

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition
2016 Poetry and Fiction Prize
Short Lists

Since its launch in 2008, Carol Ann Duffy's Manchester Writing Competition has attracted more than 12,000 submissions from over 50 countries and awarded more than £115,000 to its winners. The Competition is designed to encourage new work and seek out the best creative writing from across the world, establishing Manchester as the focal point for a major international prize. The winners of this year's £10,000 Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be revealed at a gala ceremony on Friday 25th November in the atmospheric Baronial Hall at Chetham's Library in the heart of the city.

This year's Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Janice Galloway and Juliet Pickering, and the Poetry Prize by Adam O'Riordan, Sarah Howe and Helen Mort.

For further details, go to: www.manchesterwritingcompetition.co.uk.

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2016 Manchester Poetry Prize Short-listed Poems

Eric Berlin

Recon

Back when they were still waiting for my sake,
that whole awful fall before their divorce,
it felt like something was watching us break.
The three of us, out on a random walk
the next town over at some drained-out lake
stepped with measured strides, almost lost in thought,
skirting the edge, wearing the same pained face.
Each little bridge that spanned the fractured mud
would lift us up and set us each back down
onto hard-packed dirt, the path slim enough
to excuse how we went along spaced out,
single file. I couldn't stop glancing up
at the dormant fountains, their gangly spouts
like periscopes rising from the parched ground.

From a Cross in Montreal

Remember the Biodome, where the penguins paced the manmade rocks and the sky sagged with stretch marks between hidden hooks, and in Notre Dame, that confession booth, where we mocked each other through the latticework? I forget how we ended up maneuvering through the festooned guts of some cracked cassette unspooled and sleek in a jagged branch, as mom stooped to one of those curbside things that sells the news and tugged the locked door, but I know you waited for her, and that I walked ahead because stopping like that when you've walked all day could mean not wanting to start again. And when she dug through her purse for Canadian coins, I cupped my eyes to some empty display, and soon you were doing the same beside me, making no comment on what we saw – the sharp line of sawdust across berber carpet, the white paper plate gone grey from grease, the female torso on a shelf above us, with no head or arms, just impossible breasts – and when mom caught up we went back to walking and she asked if we'd followed the headlines about Michael Jackson, how the sandman who put him to sleep each night had stepped out to yell at a couple girlfriends over the phone as the propofol flowed through the tubes unchecked. I remember trying to tune out how his body had fallen into a state *like* sleep, then sleep, then deeper, how sleep feels like danger to a child who's been beaten, how crucial a father's love can be. Nothing we didn't already know. In fact, Michael had sung all that to the crows of Oz with straw down his collar and stuffed in both cuffs, through a shivering jaw from the cross where he hung – how you can't win, child, how the world has got no shame. Our whole trip itself an elaborate distraction as we waited to hear back the word on mom's CAT scan. I scanned the bland buildings we ambled past for any remarkable detail and failed, and at the end of that block was a lot full of fat blades of grass where a wrecking ball blushed above rubble, and the rough brick flank of the last in the row of the townhouses bared the sundry wallpapers of rooms long gone, and where the stairwell had been was a dash for each step – tell me I'm not just making this up, but did you see the smudge of a palm at the top of that flight where someone maybe steadied themselves and the thin marks of fingers on the landing below where someone maybe turned back?

Amen

Her ear against
the cold white
wall, she holds
her breath like that
until the moans
resume, then beckons
me to come
and listen, too.
Our neighbors for the night
spotted this motel
just as we did,
when the snow grew thick.
We used their footsteps
to reach the front
desk, we stood
in the puddle their boots
had left, and it's not
their words but their voices
stripped down
to that whale-song part,
that double hum,
that finds us now,
our suitcase half-
unzipped, its steel
teeth dragging
scuffmarks down
my wrist as I grope
through our clothes
for a toothbrush.
By the time
I sidle into
her hair, I only
catch the last
word of their prayer.

Novena to Santa Monica

in memory of S.F.

What redwood forest with Dark Age roots
was felled, stripped, shipped
and propped up here in barnacled boots
of seaweed and tar? All down
the pier, men bow to the breeze as it strums
the slack in their lines, gargoyles
ogling the fat flanks of clouds, parched
as the stone throats of rainspouts
in drought. A merchant marine poses
with wife and kid as a stranger
babies their camera. While they wait for the flash
what happens is that behind them
the breeze browses racks of postcards – all blank
wishing no one were here.

The dragon boat reels on its titanic hinge.
What we give to be weightless, for the feel of
our skin peeling up off the vinyl as our hair
falls back in love with the wind.

Santa Monica, Patron Saint
of Disappointing Children,
whose fault was it when my friend
who staggered through traffic like a rabid
raccoon with an itch in his skull he couldn't

bang loose swam out to sleep
still wearing his shoes? If you've never
been martyred, what qualifies you to tell us
what we should do?

Eric Berlin currently lives near Syracuse, New York, where he teaches courses like The Poetics of Stand-up, The Poetics of Prayer, and Ear Training for Poets. His poems have won the National Poetry Prize 2016 and The Ledge 2014 Poetry Prize. Runner-up for the Tor House Poetry Award, Able Muse Write Prize, Tupelo Quarterly Poetry Prize, and Ruth Stone Prize, he has also been given residencies at Vermont Studio Center, Art Farm, and Constance Saltonstall Foundation. His poems have appeared in *Hunger Mountain*, *North American Review*, *Jewish Currents*, *The Poetry Review*, and *The Rialto* among others.

Dante Di Stefano

Verrückt

“A 10-year-old boy was decapitated as he rode a 168-foot-tall waterslide at a water park in Kansas. Caleb Schwab was decapitated Sunday on the Verrückt raft ride at the Schlitterbahn Waterpark in Kansas City, Kansas. The Guinness World Records has certified the ride as the tallest water slide in the world. At least two people who recently rode on Verrückt—German for “insane”—have said nylon shoulder straps came loose during the ride. It's unclear whether the straps played any role in Caleb's death.”

—*Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 2016

Before the descent, the Kansas heavens
unfurling above him might have caught him
for a moment, a glint in God's right eye,
might have held him there in unending blue,
teetering on the verge of turning sluice,
before prayer became a hurtled curse.
When he had become plummet, his body
widened into raft and dropped, hovering
toward the lonely dampness of the dirt
like a helicoptering maple seed.
He had forgiven the amusement park
its allegiance to the creed of drowning,
its patriotisms of twisting plastic.
He had decided to glide torrential
in the overwhelming middle of things.
He had broken into many angels,
become at once sacred host and choired psalm,
sent his breath, as garment of hymns, coasting
over the far away Nebraska wheat fields,
where other boys dreamt in velocity.
He realized the secret America
hidden in a wild unchecked momentum,
how something in us wants to wed ourselves
to reckless speed and call that liberty.
In whatever lightning second, the cut
that lifted his head from eternal flight
into everlasting halo, this boy
ripened into a light beyond stillness,
the shine of a flannel sleeve-scuffed apple,
a sweetness outside the insane language
of haste, an indictment on hurrying.
He was there, as he is there now, a new
physique built of wings and breaking joyful
on endless lullaby, a divine form,
a word as holy as mother, as star,

as father, as moon, as cradle, as kiss,
as nimble as grace, as agile as hope,
still plunging, exquisite cascade, lovely
as the bright chute that might ease us to peace,
deliver us—Lord—from our daily bread,
lead us away from this place of falling.

Reading Dostoyevsky at Seventeen

In those days, my dreams always changed titles
before they were finished and I wanted
only to love in that insane tortured way
of poor dear Dmitri Karamazov.
Suddenly, I was speaking the language
of lapdog and samovar. This is
the ballroom, the barracks, the firing squad.
This is the old monk with the beard of bees.
This is the orange lullaby the moon
of the moon will sing you when it's grieving.
This is the province you escape by train,
fleeing heavy snow and eternal elk.
This is the part where I take your hand in
my hand and I tell you we are burning.

Reading Rilke in Early Autumn

It is a joy, before the trees begin
their turning, to leaf through the paperback
and to meet again the many angels
whispering their secrets inside a man.
It almost might make you want to be eighteen
and angry again, alone in your twin
bed, yearning for the hot mouth of a girl,
nights that unfolded like the long letters
you wished you could compose if you lived in
a distant snowy mispronounced city.
But here you are, sitting in your classroom,
upstate, in early middle age, a rose
under your eyelids, while from the window
a breeze just comes, a panther in your brain.

Dante Di Stefano is the author of *Love is a Stone Endlessly in Flight* (Brighthorse Books, 2016). His poetry, essays, and reviews have appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, and elsewhere. He is a correspondent for The Best American Poetry Blog, a poetry editor for the online quarterly, *Dialogist*, and a book review editor for the literary magazine, *Arcadia*. He lives in Endwell, New York.

Sakinah Hofler

MECCA – THE MOST BELOVED HOLY PLACE

I drank direct from the Zam Zam fountain
beneath Masjid Al-Haram and thought
of Hagar—of her blistered feet kicking
up tufts of sand as she scrambled between
Safa and Marwa under an unforgiving sun

begging Allah to send her water. Now
when we pilgrims repeat her journey
within the walls of an air-conditioned
building, our shoes march across a solid
marble floor and the water pours

with no alleged source. I washed my keloid
with the Zam Zam. Next to me a woman
with mangled, melted, marred skin drank and drank
and drank, and when she finished, I looked
at my keloid. I looked at her face. Nothing

had changed. In the souk, men with tobacco-holed
teeth sold us goods: fake gold bangles embellished
with plastic baubles all stickered
with MADE IN CHINA. Down the road, children sold
us facial tissues and birdseed for one rial

though they all needed so much more.
Eventually they'll do to their children
what was done to them: take away a limb,
a hand, a foot, maybe feet, so that their children
will hold out paper cups with their nubs

and people will give. Later, a photographer
snapped a picture of my sister straddling
a camel, her mouth captured in a forever silent
scream as if she, too, already understood.

AND SO THE EPIDEMIC CONTINUES BECAUSE WE HAVEN'T LEARNED FROM OUR PAST

when this thin skeleton-and-skin girl approaches me at ben's pizza spot begging for some spare change i want to slap her then ask her when it all went wrong doesn't she remember the commercial with the cracked egg the sizzling yolk the deadpan dénouement *this is your brain on drugs* where are the brittle branches of examples fetid food dangling from her family tree last week my cousin dropped by the house his lies like DJ cuts Aunt Elaine please please i need please i need i need ten okay five okay okay maybe one can i get can i get can i get we stowed our laptops and purses in the pots and pans cabinet hid our iPads beneath sofa cushions didn't she grow up counting the elapsed seconds of a dope fiend's lean or have an auntie no one called auntie who spread the butt cheeks of her baby boy to let men hit for a quick fix but when i look into the girl's black button eyes i see me without mommy and daddy so i offer to buy her a slice to which she dryly replies *i'm lactose intolerant* later i see her in the park parked on her knees hands clasped like she's praying *Lord when's it gonna end* but she's really rubbing a pipe between her palms readying for the resolution found in those mother of pearl rocks

I'VE DECIDED TO STOP WRITING ABOUT THE HOOD

I

No more Street Pharmacy Tales:
No more who stole whose
crack, who got shot over bad
crack, whose aunt is high on
crack, whose baby ate a little
crack, whose corner sells the best
crack, or 5-0
crack downs.

