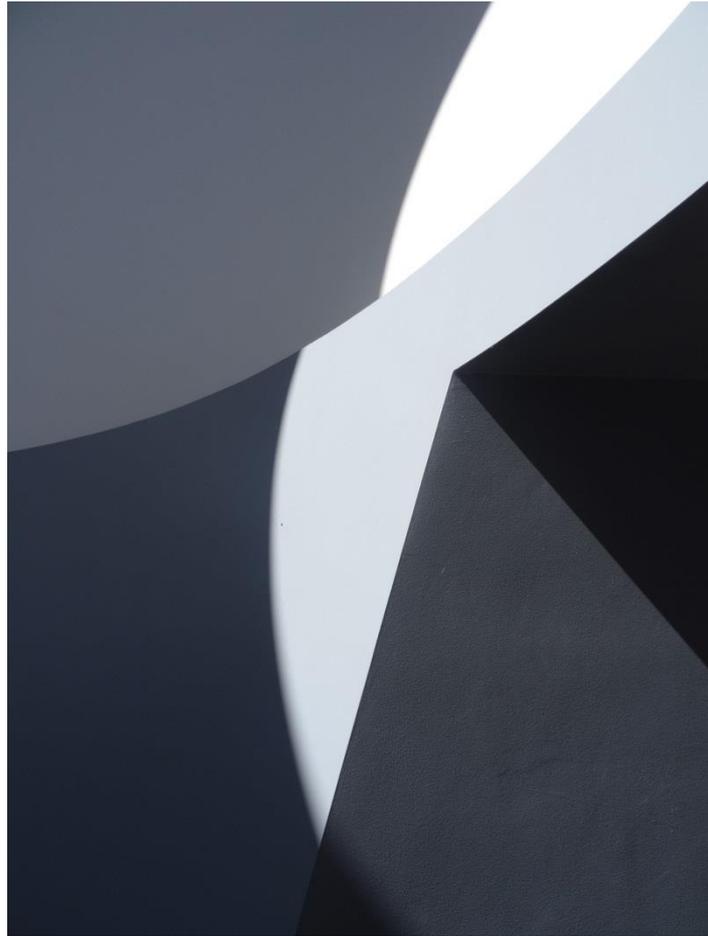


Meniscus



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About Meniscus

Meniscus is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

The title of the journal was the result of a visit made by two of the editors to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where James Turrell’s extraordinary installation, ‘Within without’ (2010), led them to think about how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact. In particular, they were struck by the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water’s containment, seems to analogise the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility that is found in much good writing.

Australian Copyright Agency

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Editorial

One of the very satisfying aspects of publishing a literary journal is in seeing how the various, selected contributions seem to gain additional verve when taking their place alongside related—or contrasting—offerings. In this edition, this was aided by the serendipitous arrival of a number of poignant works, markedly different in style and voice, many raising questions about contemporary values within differing cultures. This suggested a textural approach when it came to sequencing the contributions.

Poems, when first written, generally have other poems for company, whereas here they are placed alongside short stories, sometimes letting their first acquaintances sit elsewhere within the same publication. For the editors, it is a difficult decision to split an author's contributions in this way (and of course, if an author wishes to contribute a deliberate sequence of work, we respect that intent), but it is we believe a good test of their individual strengths. And positioning poetry and prose as we have done provides an interesting view of the contrasting strategies of each form.

Meniscus is published by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), and many of its contributions come from those based in creative writing programs in higher education. For the work produced in that arena to gain a significant audience is part of our purpose, but we are equally pleased to be attracting submissions from outside of academia. The mix is important, and feels true to the world in which writers operate. Also, although the editors are all now based in Australia and New Zealand, the journal is firmly established as international, with many submissions coming from the UK in particular, thanks to the close connections between AAWP and NAWPE, the National Association of Writers in Education. Sometimes a gathering of work from opposite sides of the world takes time to strike up a relationship. Sometimes urging that relationship seems like a risk but we believe it is highly worthwhile.

Indeed, issues of openness and tension were intrinsic to the choice of the journal's title, which relates to the work of James Turrell. The retrospective exhibition of his work in Canberra continues until June this year, and it has been the privilege of one of our editors, new to Australia, to visit that extraordinary body of work and so gain further insight into the *Meniscus* concept.

As ever, we are indebted to the Australian Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund for enabling us to pay fees to all contributors, whose work we are pleased to introduce.

Jen Webb, Gail Pittaway, Paul Munden and Paul Hetherington, with Elizabeth Colbert

Meniscus Editors

Heidi Williamson

Non-printing blue

No one is interested in your bones
my dear. Please tidy them away—
someone could trip. Feature
your best side. Like
this. Now we're content.

A poem the length of a tweet

Samuel Wagan Watson

Gulag wind

In memory of Liam and Frankie Davison ... Flight MHI7

Between 1932 and 1933 an estimated 7 million people were murdered or perished in Stalin's concentration camps in the Ukraine. And almost 80% of the region's intellectuals were handed death sentences, a majority without trial ...

Executioners are forensic raconteurs; their charges' last words and breaths are always deleted or embellished. Their quills are equally primed with an antidote for poison. The word 'genocide' is not in their vocabulary and confession is not in their creed. Those of us who can see through the veils of propaganda suddenly believe in ghosts, the endless reams of victim impact statements recorded in ectoplasm have always been there. We need to teach our children that monsters do not wait under their beds at night, but in the shadows of the world's upper echelons, where fact cannot escape an arranged marriage to fiction. Dark wings await their masters' approval for surface to air insanity. The arrival and departure lounge in a killing field has no discriminatory features. *Was that a final boarding call?* I am adamant that if you listen, you can hear Solzhenitsyn today more than yesterday in the summer skies over Ukraine, storm-front echoes of a lingering Gulag wind...

Liz Hambrick

Night bus

Sean usually made the 03:16 no problem but he had left his mobile in his locker at work and gone back for it. After that he had to leg it back to the bus stop, past the car body shop, the store front accountants, the halal grocery, and the three Victorian row houses, reaching the Lower Richmond Road just as the N22 pulled away.

He raised his face to the gods, his limbs gangling while his body gave up the momentum of the sprint. 'Fuck.'

In the bus shelter he sat with his elbows on his knees, eyes down through the clasp of his hands to the pavement littered below with gum and Transport For London tickets. He ground his foot over a still-smouldering dog end, put a cigarette in his mouth, pulled a Bic out of his pocket and spun the cog of the lighter with his gloved thumb, once, twice, three times before a lick of flame appeared. The pull of the flame through the night air brought the cigarette to life. Sean squinted through the smoke. Lifting his coat he felt for his new lighter, ran his fingers over the shape of it in the pocket of his jeans. He flipped the spent Bic towards the litter bin. It bounced off the side and rattled on the pavement, where he left it. A puff of flour exploded from a crease in his denim and landed in a flurry on his shoes. The flour always got everywhere. Up his nose, down his shirt, inside the gap at his ankle between sock and shoe. He probably had half a pound of it in his insides.

Last night when he got home Cheryl took a deep sniff and murmured, as he climbed in to spoon her. 'Cinnamon rolls.' He took her earlobe in his mouth. She turned towards him and then he was on top of her in seconds flat, the duvet in a tent over both their heads, feathers warming his back and her warming the front. She cushioned him just right. He had never been one for skinny, the notion of bone against bone.

In the shelter he began to blow smoke rings. Smoke rose from his lungs into the holding pen of his mouth, which he kept open in a small zero and from where, by precise clicks of his jawbone, he propelled circles into the street light, where they turned the pasty yellow of bread pulled too soon from the oven.

Across the road another figure huddled in another bus shelter. The N22 would whisk her away, south across Putney Bridge and the inky swell of the Thames towards Fulham, before his bus arrived to carry him west to Wandsworth Common. But both he and the bundle had a good half hour to wait. It would be too early, never mind too late, for duvet tents by the time he got home.

The smoke rings expanded before dissipating into the drizzle. On a damp night they stayed together longer. It was one of the pleasures of smoking, blowing rings, one of those minor things he was good at, the way some people are good at cracking their knuckles or raising one eyebrow. He learned it way back, after school with Cam Evans in front of the bathroom mirror before his parents got home. It passed the time. But these days he could only smoke outdoors. Cheryl wouldn't allow it and no one wanted ash in their dough, although he once worked with a man called Lug who knifed open the burlap sacks of flour and yeast over the huge mixing bowls with a Marlboro between his lips at all times.

The night before last it was Cheryl who had done the ear nibbling. He fell like a rock into bed after a longer than usual shift but she woke up ready to go. She was like that, Cheryl, and sometimes when he picked her up from the bank, saw her through the plate glass smiling softly at a customer, he found himself getting hard just thinking of what she'd done with him the night before. No one would ever guess. Not from her knee length skirt and nude stockings a shade too dark, her church lady navy blue pumps. If you looked deeper, though, maybe you could find something in those fawn eyes, something in the solid way she held herself, that let on that she did him good and hard and often.

He closed his left eye and narrowed his right to look through one of the smoke rings, an ellipsis framed around the form horizontal on the bench at the bus stop opposite.

He didn't see the man approach the shelter from his left. He sensed him before he heard the footsteps or felt the impact of his weight on the steel of the bench. Sean eyed the shoes first. Work boots. Not that it meant much these days. People wore work boots whether they were working or not. Just not splattered with blood, usually. As soon as he raised his eyes to the man's face he clocked where the blood had come from. Dark red and purple globs, recently congealed, stuck to a gash that had been sealed like body art over his right eye.

The trouble with the night bus was, all kinds relied on it.

'You should see the other guy', the man said, not looking at Sean. Sean took a quick airy drag on his cigarette and cupped it in his hand. He let the smoke swirl in his inflated lungs.

'Seven', said the man.

Sean exhaled. Here we go. A live one. Seven brides for seven brothers? Seven sisters? Seven stitches?

'Give us a light, mate.'

Sean would have said he didn't have one, but obviously he did. He pulled out the new Bic. The man scissored a roll-up between two fingers and put it in his mouth, cupping his hands around the new flame. He had LOVE tattooed on his four right knuckles. HATE flickered on his left. A hospital band circled the wrist below it. DOB 31 JANUARY 1983. Sean calculated twenty-nine years. He would have guessed closer to thirty-nine. Bolts of scar tissue ran down the inside of the wrist between the name band and the cuff of the jean jacket.

It was buttoned unevenly, revealing in an unshapely frame the C of the FCUK logo on the hoodie. 'Cheers.'

Sean drew on his cigarette, leaned his shoulders back against the Perspex wall of the shelter. The man exhaled and leaned back too. 'Cheers', he said again. They sat there, puffing. Across the street two women tottered on heels out of the Duke's Head. They held onto each other, swaying from the ankles, until they reached the shelter opposite. In silhouette they stood for a moment like night herons over the bundle on the bench then tottered to the side of the shelter and leaned in unison against that.

The man began to list to one side. His arm fell limp and the ash of his cigarette grew and teetered until it flaked off. As if the falling of it upset his equilibrium, the man started with a jump, and as if remembering the cigarette, he drew on it, resurrecting the ember on the end.

'Seven kids', he said.

Sean flicked his cigarette onto the ground, where its glow fizzled. He stomped on it.

'Yeah?'

'Seven fucking kids I got somewhere mate.'

It took a fine balance to keep the talk going without inviting a life story but to ignore it unleashed the anger in some of these types. He ignored the man's line anyway. What was he supposed to say? No joke, tell me more, mate. Love to hear all about it. I'm all ears, me.

