

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition
2015 Fiction and Poetry Prize
Short Lists

Since its launch in 2008, Carol Ann Duffy's Manchester Writing Competition has attracted more than 10,000 submissions from over 50 countries and awarded more than £95,000 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 Manchester Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be revealed at a glittering ceremony on Friday 27th November – the Manchester Writing School's first public event at its new home, Number 70 Oxford Street.

This year's Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Stuart Kelly and Leone Ross, and the Poetry Prize by Adam O'Riordan, Olivia Cole and Kei Miller.

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

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2015 Manchester Poetry Prize Short-listed Poems

Tess Barry

Wild Fennel

render me yellow

a little while longer

bedside coast through sea window

render me open

scent my bedclothes with pollen

in cupped water linger

dusting May with your flavor

render me axis

stolen stalk of Prometheus

wand of forethought

weed-stem of longing

perennial center

render me umbel

a little while longer

My Father's Remains

The moment he died,
my father's remains
grew small in size, shaped
by our hands and fingers.

The faint and lingering scent
of tobacco rose from
our paging his hymnals
and pawing his coats.

His wallet was frayed,
its outer-edges rawhide again
from years of his palming.
It held very little cash.

We opened that wallet
and found a fold-out tent,
stitched together in plastic
rows of worn faces.

It unfurled easily and we
fell down in steps. It held
all ten of us and our mother.
We found the wallet

in his small sock drawer,
the socks all uniform, all
black. I took them all and he
was laid to rest in borrowed.

Raspberries

I started out in western Pennsylvania hills
with wild raspberry and blackberry bushes
and my mother's apple field.
Bread and ripe fruit and fresh milk.
My mother cleaned the carpet right off the floor.
My father was a Troy Hill boy who played piano
and smoked Pall Malls and drank whiskey.
He won my mother in a dance contest.
Who wouldn't learn to jitterbug for a prize like her?
They took a train to Cape Cod for a honeymoon
and bought hats for their mothers.
They sailed all the way from the Cape to ten children.

My whole life has been ripe with wild fruit.
All the men I've loved had left feet. I was innocent
until I got myself a good pair of rain boots.
There is no point in wondering what I'll come to.
With my first words I wrote my own path
straight to New York: all night accents, brick stoops.
I left there like a mad dog running free
like our Dusty who got himself killed down the street,
chasing the neighborhood boys. He ran smack into a fender.
We buried him up in the woods after a proper funeral.
No amount of experience can shake
the ripeness out of me, or my mother, or my father
who didn't just win a bride
with his right feet and big shoes.
He won a green thumb.

Near the Ocean's Edge

The bus that took my mother to Atlantic City in 1945 was a Greyhound.
She was fourteen, leaving home for the first time
to visit Adeline and John Higgins, who used to live next door.
They were childless and good to her.

She traveled alone, a tiny solitary thing.
A drunken sailor sat down next to her and stared then asked
Can I suck a hickey on your neck?
She had no idea what he meant, moved seats and sat alone.

Seeing the ocean for the first time she wept.
She couldn't swim but walked the shore for hours.
Near the ocean's edge she first saw seahorses, a herd of them floating.
They were beautiful and stationary, too magical to be living—

she thought them shells. Packed her suitcase full of them,
laid them gently between her worn cotton dresses
and underthings. Arriving home she opened her case
to show her treasures to a friend and they'd rotted.

The stench so strong it dizzies her still.

After Singing Midnight Mass

The rest have gone ahead.
Old enough now
to walk the distance alone.

In these short hours
snow has fallen, just
a dusting marks the streets.

Cold air breathes all around.
Here now.
Wreathed doors beckon. Turning

the corner to North Avenue
the moon follows,
white against the clear blue night.

Up and down the sleeping mile
choir voices
echo still, the loft's round staircase,

filled with joyful noise, silent now.
Our conductor's wand
waving, his final smile

humming on. Already Christmas
morning. The paved road
ends, rough surface comes.

Ground known so well.
Almost there now.
Quiet woods to one side,

the tree trimmed before church
glows in the window.
Skating down the stone steps, one

by one. Gliding on. Hands
gloved, still warm.
Sound and light within.

Tess Barry has been writing poetry since childhood and holds an MA in English from the University of Pittsburgh and an MFA in Creative Writing/Poetry from Carlow University (a dual-residency programme in the US and Ireland). She has twice been a finalist for North American Review's James Hearst Poetry Prize and *Aesthetica's* Poetry Award, and was shortlisted for the 2014 Bridport Poetry Prize. Her poems appear in *Mudfish*, *North American Review*, and *Aesthetica's Creative Writing 2015 Annual*. She is native of Western Pennsylvania and teaches literature and creative writing at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh.

Kierstin Bridger

Demimonde

Is it any wonder she calls
to children from her lace curtains,
to fetch her pharmacy cures,

ergot dust and oil of tansy,
prussic acid and laudanum
to ease the void?

Black thread to web
frayed stockings,
white to repair a torn chemise.

She lives in a West
where larkspur seeds
are sought for poison,

where fellow fair Cyprians
dab belladonna beads on closed lids,
where bedroom eyes blink narcotic

for rough men and fine—
men who sift gold dust
in their pockets,

who once upstairs,
call her by the third name
she'll conceive this year.

Ella Belladonna

My reflection on water, unlike the mirror's silver,
under the warbled veneer my girlhood erupts
as a cutthroat gasps for early spring.

To shock my tender fire out
I rattle my skull, spell my hair to the wind—
only to find it's gone ashes and cinder.

Broken and saddled by dusk,
cracked on the inside, deeper than bone
but to you, lover, I am the red sin of carmine—

the crimson dye made of the crushed body
of beetle scale— the glow
outside the papered window where I sit

preening my rosewood-scented neck,
stroking my mane with boar's brush,
one hundred licks to coax a blue raven shine.

I dilate my eyes, delude my senses—
drip by drop via apothecary dram.
Nightly my vision clouds us both.

I'll not have water to slink down my throat.
Sweet ritual, clink of decanter, glass and paint
smoke and mirror to make a guise.

Vanity is an unstopped vial,
an unctuous master,
my trusted liquescent whip, my elixir.

Hunger Is the Villain

I'll tell you about the bashful ones:

 Their pink cheeks pay for a brute's slaps.

 They don't know my thigh hoax:

 the clenched bait and switch,

 how I even the score.

Every virgin farm boy: peaches on the bottom bough.

 My mother was poison after men lashed her,

 felt the same hot rush of sway

 when the whiskey trued her tongue.

You don't know the comfort of rags, sir,

 'til you've bared your sharp, ravening ribs,

 'til you beat back your black winged wrap,

 again and again, to bare your naked breast

 — to November's door.

Ella Unrequited

He rode in on his haggard Palomino, eyes lit with stories,
prairie hardship behind the boast, enough coins for a bath
and a shave and just enough wind to tell his tales right.

In deep baritone he said his wife, lately departed, loved
to unlace her cotton gown, slip the fabric to her hips.
She'd shiver as she bared herself to the warmth of his back.

Labor was hard with no midwife, no coal for the stove, or water,
the well under two storms of snow. He cursed the hawks for their bid
at carrion feast as he pitched his pick through frozen earth.

After he buried his beloved and their unborn babe, he drained
the whiskey he'd hid in the barn. He found me
one evening at the dance hall bar, among the hurdy-gurdy girls

with their calf length skirts, tassels and kid boots. I was a woman
who did what they wouldn't do. My only instrument the pluck
of my body, the curve of my ear, the rasp of my voice.

He followed my wavering key to a room above the saloon,
knew more trips downstairs meant I could make it another month.
Without word he stacked coin and paper in a circle like a clock.

I'll confess I'd die to lie most nights like that, in the dark rum scent
of his tonic and soap, the hollow of my stomach ladled
around the camber of his thigh, palms reaching toward the rise

of his chest, toward his steady heart. At first blush the damp
ache throb—my own sin in restless break— as he called out
in fevered dream to his darling, *Eugenia, I beg you to push, PUSH!*

If this were not a contract, and silver didn't seep
through our palms this ink-smudged morning, what promises
we might have let slip, but when I roused him at sunrise,

to point out the dawn, I saw our bond was etched in fading hoarfrost—
through winter's pane— our doubled-yoked grief. I saw myself
rouge-smudged, ruined dowry, moon-wrought at best.

Mining Town

Lightning breaks open the heart of the wood
every manner of seed takes root
whether by swallow or scavenge,
by hawk or by hoard.

This is what it feels like to be haunted
by the carved bars, vaults, and walls of this town.

In the attic overhead, a heaving chest
breathes-in fine dust like powder.

It's almost imperceptible this slow drag,
curling photographs of the sporting life,

tokens unspent, brittle lace gone to moth,
fodder, and waste. A town bought on backs.

Museum portraits catch my eye as I walk,
their milky violet bottles, child-sized shoes,

and in the alleys, colt shells unearth
under any errant cloud-kick of dirt.

Stepping out into the wild, the river talks too.
They were too young to be forgotten,

pine-hearted sirens, rustler husbands
banking on their brides, runaway maids

farming their babies to the retired, "one night wives;"
women hobbled by the work, olden and hidden.

so many mine smudged doves—
broken-winged birds waylaid by the boom.

Kierstin Bridger is a Colorado writer. She is a winner of the Mark Fischer Poetry Prize, and the 2015 ACC Writer's Studio Prize. She is editor of *Ridgway Alley Poems*, Co-Director of Open Bard Poetry Series, and contributing writer for *Telluride Inside Out*. Her poetry also appears in *Thrush Poetry Journal*, *Blast Furnace*, *The Hawaii Review*, *Pilgrimage*, *Tulane Review*, *Fugue*, and several anthologies. She earned her MFA at Pacific University.

