

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition
2019 Manchester Fiction Prize
Short List

2019 Fiction Prize Finalists

Elaine Chiew

Elaine Chiew is a Singapore-based writer and visual arts researcher. She is the author of *The Heartsick Diaspora* (Myriad Editions 2020), and compiler and editor of *Cooked Up: Food Fiction From Around the World* (New Internationalist, 2015). Twice winner of the Bridport Short Story Competition, she has published numerous stories in anthologies in the UK, US and Singapore. Originally from Malaysia, Chiew graduated from Stanford Law School and worked as a corporate securities lawyer in New York and Hong Kong. She also received an MA in Asian Art History from Goldsmiths, University of London in 2017.

Lauren Collett

Lauren grew up in Devon on a diet of Jaffa Cakes, books and *Coronation Street*, and moved to London to study for an MA in Gender and Film. She rekindled her love of writing in 2016 with a blog of personal essays tracking her relocation to The Netherlands. In 2019, she won the Reflex Press Flash Fiction Summer Competition and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She lives with her family in Amsterdam, where she is studying Dutch, writing stories and lamenting the scarcity of Jaffa Cakes in The Netherlands.

Tim Etchells

Tim Etchells is an artist and writer based in the UK whose work shifts between performance, visual art and fiction. He has worked in a wide variety of contexts, notably as the leader of the world-renowned Sheffield-based performance group Forced Entertainment. Exhibiting and presenting work in significant institutions all over the world, he is currently Professor of Performance at Lancaster University. His monograph on contemporary performance and Forced Entertainment, *Certain Fragments* (Routledge 1999), is widely acclaimed and his collection of short fiction *Endland* was published by And Other Stories in 2019.

Louise Finnigan

Louise Finnigan lives and writes in Manchester. She has been shortlisted for the Cambridge Short Story prize and was highly commended in Gaynor Jones' competition A Story for Daniel. Her first novel, *What is Left*, is being edited with the help and support of the Orton Writers' Circle. She teaches English Literature at an inner city sixth-form college. At the weekends, she loves to drag her two young daughters out for long walks and listen to their thoughts about the world. Her stories are championed, and tirelessly proof-read, by her husband Liam.

Molly Menickelly

Molly Menickelly grew up in northern Virginia, near Washington D.C. She has always been keenly interested in the natural sciences and intended to become a bovine veterinarian; instead, she earned a BA in English Literature from the College of William & Mary. She also holds an MA in Education from William & Mary and currently teaches Advanced Placement English at a high school in her hometown.

Ian Sample

Ian Sample was born in Oxfordshire and trained as a scientist. He studied at the University of Manchester and holds a PhD in biomedical engineering from Queen Mary, University of London. He was a reporter and environment news editor at *New Scientist* magazine before joining the *Guardian* where he is now science editor. His nonfiction book, *Massive*, was shortlisted for the Royal Society's Science Book Prize. He lives in London, which is unfortunate given his love of surfing, snowboarding, mountains and mountain biking.

2019 Short-listed Stories

Elaine Chiew

Welcome to the World of the Best Scenario

Lauren Collett

We Are Not Built For This

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Barely Audible Creatures

Elaine Chiew

Welcome to the World of the Best Scenario

I meet Mus at the water-cooler, the bubbles in the tank burbling as he flicks the red tap up. I'm a two-month-old rookie at the newly merged corporate behemoth, Best Scenario Inc. (SGX: 'BS'), while Mus is an Associate-Associate Vice-President.

Catching me looking at his name-tag, he says, The 'associates' in the title function like star insignias. The more you have, the higher up you are on the corporate ladder.

In the pause, an atmospheric change happens, barely perceptible, as if the sub-atomic particles between our bodies have expanded and stretched, creating an invisible warp and woof between us. We both feel this; our shared look confirms it.

Mus is in charge of the division that assesses and scores *sad mechanics*, the raw emotional states of negative emotion such as grief, sadness, anxiety, etc. Sad Mechanics Inc was the market leader in the field of psychology, devising scientifically accurate measures to assess traumatic or negative emotional states.

I'm in a subdivision within Bright Side (BS, for short; we Singaporeans love our acronyms). We craft elegant BS solutions for pet-owners suffering from the loss of a pet. *Lost your gerbil? Look on the bright side, choose between taking your grieving grandfather on a stroll around the Japanese Gardens or bak chor mee coupons at P.S. Café* (turns out losing pet rodents is really good for the noodle business).

A newbie, are you? Mus says.

Relatively new, I say.

Mus is like a Basquiat; his digital portrait hangs in HQ's Hall of Fame for being the wunderkind who invented CRABS – Combination Relational Aesthetics Bright Side, an innovative approach that

uses interactive linguistic art (e.g. making fridge magnet poetry) to overcome ‘defense mechanisms’ in depression.

I’m a trainee who failed to last even a week in the subdivision of Negative BS. Its introduction of -ve BS solutions like ‘voodoo curses’ or ‘shit-bombing someone’s car’ or ‘calling them “puny” on ALL social media’ quadrupled the stock price, instrumental in leading to the merger with Sad Mechanics Inc. My trainee evaluation form said I was too chipper. I got transferred.

Mus looks pointedly at the ID attached to my lanyard. Kirby, what kind of a name is that? Not very Singaporean, ah?

Why are you speaking to me, I ask him. Rule 47a of the List of Office Prohibited Activities (LOPA): having a chinwag at the water-cooler.

He shrugs. You look intimidated. Don’t be. In time, you’ll see what you have to be intimidated about, and you won’t be so intimidated. Rule 35e(i): badmouthing BS with a version of the truth.

Since I don’t seem able to generate a repartee, he says, Did you know that your dog dying is an eight on a scale of one to 10, but if you told how you fed it with keropok ikan bilis – spicy anchovies deep-fried in a cracker – it’s a six; fell into a mosh pit – four; accidentally ran over your dog with your lawnmower – two. The harder it is for BS solutions to fix your wretchedness, the lower your score.

Lit.

Was it my deadpan, because Mus flushes underneath his tan. Clears his throat, says he will be delivering a whopper of an assignment to our department soon, stay tuned. Some little shit in *The New Daily News* did an exposé on linguistic meta-structures that have wormed themselves into daily conversation, patterns of speech imbibed through *cultural conditioning* (now, c__ c__ is one of those phrases with a whole rule number to itself in the rulebook, Rule 5: Thou shalt not use the words ‘cultural conditioning’ under any circumstances at BS). Little shit descried conversational sentence-beginners such as ‘tbh’ or ‘frankly’, that are immediately followed by untruths. A categorical imperative in our trainee handbook states:

Untrue ≠ Fake.

Mus sees my look of dismay. Jumps in with, Oh relax, I have a free get-out-of-jail card, since I'll be in charge of the project that will neutralise what this little shit's done. I would like you to work on the project, aren't you lucky?

I nod. I feel lucky, I say.

Good.

But why me?

Mus thinks for a moment. You look 'depressed' – his fingers even make curly air quotes as he says this. (Depression is the motherlode of dark emotions. Internal office research has shown a correlation between the dark emotions like sadness, anger, envy, FOMO etc and creativity quotients in recruits crafting BS solutions. An uncanny correlation where these solutions almost always become public crazes, whereas love and its associative emotions such as empathy, generosity or kindness are lamentably poor by comparison in terms of creative output. The sample size was constituted of visual artists (probably too many potters) and writers (mainly in creative non-fiction), while the control group was comprised of logicians and scientists.)

Also, you have thick springy hair, Mus is saying. Palmolive shampoo, is it? His own hair is wonderfully styled. A forelock is shaped in a becoming wave.

He laughs when he sees how shocked I am. (In two to three sentences, he's broken an entire cluster of rules: Rule 12: revealing office secrets; Rule 25a(i)(a): referencing internal office documents to juniors without first checking if they have the appropriate level of access; Rule 47b: flirtatious behaviour at the water-cooler; Rule 47r: trying to start a gay relationship at the water-cooler; and Rule 11: starting a gay relationship, period.)

Does the project have anything to do with pets? I sputter out.

Mus winks (another cluster of rules broken). It's a Special Advisory Project. Only SAP-looking individuals need apply. See you around, he says, and makes a Korean 'Finger Heart' sign. A gesture so unassuming in the symbolic order that LOPA does not yet have a rule prohibiting it.

On our first day of working together, Mus tells our assembled team of three straightaway that our strategy (code-named BEAUT – Best Exigent Aggregated Unequivocal Tactic) is to embed truths within untruths in conversational meta-structures. The trick is to create a thicket, he says, so-called the art of layering, truths expressed in parenthesis, with ever-smaller truths in paren-parenthesis, but in dialogue, the parentheses disappears (here, he winks, making me gasp at his bodaciousness, his lack of inhibitions, his sexy aspiration of ‘p’ sounds). The woman next to me, Dewi, surrenders a nervous twitter. The man across from me, Aaron, sighs. I have a problem with long unpunctuated sentences, he says.

Mus is wearing a denim shirt and the two top buttons are unbuttoned, allowing a glimpse of a broad chest and wiry hair. (We stand!) His forelock dips over one eye. The smell of his hair gel. *Vidal Sassoon*. (Double we stand!)

Mus rumbles on. There should be a modicum of trust (another swoon-word) between superiors and underlings, looking directly at me (causing friction in the air between us). Dewi narrows her eyes. Aaron has managed to give himself a paper-cut in a minuscule unit of time.