'I said I've got seven kids.'

Sean crossed his ankle over his knee.

'You fucking deaf or something?'

Sean had a bag of iced buns at his side. When he popped them in the bag at the end of his shift they had been warm and expertly risen with uniform, tiny pockets of air throughout the dough. Icing blanketed the top, its sweet little granules almost but not quite dissolved in moisture, and a cherry, like a nipple any school kid could tell you, nestled at the top, waiting for tongue and teeth. He had picked them out for Cheryl because she loved them.

He offered the bag to the man. 'Iced bun?' Anything for a quiet life.

The man dug his arm down past the hospital band into the bag.

He pulled out a bun, formed his mouth into a cavern and stuffed it inside without examining it, biting off as much as would fit. 'They're all in care now. All of them.' Sean should have picked the bun out for him. He shouldn't have offered him one in the first place.

The man made great sloppy chewing sounds, uttering a muffled something through the substance that he had chewed back into something like dough again. After he swallowed he looked surprised, as if he had only just considered the size of the portion now in his esophagus. He took a drag off his cigarette. Sean wanted to toss the remaining bun in the litter bin.

Iced buns would be on the schedule again Thursday. Sean would bring some home then. Cheryl would stay asleep when he got into bed this morning anyway. Three mornings ago he had woken up to get ready for his shift and found her beside the bed, just home from the bank, with her navy blue nylon tights in mid-peel down around her knees. Only she could make a hygienic cotton gusset a turn on. She sat down on the bed, smiling at him, then pulled off both shoes and rolled the tights off her feet, which were clean and pink and faintly moist. He helped her out of her knickers and dropped them, beige and sensible, on the floor, but he left her button-down shirt and suit jacket on and they had done it like that.

'Me and Tiff had three together.' There was a catch in his voice.

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. Tia, Royce, and Jaren. They said they weren't being taking proper care of. Tiff nearly lost her mind.' He took a bite of the iced bun and chewed it slowly. 'Fucking cunts.' Bits of dough and spit landed on his thighs.

Sean pulled out his phone, looked at the time. Fifteen more minutes.

The third time with Cheryl, when they were finished and they lay all spent and happy in a film of sweat and whatnot, in a half-sleep Sean blurted out, 'We'll have great-looking kids.' Cheryl smiled with her eyes closed.

For a whole year after that neither of them mentioned the remark until a week or so ago when they were face to face and she looked at him full on from the pillow and said, 'Your eyes.'

'Your mouth', he said back.

'Before that it was me and Samantha's. They took them away the minute they were born. Got the court order every time before Sam was seven months gone. All she got was one quick look at them. One by one, before her milk dried up they took them. All four of them.'

‘Four of them’, said Sean. The lights of the N67 came into view, headed in the opposite direction. It was early. Or late. What sort of people had four kids taken away?

‘It was the beat that did it. Sam never would have fed it to her unborn babies. She tried not to. But the beat got her. Won in the end. You ever wondered why they call it devil drug, mate? Wonder no more.’

Sean had never wondered.

The bus approached the shelter across the street, night people slumped within a few of its lit squares. It stopped, its brakes wheezing, and stood for a minute or two before the driver honked the horn. The sound echoed across the street, bouncing off the shop windows, punching its way into the recesses of doorways and back out again. The pneumatics of the closing door hissed and the bus pulled away. The women in heels were gone. The bundle too.

The man finished the bun, sucked the tip of each finger, and belched. Sean turned his head away from the stink of the yeast, from the bun and the evening’s beer.

‘You got any kids?’

‘No kids.’ Sean began a game of Free Flow.

He had met Cheryl at the bank, struck up a conversation about the weather each time he went to deposit his paycheck. She wasn’t his usual type, but in the shower in the mornings he found himself thinking about her voice. Something in her laughter when they talked about the endless rain. He began to pay attention to her skin, its creamy translucence, its plump lack of wrinkles. The rounded hollow at the base of her shortish neck, the wrist exposed beneath the cuff of her blouse buttoned just a bit tight, and her fingers, short and tapered and fluttering so that they reminded him of baby birds in their nakedness. Soon in the shower after his shift he could hear her cry, see her perched on the counter behind the teller’s opening, her skirt and his trousers crumpled on his shoes, her hair stuck to the sweat on her face, her legs around him, thighs toppling stacks of coins.

‘I had an iPhone once.’

‘This isn’t an iPhone.’

‘It got nicked.’

It was probably nicked in the first place. Sean put his phone away. He pulled out another cigarette, held it in his mouth while he offered the pack to the man. Keep him quiet. Shut him up. He lit the man’s cigarette first. He looked at Sean through the flame with pinhead pupils in the centre of irises the color of the North Sea. He coughed and the cigarette fell from his mouth to the ground. He coughed slightly at first and then with great mounding barks, no breaths in between, the cough of entrenched illness, of an overload of neglect. The hacking stopped long enough for him to draw in air. Then it started again. He brought his arms into his chest and bent double. He needed thumping on the back or something.

Sean suspended a widespread palm over the man’s shoulder blades, waiting for an intake of breath. None came. He lowered his hand. He kept it there motionless, no pats, no rubs, just the presence of his palm on the back, the rattle of lungs vibrating beneath the jean jacket and the FCUK hoodie and the muscle, tendons, tissue, blood, bone, all that under there.

The man leaned over the side of the bench and spat. Sean withdrew his hand. He hacked away until his lungs delivered again onto the pavement. In the light of the shelter the amount of blood in the sputum stood out. It lay amongst the gum and the dog ends and the miscellaneous like a beached jellyfish.

The man wrapped his arms around his body. He leaned sideways onto the bench, away from Sean, the crease behind one knee gripping the edge of the seat. Exhaustion eased some of the pain in his face. Eyes open and focused somewhere just beyond the limits of the shelter, he let out a moan. Tears ran down his cheeks. From coughing.

Sean got up from the shelter. He would walk to the next stop, run again if he had to, if he saw the bus coming behind him. The guy was diseased. A drain on the system. A serial breeder. Who has seven kids taken away? One, maybe two. But not seven.

He walked fifty yards or so. He stopped to look back for any sign of the bus. The graffiti on the side of the shelter blocked his view of the man inside it. Sean stood facing the road, the sodium lamplight streaked like mustard across the damp macadam, mixing with the reds and blues and whites of the fluorescence of estate agents and high street coffee shops.

A kid himself when he bred the first one, more than likely.

An Audi slid by, the colors in the street licking its paintwork. Rich tossers been out clubbing.

He probably got pulled into drugs the way those people do. Simple prey for the big money. Some things are inevitable. Nothing he could do about it.

Another car screeched by with a hiss of tyre against wet asphalt. Joy riders in a souped-up Focus. One of its occupants lowered a rear window and hurled out a beer can. It landed and rolled a short way. Before the guy retracted his arm, he shoved his first two fingers up at Sean. Bass tones thumped through Sean's ears. Like fists in his head.

Behind him, his bus rounded the corner. The next stop was too far. If he missed this one he'd lose the will to live. He began to run back to the shelter.

He made it just as the driver closed the door. The man hadn't moved. Sean gestured and the driver opened the door for him. 'Bus is here', he said to the man. Sean boarded, held his Oyster card toward the scanner. The driver nodded. He was a regular. It was always him or the guy with the sleeves and gauges. Sean pulled his card back.

'Hang on, mate. Give us a minute', Sean said.

The driver nodded again, looked beyond Sean to the man on the bench. 'Yeah. Make it quick, alright?'

Sean stepped off the bus.

'Oy. Bus is here.' He put his hand on the man's upper arm and shook lightly. No reaction. He bent over to his ear, exaggerated against the stubble of his hair. 'The bus is here,' he said, louder. He put his hand on the man's back, checking for a rise and fall. He felt the man's forehead, careful to avoid the gash. The man shuddered down the length of his bones.

The driver closed the door slightly then opened it again. A signal to go. Sean waved at him to go ahead. The doors closed and the bus pulled away. Sean sat down, picked up the man's wrist, and read the name on the hospital band.

Ian C. Smith

Gallery retrospective

The entire width of this bat-haunted house
extended when short-range plans seemed long,
lies between piled books, papers, and where
I rest my head and shall probably die.

Next to my bed which sometimes collapsed,
forcing us to sheepishly reassemble it,
a full-length window overlooks a glory vine
heraldic when autumn light first appears.

A club armchair hulks before another window
where I mull over narratives in quietude.
Behind the chair in which I sometimes doze
dead insects fade to husks in slanting light.

Between these places where I sit and lie
I shuffle past an exhibition of pictures,
prints, artwork from distant junior schooldays,
photos where a graduation replaced a wedding.

I regularly rummaged through a jar,
assorted screws and hooks for pictures.
Now a gauze of dust greys their rainbow splendour
in cold silence measured by the clock's pulse.

On visits to art galleries I stared into the past,
imagining myself into sumptuous stories
pictures whispered, their price so high,
small dramas of days beyond paint, gilded frames.

Tina Cole

How to hold silence

First,
let the fan of your fingers
open, feel your breath
expand, face muscles loosen
as the span of silence settles
white like a quilt
with feather light lining.

Watch the mass
of people
passing,
each in a unique place,
you could not know their story
even if you looked them
in the face and said
hello. You would not

know nor understand
the wet sand weight
of the things
they are carrying.

The extraordinary flat effort
it takes to appear '*normal*',
to wrestle down fear,
oh,
the loneliness of that.

Beyond the city
traffic whistles by,
geese rush the air,
hold silence
and you may hear
rain on dry earth,
the birth of stories
on fluttering lips,
a muffled sigh.

Owen Bullock

consumption

falling through turns of lips
floodbanks
your prophecy is a cartoon

hang bread and roses
by a famous column
to acknowledge a wilting deity
the one you studied half your life
to write a tome about

cycle
through manbags of the world
to find a goatee and a frown

don't bump the table
the table will rock
and the moment will end

agree with wind power
how else to fill the gap—
someone asked a question
teachers ask questions

gaslines
getting longer
power lines gone underground

the casting competition
held up traffic—
they ran out of fish

she'll bring more sugar
the waitress
you deserve more
so you'll get more
what you deserve
is important

baked

casual sounding

half a dozen bionic bakers

equality, standing

on a rung the right height

implicit acceptance warranted

the idea of a thing

makes the thing, but of no-

thing-ness one can say ...

and leave it there

for the street-sweeper

to not pick up

a solution

40 per cent wholemeal

Sarah Barr

Reservoir

The massive dam wall reminds me of the strength
of water and how it can destroy a landscape
as well as make it. The reservoir is low today.

Sometimes it's easier for us to draw closer
when we're walking but in the end
it's what we don't talk about that stays with me.

These rows of fallen limbs and trunks of trees
covered in emerald moss and grey-green lichen
are like people stretched out in sleep.

A sort of light-headedness tempts me to lie down
in the bracken with them even though the Dartmoor
air is clean and mild and fills my lungs.

Not talking about my Dad and how he came here
and later was brought in a wheelchair
to sit at these sturdy wooden tables and benches

we skirt so quickly. Not talking about
the whole Devon thing, a brother's anger,
how the farmhouse was sold at a knock-down price.

If we had to, we could step our way
along the ledge on the far side of the dam wall,
as long as we were careful not to look down.

David McVey

A year's hoard

The two weeks after New Year were the time for family gatherings. Mum and Dad would get home from work, we'd get tea out of the way quickly and then run out for the bus to Kilsyth or Bishopbriggs and meet up with everyone else in whichever auntie and uncle's house the party was happening.