II

There were too many babies birthing
babies, too many hours on the clock,
too many footskins thinned. No child
left behind brought tenth graders to my
afterschool program who couldn't add,
subtract, pronounce retention, recidivism,
or gentrification. They'd learned
from Newark's School of Hard Heads
how to stand on opposite sides of the class,
wave red or blue flags and say, "Blood Love
Overcomes Our Depressions" or "Continuous
Revolution In Progress." I had to strap
them to tables, force conjugation,
multiplication, and real division
in their ears, iron respectability
on their skins. Then one day I heard
about the four kids (who had managed
to escape and attend Del State)
home for the break, all shot execution-style
by flag wavers only four blocks away.
So next week when my student
screamed she ain't gotta do shit but stay black
and die, I told her, "Kiana, baby,
you're so abso-fucking-lutely right."

no more
white-T's
grafitti'ed
with R.I.P.'s
no more
mothers kneeling
next to dead sons
no more
dead sons see I
wish I could
stop writing

WE ONLY DO THE HALAAL THING NOW

We have given up
Sundays & our mouths.

No more dinners at Grandma's.

No more *pass the dressing*,
collard greens, string beans,
mustard greens, praising Jesus,
pork chops, ham hocks,
baked fish, flaky batter,
thank you Jesus, melted
butter, take-home platters.

We've traded Sunday
clothes for thoubes, purple
church hats for jilbaabs,
snipped African
from the American,
then burned that, too.

We spend Fridays *praying*
till ankle bones snap
till eye vessels balloon
till fluency flows
till our souls fracture.

Sakinah Hofler is from Newark, New Jersey. She is an MFA candidate at Florida State University where she was a recipient for the Kingsbury Fellowship. She is the Assistant Moderator for Book-in-a-week.com. A former quality and chemical engineer for the United States Department of Defense, she now spends her time teaching and writing fiction, screenplays, and poetry.

Rebecca Tamás

Julian of Norwich

Come home if you can bear it, the same divine, familiar beds,
the same wall hangings with your name written in purple,
the same glasses smashing, the same food congealing on the hob.
She fastens milky attachments to your sleep,
cups your head in her hands and sings softly,
cigarette ash sliding down her warm legs onto the bare boards.
God is not the far off, steely mountain gazer, the slick night bus
you missed, crying and retching.
God is already in your arms and breathing up against your face,
so close it hurts. You know the fresh and bloody pith of her,
the damp redness between her legs, the wet tense stomach,
the eyes black and rolling.
Inside her mouth she licks your own muddy spit,
calls birds into the house, breaks hidden skulls,
reads your diary, leaving subtle and deliberate yellow smudges in the margins.
She made you, is remade,
love that's virulent, ugly, nutshell tight,
love that throws out a tender and extravagant brightness,
calling you with torn crying into vision.

Theresa of Ávila

I cannot

would you please tell me when

when I was forgiven it felt almost like bed

you bleed through the fragile sheets

and want to bleed

the scent of apples getting all

the excess of pain is not pain

I am whipped into feathers hot tea sweetness

please keep the pain, this keening gold,

huge fractures and clear lightning

have you seen how dark it gets outside? I hear the things they say

and oh it is not pain,

the tearing and burning

it is night shaking without stars, or getting so close but not

you don't know anything about it at all

you cannot know

pain, my cat, my furred adoring thing, my space, gone wet like treacle oh

a woman is a dense and lovely void

I will not go down these songs that tie me in their hands

I easily escape, am thrown, then the arrow sore the breast, heart

meat entirely meat yes bird

he enters in

the light goes on and endless

bloody ragged moaning singing mouth

Hildegard of Bingen

Creation is a blue egg, no, a seed.

Creation is the air streaming from sea water,

vulva where a tree is planted—

these smeared leaves, strange laughter, ancient and desiring fruit.

Creation is round in my hands, sings roundly in my own language,

creation is a sodden sheet, heavy on the streaming body

and its streaming mouth, burning in the parched bush,

fingers on your throat, your throat kissed, your kissing throat, your chest.

Creation is lazarus in the woods, heaving blood into skin,

green sour heart going plum pink, eyes sugar white, then black,

knees bent, fat tongue lolling out, penis with rising heat in it, damp hair,

coughing, breathing, then that voice—

voice in cobalt, tiny burnished engine, yolk in flame,

voice that has his name in, that sprouts ivy, dandelion, ash,

voice of a swallow on long distance travel,

voice of bruises coming up like hard pears, of dirty teeth, of curt hyenas.

Creation is the pushing of this spring, this dangling womb in oak,

his new grown hands so warm, his fingers fleshy, smooth and wet.

Simone Weil

All night I tap the wall, and no one comes.

I would not like anyone to come.

I would like to lie down and be walked over,

I am that strong. My bones would come up
like persistent weeds.

You are large and disgusting,

I am thin and disgusting.

You are entirely lovely, standing there,
your stink of death, your lazy, precious eyes.

No one comes, and all night the things of the world
rise up on their haunches, savvy ghosts in dance,
shaking with their fury, their happiness.

If he could come, thick and present,

would you want that in your house?

Some fat pseudo Zeus unbuttoning his flies,

'this won't hurt a bit,'

tangle of wings, easy easy presence, easy grace.

I hope to eat, to put things in my mouth,

a grey entire horizon, vegetation of a slippy earth,

people talking in the dusk, their quiet speech,

they hear my hungry tongue, my hungry blood.

He is Antarctica in every cell, uncaptured space,

untouched, the wonder of it,
a map made up of empty white, a pearl that waits,
footsteps on the stairs, the wind screaming
hieroglyphics, the aurora peeling off the sky.

You are very clever, there is nothing here:

a table set with bread and wine,
dogrose in a copper cup,
sun at an angle, window-prayer,
the smell of stewing fruit,
my own smell, sweat, tobacco, soot.

My own things are not his,
he left me here, he let me be.

Marguerite Porete

A happy hunting soul –

wet in the snow, and blue,

cold and shining against the mirror of the world.

You are naked in the air, and I see everything,

the dogs barking out their spooky empathy,

the pockets of your skin, how they hurt and chill.

You swoon in perfect love, too much, sun on ice a blinding,

smoke disappearing through space.

Love eats me,

insect in tangerine, citrus bright,

sharp nourishment.

Love is going away and I am going away,

this lake, doesn't it make your eyes rejoice?

This petal firing off electric hums,

the shivering split places under cloth?

Quiet mud, calling to every rock with hidden names,

a wolf in her own handling, clipped slattern shout,

curd of the inside form, cruel language,

love a seething jam, wasps licking it all over.

You are very lonely. You are at zero degrees.

My body runs under you, hot water,
glow from the embers of the first explosion,
pale comet mouth, freckled meteor face,
the milky-way my satin wedding band.

Under your dark sky, your closed eyes,

I bloom.

Rebecca Tamás is a London born poet based in Norwich, where she is completing a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing at The University of East Anglia. She has most recently been published in *Best British Poetry 2015*, *The White Review* and *The Suburban Review*, where she was online poet-in-residence. Rebecca's poetry pamphlet, *The Ophelia Letters*, was published by Salt in 2013, and she's currently at work on her first collection which focuses on witchcraft, alterity and female strangeness.

Ruth Tang

Pome

It's easy not to love God when this apple
pie is so good. And lunch, too, is inconsequential,
or consequential to mornings of nothings,
of bad bread, of pigeons that hide
and reappear around breakfast. Upon realising
lunch is a farce breakfast goes too, and one eats
at odd hours. Toast at three if pigeon on the
sill; half-orange if not. Is not the world
foolish? If I tossed
a quince at it, for my love, what could I
get back? I have thrown
quinces all day. I have changed
my sheets, I am waiting for something
better. For good bread, loyal
pigeons, true breakfasts. To cut
the pome into three parts
and share it.

The Cut

It was best not to have outlived
yourself. Time to put
away childish things, you did and did

again till. Till what? Declarative
sentences cannot hurt you
any longer. Nor can the open

hasp of the ugly but necessary
?, the question that lets one presuppose
action, emotion, syntax. You

say *one* rather than
I — I I I want, or do not. In most
poems there was no

wanting, only arguing. It's nothing as
easy as a trap. Perhaps the
voice crept down

throat in the night, clung like late
retort. A weapon. You've
spent an age polishing

teeth but all it is is a dog,
old, taking your
wrist in its gums. See here —

but no, imperative was that
first childish thing. Put away. It
ends rather than loops. It must.

Smaller

I know the world is catamites &
unhappy marriages, which is god's
shorthand for impending
unmaking, which is my bad
longhand shrinking death
from apocalypse to orgasm.
There is a place here — which is
to say, for time & perversity, perversity
& time. As they say. In the square
something is happening. I'm sure
it's important, whenever one starts
a sentence with *in the square*
something important happens.
Otherwise no one would say
it. It makes me think of buskers
& fountains stuffed with
fistfuls of song & love
in small change, death
smaller.

First line is a misreading of a badly copied-out line from Amy De'ath's "Poems for Pescatarians", which should read: "I know the world is calamities".

Light Speed

The painting is blue and
singing. I, neither. I am sad,
yes, but my throat is good

only for coughing. The tape runs
away into voice, then silence. It is telling
me what to see. I see a pulling

away from the world,
what, at the end of the tape,
the reader calls *the light speed*

of the dream. I am not
an argument about language, but
sometimes I see them standing

in the doorway, English and
Latin, chastened schoolboys. English
in tears and Latin a

uniform with pockets, all
tucked into each other, a word
inside a word inside a word. Possession

inside action inside noun. While
English is shells in a row; the words
mustn't move. If they do

they become something else. So
English stands really still, Latin
is feeding swans but English

has no pockets. Much later
it is the mirror, and me tucked
into my body, staring:

perhaps I too
am a word &
another word within.

Ruth Tang writes poetry and plays. Her poetry has appeared in the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*. She has also won at the 2016 National Poetry Competition Singapore and been longlisted for the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize 2016. She co-edited *SingPoWriMo 2016: The Anthology* with Joshua Ip and Daryl Yam.

Eoghan Walls

The Keelhauling of Noah

With Shem's hands bound below deck, out of trouble,
Ham and Shepheth tipped the great man overboard

knifing the water, to feel each cubit and its barnacles
on the skin of his back. But ever afterwards, he swore

there were such orreries of jellyfish blooming there,
he could map out the cosmos in their glowing bells.

They multiplied so wild on the nutrients of his people,
he doubted his was the only covenant, as great swarms

loved his face until he blacked out in their tentacles.
He awoke on deck, scalped, with a cursive scripture

of all that lay outside the ark in his looping sores,
and two fingers missing. Borne to the ship's bowels,

warm with dung and the brawling ocelots, he still
found no peace from the faces of his neighbours.

Swimming Lessons

This morning a thump declared a swallow's neck was broken
below the big window. So she demanded a swallow's burial
in the furthest corner of the garden,

and now she hangs like a carcass and watches her fingers bloat
through her goggles, given up on her breathless doggy paddle
for limp drifting, only half-afloat,

gone through the looking glass into pale underworlds of water,
among the light particles and swollen legs, where she struggles
to recall swallow psalms from earlier,

how nests are made by swallows coating their tongues in mud,
how autumn looses typhoons of swallows into oceanic squalls,
but odd fledglings bounce from headbutts

to swing between the earth and air. At the sight of her gutty father
she needs breath, shoulder-blades twisting in her beds of muscle
like twin buried arrowheads of feathers.