Cath Drake

Truly, Deeply

Of course, he's not what he used to be, this rickety old thing whose ribs, legs, tail, neck and even some organs are replaced by mechanics. The angles are never quite the same: his hind legs jut from a wasted body held up by his four-legged walker. I'm not really sure which parts of him are still dog. The way he sneezes or itches isn't very dog any more. But I don't mind because at 46 – older than me – I'm so grateful he's alive. When he sees me, he still has that unmistakable dog excitement, though faint, in the white bloom of his eyes and jiggle of limbs, his joints rattling. It's mostly by smell he knows me now; I'm a fog of memory to him. His tongue shakes oddly. An amber fluid drips from the side of his mouth and the juncture of a thigh: saliva, plasma, lubricating oil or a mixture of body and machine. A heady infusion masks his raw scent and the waft of musky fuchsia odouriser is like nothing I've ever known. Oh yes, his bike basket, canoe-companion, pulling-roller-skates heyday is long gone. I wouldn't dare handle a stick or speak the word 'cat' for fear he would injure himself or worse. I know it's him: my first love, my childhood dog. Now he's become mostly a feeling. The material world is so fickle anyway. I sit upright in bed listening for his squeaky limbs. I could never abandon him.

A Man my Father Played Golf With

I watch on TV as a swollen man drags his lardy legs that can barely walk, his belly lodged on top of them, his burred knees turned into themselves, feet wadding awkwardly. I watch as this man, Mr Harris, struggles onto the cricket pitch as Australia loses badly and someone yells out 'run for your life'. I don't see it at first, only his panelled brow and familiar wodge of moustache, but then I see he's carrying a gun close to his bulging belly. The shiny gun keeps everyone at bay. The men on the field stop still or dash to the boundary line, ducking with the crowd, as Mr Roger Harris tests the angle of the barrel with his fat fingers, at his legs, his stomach, his head, but of course, he is a real man, so he aims straight at his own balls and shoots.

And the previous weekend, as it happens, Mr Harris played golf with my father in puff-ball plaids, his podge of feet stuffed in fringed golf shoes, his face a basketball caught in an exhaust pipe about to burst. His huge thunk of a head could take up a whole mantelpiece where perhaps it could rest when he dies so we could gaze at his huge bones. Mr Roger Harris owned his weight and weight mattered: he measured his sway that way. If he fell, he could take out everything underneath. The grass paled as he yelled at it for the stupid government, stupid human rights morons, idiot environmentalists. He missed an easy putt on the 17th, thwacked his club and sent earth flying, then he and my father discussed tactics of the game, the balls, the angle of wind and banking cloud right up to closing time at the clubhouse.

Why I Feel Queasy Scanning Rental Listings

It isn't my fault. It's the ground. I never bother getting furniture to fit. Nothing just fits: things don't find their proper place. Clothes, papers, shoes, mugs, knickers, earrings get shoved from one day to another. The giddiness, the seasickness is expected and I lose things: cardigans, crockery, books. I lie in bed, waiting for the floor to stop sliding away or pulling in opposite directions between the lamp and couch. It affects my sense of conviction, my resilience, my relationships: men who stay over seem to shift oddly by morning. There have been times when I watch my hand rest on another's, then seen it drift away when I was sure I was sitting still. I tell myself I'll move to somewhere stable soon, but I don't *pick* these flats – like someone who always complains of finding lovers the same as their absent or violent father, I'm always hopeful but keep finding flats where the floors move. There was Wasley Street that had such an awful twitching slant: I'd wake up shuffled into a corner. There were three blissful months in a big-windowed flat on the hill of Edward Street before it started, slow at first, but then I was standing at the bathroom basin, my face wet, watching my bedroom inch away until it was almost at the back fence. I waited in my socks, sitting on the edge of the bath, feeling sad. Sometimes I dream of a simple life where I choose what to wear in the morning from clothes that hang in the same place every day, matching jewellery, a silk scarf perhaps, shined brogues and I dress in an uncanny stillness, then slowly eat granola with strawberries like those pictures on cereal boxes, my life rolling out on a rug of calm.

The Flowers of Our City

Here flowers are airborne: their petals
catch on a twig or window sill, their roots
shoot toward the sky, seeking air,

more air, the flow of wind, tides, breath,
the waft of steam from an air conditioner.
They billow over the city as we talk.

Daisy, geranium, hovea, hibbertia,
mess up our hair, stroke our foreheads.
At times we want our feet to fly up too,

our hands to reach for the ground, while
tissues, tickets, coins fall out of pockets.
We want to be blossom, immerse in scent.

An astonishing blue *Lechenaultia* hooks
around a street lamp; a red *grevillea stigmata*
flits inside an open notebook. There's comfort

in fine hibiscus pollen appearing
on an outstretched hand or purple hovea
curling inside a window then turning

into the wind, its roots clasping a drainpipe.
We marvel at gravity and the pull of sun.
A poppy and its bee can dangle toward me

just when I need to be drawn back to the earth
from despair. A sudden *conospermum* cloud
brings a blur, a brush of calm. I've heard

there are places where flowers grow fixed
in the ground. They're don't drift past you
and roads, houses, footpaths, skyscrapers

are built around them. Here, all feels as it should.
Our wind pipes and delicate neck muscles
quiver with gerberas, *isopogons*, myrtles.

Cath Drake is an Australian from Perth who lives in London. She has been published in anthologies and literary magazines in the UK, Australia and the US. In 2012, she was short-listed for the Venture Poetry Award, awarded an Arts Council England grant and was writer in residence at the Albany Arts Centre café. Cath's pamphlet *Sleeping with Rivers* (Seren Books) won the 2013 *Mslaxia/Seren* poetry pamphlet prize and was the Poetry Book Society summer choice 2014. She was included in *Best Australian Poetry 2014* anthology (Black Inc books).

Linda France

Dawn Chorus

While the Plough's still hard at work churning clouds –
clouds Turner would have loved, moody, fat –
a tawny owl's set on clocking off, strings
of silence plucked, the sound of a heart breaking
like glass. Cue to lift the lid off the dark
forest of this fairy tale we live: here
we sit like old pagans looking at the sky
as if it were a god dividing night
from day. 4 a.m. and all we can hear
is the stir of the wind, held breath, earth
not ready to exhale yet. This is the life
we normally sleep through, don't hear for the boil
and prowl of our own minds.

But the red birds
of morning begin to claim their territory.
The restless owl closes a door crying out
for a drop of oil, the rent air tacked back
together with song. Up on their perches,
invisible birds buzz with the wake-up call
of hormone and instinct, jostling for longest,
loudest, limberest. *Listen to me! Listen to me!*
I'm alive! Alive! Something to boast about
after the long night's fasting. Our first bird,
a robin – early riser, fierce defender. Soon,
the song thrush, piping his two notes; blackbird
rinsing his golden beak, polishing the ring
round his eye. Necessary to give voice to this
yearning to live and love and have your children
survive. 4.25 something different happens –
an inchoate elating – in strikes the first warbler,
our northern nightingale, the blackcap.
All the threads of sound spinning now
in a net around us. We are enchanted,
words fail us, we are all ears, caught in the net,
not knowing if what we're hearing is spaces
or strings. We are liquid, our edges
melting into music till we lose our 'I'ness
and we are song. Our little flock huddle,
warm hands round cups of tea in the chill
of what doesn't yet qualify as morning.
The trilling and calling, squeaking and fluting
crashes in from all directions, so
the whole body is tender to it, our core
touched by it; a wood pigeon's aching purr,
distant falsetto. This is the way
you always wanted to begin the day – met

and held, lifted back into yourself
after the long night's forgetting. A small
interstice of feeling lost so you can fall
into finding why you're bone-alive again.

The erotics of ornithology:

living through the senses all the way to rapture,
joy. An hour of nothing else between
your ears and you can't stop grinning, mouth
widening to make more room for all this
glory, all this life for its own sake. 5.40,
nothing short of radiance, sun rising above
an elusive horizon, splashing trees,
walls, you, with gold, loud and sharp as the birds
singing so they become its guardians,
mystic visitants, spirits of the day.

Pheasant and wagtail, great tit and chiff-chaff,
goldcrest and wren (little wren, who weighs less
than a 50p piece), treecreeper, blue tit
and mistle thrush (with his football rattle) –
an onomatopoeia of feathered things
that Emily Dickinson, dressed all in white,
heard as 'Hope', vowel and plosive, a gesture,
a giving of lips and throat –

how we learned
to talk after all, by imitating
these birds, borrowing their beauty, bringing
our very selves to light. And so we hear
our own hearts – tinsel and workshop, too many
yesses to count; according to Emily, *find ecstasy
in life, the mere sense of living joy enough* –
turning it up, turning it up, us all, ratchet and caw.

Swallow Song

Alone, I do not make a summer
but, like a chandler, ply my ropes
 round the earth, woven from sand
 and rain, home and away.
 Call me a calligrapher of space,
 arcing the geometry of walls and doors,
the upturned cup of an arch;
 needle and compass, scratching sounds
 out of old-time discs, arrowing north
 and south and back again,
 hymn to beauty, ode to endurance.
I am aerial, attuned to invisible waves,
spiritual and brave, unburdened
 by distractions, what you say is sorrow,
 waste. I see what I see and I sing it.
 O Africa O peat brown river O feast
 of insects. Churning through sky soft as milk,
my creamy breast's a lifted spoon,
and lifting, wings flung wide to the drift
 of air. Finding no edges, I raise the roof,
 a streak of wet slate, brushed ink ideogram
 of the child, still wise. If you only knew,
 today I open my auburn throat
 just for you – how much you can do
if you call a dream a dream
 and live it right through, untethered,
 year after year on the wing.

To an Unplayed Piano

How long now have you been affronted
with silence, your eighty-five notes locked inside?
How many times can you not tell me you love me?

You are turning into an antique,
the contrast between your keys fading.
Your patron, Ingrid, Queen of Denmark,
has abandoned you, left you to your own devices,
occluded hammers and strings.

What are you building inside your veneered cabinet?
A coffin for what can't be said or won't be heard?
Don't they both go the same way when the music stops?

If I moved you into the garden,
would sunlight step on your keys in the mornings
and leave its footprints – C G B F – an ascending scale
to wake the land and set it ringing,
start us all singing again.

Linda France is based close to Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland. Since 1992, she has published seven poetry collections with Bloodaxe, Smokestack and Arc, including *The Gentleness of the Very Tall*, *The Toast of the Kit Cat Club*, *book of days* and *You are Her*. Linda also edited the ground-breaking anthology *Sixty Women Poets* (Bloodaxe 1993). She won First Prize in the 2013 National Poetry Competition with a poem from her new collection *Reading the Flowers*, due from Arc in 2016.