Mus kills the room lights, turns on the projector. He’s prepared slides (swoon). He intones, The ruling party leader, Nusa T.I. Palsu, was struck by an epiphany, a wodge of Brie glanced off his brow (wry tone, noted) and conceived a Structured Incentive Codified Konsep (SICK (the lad, too, btw)) whereby a person will receive a BS score in accordance with their social media popularity (the more ‘Likes’, the higher their score). Aaron stifles a deep yawn, causing his eyes to water in a dead give-away. Dewi blinks rapidly.

Instead of having one’s emotional states measured and scored, Mus carries on, one’s entire state of being would receive a BS score. Fantastic, isn’t it? Their score would enable them to receive Supra Official Benefits – SOBs. Aaron props his face on one upraised palm, breaking a rule about exhibiting bored behaviour during office meetings. Dewi, *au contraire*, has begun jotting furiously in a legal-sized notepad.

Our plan of attack will be two-pronged. First, we start a social media campaign to defang the exposé (*defang*, □) and discredit this *New Daily News* impudent fellow. Second, we create a Diversion Via Important Spurious Situation (DISS), generate, say, a calamity about rampaging K-Pop fans transmitting diseases through bus-seats, and SOBs will be awarded based on the number of likes, retweets, or shares.

As the meeting breaks up, Mus asks for a word. Dewi saunters out, looking back over her shoulder. Aaron trips over the carpet.

Standing next to the white board, the projector light casts our shadows against it. Mus' expression is hard to make out in the semi-darkness. He says, You're good with this, right?

WDYM?

No reason, you look troubled.

I think I can be good at creating a DISS.

Err on the side of cryptic. He quirks a masculine eyebrow, then coughs, cratering the effect (OMG, he's as nervous as I am).

He smiles. The smile does it. WDYK, it turns the heart into a passion fruit.

Because of the ban on office romance and the many rules pertaining to office communications that we must know at our finger tips, it's not possible to date or to even discuss dating. Even flirty banter might get office tongues wagging and then you have to write a tedious report to the Quintuple-A VP (who is a rodent-on-a-treadmill type, unduly obsessed with his pelt of muskrat-coloured hair, with a pebble-sized brain to boot which means people who work with him are plenty taxed).

If caught in an office affair, it's court-martial for the both of us, which entails not just being sacked, but also having to sit in a glass aquarium in front of a peanut gallery of fellow employees while their criticisms are piped in via audio surround into the cramped space. (The criticism is meant to be part of labour E&I (education and improvement), but in fact no one survives the glass aquarium treatment with dignity intact. Stripped of humanity, your sanity disintegrates.)

Our first DISS entails making a video (a mockumentary). A terrorist group has infiltrated the popular computer game MINDRAFT, and their gamers build structures like banana plantations and deep wells, innocuous geographic features like sand-dunes and placid lakes, that explode and unleash an actual bubonic plague. The group means to bring down the administration of Nusa Palsu. It has to be stopped.

In the midst of the project we lose Aaron. At his court-martial, watching the hail of invidious criticisms he receives, the balance tips between Mus and me; we experience an anti-epiphany (*carpe diem* and WDIM; what if life is a metaphysical conceit or a beautiful idea, and time doesn't exist, but you have to live through it anyway?).

We smile at each other. (Our entire relationship then unfolds in subterfuge, as a dialogue *sans* words, in the spaces between the reading of each other's body language.) We speak (in codes). Our bodies are constantly turned towards each other (in gestures of wanting). We leave bland messages for each other on yellow post-it notes. On one of my ideas, he writes, 'Starting a pink campaign to reinstate Nusa Palsu's public approval ratings – nice! Pink is the colour of unconditional love' (so, I wear something pink to the office every day). 'Creating a puking emoji, brilliant (WDYK, an avalanche of puking emojis is tantamount to an emoji with hearts plastered all over its face). These days, Mus is so happy he walks as if he's bouncing on air pockets. He guffaws (the register of heightened laughter tells me how excited he is). We sit at the conference table close together, working on documents for long hours, even though we both have our own desks.

Dewi watches us closely. Jots in her notepad.

In a month, the project will launch, the video will air, and our meta-language campaign will be rolled out. Even being as careful as we are, a co-worker tells Mus that a rumour is circulating: spending so much time in a conference room together raises eyebrows. We both suspect Dewi.

Mus tries to deflect attention by talking up Dewi at the lunch-counter. His actions – yielding the last piece of appam-without-yeast to her, letting her pay first – were reported to Quintuple A VP,

scrutinised and dissected down to every inflection: did his eyeballs get bigger, did he laugh baring all his teeth, did he say 'Would you like the last piece of appam', or 'Would you like *my* piece of appam'?

Like watching a dust storm gathering momentum, spiralling, wraithing in the desert, instances array themselves against Mus, with no one able to tell what is bald statement and what exists in parenthesis. It culminates in Mus being called up for court-martial, and sends me into a vortex of deep desperation.

Mus sits in the glass aquarium. A loose white Oxford shirt, blue jeans, a baseball cap tilted down at the brim, his trademark forelock hidden away from sight. Back hunched, chest concaved, his legs making the figure four (body language I read without problem: the concave chest (I'm already weakened), the squaring of the shoulders (give me all you've got), the space opened up by his legs (I will survive this)).

Sitting in the pews with our colleagues, I cower in the shadow of my own baseball cap.

Mus is pilloried. Basquiat or not, the comments are delivered *tout court*, one after another. *He flouts rules too nonchalantly. He hogs the mike at office karaoke events. His baseball cap tips lower. We saw him using kindness as an occasion to flirt. Grabbing men and women in no-touch zones, such as the shoulders. Opening too many doors for people. Bringing in home-made brownies, no way they could be home made, who made them?* His shoulders sag; his body folds in more compactly on the chair. At one point, he lifts a hand to his face, then sets it on his knee. It's a fist.

I've been dreading that moment when the mike comes to me. Now it has. I steal a glance at Mus from underneath the brim of my cap (and only then does the truth of my own feelings stab me in all its ferocity – *ILY* – an acronym which reveals the entire world of BS as a conservatoire that breeds plants with truncated spirits. The air suppurates, buckles into layers).

Mus lifts his head. Shoots me a look (of such naked wounded bewilderment that) I gasped (in a released spurt of held-in pressure).

Suddenly, all those eyes swivelling, spotlighting me. The suspended hush. Parentheses dissolving before my eyes. The rush of blood to my head. I've stood up, and I'm looking straight at Mus. My lips move, although nothing comes out just yet. Mus shakes his head fearfully, mouthing (save yourself).

Irrepressibly, I plunge ahead. I dive into the pain. What if all the stories already belong to BS, and we made it so? How do we save ourselves? We are all witnesses of our zeitgeist. We have an inalienable right: our agency, no matter how weak, to STTP. No, not Sarah the Teen Princess. To Speak Truth to Power.

Lauren Collett

We Are Not Built For This

It first occurred to Sylvia to sleep with a teenager on the fourth day of the heat wave. Or was it the fifth? She had lost track. The oppressive heat burnt away the softer edges of sleep, leaving a solid kernel of unconsciousness; a coma between the hours of one and five am. The soporific effect of this was cumulative, and by the fourth day – or, perhaps, the fifth – everyone had the lazy gait of a September wasp. This was what Sylvia noticed as she walked to the supermarket, dodging lolling pedestrians on the way. People looked through Sylvia, as if she did not exist.

This behaviour did not bother Sylvia.

Or, rather: it did not come as a surprise.

Bob had air conditioning in both his office and his car, but he still came home each evening with wet patches under his arms and an aroma of prolonged decay. Over dinner the night before (leeks wrapped in ham with a cheese and breadcrumb sauce; “Some new potatoes on the side next time?” Bob had suggested), Sylvia had seen fruit flies buzzing around Bob’s neck. She supposed that the smell and heat emanating from his yellowing collar suggested to the flies the promise of food, as might a pan of bubbling jam on the stove, or an open wound.

She had made far too much cheese sauce, still being in the mindset of feeding four rather than two. She hadn’t quite got into the habit of dividing the ingredients of long-trusted recipes in half. She had assumed, perhaps, that both of her girls would come home for the summer. Now, though, Verity had her own home, and Isabel, younger and more unpredictable (suddenly vegan!), had decided at the last minute to go to Greece, volunteering for a stray-dog charity. Sylvia had no real idea of what this entailed, and imagined, in idle moments, her youngest daughter, bikini-clad, brandishing a large fishing net, chasing Greek dogs down cobbled streets.

Bob was not impressed with Isabel’s use of her summer.

“Rounding up rabid dogs will do nothing for her CV,” he had said.

“Who’s to say?” replied Sylvia. “Maybe she’ll become a vet.”

“She’s studying *media*,” said Bob.

“Her moral fibre, then,” sighed Sylvia. “Saving Greek dogs has a certain nobility about it.”

“*Dogs*,” said Bob.

“What?”

“Dogs, not gods.”

“I said dogs.”

“You said *gods*,” Bob insisted, and then shook his head. “If the gods are to rely on our Isabel, then we’re all off to Hell in a handcart.”