Dreams of the Ice Bear

She is a cub again on the long swim south
treading in the dark wake of her mother
as stars rain, hissing out in the seawater.

Unending rutting. His claws pinch her,
so parched she jaws the powdery drift,
to watch the steam plume from her lips.

Losing her grip from the foot of the cliff
she tumbles skywards past the rank nests
of the kittiwake and the screeching auklets.

Inside each beached whale there is a pit
where the bodies of her long-dead cubs
live peering between the blubbery ribs.

Her paws shrunk to a seal's black nubs,
she breathes water and is untouchable,
bears lumbering afterwards in the blue chill.

Bawling toothlessly she watches her kill
stripped by foxes down to the bare bones,
unable to lift her paws up from the snow.

Horking beached blubber down her throat,
she hears the whale's lungs, and its breath
is indistinguishable from her mother's breath.

The ice is gone. The males have stayed south
to sweat and brawl on the drylands forever,
leaving her mewling cubless on the gravel.

The moon burns the blizzard at eyelevel,
until the snow leaves her and the moon alone,
its skin as warm as a teat against her nose.

The History of Aviation

As Yuang Huangtou was roughhoused off the tower
with a man-sized paper owl strapped to his shoulders

tumbling face-first into kite-wreckage and prisoners,
when the owl jerked and caught a bellyful of updraft

bearing him up into a northerly over the Purple Path,
I like to think there were a few moments he laughed,

flinging his eyes to the horizon, the way my daughter
hollows her red lungs as she casts her arms about her

when I hurl her skywards, a will-it-won't-it laughter,
briefly permitting the thought that falling is optional,

before the lurch comes, tilting the owl back to the soil
where Gao Yang's men line up at the brow of the hill.

The Story of Grace

And then there was a night when the train stopped
by a field halfway between Leuchars and Dundee
and the world was in snow as far as she could see,
the moon ridiculously big, and despite her laptop

at her seat, the boys, the shop, she took the window,
dropped to the rocky track where her ankle twisted
and soaked her jeans clambering up from the ditch
until she was scrambling across the uneven snow

taking the path of the stoat or the doe in the dark
aware of her muscles again and the edges of air
in her lungs, up her back, plunging into nowhere,
trailing warm plumes of breath beneath the stars

until the train left her there with her own sounds,
alone on the earth, wondering what happens now.

Eoghan Walls was born in Derry, and has lived in Ireland, Germany, Rwanda and Scotland. He has received an Eric Gregory Award, an Irish Arts Council Bursary and his first collection, *The Salt Harvest*, was published by Seren in 2011, and was shortlisted for the Strong Award for Best First Collection. He lectures Creative Writing at Lancaster University.

2016 Manchester Fiction Prize Short-listed Stories

The God Quetzalcoatl Has Retired And Now Runs A Pub In North Manchester Michael Conley

He likes this new work: granting, recurringly, the single recurring prayer of the drunk; the way the fallow light drags ruby through the bottom of a pint of stout. He loves the early afternoon lull, the heavy silence punctuated only by the occasional cough or the bright jangle of the fruit machine. Even the stench of the gents' toilets, which he has never been able to fully eliminate, is at least honest. The days are so still he's forgetting what it was like to be a god. Lots of heat, a little light. Smug superiority. Unmanageable mood swings.

In his last clear memory of Tenochtitlan, he is weak and sick: as his people succumb to Spanish thunder, they inevitably lose the faith that sustains him. The conquistadors toast their victory in the sizzling night. His last loyal High Priest hurriedly sews together a working human body from the butchered remains on the streets and then leaps, jacketed in flames, from the sacked city's tallest tower. He inhabits the body: not quite like putting on clothes, more like a puppeteer insinuating himself between the cells of the puppet and learning to master woodenness. Then one final choice before his omnipotence disappears forever – a time and a place, far from here.

He wakes up, naked, on the pool table of the Three Arrows, a crowd of people laughing at him. They think he's the new owner and estimate that he's in his late fifties, and he doesn't contradict them. That was three months ago. He's decided on an English name he can give in case anybody asks, but nobody has yet.

If the first adjustment to being mortal is to fear death, the second is learning to ignore that fear; reducing it to a perpetual but faraway alarm. He can't believe how often his body reminds him of its own meatiness, its slow decay, but he quickly picks up the ways to mask or delay it – toothpaste, hair dye, deodorant, wet wipes. Everything else is easy. He mastered the language within days, though even now, some narrow their eyes and ask if that's a hint of foreign they detect in his accent. He smiles enigmatically.

Sometimes they make him put the football on. His favourite camera angle is the one from above, where the men are twenty-two blobs of colour and you can watch them swirl like phosphores. Then he discovers PlayerCam: pressing the red button to follow just one footballer for the whole match. He always selects Rooney; admires that straightforward ugliness, the loosely-tethered simmering violence. He likes it when Rooney is watching and chasing something off-screen, when Rooney receives the ball, looks up, releases it again, receives the ball, looks up, releases it again. He doesn't care where the ball is when it's not in Rooney's orbit. He dismisses any complaints, doesn't understand: if you don't want to watch Rooney, why do you keep singing his name?

Neither do they understand him. They suggest he's lonely, that getting a dog might help. He's directed to www.failed-guide-dogs.org.uk, where he scrolls through pictures of the weak hearted,

the easily distracted, the slow learners. Losers in a game they didn't realise they were playing. Some of them aren't even looking into the camera for their photograph. They probably all think their noses are just as wet, their coats just as glossy as the other, more successful dogs'. He clicks on a picture of Axel, who *has no eyes but does not let this affect any aspect of his life*. He finds that unquestionably admirable, but imagines waking up with Axel sitting at the top of the stairs, stinking tongue hanging out, black sockets fixated upon him inaccurately, tail thumping on the landing, every day until one of them is dead. The thought repulses him.

After he made it clear the dog was a no-go, they started trying to find him a partner. He has no desire to share his bed with the dead weight of another body, and he doesn't need help sharing out domestic tasks. Eventually, he buys a picture frame and leaves the stock photograph in it: a black-and-white headshot of a dark-haired woman in her early forties, lip curled up over her top teeth in a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. He names her Shirley after a Billy Bragg song on the jukebox. Now whenever anyone tries to hint about their lonely friend or family member, he shrugs, nods to Shirley and leaves a pause. He doesn't know what conclusions they reach but it tends to work. He wants them to think it's complicated: over, but not his fault, and not because he harmed her or anything. He doesn't think he would ever have harmed Shirley.

When the General Election comes, he regards the concept of democracy with interest, and, with all the experience of a former god, concludes it's a stupid idea. There's a man in his pub who comes in every day and stands underneath the dartboard with his dog and a pint of mild. The man breathes loudly through a partially blocked nose, and never speaks, except when anyone asks him to move because they want to play darts, in which case he tells them to fuck off. That man's vote counts exactly the same as everybody else's.

He doesn't think much of either main party, but he does notice that the most objectionable people in the pub all seem to belong to the same side, so he registers in order to vote for the other. He marks his X with a pencil tied to a piece of string; in the privacy of a booth, as though it's dirty. He looks at the pencil tied to the piece of string. How can we be trusted to elect leaders if we can't be trusted not to walk off with the fucking pencil? He rips the ballot paper into several pieces and tosses it into the air. He kicks out at an adorably tiny plastic chair as he stalks out of the primary school. It skitters across the hall and collides with a display of many carefully cut-out and coloured-in disembodied hands. He doesn't even watch the results on TV.

Someone is hacked to death outside his pub during the night, but it's nothing to do with the election. The police don't tell him much, and he has to leave the dark stains on the wall and pavement for a few days before they allow him to hire a steam cleaner. It makes the local papers, and now his pub is that pub someone was hacked to death outside. The regulars still come but he doesn't see any new faces for a while.

He starts having nightmares, all on the same theme: sometimes he's the murderer, feeling the buttery yield of flesh to machete, sometimes the victim, trying and failing to keep from spilling himself all over the concrete. Once he's the high priest back home, sinking the obsidian knife into the chest of the virgin and squinting at the clouds as he lifts out the dripping heart. Whenever the dreams jolt him awake, he invents a happy childhood for himself, a mother with a lavender scent, and pretends to recall the sound of her lullabies.

At these moments, he does regret that there is nobody he feels he can talk to about his situation. He reads in a supermarket magazine that there is a woman in Leeds who claims to be the mortal incarnation of Pallas Athene, the Ancient Greek goddess of wisdom. There is a photograph of her standing on a crate in Leeds city centre: he finds it hard to believe her but, admittedly, he isn't much to look at himself these days either.

He gets the train to Leeds and finds her crate. She is wearing an off-white bedsheet fastened at the shoulder with a gold brooch. People walk by without even looking as she shakes her tight, shrivelled pomegranate fists at them. He smiles at her and holds his hand out. Imperiously, she takes it and steps off the crate. He looks into her eyes. It's immediately very clear to him that she is not the mortal incarnation of Pallas Athene or any other deity.

He buys her a coffee anyway. He tells her he is the mortal incarnation of Quetzalcoatl, the Mesoamerican god of wind and learning. She nods. He asks if she would like anything to eat. She orders a teacake. He asks if there is anything she'd like to know. She pauses and shakes her head. Then she asks him how many times he thinks the world has been destroyed by wind, flood and fire then re-created again from nothing. He says that as far as he knows this is the fifth time, but he can't be sure. She nods again and seems content. He wonders if claiming to be the 'mortal incarnation' of the god Quetzalcoatl is even accurate any more. It seems a very long time ago and he feels tired. Pallas Athene offers him a bite of her teacake. They part friends and he helps her back up onto her crate.

On a whim, he decides to abandon the pub, and instead gets a taxi to the airport. He arrives in Acapulco in the early hours of the morning and finds himself on the beach. Miles of bleached sand, no reference points. He thinks of staging a photograph: he would dangle his thumb close to the camera lens, while someone far away looked up in terror, as if a giant sky-thumb is crushing them. But he's alone. Instead, as the sun rises, he takes a photo of a bird flying towards him, which is either very large and in the distance or very small and almost upon him.

As the sun gets higher, the beach fills. He buys a towel and a cheap paperback from the hawkers that wander by. He wriggles on the towel all morning, trying to read his novel, arms like pink swan throats. On his back, the craning gives him neckache and he's conscious of passersby glancing at the squat beanbag of his genitals inside his underpants. On his front, the sand chafes his elbows and the glare on the white page makes him squint. On his side, he has to balance the novel and it keeps falling over. Teenage divers shout from a tall sea stack. He wishes them a rocky landing. In the distance, motorboats skitter across the bay like mayflies. He gives in and takes the six-hour bus ride to Mexico City.

He uses a consumer review website to find somewhere good for an evening meal. On the page for a cheap place just off the Zocalo he comes across this post from Don H: *Try the scallop ceviche. Nana had tacos which she shared with me. It was so nice to be out together.*

He feels a sudden rush of love for Don H. He clicks on the profile but apart from one thumbnail of a white, middle-aged man with glasses, he finds only this review. There is nothing on social media either. He rushes to the restaurant. The waitress says she doesn't know any Don H and she doesn't recognise the man in the picture. He orders scallop ceviche. It's the best thing he's ever tasted.

