, where they bought it, what they cooked, what kind of stone the terrace had been constructed in, how Peter had learned how to build a summer-house (these skills from adolescence: his uncle). What time they came home from work, what kind of clothes she wore; what their families were like. Their friends; their weekends; their holidays. I was happy – vicarious happiness –, and conversation about the non-existent business deal fell off, even when Peter asked. I would ask instead: what are the colour of her eyes (blue), how often did she get her hair done ('about once a month'), what is her middle name (Anne)?

Then I had a big loss at cards.

I did not see Peter for a week. There were negotiations regarding my finances and, shall we say, my personal safety. But these negotiations forced my hand. One's financial position is not always as buoyant as one would like. Therefore, I had been placed in a delicate position and as much as I enjoyed Peter's company, other considerations were bringing that intimate phase of our relationship to a close. Consequently, our next conversation, in the hotel bar, included this exchange:

'I will be open with you, Peter. I am not able to raise the sum I need for the property venture. I have been trying to raise this sum. This deal is significant to ... my future.'

'I see.' There was a silence while we both considered this statement, its significance and ramifications. 'What sort of sum is it?'

'It is only four thousand. I have the rest. I am embarrassed.'

Peter swirled the whisky in its glass in pudgy fingers, the base still on the table. Then he looked up 'I can lend you four thousand,' he said.

He raised his glass. After a moment, I did too. We toasted. He studied me carefully.

Later, Peter spoke of Lisa (that familiar refrain), this time early on in the marriage, of cooking for each other. Before the summer-house was built, naturally. Cooking. Eating together.

‘This simple thing,’ he said. ‘Funny, isn’t it?’

There was something gentle in him now, in this wistfulness. In kindness there is some power, there is the knowledge that one is able to help another; his generosity to me was flooding him now, bringing back thoughts of other generous moments, other days of equality, tenderness, giving.

Before we parted, I asked him if he was interested in joining the property investment. ‘Perhaps a new start for you.’ Thirty thousand cash (plus the four he was ‘loaning’ me). His eyes were still misty from the mix of nostalgia and alcohol, and he simply nodded.

He thought about it and said yes. I arranged a date and time for us to meet the (non-existent) property developers. My prospects, both financial and physical, were promising: Peter had offered me his trust, and I was going to take it.

Over the days before the meeting, the old man wandered London. He ended his wanderings in the subterranean glasshouse of Liverpool Street Station and took the escalator to a busy, windy plaza. It was dusk, and there was a bruisedness to the streets, the concrete, the glass; the district turning dark. He went into the subdued lobby of one of the big financial institutions and watched people descending the escalators; observing was what he had been doing his whole life: it surprised him how others lived, that gestures, glances, styles of dress should so often give the soul away. But because he was looking for one particular soul, searching for that soul – almost knew the stage it had reached in its journey (sensing a journey for each person – the financial advisers, software engineers, brokers, secretaries, administrators, CEOs –, a journey not plotted like the tube map with turns and circuitous routes but unfolding in time in a single line, and he himself closer to the end of the line than most) – and because he felt himself drawn to this one soul he was seeking, he let the faces slide past as they came into the soft illumination of the marble-floored and -walled lobby, on the lookout for that one face.

Each time a light-coloured female head appeared, he would study the face; true, it was possible she had changed her hair but he thought, for some reason, there would be this continuity. There were dozens, then scores, then hundreds, then thousands of people. The escalators poured people: the tower was emptying. And still by six-thirty she had not appeared. He wondered if he had missed her. A security guard approached. The guard asked if he could help: I am waiting for my daughter (he had no daughter). Would you like me to phone for her? He shook his head.

He waited. He could wait all night. She would never know he was here, that he had waited for her. The people came in a trickle now. At seven-thirty the escalators stopped. He walked outside. It was very cold, and he immediately began shivering. He wanted warmth. His thoughts went to the past; to his childhood in north London: there was nothing exceptional there. His life was a small circle he had drawn early on and in which he had lived ever since, except for some years abroad during National Service, a few years in prison for false accounting. He felt, in the darkness, some moment of yearning, of nearing something. Liverpool Street Station was bright, empty, and he descended to the underground.