The children were packed off into another room to play, but often we just listened to the laughing and loud voices coming from next door, and the music playing on the record player—*Dance to My Ten Guitars* and *Do the Hucklebuck*. Then when things were getting lively, we were able to sneak in and sup some forgotten drinks in abandoned glasses.

At one party I heard angry voices next door and I wondered if it was Mum and Dad. Later my cousin Jennifer stole into the living room and returned with a tiny bottle of cloudy yellow stuff she'd managed to slip away with.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Advocaat,' she said, 'It's made from eggs, so it's good for ye.'

Only Jennifer and I would touch the bottle, so she had a couple of mouthfuls and then I finished it. It was lovely, like a creamy milkshake but better. For a while I felt fine but then I got dizzy and confused and ran rubber-legged for the toilet. From the lobby I could hear Elvis singing *Old Shep* in the living room and smell the whisky and lager and cigarette smoke. I collapsed in front of the toilet and spewed and spewed.

*

In February we went on a school trip to Edinburgh Zoo. The bus parked on the road behind the school and we all piled in. There was a paper bag on each seat because we were going by the new motorway and the driver wouldn't be able to stop if any of us were sick. All the way boys were making sick noises and there was farting and people singing 'Stop the bus I need a wee-wee' and by the time we were coming to Edinburgh some weak kids had been sick into their bags and the bus was beginning to smell.

At the zoo we saw antelopes and lions and tigers and buffalo and crocodiles. Then some of us decided to go to the top of the hill behind the zoo. There was some light snow on the ground and we tramped in it and threw snowballs at trees and each other.

Then I stopped and picked up something that had just fallen out of a tree. A long, thin, rough-skinned pine cone, of a kind I hadn't seen before. I looked at it and stroked it in wonder.

'Come on', shouted one of the others, 'let's go back and see the penguins!'

*

Wullie Seaton's granny died a few weeks later, at the end of March. We didn't know her much; she had lived with them just a few weeks, since she'd not been able to look after herself. I was getting ready for school next day and when I was dressed I opened the curtains in my bedroom and Mum made me shut them again. When I asked why she said, 'Because auld Mrs Seaton's deid, that's why.'

When I went outside, sure enough, all the curtains in the upper windows of every house in the street were closed, like a line of people with their eyes shut.

My Mum and Dad went to the funeral and afterwards for the sausage rolls and tea at the Co-operative Hall. ‘They had a funeral programme and everything’, said Dad, ‘and black napkins at the purvey. That’s the way to go.’

*

It was sunny during the Easter holidays, no April showers, though Mum kept warning me to watch out for rain when I ran off down to the burn. The burn flooded slow and brown through an old rubbish-covered field bursting with new grass. There were sticklebacks and minnows and wee caddis cases made out of weed and gravel. Sometimes you could catch water beetles and even freshwater shrimps; in the marshy pools in the fields there were wiggling millions of tadpoles.

Once I thrust in my net and pulled out something hard and delicate. I took it home and put it in the fishbowl with some minnows and water beetles and a pond skater. It threw out a feather of limb and jerked through the water like a tiny submarine, and attached itself to the glass wall.

‘A pond snail?’ said my dad, ‘Don’t see many of them about. It’ll die soon, though.’

But it lived for two weeks, longer than most of the other creatures in the bowl.

*

My Grandad took me to the Junior Cup semi-final in May. On our way back he made us get off the bus a couple of stops early. ‘We’ll walk home by the old railway line’, he said. He had been a train driver and my Dad had been a signaller at our local station, but it had been shut years before when everyone had said bad words about Beeching. Just last year the railway had been completely shut and not even goods trains rattled through town anymore. Dad now travelled into Glasgow to work in a signal box there.

It was a Friday night, still and sunny, and beams of sunlight came through the trees above the cutting where we crunched along the ballast, past odd bits of rail and sleeper that hadn’t been removed yet. Everywhere there were abandoned things, stuff you wanted to pick up.

‘How are yer Mum and Dad getting on?’ said my Grandad, suddenly.

‘All right, I think’, I said, but I didn’t really know what he meant.

We reached the old station, shuttered, covered in spray-painted writing, windows smashed, the old canopy sagging and broken. A sign still pointed to the ticket office and the exit. ‘Cooncil never put up much of a fight’, said Grandad to Mum when we got home, ‘not with McDonald the car salesman and Duncan the haulage contractor on the transport committee.’ Then he put his head closer to Mum’s and whispered—though I could still hear—‘Are ye all right, hen?’

*

Our team had reached the Junior Cup Final and we made the trip to Hampden in bright June sunshine. By five o’clock I was red raw (‘you should have stood in the shade!’ my Mum told me when I got home) and weary and fed up after watching the team lose 3–1. We got home off the bus and started playing football ourselves in the park. ‘We’ll win it next year’, said Eddie.

I felt sad but school would be finished soon and so there was plenty to look forward to. As I was thinking, Eddie lifted a ball high for me to take on the head but I was miles away and it walloped me on the side of the face making the sunburn sting and Eddie and the others all laughed.

Then I went home for my tea. Dad had gone to the game on a bus with his domino club mates and wasn't back yet. 'Will they have stopped for their tea somewhere?' I asked.

'Aye, they'll have stopped somewhere all right', said Mum, slamming my plate of sausage and chips on the table.

*

During the school holidays we always went on bus runs from the town centre. The week of the Glasgow Fair there were always loads to choose from. Mum and me went over to the car park the buses left from and at 11 o'clock there was one leaving for Largs, another for Ayr and another for Callander. We were going to Largs.

Mum tried to smile but she didn't say much and when I asked why Dad wasn't coming with us she looked away, as if seeing something interesting through the window. We arrived in Largs and got a hot dog each from a stand and went round the mini-zoo. 'He's over a hundred years old, that tortoise', said Mum, but I didn't believe her. We had ice creams in Nardini's and then sat looking at the water for a while. There were buses and cars parked everywhere in the town and crowds of people, a fresh surge every time a train came in. A few yards from us a fisherman sat, cap sitting squinty on his head, and a cigarette pushed in his bearded mouth. He was cutting, lashing and tidying up the end of a rope, and I watched him work as I sat on the rough beach pebbles and felt them in my hand. Mum just lit a cigarette and said nothing.

*

The week before I went back to school my Mum sent me on a kids' holiday run by the Gospel Hall up the road. We slept in big rooms with loads of beds in an old army camp in Aberfoyle. There were massive pine trees and a burn running through the site and there were loads of girls there too. We went for walks and played in burns and visited a castle, and in the evening we had Bible talks and played games and sometimes went out again for football but the midges were terrible so we came back in.

Near the end of the week Francis, the church's youth leader, took me aside and asked if I was all right. I had been sitting on the front step of the hut whittling a stick and I was still holding it. 'Look, Andrew', he said, 'your Mum asked me to speak to you before you came home. You know your Mum and Dad haven't been getting along too well, lately?'

I carried on whittling the stick.

'Well, your Dad is going to live somewhere else for a while. Hopefully not for long and we'll do everything we can to help your parents back together. Do you understand what I'm saying, Andrew?'

*

I went to stay with Dad for the September weekend. He was living with a mate of his in Glasgow. 'It's much handier for my work', he said. 'I can be there in five minutes.'

On the Saturday afternoon we went to see Partick Thistle. They were his team; because he came from Maryhill. He only came to live in Kirkie when he was moved there with the railway. The game was all right but outside the ground afterwards he got speaking to some of his pals and explained, 'Naw, ah cannae come out the night, I've got the lad wi me, eh?' His mates kept on at him, though.

I was tired after the football and everything and so Dad gave me a Biggles book to read and said I should go to my bed early. So I went up not long after eight, read for a bit and fell asleep fairly soon. But I woke up again when I heard Dad and his pal creeping quietly out the front door.

*

October was the month of more dark and heavy rain and your breath rising like smoke wherever you went. The fireworks had started and bad boys were throwing bangers into the road and jumping jacks into people's gardens. At Hallowe'en we went guising and then into the church hall for the Junior BB Party. I didn't enjoy it because big Davie MacLean was there even though he hardly came to BB.

At a quiet bit he grabbed me and whispered, 'Your faither left ye, ya wee fud!' 'Shut up!' I said and he kicked me and gave me a dead leg.

At the end of the night we had a pot of mashed potatoes that had money hidden in it. I had one of the first spoonfuls and I got a sixpence, bright and silver and shiny after I freed it from its wax paper jacket.

*

On Guy Fawkes Night I went to the bonfire at the back of the church hall. We'd been collecting old bits of wood and chairs and tables and cradles for weeks and now the pile soared and tottered. After tea I ran all the way there; the fire was already lit and golden light licked the faces of all the people round it. We had some hot chocolate and biscuits and crisps and then crowded right up to the back of the church car park where a couple of the youth leaders set off fireworks. Rockets hissed into the air, catherine wheels fizzed and sparked and floodlights glowed green and orange and made our faces coloured and strange.

The adults there smiled at me and exchanged looks with each other. On the way back down the street, I stopped to watch a huge rocket flare and fizzle into the sky and explode in a fountain of colour. For a while you could still see it, just a dull orange cinder, plummeting earthwards. I started walking again, and then the rocket clattered onto the road beside me, a sad, charred stump on a stick.

When I arrived back at the house, Mum had been crying.

*

I spent Christmas with Mum and then a day or two after that with my Dad. He didn't seem very interested in me this time and was unshaved and dirty-looking. He didn't want to go to the Partick Thistle game even though they were at home.

When I was back at Mum's, on Hogmanay, I took out my hoard of the year. It was just a cardboard box that once held a pair of boots but now I'd put in it all the things I'd collected during the year, one for each month.

A small empty bottle that had once held advocaat,
a long, slender pine cone,
a black paper napkin,
an empty water-snail shell,
a heavy iron joint from a piece of railway track,
a Junior Cup Final programme,
a beach pebble,
a whittled stick,
a Biggles book,
a shiny sixpence,
a stub of a skyrocket.

To these I added the bottle of whisky I'd swiped from Dad's house. Tomorrow I'd empty the whisky down the toilet, clean the bottle, and keep it with the rest of the hoard.

Willo Drummond

Some words for migratory birds

I remember last year on the flyway
just before the fourth stopover
you taught me to read star-maps
under the blush of sea-sprayed moonlight

Direction was magnetic
then: I-you-she-he-we
moved shore-to-shore
without the burden of

knowing. Flying in tight
formation, hearts
driven with
intention

[Now we witness the birth of a
white-bellied sea-eagle on a two inch screen]

My hand—my limb—reaches for
the familiar feel of your wing-tip
while you, preoccupied, testing the waters
of transformation, almost miss the cue

Thing is, the slightest shift in alkalinity
sets the whole thing in motion. We must
conserve our energy, for there's just
so far to go. Here

listen to my voice:
The world is waiting for you
and your flight-notes. What
will you make of them?

Turn
face north-ward
embark

Christina Thatcher

Anticipation

I sat in the car
and waited
for whatever
you were doing
to finish.

You told me
if I was good
I could have
my own pack
of red gum
from the store.

For hours
I imagined
the taste
of cinnamon
that never came.

Alexandra McLeavy

Marked

I fell in love with a boy who had an identical birthmark to me. We met outside the charcoal chicken shop in town. We had a friend of a friend in common. It all happened so fast: he smiled at me and something shifted.