Sylvia said nothing. She had said dogs, she was sure of it. But then – Greek dogs, Greek gods; crikey, perhaps not. How much does one listen to oneself when talking? Sylvia did not pay much attention to herself, she had to admit; particularly when she was talking to Bob.

Sylvia overshot the supermarket, deep in a thought that seemed to spontaneously combust. She turned back on herself, chasing her tail, she thought, like one of Isabel’s Greek mutts. She drifted into the supermarket, the air-conditioning slipping around her like a wet towel. Her bodily hairs stood to attention. She had chosen a pair of Isabel’s trousers, beige clam-diggers that cut off just below her knee. A choice of outfit based entirely on ventilation; thin (cheap) and baggy, with many pockets, one of which still contained a crumpled packet of Rizla. On her top half, Sylvia wore a buttoned-up silk shirt, cream in colour, which she normally wore to work. Standing in front of Frozen Vegan Goods (Isabel might, after all, turn up at any time), Sylvia saw a woman dressed as a vanilla ice cream cone staring back at her. Sylvia studied her own face. A slight look of Verity in her early teens, when she had been at her most anxious. This came as a surprise to Sylvia, to whom anxiety would have been a welcome detour from the norm. She stood there for a while, assessing this

version of herself with interest, before opening the doors and reaching for Linda McCartney's sausages.

"Stamps or cash-back?"

Sylvia found herself at the till, and the boy behind it was looking at her expectantly, his bottom jaw jutting out, his eyebrows arched. To Sylvia, he looked like a tiger, ready to pounce. At no point in her life had she felt anything other than inferior around the young; not even in her own youth, when she'd never quite understood how to be fun. (If you put any thought into it, she'd quickly come to realise, then you're already doing it wrong.)

"I don't think so, thank you. Oh —" she hesitated, and with that the boy's hand hovered over the till, suspended in the air, poised — "perhaps I better get cash-back."

"You never know, right?" the boy smiled, his teeth clamping his tongue. Flames might have licked his lips. He wiggled his fingers midair. "How much?"

"Twenty," said Sylvia.

More wiggling fingers. The boy had a bracelet that looked to be made out of an old shoelace.

"Sure that's enough?" he said.

Sylvia considered, or made a show of considering. "Okay, let's go with forty."

The boy smiled, and jabbed at the till, ripping out two twenties.

"That'll do it," he said, passing them over with her receipt. There was something in his expression as he looked at her that was oddly familiar.

As Sylvia walked towards the exit, she caught her reflection in the automatic doors as they slid open, and she remembered her image in front of Frozen Vegan Goods. She realised, stepping out into the heat, that the boy had looked at her in the same way that she had, in front of Linda McCartney's sausages, looked at herself.

With interest.

On the evening news, a reporter crouched upon a rock at the beach. He cracked an egg onto the rock and it began to cook. Sylvia gasped; the Earth was alive, and the sun had made it so. What a wonder.

“What a waste of an egg,” said Bob.

There was a row the next morning. Bob told Sylvia that she had left a ten pound note in his trouser pocket when she’d washed them. He saw that she had gone so far as to remove the belt; why hadn’t she taken just a few more seconds to check the pockets? The pockets are right next to the belt, he kept saying to her, as she searched for the trousers in her *ready-to-iron* pile.

The pockets are right. Next. To. The. Belt.

Sylvia located the mishandled trousers.

“Here,” she said, holding the money aloft. “Laundered money!”

Bob took the note. Bob took time to examine the note. Bob turned the note over in his hands. It fluttered under his nasal fury.

“They are indestructible now,” continued Sylvia. “All the notes. You can’t destroy them.”

This response sounded like placation and reassurance. Men like Bob needed placation and reassurance. They wouldn’t ask for it; not in so many words. You had to assess their tone, like a mother detecting the differing cries of her baby. *He is hungry, he is tired, he is scared.*

“I know that, do you think I don’t know that?” said Bob, still studying the note.

Sylvia watched him. Perspiration beaded his brow. How determined he was, to be angry.

He looked up at her, and said “What?”

Sylvia knew this *what*. Her daughters had both dabbled in it. Isabel most effectively, of course; Verity had inherited Sylvia’s compulsion for apology. Isabel, though, having pushed all her vegetables to the side of her plate, or hastily dropping a cigarette out of her bedroom window, or heading towards the front door the night before her first exam:

What?

It meant: *I will not say sorry.*

Isabel had long since grown out of it.

The boy was stacking nappies when she next saw him. He was tall, she now saw; a tallness that spoke for itself, a simple line, up and down. He seemed clean, which was not something Sylvia normally associated with boys. The hunched, messy creatures that her daughters had brought home were polluted; grime oozed out of them like lava.

Sylvia knew that this boy would smell clean. She knew that his skin would be smooth and cool, but that her hand would crackle on the small of his back. She could crack an egg on his torso and the yolk would flutter with his pulse. A puddle during a mild earthquake. Maybe a little jelly would pool into his belly button.

He was looking at her. How long for? Sylvia didn't know.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," he said. "You spent your forty quid yet?"

"Oh, that's long gone," said Sylvia.

The boy laughed, and then bit at his thumbnail. He was nervous, Sylvia realised. She was making him nervous. Her eyes fell on the shoelace around his wrist. It looked old and dirty. It did not belong on him.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing to the bracelet.

The boy released his thumb, and looked down at his wrist.

"You know, I forget I still have this," he said. He leant down towards her; he did smell good. "My ex-girlfriend tied it on. It's more or less welded."

"You could cut it off," suggested Sylvia.

"I could," he said. "I should."

Sylvia had nail scissors in her bag. She could cut the dirty bracelet from him right this second. She could take the bracelet with her, saying that she'd dispose of it. He needn't give the bracelet, or the ex, a second thought. She could hide it under the bed. No; she wouldn't even need to hide it. No questions would be asked.

"Sorry," said the boy, looking behind Sylvia.

Sylvia turned to see what he was looking at, and she saw a girl with purple hair and a nose stud pushing another crate of nappies towards them. The girl's eyebrows were cartoonish black. Her face was quite a different colour from her skin. She wore black boots with purple laces and enormous soles. Her expression was unreadable.

As Sylvia walked away, she found herself feeling for the girl. She found herself feeling for all girls. How sad it was, that they had to paint and pierce themselves, in order to appear free. How sad it was, that they had to cement themselves in.

Sylvia paid for her shopping and stepped out into the heat. Nothing between her and the sun.

"I don't suppose you remembered my shoe polish?" said Bob that evening, over dinner (potato salad and mackerel; he'd smell of it tomorrow, she knew).

"I didn't, sorry," she said. "I'll nip to the shop tomorrow."

Bob fingered his mouth.

"Bone," he said, accusingly, holding it towards her as evidence.

It was a bone. Sylvia could not deny it. She stifled a laugh.

The roads began to melt. Hosepipes were forbidden. Dogs died in cars; Sylvia felt outrage on behalf of her youngest. What was worse, she wondered; to drown or to dehydrate? She had heard that the moment of drowning invoked a searing pain, as if your lungs were on fire, which was ironic, considering the circumstances. The news warned the vulnerable to avoid exertion. Emergency calls had spiked.

“People could die,” said Sylvia.

“We are not built for this,” said Bob.

He spoke as if this were an inevitability to which he had been alluding all his life. As if, were there a death, he could finally release a satisfied sigh of vindication.

“No,” said Sylvia. It sounded like corroboration. It wasn’t, of course. But it sounded like it was.

The ninth day of the heat wave, or maybe the tenth. Someone did die; a toddler, left sleeping in a car seat, in a drive. The mother was under investigation. Sylvia had left her girls sleeping in the car plenty of times. Would she have been so stupid as to have done that during a heat wave? Perhaps so, she had to concede. She was starting to realise that, in those early days of motherhood, she’d only been half awake herself. Now she was cracked open, sizzling upon a rock. Now she was done. Ready.

He was not at the till. She patted the cool tin of shoe polish on her chest. It latched momentarily, like a baby. She pulled it away, and pressed it again to her skin. Possibly it was his day off. He might still be in bed. She could not imagine his mother.

A fist appeared in front of her.

Him.

“It came off,” said the boy.

It took Sylvia a moment to realise that he meant the shoelace bracelet.

“We should celebrate,” said Sylvia. As if she had spoken like this her whole life.

“Well,” he said. He was not shocked. Of course he wasn’t. She remembered boys like him from her own school days. They were the first men, beyond reproach. They went through the motions of these final moments of childhood with an even-handed patience that was familiar to Sylvia. Good things come to those who wait. Perhaps freedom. Perhaps now.

“I’m going for a smoke in five minutes,” he said. “In the car park. Come?”

Sylvia nodded, her hand still to her chest. She turned, and walked past the girl with the unfortunate hair and the laden face. Sylvia peeled the tin of shoe polish from her chest; it was now warm. A red circle marked her.

Perhaps now.

He was leaning on a car that she supposed was his. Another thing about those first men: they always had cars. The sky was overcast; today was the day that everything was supposed to change. A breeze slipped through her as she approached. He was smoking.

“Well,” she said.

“Well,” he purred.

And then a snort, from somewhere. A guffaw. The boy’s eyes twitched. Sylvia looked past the boy into the car, and saw the purple-haired girl, just at the moment that she smelt the smoke and realised that it wasn’t an ordinary cigarette. Sylvia looked back at the boy. Smoke snaked from his mouth. He was so beautiful. Laughter peeled from inside the car.