His childhood. He remembered the circle of his family. And yet he had not replaced the affection he had received from his mother – his father did not return from the war and he remembered him only as a small, narrow shape (he could never see faces in memory) scented with something sharp he discovered years later was hair oil and which he now occasionally himself used – or from his sister (married, childless, dead). He had replaced it with nothing, in fact. That did not matter. No, it mattered, but that was not it: it was not the sense of loss this fact occasioned; the loss from his own life of a life he could have led: it was not the past subjunctive mood of his loss which he was looking for here, the *'could have been'*. Or if it was that, it was not that in melancholy, but in the sense of examination, of what other people were like, these other souls. The un-lived life is not worth living, is that what people said? And his life, in many respects, was un-lived. And it was too late now to live it. But this was not it. This was not what he was moving towards in his slow mind.

The train snaked through tunnels, under darkness sometimes of open sky, then of the system of the north where he rocked and rattled, and he looked at those around him: a man with thinning hair and a long coat, blinking innocently, a woman and a man holding hands, her face turned from his to the window, her reflection blooming there. A man in a suit, a

battered leather briefcase between his legs. A woman reading the free newspaper. Where were their lives going? Were there sorrows in their lives too? Yes. Of course.

The dining room at the Burlington. Pillared; white tablecloths. Some diners by the far windows. Me and Peter Skitkin. Six o'clock.

I made sure there was plenty of water, and we ordered drinks. Peter had his document case, I a battered satchel. My bag, of course, empty, his with stacks of cash. Peter nervous. I ordered brandy, Peter whisky. Peter slid across the table a fat envelope. Inside: four thousand. I put it in my pocket.

We sat quietly like that for an hour. I tried the non-existent parties we were to meet several times on my mobile. They were late, I said; they would be here soon. I asked Peter to watch my satchel, put it on my chair, and left. When I returned five minutes later, Peter visibly calmed. We continued waiting.

Consulting watches. Sipping drinks. More water poured. Then: Peter banging the table with an open palm. Looking behind him. Bent over the table, ruffled hair in his hands. I let the tension build.

It was an hour and forty minutes before Peter's discomfort took hold. I suggested he take a break. They would not be here until eight.

It is a very simple thing, to steal from someone. It is an issue of trust. Because what a person wants is to give trust. Or the type of person, anyway, that you must choose. This is what Peter Skitkin wants. Especially now. He wants to dredge from the mud of his heart, from the blood, guts of him – all those organs and vessels which substantiate his pain – from his insides, you understand, this trust. And to offer it to me like a shining sword. Because this will redeem him, renew him, salvage something from that wreck of himself. This is a car-crash of a man, you understand, brought to this point by no-one but himself (we all have, don't we, no-one to blame but ourselves?) But here it is, I realised, sitting there: I don't believe this at all. Because contemptuous as I was of Peter, and knowledgeable about my own fate, which will be either the result of the bulwarks of medical science giving out or, alternatively, a visit from my gambling friends, I believed something further, which I was moving towards in that most unlikely of settings, the dining room of the Burlington Hotel in Bloomsbury. But what that further thing was, that thing which I believed but did not know, remained shadowy and dim to me, like a shape in the dusk which has the contours of a figure one recognises.

Then two things happened at the same time. The first is that Peter decided that, yes, he would ease both nerves and bladder, and left in my care – which is what he wanted to do, I never asked him, I am without stain – his document case with thirty thousand pounds inside. (And if what Peter wanted was to give trust, the thirty grand is what I wanted, to save my own life if not my soul. To use a phrase Peter himself might use professionally: this is the outcome I was seeking.)

And the second thing that happened then, and this is the thing which led directly to my ruin, is that Lisa Skitkin appeared in the restaurant doorway.