We smoked a cigarette and complained that nothing ever happened. We ordered hot chips and walked down to the creek behind the train station. The others smoked bongos while we sat together in the branches of a willow and twisted the skin around our knees to compare the blots: small, matching, milk-coffee coloured hearts hidden in the creases.

‘I’m special,’ he said with a smile. ‘*Chosen*, or something.’

‘I’m boring’, I replied. ‘Boringly so. This is my precious oddity.’

‘You’re wrong’, he said. ‘You could be queen.’

We moved into a little flat together in the city in the middle of summer, when the days stretched languorously beneath the blue sky. In the evenings, the sun fell to the west in a blaze of brilliant, hibiscus light. Steeples, wires and the mirror windows of apartment blocks shimmered on the distant horizon. I held his head of wild, wiry head in the crook of my arm and told him about things that happened hundreds of years ago.

‘My dad had a “thing” for my mum’, he said. *Lost*. It didn’t last. He beat her blue with a vacuum cleaner, they got divorced and then they went to war over me. But I *love* you.’

We watched *Bonnie and Clyde*, starring Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty. We kissed until my chin chafed and my body felt like a river. The next morning I found a note in my bag.

Dear Bonnie,

There are things which boyfriends do to their girlfriends that I have not yet done to you. For reasons I cannot yet explain these things are difficult for me to do, no matter how much I want to do them to you.

I am a eighteen-year-old virgin (how pathetic).

I really, really want you.

Please do not doubt it. Please do not lose patience.

I want you so bad that I dream about undressing you while climbing blank walls.

From, Clyde

We walked to Circular Quay and watched tourists milling about the ankles of mime artists. Beneath a palm outside the MCA we smoked a joint and lolled on the grass. Inside, we saw a retrospective of Julie Rrap. He gazed into her eyes and I scrutinised her bare, pearlescent thighs.

'I'm a feminist', he said.

'So am I', I said.

Later, we danced in our fluorescent kitchenette, our bodies pressed hard to one another.

When the pasta boiled over, we prised ourselves apart and I saw the pink, slit tip of his penis peeping above the waistband of his pants. I was girlish. I giggled flippantly and coloured.

But he was graceful and he said, 'This is just another way that I can show you how I love you.'

'I think that if one of us had AIDS the other one would have caught it by now', he said, lying on his side in our cramped single bed. 'It takes 10,000 litres of saliva to share.'

On New Year's Eve we filled our pockets with blue Mitsubishis and yellow Corvettes.

We caught the 470 into the city with a bunch of friends.

His pupils were big and silvery black. I saw myself reflected in them, against the splinter of fireworks.

'I want you to be the mother of my children', he said.

That was how I learned about my womb. I felt the kick inside.

At the bottom of the sandstone stairs leading up to the Rocks I vomited the second pill.

Everything slowed and seemed sad. He smoothed the hair on my head and twisted what was loose into a rope and held it neat against my buckled spine. Even then, feeling nothing, I still believed in love.

He laid his journals out before me. We sat cross-legged on the carpet. He sipped coffee and smoked cigarette after cigarette. I read every etching, every word. I devoured him, and when I was done I wanted more.

Outside the night was heavy and black.

'I want to tell you—I understand—' I said. I was afraid to say more.

'Tell me what?' His skin, jaundiced in the dull lamplight. 'Tell me.'

'I don't know, I—'

'Baby, tell me.'

His eyes were full of hope. I didn't want to disappoint him. I felt like he'd discovered me and I didn't know what to do with that. I was raw.

'I know about men, too', I said. 'I know.'

Did I want to make him jealous? To counsel him? Or pity him?

Did I want drama? To be his mother?

Did I want to debase what we shared?

No: I only wanted him to know everything. I only wanted to be special.

But he looked at me as if I'd desecrated a goddess and left an effigy in her place.

'He *raped* you.'

'It wasn't right. But it wasn't rape', I said. 'He was like a brother to me. He loved me, in his own way.'

'If that's what love is then I know nothing about love', he said.

Mario Petrucci

Hafez 361

(born 14th century, Shiraz, Iran)

Your slow shape, the way You move, blows hearts to chaff.
To each: Your *No*. A loving planet tilts towards You, jilted.

Sometimes, in separation, I release a sigh—almost a laugh.
Othertimes, You draw the arrow from my heart's dark quiver.

How to explain, to beasts that lie in wait, the ruby of those lips?
The worldly adore dull rainbows, quip ignorance at purer hues.

Somewhere, Your beauty increases. Moon glares, but is no match:
moon is extinguishable, exhausts itself; must wane as well as wax.

Heart lost, soul relinquished—again. Am I Your only dwelling
for gloom? I'm bankrupt. Why not send the tax collector as well?

Reader: if I ever set toe or fingertip in God's walled enclosure,
I'll grip, for holy hell, the Beloved hem—let go of this world.

Notes:

Hafez (also 'Hafiz') is a celebrated 14th century Persian mystic poet. Ubiquitous in Iran, he has also been hugely influential in the west. I am preparing a selection of 'faithfully loose' translations from his oeuvre, using one of the classic sources as principal guide: the prose translations of *The Divan-i-Hafiz* by Lieut-Col H Wilberforce Clarke (Calcutta, 1891). I find just about everything in Hafez to be profoundly relevant to the violent sleepwalking that characterises much of our current human crisis. Hafez maintains his potency across time because his sensibility has mapped itself out on the timeless canvas of the soul's necessary migration. However, few translations of Hafez have matched the original's easy beauty, rich musicality and suggestive complexity. I hope to reanimate, for the English reader, all of the moral clarity and sensual abundance of this spiritual and literary master.

Ian C Smith

Incognito in Seattle

‘When a man thinks of his past he looks at the ground.
When he thinks of his future he looks at the sky.’
(Aristotle)

We are dropped at the airport car park early,
schedules being tricky for hitch-hikers,
edgy, what with somebody else’s tickets,
and our first visit when our visas expired.
We were declared, and felt like, aliens.
We watch, wait for the check in to crowd up.

Runways through glass, dreamlike, almost soundproof,
that faint siren a taxiing jet’s whine.
Time creeps in dusty light, the concourse busier.
Then our flight pushes in, top of the board.
We fly to Houston, then London. Or not.
Or what? Led away by security?

This flight goes on to Paris in autumn
but we are dead broke and travel weary,
craving shelter, our makeshift English base.
We could be detained, turned back, deported.
This plan’s dependence on luck is dodgy,
like hitching from Labrador to Alaska.

With our last dollars we bought the cheap tickets
from a couple in a Vancouver hostel
whose double-barrelled surname included ours.
If challenged, the best we can come up with:
we both use shorter, preferred names, sounds soft.
I feel like a spy with nowhere left to hide.

You were racked by illness during the flight,
a reaction brought on by my hubris,
far beneath us, the Atlantic’s black waves,
under all that pressure, minute crustaceans.
Chastened, safe, I still feared a wasted life.
Now I edit fading news from an armchair.

Christine Stanton

Down to the ponds

The Visitor comes once a fortnight. She comes to see The Conditions. ‘Just popped by to check The Conditions’, she says to Her. Then she says ‘HELLO’, to me, very loudly. The Visitor smiles at me, but not with her eyes, her eyes are busy watching ... checking. ‘She still not talking I see?’ the Visitor says to Her. Her smiles at the Visitor. Her smiles at me too, but only when the Visitor is there. Other times Her shows her teeth at me.

When the Visitor is not there Her says ‘People come here from all the four corners of the world. We take them in. All we ask in return is a bit of gratitude. I took you in. I could have had children of my own, but I took you in instead. Because I am a good person. Everyone says so. They say “It takes a very big heart to do what you’re doing. It takes sacrifice”. But I don’t know how much longer I can keep it up. You are a trial. You spoil things. Do you hear? Do you hear even if you do not speak? I know you do hear because the doctors say so. I like the small back room not to smell. It smells of you. It smells of lions and monkeys. Do people eat monkey brains in your country? They say you go mad if you do. Did you eat monkey brains? They say if you eat monkey brains that first you will go mad and then you will die. I say you would have to be mad to eat monkey brains in the first place. Here, here is your dinner. Eat it. Eat it all up. Soft isn’t it, and pale. It is soft, pale sheep’s brains! Ha ha! They are small, like your brains. It’s from a sheep because the butcher does not have monkey brains. This is a civilised country where we do not sell monkey brains!’

One morning Her stares at my head. She sucks her teeth and sighs. ‘Oh that dreadful hair. Doormat hair to wipe your boots on. There’s only one way to control that hair. It has to go.’

Her shaves my hair off, leaving only enough to make the shape of a cross; one thick line across from ear to ear and one thick line from the nape to the middle of my forehead.

‘There’, she says, ‘It covers that funny little hollow in your head very nicely. I sometimes wonder what’s missing from there. How come you’ve got a hollow on the top of your head? How did that get there? What’s missing from there?’

The people I came here with did not have papers for me, they said I was their daughter, but I wasn’t. They found me alive amongst the corpses in a village they were passing through on the way to the camp. I already had the hollow in the top of my head. They took me with them in case I was really a spirit in infant form and would curse them for leaving me behind. Now they are sure I am a spirit, but one that will not let them stay in this country.

‘Where are her papers?’ say the people in the Office. ‘She must have papers. Everyone must have papers. We need papers to know who she is. No papers, no ID.’

So the people who brought me said 'We will give her away. She is not ours so we should not keep her, we have daughters of our own, neither of them have a hollow at the back of the head.'

'Never mind the hollow, that's an injury, we have no problem with the hollow, only who she is. You can't simply decide to call her another daughter and then dump her. Not in this country.' The people who brought me were afraid they would be sent back because I had no papers. So they gave me to the people in the Office.

Then the people in the Office gave me to Her. Her said she wanted, me, oh so much, to care for. To give a home. So the people in the Office let me stay with Her.

Now have papers. I have lots of papers. I collect them everyday, from where they have fallen in the street. These are my papers. The people in the Office can have some of those papers, then I can go back to the family who brought me here with their own daughters. I keep the papers in my trolley. It is a beautiful trolley. It makes a noise in its wheels when it moves. I got it from a shop. You can just take them. Sometimes people try to tell me this is not my trolley. They say I must give it back to the shop. But the shop is not a person or spirit, so it cannot have trolleys for its own. This is my trolley. These are my papers.

Once a week Her takes me to The Centre. I have friend there. A Chinese girl, who also does not speak, but still she tells me things. Her father has a shop where he chops cooked duck at an open window out the front, so people will smell it and want to buy. I like to watch him. How fast his hands go, how deep he cuts and right through. He cuts the duck across, not down sideways like Her cuts meat. Her saw him do it once; she said 'That is wrong, but what can you expect of the Chinese?' There are silver flashes like light in water as the blade falls faster and faster. How neat the edges are. One duck, two ducks, three. He stops before four. My friend tells me four is a sorry number for the Chinese. But it is not bad for me. Four is the number of things that give us good life; earth, air, fire, water. Each time the man finishes three ducks he puts down the cleaver, pushes the meat onto a tray and turns around to hand the tray to another man. That is when I take the cleaver. I like the cleaver. I want it to be mine. The man turns back and looks at the place where he left the cleaver. He looks at me, but shrugs and leans over the counter and looks up and down the street. He says something in Chinese. I think he is asking a question, but I don't understand Chinese and I don't speak, so I just shake my head.

Sometimes I walk down our street to the rail yards where they fix the trains. The first time I was sitting outside on the curb with a watermelon in my trolley. It was a hot day so I balanced the melon on the child seat part of the trolley and sliced into it with the cleaver.