Later, in the hotel, he picks up a leaflet for a guided tour of the ruins of Tenochtitlan. He studies the black and white picture of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. He barely recognises it. Tomorrow he will climb it and lie on its flat top, feeling the warmed stone prickle his skin. For now, he insists upon a city view room, where he can see a pharmacy, a German pancake house and, as night settles, the anonymous yellow city lights that, for the most part, wink out in the early hours, it not being a weekend or public holiday.

Michael Conley is a 32 year old teacher from Manchester. He mostly writes poetry: his first collection *Aquarium* was published as a pamphlet by Flarestack Poets in 2014, and his second, *More Weight*, came out with Eyewear in March of this year. He took third place in the in the 2014 Bridport Flash Fiction Prize, and his poem 'These Three Young Ladies...' was Highly Commended in the 2015 Forward Prize. His work has appeared in a variety of magazines including Magma, Rialto and New Welsh Review. He is a graduate of the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Sixteen Feet

Erinna Mettler

Baby finds it first. Snuffling under driftwood and seaweed rock, a *gnang-gnang-gnang* emanating from the back of her throat. She shakes her tail and whips her head from side to side, pulling the buried treasure free, losing her footing on the uneven ground before bouncing off, a ball of wet fur and excitement.

‘Here girl!’ I call. Whistle. ‘Whatcha got there?’

She stops on the sand short of the shore-line, her prize between her front paws, gnawing and whimpering with relish. Sometimes the beach yields danger, toxic chemicals, condoms to choke on, rancid fish. I need to make sure that what she’s found is no threat. I can’t lose her too. I step towards her, my lungs still smarting from the exertion of our daily run. These days I run full-pelt for hours, feet pounding the shore, miles at a time, until I can’t feel my legs. Until I can’t feel anything. Baby eyes me, nose down, tightening her grip.

‘What is it, girl? What’s that?’ I sing-song and bend to retrieve the unknown from Baby’s slobber. She doesn’t give it up easily and a tug of war ensues, Baby’s teeth firmly clamped on one end.

I can see that it’s part of a boot. Rubber and ragged as if it’s been torn away from something, wrenched by the jaws of a shark perhaps. You do get sharks out here sometimes; people think it’s too cold this far north but we’ve even seen a great white from your boat, the tell-tale fin unmistakable, a butter knife through grey wrinkled water. The boot is dark blue, with a thick white tread. It’s exactly the same as the boots you wore to fish, rubber-soled, a built in wool sock for extra comfort, part wader, part wellington, part steel cap. You’d clomp around the house in them on work mornings like an earthbound astronaut. Ridiculous – and yes, kinda sexy, on you anyway. Your protection. A uniform as essential to your well-being as a fire-man’s or a soldier’s.

You had three pairs of boots, all worn in to serve you best, soft and moulded into the shape of you, yet still strong and durable. Two pairs are lined up in the shoe rack by the front door and the third is on you.

Baby growls and digs her paws in. I have an overwhelming desire to claim this boot, smooth and cold in my fingers. It feels like the lost piece of an almost-finished jigsaw puzzle. I pull Baby away by the collar, perhaps a little roughly, and pick up a thick stick of driftwood with my free hand.

‘Fetch, Baby!’ I shout and hurl the stick upwards and forwards into the sea where it catches a wave back to the sand. She starts to run instinctively then stops short, lively eyes dancing, whining again. She must really like this boot. I pick it up by the heel. It’s heavy, with what I assume to be wet sand trapped in the toe, the rubber is criss-crossed with pale scratches (like whale skin) and dulled by saline saturation. Baby barks, the sound echoing off the tree-line, once, twice, doubled back into four. She steps forward with one paw raised, her head cocked. I look closely at the boot. There’s

something inside, off white, a good inch around, hard and gnarly and wrapped in lime-green seaweed. I squint into the darkness. Some kind of coral? I reach in and give it a tug but it's stuck fast. The sea swells in my ears, her rhythmic rush reminding me of the blood pumping through my veins. I look at the ocean, at the place where it disappears on the horizon, then at the shoreline. A group of gulls bobs on the waves, watching me with reptilian eyes. Compelled, I tighten my grip and begin to wrestle with the creature of the boot. There's something familiar about its shape in my fist, the way it is smooth and knobby at the same time. It won't budge so I let go. Cold sweat prickles between my shoulders, I shiver in the wind.

Baby barks again and flicks up sand with her nose, jumping from side to side, her tail wagging into a blur. I peer inside and realise it's not just one thing but many connected things, fanned inside the dark, clinging to the insole. I go in again and pull determinedly, holding the heel in my left hand, my head buzzing with the wind and the waves and Baby's constant bark. Suddenly the object comes free, sending the boot flying from my hand and me flat onto my ass, the fingers of my right hand still tightly grasping the thing. I sit in astonishment, staring at the secret given up by the boot. It is, unmistakably, the remains of a human foot.

I look at it for a long time, oblivious to the wind biting through my thin running skins. Baby starts to get nervous; it's gone beyond a game now. She can't understand why this bone is any different to the bones she gets at home; she wants to crunch and gnaw, to lick out the marrow and pulverise the joints. Her body shivers tip to tail and she looks at me beseechingly, tongue lolling, foam bubbling around her teeth.

How can there be a severed foot on the beach?

There's still flesh on the toes, bloated and blubbery, a ghastly blue in colour, welded to fragments of bright orange insole. One of the nails is there too, on the big toe, monstrously opaque and jagged, swollen ridges along its length. Repulsed, I move to drop the foot onto the sand but my fingers seem glued to it. I try to look away but my head won't turn and my eyes won't close. As I hold it up for closer inspection, a terrible thought explodes into consciousness. What if it's your foot? What if I'm holding your ankle bone in my clenched fist?

An image comes to me of you erect, solid with blood and instinct, my hand sliding eagerly up and down. You, head back, eyes flickering, panting through parted lips as sweat glistens on your chest.

Scalding heat rises to my cheeks. My hand burns. I hurl the foot onto the beach and throw up on the sand.

I'm swilling my mouth out with water when Baby drops the empty boot at my feet. She doesn't go for the foot; sensing now that it's out of bounds. She whimpers and nudges my arm. I feel better for being sick. My head begins to clear, practical thoughts looming in capital letters. WE SHOULD REPORT IT. TELL SOMEONE. SOMEONE MIGHT NEED TO KNOW. I stand up and brush the sand from my legs.

'Good girl,' I whisper, rubbing Baby behind her ears. I fish for a treat from my pocket, tossing it into the air for her to jump and catch. You taught her how, remember? The first time we brought her to

the beach for a walk. She was eight weeks old, fuzzy and tiny, peeing uncontrollably over every rock, barking at the tide like it was a living thing. She was so tired by the end you carried her home inside your coat. Our Baby.

I pick up the boot and quickly scoop the foot into it, ankle first so I don't have to touch it to get it in. The toes stick out over the ragged cuff. A slimy lace of seaweed slicks like a tentacle across my wrist, cold against the skin. I flick it away with my fingernail, bile resurging in my throat.

It crosses my mind to just leave the boot and foot here and forget Baby ever found them. But I can't shake the idea that it could be yours, that a part of you has somehow found a way back to me. We start back to the house, Baby barking for more treats, me holding the boot unsteadily upright by the heel. A flock of geese cross noisily overhead, an arrow pointing the way home.

'Not that uncommon,' says Sherriff Wilkes (or Steve as he's known over beers at The Pelican). The boot and the foot sit between us on his desk stinking of sea and bad meat.

'Not so much this far south but just over the border in BC they've had fifteen in the last year. Usually sneakers, if you can believe it, rather than actual work boots. They're not always so decayed. Sometimes it's as if they've been newly chopped off.'

He leans over and pushes the foot to one side with a pen, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

'I would say this one's been out there for several weeks. The toes didn't get eaten because they were lodged deep in the boot but the ankle bone is picked pretty clean. Looks like something had a pretty good go at the boot too.' He raises his immensely bushy eyebrows. 'Shark maybe?'

He turns the foot out onto the desk, tipping gritty sand out with it onto the wood, and prods some more.

'See how the skin has welded to the shoe lining?'

I try not to look.

'But... why? How? How is there a severed foot on the beach? Correction, how have *sixteen* severed feet washed up on nearby beaches? What is it, gangs or something?'

Steve laughs, bear-like to match his build.

'In British Columbia? Yeah, well-known for its gangsters. Those Salish tribes are real bastards. Always fighting over fishing rights...'

I'm not laughing. Steve clears his throat.

'Sorry,' he says. 'You must have had quite a shock. It's the thing that falls off first is all, the hands and feet. If there's a body in the water, the rocking motion of the tide dislodges the extremities, the hands and feet drift off leaving the body to sink. The tide can carry them for miles. The Sound seems to be the place they naturally wash up, the current, I s'pose. I don't know why it's just feet that wash

up rather than hands, protected by the shoes maybe. A lot of people drown in the ocean, Brian, no way of telling who it belonged to or what happened to them.'

He realises what he's said. I can tell by the way he looks down at his desk and doodles with the pen on the blotter in front of him.

I let out an involuntary moan and he looks up at me, mouth open but without words.

'I... I thought it could be Kevin's, you know, given where I found it and the fact that I found it, like he'd sent a bit of himself back to me. Something to bury.'

The tears come fast then, silently. I taste their salt on my lips. It's the first time I've cried since the night of the storm. I didn't even cry at the memorial. There was nothing to cry about, you weren't there. It was like you could still come home. We didn't have a body, just a corny photograph of you in your wedding suit – not like you at all. Your Mom said that as she held my hand, *Not like Kevin at all*. Steve pulls a Kleenex from the box on his desk and hands it to me, avoiding my eyes again.

'I tell you what, Brian, because it's undoubtedly a male foot and, even though it's extremely unlikely and I'll probably get in trouble for authorising it, I'll get forensics to take a look, see if they can call it one way or another.'

I dream about you again, like I have pretty much every night since you've been gone. Normally I see you on your boat. You are out on a catch, pulling in the nets, the effort etched on your face, working rhythmically with the crew, happy. I'm always on the beach with Baby. She's barking at the tide and I'm waving frantically and shouting at you to look up at the storm clouds gathering overhead. You can't hear me, even though I'm screaming myself hoarse, you remain intent on your work and the banter of your shipmates.

This dream is different, a precise memory of our last goodbye. I see you walk from the kitchen carrying a square of fresh toast in your mouth. That long-legged, cowboy swagger that was the first thing I noticed about you. You grab your boots from the shoe-rack and slump on the sofa, bleary eyed. It's not even dawn, pitch black outside, the wind rattling the windows. You take the toast from your mouth and rip a chunk away with your teeth. Baby sits by your feet, attentive to every chew.

'Do you want to go to the city this weekend?' you say. 'We haven't been for months and we should be in the clover after this trip. Word is there's millions of sock eye just North West of here. I won't have to go out again for the rest of the year.' You smile. 'We could book into the Fairmont. Take a second honeymoon.'

I lean down and kiss you on the lips, taste the syrup you slather on your toast, look into your eyes. 'Sure. Why not? I'll make a reservation.'

I grab the toast from your hand and make my way back to the bedroom. At the door I turn and watch you slide your feet into your big fisherman's boots and push and pull until they fit snugly around your calves.