I knew it was Lisa immediately. It was as if she was already present in my mind and her appearance simply corroborated something I had fore-known, as if I carried an imprint of her somewhere inside me. She was older than in the photo, perhaps heavier, but only slightly, and her hair had thinned a little. She was wearing a grey suit and carrying a briefcase. She scanned the restaurant. Peter had already seen her. He had stopped. I could see only his back.

Then she saw him. They went to each other. Let me correct any misconception arising from their meeting: this was no reconciliation or reunion (if there ever had been union in any true sense: that I do not know).

I am, if nothing else, a gambler. So I stayed where I was, didn't try to run. Lisa deals, for her work, in risk also: this is something we have in common; this is something we all have in common, isn't it? The risk of our lives, what we gamble with. And in fact, these two have gambled and both lost. And I have never gambled in some senses, and I have neither won nor lost: I have simply observed.

There was a kiss on the cheek, then she looked over his shoulder and said something. Peter turned. He was looking at me strangely now. I was smiling. They came towards me, moving between the tables. I stood. We were introduced. I shook Lisa's hand. We sat. There was quiet for what felt like a long time.

She let me speak a while. And I spoke quietly about the parties we were waiting for. Peter had his eyes on me. Some rationality had descended. He sat still, all that turbulence gone. And Lisa: also still, erect, hands on the tablecloth, fingers of one curled lightly round the lightly closed fist of the other, an attitude somewhere between prayer and power-holding. Her eyes blue. And I looked into her eyes. Very startling eyes; you could see how one would be taken by these eyes, and the way they held you with such attention; it was enough to have gone through all this, simply to have looked into those eyes. Well, perhaps.

And I explained the business proposition again. Her question: Have you seen the property, Pete? A silence, then Peter answered: No. See, this is unbelievable, isn't it, what a person will do to themselves? I smiled.

There was a tension between us. Because now there was some doubt in Peter. It had not quite taken hold, because Lisa had only just arrived; he still trusted me, was still holding onto his trust, not wanting to walk into humiliation (which he knew would need to happen before Lisa); but the anger was brewing; his squat frame was beginning to simmer, and soon he would boil. So I spoke.

'Do you think, Lisa, that Peter is making a terrible mistake?'

We held each other's eyes. There was a silence. A long silence. Her hands, curled, did not move; her body did not move. There was something tremendously powerful in this stillness. It was possible to see why she was so successful in work; possible, too, to see other things: that she had no need of Peter (perhaps never did), that she had already moved past him, that she was self-possessed and self-contained, and that the cause of their destruction, these two who spent part of their lives together, gave something important of themselves to each other, yes, gave their trust, was that sense of her measure and of his abandonment, that inequality, these two people messing up each other's lives because of or in spite of their care (love?) for each other. Because of, or in spite of?

And this is what I wanted to know. This is all I wanted to know. Not longing, or passion, or the loneliness of the lonely, but this alone: how two lives might come together, pry each other apart and do untold good and bad things to each other and then come away. And the image, suddenly, of two turtles on a beach came to me. Coupling. One riding the other. I do not know if turtles do make love like this – what sort of creatures are turtles: amphibians, yes? – but the clacking of those hard cases, like heavy dinner plates, and their slow coupling. It made me want to laugh. An epiphany: two turtles making love on a beach, which might well be an impossible thing that does not exist. But there you are: we are often touched by impossible images. and this is what I was looking for: this was my gamble. I smiled at them both.

I stood. Lisa could challenge me if she wished, and I would be carted off to prison a second time, to spend my retirement there, my last days, days of oblivion. It would be very simple. All she needed to do was speak. Peter was ready to explode. I lifted my satchel and put it on my chair.

'I will be back shortly.'

And I smiled at Lisa, and then at Peter, and walked around the table. Peter leaned back and put an arm on the chair-rest as if he was thinking about standing. Then he swallowed and breathed in as if he was going to speak. All it needed was a movement from Lisa. But as I said, what is life if there is no risk?