I was eating the beautiful neat slice a when some rail yards workmen came along. One of them said 'Can I have a bite, sweetheart? I'll pay you.' He grinned and winked and another men nudged him and whispered something to him.

'Oh, sorry', he said. 'I meant a piece of melon.'

I stuck my finger in the cut melon to wet it and wrote '25' on the concrete path.

'Okay', said the man. He gave me twenty-five cents. I cut him a piece of melon.

I did not tell Her. The next week I bought more melons and stood outside the rail yards. More men bought my melon slices. I like to show how well I can cut as the Chinese do, across, not along.

I got six dollars fifty that day. Someone must have been watching, because Her found out and so did the Visitor. They talked together and the Visitor talked to the rail yards people and they decided that it was all right for me to sell fruit to the workers so long as I did it inside the rail yards, not on the footpath outside. I liked that. I could take a short cut across the yards to the end of the street I lived in. It was still a long way and Her said I had to be careful in case Something Fell On me because there was building work in the yards. Every night when I got home. Her said 'So, nothing has fallen on you yet?' This does not make her happy. Her world is not right for her.

I would like to make everything in the world all right for everyone again. I think I can do that: but first I need gifts for every spirit that looks after life. One for the spirit of earth, which must go under the earth so that animals cannot bring it out. One for the spirit of air, which must be held up high so that the air can whisk it away to wherever it pleases. One for the spirit of fire, which must be completely devoured by fire so it becomes heat and light itself. One for the spirit of water, which must stay under the water long enough to teach the water to swim and flow so it will stay sweet.

I can do that.

So, I make four gifts, one for each corner of the world, to receive earth, air, fire, water. Each wrapped in an orange plastic bag folded around and around. I could use black bags but I like orange better.

One morning I am at the rail yards, sitting in the new shed.

'Come away from the concrete, love', says a railwayman. 'It's still fresh and wet, and very thick because it has to support heavy machines once it's dry. You wouldn't want to stumble and fall into it. It's a bugger to clean off if it gets on you and you wouldn't want to sink right into it. Didn't you see the guys working up the back of the shed the other day? Didn't you realise that they'd be moving on down this end to lay the floor for the new sheds? Oh, look! They've left this section unsmoothed, they're a sloppy bunch.' He takes a plank lying nearby and pulls it across the wet concrete, evening out the wet surface.

'There', he says. He crouches and looks at it sideways, then grunts and stands up.

'There's still quite a big bump', he says. 'But I won't tell if you don't and no one will notice in this corner of the world. Eh? Not in this little corner of the world.'

Now the earth parcel is safe in its place, I must go up to the mountains. On the train.

I have to leave the trolley at the station. I push it under the metal stairs that lead up to the walkway over the railway line that goes from one side of the track to the other. No one will touch it there. Everyone knows it is mine.

A woman on the station puts her face close to mine. She says, 'Does your carer know you're getting on a train by yourself?' I can see some kindness in her eyes so I want to please her; I want to let her know Her's coming with me; so I nod.

On the way to the mountains, I see the Ponds for the first time, from the train window. Water so still it could be solid, it could be dead. Long-legged birds standing very still in it. I must remember where to find it again, because it is the right kind of water. I am pleased.

I got off the train where the mountains seemed highest. Where the trees bend and thrash in the wind. Where there is so much air because the mountains are so close to the sky. I waited for the right station, one where not many people get off; a station with many tall trees around it. I walked down a path beside the station and found a tree I liked, very tall, leaning out over a rocky valley; a tree you would hurry past if you did not have business with it. I climbed it easily, my legs wrapped around it, inching up until I reach the right branch, where I wedged the gift between branch and trunk.

On the train ride back I sat where I could get a good look at the Ponds. Bare grey tree trunks forlorn in the black water. Thick tufts of ragged water grasses. The birds were still there.

When I got off the train to get my trolley, I could smell the wet smoke, though it was several blocks away. I didn't go closer, but two neighbours of Her saw me.

'Oh my God, look at you! Face all sooty, hair singed. Oh, you poor little thing ... We thought ... we thought *you* too...'

'No, don't tell her yet! Break it gently.'

'Wait! Where are you going? Wait here!'

I do not need to wait now the fire spirit has what it needs. I have to go right away, down to the Ponds.

I walk all the rest of the day along many streets to get there, always keeping the sun to my right and staying close to the sound of trains. The last way to the Ponds is a big road, with many trees on the side where I know the Ponds are. As I get closer, some boys on bikes ride up behind me, they shout and point and laugh.

'Look! A supermarket trolley. A loony black chick with a supermarket trolley. That's an offence, chick. Did you know that's an offence? To take them out of a store car park? Dumb chick!'

I step off the road and into the trees. The boys get off their bikes and follow me, saying many bad words. I can smell dampness amongst the trees. I can feel softness where I tread. The ground pulls at my feet. Every shoe mark I make fills with water. The boys keep coming behind me.

I can hear the cries of water birds now. I see the reeds at the edge of the Ponds.

I cannot push the trolley any further. It sticks in the sucking ground.

Four boys. Four. Four the bad number for some people. Four is a small number. I am not small. My neck is long, my breasts have come quickly, I grow taller every day. I am bigger than the Chinese, so it would have to be a bigger number to frighten me. Maybe eight. Yes, eight would be unlucky for me, but here, now, there are only four.

I lean into the trolley to pick up the cleaver. The boys are there too quickly. They surround me. One of them grabs my wrist and digs his fingernails into the soft inside, making my hand open. He snatches the cleaver. Two others hold me while another takes the last parcel out of the trolley.

'Have you brought us a present then? To help the party along?'

The boy with the cleaver starts slashing at my beautiful parcel. I howl loud so the water spirit will know its offering is being stolen.

'Oh man', says one of the boys. 'Check that animal yell. This should be a great night!'

'And later it can wash itself off in the Ponds.' They laugh again.

The slasher-boy pulls aside the covering of the parcel.

‘Let’s see what’ve you got ... ’

He drops the cleaver. He says many bad words. He starts to run, like an old man, the wet ground tugging on his shoes. The others stare at my parcel, then they start to run too, all old men.

They will never come back here. Four is a bad number for them ...

I re-wrap the parcel as well as I can; it doesn’t matter now I am so close to the Ponds, but I want to make it mine again.

At the edge of the silver-black water, I slide it in. It sinks slowly, with only a few bubbles, until it is out of sight. A train rushes past on the line above the Ponds. The lights are on inside carriages because it is almost dark now. The trees around me seem to close in as if to crowd me into the water too, but I will never be harmed now because the four corners of the world are as they are meant to be.

Good.

Helen L Moore

Climate adaptation, #2

The Sun presses down with many hands—
we are pig iron smelted in the furnace; Trafalgar
Square bakes like Tahrir Square without its people.
And we have slowly adapted—come out at night
when it's cooler, stroll the canals fashioned
by the uprisings of the Thames. Little Venice
has spread; we're the Venice of the North
now the original has gone. And there's no choice
but to be in what's left of Europe—Mother
Earth has moored humanity together at her table,
and she's at the centre of all our decisions.
From our boat, I watch the river swimming
with the gibbous Moon; we use her light to sow
our seeds, and harvest every month when she dies.
We live by lunulations—have become silvery,
left-handed humans, who see their shadows;
and feminine in ways that men and women
had forgotten how to be. My Beloved & I
have taken rooms in a Moon Palace—we enjoy
the circularity of life inside the straw-bale towers
with our fine lunar gardens out on the roof. At dusk
the neighbourhood collective meets to plan
the night's work. The scent of jasmine
sweetens the air; in the dark I've heightened senses
for finding all our herbs & medicines.
Like our planet, we're slowly convalescing.
To celebrate, my guild of astronomers has polished
Aluna—our tidal-powered Moon clock may be copied
by surviving cities all around the world.

Geoffrey Heptonstall

A map of the world

She reads in the silence of reading,
Easily mistaken for penitence.
There is a room set apart
Where supplicants seek solitude.
Here she may find a change of fortune
When he speaks to her.
The voice is quite clear,
At times nervous, but often bold.
She sees at once his style,
Catching his smile and seriousness.

In the reading room is a globe,
Ancient and imperfect.
More is now known
Of the world than before.
The dangers are no less,
Even as ships sail into harbour.
What other women there are
In distant, dark places:
Of this she dare not wonder.
He has signed his love for her.

A door in the corner opens.
No one comes through.
Her eyes survey the dark
Of every low lit recess.
All she dare do is whisper.
There is no reply
But a sound resembling sea waves.
The globe at her touch turns slowly.
His letter falls from its reader's hand.
The journey she makes has begun.

John Irving Clarke

Listening to owls on Christmas Eve

Twenty years since
the owl on Christmas morning
stopped us in our muddy track,

since we set back the rip of festive paper,
heartfelt gratitudes
and hope-you-like-its.

No one about those unkempt fields,
the outbuildings in their renovation stasis,
just us, holding in the grey light

the look-at-me disdainful flight,
the brook-no-argument stance,
our suspended celebration,

the grace and power in quartering land
the studied pose on crumbling brick,
command.

Now we seal a double decade
with rituals shaped by death,
separation cloaked in promise

and sleeplessness on Christmas Eve,
when two owls connect
across a purple sky,

their long range communication,
their call and response confirmation,
I'm doing fine, how are you

how are you.

Heather Richardson

Outbound/Inbound

Outbound

The queue for Starbucks at the airport always looked longer than it really was, because no one wanted to stand too close to anyone else, just in case they were a suicide bomber. So the line that looked like it might have ten people in it was actually only four people long, plus a bit of exploding room. Chell took her place at the end of the queue. At least nobody would think she was a suicide bomber, because she'd left Ray in charge of their hand luggage, and her purse was only little, not big enough for a homemade device. Chell looked at the fancy buns displayed behind glass on the counter. They always tried to make them sound so virtuous. All the ingredients seemed to be organic this or Fair Trade that. As if that would make any difference to your fat cells. Maybe it would though. It was probably better to be organically obese.

She jumped when she realised there was someone standing very close to her. It was a guy with red hair—no, not red, more auburn. Could men be auburn? It didn't seem right some how. He looked at her intently, and she turned quickly back to the Fair Trade chocolate brownies. She shuffled up the queue and gave her order to the Starbucks girl.

The red-haired man got his order before hers arrived, because he only wanted an Americano, and she'd ordered two Caramel Café Lattes, and they always took ages. He lifted his coffee and looked at her again before walking away. No milk or sugar. Very sophisticated.

By the time she got served the man had done a circuit of Departures and was walking past Starbucks again, sipping at his Americano. He stared at her, harder this time. His eyes were really dark. She wished she'd checked what colour they were when he'd been up close, but she hadn't. She always forgot to look properly that way.

Ray was talking to a woman with a baby when she got back to him. Chell handed him his coffee and sat down. Ray smiled over to her in that way that made her feel anxious. 'Isn't he cute?' Ray said, nodding at the baby.

'Lovely', Chell agreed, without looking at the child. She took a sneaky peek at the mum instead. The poor woman seemed seriously spooked.

'I was just saying to his mummy, he's a lot like our Donny was when he was that age, don't you think?'

'Mmm', Chell said. The baby's mum looked all around, as if she hoped someone might rescue her. Chell guessed she'd have moved seats, if she hadn't had so much baby paraphernalia with her.

'He's with his nana and papa while we're away', Ray went on, offering his finger to the baby. The mother flinched as the child wrapped its own little fingers around Ray's. 'It's so important to have a bit of quality time with your partner, don't you think?'