Erinna Mettler is a Brighton-based writer. Her first novel, *Starlings*, was published in 2011 and described by one critic as doing for Brighton what *The Wire* did for Baltimore. She is a founder and co-director of The Brighton Prize for short fiction and of the spoken word group Rattle Tales. Her stories have been published internationally and short-listed for The Bristol Prize, The Fish Prize and The Writers & Artists Yearbook Award. Her career highlight was having a short story read by a *Game of Thrones* actor at Latitude Festival. Erinna's new short story collection on the theme of fame, *Fifteen Minutes*, will soon be published by Unbound Publishing.

The Dark Instruments

Laura Pocock

They are neatly laid out on the workbench in size order, starting with the smallest on the left. That's important. Keeping your tools handy is one thing. But when you reach for a heavy-duty, skew chisel knife, that's what you want to pick up. Details matter.

Unfortunately, some nights you can never be sure that you've returned everything to its proper place. Even if you remember arranging everything precisely – even if you *distinctly* remember checking and rechecking – sometimes doubt lies next to your head on the pillow and whispers in your ear that you are wrong. That something's out of place.

So you get up.

You walk across the bare floorboards, dragging your calloused feet through the dust. The key to the garage is hung up in its usual spot by the door – you take this as a good sign that everything's five-by-five. But you still need to check just in case.

Just in case. The phrase you use so often now that hearing it has become as commonplace as the sound of your own name. Unplug the electric heater, just in case. Lock the window, just in case. You never finish the sentence or conceive the consequence of inaction: just in case *what*, exactly, never comes up.

There is a chill in the air tonight but you don't mind. It barely registers. You concentrate on the task: you fumble the key into the lock with a shaking hand and slide the garage door up. The smell hits you immediately.

You pretend to ignore what's under the white tarpaulin on the table in the middle of the garage. You walk around it, as though the peaks and troughs in the tarp don't inspire any fascination. Out of the corner of your eye, you see it move, but you pretend you don't. And there, resting on a green towel in size order, are your knives.

They wink up at you from a square of moonlight let in by the window, but when you run your fingers down each tool, your hand casts a long shadow across the blades. Your fingers walk along the white beech wood handles and the ergonomic tactility pleases you. Little beauties. Everything is just as it should be.

When you turn around to go back to the house, you see it again. The tarpaulin. You hold your breath and you allow your greedy eyes to take in the entire table. You reach out to touch it. You'd known all along that walking past and pretend to ignore it a second time was out of the question.

This is the real reason you got out of bed. A small part of you knows that. The knives were just an excuse. A cold breeze rustles the tarp and it moves like before. Now that you're here anyway, you tell yourself you might as well have a little look. Make sure everything's A-OK. You take a fist full of the tarp and are just about to whip it off, when a light flashes in your eyes.

'Who's there?' whispers the light-bearer.

You drop the tarp. In the white beam of the flashlight, you feel caught. Your instinct is to put your hands in the air, but you know this will imply guilt and you quickly let your arms fall to your sides.

'Oh hell, Marshall! You about gave me a god-damned heart attack!' you cry. This is good. You deflect blame.

'Sorry, Bobby!'

You sigh. No one else has called you Bobby since you were a teenager. Marshall had never adjusted to calling you Robert. This isn't the time to correct him.

'I heard a noise out here. I saw your garage door was open so I assumed the worst,' says Marshall.

'Would you get that light out of my eyes?' You pat your chest with your right hand.

'Sure, sure.' He points the flashlight downward and now you can see his wide eyes.

'What are you doing out here? It's past two in the morning.' The eyes move around the garage, searching for answers before finally landing on your face.

You think. You have known Marshall since you were both kids, but you were always in the smart class. You can talk your way out of this. Your mind shuffles a deck of possible answers and finally lands on the sympathy card. You can't play this card often. If you do, it stops working. But this is an emergency.

'Ah, well, it's my knee again. I've been trying to get organised out here and a few days ago I knelt down to move some of those paint cans. It's been keeping me awake since.'

'Can't they do anything for that knee? With you being a decorated war hero and all, you'd think that—'

You let him talk. You've heard this speech before. He's just getting to the part where he calls it a travesty and you begin to wonder what his reaction would be if you told him the truth. Your mouth is now full of the sentence you could say. You could tell him what the doctors have told you: that there is no pain.

There's no physical reason for the pain you're experiencing, Mr McNeil. It has healed well for a gun-shot wound, barely any scar-tissue. You've been to three doctors and they've all confirmed it. What would Marshall make of that? You test the water with:

'They don't really know what's wrong with it.'

But this just invigorates his rant about what this country is coming to. No, Marshall is the wrong person to talk to about this, and you have allowed him to dictate the line of conversation too long. You remember where you are. Marshall's proximity to your secret. There's a tightness in your chest and you realise it's been there since the moment he shone the damned flashlight at you. He needs cutting off.

'So anyway, sorry to have woken you, Marshall. I couldn't sleep. I thought I might have left the heater on out here, so I got up to check.'

'You oughta be careful, walking around in the dark,' says Marshall. He grips his dressing gown tight in the centre to save his chest from the cold air. 'You don't want to make that knee worse.'

'No, not at all,' you agree. 'Well, it's getting late, so...'

But you can tell he's not fully listening. He has finally seen the table, and is walking towards it.

'Whoa – what's all this?'

You sigh.

'It's just a project I've been working on.' You don't like where this is going but once the cow is already dead, you may as well eat the steak. 'Would you like to see?'

'Would I ever!' He points the torch back in your face, and you are smiling now.

'Alright, Marshall. Just do me one favour first: pull the garage door closed behind you. We wouldn't want to expose what's under here to the wind.'

'Good idea.'

You watch him slide the garage door to the ground. He does it slowly, quietly, like you should have on your way in. You click your tongue and give him a nod.

'Atta boy.' He never seems to mind that you speak down to him. If anything, you sense that he likes it, which is odd for a guy in his thirties.

If you had known twenty minutes ago that you'd be about to do this, you'd have stayed on the couch, counting the ceiling slats. But you're here now, and it can't be helped. You tell Marshall to take two corners of the tarp and gently lift before moving it to the side of the table, so as not to disturb what's underneath. Wouldn't want to spoil the impact.

Together, you lift the tarp like unmaking a bed, and the objects below are revealed. You suddenly feel vulnerable.

Marshall gasps.

'Oh, my...!' He stands with his hands pressed together in front of his chest. He seems to instinctively know you don't want him to touch. He knows these are yours.

You watch him as he looks at the miniature model town you've created with your hands. The model buildings and trees stand proud in the beam of Marshall's torch. *Look at us, they seem to say. Aren't we special?*

'Bobby! I had no idea. I knew you were talented in shop class when we were kids. I've always loved those chess sets you make... but this is something else!'

You say nothing. You just watch him and tell yourself you can show him the town without revealing its secret. Your secret.

'This is Woodbury, isn't it?' he asks, but he doesn't take his eyes off the miniature town to see me nod. 'Oh, wow! It's all here. You got Main Street all perfect: Barney's Hock Shop, the pancake house, Chick's Hardware Store.' He shakes his head in what seems like awe.

You can't quite tell, but you think that the feeling in your chest is pride. You figure this is how new parents must feel when they are told their babies are beautiful.

Marshall walks a few steps around the table. When his hand brushes against a rough indentation, he shines the torch to reveal a compass carved into the surface. He chuckles and shakes his head again.

He moves north of Main Street to Little Hill. The model of All Saints Evangelical Church is nestled into the side of the hill, just as it is in the real Woodbury.

'Would you get a load of this?' He claps you hard on the back. 'Kristy and me, we got married in this church.'

You say nothing. The truth is, Marshall's wedding is one of those memories that are now so hazy, so tarnished by the fact that the following week you shipped out and your life went to hell. But you don't tell him that. Instead you try to bury the thought by staring at your handiwork.

'Best day of my life,' he continues. 'Before Little Jim was born, anyway. Hey – you even got the missing stained glass window.' He looks at you in confusion. You panic. Could Marshall figure you out? 'But why would you include that? It wasn't exactly a great moment for the town, to hear that vandals had broken it.'

Your heart feels like mortar rounds firing in your chest.

'It's a coincidence, that's all. I'm still working on the church. Stained glass is no simple thing in miniature, you know.'

Good. This is good. Marshall is nodding and his attention is caught by the next tiny treasure. You watch in dismay as he reaches out to touch the yellow school bus in front of Woodbury Elementary. You had thought there was an unspoken understanding of no touching, but apparently not. Your stomach lurches as he turns the bus upside down and spins the rear left wheel with an index finger. He giggles like a kid and sets the bus back down.

'This is unbelievable, Bobby. I always wondered what you were up to in here. How long did it take you?'

'I don't know, it's just a hobby.' You shrug and give him your best *Aw, shucks* smile. A hobby. It had started out so innocently.

'A hobby that could earn you some proper moolah, friend. You should start a website. "Tinkertowns.com" has a nice *cha-ching* to it, wouldn't you say?'

'Ha!' You try to say very little. Your palms are sweating. You realise now that you just want him gone.

Marshall moves west, toward the houses.

'You even got our street. Kristy would love this.' He bends down to look at the model of his own house, 1360 Rovello Drive. 'These are so realistic, I feel like I could look through Randy's window and see his *X-Men* posters.' He shakes his head, then stands up straight. 'Have you ever put lights in these houses? You could make bespoke Christmas villages.'

You clench your fists. You tell him that wouldn't be a good idea. It's not safe.

'So you've tried it?'

You try to appear calm. You tell him yes.

'So what happened?'

You tell him it had started a fire. Your eyes flit briefly to the shelf where the burnt model house stands. You blink a few times to try to cover yourself, but Marshall is already walking to the shelf and has no reservation about taking the charred building down.

'I see now. You're right, this could have been nasty.' He turns it in his hands and places it back on the shelf. When Marshall moves back to the table, you think you've gotten away with it.

'Listen, Marshall, I'm beat. I think we should get back to our beds, what do you say?' You think you're speaking normally under the circumstances.

'Well, I could just about look at this thing all night, but I guess you're right.'

You want to let out a huge sigh of relief but you know it would be a huge tell to let slip on the final hand. Marshall helps you cover the town with the tarp, and you even manage to crack a joke about 'tucking her in'. When you're out of the garage and the door is locked tight, you think you are safe.

Then he turns to you.

'Wait.' He frowns. He is whispering now that you are back outside. 'That burnt house. It was the Henry place, right?' He takes a few steps to the right and leans to look in the direction of Phillip Henry's newly restored house.

You freeze up. You would open your mouth to answer, but he's already connecting the dots in his head.

'Uh huh,' he says, and scratches his rough chin. It sounds like sandpaper. 'It was definitely the Henry place. How strange.'

'Strange? How so?' Your acting skills have been worn precariously thin tonight. You wish you'd just stayed put on the couch earlier. You wish you'd never started building the town. More than anything, you wish you could just tell Marshall to mind his damned bees wax.

'Well, yeah... what with the real fire in the Henry place last year,' he said. 'What a coincidence!'

You watch a frown form as his gaze shifts from the new Henry house across the street, to the black remains of the model on the garage shelf. Marshall then looks at the dark outline of the tarp for several seconds before his widened eyes fall on you.

Perhaps it is just your heightened nerves, but you could swear he looks paler now. He backs away from you a step. Apparently, Marshall has a lousy poker face.