And I moved between tables, wondering if one of them would call me back. And neither did.

And now I am sitting somewhere off the map in a cold station café with seaweed-green wall tiles and a dim light in the ceiling with a plastic lampshade of vast circumference. And I have moved beyond the circle of my childhood, and my later life, that region of north London into which I was born and in which I have lived. And I am sound in body, although it leaks, has pain which is worse at this latitude and this season, and which is not helped by a cup of foul scalding tea the girl, who is leaning on the counter, poured a minute ago. A train goes by with a deep rumbling roar, and there are questions still unanswered.

And some of these questions are answerable, and some are not. What is love? I do not know. Did they know, Peter and Lisa? I do not know. Perhaps. That is as far as I can get.

I have to my name a little under four thousand pounds, the suit and coat I wear (which do not keep me warm), and the loss of the one city I knew where to live. And loss. A sense of loss which has replaced everything else: I think of my mother, my sister, even the dark shape of my father. And of Peter, and mostly of Lisa. Which brings me to a specific question that is answerable, which is why did Lisa turn up at the Burlington restaurant that evening, to ruin me, to force me on the run?

And the answer is that I phoned her at her work near Liverpool Street the afternoon of our meeting, and told her:

‘Peter Skitkin will make a terrible mistake this evening.’

I told her where to be and when. As I said, life is nothing if not risk.

Biographies

Isabel Ashdown lives and writes from the makeshift office of her Victorian home in West Sussex. She grew up in a provincial seaside village on the south coast of England, from which she now draws many of her creations, including her runner-up poem, 'Milk and Eggs'. The Bridport Prize is her first award for poetry.

Having spent 15 years working for companies such as Virgin and The Body Shop, Isabel left her job in senior management to pursue her literary ambitions. She is now in the final year of a creative writing degree at Chichester University, which boasts a number of previous Bridport winners amongst its staff. Isabel shares her life with her carpenter husband and two young children.

Zac Barker was born in 1978 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He was educated in France, England and US. He is unemployed.

Jon Bauer stumbled across his passion for short fiction two years ago while working as an advertising copywriter – secretly tapping away at stories during the lulls in his workload (and some of the busy times). Now a full-time writer, he lives in Melbourne with his imaginary wife and children. Has published *Sleepers Almanac 2007* (Australia and New Zealand). Email: jonbauer@hotmail.com

Katharine Braddick was born in Hertfordshire and grew up there and in Brussels. After studying at the universities of Warwick and Cambridge she moved to London, and now works at the Financial Services Authority. She has completed two novels, both unpublished, and also has an interest in film theory and criticism – she runs a blog, <http://takingcarltothepictures.blogspot.com/>, on popular film and Jungian theory. 'Cold Weather' is her first published fiction.

Helen Carr was born in Swansea 1951 and read English at University of Leeds '69-'72. She was a teacher in Steiner Waldorf Schools for several inspiring years and now lives in Carmarthenshire, where she teaches young adults with special needs in a Camphill community. 'I have written, intermittently, throughout my life. Over the past two years I have committed myself to writing regularly, and to sending my work out into the world to seek its fortune.'

Andrew Craigs was born at the east end of Hadrian's Wall in 1964. Since then, he has lived and spent time in North Wales, Bristol, Exeter, Canada and Eastern Europe before returning to live on the north-east coast. Most people call him Alfie, short for Alphabet, as his initials are A B C. He graduated in Drama from the University of Bangor and has spent the last twenty years working as a writer and director in theatre of various stripes. He has also worked as a lecturer in theatre devising and theatre history for numerous colleges in the South West. 'I have always written and collected stories and am currently working on a collection of interconnected short stories about sheets and a novel about washing.'