Lindsey Holland

Yellow Jack

On board the brig Calder, The Windward Islands, 1853

I first saw the flag, the Yellow Jack,
on a barque in Bequia. That ship was quarantined
but still the fever touched me. The lads slept
in sallow pipe smoke, lit by the whale oil
of my lamp. As I began to drift, a living
Yellow Jack crept in. I watched his chicken-bone
fingers hook around the hatch, then
his body slinked through the crack. He was
too nimble to track, with the heels of a dancer.
His face was crumpled, eyelids inverted,
lips taut. There was a worn-saddle
sheen to his skin. His tongue poked out,
a wooden cuckoo in his mouth. He stroked
the strings of my hammock, knit his fingers
through, and began to spin me. I tried
to thrash but my arms were bound. His heart
pushed at the leather of his chest
like the restless head of an unborn child.
I could not kick. His hands were the cold
and damp of stalactites. He wrapped me so tight
the canvas stretched my gums. I thought
of all the people who'd been trussed up
like this, whose eyes before mine
had known his jaundiced cheeks: people
who fought him well, but not well enough.
Don't fight my mother once said *Listen first
then ask the perfect question*. Below the whir
of spinning, breathing, I thought I heard
a crackling voice: *Do you want?* it said.
But no, I didn't want for much, in fact
I didn't want at all. I had no instinct
for ambition – gold, sovereigns, uncharted
yellow sands, spices, acres of barley –
and hadn't yet known love. I was shrunken
I suppose. And he began to twist me back,
anticlockwise, until the hammock popped open
and I lay there swinging. I was half aware
as he flew across the tilted room, up
and through the hatch. Sucked, I thought,
and grimacing, afraid of what he'd seen.

The Raft

Honeymoon, 1861

Together, we sail in our bed. The plaster gives out
on eggshell blue, swells and sandbars, all spangled

with chattering lights as though a billion defiant souls
are milling, charged up. We squint, our pillows blinding.

Our sheets don't billow. The coastline we aged with
recedes and drops away, its dunes unthought.

We dangle our legs – twenty toes, how many bones? –
and watch our feet remake themselves, lighter underwater, greener,

then drift, as the moon rises over mangroves, our lives belted
to the rigging. We shift and don't shift. We don't dream ourselves old

but honed, remoulded by each yaw of the bedframe, each blink
on the water, or the tingle of our peeling skin.

A landform grows, a hint of yellow, then laden with colour
and jangling with sound: bounced from cliff to crag, the howl

of an island, its gibbons, or our two mouths lifting to speak
beyond their fleshy words, beyond their small wet worlds.

St. Elmo's Fire

On board the brig Calder, 1868

The game was up. For two days straight
we'd fought each swell. A skull can only house
so much thwacking. Our brains smacked bone,
and bones thumped walls, as the hull
bashed water. Then up, up, up as if winched.
I rode the waves with the vessel. The knack
is to go in sideways, one foot to stern,
the other to bow, toes or heels to starboard.
Some couldn't take it. That night I saw
a lad of twelve, newly bound to service –
it was his first voyage – curl around the main mast.
They peeled him away. The mountainous sea
forgave no one. Three able seamen
lost their grip. All hands are called to deck
in thunderstorms but in that tumult
all I could see were hands: bare hands
like dead crabs, picking at rope, gloved hands
which hoisted, hands on crates, hands clinging
as we beat the belly of troughs. At the top
of crests, the figurehead pointed at sky
and lingered there, dreaming of flight.
The rain pricked our eyes if we dared look up.
It soaked our minds. Everywhere was water.
The deck was a pool. Anything loose –
all the cargo – had to be secured.
A bang in the hold and five men would skid
below to fix the straps. Then there was a moment
when all the Atlantic's roar, the drumming
and the holler of men appeared to fall quiet,
though nothing stopped moving, the rain
still pummelled, still there were my hands
at work, but now there was a numbness too.
I felt I could *just let go*. Amid endeavour
and cacophony, such struggle, with great
exhaustion perhaps, I was flooded with peace.
It's easy, in the end, to let life slip.
And in that calm I remembered her face
as she pulled back her wedding veil, the way
I kissed her then. The chapel smelt of freesias,
rosemary and stock. On the ship, I was tightening
a boling knot when the perfume reached me.
Three thousand miles and seven years away
from her smile that afternoon, but she was
as present as ever. Her skin had glowed
on our wedding night, yellow by the lantern,
selenium in the moon. My fingers seemed
like doves as I traced her shape, the roundness
of her bones, the way her muscles shifted.

In the storm off Cape Verde, my hands
were ghosts in the rigging. I was on my last
that night. I lost all feeling
in my thighs; they were so heavy, if I'd fallen
they would have dragged me down. It was
an hour before dawn. The second mate yelled
and pointed at the masts. On each end, I saw
a violet flame: *Corposant!* To the Welsh,
a *Canwyll yr ysbryd*, spirit candle. To others,
the fire of St. Erasmus, patron of sailors, or
a torch of the Holy Ghost. I like to think
the Welsh got it right: she was with me.
I held on to that, and the worst of it eased.

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Lucy Ingrams

So will there be apples?

Cold nights clear days the fruit trees'
soft raised spurs all thought of
him rinsed with light: *promise me—*
and then? the hedges whisper in
new viridian dialects willow-wrecks
leaf into bird-houses and
she is distracted,

keeps coming up against singulars: a
bicycling girl, her basket plaited
with hawthorn *when will it rain?*
— *it will rain* a blackbird's
tv-aerial aria this blue match
to a log — flame licking
the emerald evenings,

and now he is lost to her if she looks for him
in the greenwood will she find herself/
lose herself? 'frost in May' her friends
are afraid for her at what stage
of a fire is the term 'conflagration'
applied? *so many promises*
she goes out she goes looking:

how can anyone stand this much
tenderness ... the woods holding the last
of the day in their arms? she wishes
a hawthorn bicycle, a path home instead a
quiet fine rain begins: *your promise*
— *kept, so if I find you will there be apples,*
where now there are sleeves of blossom?

what if there's no further trace of him
before nightfall? the bird-houses
trip with alarm calls her every step
carefully—

Signs

And whether you loved me loved me not
would come with a letter come with you
would come would come with some sign
(of which there was no sign

yet) and yet when it came a letter (not you)
scribbled with signs coding your answer
I laid it down on the table walked out into fields
hung with signs of their own: spring breaking

through (though wearing them naked as gooseflesh
still) and looked for a text to hook yours to
red in the willow crowns plum in the birch
patterns of gnats looked for a language

larger than us *tremor of catkins*
folds of a bud for meanings like runes
harder than answers *length in the light*
the over and over of wood pigeon music

am out here still waiting still longer sure only
I'm not whether you love me love me not
flowering stars on the blackthorn bars and at dusk:
Sirius setting, Leo rising or neither and both—

A hearting space

– the hollow between two skins of wall. *Dry Stone Walling Terms*

He couldn't tell, or have told you, what his feelings were at that time. Had formed instead a cairn-making habit – small markers along the way – raised from skirmishes between his lived experience and his thought, hoping that one might open soon: a door on to his unseen.

Walking in winter fields one afternoon, he'd watched his dog plant its hind legs wide and tensile, as three deer bounced away from it – their pied, plié-ing rumps synchronising in anticipation of the chase – and it struck him, at once, that the trouble with story

is that it has too much gradient, is for ever tipping up or down hill, like those deer, turning everything between into so much traction. *How to un-truck from it?* he'd asked himself, as he spoke to his dog severely about un-subtlety across all its behaviours.

Later, she'd shown him a flock of waxwings flitch their way round a berry-tree, ruthlessly light as they'd cropped it – and been drawn only to the unconcern of a blackbird planted heavily nearby, witness to the attenuating dusk.

Hey, hey? she'd asked,

so he'd explained about the tipping deer, and how he wondered if the blackbird, unlike the dog, had un-coupled itself from story? How, come to think of it, he'd felt attracted for weeks now to the floors of valleys, level bodies of water, flat roofs, table mountains—

Next morning, he'd been tempted to call her in much the same vein: *Just here, on the patio flags, where the neighbour's cat lies taking the January sun ... just here, something might show itself, a point of origin open...*

But when the cat lifted its bedazzled head, he'd thought he'd read in the prick of its ears that this was no more than yearning on his part, and planted the phone back on its holster. (Whereupon it rang – and was someone else entirely.)

Whether from doubt, or the nature of the exercise, these cairns of his mostly stayed blind. (Though stray cracks of light shone on his increasing skill at placing dry stones.) He'd resolved to stick with them though – doggedness being close to, if not actually, a feeling.

Siena

Lost in the rigour of lightless streets, I remember a hopeless
feeling of going-with – our large-eyed, flatfish
effort to absorb bad tourist karma – then this:

colour and a sudden opening-out, the famous
piazza's brick petalling underfoot, like a rose
parachute – hemmed with amber palaces, café-bar umbrellas.

At first our sight was pupa-soft, weak with lack
of narrative. I lit on pigeons queuing for a fountain soak,
a kicking breeze that blew *contrada* flags awake,

dreamed *Palio* hoofbeats – the horses moving as one silk
(bay, chestnut, dun) – before I could come to: take in the stock
of morning quiet, the other tourists – each reprieved a space,

like us – stunned out of role, no longer lusting after somewhere
else to be. Photographs bloomed in the strawberry
light, but we sat down – liminal still – and tried to store

the picture cellularly, mindful of the waiting dark, as you might
pick a crop of pippins, one by one, and stow them in an apple loft
to rhyme against the blight of winter's onset.

August letter

In the dream you were – how were you? – whole, humorous, young. I must write and tell you. Your skin shone.

I must tell you that I dreamt of you last night. And other news: one friend makes her will, another plans his wedding for the spring...

It seems this is a time of year when people turn, address themselves? The moulting birds, too, empty the sky. Instead, colours move now on the wings of butterflies –tortoiseshells and admirals cherish the eyes of asters over and over.

I want to tell you how the year to me from August appears upside-down. Like a tumbler tipped out. I peer into its base and trace a tiny counterpoint: snow-hyacinths on a tablecloth, winter coats on chairs pushed back, the smell of pears.

And I must ask you if you saw it too – perhaps our gazes met on its third eye – last week's late-night blue moon? In my dream, your look ran clear, ran green.

The evenings here are long still, are they with you? Yet I plant mine up with candlelight, build fires sometimes (though it's not cold) – watch the mirror catch and flush.