“What?” he said.

Sylvia smiled, and kept walking.

When the rain came, it did not provide the promised relief. She watched from the kitchen window as it beat down upon the washing on the line; Sylvia’s cream blouse, Isabel’s clam-diggers, Bob’s shirt. Sylvia thought of Bob in his office, hiding his scuffed shoes beneath his desk. Bob believed that you could tell a lot about a person by the state of their shoes. Correction, thought Sylvia: Bob thought that you could tell a lot about a man by the state of his shoes.

Sylvia supposed that there was something in this, and headed out into the rain.

Tim Etchells

Strange Weather

Two small-time crooks, laying low in a run-down seaside resort after a robbery goes wrong, decide to renovate an abandoned building and open a vegan café.

A doctor in a busy regional town decides to kill himself, trying various methods but always fudging it or losing his nerve at the last moment. During the last of these suicide attempts, in which he plans to throw himself off a bridge onto railway tracks below, he encounters another guy, also clambered onto the parapet and with the identical intention of ending his own life. After talking each other down slowly from their respective precarious positions, the doctor and the other guy (a priest turned stand-up comedian) embark on an unlikely but passionate love affair that will change their lives for ever.

A rich woman decides that she wants to know what it would be like to be poor. She secures her fortune in a complex set of trusts, assumes a new identity, has plastic surgery to disguise her well-known appearance. A few tumultuous months pass in her experiment, during which time her life is endangered and her values are profoundly called into question. When she finally decides that it's time to return to her old life, armed with the knowledge she's gained and a determination to do good in the world, she discovers that her relatives have conspired with corrupt members of her legal team to prevent her from re-asserting control of her own finances and property. The poverty she looked for as a kind of temporary learning experience looks set to be reality for the rest of her life. Resolving to escape this fate, wreak vengeance and restore her rightful fortune, she calls in help from the new friend group she's formed in her time on the street – a con man and convicted felon called Eddie, a car thief and hooker called Rose and a crack-addicted maniac called Telegram Sam.

Demolition work on a building in a rapidly gentrifying area of town uncovers human remains on the site of a former clothing factory. The development project is stopped while the police investigate, and delays bring the deputy head of forensics into conflict with an impatient older colleague as well as with a group of thugs linked to investors from the shady Undertow Property Group, whose plans for the building site are threatened by the gruesome discoveries.

A young woman gets a terminal cancer diagnosis and opts not to share news of her prospects with family or friends. When her limited treatment options are exhausted and she's too sick to continue work as an administrative assistant in a lacklustre car rental franchise, she cashes out her savings and moves secretly to a close-knit and isolated rural community, intending to die there alone, avoiding the emotional complexities of love, friendship or social contact that her life otherwise contains. A chance encounter on Christmas Eve in a greengrocer's near to the flat she has rented almost puts paid to her isolation, however, and soon she is teetering on the edge of a friendship that almost becomes an affair. In the end though, before the new relationship – with a taciturn, long-exiled Russian academic and alcoholic called Alexei – can be consummated, she dies naked and alone on the floor of her bathroom.

Colonists on a distant planet far in the future fall victim to a debilitating plague that is unknown to their medical science. While the sickness is not life threatening, it is ferociously contagious and soon runs rife through the complex of interconnected tunnels and bio-domes that make up the Base Camp. Perplexed – first by the news of the outbreak and then by a series of incoherent and disturbing communications from the colony – Star Command HQ send a rescue mission led by two beautiful vat-grown symbiotic Captains, a tough and experienced Cyborg navigator and a battle-scarred Weapons and Systems Engineer with a degree in Old Earth languages. Arriving at the colony they find everyone gripped by the major symptom of the plague – a strange paralysing apathy has

rendered the colonists listless and emotionally numb. With the workforce afflicted in this way – listening to algorithmic muzak, sleeping or daydreaming listlessly for large portions of the day – the hardy crops in their bio-domes wither untended and the air-filtration systems choke and falter without regular maintenance. Members of the rescue mission are not sure how to proceed. Fearing for their own safety, some demand exit from the planet and a swift return to HQ to bring back qualified medical experts. Others argue that the immediate detonation of a nuclear device and the destruction of all life on the planet is the only thing that can save humanity. When one of the colonists unexpectedly breaks lethargy to sabotage the landing craft, the newcomers have little option but to take matters into their own hands and a sinister secret is revealed.

A librarian working the desk in a suburban library finds a filthy sexually explicit note placed anonymously at the back of a book piled with other volumes waiting to be re-shelved. Disturbed and fascinated in equal measure, she begins to scrutinise library users with a new attentiveness, passing the long hours of her work shifts by speculating (or imagining) which of them might be capable of such lust and depravity, while secretly comparing the handwriting on the note with that of people filling out request forms or doing research at the library tables. Late one night while working alone the librarian finally figures that the loan history of the book containing the note could well serve as pointer to its possible author. Feverish and unable to restrain herself, she breaks protocol to search the database for names and addresses, later crossing the city to different neighbourhoods each night after work in order to spy on the houses of the strangers she suspects. As the intensity of her sexual agitation and unsubstantiated projection reach their height, she confronts an older woman in the elevator of a stylish apartment building, thrusting the note into her hands while quoting from it aloud.

A politician burns herself to death in a field beside a busy motorway. While initial clues suggest she took her own life, one detective has an intuition that something is wrong.

A married couple fall slowly out of love but neither dares admit it. They spend less and less time together, rarely socialising or conversing in any depth. As weeks go by, each of them opts to stay later at work or else brings work home, using it, their stress and exhaustion as a barrier to any possible intimacy or connection.

Scientists researching an anomaly in the readings from a top-secret research satellite discover something that will change the fate of humanity.

When a neighbour's son goes missing, an old-age pensioner turns amateur detective, with terrifying consequences for her sister, her dentist and her former husband.

A stripper falls in love with a customer.

A woman is contacted by an old school friend out of the blue but when they meet for drinks to reconnect, things don't quite add up. Changes in her friend's appearance since their last meeting years before and the fact that her accent no longer matches that of the small town they both grew up in are easy enough to reconcile with, but as the evening progresses there are further intimations that the person she's sitting with is not her friend at all. Anecdotes from childhood are told and re-told with little variation, the key moments described in identical phrases – a troubling signal that the words themselves might have been learned by rote. Questions about details produce vague answers, evasive behaviour and changes of subject. The names of certain friends are not recognised. Later, as conversation turns to money, the stranger's ambition becomes clearer. But still the woman can't be sure. Back home after midnight following their meeting, she Googles her old friend's name and the strange truth slowly begins to emerge.

Celebrating a child's birthday with a party in a beautiful new home should be a convivial and affirming family occasion but when one of the Guptas' guests goes missing during an impromptu game of hide and seek, panic and chaos quickly ensue. Distraught parents are informed. The police are summoned and the house and its grounds are meticulously searched – all to no avail. Only months later, after rising tension has broken everyone with no hope of resolution, is the child in question found, sitting naked, silent and alone on the stairs to the attic. In the child's hands is a book made of unknown materials, written in an unknown language.

A mechanic is working on a broken-down car in the garage where he's recently taken a job. Routine checks to find the source of the problem reveal a large metal box that's been welded to the underside of its chassis. What he finds inside the box, and what he chooses to do with it, soon plunge him headlong into a drama that will threaten his life.

Two school kids on a hike get separated from the rest of their party. As a storm moves in, they take shelter in what seems to be an ordinary cave.

A streetwise up-and-coming rap star, L-Deep, is cast as co-lead in a network TV show about well-heeled young people coming of age in the suburbs. The first weeks of filming go well and his performance wins praise on set. Indeed there's a growing buzz from cast, crew and the rumour mill that L-Deep is destined for immeasurable success. Problems from his unruly past in an impoverished rough and tough neighbourhood haunt L-Deep, however, and the edgy behaviour of his entourage soon causes tensions on set, with two of his closest circle warned by security not to come back to the lot or face unspecified penalties. L-Deep is on the verge of making a scene and thus endangering his future but his business-savvy girlfriend Milena talks him round, insisting on a measured response. The problem is only delayed though, not truly averted. Two weeks later L-Deep's cousin comes in from out of town, driving a stolen car that has a trunk filled with molly and heroin. As filming of the

first season comes to a close, a studio party for L-Deep in a newly opened nightclub gets out of control, with members of his clique ejected and humiliated. Tensions continue to rise. Some nights later in a seedy bar down by the river, L-Deep and his cousin get into a dispute with some locals which leads to a fight in which a firearm is discharged, the cops are called and everyone disperses. Much later, Milena and L-Deep are seen staggering and yelling at each other near the on-ramp of the freeway south of Basin Street. When dawn finally comes, only one of them is alive.

A group of older women lose their jobs in a clothing factory because the production line has been almost completely automated. They enlist the support of their co-workers in other departments who call a strike to try to force the company to reverse their decision. Their action is unsuccessful but the experience of the dispute transforms the community, galvanising their friendships.

A corrupt politician does a deal with a lobbyist, promising to help pass a certain piece of legislation in exchange for gifts including holidays, travel and luxury goods.

Group of astronauts in the same retirement home a long time after their missions. Haunted by something they saw – an event or a discovery that was repressed in the official accounts.