Elizabeth Dalton was born in New York City, but has lived in many parts of the United States, and also in France. She got a B.A., Honors in English, Phi Beta Kappa, from the University of California at Berkeley, and then studied in France on a Fulbright Scholarship. She returned to the U. S. and got a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. Until a few years ago she taught literature and creative writing in the English Department at Barnard College, the women's college affiliated with Columbia. She has had fiction and criticism in *The New Yorker*, *Partisan Review* and other publications. *Unconscious Structure in The Idiot*, a psychoanalytic study of the Dostoevsky novel, was published by Princeton University Press. 'I now live in Manhattan. My 27-year-old-son, Matthew, who is a journalist, lives in Brooklyn. Now that I am no longer teaching, I want to devote my time to writing, especially – with the encouragement of the Bridport Prize – to writing fiction.'

Claudia Daventry was born in London and read a lot of English books while she was supposed to be studying French and Spanish. After being at the same distinguished Oxford college as W.H. Auden (though not at the same time) and getting the same undistinguished degree result, it should have been clear that poetry was the way forward. However, she ignored these signs for far too long and worked instead as a copywriter, extra in a kung-fu movie, production-line worker and singer in a Catalan blues band. At the moment she lives in Amsterdam, where she writes, teaches, translates, runs after her children and performs her poetry. Her work has appeared in the Amsterdam-based *Versal International Literary Magazine*. In the UK her writing has also appeared in the *Independent* and *Scotsman*.

Sarah Davies was born in New Brighton, Wirral 'the greatest seaside resort of the future that never was'. From this she gained her love of the

British seaside, the sea and fairgrounds. 'I started writing when I was about 6 – my first poem was recited proudly in front of my grandparents and featured a velvet-pawed tiger who tortured a rabbit and killed a hare – cheery stuff! I was always in love with the power of words.'

She went on to study English at Edinburgh University, then Communications at London College of Printing and ended up working in Multimedia and Learning design. In her 20s she stopped writing, but started again a few years ago and now it is an important part of her life. She lives in Bedford with her long-term partner Roy and baby daughter Jenny Miranda. At the moment, writing and more importantly editing as much as she'd like is 'pretty difficult, though my goal in the next year is to hone and submit as much as I can for publication'. 'Snakeskin' was published by *Stride*.

Jonathan Hadwen lives in Brisbane, Australia. Dividing his time between attending art classes, working as a web-developer for a university, and writing, Jon's life is devoted to his family, his girlfriend and their little black dog. A poem will be published in the 2006 anthology of entries into the Henry Kendall Poetry Award.

Mischa Hiller grew up in Durham, London, Beirut, Dar El-Salaam and Brighton. He has written one novel based on his Beirut experiences and is completing a second, a thriller. He has also adapted his first novel into a screenplay. He has written only one short story, but now plans to write more. Most of the time he is a self-employed IT consultant so that he can pay the mortgage, play poker with his friends, and keep his boys in trainers. He lives in Cambridge with his family and a slightly whiffy dog.

Greg Hrbek is a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop. His first novel, *The Hindenburg Crashes Nightly*, has been published in the US, France, and Norway. His short fiction and non-fiction has appeared in *Harper's* ('Green World', December 1999), *Salmagundi* ('Frannycam.net/diary', Winter/Spring 2004) and the *Idaho Review* ('Summer of the Lawn Moths' Vol. VII, 2006). He lives with his wife and son in the Northern Mariana Islands, and teaches part of the year at Skidmore College in Upstate New York.

Christopher James has won the Ledbury and Bridport Poetry Prizes and in 2002 was a recipient of an Eric Gregory award from the Society of Authors. His first collection, *The Invention of Butterfly* was launched this

year and is available from www.raggedraven.co.uk 'James' ability to develop an original idea, character or place is remarkable, and he writes on the sure foundation of a genuine talent,' wrote Will Daunt in *Envoi 144*. New poems have also appeared in *Smiths Knoll*, *Poetry Nottingham* and *The Rialto*.