This month's like that, a flare I want to boost, that even so will carry summer out. My fingers flutter like the leaves to think of it.

In the dream, your hands were empty: full of your touch. If you were here, I could put mine out and you could take them.

Lucy Ingrams won the Birkbeck Michael Donaghy poetry prize and is currently studying on the MPhil Creative Writing programme at the University of South Wales under Philip Gross. She was a recent prize-winner in *Magma's* annual poetry competition, and has had poems in various magazines, including *Poetry Ireland, Ink, Sweat and Tears* and *Agenda*. She lives in Oxford, where she works as a nursery school teacher.

2015 Manchester Fiction Prize Short-listed Stories

Holding Water

Harriet Clare

And in the dark sliding silt there was a hand. A flash of minnow skimming skin, then gone. Jane twisted away instinctively.

“What was that?”

Catrin swam alongside her – rings flashing in the sun – the bright metal just below the water.

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah sorry, I thought I felt something.”

She stood to steady herself, pressing her toes down into the silt until she was anchored, her T shirt ballooning in the current. Beneath the surface her arms glowed white. As the river settled between them a water boatman skittered past.

“It was probably just some weed or something,” Catrin said. “You shouldn’t be so panicky.”

She rolled onto her back, flexing the pads of her feet towards the sky – as she stretched, a dark seam of silt slid from under her toes, spreading across the surface of the water.

“Come on. I’m getting cold,” Cat said. “There’s a really shallow bit further up – it’s much warmer there.”

She rolled again, duck-diving under water. The swell from her moving body broke across Jane’s chest, and she winced in the cold. Cat’s head broke the surface of the water a few metres away, and she moved downstream, her dark crown dipping and rising with each stroke. Jane followed, closing her mouth against the drifting leaves.

The cold had hardened their limbs – so she couldn’t be sure – but it felt like a hand; fingers touching flesh with deliberate pressure, and then the hard edge of metal.

*

They had jumped into the water just after leaving the boat club.

“Oh, come on guys,” Adam had shouted from his kayak, clanking his paddle exasperatedly crossways. “Now what?”

“Now we’re swimming,” Cat had said. “Duh.”

She was wearing her school swimsuit under the shirt and shorts. It was slightly too small – the black lycra pinching her arms, and a red line running across her shoulders; the material straining against new weight. She placed one foot on the edge of the canoe.

“Well, are you coming?” she had said, turning to face Jane, who was still wearing her life vest – the foam husk high around her ears.

Without waiting for an answer, Cat jumped. Swinging her back foot over the edge of the canoe, and out into the air. The plastic hull veered towards the river, a mouthful of water slipping over the side, before it swung back to centre. Cat’s discarded shorts darkened on the floor. Jane leaned over the side, to meet Cat’s upturned face. The skin on her chest was ridged with cold.

“Well? Are you coming?” she said. “Adam’ll take the canoe – won’t you, Adam?”

“Suit yourself.”

Jane looked down, pretending to worry at the drawstring at her waist. She was wearing cotton pants and a crop top under her shirt. She hadn’t known they would be swimming – and she couldn’t face Cat seeing the dark hair and soft beginnings of breasts under her clothes. She kicked off her flip flops, jerking the drawstring loose, and lifting the life vest over her head. She jumped from flat feet into the water.

“What are you doing?” Adam said. “Why’d you jump in with your clothes on?”

“It’ll keep me warm.”

“Whatever.” With two strokes he had brought his kayak alongside the empty canoe. He tied them together and pushed off. “I’ll see you guys there,” he said.

“You’re so fast!” Catrin called after him.

*

Cat was two years older. At school they passed without speaking, pretending they had never eaten fistfuls of popcorn together, licking each other’s greasy fingers, and crunching the hard kernels when everything was finished. Their parents ran the boat club – teaching the younger kids how to row, until they could take a skiff out on their own. Cat and Jane had played ping pong for long summer afternoons, towelling the life jackets so they didn’t go mouldy, or sneaking a beer can into the garage during one of the barbecues and drinking it beside the upturned canoes.

Adam went to the boys school on the other side of the road. For the past few months he had met Catrin at the bus stop. Jane would stand looking at the floor, while they talked. She hung back so they could get on the bus together. He would carry Cat’s bag. Jane watched the backs of their heads as they talked – Cat pulling her hair up to a high ponytail, and twisting the ends around her fingers. She used to worry at the skin around her thumb with her teeth, when she was nervous, and the down at the nape of her neck looked almost luminous in the sun.

She had brought him to the boat club a week ago. Jane had been sorting through the paddles, by the boat shed.

“Hey J, this is Adam. You guys have met, right?”

“No,” she replied.

“Well I’ve told him so much about this place that he wanted to see it for himself. Turns out he’s really good at canoeing.”

“Oh,” Jane said. The adults had started a barbecue on the other side of the boat shed, and the air smelt of charcoal and meat grease.

“Yeah,” Adam said. “We train a bit further down the river on Wednesday evenings.”

“He’s really fast,” Cat continued, her hand resting on his forearm. There was a vein running under her fingers; a raised ridge of skin. “I said he could come out with us on Saturday.”

“OK,” Jane said. Cold water dripped down the metal shaft onto her bare feet.

“It’s mainly kayaking I do though,” Adam said, “for the speed.”

“OK.” The paddles were heavy in Jane’s arms. She turned and laid them upright against the wall. Her eyes stung with sweat. There were shells set into the pebbledash, and someone else’s signature in the concrete.

“See you both then, I guess,” she said.

*

The clothes made her clumsy in the water. Her denim shorts rubbed between her legs and the T shirt dragged behind her. This part of the river was narrower than by the boat club. Gardens backed down to the water, opening onto their other people’s lives; empty boats and gazebos. Jane hadn’t been this way before, so followed close with Cat. It was difficult to keep up in her clothes, and her throat was tight with cold. She wasn’t sure where she was going.

Adam and Cat had found this route the week before.

They had taken the kayaks out after school. Jane had watched them leave, shrugging off their life vests, and laughing when their paddles hit each other. She had taken a fistful of pick and mix from the tubs in the boat club garage, and sat on the slipway sucking the sugar off the cherries. She held them on her fingers like naked anemones, sticky and livid.

They came back giggling and wet in the half light.

“Honestly, J, it’s awesome down there,” Cat had said, as they hauled the canoes onto the bank, “You’ll like it – we should definitely all go on Saturday.”

*

Adam was waiting for them at the sandbank.

“I thought you’d drowned,” he said. “What happened?”

He had pulled the kayak onto the river bank, and was sitting beside the upturned hull, drinking Coke out of a can. He had taken his shirt off to dry – his white belly absurd suddenly in the sun.

“You must be freezing,” he called towards them.

Cat was in the centre of the river, and pushed herself up to her full height. The water was shallower here, and lapped below her knees. The dark lycra suit was sluiced as she stood – ribbons of water running over her shoulders.

“Nah, we’re alright,” she shouted. “I just wanna show J something.”

She fell backwards, with an ostentatious splash. Adam gave a slow round of applause from the bank, and she smiled, before turning to crouch on the sandbank. Jane squatted opposite, the swell from the splash slapping warm against her.

“Look,” Cat said, reaching below the surface. “They’re cool, aren’t they?”

The sand on the bottom of the river was broken by dark ridges – hard arcs rising against the undulating silt. Cat ran her finger along one of the edges, sweeping the sand away with her thumb, to reveal an almost-black oval.

“They’re freshwater mussels,” she said.

“Really?”

“Yeah – look.” She reached her hand under the shell, working it out of the river bed, until it came up with a satisfying pop. The water sucked back into the vacuum – silt collapsing in on the hole.

“It proves the water’s clean,” she said. “They don’t live in the main bit where the boats are – only here.”

She held the mussel just under the surface, the meniscus laced between her fingers. She began to scrape at the outer layer, to reveal a slither of iridescent shell beneath.

“They’re pretty aren’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“Here.” Cat threw the shell at Jane – but it skimmed her shoulder, falling back into the water with a heavy plop. It drifted slowly down to the sand bank, where it listed to and fro in the current.

“Oh come on, that was an easy catch,” Cat said.

The mussel lay inert – the pale slither of naked shell winking in the sunlight.

“Will it even live now?” Jane said. “Can it live if it’s been uprooted, like that?”

“I don’t know.” Cat kicked at the sand with her toe, so that fine swirls of grit muddied the water, and the mussel disappeared.

“Why’d you do that?” said Jane, reaching through the moving silt to find the shell. The hard edges of the other mussels rose above the sand, like coins. Cat put her hand into the water beside her. The pressure shifted across Jane’s skin.

“Apparently they move too,” Cat said. “But it’s super slow so you wouldn’t even notice it.”

As she spoke, Cat began to walk her fingers across the back of Jane's hand. Her touch was tentative, gentle; a shadow of something not yet fully formed. Jane didn't move; the surface of the water rose and fell like a breath on the back of her thighs. Cat's fingers were firmer now, moving towards the ridge of her wrist.

"What're you doing?" Jane said, keeping her voice low so it wouldn't carry across the river.

Cat kept her eyes on the water, and looped her hand around Jane's arm – braceleting the bone with her forefinger and thumb.

"Nothing," she said, quietly, as she turned Jane's arm in the water, and began to trace her fingers slowly along the pale underskin, moving from the delicate veins at her wrist to the open fold of her elbow. The silt had started to settle now, and a thin layer salted their limbs. The track of fingered skin glowed in the dirt.

"Maybe you're right," she said. "Maybe that mussel will die now we've touched it." She glanced up, "I still can't see it though, can you?"

She let go. Jane's arm hung almost inanimate in the water, and Cat began to trace around her feet in the sand: slowly marking the outline of her body. Her fingers followed the edge of Jane's toes, and then ran up along the side of her foot, to the ridge of her ankle, before settling in the warm crease between calf and thigh, just at the edge of her shorts.

"Cat," Jane said softly.

"Mmm?" Cat looked up in almost-acknowledgement.

"Guys, what's going on?" Adam was standing on the bank now, the Coke can sweating on the empty canoe.

Cat let go; her hand recoiling in the water. Jane fell backwards, swallowing silt and cold. She stumbled to find her footing, looking for a space between the mussels – and winced as a shell split the soft skin under her toes.

"Ah shit," she said, closing her hands over the cut.