A young woman is brutally murdered but there are no clues. Detectives who come in from another town also fail to make significant progress. The case is dropped or closed due to lack of information.

A beautiful boy going blind for reasons no one can understand. A last trip to see something or other.

Characters that turn out to be robots and/or characters that seem to be robots but aren't.

Something about dog walkers, the dogs getting mixed up. Or blackmail.

Rivalries in a sports team of some kind.

Cops due to retire at the end of the week.

Woman finds work as a telephone psychic. Her kid – or her mum – goes missing.

Something heartbreaking, intensely rural. Isolation.

Doctors fighting to save the life of a ballerina. Life-threatening leg injury.

Peripheral neo-cons.

Someone that dies. Then they start a Kickstarter to raise funds to help them come back to life.

Very very very brutal murders with no explanation.

On the day of 9/11. Main events set somewhere else, another part of the world, where the Twin Towers falling just features in the background of one shot, like in a kebab shop or something, not even noticed by the characters, of no relevance.

An abortionist. Relations with customers. Landlord of the clinic (ambivalent).

Musicians on a badly organised tour.

Parents worried about a child.

Something about spies. A writer that dies.

Inexplicable dead crops in a farming community.

Unhappy wives kill their husbands. Someone writing a book that comes true – whatever they write.

Drunken pilots.

Animals driven from natural habitat by deforestation start to live in a medium-sized abandoned unit at a strip mall.

People who think they really got away with something but they didn't.

Terrifying nightmares drive someone insane.

Things happen and people don't react – either they don't know what to think or are not even thinking they should be thinking something.

A surfer risks everything for a particular wave. Killed in some other way at some other time.

Migrant workers living in a miserable and badly run hostel decide to put on a play of some kind. *King Lear*. *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Someone whose lies don't catch up with them.

Builders lying to their clients about how they are going to come back on Monday and finish everything off no problem.

Traffic cops in disco era.

Waiter with an insatiable sexual appetite for older men.

Tug of love. Mistaken identity.

Questions of paternity.

Troubled people.

Gardener in a grand old country house that's seen better days.

Humans and alien species working side by side in an overcrowded kitchen.

Memories. Decadence.

Ambiguous feelings.

Woman who suspects something.

A weird feeling that crystallises slowly.

Kleptocracy. Late Capital.

Childhood holidays.

A testimony unravels.

Something about survivors of a massacre who exaggerate stories to a news crew in the hope of reward but the plan backfires.

Woman in her 60s begins an affair.

Comedy of Tech Support.

Bleak winter on an island.

A shadow realm or universe.

Young offenders in an institution.

Erotic fantasy of murder.

Inexplicable remorse.

Unpaid bills that tip her over the edge.

The opposite of bravery.

Accusations without substance.

A certain quality of light.

Ghost riders.

No alibi.

Crossed wires.

Hearing voices.

Wasteland of fly-tipping and broken trees.

A kind of impasse.

The various forms and appearances of sadness.

Freedom of the road.

Strange weather.

All kinds of uncertainty.

Louise Finnigan

Sirens

2:45 am

There is a mask lying by the side of the pool. I see the crumpled oxygen bag then the small suction face glinting blue as the engine starts and the sirens howl out to the road. Mum steers me away and I retch into a bed of white flowers. It is all liquid, burning and sweet. 'Come on, get it all out,' she says. Above us, Terri is screaming. Smashing things in the apartment. I do not want to either speak or listen, so I am glad it keeps coming, my stomach clenching, my mouth full. When I raise my head, the air has quietened. Only Mum's voice in a whisper. 'Tell me how it happened. Just tell me. I can help you if I know.' I shake my head and wipe the vomit from my mouth. Terri will be crying up there now, collapsed on the heap of clothes we didn't wear. I sway against the wall and see the hotel's name glowing above us. Hear the electric hum, Mum's low words and the far-off wail echoing against the rocks. I close my eyes and wait for the others. The ones that are coming for us.

1:50 am

Terri is in a cubicle with her head drooping to her knees. The door is open and she doesn't care. Her face is only a veil of hair now. She could be anyone.

'We need to go back, now.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' says the hair. 'Go an' get another drink.' She kicks her purse across the toilet floor towards me. I look down the length of her leg. Pearly pink toenails. Dirty feet from where she has slipped off her shoes and lost them.

'I think it's really late.'

'If you want to know the time,' she snarls, 'why don't you look at your fuckin' watch?'

'Because it's useless. I never even wanted it.'

'Give it to me then.' She lunges forward and I see her underwear stretched across her parted thighs. She revolts me. I take the watch and drop it into her hand. Rolex, it says, somewhere underneath all that splintered glass. She is laughing at me now. Doing that thing where she says my whole name over and over. 'Lucy Featherstone. Lucy, Lucy, Lucy. Feather. Stone.' She makes it sound unbearably posh. She makes it sound like I'm sinking.

No-one at the bar will tell me what time it is. A man in a flowered shirt lumbers over and pushes a bottle of beer up between my breasts. 'Cual tiempo es?' I ask him, my brain fighting against the thump of Destiny's Child and the dizzying creep of the lights. But it's not '*cual*', it's '*que*'. 'Que es tiempo?' I hear my own stupid voice ring out under the fog of the smoke machine. He points at the door. 'Come with me,' he says, and I want to cry. I'm predicted an A* in Spanish.

'What time is it?' I try, angry now, with the barman. He shrugs. I get a drink because I don't know what else to do. I don't even know how to get back to the hotel. I find Terri's shoes in a dark corner and carry them to her.

I know what I will see before I see it. Before I push at the cubicle door. It has been waiting the whole time. It was waiting as we wandered in and out of bars sipping at Bacardis and ordering burgers. It was waiting the other day as we sat by the edge of the pool with Lily. It was there the first time I saw her, laughing with the boys from apartment 14b. The boys who didn't talk to me but watched her instead. I saw it, even then. Not the white bikini, the golden softness of her body, the way the pattern on the barstool dimpled her flesh. It was more like something inside her. Something soft and dangerous.

I fix my eyes on a crack in the sink as I plead with her. 'Terri, stop. We need to leave. We need to get back before something really bad happens.' She doesn't answer. The man with the flowered shirt is stood between us. I try not to look at how his hands are pressed into the wall above her head. He is not old, but he is a lot older than the boys in 14b. And they were all I wanted. Just one lingering kiss, an arm over my shoulder. But these arms are hairy, and the muscle is thick, straining. Then I see it. Strapped to his wrist.

'It's ten past two,' I tell her.

She wriggles away. Her mouth is gaping and slick.

'What?'

'It's ten past two.'

Que hora es? It comes back to me, clear as a classroom window. But it's already far too late.

12:30 am

We all watch as Terri dances and drinks. She knows how to make a shipwreck of the room without even trying. Pulse from the hips, grin wide, dip low, roll deep as the ocean floor. Her dress flashes in ultra-violet and her limbs suck all eyes into herself. I can't move like she does, but she swirls into the space behind me and rubs herself on my skin. I feel better and worse at the same time. Like I'm catching something.

The rims of the cocktail glasses are crusted with sugar and the liquid looks like soured milk. 'Do we have to pay?' she asks the barman, making her eyes big and shiny as if she doesn't understand how the whole thing works. He doesn't speak but he doesn't ask for any money either. Terri stares at him a little longer. 'Can we have them little umbrella thingies?' He gives them to her. 'And two straws?' Her smile is stickier than the edge of the glass.

The boys from 14b laughed when she did it the first time. Sitting by the pool with a pink straw and a bottle of Coke, sliding her lips up and down. I thought she was going to be annoyed at them for laughing. Or that she might feel ashamed. Her mum and baby sister were right there in the shallow end. That's what I thought at the time. I thought Linda was her mum. I watched from behind the dry glare of *Middlemarch* as she did it again. Pouting, expert. I knew the boys were impressed, or interested, or something. She ran a finger under the straps of her white bikini, as if she had an itch. Then she nodded over at me.

'That your sister?'

'No. we don't know her.'

'What's her name?'

'Just said. We don't know her.'

'Oi! Book girl!' she shouted, and they all laughed again. I felt the spine slipping out of my hands and the water seeping up through the pages as she beckoned me over and smiled.

11:00 pm

She bites down and her voice is muffled by the meat. 'We need to be back at one so keep an eye on the time. Or...' She has remembered the smashed watch. 'Look for clocks or whatever. You're the sensible one.'

'I think we should go back earlier,' I say.

'It'll be fine.'

'What if it's not?'

'I do it all the time. It's always fine.'

It should be properly dark by now but the sky flares like an infection. The neon signs scream karaoke and shooters and goldfish bowls and girls. A man comes jogging over with cheap fliers and broken English. Terri looks him up and down. 'Yeah, yeah, lovely jubbly, sexy banana, whatever, fuck off.'

'That was a bit harsh,' I tell her as he slumps away.

She finishes her burger and wipes the grease from her mouth. 'I know but I don't want to go somewhere dead. I want to find somewhere fun. With people.'

'Why?'

'What do you mean, why?'

What are you looking for? I want to ask her. *What do you think you are going to find?* Goose-bumps prickle her legs. Like a bird with its feathers plucked. She stares at the lights and starts to smooth the greasy paper from the burger in her hands. It becomes briefly translucent. 'I don't know what you're on about. You're too clever for me.' She lets it drift to the pavement as she turns away.