Cynthia Kitchen is married with one son and has been writing and having poetry published since the 1980s. She is a primary school teacher by profession but now semi-retired and draws her inspiration from Morecambe Bay, Cumbria. She has been published in a range of magazines, and has been a prize-winner and runner-up in various competition anthologies including Manchester, Chester, Lancaster, Ver Poets Open Competition and *Staple Anthology*. She has been featured on BBC Radio Merseyside and her first collection is due from Headland Publications in 2007.

Elizabeth Koch graduated from Princeton in 1999 and received her MFA in creative writing from The New School in New York City in 2004, thesis pending. Since moving to New York in the fall of '99, she has worked as an assistant editor for *Elle* magazine, an editor/writer for digitalcity.com, a researcher/writer for John Stossel and other news journalists, and has published fiction, non-fiction, and humour pieces in a variety of publications. In 2004 she covered the Martha Stewart trial for *Reason* magazine, and for the last two years has worked as a freelance editor for novelists, short fiction writers, and non-fiction authors, including John Stossel. She is currently working on a collection of short fiction, and is the Executive Editor of a literary humour publication called *Opium*. She has been published in *The New York Observer*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Elle* magazine, *Reason* magazine, *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*, *Yankee Potroast*, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Hobart*, *Small Spiral Notebook online*, and *Orchid Lit* magazine. She lives in San Francisco.

Richard Lambert was born in London in 1971 and has lived in Bristol for 12 years. He completed his second novel this summer and wants to find a literary agent. A poem was published in the anthology *The Poetry Cure* published by Bloodaxe in 2005, and poems in magazines, including *Poetry Review*, *The Rialto*, and *The Shop*. A short story was published in the magazine *Tears in the Fence* in 2005. He is currently working on his third novel.

Shaun Levin's collection of short stories, *A Year of Two Summers*, was published in 2005. A novella, *Seven Sweet Things*, was published in 2003.

His short stories appear in anthologies as diverse as *Modern South African Stories*, *Does the Sun Rise Over Dagenham*, *Gay Times Book of Short Stories*, and *The Slow Mirror: New Fiction by Jewish Writers*. He has been writer-in-residence in a school, theatre, bookshop, and on the island of Tasmania. He is the editor of *Chroma: A Queer Literary Journal*.

Devon McC Jackson was born in Nashville, USA. 'I was more or less raised in the Southwest (Albuquerque), went to college in the East (Columbia University). I have an MFA in fiction from The New School (class of 1998). I'm a freelance writer and have written for *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *Vanity Fair* and *Outside* magazine, among other newspapers and magazines.' He has had short stories published in *The Mississippi Review* and *The Chicago Review*, and has a poem coming out soon in *Nimrod*.

Annie McDowall is forty nine. She lives in south London with her partner, two cats, 'and a garden full of loose-bowelled foxes'. She wrote her first novella at the age of eight. *The Adventures of Bolomokey Island* has yet to be published. Creative writing became overshadowed by the constraints of university dissertations and business writing. Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, a workshop with V G Lee in York, and evening classes with Leone Ross at the City Lit in London sparked Annie's imagination, and now writing is an important part of her life. Her short story 'Going, Going ...' was published on the PitWit website in 2006. Annie is chief executive of a voluntary organisation in south London.

John Okrent was born and raised in Worthington, MA, and then raised some more in New York, NY. 'Now I live in Brooklyn and work as a caregiver at a daycare centre in Manhattan. I am in the process of applying to medical school.' His entry in the Bridport competition was his first attempt to publish his work.

Gerry Ryan is a graduate of Bath Spa University College with a first class honours degree in English and Creative Writing. She has been Writer in Residence at HMP Rye Hill since October 2005 and Creative Writing tutor for the Open College of Arts. A first novel nears completion. 'I spend most of my time writing in a caravan in the middle of nowhere.'

Anthony Snider, a native of North Carolina, lives in Wilmington, NC, where he works for the NC Coastal Reserve managing research reserves

on barrier islands. He completed his MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College in July 2006. He formerly held a faculty position teaching environmental policy at the University of Minnesota which he left to focus on poetry. He is currently putting the finishing touches to his first book-length collection of poems. He spends his spare time kayaking in salt marshes.