Cat stood up. The dimensions of the world had shifted. In three slow steps she had left the sand bank, and was swimming in deeper water – her head breaking the surface as she breathed in.

It felt very quiet. Jane paddled slowly towards the shore – her toes curled like broken fists to stem the bleeding. She wanted something solid to hold; an acknowledgment of what had happened.

As she pushed away from the sand bank, she saw a dark curve moving in the water. It was the lost mussel, turning over in Cat's slipstream; loosed from its mooring with the others, and rolling towards the edge. She reached down and closed her fingers over the cold weight.

*

There were nettles at the tideline. Jane's wrists prickled as she pulled herself ashore, slipping on the silt and duck muck. The pain in her foot made her clumsy, and she couldn't avoid their sting. Hard red ridges rose across her body, and there were dark smears of mud along her shins, as she stood.

Cat was already dry. Adam had reached down to pull her up, their hands fastening around each other as she rose from the water. She sat beside him on the warm plastic of the canoe.

"I found our mussel," Jane said, opening her palm. It looked dull out of the water, the ridges of iridescence dead white. Cat was wringing the river out of her hair, twisting it around her fist. She didn't look up.

Jane set the mussel down at Cat's feet – a cairn to another place – and sat with her back against the canoe. She rubbed at the angry braille where she had been stung. Her eyes were hot with the nettles, and the smeared shit on her shins, and everything that had been unspoken. She uncurled her toes, sticky with darkening blood.

There was a crack, just beside her head. Cat had picked up the mussel and rammed it against the hard plastic of the canoe. The juice smelt salty, putrid; a newly dying thing.

"What are you doing?" she said, turning to see Cat's fist close over the dark shell. She rammed it against the canoe again.

"It'll die anyway," she said. "I'm putting it out of its misery."

Cat opened her hand. The top part of the shell had shattered. She pulled the biggest piece away, and used it to lever the shell apart. The soft creature inside recoiled in the open air.

"Come on, Cat, that's not normal," said Adam, inching away from the sickly flesh. He looked at Jane. "You shouldn't have brought it out of the river."

"Sorry," Jane said. "Please, Cat—"

Cat dug her thumbs into the mussel. There was a soft squelch of sinew, clear juice dripping between her fingers. She threw the shards towards the river, smearing her wet palm against her thighs. The living jelly quivered by the nettles, as the moment of possibility passed.

"There," she said. "It's done."

Harriet Clare is an award winning journalist and filmmaker. She lives in London, and when not behind a camera, she writes fiction and narrative non-fiction – sometimes a little bit of both.

Loribelle and Cooter Martin Dodd

Loribelle's never without bubble gum, not even in bed. That's why her hair has that choppy look. She greets me at the door of her double-wide with her face hidden behind a bowling-ball sized pink gum balloon. Sometimes I think she does this to draw your attention away from the black eye patch strung across her right peeper that gives her a blond pirate look. The bubble pops, and I drop my grocery sack of overnight stuff to hug her. She backs away, sucks the gum back in her mouth, and sticks out her hand. "I just want to talk, Cooter."

That sets me back into last week. Shaking hands with someone I've been dinging for the past year and a half feels really flaky. I look down at my sack. "I thought when you called... Well, I brought some things. I guess I ought not've."

Loribelle picks up my stuff, pulls me inside, and shuts the door.

I ask, "Is this the 'get lost Cooter' talk?"

"No. But, slow down on any of your wham-bam ideas, I need... Well, I just need."

Slow down? I ain't much on American Idol or televangelists and Loribelle don't like football, so I figure we'll talk about the weather for awhile and then maybe we can get to the makeup-makeout part.

I plop in "my" chair across from the 60" flat screen that makes sports a must watch, even golf. Beside the TV there's a five foot high knick-knack case, which holds Loribelle's ballerina collection. There must be fifty of those puppies made of different stuff like glass, wood, china, silver, and plastic. She don't lack for culture. Loribelle saw "The Nutcracker" on her sixth birthday and still talks about it.

She drops my overnighter beside me and asks, "You want something to eat? There's no supper stuff, but I can fix you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Or a cucumber sandwich, that's what I'll have." She pats her butt. Loribelle's always on a diet, except for In and Out Burger. But, even then she only eats half her fries, which gives some idea of her will power.

I ask for the PB and J. I prefer grape jelly, but she uses strawberry jam. That's okay, because she keeps a pitcher of sweet tea in her ice box, which can make goose liver tolerable.

Loribelle lives in Gator Bend Trailer Park and Mobile Home Estates on the Brazos River, near Sortanova, between Houston and College Station. It has a new section where the units ain't in any way mobile. The old section lets in comers and goers, but most squat and stay including a couple of old Airstream trailers and a few RVs (one with flat tires). There's central showers and toilets for those folks. A railroad track runs in between the two sections, and Loribelle lives on the better side, where the plumbing's all indoors, but she's not snooty about it.

She and I've spun off and on a half-dozen times, sometimes for months, sometimes for days. We go along A-one, then one day we start out talking and wind up arguing. Why? I don't know. When she called tonight, we'd been in that middling place, kinda like pause on a video player. Our problem? I think age and income, her age and my income, or lack of it. She has the "Oh-my-God-I'm-over-thirty" twirlies and has said there weren't time left for another mistake.

So there you have it, my thirty-two-year-old squeeze playing ping pong with a forty-one-year-old odd-job plumber. That's me. I ain't much to look at, but I got all my hair and most of my teeth. I help with the dishes if asked, and I can stop a drip, replace a dispose-all, and unplug a john. That last one's a real plus, 'cause ninety-nine out of a hundred gals go grasshoppers, freaked cross-eyed by an overflowing toilet.

Loribelle gets herself wound up like a ball of yarn about her mistakes. She got herself in a family way at fifteen, and at nineteen had a toddler, a divorce, and one less eye. She took another

stab at forevermore at twenty-eight, but Jaycee, that's her daughter, called the guy "El Creepo". He bought Loribelle an SUV for a wedding present, then drove away in it six months later with a redheaded pole dancer riding shotgun.

Not that I've any better luck at staying hitched. I lost my first two wives, with one kid each, to Honky-Tonk fever, and my third don't count – you know, one of those go-to-bed-with-Marilyn-wake-up-with-Morticia things. I try not to think about that one, and I've lost track of the first two and the kids.

Even with our back and forth, I'm stuck on Loribelle, and I'm sure she'd give me mouth-to-mouth if I spark out. After all, she *had called* and said, "I *need* to see you." So I threw an extra tee shirt and my other pair of shorts in a sack, jumped on my Harley Hawg and boogied to her place.

Loribelle finishes in the kitchen, brings the sandwiches over, and puts them on the coffee table then sits on the sofa, leaning forward, tight as the rope in a tug-o'-war. She takes a bite of her sandwich and kinda spaces out, crunching the cucumbers.

If Loribelle needed money she'd act like this, but she'd call dial-a-prayer before me. In between chewing and sipping, I ask about her Uncle Mort's gout, will the Aggies beat the Longhorns, and is it gonna or not gonna rain? She mumbles one-word answers. Then it gets real quiet. I can't stand quiet. Quiet too long makes my stomach go funny, and I get the hiccups. So I ask, "Why'd you call?"

My question just hangs there. She must be totin' a heavy worry, so I ease into it. "Seen any good movies?"

Loribelle turns and looks at me like I was a fly that just lit on her plate. "Movies? Oh... same ones you have. I don't go alone. If I do, I feel like I'm watching me watch the movie."

"That's weird."

She sips her tea and says nothing.

I try again. "I tell you what's really weird. You watching you watching a movie in which the people in it are watching a movie. That'd be really weird."

She looks at me as if I'd farted, then takes her last bite of sandwich.

Like I said, I hate quiet. I think a moment then say, "I'll tell you what'd be even more weirder, that in the movie the people are watching, those people are watching a movie. Then it would be you watching you watching movie people watching movie people watching a movie. I think I got that right."

Loribelle frowns. "That would be weird. I wonder if it's ever happened."

"My mama tells me the Bible says there's nothing new under the sun. What's been did will be did all over again."

She goes zero, nothing, staring at the wall behind me.

I say, "What?"

"I wish I hadn't heard that." She stands. "You want something else?"

"Wanna go a little faster?"

Loribelle fixes her eye on me for a few seconds then says, "Cooter, we've got Bedroom Bingo down pat. That's been the bungee cord that holds us together. And holding hands for two hours in a movie is easy as breathing. It's the in-between that screws us up. You have your bike and things to do, and I have mine. That's good, but we need something to do together, something shared, like you could join my church – *don't roll your eyes* – and, we need something to talk about, to be able to have simple conversations."

"Didn't we just do that?"

"For what? Two minutes?"

"Maybe five?"

Loribelle shakes her head and takes both plates and glasses into the kitchen. She pulls out a piece of bubble gum from her jeans, unwraps it, and pops it in her mouth.

I watch while she puts things in the dishwasher and straightens up. It's too quiet. I look at the magazines on the coffee table. There are *People*, the *Enquirer*, and *Us*. I choose the *Enquirer* and page through it.

Loribelle comes back and sits on the sofa with her legs folded under her.

I say, "Do you think aliens landed in New Mexico?"

"Huh?"

"Aliens, you know, like ET."

"I don't know. Why?"

I hold up the paper. "It's here in the *Enquirer*. Something happened at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947. Says, the government covered it up."

"Oh, I didn't read that. I got the paper because it says Michael Jackson and Elvis were seen together in Argentina."

"That could be. Some say Jesus come back – several times. He even showed upon a toasted cheese sandwich. Or was that his mama? Anyway there's been people that's seen Lincoln in the White House. I mean after he was buried."

She says, "I wouldn't compare Michael Jackson with Jesus."

"How about Elvis?"

"Jaycee's pregnant."

"What?"

Loribelle tears up. "Jaycee's pregnant."

I can't figure where Loribelle stands with this. Why the tears? I would've guessed she'd be chainsaw mad. Maybe she don't wanna be a grandmother at thirty-two and needs cheering up. "Hey, you'll be a knock-out grandma. You can still win a wet tee-shirt contest."

"Cooter, shut up and hold me."

I move over beside her and put my arms around her. "Who's the daddy?"

"She moved in with that loser who owns the tattoo shop in Sortanova."