'You can't just leave that there,' I said when she did the same thing by the pool. A crisp packet this time. She shifted Lily into the other arm and rolled her eyes at me. 'Got to leave something for the cleaners to do. Or there'd be no jobs.' It sounded like something she'd heard from Linda. Mum was sniffy about Linda. Said it was the ignorance she disliked more than anything else. I lowered myself to fish it out and felt the salty water dribble down my arm.

Terri adjusted the sunhat over Lily's head. 'I would have got it if it bothers you that much. But my hands are full, aren't they?' It was true. She spent almost every hour with the baby nuzzling into her neck or dribbling onto her shoulder. Mum had made several knowing comments about it. But she didn't know anything. I dripped across the tiles to find a bin and watched how the sunlight flashed against the packet like a wet mirror. Terri wasn't even related to the baby or to Linda. She was just something they had picked up.

9:45 pm

'How old are you two? Please tell me you're at least seventeen.'

'Sixteen,' Terri lies. It's an Irish bar only two blocks from the hotel. The boys from 14b aren't here and I feel stupid. I shouldn't have listened to her.

'So, you're on holiday with your parents then?'

'Just my mum,' Terri says, and I turn away. It hurts to watch the fantasy spill from her mouth. Dragging us all down to a breathless place where no-one will contradict her. I feel the leather of the barstool sticking to my leg where my skirt has ridden up.

'What about you?' he asks, taking another sip of his pint. 'Still in school?'

'Is that what you like?' asks Terri, sliding her arm over mine and flicking her eyes up at him.

'Good little schoolgirls?'

'I'm just being friendly, that's all.'

'I'm in college actually.' My voice breaks in too loud. Too obvious. I need to be more specific.

'Studying Psychology. And French.'

‘She’s the clever one,’ says Terri. ‘And I’m the fun one. So, are you gonna buy us a drink then or what?’

Linda would often speak like that too. ‘Grasping,’ Mum called it. ‘Money-grabbing.’ Then, about Terri: ‘It’s sad really. She’s only copying the behaviour she’s been shown.’ But even I found it hard to look away from Linda as she dangled the broken watch over the reception desk. ‘It was fine before the maid came in. Looks like she’s stepped on it, the silly cow. I paid good money for that.’ I looked down at Lily who had been pushed into my arms, still wet and slippery from the pool. I was scared of holding her. Scared of her little face, her lips bobbing against my shoulder like a fish. Scared of the head that lolled right back as if she might snap at the neck. I tried to listen to her bubbling coo instead of Linda’s gnashing complaints. The woman behind the desk had retreated and Terri was staring down at the crumpled mess of gold.

‘Are you gonna get money for this?’

‘Too right I will. Or a new one maybe.’

‘What will you do with the old one?’ She reached out her hand and I saw the hunger flush under her skin. But Linda turned and looked at me instead. ‘Lucy can have it. You’d only make it look like trash.’

8:50 pm

‘Please don’t tell me you’re gonna wear that,’ Terri says as she strips out of a silky top and kicks it across the floor of the apartment. I notice how the flesh on her stomach creases when she bends down, then smooths into a stretch of perfect bronze when she straightens up. Like the beach before someone has stepped on it. She chucks me a denim skirt so short the pockets stick out under the hem.

‘Put that on. Make a bit of effort for once.’

‘I’m not sure about this. What if Linda—’

'Linda's a stupid bitch,' says Terri rubbing blusher into her cheeks till they shine like apples.

'Stupid. Old. Bitch.'

I want to ask her why she's here if she hates Linda so much, but I know that's something you can't do. You can't just ask someone why they don't live with their own family. Why they have to cling on to whatever they can get. I hold up the skirt and pretend to examine the zip, so I don't have to look at her when I say: 'Is she paying you?'

'Who, Linda?'

'Yeah. She leaves you with Lily all the time.'

Terri makes a face. 'She gives me a bit now and again. It's just till I turn sixteen. I'm not going to be her fuckin' nanny for ever.'

I think about asking her: what *are* you going to be? But I decide not to bring that up again. How I want to be a lawyer, the same as Mum. How I'm going to take languages so I can work internationally, prosecuting criminals. How she looked into my eyes and then looked away.

In Lily's room, there is no sound except her breathing. I move closer and put my hand in front of her nose to feel each tiny ripple of air. Terri follows me in. She strokes the blanket and folds it down under Lily's arms.

'Won't she be cold like that?'

I hear her sigh through the shadows of the room. 'No. That's how you're meant to do it.'

'What if she wakes up?'

'She won't. She's a good sleeper. And Linda's never back till two.' She trails a lazy kiss and walks away.

I am left wavering by the cot and thinking of the boys in 14b. A moped speeds past and jolts through the quiet so I shut the window and the room is quickly warm. That's better. I cannot stand the thought of Lily lying cold when we should have been with her. So, before I leave, I pull the blanket higher. Tuck it snugly round her sleeping face so she might feel she is being held.

'What if she wakes up?' I say again as the door closes behind us.

Terri turns her face to the blue, oblivious sky. 'She won't.'

Molly Menickelly

Mag cicada

The summer before sixth grade, the cicadas come.

It's biblical, that's what it is. Hordes of locusts appear, clawing their way to the surface of the forest floor, emerging, gasping, desperate to eat and mate and die. They descend upon our town, taking advantage of the deep layers of woods that surround us on all sides, and eventually they cover every last inch of available surface. There can be a million and a half cicadas per acre, my best friend Amelia reads aloud from the newspaper, and Sargasso has a lot of acres.

Amelia isn't the only person obsessed with the idea of periodical cicadas. The oncoming swarm fascinates my fifth-grade class to the point of distraction, so our teacher gives us a lesson on their life cycle in the dwindling days of the school year.

The female cicada cuts a slit in a twig and lays eggs – 600 at a time – Ms Williams explains to her riveted audience. It's better than her lessons on atomic power, better than HBO or pay-per-view, better than scary stories whispered between sleeping bags at slumber parties. In six to ten weeks, Ms Williams continues, drawing diagrams on the overhead projector, the eggs will hatch, and the babies, or nymphs, will fall from the trees and bury themselves for seventeen years. And for the next dozen or so weeks, the cicadas will scream and scream and scream for everyone to hear.

Wow, Amelia breathes, eyes wide. She's already scribbling away in the notebook she's purchased specifically for this summer.

Yuck, Chad laughs, elbowing Matt. He'll eat at least three cicadas by the end of the summer, after he consistently forgets the consequences of playing truth or dare.

I say nothing, any song I might have had to share with the class trapped as a scream in my throat while I imagine the dirt covering me; I press my cheek to the cool laminate of the desk and stare out the window at the trees where the first echoes of cicada calls can be heard in the middle of the day.

In a few weeks, those early risers will be joined by millions of their brethren, ripping through dirt to shake their wings free after seventeen years of waiting. They get seventeen years before they have to leave the soil that protected them. Seventeen years until they're expected to infest and thrive.

Change comes quickly to Sargasso the summer we all turn twelve and leave behind childhood. No longer will we report to Sargasso Elementary: in the fall, we'll move as one to the town's single junior high, a half mile southeast, a building with two whole floors and an actual soccer field catty-cornered to the bus loop. We find ourselves in the field at the beginning of the summer, dragging our sneakers through the unkempt grass, screeching as we unearth cicada shells from unexpected places.

Change comes in other forms, too. My mother gets remarried in late spring, and Emily, my older sister, goes off to college at the start of summer. A spot is vacated only to be filled right back up again, my stepfather slipping into our lives like a cowbird come to roost, an interloper that doesn't quite fit in the nest, an interruption that will yield a changeling by next season.

With Emily gone and my mother occupied by a new husband who flashes smiles like iridescent wings and whistles in the morning louder than the dawn chorus, I learn how to be quiet, how to be small, how to adjust my role in an ecosystem that no longer knows what to do with me. The cicadas are a welcome distraction from the changes that have forced our family to evolve, and I find myself escaping to the soccer field as much as I can while trying not to draw unwanted attention.

On the outskirts of the field, on the asphalt whose heat leaks upwards to burn our legs when we sit criss-cross-applesauce, we make piles of the shells, these husks of chitin, which are translucent when held up to the June sunlight. The first time I see one, I think it's a corpse, and the panic tightens in my chest. Tightens, until Amelia grasps my hand and smiles with all her braces-filled wisdom and whispers that *they shed their skin to survive*.

Snakeskins are a familiar enough concept to those of us who've grown up fending off cottonmouths and copperheads, so we adapt to this notion quickly, fascinated by the abandoned husks of the cicadas. The start of summer is spent collecting them, admiring their strange, musty odor and the crackle of the forelimbs between our fingers whenever we feel bold enough to rip them apart.

But my friends don't usually tear the shells apart. Instead, they place them on their shoulders like badges of honor, slip them into jars and rattle them excitedly at parents who smile through thinly veiled horror, throw them at each other during games of tag. The first month of summer slips past with declarations of *Behold, the Bug Queen!* and ill-fated sequences of truth or dare where Chad will take the record in most cicadas eaten.

There are cicada shells on car windshields in the mornings, cicada shells coating every piece of patio furniture. There are shells that float on the surface of the fountain outside the mall, and a heap of them on the mayor's front lawn on account of the chestnut tree he keeps there. There's a scientific name for the shells, we're well aware – Amelia keeps reminding us, *exoskeletons, guys, they have a name already* – but we just call them crunchies when we irresponsibly forget.