'You had better go inside, now,' you say. 'It's dangerously cold.'

He tugs his dressing gown closed and treads lightly toward his home. You watch him hurry inside. Marshall's door shuts with a click. You stand in the crisp November night for a further five minutes to check he doesn't come back out.

Just in case.

Laura Pocock was born in South Wales and is an English teacher living in Leicester. She holds a BA (Hons) in English from the University of Leicester, and will soon graduate with an MA in Creative Writing from Nottingham Trent University. Laura has written a body of Eco-poetry and enjoys experimenting with the sonnet form. Her short story, 'Recruitment', has recently been published in *Monster*, an anthology of literature by Nottingham writers. She is currently writing a futuristic young adult novel.

Succubus

Lucy Ribchester

How many times, in all honesty, has Rebecca seen the mechanic in the past two months? It might be every day, it is possibly only a couple of times a week. He is either new to the garage or she has accidentally changed her routine so that she walks past ten minutes later these days. Maybe there are more people queuing up at the baker's, maybe it is her stubbornness to go anywhere else for breakfast, or to eat at home, or that she has begun recently to fold her towel once again after showering, and tuck it onto the pine rail in the bathroom instead of dumping it on the tiles. All these things add seconds. Of course she has noticed him. It is impossible not to notice when a man stares at you every day – not every day, a couple of times a week. And though he is lecherous, stained, balding, lazy-eyed – nothing like Liam ever was – he has an air about him that says he keeps clean underneath the smeary overalls. His beard is neat. She reckons he looks after his teeth, and his belly might smell of grease but there will be soap down there too.

When he dies, she is driving home. She works this out later from the timing of the ambulance outside the garage, and the announcement on the news. He was stabbed around five. A fight. They have someone in custody already, a client. The photograph they use makes his face look jowelly and goblinesque. It doesn't do him justice, and for some reason it is this that tips Rebecca over the edge. Standing in the living room in front of the television she sends the heavy base of her tequila glass plunging into her stomach, so that while it doesn't smash, it gives her a nasty, searing, satisfying pain.

She goes upstairs without dinner and crashes out, tired as a child, in the spare room. All around her on the sofa-bed Liam's things are neatly folded into piles: red t-shirt, black wallet, his cufflinks with the Gaudi lizard on them. As she sleeps her hands reach out and topple them into flotsam; the cufflinks chime in her dreaming ear like a tiny church bell.

**

She wakes to see the broad blue back of the mechanic facing away from her. She is awake. She can touch him. More than that, she can smell him, and she does not smell in her dreams. Engine grease, as suspected, but also raisins and seaweed, aftershave for an older man, an embarrassing choice that seems in a way unsurprising. The taste of dead tequila is rancid in her mouth, but so is the scent of his jeans, a ferric, intestinal, stab-wound smell still steaming from his right thigh, with its rip sticking blue thread to skin as he twists at the waist and lets her gently peel them down.

The room is half-dark. Six o'clock, autumn, with the curtains open, only one streetlight a blur of amber outside, and the top of his face is in blue shadow; she never once sees his eyes, even when he comes close enough to kiss. But the lips and the beard and the tongue, they are real. His face beneath her fingertips sweats wildly, and the hairs on his fingers are clotted with blood where they tried to stem the wound.

She looks at her own thin hands, pressing down on his unbuckled hips – stare at your hands, this way you know you are awake – but she can't speak. Neither of them can. It is as if the fatal

cardiac arrest that finished him off, the gash in his thigh that pumped the life out of him, has also stopped his mouth.

When the sun rises she is the only one in the bed, but the smell of metal is tart in her lungs. Liam's cufflinks are pressed in a fist to her nose, and she is left with the unmistakable, unshakeable feeling that she has been entered.

**

The following month the patissier who runs the bakery on the high street dies in a climbing accident. That afternoon Rebecca falls asleep on the kitchen floor and wakes with a bready, blonde aroma in her mouth. He is strong for a spirit, more bagel than cake. He leaves a lovebite on her throat that she covers knowingly with a silk scarf at work for the rest of the week. Afterwards she lies spread-eagled, shivering, a butter knife in her hand, icy to the touch, one thought in her head: a ghost's orgasm is frighteningly cold.

Soon there is no stopping them. Drowned poets come sliding out of river beds. A rock star who died of a drug overdose materialises in an opiate haze in her easy chair one day and licks her sternum, the casual way he might lick closed a roll-up. Monks from the previous millennium come in a long line, cassocks trembling, unsure where to put their hands, eagerly watching, one after the next. Rebecca takes them all patiently, exhausted. It isn't boring. They all have stories to whisper, illuminated gold and blue, too hazy to read, just a blinding burst of stars behind her closed eyes. Shipwrecked sailors come with filth in their mouths and waterlogged tattoos, grumbling about the whores who gave them syphilis.

Every time a ghost visits she allows herself to take another thing of Liam's to the charity shop in the morning. The pile in the spare room depletes. The cufflinks go one day and a few weeks later she doesn't even remember having taken them, just wonders where they have gone.

She begins to sleepwalk. She wakes at six in the morning in the doorway outside the mortuary, crouched with one hand down her knickers and the other balled in her mouth. She wakes in the cemetery, clutching a freezing grave between her thighs.

She Googles 'sex with ghosts' and finds a website where for \$14.99 you can download Seven Secrets to Seducing a Succubus. The owner's blog says his wife left him, and afterwards he despaired of humans and discovered spiritual sex with Elodie, a benign sprite, who, when he is falling asleep, strokes his hair in a comforting way.

**

Liam. Temperate, ginger.

She has tried to track him down online but he has been clever in mopping up the various traces of himself. He has taken down his website, vanished into ether. After the confrontation, the names he called her, names she cannot bear to remember, what else could he have done?

**

Tuesday: Duncan walks into the dispensary wearing metal-togged boots, heavy enough to make the counter shake, carrying his motorcycle helmet under one arm. Rebecca has spotted him before.

Sometimes he has an organ box and she has to let him jump the queue. Today he is on his way back from delivering a liver and he has time to lean against the counter and chat.

He says the weather is bad up the A9, there was a crash because the roads were slippery. He had to be careful with the liver riding pillion. When he says the words 'liver' and 'pillion' she blushes and drops her pen so that she can duck beneath the counter and will have the excuse of a headrush for the blush when she rises. She catches him staring at her shaking hands as she uses the till to write off the prescription with the ward code he gives her. She takes perverse pleasure in watching him watch her humiliation. He reaches across the counter to touch her brow the way a doctor or parent might, but his hand lands in the wrong place and the twisted Celtic ring on his middle finger snags her eyelid.

The next day he asks how her eye is.

The day after that he asks her to dinner.

**

Rebecca has trouble deciding what to wear. All her clothes seem to make her itch in different places. She never went to dinner with Liam, not ever, and the ghosts don't seem to mind how untrimmed or slovenly she is.

She settles for a cream blouse and black skirt, office wear, a novelty for her. She tells her colleagues she is meeting a friend 'whose identity she can't disclose', and they take her story at face value.

All day, while she measures powder and pill-pop sheets into boxes, her heart feels lumpen and slippery and at one point begins to palpitate. She is sure it is the cause of the restlessness she feels, and it makes her want to reach inside between her ribs and slide the thing out. She isn't sure what she would do with it, but this image fixes in her head: her heart, gleaming scarlet, a femme fatale's licked lips, beating irregularly.

**

Duncan has a habit of keeping his teeth bared in a half smile while he is listening, and pronouncing long words deliberately, as if she is slow and he is gallant. He has an exceptionally symmetrical face, sharp cheekbones. He tells her to choose the wine. His hair is beginning to thin. He reminds her of someone she knew when she was a child, a friend's big brother who used to tickle her in a way that made her uncomfortable, but also gave her a feeling she now recognises as arousal.

She chooses scallops. He orders blue steak. The texture of it against his serrated knife reminds her of what she thought her heart must look like: sinewy, sliced, as good as eaten. A sudden torrent of nausea breaks above her head and she has to make an excuse about a migraine and go home. He insists on paying the bill.

In the spare room she tries to find Liam online, but he has retreated from the internet entirely. One of the conditions of the court order is that she is not allowed to try and contact him on Facebook.

**

In the secret moments when she is balled on her bed looking backwards, she knows the cufflinks started it. Most people at the gym – including Liam – didn't use a locker, dumped their bags in the corner. She had meant to give them back. The books she lifted from a bag he'd taken to the charity shop two doors from his flat. The t-shirt and wallet were trickier. They had required some degree of deception, which even now she doesn't like to think about because it brings on a heavy shame. At the time the path seemed clearly drawn, perfectly laid out; she could only fathom things turning out for the best. She had thought it would all be worth it, that the grains of sand he had dropped in her path when his eyes grabbed her in the street, when he picked out flatteringly heavy free-weights for her, when her heart was gaping in the wee hours and she read on his website that his song-writing inspirations were Emmylou Harris and Joni Mitchell, grains of sand she had blown into elaborate glass palaces for them both to inhabit; she had thought he could see them as well.

Instead he set an IP address tracker on his website so he could keep tabs on how many times she visited. He logged her phone number. He went to the police. Unlike the ghosts, Liam never had sex with Rebecca.

**

Duncan says the evening was a success, and as she listens to him say this, for a fleeting second she catches a glimpse of herself through his green eyes: demure, nervous, light-footed with propriety. The thought thrills and stuns her. But a moment later she is back in the dispensary, in crimson cords and a white coat, her hair parted like a farmhouse loaf, and he is looking at her, and she feels her body come apart: for a second the world doesn't feel quite real, as if she has stepped into someone else's dream.

Duncan asks her out three times again before she agrees. Each time she declines he shakes his head as if she has played a blinder of a chess move. How, she wonders, how can he not see the vomit swilling in her stomach? How can he misread her anxiety as a fantasy of feminine wiles?

She agrees to go to the aquarium on Sunday afternoon, then in a fit of panic goes home and has sex with a student who died in a plane crash, a boy with acne and hair caked in coconut-smelling muck.

**

It isn't anything Duncan does. If anything, she blames the octopus. After clapping eyes on its tentacles she cannot shake the association with Duncan's hands. He invites her home but every time he touches her, even slightly, her body produces a screaming laugh. He strokes her throat, she shrieks. He reaches for her back, she cackles. She tries pushing her hand under his t-shirt but the feel of the hair sends funny jerking signals to her brain, squeezing it so that she cannot touch and think at the same time.

Every perfect, mortal, wet and scented piece of him she wants. But the only way she can calm herself enough to let him kiss her is by thinking back to the mechanic, by dismantling the man in front of her and reconstructing him as one who isn't really there.

**

He snores like he is trapped under water, but her dream is gin clear. Like a stroke of Elodie the Succubus's finger, it lights her scalp.

She is waiting at the car park exit, sees Duncan on his bike and she follows. All the way to the hospital, hiding in the shadows of traffic as cars bob lanes. He emerges, organ-box free, climbs back onto his bike. The traffic is light, 11am. She should be back at the dispensary. Her break ended half an hour ago.

Her seatbelt is fastened, the gears were checked last night at the garage where the mechanic used to work.

He hooks into the dual carriageway. She accelerates on the inside, overtakes. He's fast but she floors it, and does he recognise her in her sunglasses? Does he know the registration of her car? She cuts suddenly into a slip road and brakes the car into a spin; once she has one-eighty'd she floors it. Screeches left back onto the highway.