"Mike Angelo?"

"You know him?"

"He wants to buy my Hawg."

Loribelle's tears turn to sobs. What's going on? Sure, Jaycee's only sixteen, but the guy is a businessman. I hug Loribelle tight and stroke her hair. "Hey, Sweetie, look on the bright side. Mike's got an income, and as far as I know all his arrests have been misdemeanors."

Loribelle answers my soothing with louder sobs. She gets up, goes to the kitchen, tears off a paper towel and blows her nose. "I think he's a phony. What kind of name is Michael Angelo?"

"Prob'ly Eye-tie, he don't look Mexican."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Cooter."

"What's the matter?" I feel we're sliding into one of our no-sense arguments.

Loribelle takes several deep breaths then blows a small bubble. She sucks it back before it pops.

I relax a little. "Can I say something?"

She nods.

"Mike's a real artist. One of a kind. I seen a tattoo of the landing at Normandy he did on the back an eight-five-year-old World War Two vet. He used the wrinkles for waves—"

"The S.O.B. wants her to get an abortion."

"Oh... How much will that cost?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"I can sell my Harley."

"Cooter, don't be an idiot."

"Okay, I'll get a loan on it."

She wads the paper towel and throws it at me.

I dodge, but the paper ball bounces off my ear. Yep, we're in a spin cycle. "I'm just trying to help."

"Then listen to me." Loribelle rips off another towel, comes back and sits on the coffee table facing me. "I don't want her to have an abortion."

"She can adopt it out."

Loribelle gives me her one-eye burner, and I shut up.

She leans forward and puts her hand on my knee. "I don't want strangers to raise my grandbaby. You hear me? No strangers."

I bite my lip.

Her bird clock chirps seven. Loribelle blows a bubble and sucks it back.

"Cooter?"

"Yeah?"

"Marry me. We can raise the baby." She pauses. "Close your mouth. My mama was fifteen when she had me. I was sixteen when Jaycee was born, and she'll be barely seventeen when my grandchild gets here. We can break this chain."

"Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen... sounds like it's getting better on it's own."

Loribelle gives me a real pisser-look, chewing and chewing.

"Well... it might be a boy."

She shakes her head. "Cooter, my granddaddy told me that when God molded people out of clay, he propped them against the wall and went to the refrigerator to get their brains. While he was gone, some of those people walked off. If you're not one of them, you give a damn good imitation."

Silence returns. I have to think about that. Don't sound like an "atta-boy", but we don't need a squabble. "Do you wanna watch TV?"

"No."

"Wanna take a walk?"

"No. Crazy Earl may be out there, and I don't want to hear about little green men."

Crazy Earl lives alone in one of the Airstreams. He roams the park at night carrying binoculars, claiming he's on watch for UFOs. Most women think Earl's a peeker trying to catch a gal in the altogether. The rest of the women think he's just lonely and a little bit crackers. Loribelle falls into that group.

"Wanna watch TV?"

"You already asked that."

Silence, more silence, more. I don't know what to say. My innards bubble... "Hic!"

Loribelle squints at me. "Have you ever seen a doctor about—?"

From next door, Thurleen, busts our talk yelling at Crazy Earl. "Get out of here, you nut-job pervert."

Earl yells back, "If the Martians come at you, don't call me."

I pick up the *Enquirer*. "Hey, maybe Earl will know the inside dope about that stuff in New Mexico."

No answer. Loribelle wipes her nose with the paper towel. She sits there, sniffing... and silent.

I study her. Loribelle can be sweeter than cotton candy, and I find her eye patch with matching black bra and panties centerfold class. And, making love to her tops a three-day rodeo, but her silence thunders. I hate quiet.

I ask, "Do you like raw oysters?"

"What kind of goofy question is that? You sound crazy as Earl."

"I could be. But I know a great oyster bar in New Orleans, and that's a good town for a honeymoon. Besides I got a cousin there with a spare room."

Loribelle stops chewing and smiles. "Cooter, darling, you'll grow to love Sunday school. And we'll take in a movie or two during the week. And in the evenings – in the evenings, we can talk about our grandchild – among other things." She stands, blowing another bubble, takes my hand, and pulls me toward the bedroom.

Martin Dodd lives in Steinbeck Country: Salinas, California, USA. Following his retirement from community service, he began creative writing in 2002 at age 67. His work has appeared in *Cadillac Cicatrix*, *Hobart Journal*, *New Yinzer*, *Homestead Review*, *Holy Cuspidor*, *Foolish Times*, *Monkey Bicycle*, *Over My Dead Body*, and *Chicken Soup for the Recovering Soul*. He has won, or received recognition in, various contests: Gimme Credit Screenplay Competition, St Louis Short Story Contest, Writers Digest, By Line Magazine, Glimmer Train, Inkwell Journal, Writers Weekly, The Stoneslide Corrective, Central Coast Writers (California), East of Eden Writers Conference, and NorthernPros.

Snake Charm

Sean Lusk

After he said what he'd got to say they sat in silence. They sat that way at the kitchen table for a long time until he stood, the skin on his face tight as a child's telling a lie. She wanted to say 'I hate you.' But she didn't hate him, and the silence felt like something, something she didn't want to break.

When he left he took his coat, a bright orange jacket – the type workmen wear in the road. He wouldn't be back for his other things, she knew. He didn't have much – a pair of trainers that needed throwing out, a couple of T-shirts, three pairs of shorts and a rucksack, a kid's one, with a cartoon character on it she didn't recognise. In it she found a screwed-up shopping list, a broken mobile phone – not that she'd been looking. His things were his. They had his smell about them – slightly musty, not good, but not bad either. After he'd gone she walked around the house trying to see it as he must have seen it when he'd first come, as he'd see it if he ever came back. She saw that he'd left his wash bag on the floor by the sink. She knew he wouldn't change his mind for a toothbrush.

Back in the kitchen she made a cup of tea, took it to the table and sat there, staring at the vivarium. She did not like having the snake in the kitchen. That had been Ryan's idea. It needed the warmth, he'd said. She wondered how she could get rid of it, now that he'd gone. Her throat felt dry, her skin hot. She went to the cupboard, took out a coffee mug and held it for a moment before dropping it. It made a dull noise as it hit the floor and broke. She broke some plates, too, but nothing made the noise she wanted to hear. She felt she was underwater. The snake stared at her, blankly.

'You depress me'. Those had been Ryan's last words to her.

No one at work knew about Ryan, about the snake. No one at work knew anything about her at all. If you keep yourself to yourself for long enough people start to leave you alone. To begin with they used to ask her to go with them on their nights out – bowling, to a nightclub, for a meal. She said 'no' because the money she made she needed. She never offered an explanation. She didn't want their kind of sympathy. She always tried to give the impression that she was older than the others, even though she was only thirty-five and there were plenty older. They stopped asking her out after she didn't go to the Christmas party the second year. That was the year they said they'd treat her and it wouldn't be a proper celebration without her – Debbie and the others saying 'she must come', that it would be a 'laugh'. But there was nothing in the world that Lisa felt she must do, least of all drink warm white wine in the basement of a Mexican restaurant where she'd be sat in the corner, her view obscured by a plastic cactus plant, and where the Polish waiters would be obliged to wear sombreros, where the smell of chilli would not quite obscure the smell of armpit sweat and where she would try and fail to follow the fractured conversations of people who would not, in any case, be talking to her.

The next day she slept until midday. When she woke she remembered what had happened, what had happened with Ryan. She left a message at the office to say she was sick and then went back to sleep. It was only after dark that she remembered it was a Saturday and that no-one would be there anyway.

Before she went to work on the Monday she hunched her shoulders, dulled her eyes. She found a way of applying make up so that her face looked closed, beyond inquisition. She wore a pair

of flat, black leather shoes, a short woollen skirt and thick, purple tights that rode above her knees a little. She combed her hair so that it looked uncombed. She smelled slightly of antiseptic. She tended to alternate between two cardigans – one mustard, the other an uncertain blue-green the colour of municipal paint. She chose the blue-green. The cat slept on the one she wasn't wearing.

Lisa had once told the girls at the office that she looked after her elderly mother. She did not know why she had said this. At the time it had seemed a convenient lie, but soon she was asked questions she could not answer easily. She was asked whether her mother needed a lot of care, whether she got out at all, whether she was forgetful. The girls began to talk to each other about her caring responsibilities and about the status of carers. They informed her that, as a 'carer' she was entitled to help. Her new status absolved her from all remaining expectation that she would join their coffee club, or that she would laugh at the e-mails they sent around the office headed *this will make you laugh*. She nodded at their questions, at news of their engagements and pregnancies and separations and in this way was freed from the obligation to show interest. She was careful not to lie, or not outright.

"How's mum?" she was asked one Monday morning.

"Not too good," she said with a little shake of her head and a solemn smile.

"Can she manage the stairs?" asked Debbie.

"Not at all," said Lisa, which was true. Her mother had been dead for ten years, and they hadn't spoken for ten years before that. Stairs were certainly beyond her.

Back home that evening she found no message from Ryan, no message from anyone; only the snake awaited her, perfectly patient, as if it was waiting for something important. Ryan had named the snake 'Frank', but she called the snake 'Snake'. "Hello, Snake," she said, leaving a pause, as if expecting an answer. It stared back at her, unblinking, its eye alien and cold.

After a fortnight she thought the snake looked hungry. "I can't let you starve to death, can I?" she said. The snake seemed too weak to reply. She went to the freezer and took one of Ryan's white rats from it, hammering its ice-hard head on the kitchen work surface before dropping it into a glass dish and putting it in the microwave. She pressed 'defrost' and let it turn there for fifteen minutes, performing its cruel pirouettes before it exploded with a small thud, globules of liver-brown flesh splattering against the glass. Lisa opened the door, turning her nose away from the smell of warm and gutty death. She felt guilty, as if she had waved a child into the path of a speeding car. She remembered that Ryan had always thawed his rats in a bowl of hot water, weighing them down with a heavy plate. She took another rat from the freezer and did what Ryan had once done. After twenty minutes the rat sat warm and limp in her hands, as if the water had brought it back to life. Its fur was matted from all that frozen time. She let it drop from one hand to the other, half expecting it to spring from her hand and scuttle off into a corner. She remembered that Ryan used to borrow her hairdryer to 'fluff it up'. He used to take particular care to heat the dead rat's brain, because it was the brain, he said, that snakes were keenest to devour. She passed the dryer backwards and forwards over the white fur. She thought of the word *lovingly*. She thought it a strange word to apply to drying a rat, dead or alive. She thought it a strange word to apply to anything.