Kerry Swash, since graduating from London College of Communications with an MA in Screenwriting, has had interest in two of her feature scripts. Hoping to find more time to write she recently moved to SW France where she is involved in setting up a rural studio and workshop space designed to encourage opportunity and interest in les beaux arts.

Joel M. Toledo is a faculty member at the English Department of Miriam College in Quezon City, Philippines. Among a number of awards, he won first prize for the Poetry in English category of the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in 2005 for his collection, *What Little I Know of Luminosity* and came second in the same category in 2004 for the collection, *Literature and Other Poems*. His poems have appeared in various local publications in the Philippines. He graduated with a Masters Degree in Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines, where he also took up B.A. English (Creative Writing) and B.A. Communication (Journalism). He plays the drums for the local rock band, Los Chupacabras. He is 34 years old and living in Quezon City, Philippines with his wife April and children Red and Moira. He has a published novelette for young adults entitled *Pedro and the Lifeforce* (Giraffe Books, 1997).

Janet Ward has been writing poems since seventh grade, when the Beats swept her off her feet and she saw the light of language for the first time. She went on to study with Ron Koertge, Stephen Ratcliffe and Chana Bloch. Frank O Hara, e.e.cummings, the city of New York, John Donne, jazz, Emily Dickinson, and Samuel Beckett continue to influence her work. In 2002, she entered a competition for the first time. Of over 6,000 entries, she was one of three winners and subsequently appeared at an event held at Symphony Space in New York City, where she read her poem and shared the stage with Gerald Stern, Sharon Olds, Paul Muldoon and Nikki Giovanni, who personally selected her poem, 'change', as the adult winner of the 10th Anniversary Poetry-In-Motion Contest, co-sponsored by the Poetry Society of America and the MTA. In 2003, 'change' appeared on New York City buses and subways. She continues to give

Biographies

readings in New York City, where she works as an actress and a secretary. Her poem, 'nonetogram', appears in the liner notes of the Alan Ferber Nonet jazz album, *Scenes From An Exit Row*, released in June 2005 on Fresh Sound Records.

Deborah Willis grew up in Calgary, Alberta, and moved to British Columbia to study at the University of Victoria. She recently completed a degree in literature and currently works as a bookseller in Victoria, Canada's almost-British city. She has published fiction in the Canadian literary journals *Event Magazine* and *Grain Magazine* and her story 'Vanishing' won this year's fiction contest in *Prism International*.

This anthology offers readers a taste of the best of new writing: the winners of the **BRIDPORT PRIZE 2006** – one of the toughest, and richest, open writing competitions in the English language. The **26** finest short stories and poems have been chosen from thousands of entries.



Poetry Judge: Lavinia Greenlaw, has published three books of poems, and two novels. Her awards include an Eric Gregory Award, Forward Prize for best single poem and a NESTA fellowship. She lectures at Goldsmiths College, University of London and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

"A poem has to thrill or disturb me, ideally both. I like a poem to take risks, and to be as imaginatively alive as it is technically disciplined. I look for attention to the minutiae of language and authenticity of experience".



Short Story Judge: Jane Gardam's first book for adults won both the David Higham Prize for Fiction and the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize. Subsequent collections of short stories have won the Katherine Mansfield Award and the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award (1995). Jane also writes novels and in 1999 was awarded the Heywood Hill Literary Prize in recognition of a distinguished literary career. "Old Filth" was shortlisted for the Orange Prize 2005. Jane Gardam is a member of PEN and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Enter the **BRIDPORT PRIZE 2007** online:

www.bridportprize.org.uk



The Bridport Prize fundraises
for Bridport Arts Centre
Charity No. 1069780

online PDF

£5

Cover photograph: Ian Robins
Design: Harriet Laurie
or www.outpostproductions.co.uk