The woman pulled the baby away from Ray and set him into his pushchair.

'You off then?' said Ray.

'I think my flight's been called', the woman mumbled, and picked up all her bags, hooking them crosswise over her shoulders so that she ended up loaded down on both sides, like one of those Spanish donkeys. As she pushed the baby away Chell saw the red-haired man walk past. He'd finished his coffee by the looks of things. As he went by he stared at her again. Ray leaned back in his seat and sucked the foamed milk off the top of his latte. 'Nice baby', he said. 'I asked her where she was flying to, and she said Liverpool, so I said that was where we were going as well, and that we'd try to get sat beside her on the plane, in case she needed a hand.'

'You've got to stop doing that Ray.'

'Doing what?'

'Pretending we've got a child. Saying we're going to Liverpool when we're going to Berlin. Lying really.'

'It's just a laugh.'

'No. It's weird. I mean, I think it makes you seem like a bit of a psychopath.'

'You're too straight.'

'She thought you were weird. That baby's mother.'

Ray shrugged and drank some more of his coffee. The red-haired man came past again. How many times was that now?

'You see that red-haired bloke?' she whispered.

Ray looked around. 'The one with the fancy laptop bag? Yeah, I see him.'

'But no, the thing is, he keeps on walking past us, giving me funny looks.'

'You mean like get-yer-kit off looks?'

'Yeah.' Chell watched as the red-haired man did another circuit of Departures.

He began walking back towards them. She nudged Ray. 'Here he comes. You watch.'

The man walked past them, eyes fixed on the Departure monitors. Chell felt a dip of disappointment, and then, just when he was nearly away, he glanced over at her. His eyes looked all sort of ... aroused. And he was a bit red in the face, but that might just have been his complexion. 'Well?' she said to Ray. 'What do you think?'

Ray nodded. 'Probably.' He poked the wooden stick at the froth in his cardboard coffee cup and then looked straight at her, eyes all bright with challenge. 'Would you then?'

'Him? Yeah. You know me.'

Inbound

This particular mini-break hadn't been a success. The couple in the room next door had spent a lot of time shagging in that enthusiastic way Europeans seemed to have. Chell knew it had depressed Ray. It was all a bit too real. He was still in a mood when they got to the airport.

They headed straight for security, because it took so bloody long these days. Up ahead there was a party of pre-teen boys and a couple of exhausted looking women. One of the boys was carrying a huge furry pink toy fish. It was easily five feet long. 'Here', Ray said nudging her. 'Do you think they've booked a seat for the fish?'

'You'd have thought they'd have checked it in as hold luggage.'

Ray looked at her as if she'd said something monstrous. 'You can't put a sensitive fish like that in the hold. It's tropical. Needs looking after.'

Chell knew she should say something back, play her part like she normally did, but she was too tired. She'd had a mini-break's worth of him sulking, and now he wanted her back in character. Just like that.

They were still stuck in the security line when the final call sign appeared on the Departures screen. As soon as they got through Chell started trotting through the airport towards their gate. Ray lagged behind, stopping and looking at a news stand, so that she had to stop and wait for him. 'They'll not fly off without us', he said, picking up a German TV listings magazine.

'I'm going, right?'

Ray shrugged.

Chell ran in the direction of the gate, down a flight of stairs and into a long corridor. She could see the huge pink fish up ahead, bobbing along as it went. The fish must be on the same flight as them, along with all those little boys and the two women. Maybe a school party. God, she hoped Ray wouldn't get talking to them on the plane.

At the end of the corridor people had stopped running and were forming themselves into another queue. Chell joined the end of it. After about ten minutes they still hadn't moved. She looked back down the corridor. There was Ray, sauntering along, tapping a rolled up newspaper against his leg as he walked. 'Told you there was no rush', he said as he caught up with her.

'What paper did you get?'

He held up the newspaper. It was in a language Chell didn't recognise. Not English, that was for sure. Not even German. Russian? 'Okay', she said.

Something was bothering the man in front of them. He was making all those little twitchy movements that people make when they're getting agitated; when what they really want is for someone to notice, and say, 'Is everything all right?'

But no one was taking notice, unless you counted Chell, and she didn't think she was the sort of person he was after. He wanted someone in authority. The nearest he got was a shockingly fat girl with a walkie-talkie. She kept appearing at the front of the queue, looking at her clipboard, and talking into her walkie-talkie with a very serious look on her face. Then she'd slip off into that mysterious nirvana beyond the top of the queue and they'd all shuffle around a bit and fold their arms and sigh.

Then, at last, walkie-talkie girl decided she should walk along the length of the queue. The twitching man noticed. Chell saw the twitching increase, and then, as walkie-talkie girl got nearer, he became very still, like a tiger preparing itself for a pounce. 'Excuse me', he said, in a voice that didn't sound used to being listened to.

'Yes sir', said walkie-talkie girl. She was able to do that thing with her eyes, Chell noticed, so that she managed to look as if she might actually be dead, even though she was talking. Chell envied her that talent.

Twitching man pointed up the queue at the big furry fish. 'How come that got through security?' he said.

'I don't know sir. You'd have to ask them. I work for the airline, not for security.'

'They confiscated my mouthwash', twitching man said. His face was very red now, and he was trembling slightly, the way her mum's old pressure cooker used to. 'It was 125mls, they said. Broke the rules, they said. It was half empty. No more than 75mls in it. 80mls max. But that didn't matter, they said. It was the bottle size that mattered, they said.'

Chell noticed that Ray was listening too. He leaned forward and tapped the man on the shoulder. Chell felt a bit sick.

‘Do you know what?’ Ray said. Twitching man and walkie-talkie girl both looked at him. ‘It would sound a lot better if you swore.’

Twitching man frowned, as if someone had told him something beyond his understanding. ‘Pardon?’ he said.

‘You want a few fucks in there’, Ray said. ‘Give it a bit more impact. Like this; “Broke the fucking rules, they said.” Don’t you think that sounds better? Stronger?’

‘There’s no need for that sort of language sir’, walkie-talkie girl said.

‘But I’m not saying it. I’m suggesting it. It was in inverted commas.’ Ray raised both his hands and waggled the first two fingers to illustrate.

Twitching man turned back to walkie-talkie girl. ‘That fish’, he said, pointing at it, ‘could be stuffed to the gills with explosives.’

‘Please sir’, walkie-talkie girl said, ‘I would advise you against making flippant remarks about explosives.’

‘Or hashish’, Ray added. ‘Don’t be fooled by that sweet looking little boy who’s carrying the fish. He’s probably working as a mule for a drug baron.’

‘The point I’m trying to make’, twitching man said, jabbing his finger feebly towards walkie-talkie girl, ‘is that my mouthwash was entirely innocuous. I offered to gargle with it for goodness sake.’

“‘For fuck’s sake’”, Ray suggested. ‘Got a bit more va-va-voom, don’t you think?’

Twitching man swung back round to face Ray. ‘Will you keep quiet? This is none of your business. And I find your language extremely offensive.’

Walkie-talkie girl took advantage of the moment to stride back up the queue, past the furry fish. Once she got to the top she spoke urgently into her walkie-talkie, and began to usher the people at the head of the queue forward through the entry to the departure gate.

Ray looked as if he was about to talk to twitching man again. Chell tugged on his sleeve to distract him. ‘When we get in there you can play, take your pick.’

Ray frowned. ‘For me or for you?’

‘You of course. It’s your turn.’

‘Okay.’

It had worked. Ray was ignoring twitching man and trying to scope out the females in the queue. They shuffled through the doorway. Walkie-talkie girl checked their boarding passes and passports, but avoided making eye contact with either of them. They were directed into Lane B.

Once everyone was through the doorway Ray looked along their lane first, then all the other ones, checking out each woman in turn. ‘Jesus’, he said. ‘Slim pickings.’

‘Fat pickings, more like.’

‘No MILFs.’ Ray checked out the women again. ‘Jesus’, he repeated.

‘Imagine that one there ...’ Chell pointed at a stout young lass in a white tracksuit. She had porn-star nail extensions on all but one of her chubby fingers.

Ray leaned in close to her and put his mouth to her ear. ‘You are a very sick woman, do you know that?’

He was happy now.

Helen L Moore

Ark rains, from Aberdeen to Zennor

To work her sympathetic magic
Noah's girl has pilfered from every last
haberdashers, and drops her haul, pounds
of pins & needles stabbing at the tarmac—
aquapuncture raising energetic waves
across our streets. Suddenly the sea arises
where it never did before, and gone that old-style
British drizzle—now a month's precipitation
tips down in a day, private archives are unleashed,
the family silver squirreled under a bathtub:
candlesticks, napkin rings, tureens, ladles,
platters, canteens of bright cutlery rattling
down the roads—and factories springing up
to churn out more, mass markets swelling rivers
within minutes, huge aching sheets that crumble our
defences, break into homes, leave insurers wringing out
their hands, packing sandbags, heading for the hills in a loss
adjustment of mud, as anchor-men & women stoically report
yet another freakish storm—a one in one hundred chance.

*

*Ab, sighs Noah's daughter, these rains
are all the tears that people never shed,
but the drops bouncing from their noses
will help them open up their ducts.*

At this, she smiles, unbuttoning
her beloved as they shake themselves free
from their clothes. Naked and beautiful,
they writhe, couple. *Deep water!* she whispers.

Arching, they become a pair
of Great Whales conjoined, diving
to the ocean bed.

Matthew Arnaudon

Context

Lately my kid's been asking about my gun. He's at that age. He gives me the queerest look when I get in of night. It must be strange to see me as anything other than Dad. As a kid, I once saw our priest in line at the supermarket wearing blue jeans and a faded Springsteen tour shirt.

I never forgot it. Complete head-fuck.

So the questions came as no surprise to me. I've been there myself, at that age, watching my own dad before me; easing his Patrol in the drive, creeping down the hall in the dark. Who was this mysterious hero? Leaning against the bathroom vanity wearing a towel instead of a cape? His foggy reflection in the mirror silently crying, his badge on the porcelain dappled with shower steam and shave cream.

I always knew better than to ask Dad about his gun and he never once offered any insight of his own accord. It would hang there limply from a towel hook, secured in a black leather pouch that made it seem all the more fascinating. Then by morning, when my mother would dress me for school, the pouch would be gone along with the enigmatic crusader.

I don't want that for my own son. I want him to know who I am. Kids are different these days; they will come right out and ask anything without fear of reproach and I've had time to prepare myself for this inevitable string of questions. The first thing he wanted to know was had I ever shot anybody. I stopped in the doorway that night as I was leaving the room and turned back to the futon where he lay wrapped in a tiger print throw.

'No', I lied, 'but ... if somebody needed help I might have to do it ...' and my well-prepared response unravelled across the apartment floor. He gave this some thought and then asked 'Dad—'

'Yeah?'

'Did Grandpa ever shoot anybody?'

'I don't know buddy, maybe he did, maybe he didn't', and in an instant I felt fifty-five and stubborn and I saw my father in an old clawfoot bathtub with a soft red trickle over the rim, an empty black leather pouch on the tiles.

We left it at that until his next visit when he asked me the more mundane and illogical questions he had obviously been brooding on all month. Do I carry it everywhere? Is it better than the army ones? Do I like it?

When he felt more confident he casually asked more probing questions like great big glowing hints. Is it heavy? If he held it would it be heavy for him? Would he go to gaol if he held it just once?