She opened the lid of the vivarium and moved the rat about in semblance of life, of terror, of futile escape, but the snake did not move. In the morning the rat was gone and Snake seemed more content. "Happy now?" she said as she left to catch the bus. As she checked her keys and closed the door she thought she heard it mutter something unintelligible in reply.

Lisa worked hard at the office. She dealt with all her calls and e-mails each day and wrote business summaries that were superior to those that Kay, her manager, could produce. In this way Lisa protected herself from the threat of being dismissed. Kay was a vindictive woman, but she was also too lazy to rid herself of someone who was useful to her, however eccentric that person might be. Lisa's neat and accurate figures allowed Kay to remain in her office most of the day eating Jaffa Cakes, trading in Manx cats on the internet and growing morbidly obese.

Frank did put on a few centimetres, and then a few more. Lisa began to feel that it was cruel to confine him to the vivarium, which had been bought for him when he was so much smaller. She let him free. She would come home to find him lying under the radiator in the living room, or coiled half-heartedly around the immersion heater. One night she found him lying across the floor just inside the front door. Inadvertently, she kicked him. "Ouch," he said, coiling himself around her leg. "Sorry," she said. He loosened his grip. Quite often he'd be in the bath. One time he was swimming there, in two feet of water that Lisa was certain she had not left in it. Another night she could not find him at all. She looked in all his usual places: beneath the radiators, in the bathroom, in the kitchen cupboards, under her bed. Just as she was getting worried, wondering who to ask for help, her head brushed against something and, looking up, she saw Snake hanging from the light fitting in the hall. "You had me worried!" she laughed in relief.

He smiled.

"You're a tease," she said, warmly.

"I try to keep you amused," she heard him say.

On the Thursday she came home to find both the cat and Snake gone. She called them both, looked in every possible place, but there was no sign of them. She wondered if they might have run away together. They'd not grow hungry – but it was November and a python wouldn't last long on the streets of Salford. She walked the empty sodium-lit city calling for them. The cat was called 'Jarvis'. Her calls of 'Frank!... Jarvis!' sounded oddly formal in the dark, drizzly night.

On Saturday morning she found Snake under the kitchen sink. He was sleepy. "I expect you've had quite an adventure," she said, feeling elated, wanting to pick him up and embrace him, "you and Jarvis." He shifted contentedly, signalling his agreement. But Jarvis never did return.

Snake did not eat for two months.

One Sunday night there was a pounding on the door. For a long time Lisa ignored it, but eventually she went and saw that it was Ryan who stood there. Rainwater streamed from his blue-black hair into his eyes, down his nose. It poured from the cleft in his chin like a tap.

"You're wet," she said.

"Yeah, it's wet," he said, looking up, extending his arms, as if to suggest that he had conjured the weather himself, like a god. He gave her a smile. He had beautiful teeth.

"What do you want?"

"To see how you are." He blinked slowly, trying to squeeze the rain out of his eyes.

“Where’s your coat?”

He shrugged, then laughed.

She didn’t believe that he’d come to see how she was. “Why didn’t you send me a text, at least?”

“I did. When was the last time you charged your phone?” He was smiling, his voice warm in the rain.

“If you’ve come for Frank, I sold him.”

“You what?” Ryan tilted his head to one side. His smile changed, revealing the bottom row of his beautiful teeth, which is what happened when he was angry.

“Yeah,” she said, and she gave herself a little nod of agreement, “Yeah. Got a hundred quid for him as a matter of fact. But I’ve spent it now.”

She saw that he’d begun to shiver. She thought for a moment about letting him in, about lighting the oven and standing him in front it and getting him to take off his clothes in front of her. She’d see his pale, pale skin and his black, black hairs, the ones that made a circle around his nipples and trailed down from his belly button. She wanted to dry his clothes for him, to warm him up, but then he might see Snake, take him from her. She shut the door.

In her sleep she didn’t hear the sound of his quiet coming. She didn’t hear him slip into her bedroom, didn’t know how long he watched her before reaching his decision. But when he moved into her bed she felt the bulk of him beside her, his skin cool and dry against hers. He rested there, warming slowly. She put one arm over him and noticed how much thinner he was than before. With her fingers she felt his bones beneath his skin, running them up and down, up and down, as if playing a strange, soundless instrument. She pushed herself up against his long body and he pressed himself against her and she felt almost complete. He smelled neither good nor bad. He smelled of nothing at all.

Sometime in the night they must have shifted positions, they must have wrapped themselves around each other and entwined themselves as if they would grow from two into one, she tightening her grip on him and he tightening his on her, tighter and tighter until it seemed that her flesh would become his.

Until, when daylight came, there could be no letting go.

Sean Lusk recently quit his job in the civil service in order to write full-time. After a decade of wrestling with it, he has just finished his first novel. In 2014 he was runner-up in the Bridport Short Story Prize, and his stories have also been published in the Fish anthology and in *Staple* magazine. He has lived in Pakistan, South Africa and Egypt. He currently lives in Dorset, as he believes green hills and rough seas are the indispensable allies of the writer. He also likes to spend time in Greece, for much the same reason.

Fishtail

Angela Readman

Rosemary Walker passes our door carrying a suit in her arms. I see her daily at this time of year, on mornings the sky is slate and the sun ripping out of the clouds looks painful. Tied by the laces, shoes dangle around her neck, kicking her breast.

Once, I followed her, footsteps sticking in the cobbles. She didn't turn around, eyes set on the sea line ahead. It was so early only the kittiwakes kept her company, she thought, so dead no one would see her lay the suit on the beach. I saw her place stones on the jacket and trousers to prevent them dancing off in the wind, and leave. This, I told no one. There are some things no one needs to hear.

The sheets flap as my father lays fresh linen on the mattress. He snips a clot of roses off the bush and sets a vase on one side of the bed. It is dusk. I think of Rosemary collecting the suit, damp, glittered in shale, bird droppings like a flower on the lapel.

'This one? Or this?' His voice echoes in the open wardrobe. My father pulls out two dresses, hangers on the rail rattling like bones. 'This was her favourite. We'll go with that,' he says. 'What do you think?'

It sounds like she's dead. That's what I think; my mother is half gone, strands of hair in a brush on the dresser and bits of lace in her button jar like frills on the water. We lose her over and over.

'I like the blue one,' I say, but it's the lemon dress he leaves out. He says it reminds her of the sun under water, a pale cloth above her she'll dive up and shred.

I'm glad he doesn't care what I think, about dresses, or anything else. Sometimes, I think this time my mother won't come back.

Rosemary Walker is evidence of that. Father won't speak her name. If push comes to shove and he has to admit who sold him flax, or got the last cherries at the market, he says, 'The woman down the lane.' That's as close he dares get. We are too fortunate. Mother always returns at that backendish time of the year when the notion of summer falls and browns. She has to come, he says, the way salmon swim up river to spawn. The day I was born pulls her ashore like a hole in a heart to be filled. He says she'd never leave if she had a choice.

Rosemary Walker isn't so fortunate. She lays out the suit for her husband to slip on and stroll to her door, shy as a man coming courting. He hasn't arrived for years. She lives close by, yet we avoid her; her eyes are mirrors full of all my father doesn't want to consider. That one day, he could find himself carrying a dress through the door without a woman inside.

The sea's choppy, kittiwakes hark on overhead. I stare at the waves with my father, waiting for my mother to roll in. It's almost dark, we've waited so long. I look back towards the lane, legs splashed with sand as Father runs, runs to my mother staggering out of the ocean. Naked, grit skinned, shivering, she falls in his arms. The towel flaps around her like something winged.

'Told you she'd come!' he says. 'Finn wanted to go! We came every night last week, but... No matter! You're here now.'

He rubs her ruddy and holds the dress over her head. She stretches into it, pearlescent buttons undone, fingers struggling to make sense of the holes.

'You must be freezing. Here, I'll do it. Let's get you home.'

His arm stays clamped around her small waist as we walk along the lane. It's always the same coming home. He laughs, chatting joyously about the cottage and how much I've grown. Footsteps waver and lurch, I glance at my staggering mother, without him she'd walk into walls.

If she looks at us like strangers, we pretend not to care. It will be awkward for days. She sits in an oak chair. Father drinks tea. She watches him, picks up her cup, considers the handle and sips.

'I'm glad you're back,' he says.

She nods. 'I'm glad.'

The words are slow, but it's a start. Relief spreads from his lips to his eyes. He looks at the floor rather than let me see them shine.

'What was it like, Ma,' I ask, 'where you were?'

Father shakes his head. I shouldn't ask, and can't not.

'It was. It...'. She stops reaching for words.

'It's been a long day,' he says. 'Time for bed, Son.'

I try not to wonder what they're doing downstairs. Try not to overhear him reminding her of words: *Cup, teapot, kettle, spout, lid*. The cottage is suddenly full of small stories, stories spill out of every object on the shelves.

'Do you remember this jug we bought on honeymoon?' he asks. 'Or this bowl? You once said it reminds you of the morning after our wedding night. You made porridge as I slept. Looking out at dawn, you said, the hills were as green as the china in your hands.'

I scrunch a pillow around my face, smothering her voice, stilted and strange, searching for a reply.

Come morning, she wears a nightdress, lace on the hem froths at her heels. I can't look anywhere but at her ankles, her legs fascinate me, at least the bits I can see. The only sign of a tail is a lustre left on her skin, catching the light like a pearl or bubble of soap. Over the weeks it will fade, but this morning my mother is dazzling. She pours tea, a scald off the pot splotching her knuckles.

'You'll be back into the swing of things in no time!' Father compliments her tea. Just right, for him, the colour of a China doll's hands.

My mother looks uncertain what *the swing of things* is, but some part of her remembers this room and what she's supposed to do in here. The sugar bowl is empty, other than for a glittery crust on the rim. She brings the jar from the pantry without being directed. Father smiles.

'You always liked a spoon and a half. Sweet tooth.'

He sounds like a man saying I love you so much I feel I should leave the room.

'Sweet tooth,' my mother replies, stirring sugar in her cup. The spoon chimes.