They face each other, flying.

His green eyes stab through the black shine of his visor. This is what she has learned to do, see through things, substance, matter, and the realisation that she could be riding a shooting star towards her future makes the speed and the dizziness no less petrifying, no less thrilling. Does he panic? Is that why he doesn't swerve?

One hand on the wheel, smiling, smiling. She reaches down the other and unclips her—

**

White air, clean sheets.

Two green snakes on monitors, side by side.

Two hearts beating.

Lucy Ribchester lives in Edinburgh. She has written two novels, *The Hourglass Factory* and *The Amber Shadows*. Her short fiction has been published in various journals and previously shortlisted for the Costa Short Story Award. She is a former recipient of a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award and this year was awarded a Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship, during which time she wrote the story 'Succubus' (short-listed for the 2016 Manchester Fiction Prize). She also writes about dance and circus for *The List* magazine and tutors English.

The First Hard Rain

Sophie Wellstood

Somewhere over the Irish sea an almighty storm must have exploded, a tempest of such Biblical proportions that a flock of seagulls, a flock of chaotic, tumbling, terrified birds, hundreds upon hundreds of them, had been forced miles inland: herring gulls, black backed gulls – all now so far away from the wild spray and sleet that Rachael doubted they would ever find their way back to their desolate ocean home.

But what a stupid thing to think. As if seagulls could get lost, or would be bothered by wintery English weather. Rachael knew that the real reason for the God-awful screeching above her was unromantic and mundane: the city's landfill site attracted any number of scavengers, of a variety of species, and the gulls were swooping over hillocks of human waste. Some herrings, at least, would swim safer today.

She gathered her thoughts and concentrated on the scene in front of her. Peter, her ex-husband, and Val, his mother, leaned against the footbridge railings, Peter in a blue anorak over his suit, Val in a too-tight black jacket. They stared north. Val breathed heavily, red-cheeked and rigid-jawed. After a few moments she pulled a green plastic tub from a carrier bag at her ankles. Thirty feet below, the early morning traffic sped by in rhythmic waves, lights still on, occasional windscreen wipers moving like scolding fingers. Rachael had to resist the urge to flick them the V.

Peter took the tub. 'Human ashes are heavier than most people anticipate,' he said. 'They're crushed bone, to be precise, not ash at all. Phosphates and calcium. That's why one mustn't put them on the roses, Ma, no organic value in them at all, none whatsoever.'

As soon as the lid was off, a puff of grey dust blew up and out of the tub, some of it settling on his moustache.

Val looked at her son and opened her hands. Peter tipped a small amount of ashes into his mother's cupped palms. He then nodded at Rachael and she too opened her hands and let him tip a pile of ash into them. She wondered which parts of Terry's crushed skeleton she was cradling. Tibia? Rib? Thick skull?

The lid crunched as Peter screwed it back on. Val tipped some of her ashes back into his hands and then they all became still, waiting for a suitable break in the traffic. At this hour, the M6 was mostly lorries and vans, but with every passing minute the volume of Audis, BMWs and Range Rovers increased as the West Midlands commuters accelerated through the bitter morning.

'We'll just throw ever such a tiny bit,' Val said, mindful of creating a danger to other road users. In these conditions, she'd repeated since leaving the house, in these conditions the safe stopping distance would be at least seventy-five metres, and she would not be held responsible for causing a hazard.

Now, standing by the railings, she looked wildly at Rachael and Peter.

'It was his favourite motorway,' she said, her voice breaking.

They opened their hands and let go. Terry's dust didn't plummet into the traffic as Val had feared, but was snatched horizontally away from them, whipped into thin cloudy columns which stretched and curled over the hard shoulder towards the junction with the M54. The road to north Wales.

Val whispered something which Rachael could not hear. Drops of moisture collected on Peter's moustache and the seagulls continued their incessant shrieking up above.

After a few minutes of what she hoped was a respectful silence, Rachael put her gloves back on and rested a hand on Val's shoulder.

'Perhaps he's on his way to the caravan,' she said, and instantly wished the words back, heat flooding her face. 'No, no. I'm sorry. I meant—'

Val looked at her in bewilderment. Peter put the plastic tub back in the carrier bag, blinking hard.

Five minutes later the three of them had climbed down the steps and walked to where the Volvo was parked. Rachael sat in the back and let her breath steam up the window. Peter put on Radio 2 and drove at a steady fifty-five miles per hour for fifteen minutes.

The countryside was ugly in this part of the world. Flat, scrubby fields stretched to a horizon jagged with chimneys, tower blocks and steel pylons. Bone-thin ponies stood motionless beside barbed wire fences, and mile after mile of the roadside bramble was strewn with fluttering plastic.

The King's Head Hotel and Executive Golf Club sat five minutes off the dual carriageway, hidden by a shimmering wall of poplar trees. Peter reversed into the first space available after the disabled bays, then got out to open the passenger door for Val and helped her across the car park.

After they'd used the toilets, Rachael bought them all coffee and carrot cake in the Garden Terrace bar, her treat, she absolutely insisted. They were the only customers.

On a far wall, a wide screen TV showed a twenty-four hour news channel, the two presenters silently mouthing events unfolding in Libya, Iraq and London, whilst a stream of words slid across the screen.

Rachael said she would stay in the bar whilst Peter and Val took the rest of Terry down to the river, or at least as far as Val was able to walk. After they left, Rachael went to the window and watched the two slow-moving figures with the carrier bag cross the wet lawn. The February drizzle was turning into a cold, hard rain and she did not expect them to be out there for very long.

Two years ago, on a golden September evening, the TV playing impossibly loudly, she had taken Peter's supper plate to the kitchen, put it in the dishwasher and told him she was going for a bit of a walk. He hadn't looked away from the girl dancing with a little white dog.

Peter moved back in with Terry and Val a week later. Rachael kept the house – she had paid for most of it, and Steve moved in after a respectful period. A lazy, workable truce settled between them all and Rachael continued to do Terry's books because she was a good accountant and why not?

She heard a soft chiming from her bag and pulled out her phone. Steve's message was a single question mark. She typed back a single exclamation mark, followed by two x's, then went to the bar and asked for a vodka and slim line tonic. Double.

'Any ice with that?' According to the shiny badge on her breast, the woman serving was called Lorrelle. She was older than Rachael by about ten years. Rachael shook her head.

'He used to drink here a lot,' Lorrelle said, putting Rachael's glass on a frilly paper mat. Her nails were manicured to a sharp, bloody red. Her lipstick matched.

Rachael flinched. 'You knew him?'

Lorrelle laughed without humour. 'Not personally. But I recognised her, the wife. From the papers. I'm good with faces. Poor cow.' She crossed her arms. 'Sorry. You related?'

'Nope. Daughter-in-law. Ex.' Rachael swallowed the vodka in three long pulls. She wiped her mouth cowboy-style, and slid the glass back to Lorrelle. 'We all make mistakes.'

'Terry Hastings,' Lorrelle said. 'My niece was one of his pupils. Passed first time. Surprise surprise.' Again, the humourless laugh. She waved Rachael's ten pound note away. 'No, you're all right, love.'

Peter and Val returned half an hour later. The cold wind brought with it a swirl of dead leaves which scurried around their ankles like rats. Val's shoes were caked with mud, the tops of her feet spilling out over the tight cream pumps, so wholly and predictably inappropriate for the weather. She sank into the leather sofa, her hair stuck to her cheeks, her chest heaving, her skirt and knees wet through.

She looks like a walrus, Rachael thought, feeling the zip of vodka and caffeine loosen her neck and shoulders. Actually, she looks very, very ill. Days numbered, surely. And then what? Peter would inherit a business that no one would touch with a bargepole and a house with sticky carpets that smelled of dog and bacon.

'So that's that,' Peter said, his eyes hard. He sat back in his chair, the empty green tub by his feet. He clicked his fingers in the direction of the bar. Rachael watched as Lorrelle slowly turned around. Peter raised his chin and nodded at the cups on the table. Lorrelle stood still, hands on hips. Rachael noticed a small patch of red developing on the side of Peter's neck. He pointed again to the table. Lorrelle cupped a hand behind one ear and raised her eyebrows.

'For Christ's sake,' Peter said, and cleared his throat. 'Refills, if you don't mind.'

Lorrelle didn't move.

'Is there a problem?' Peter said, the red patch spreading up his throat. Rachael wanted to kick her feet with glee.

Lorrelle wiped her hands on a towel and walked slowly towards them, just like a bear, Rachael thought, a bear that had stepped out from its cage.

'What can I get you?' she said, standing over Peter.

'More coffee, thanking you,' Peter said. His neck was puce. 'Ma?'

'I think I'd like a small sherry, please,' Val said. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her cheeks blotchy.

'A sherry,' Lorrelle repeated. '*Fino, Manzanilla, Amontillado, Olorosso?*'

Val stared at her.

'Or Harvey's Bristol Cream?'

Val nodded. 'Yes, yes, a Harvey's Bristol Cream. That will be lovely. Thank you.'

Lorrelle looked at Rachael. 'Another mineral water for you?' she asked.

Rachael smiled. 'Thank you. Thank you very much.'

'Perhaps we'll be left in peace now,' Val said.

She sipped at the sherry. Peter stared at the ceiling, gripping his coffee, knuckles white.

'Do you want to undo your tie a bit, love?' Val said. 'You know he wouldn't have minded.'

Peter shook his head and closed his eyes.

On the TV, the news channel showed a smiling Royal over on the other side of the world shaking hands, dozens of people in native dress dancing energetically around him. Rachael watched as the Royal clapped and laughed, sweating in his suit, trying a few clunky moves himself. A beautiful girl placed a garland of flowers around his neck. Everyone looked so happy, so delighted, so carefree. Rachael imagined herself out there with the dancing natives, the flowers, the sunshine, the awkward Royal. How lovely to be him. How strange and lovely.

'I'll get a cab back,' she said, half an hour later, as Peter and Val stood up to leave. 'I've got nothing on this afternoon. Or I'll call Steve. Really. You go.'

Peter frowned. 'I'll be in touch. About the books. You'll need to tie things up.'

'I know,' Rachael said. 'I do know.'

'Right then,' Peter said. 'Well then. Bye.' He held his hand out.

Rachael took it. 'Bye,' she said. 'Take care.'

Val picked up the empty green tub and put it back in the carrier bag. Rachael kissed her swiftly, then Peter helped her on with her jacket and they headed for the door. A couple of minutes later Rachael heard the Volvo's engine revving, then the crunch of tyres on gravel, and then all was quiet. She returned to the leather sofa.

Lorrelle brought over two large vodkas and two bags of pork scratchings and sat down next to Rachael. They clinked glasses.

'To new friends.'

'New friends.' Lorrelle opened both packets and tipped the scratchings out onto the table. 'I've got keys to the store room,' she said. 'Perks. Help yourself.' She put a handful of scratchings in her mouth.

Rachael took a couple.

'These'll kill me,' Lorrelle said, crunching, 'but I'm addicted to them. I think it's the salt. I think I'm lacking in salt or something.'

They finished the vodkas and the pork scratchings, then Lorrelle went behind the bar and picked up a pack of Marlboros. Rachael followed her out into the back yard. The rain had stopped and now a pale, wet sunshine picked out silvery drips on the beer crates and barrels.