He asked increasingly difficult questions, some unanswerable; I rarely gave a complete or truthful response. My well-prepared fatherly advice had long since scuttled far under the refrigerator, but I allowed myself to feel like the mysterious hero for that brief period.

Right now though he's sleeping on the couch by a mountain of pizza boxes.

'He's a drop of blood in a cup of milk', my mother once said.

I expect the sitter will arrive soon.

My radio is hissing at me from my belt. I'll be out all night.

Wes Lee

Spectre

A vision of you in that hallway. And on the Net, the forensic photo of your ankles, sitting in that chair, a spectre. In a place where swimming costumes make no sense, who knows what night games they get up to? Those Bel Air nights flying over, the lights almost too much, the possibilities behind all that glass and steel. A leg shivers, turning on a music box; wide apart in a red dress, suspended on wires under the dress. The chipped cup's luminescence—already dented, it cannot be dented. The scarf with the stain, the dress with the fray, its withered grosgrain. The body is where you begin, all you have to give, to protest. You wanted so much, a carpetbagger arriving fresh to pour cocktails, to pour yourself into a dress. You paid the price for wanting; that town's shoddy receipt, its *Pretty Woman* leer, flat and glazed. A Black Dahlia wanting. A Boulevard slip of hand to wet concrete. Its awkward moment before the mirror, your false eyelashes dropped between his taps; what music was playing in his own private elevator? Fingers inside you—the whole cycle gone now, not even a memory, an ouija board drift to *No* to *Yes*. And all these fractured things we know—you painted your walls red and the door black (which your landlady thought quite strange); you loved Marilyn framed above your bed, as so many others before you and will come after.

Jane Simpson

Lethe

for Lynda

leaves slip gently
the river takes you
to her own—
Wairua Tapu

willows pool
their gold,
swirl, you
flow on

wood should float—
you fly 12,000 miles
then sink into
your native soil

spices and myrrh—
the women prepared—mix
with kitchen smells
near your favourite table

your adopted whanau
sing halting karakia,
Gaelic is spoken
in your village where

the river takes you
to her own—
Wairua Tapu

Notes:

The Very Rev Lynda Patterson came to New Zealand from her native Northern Ireland to study Maori. She became the first female dean of Christchurch and died after a short illness a year later in 2014, aged 40.

karakia: prayers

Wairua Tapu: Holy Spirit in Christian theology

whanau: extended family. Also used for friends who may not have any kinship ties to the other members

Margarita Tenser

Poem for this Anapurna lodge at twilight

Things that do not consider awkwardness include: yaks.

flat stones.

teaspoons.

rhododendrons.

big foamy clouds

like dirty cotton wool rolling over the tops of mountain ridges.

mountains, unless

the steady upwards pressure of tectonic collision

bestows a cringing awareness of the future,

burrowing higher

and shamefully

higher

into the bellies of those cool kid clouds

all 'dude, could you, uh ... not?'

If erosion

is a welcome relief

from this apologetic intrusion skywards, then perhaps

mountains

do not belong on my list. Similarly,

in the event that teaspoons

tinkling prematurely to the table

think 'ah shit, how loud was that?

oh god, everybody's looking,'

there would be no way to differentiate this

from the ordinary existence of cutlery.

Yaks, though

definitely justify

their listedness. No creature that feels shame

would scatter such enormous piles of shit

so regularly

and so precisely

in absolutely everybody's way. Some of us

have boots whose colour is only two or three shades dark with dust

so far, and would quite like to keep them that way,

you big

brown

jingling

pantsless

bastards.

Eugen Bacon

The Queen's waltz

It might have been easier if they'd fought. If Audrey were tight-faced and screaming, shrew-like and abusing, spitting out words that not only goaded but stuck. Abuse that returned to haunt in little bursts: in the stillness of the bath, between pages of a novel, in the heart of a dream.

Liam might have understood if there had been a wrestle, if—as he held her by the hair to subdue her and she punched girly fists into his ribs—she had said it. Or if she had flung something at him and it bounced off his cheek, cracked on the floor and, as he touched his flaming skin, she had said it. Or if he'd beat her up so bad and, as cops pressed him to the back of a car, she had said it.

But there was no precedent. Even if she had said it that normal way, fought him, lashed horrible words at him, then spat intentions of leaving, it would have been hard, so very hard, to let her go.

*

It was middle of spring. Audrey sat delicious and serene across the dinner table. She listened with slanted head to the flavour of a buttered parsnip on her tongue. She smiled at *Ride of the Valkyries* playing in the background. She held her fork with nails faultlessly shaped; chewed delicately and moved lips immaculately painted; dabbed at those lips with a napkin flawlessly white. She sat there clad in cat-walk material: baby-soft, catchy enough to intrigue, toned enough to not encroach.

When the serenity of Bach touched their world, there was no disdain in Audrey's look at Liam. No wonderment at a fool with the table manners of a possum, as he fingered corn on the cob, greased cutlery with messy hands, and pushed aside parsley with a thumb.

That type of derision was not in those temptation eyes that lifted from her plate, not in those lips that smiled a tender smile, and said, 'His name is Flint.'

The music stopped. Perhaps the classical selection had come to a natural end. Audrey's smile, directed at something between Liam's nose and his forehead in that long stretch of silence, rendered him useless. He looked at Audrey and said nothing. Not 'Why?' or 'How?' or 'When?' Perhaps she would have understood if he had spoken, would have perfectly understood with that efficient air of hers. But he gave nothing.

She forked a sliver of beef and ate it. Her little mouth toyed with flavour as she ate. She even nibbled and swallowed a second parsnip, began to pierce a capsicum but thought better of it.

He waited, fork and knife poised in space. Stared in silence at the woman who was everything to him, and more: his firework—the sparkler on the wick; his candle—the orange on the flame; his flower—the velvet on the petal. Audrey was his stream, his river, his moon. And now she, she ... He said nothing.

She laid down her fork, dubbed at soft lips, folded the napkin and laid it on the calm table. She sipped a baby nip of burgundy wine, left no stain of lipstick on its rim. She stood up, hedged the table, paused. Even lifted hair from her face with immaculate fingers, smoothed it and pushed it to unruffled waves. Only when she turned away did he grip the edge of the table as if to rise, as if to follow her with those questions: ‘How?’ ‘Where?’ ‘When?’

He actually began to rise but his knees gave. So he sat with a tomb in his heart. A dark, uninvited tomb that deepened, filled emptiness with more empty, blackened darkness with more black. When anxiety began to rise, then confusion, pain, and finally rage so wild it was silent, his mouth tasted of cardboard.

Audrey moved away from the table. When the door shut quietly behind her, Liam watched the wood, as though his wife were embossed on it.

Suddenly, he felt fear. Fear of loneliness real as touch. Beyond that moment, that night, that revelation, what else? He hugged his fork, listened to her heels *clip! clip! clip!* towards the door, as they had done, even though she was no longer in the room. *His name is Flint ... Flint ... Flint ...* The ghost clippety clip did nothing to soothe those words said calmly, yard-long words from the weight of them, words that had slipped with ease from such beautiful lips. Refusing to settle, the words filled Liam’s air with resonance: *Flint ... Flint ... Flint ...*

He sat with his knife and fork. Before he had time to grasp it, bank it, judge it, confront it, scorn the value of it, define it, comprehend it even—so deep was the astonishment, it rendered him powerless—she was gone.

Audrey took with her that wild flower smell associated with home. She also took her tennis racket, a rosy negligee, two suitcases, four yoga video tapes, a bunch of books, her classical collection, and Liam’s heart.

*

That night, he wiped clean the bottle of burgundy wine she had nipped with baby sips. Before long, such was his state, he had summoned moroseness. Together they pulled several cans from the fridge, sat on the floor, killed a pint of lager and then two. Beer raced down Liam’s throat. When it pressed down on his bladder, he sorted it. Then he took moroseness’ advice and reclined on a cushion on the floor, Audrey’s velvet cushion soft as a cat. There, he sank to acres of drinking solace. When eyelids finally closed, he succumbed to a maudlin sleep where he once more became a little boy with freckles large as pebbles.

*

The corn was still on the cob on a dirty plate three days later. So were parsley and sleek cucumber slices, thin enough for a royal garden party, interspersed with cold beef julienne. On the fourth morning of drinking to a stupefied sleep, he woke with a blooming headache and bloodshot eyes. Soon as his headache waned, soon as he trusted his stomach, Liam ran. *Rock-a-tee. Rock-a-tee.* Past an abandoned pond lined with trees. Green trees, yellow trees, red trees, brown trees, leafless trees ... A morning shadow raced with him below pale blue sky interspersed with silver grey clouds. A rising sun glided in and out of the clouds. Liam's feet pounded footpaths, cyclists swerved around him, some shouted profanities, but he kept moving miles, miles out.

Rock-a-tee. Rock-a-tee. Rock-a-tee-tee-rock-a-tee.

He jogged back home to an apartment tight with absence. Strewn with dirty socks, grimy plates, empty beer cans and scattered bottles of Claret, Shiraz, even cleanskins.

*

He found Meredith in the mauve pages under 'G': Gentleman's escort.

Meredith lived in a beachcomber in Affleck Boulevard. She took only pre-bookings. She accepted bite size chocolates and vintage bubbly. She asked no questions and demanded that none be asked of her. All was well as long as Liam did not succumb to a terrible impulse to reminisce, talk about or prompt personal history. When he took her, she lay unruffled and wore a cool face of iridescent beauty. She held her hand delicately to the small of his back, as though they were dancing to a waltz at a Queen's ball. She only glanced at her watch when time was up or nearly up.

One day it dawned upon him: He had thumbed the yellow pages and found a whore who looked like Audrey. Who dressed like Audrey. Who moved like Audrey. Who spoke in a china-cup fragile way. Who fucked like a Queen's waltz.

Liam paused with that thought, holding a red box chocolate selection (bite size), right there, in the middle of Meredith's lounge. He glanced at a famous portrait (Meredith said) of a medieval sprite named *Aquila*, *Degilla* or *Godilla*. He couldn't tell, from the way she said it in her fragile way, what was correct.

"That you, darling?" she said from somewhere upstairs.

He heard her climbing delicately down the spiralling staircase, pictured her autumn eyes and velvet skin, replayed her engineered 10-carat smile. Before hint of her wild flower scent reached him, before her trophy smile—poised for effect, bestowed as reward, held perfectly on a five star face with movie calibre immortality—before all that could infect him, he was gone.

Stephen Devereux

Marthe de Méigny

I lied. About everything. My name is Maria not Marthe.
I was twenty four, not sixteen when he first saw me.
I had to get on that tram a dozen times before
he picked me out. I was a laundress, not a florist.
When I came to Paris it was because my mother
kicked me out. I had not run away.

Had he been more honest? He would not marry me
for twenty years though we lived in here together.
He painted me every day. Before we made love,
just after. In the bath. Always in the bath or drying
myself on a towel. Or quietly sitting outside. Naked.

And he photographed me nude. I did not mind that.
But we never went out together. He always said how he
adored our domesticity, our erotic palace he called it,
where we drank tea and danced. I was like a cherished pet.
Maybe all that was a lie too. And now there's another secret.

I am not well. Too long in this cage. Too many baths, he says.
My mind's not always what it should be. I fear other men.
My skin is not the soft porcelain I saw in my mirror, in his eyes.
It flakes and bubbles now, and I am old. My legs are bent.
And nowadays he paints me only as he saw me then.

Baby in a bottle

Born and died in a day. Then your life began.
Little Poseidon, lord of formaldehyde.
You should have been buried with her.
Then the bottle came.