I flicker here and there that summer, showing up at odd times to hangouts and bug-catching sessions. It's not that I'm disgusted by the cicada fever that's swept up the other kids, disgusted by the bugs that have worked their way into every part of our lives. They don't disgust me at all. In fact, I found four crunchies on the windowsill of my bedroom at the beginning of June, and I swept them up as carefully as I could, taking care with their forelimbs and the echo of their once beautiful wings.

I buried them in the back of the mudroom where I figured they'd be happy. Protected. Safe.

I show up late if I show up at all, and Amelia's eyes watch me sometimes behind her red-framed glasses. I wonder if she sees me the way she sees the diagrams of bugs in her books: pre-dissected curiosities with something to learn buried deep inside the parts that whirl and click so cheerfully, hiding secrets that only need to be found.

The jewel-toned diagrams in Amelia's books don't do the cicadas justice. In reality, they are whizzbang creatures, red-eyed and heavy with noise as they propel themselves from tree to tree. They twitch when they land in the grass, eyes unblinking as they stare up at the children who study their movements with the voracious interest of would-be scientists. I like Amelia's books because they don't rip the bugs apart to learn more about them. No cicadas were sacrificed for her to learn more about them, something that strikes me as unbearably important.

We've all heard the horror stories from last year's sixth-graders who were asked to dissect a cricket, then a frog, then a pig.

The cicadas on the page have all the appropriate labels – *head, compound eye, pronotum, pronotal collar, forewing hinge* – but with none of the suffering that I assume must happen during the normal cycle of biological study. Sure, the drawing doesn't capture the full glory of a cicada in flight, its black body gleaming with an iridescence that might be imagined, all fury and humming wings hurtling through the air in a balance of chaos and desperation and grace. The drawing can't capture that, but at least nothing got hurt for some knowledge to be pinned down in a book.

One day when I'm a mile or two into the woods, I find a cicada shedding its skin. It's frozen on the bark of a loblolly, and I think for a long moment that it's sick. There's no veterinarian in Sargasso for insects (at least, none that I know of), so I'm frozen too, frozen by fear for what's about to happen.

Horribly enough, the back of the cicada splits down the middle, and nausea rises in my throat in a burning tide; but, quickly, something emerges from the fissure.

I've seen phoenixes in the mythology books at the public library, and until that moment, rebirth has always sounded like a glorious option, emerging triumphant from the ashes of your own destruction. Watching the cicada crawl and squirm its way from the body of its former self is certainly nothing near glorious. It comes out pale and shivering, slimy and vulnerable, and I hate it in that moment.

I hate its blind eyes and broken body, I hate it for leaving the brown shell behind it on the bark, and I hate that if I wanted to, I could kill it. It would be easy. Easy, in that moment, to destroy the creature that has dominated our summer and imaginations.

The full molting process takes over an hour, longer including recovery, but I stand there and watch, watch its wings unfurl and dry in the sunlight that filters in through the trees. Watch as its body hardens. Watch its first resurrected steps. Watch as my hate subsides to something bitter that sits more like envy in my chest. I watch the whole time, and when the cicada flies off at long last, I turn and go back the way I came.

When I hear the cicadas start to scream that night, I wonder if my cicada is there with them, showing off his updated shell, and flashing his newly red eyes to his friends in an attempt to stand out from the crowd.

I lie there in the dark of my room (Emily and I had shared this room for twelve years, and the idea of more space, my own space, so intoxicating at first, has quickly become a strange emptiness that takes up a queasy residence in my gut) and I wonder about my cicada, reborn and magnificent after such a long time spent as something revolting and strange. My cicada who'd re-learned how to fly, even if it had to split itself in half first. I lie there in the dark and wonder about my cicada and try not to think about how the creak of my door when it opens is almost completely buried under the sound of the cicada choir outside my window.

It's the adult males who act like a chorus, the individual insects producing a raucous chirp to attract mates in their limited time above ground. People often assume that cicadas, much like the less creepy and more common cricket, make their chirps by rubbing their wings together. Not so, Amelia reads to me from a textbook while she hangs upside down from an armchair in her living room, not so at all. Cicadas produce noise by flexing their muscles and forcing a special set of ribs, or *tymbal* (she says the word carefully, making it rhyme with *slimeball*; later, when I peer at the textbook, I'll think privately that maybe it's meant to be pronounced like *cymbal*, but in the

oppressive heat of July with my song stuck in my throat, I won't have the energy to correct her), to buckle.

I mull over the idea of buckling for hours after I leave Amelia's house, wondering as I walk the back paths through the trees, the long way home – cicadas swoop low overhead, nearly colliding with me multiple times, screeching bombastically as I thread through the sawbriar and Carolina rose. I put a hand to my ribcage to envision it. Buckling, giving in, collapsing in just to expand right back out. An accordion trapped inside me, folding and unfolding and letting loose a sound that's been trapped underground for years. My heart twitches under my palm, and I wonder when I'll buckle.

No matter how it happens, saw-toothed wings or buckling tymbals or throats unstuck by rage, the cicadas soon reach the sort of cacophony that sixth-graders envy deep in their bones. Their song can reach 100 decibels, a fact shared by a newscaster with the sort of disgust that wraps all the way around and becomes primal glee. A hundred decibels really is something else when it explodes from the dark woods that used to be silently ruled by deer, by snakes, by a mountain lion here or there. That summer, the woods are ruled by insects that weigh less than half a gram, and the quiet animals that are much larger and much more formidable take refuge out of sight and away from all that noise.

That summer, silence can be found nowhere at all except in the dark places I wish noise would appear. Silence in the wake of a door opening and closing. Silence in the moments after, where my heart beats too quickly to be heard. Silence from my mother, whose eyes avoid mine. I wonder if she's like the cicada after a molt, blinded by the shedding of something unwanted. I wonder if I'm the unwanted thing that's being left behind, scattered among the roots in the woods.

I feel the weight of the earth over my head, metric tons of dirt wrapping around me while I go through molt after molt, unseen by anyone, unheard by anyone. I don't get seventeen years to burst free of my own volition, free to eat and mate and die. I was buried in the dirt and ripped away from it long before I was ready, my ribs suddenly buckling without warning, without any practice, without enough time.

It's deafening that summer, and no one can hear me when I run from the back porch of my falling-down house, screen door banging on the frame as I run for the woods. No one can hear me in that dying August light while I thrash through the undergrowth and duck under low-hanging bagworm, the air hot and sticky, reaching into my lungs.

I am twelve years old, and not a single person can hear me as I scream in the forest, scarlet-faced with fury, nothing but the cicadas as my raging yet silent witnesses, hanging from every tree. Their red eyes offer no judgment as I dig my fingernails into bark that is covered with the evidence of our molting and release the raggedness of what's been broken inside of me into endless dirt.

At the end of the summer, the chorus dies out. The eggs hatch. The nymphs fall.

The cicadas crawl back into the ground and carry my secret with them.

Buried for the next seventeen years.

Ian Sample

Barely Audible Creatures

It was hot after lunch and we went to the river. I packed a bag with our shorts and towels and grabbed the inflatable he'd picked from a shop at the services driving down. He was waiting for me out the front of the cabin, squatting on the ground with knees about ears, carving shapes in the dirt with a stick he had found. When I came out, he took my hand and we made off down the track through the trees. I stretched out ludicrously in those early strides, arching back then curling forwards, pushing my arms wide then locking my legs, unfolding from the night. The forest was bright and brittle from drought and my skin smelled sweet walking through it.

We had arrived in the dark the night before at this place that would be home for the weekend. While Jack slept in, I unpacked our clothes and piled up the shelf with supplies. I had this vision of us cooking by fire, but the bacon already looked iffy. It was a fanciful plan from the start, I suppose, and the cafe on site had been noted. That would save us, at least, from enlisting the services of the advertised resident veteran. The man, one assumed, was partially feral and would doubtless recall his service to country as we skinned our freshly trapped dinners.

The cabin was basic and tucked in the forest and this alone was a thrill. It had a little kitchen with a fold-out table where I'd pull up a chair later on. By lamp, I'd sit there with paper and pen, chasing words and scrubbing them out again. But one way or another I'd finish the letter and my life would be changed for ever. When I was done I'd see off my drink and pack myself into the narrow camp bed for what barely passed for sleep.

Friends of mine had talked about adventures like this. They took their kids off to the wilderness for the purposes of paternal validation. Deprived of the comforts of urban life, the children faced dangers they only knew from books and Netflix movies: campfires, darkness, and the better-than-even odds of sharing a room with barely audible creatures. Such trips were fabulously successful, I

was told. Wary and uncertain, the kids learned fresh respect for their fathers, even came to see them as heroes. They forged stronger bonds, friendships, it was said, the sort I was assured would not develop through weekends of screen time alone. The whole idea was bullshit of course, but I wanted him to think well of me.

We followed a route on the map I'd found in the pack we received on arrival. Above our heads, the trees reached out so their limbs became lost in their neighbours. The canopy threw the path into shade, but the air was as thick as a heavy blanket and all you could do was push through it.