'How is she?' Rachael asked. She watched a blackbird hopping and pecking around the dustbins; quick, jerky movements: peck, peck, run, peck, peck, run. 'Your niece, how is she now?'

Lorrelle looked up to the sky and Rachael followed her gaze. The seagulls were still there, miles away over the landfill, catching the thermals, rising and dipping crazily in their unknowable world. Lorrelle took a deep drag on her cigarette and then smoke streamed from her mouth and nostrils like a ghost leaving her body. The blackbird, suddenly startled, flew into the shrubbery, calling out a loud *chook chook chook*. Lorrelle threw her cigarette onto the ground, twisted the stub under her foot and lit another one. She turned to Rachael.

'Kelly? She'll be OK. You know.' Rachael saw tears balancing on her eyelashes. 'She's going to go back to college. She'll be OK.'

Sophie Wellstood grew up in rural Warwickshire in an unconventional family. She is the author of numerous short stories and poems which draw on the bizarre and absurd, and which reflect her love of wild places and people. Her fiction was first published in 2014, in *Stories for Homes*, an anthology for Shelter. She was long-listed for the Bath Award in 2016. Sophie recently won Triskele Books Big 5 competition, and her debut novel will be published in 2017. She lives in west London and is working on her second novel and a short story collection.

All This Concrete Beneath Your Feet

D. W. Wilson

The moment you figure out how all of this will end, you're driving west along the Alaskan Highway. It's January, that month of old wounds and fresh scars. Wind ushers hoarfrost from the treetops and snowflakes rasp your windshield like a clock's ever-patient *tick*. Five hours earlier you fled a motel room in Grand Prairie, garbed in a worn overcoat that once belonged to your ex-wife, its pockets stuffed with cigarettes and mailbox keys and a roll of antacids that taste like playground chalk. In the midnight dark you cradled your son to your car, buckled him in, and he mumbled a nonsensical *thank you*. Now as you drive west the radio slurs Gord Downie's "Wheat Kings" on an endless dangerous loop, and your tires *shush* along asphalt that is lit storm-red by the rising sun. Things you notice: the car's broken blinker; the palm-bald gearshift rubbed as smooth as bone; the empty passenger seat beside you.

You press a wrist to your eye and unwrap an energy bar. Every so often, in the rearview, you glimpse the boy's squirrel-brown hair. He sleeps like a kid that age should, and drools, and clutches a sock-puppet worm he's had for four full years. Bret, your son's name, as in "The Hitman" Hart—your idol, growing up.

Your 1964 Rambler jitterbugs over potholes and packed snow, and the road turns some colour of sludge. The plan: bomb down the Alaskan Highway with no plan and nowhere to go, until something turns up, because sooner or later something has to turn up—it's the law of averages, it's the law of pure belief, and you will believe your way out of this, you who have always styled yourself a fixer-of-things.

So on and on you go—under-the-counter jobs and loveless late-night couplings, trying not to draw too many eyes. Your son, all the while, endures: he, unlike you, does not have the illusion of choice. Beneath you, the car shudders like a bewildered dog. The engine draws a wheezy breath. Your son looks as if he would give anything to play in a park, to just hear a recess bell ring, to eat a peanut butter and jam sandwich in the shade of a homemade swing. It breaks your heart, those things denied.

Thus, with conviction, you makes plans to settle down and straighten out, to buy a nice shirt, to take your son to a movie. You plan to fix this car—a vehicle that saw your first kiss, that ferried your ex-wife when her water broke in the parking lot of a Kentucky Fried Chicken, that, so many moons ago, somebody with more to live for than you nearly wrapped around a power pole. You plan to be a good dad, get remarried, get a job, get out of this mess. You plan to quit being so goddamned lonely.

Ahead of you, the road seethes like ocean.

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The car, you realize, smells like a locker room: all that sweat and trepidation.

Probably the happiest you've ever been were the nine months you spent bareknuckling for cash, in Northern Alberta, to pay for your ex-wife's appetite through her pregnancy. In those days, you padded your hands with gauze and descended to the basement of a local dive bar to gouge your fists on dumb guys' teeth. Money changed hands. You broke a few bones, not all of them your own. Each night after the fights your wife massaged iodine into your cuts with her thumbs, wrapped your swollen knuckles in cold cloths, in bags of frozen peas. Later, you'd lie on the small bed in your apartment, her thin fingers as soothing as balm, and sleep ebbed in and out of you. She might draw your head to her ropey shoulder. You might tell her you loved her. You could see her belly by then, how she cupped it from underneath. *Lockdown*, they called you in the ring, because once you got a hold of something, you never let it go.

Then Bret cracks a window, and you sniff a jolt of winter and streetsalt and morning, and for a second you go back in time to a time when you're a kid riding shotgun with your own dad. But you drag yourself out of the fantasy. It's always been like that—two parts of you vying like rivals. The dreamer, the man of action. The patriot, the father. The coward.

Everything okay, Dad? Bret says.

You squeeze your hands on the wheel and watch your knuckles drain to white, then fill, then drain. You had so many plans at the start, so many ways your lives could've gone. Unless, of course, there weren't. It is possible that, like driving this highway, all your life you've been moving toward the same exact moment. Above you, a band of clouds clear—a narrow canal of sunlight across the overcast sky, and you smell winter air so clean no other human has breathed it. In the backseat, for an instant, your son becomes a grown man full of his own inadequacies, his own failures, his own loved ones who—like you—he had to leave behind.

Then he is a boy again, four years old. A wiser man would pull over and hazard a nap on the roadside so that, if nothing else, father and son may share the moment. There are, you suspect, few of them left. But you rub the heel of your palm in each eye, smack your gums, bite down on your cheek until the pain spikes you awake. Your son wears his sock-puppet worm, and it gnaws on his free arm and he squeals in pretend horror. You pass a trio of deer, lined up on the roadside. You pass a green highway sign that says *Kirkwall 25*, but you don't pay attention to the name: one town is the same as another town, two like any two.

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In Kirkwall, you choose the first diner, some place with a neon dog's head in the window. All parts of you ache. Your neck crackles when you stretch. Your shoulders and arms windlass with fatigue and when you glimpse yourself in the car's windowglass you realize you look exactly like the kind of man you are.

Inside, you order a plate of eggs and toast and your son asks for pancakes with strawberries and maple syrup, and though you must count your dwindling bills you will not, at least not yet, deny him the food he loves. The waitress—a woman your age, with dishwater blonde hair and fatigue bags beneath her eyes—fills your coffee mug, unbidden, and says, I know a tired soul when I see one.

Thank you, you say.

Her lips lift at the edges. Hint of a dimple.

You douse your coffee in milk and sugar and try to remember when you last sat down for a meal, and when you last sat down for a meal with your son. Almost a year, at least: his mother invited you over for Easter dinner, knowing that if she didn't you would eat at McDonalds, or worse. She had her new man with her, an electrician named Sawyer who had the *Wizard of Oz's* Tin Man tattooed on his upper arm.

Then two cops in their Mountie greys take the table nearest you, and you stare out the window at your Rambler, at the glaciers that ring this strange northern town, at your son who, with his sock-puppet on one hand, arranges the salt and pepper shakers on the table like a pair of tiny adversaries. The cops order coffees and say *Thank you, ma'am* when their food arrives—pre-ordered, you figure—and jaw about some kidnapping in Alberta they'd been warned about. Your son walks his sock puppet worm across the table, lets it roar at a ketchup bottle with its mouth crusted red. Beside you, the cops grin behind their wrists.

Do you want a Coke? you ask the boy.

That a southern drawl? one of the cops says. He's got a bushy moustache, looks your age, smirks with only one cheek. You a neighbour from downstairs?

Yes sir, you lie.

Up here for a vay-cay?

You got it.

He swallows a bite of egg. Whereabouts you from?

Colorado, you say. Though I'm more of a Blackhawks fan, if I'm honest.

But where are you from? he says, and bites into his toast, eyes on you the whole time.

Boulder Creek, you tell him.

He pushes a forkful of bacon into his mouth. Skier?

Thought I might try.

How about your boy, the other cop says, and levels his fork at your son, and, bewilderingly, you feel a clot of anger at the cauldron of your throat, same way you used to when you fought for cash, the adrenaline behind a floodgate, that urge to clench your jaw as hard as you can.

Is he a skier? the cop continues. He looks like he's a skier.

I do not believe he has ever skied.

The cop swallows. His gullet bobs like a piston. You don't believe so? he says, and lays his knife and fork on the table, one *tinking* after the other. The other cop crosses his arms and tilts his head back and it could be a trick of the light, but it looks like he's slid out from the table, an inch—no more. Or you don't know so?

I believe he has never been skiing, you say.

The cop spreads his hands on his table, runs a tongue along his teeth so the lip bulges with it. It could be a smile, or something else. How long you been up here?

A week, maybe.

What're you here for?

A holiday, you say.

A holiday, or a vacation? Where's your wife?

The boy looks at you, and you wait a full breath before giving your answer. Back in the USA, you say. With somebody else.

The cop leans forward on his elbows, plucks the fork, stabs a piece of egg. The other one follows suit. Your food arrives, pancakes heaped as high as Bret's chin and bacon on your plate you didn't order and when you look to the waitress she winks and raises a mug of coffee in salute. Above you, on the wall, a mounted stag's head lords over the room, this small slice of the human world. Someone has hung a sign from it that reads: *The Mountains Shall Bring Peace to the People*.

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In the bathroom, you listen to the tinkle of your son's urine on an enamel bowl. Some nearby graffiti reads, *Could you fuck the sadness out of me?* When Bret finishes, he dutifully washes his hands, dries them. You pass him the sock puppet worm—you, its momentary keeper—and he falls against your chest and you ferry him to the Rambler. You buckle him in. There are a few conversations you'd like to have with your son, but your heart is simply not in it.

How much do you resent me? you say to the unconscious boy.

And right then, as you loom above him, you make plans to scrub yourself down and clean yourself up, to quit smoking and stop drinking, to brush your teeth every goddamned day. You make these plans with conviction. You'll sell your car—a vehicle that will become a teenager's first ride, that will see a child conceived in the parking lot of a neon-lit bar, that, many moons later, somebody far lonelier than you will wrap around a power pole. You'll stop sleeping around and find a nice girl before you're thirty-five. You'll turn into a parent other parents will tell their kids to admire—a parent your own kid will admire.

But apart from those that do not matter, these plans will not come true. You have to know this, even as you just drive, just drive, just drive. Things you don't notice: a stray thread on your overcoat's collar that rubs against your chin, all but undetectable, but also persistent, consistent, perplexing; the headlights far behind you, getting slowly bigger, slowly closer; and your own long, low, exhausted breath that could almost be mistaken for a sigh.

D. W. Wilson is the author of *Once You Break a Knuckle*, a collection of stories, and *Ballistics*, a novel. He is the youngest-ever winner of the BBC's National Short Story Award, and his fiction and essays have appeared in literary journals on both sides of the Atlantic. He is a nerd, redneck, and prolific procrastinator who once spent six-hundred hours building an Iron Man costume, for his wife, for Halloween. It had light-up eyes.

The Manchester Writing Competition was devised by Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy and is run by her team in the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University: www.mmu.ac.uk/writingschool. Presented in partnership with [Manchester Literature Festival](#) and sponsored by [Macdonald Hotels and Resorts](#).

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