For your birthday they squeezed you in,
poured in the formic acid over your head,
filling your virgin lungs. Then they screwed
on the lid.

They never cut your cord. For a century
you wore it over your right shoulder, a sash
of office until it broke free and floats now,
like a frayed rope in a stilled sea.

Your doll's left arm reaches out for it
somewhere in front of you like a lost
astronaut set adrift in watery space.

Your spine droops, decade by decade,
to your knees. Your blue silent eyes watch
our fallen world beyond the distorting glass
of a womb that slowly yellows.
Generations of lab assistants stare back.

An elder statesman, now, amongst your siblings
and subjects—a murderer's head, a syphilitic
penis, a cancerous breast—you will outlive
them all. But you have not escaped time.
It goes more slowly under glass.

Nor have you escaped life. Even now,
worms of mycelia try your innocence.
It seems your flesh is melting down to
a soft lump like a pickled oyster, a panna cotta.
In another century or so, your jar will crack
and you will ooze through in a welter of living slime.

Heidi Williamson

Ascender

She wakes each hour to quiet
the calling child. The flint cottage
stacks its stones around her.
Her breath shines in the cold
autumn night. The pane glints
with delayed starlight.

She wakes each hour
to no discernible sound.
The child is quiet. Stars
thicken the night's throat.
The cottage accepts the dark.
Its stone walls shift constantly.

She wakes each hour and calls
out like a child. The walls
contain the small sound.
The stars' colours shift and flare
with no discernible surface—
with no discernible noise, go out.

Author biographies

Matthew Arnaudon

Matthew Arnaudon holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with Honours, and a Major in Creative Writing from the University of Canberra. He has published several pieces of prose and nonfiction writing, including *Tats and Lisp*, *Context*, and *Getting Away With It*. He spent a number of years in rural Australian towns that continue to inform his writing. Matthew is presently working on *Charlatan Communiqué*, a debut novel. Outside of writing Matthew teaches early childhood music and records as Kid of Harith, an experimental music project. He now lives in Canberra with his wife and two cats. He aspires to become a cat-lady.

Eugen Bacon

Eugen Bacon studied at Maritime Campus—Greenwich University, UK, less than two minutes' walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. Her arty muse fostered itself within the baroque setting of the Old Royal Naval College, and Eugen found herself a computer graduate mentally re-engineered into creative writing. She is now a PhD candidate in Writing by artefact and exegesis at Swinburne University of Technology. Her short story 'A puzzle piece' was shortlisted in the Lightship Publishing (UK) international short story prize 2013, and is published in *Lightship Anthology 3*.

Sarah Barr

Sarah Barr lives in Dorset, UK. She writes poetry and fiction, leads writing workshops, gives readings and is a creative writing tutor for the Open University. Her subject matter is varied, but is often about our relationships with each other and with the natural world. She's noticed that her poems often want to tell stories while her stories yearn to become poems. Her writing has won some prizes and been published in magazines and anthologies, including *The Bridport Prize Anthology 2010*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Other Poetry*, *South*, and *The Penniless Press*. She hopes to publish a collection of poetry in the not-too-distant future.

Owen Bullock

Owen Bullock has published a collection of poetry, *sometimes the sky isn't big enough* (Steele Roberts, 2010), two books of haiku, and a novella. He has edited a number of journals, including Poetry NZ; and various anthologies, most recently, *Dazzled – The University of Canberra's Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize*, 2014. Owen is a PhD candidate in Writing at the University of Canberra.

John Irving Clarke

Born in Cumbria and living in Yorkshire UK, **John Irving Clarke** recently resigned his fulltime teaching post. He now tutors an adult creative writing class and leads reading and writing workshops. His recently published novel, *Who the Hell is Ricky Bell?* was widely praised, and this was some solace as John now faces the terrifying freedom to write.

Tina Cole

Tina Cole lives in the UK in the beautiful Herefordshire countryside. She is a retired education consultant who delights in poetry that speaks about relationships and how people manage their inner worlds. Her poems have been published in a number of UK magazines (*Msllexia*, *Aesthetica*, *Decanto*) and several anthologies. She is a member of the poetry group www.borderpoets.org and has enjoyed reading at local poetry festivals and events. She is publishing her first full collection this year.

Stephen Devereux

Stephen Devereux is a poet, playwright, essayist, and short story writer. He has had his work published in magazines/websites in the UK, Eire, Austria, Germany, Australia and the USA. He has won/been placed in several competitions including, most recently, the Flambards Poetry Prize and the Bare Fiction Poetry Prize. He lives in Liverpool.

Willo Drummond

Willo Drummond is a PhD candidate in creative writing at Macquarie University and a recipient of the Australian Postgraduate Award. Recently migrated from the wilds of the NSW Blue Mountains to the shores of the Parramatta River, she has weathered previous lives as an actor, singer-songwriter, photographer and arts administrator. In 2012 she served on the assessment panel for the *Varuna* Publisher Fellowships and last year completed a Master of Research thesis examining the ethics of the lyric mode in Australian ecopoetics. 'Some Words for Migratory Birds' formed a part of this work. Other poetry and short fiction have appeared in *Cordite* and *The Quarry*.

Liz Hambrick

Liz Hambrick lives in the US but remains umbilically attached to the UK, where she was born and grew up, and where she spends increasing amounts of time. She recently earned an MA in Creative Writing Prose Fiction at the University of East Anglia and holds a bachelor's in Creative Writing and the Social Sciences from George Mason University. In addition to *Meniscus* her writing has appeared in *All Things Girl*, and was longlisted for the 2014 Bristol Short Story Prize. She is working on her first novel.

Geoffrey Heptonstall

Geoffrey Heptonstall writes regularly for *The London Magazine*. He is a poet, playwright, essayist, and writer of short fiction.

Wes Lee

Wes Lee lives in Wellington, New Zealand. Her chapbook of short stories *Cowboy Genes* was published by Grist Books at the University of Huddersfield, and launched at the Huddersfield Literature Festival in March 2014. She was the 2010 recipient of the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Literary Award. She was selected this year as a finalist in the Troubadour Poetry Prize in London, and shortlisted for the Cork Literary Review Poetry Manuscript Prize in Ireland, and the London Magazine's Short Story Competition. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Poetry London*, *Magma*, *Riptide*, *Westerly*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Landfall*, and *Dazzled: The University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's Poetry Prize Anthology*. www.weslee.co.nz

Alexandra McLeavy

Alexandra McLeavy is a freelance writer. She is currently completing a Masters of Creative Writing at Wollongong University.

David McVey

David McVey teaches Communication at New College Lanarkshire in Scotland. He has published over 100 short stories and a great deal of nonfiction that focuses on history and the outdoors. He enjoys hillwalking, visiting historic sites, reading, watching telly, and supporting his hometown football (soccer) team, Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC.

Helen L. Moore

Helen L. Moore is an award-winning eco poet and community artist/activist based in Somerset, UK. Her debut poetry collection, *Hedge Fund, And Other Living Margins* (Shearsman Books, 2012), was described by Alasdair Paterson as being ‘in the great tradition of visionary politics in British poetry’. Her second collection, *ECOZOA* (Permanent Publications, 2015), which responds to Thomas Berry’s vision of the ‘Ecozoic Era’, where we live in harmony ‘with the Earth as community’ has already been acclaimed by John Kinsella, as ‘a milestone in the journey of eco-poetics’. www.natures-words.co.uk

Mario Petrucci

Mario Petrucci is a multi-awardwinning UK poet and residency frontiersman, the only poet to have held residencies at the Imperial War Museum and with BBC Radio 3. ‘Reminiscent of e.e. cummings at his best’ (*Envoi*), Petrucci aspires to ‘Poetry on a geological scale’ (*Verse*). He is four times winner of the London Writers competition, and holds the Bridport Prize, the Frogmore Prize, a Silver Wyvern Award and the Irish Times Perpetual Trophy. *Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl* (Enitharmon, 2004) secured the Daily Telegraph/ Arvon Prize. *i tulips* (Enitharmon, 2010) takes its name from Petrucci’s vast Anglo-American sequence, whose ‘modernist marvels’ (Poetry Book Society) convey his distinctive combination of innovation and humanity. www.mariopetrucci.com

Heather Richardson

Heather Richardson lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She is one of three featured writers in *Short Story Introductions 1* (Lagan Press 2007), and had a story included in *Brace: A New Generation in Short Fiction* (Comma Press 2008). Her fiction and poetry has also been published in magazines in the UK and Ireland, including *The Stinging Fly*, *QWF*, *pulp.net*, *Black Mountain Review*, and *In the Red*. She was runner-up in the 2007 Academi Cardiff International Poetry Competition with the poem ‘Wedding at Sea’. Her first novel, *Magdeburg* (Lagan Press 2010), is set in Germany during the Thirty Years War.

Jane Simpson

Jane Simpson is a poet, historian, tutor, and editor, based in Christchurch. She has a PhD (Otago) in religion and gender in post-war NZ. Her poems have been published in journals including *Takabe*, *Poetry NZ*, *Brief*, and *Meniscus*. She has been anthologized in *An exchange of gifts*, *Big sky*, and *With our eyes open*. Her chapbook, *Candlewick Kelp*, with images from Michael Tuffery, was published in 2002. Her theological training and poetry have come together in her contemporary hymns and songs, recorded on the CD *Tussocks Dancing*.

Ian C. Smith

Ian C Smith lives in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria. His work has appeared in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Rabbit Journal*, *Regime*, *The Weekend Australian*, and *Westerly*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide, 2014.

Christine Stanton

Christine Stanton lives in Sydney and is currently completing a Doctor of Arts in Creative Writing at Sydney University. Her work centres around issues of cultural alienation. Her short fiction has been published in literary journals such as *Southerly*, *Wet Ink*, *Griffith Review*, *Etchings*, *Island*, *Copperfield Review*, and in *Best Australian Stories 2006*.

Margarita Tenser

A Ukrainian-born resident of Sydney, **Margarita Tenser** has had poems published in *Voiceworks*, the *UTS Anthology*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Breath & Shadow*. M's blog can be found at www.thepresenttenser.wordpress.com.

Christina Thatcher

Christina Thatcher fell in love with Wales while studying for a Creative Writing MA at Cardiff University. She now delivers creative writing workshops for at-risk youth across the valleys and keeps busy in Cardiff too where she facilitates the local 'Roath Writers' group, conducts research for her PhD, hosts open mic events around the city, and more. Christina's poetry has recently been published in *The London Magazine*, *Neon Literary Magazine*, and the *Lampeter Review*, among others. To learn more about her work, please visit her website, www.collectingwords.wordpress.com, or follow her on Twitter [@writetoempower](https://twitter.com/writetoempower).

Samuel Wagan Watson

Samuel Wagan Watson is an award-winning Indigenous poet and professional raconteur. Born in Brisbane in 1972, he is of Munanjali, Birri Gubba, German and Irish descent. Samuel's first collection of poems won the 1998 David Unaipon Award. His fourth collection, *Smoke Encrypted Whispers* won the 2005 NSW Premier's Award and the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize. Samuel has toured Australia extensively, has been a writer-in-residence at a number of institutions and has toured New Zealand, Germany and Norway to promote his work.

Heidi Williamson

Heidi Williamson is a writing tutor, coach, and poet. Her first collection, *Electric Shadow* (Bloodaxe, 2011), was a Poetry Book Society recommendation and shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre Prize for Poetry. www.heidiwilliamsonpoet.com