Jack kept himself busy with questions he asked the moment they formed in his head. Have we got far to go, is there ice-cream there, do crocodiles live in the river? I lifted him up and gave him a squeeze and locked my hands beneath him. He hung his arms around my neck, his cheek on mine, soft as flour. With his feet bumping against my waist, we made our way past all those signs that the city was far behind us: the hard, cracked mud with its coat of dust; the aromas of plants and the terpenes from pines; those hopeful exchanges of birdsong.

Half a mile on, the track broadened out and the mud gave way to sand and cobbles that swept coolly down to the river. There was a stretch of riffles that welcomed us in and I must have sighed out loud. On sight of the water, Jack started to wriggle, and I swung him to the ground in an arc. We hurried over the stones to the water's edge where we kicked off our shoes and stepped in. The cold water rushed around our feet and I struggled to imagine a more perfect match of ailment and glorious remedy.

There were finger-sized fish picking about in the shallows, nosing up to green-sheened pebbles, then darting off in alarm. The water was clear and further out it could have been one foot deep or four. I saw trout the size of his forearm there, patrolling gently left and right, then kicking forwards suddenly, sending thick swirls across the surface.

Shoes in hand, we ambled downstream to a stretch that had gathered the crowds. Sunbathers lay baking along the shore, some curved around books, others propped on one arm, surveying the scene, or exchanging the odd word with the bodies that lay around them. The river was filled with

cries and chatter from children with nets and rubber rings, and adults cooling off in the shallows. Each seemed utterly absorbed in the now and I loved them for their achievement. They were happy with life because life worked out and life worked out because it was simple.

The sun left only scraps of shade and the people left even less. We settled on a patch under a bent scrub oak where I laid out our towels side by side. We rushed our shorts on, dumped our clothes in a heap, and stepped out into the sun. Far upriver a bridge spanned the gorge, delicate despite its strength. It was anchored on the far bank by a tall stone tower from which cables were slung in lazy smiles to drop hangers to the deck. It crossed the river with confidence and grace until it vanished as it reached the forest.

Where we'd stopped the river was wide and great strips of the bed were exposed. The long, broad ridges of sun-bleached stones divided the water into competing streams that rejoined one another further down. Here and there, deeper channels weaved through, forming winding paths through the ridges. At the entrances to these natural flumes, parents helped children on to rubber rings and launched them with a hearty shove. The currents duly whisked them off, whooping towards the shore.

There were others exploring the ridge nearest us and I watched a woman, wiry and tanned, building a dam that edged into the river. She was lost in her labour, heaving up stones, then setting them down in the water. Each she placed with a pleasing *glock*, as if stacking clay pots from the kiln. Along the ridge were more half-built dams and together they resembled the bony processes on the spine of some lost world beast.

It was the yelping that brought me back from my thoughts. Jack was hopping, pulling my hand, and tugging on the inflatable: an improbable multicoloured rocket.

"Come. Onnn!" he said.

I took his hand. "You're going to love this," I said.

We paddled to a spot that was mobbed with children riding down one of the channels. When it came to our turn, I lifted him up and on to his lurid float.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes!”

“Threee. Twooo.”

“Daddy!” he squealed.

“Onnne. Gooo!”

I pushed him into the rush of water. The rocket surged forward and down the channel. I lumbered after him, in knee-deep water, cheering as he drew away from me. Up ahead, he span out of the current and drifted towards the bank. When he ran aground, he clambered off and turned to roar with delight. He was still shouting when I caught up with him, and I hugged him until he pushed me off.

We paddled back up for another go, and then another and another. Every time he barrelled out, he deftly slipped off and spun around, throwing his arms in the air in triumph. I watched all this closely: I wanted the memories to set in my mind so I could later recall with perfect clarity all that happened in those moments.

Further downstream it was deep enough that adults were able to swim. After some negotiation we made our way there, me wading, him flopped on the rocket. As the river deepened I crouched down low until my nose and mouth were submerged. With my eyes barely above the surface, I watched life unfold at the interface. I found that if I tucked up my legs, the current carried us both along, and we drifted like this, past the cobalt streaks of damselflies that skimmed the surface then stopped to rest on waxy party-plate lily pads.

I stood up to look around. The sun had sauntered inevitably west and downriver the water glittered like a rumpled sheet of flashbulbs.

“Shall we go back up?” I asked.

“Yes!” he cried.

I steered the inflatable to face upstream and we began to make our way back. We had drifted some way from where we’d set camp and you could easily see the curves in the river where the

shallows narrowed, the water deepened, and the shores rose up into banks. I became lost in my thoughts as I pushed him along until a noise pulled me back to my senses.

I have revisited the scene many times in my mind. It is always his stillness, his position in the water, that shapes the moment the most. He wasn't struggling for air, or trying to swim; he did not appear distressed. He was entirely still, with hands pushed upwards, as if reaching for the high kitchen cupboard. His head was inches beneath the surface, hair swollen around his face. He was looking at me, through water and air, but there was no urgency in his expression.

I looked at him in the water.

The image struck my retina, hurried to my brain and was processed in microseconds. Before it told me what the picture meant, the organ sent word to my adrenal glands to flood my blood with adrenalin. The hormone surged along my veins and poured into my waiting heart. There it swept over a billion proteins that reached up from my cells like eager hands waving at a music festival. They hauled the hormone out of the flow, each grasp as sure as a trapezist's catch, sending a cattle-prod jolt through my body. My heart thumped hard, pumping oxygen to my brain, and a panicked focus took over me. I turned and fixed my eyes on the boy and thrust my arms towards him. The frantic act played out in lead and my hands closed short around water.

I had most of the letter written out by now. Or at least a first rough draft. My intention was to be brief, because why go on, but still I skirted the point. Instead of making myself clear from the start, the message emerged stroke by stroke, in my wretched signature cowardice. It needed more work, another read over, when I had time to think at the table. I wanted to ensure it hit the right balance of shame, regret and despair. But the latter had me struggling to feel anything much, beyond the weight of the slab that pressed on my chest, and how it left me gasping.

When I was done I'd find an old biro and copy it out freehand. I had mulled over using the Waterman, but that always made her chew her lip and look purposefully to the ceiling. Nor could I print out a letter like this. That would suggest formality and distance rather than the intimacy

rejection requires. Once I had it in final form, I would fold it once, push it into an envelope, and leave it on the table by the door. With that it would be done, and I would go.

There is nothing much to say about why, but I would have to come up with a reason. Gav would ask once I'd settled in, as much as I ever could there. The others would be harder to face, most of all the boy himself. I owed them all an answer, of course, but what was I supposed to say?

I lunged for him again. My hands clamped tight around his ribs and I pulled him from the water. I pulled him to my chest and turned my shoulders to hide him from public view. My left hand went to the back of his head and I held him firmly as a secret. There was nothing more I could bear to do but rock from side to side.

I said: "Hey, hey, hey."

Every cell of me wanted to check him over but I steadfastly refused to do so. If I looked at him – if anyone did – the high-wire act of that precarious moment would topple into truth. In uncertainty lies the comfort of hope and the terror of what might be. Whether the day continued, that beautiful day, or the world pressed pause, to fold up our future, were held at once in that moment.

Jack was silent.

I stood there in chest-deep water holding him still against my skin. Inside my pleading was polluted with rage. How could such a brief event hold such destructive power? By what wicked mechanism are the slightest moments granted such unbearable weight? The nonsense of it should have been enough for the universe to flinch an apology. When word got out, the streets would blaze with the uproar of global protest.

I wished him to move, or make a sound, for life to force itself on me. But it was too much to ask, I knew that by then, so I held him and whispered: "I love you."

The mind has ways of sensing the world that cannot be held off for ever. And so the moment ruptured and spilled its hidden possibility. Through the way he filled space, how he hung in my arms, the truth leaked out and set solid.

Later that night I sat on my bed leaning back on the cabin wall. I had emptied my glass too many times and my fingers tinged of tobacco. When I closed my eyes it wasn't clear if the room got any blacker. Beyond the press of the wood on my body, my senses had nothing to offer. I listened, intently, for the hint of a rhythm, for the lazy turns of sleep.

There are infinite moments when all there is eases apart and heads quietly in orthogonal directions. In one world I sat there quite alone and nothing else would ever matter. In the other he lay there, breathing slow and deep, and I burned from the grief of my other self that poured through space untempered.

Since its launch in 2008, the Manchester Writing Competition has attracted more than 20,000 submissions from over 50 countries and awarded £175,000 to its winners. These are the UK's biggest prizes for unpublished writing. The Competition encourages new work and seeks out the best creative writing from across the world, with Manchester as the focal point for a major international literary award. The winners of this year's £10,000 Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be revealed at a gala ceremony on Friday 7th February in the atmospheric Baronial Hall at Chetham's Library in the heart of the city. The event will feature readings from each of this year's finalists before the announcement of the winners.

This year's Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Jonathan Gibbs, Sakinah Hofler and Lara Williams. The Poetry Prize was judged by Malika Booker, W. N. Herbert and Karen McCarthy Woolf.

The Manchester Writing Competition was devised by Carol Ann Duffy (UK Poet Laureate 2009-2019) and is run the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University: www.mmu.ac.uk/writingschool.

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If you have any queries, or would like any further information, about the Manchester Writing Competition, please contact writingschool@mmu.ac.uk; +44 (0) 161 247 1787.

Press enquiries: Dominic Smith: dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk; +44 (0) 161 247 5277. The judges and finalists are all available for interview.

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