The knock makes us all jump as if we've been caught practising an instrument we don't play well enough for an audience. Mother knocks over the sugar jar. We stare at the door.

'Just some nosey-parker wanting a neb, I bet,' Father says, 'There's always one.'

He's right, whenever my mother returns someone stops by. No one for miles married water folk, but him and Rosemary Walker, and there's nowt to see there. Boys come for a gander, heads full of sea monsters. Girls selling jam crane for a glimpse of the woman who loved a man enough to swap her fishtail for legs.

Rosemary Walker carries a basket of eggs. She's scurrying up the path when my father opens the door.

'I've too many eggs,' she says, 'thought you might want some.'

She looks past him to my mother wandering to the doorway, bare footed, licking her sugary fingers. Rosemary stalls. Her face reminds me of a widow who chats to strangers who knew her husband, the grief washing out of her as people tell stories about him, flooding her as they leave her at the fish stall alone.

'You can keep your bloody eggs,' my father says.

The door shuts, but she's still with us for a minute, Rosemary Walker. The room is rammed with us trying not to imagine what she needed. Father sweeps up spilled sugar. Mother strokes the gritty table, the tip of her little finger looping a fish tail shape into the grains.

It gets easier to remember why I love her, a bit more each week. Over breakfast, my father keeps stroking my mother's silky soft hands and telling her how she slept, curling and uncurling her toes against his calves all night long, discovering the miracle of feet. He leaves for work and she waves. Everything looks righter than the rain she stands out in on afternoons when he's gone, fingers

spread, head facing the sky. She opens her mouth and flashes small teeth so sharp and white I rub salt on mine before bed, hoping to grind my blunt edges away.

I don't tell my father any of this. Everything is an adventure, with her, even the long nights. She laughs at the whoosh of fire catching the kindling, the swirl of water glugging over the pots and down the drain.

'Look at that! Listen!' she says, so delighted by the ordinary sounds of the house we feel we've been deaf to our lives.

'Do you remember the apple tree the day we got married, snowing all over us?' my father asks.

She cleans the grate clumsily before bed, ash drifts in the air. He pulls her up to feet and dances with her in the lounge. He needs no music but her. She follows his lead like a drunk, lumbering steps not quite used to her legs.

I hum a song for the pair, fighting the thought that one day, when she's gone, all of this will just be a story he tells to remind me she was here. 'She really couldn't dance, could she?' he'll say. 'No dance ever stuck, when she comes we'll teach her again.'

I have to stop thinking this way, my birthday coming up helps.

Father insists on us having a small party, not because we're party people, but because she is here, like a point to be proved. He proves something by inviting my grandmother, his sister, her husband, and their twin boys. He proves something with the fruit cake Mother has been making all week, crests of icing like a hundred waves rising to a peak. He proves all is right with the cloth that she ironed, barely scorching a fingernail, and with the fish pie we all eat until we're fit to burst, butter slipping over our chins, and prawns in our teeth.

'That was decent,' my grandmother sniffs, eyeing my mother, suspicious of anything not exactly like her.

Mother walks around the room filling everyone's glasses, scraping scalloped potato off my cousin's plates. Too small to play with, they fall asleep at the table. She folds her shawl, and slips a pillow under their curly heads.

'I'll bring the cake.'

The candles are lit. I blow and wish as silently as I should. The guests all leave with slices of cake, drained by politeness and trying to think of harmless and interesting things to say. Mother stands at the sink, rinsing the plates. My father wraps his arms around her and nuzzles her neck.

'Told you it would go OK,' he says.

'Not now.' She pulls away. 'I have to clean up first.'

She carries a bag full of fish skins and prawn shells outside to the bin. Father waits, and finally falls asleep in his chair, hand dangling off the armrest. I pick up a milk bottle and follow her out.

It's cold in the garden. The moon is a plate rim, clean and sharp looking. Mother sits by the pond, skirt pulled up to her thighs, fishskins in her hands. One by one, she drapes a skin in the water and lays it on her knees, calves, scales skyward, a shimmering patchwork that doesn't fit all of her legs. I slink to the other side of the house and race to the door of the woman down the lane.

Rosemary Walker's kitchen is steamy, a freshly washed shirt hangs over the fire. She brushes sand off the suit jacket. The iron waits for the shirt she'll lay on the beach in morning, again. I'm breathless with running and wanting to know. She pours me water and pulls out a chair.

'Did you know your husband wasn't going to come back?' I ask.

'I always knew it would happen one day.'

Her voice is so small I consider the wool suit, the dead weight of the boots hanging off her neck.

'How?'

'Little things. Everything.'

She pats a chair and tells me about John Walker taking off his shirt in a snow storm. Tells me he wouldn't even look at the ocean, and of her surprise at catching him outside, the coal forgotten. He

stood by the shed slipping a strip of seaweed between his fingers, over and over, twining it around his bare arms and legs, naked as the day he was born.

‘He thought he could live out the happy ending,’ she says, ‘they all do, but he couldn’t stick it on land. That’s when he started returning to the ocean in spring, washing in when winter comes around. Your mother’s the same. She was here all the time for a few years after you were born, you probably don’t remember it.’

‘How do you stop them going?’

‘You don’t, you just leave the door open, in case they remember they’ve forgotten something one day.’

Love sounds like the gas accidentally being left on in the kitchen, annoying as lost keys someone picks up and leaves under a mat. She lets it sound like that.

‘You’re lying,’ I say, but I know she isn’t. I know from her eyes, looking at my water, fingers stroking beads of condensation on the glass. I know my father told me a pretty lie, rather than admit my mother chooses not to be with us full time. Like a salmon swims up river, or loneliness finds a woman in a crowd, he says, she comes to us, she has to, always. It’s such a beautiful story I can’t change the end.

‘You’re a liar!’ I shout. ‘My father’s right about you, you’re a crazy cowbag!’

I race out, leaving the look on her face drip-drying in a kitchen so close to ours. I run back and catch my breath at the gate. Outside our house looks as it should, smoke spools out of the chimney. The windows are small patches of light, flickering in the dark lane.

Angela Readman’s stories have been finalists in the Short Story Prize, the Bristol Prize, the Bath Short Story Award and the Asham Award. She is a twice shortlisted winner of the Costa Short Story Award. Her debut story collection, *Don’t Try This at Home*, was published in 2015 (And Other Stories.) The collection won a Saboteur Award and the Rubery Book Award. She also writes poetry.

Stage Three

Tracey Slaughter

I gave her cancer in the end. It seemed like the best thing. I picked out a funeral, a finger down the column in the local: it was all too easy. One of those prefab chapels in the next town had overlaps in three suites: I could just park under the lineup of trees and take my time choosing which one. I liked the shoes on a girl that led me to the green room, the front all glass on a bulldozed rise where they were going to pour a pond: they had stage-three posters in the foyer, with pink flowers planned in the water and buddied-up ducks. The coffin was nice and closed. Some third cousin staked out the arch you had to file through with deadgirl flyers. In her photo she was sipping a cocktail and didn't know she was going to be compost. There was luck in the happyhour lipstick and the umbrella was a yellow one, stretched on its toothpick half-life, lefthand of her grin. You could just feel someone saying 'Cheese'. But I shot so those programmes stayed off camera: I picked up the chrome and the long necks on the flowers and the hiccups in the crowd. Front and centre there was a hunch of family in the green velvet seats. There was a Nana with pantyhose the colour of peanutbutter and cutprice flowers on a self-belted dress that still had a drizzle of breakfast down the bust. Her voice shook all over the hymns, which was a good clip. All the best friends blinked off their Maybelline while her voice wheeled up to God on an epileptic high: so I got my close-up. It got a lot of hits. The jack on the shoes of the girl I'd followed in kept her teeth gritted, steep at the ankle to the point she had to stagger to sing. But a quarter hour in she caught grief like a nosebleed: her head dropped forward and rocked and her lopsided bun got loose like honey. You wouldn't have thought she'd be the one.

Something about the green made it look like a cancer funeral. I took time transplanting it. Bits of the service were like jigsaw that I'd jammed in, but no one checked. People online believe in cancer. I'd posted as her aunty, after the opening blurb that she'd lost her fight, asking her friends to vote for which pic I should use on her own funeral handout. But I already knew which one would get the thumbs up. She had a face made for selfies, the kind you can't shoot in a bad light – nothing but sun and goodness sticks. So there was a gallery of teeth ringed with colourstay, swatches of hair tossed back from the crown and frosted tight, cheekbones curving like plasticine. She was brand Cancer. No one wanted after-shots. No one asked for close-ups of her scalped and cornered in Ward Six, the ties of her beige gown tagging the bolts of shadow that were her downhill spine. But I had a back-catalogue of shots. I could zoom-in on details: I did the chuck jug rinsed on the locker waiting for her next gutsy solo, I did the slouchy sack of gels pegged up to slither to the white X of tape that marked her line. I did the endless screwtops with their apricot glow and their rattle of toxins. No one checked the meds. Grief did for the fingerprint. At least, it did for a while. And I wrote her off fast. I got her in the bodybag before anyone could ask for flight times. I got to the Silver Shores funeral home and tracked the sad crowd filling the green fibro suite before anyone could try clearing miles in a rental car to pay in-person tribute. I had it sussed. I remember standing in the foyer after the service and smirking with faux pain at the girl I'd followed in her smudged up-do and high-rise shoes. She was one of those women whose face isn't there until it's painted into place: her lids were half-cocked now in a run of mascara, and she was angling her cellphone screen to try to swab the mess. But it was beyond fixing. She sloped around a lipstick but I watched her mouth keep trembling under it. Midriver the kohl blinked straight back off. I took a lot of her. I was impressed. Her eyes were under a solid inch of tears.

The night I first posted as her, I remember a preacher being on television. Past his toupee there was a widescreen of blueplanet doing 360s in space, and there were pillars that boxed it, budget temple style like the green room I'd later let her die in. The subtitles said he was a Dr, but he was tinted orange and wore a polka dot tie. Things like that cancel holy out. He was on about turning points and one of the pillars got gospel flashed up so you could store the numbers for later, blips of digital scripture you could take in the dark like painkillers. I flicked over and there was a show about hoarders, tiny old ladies moving in slowmo shivers through trenches of plastic bags. There was one headcase in a floral frock, upwards of eighty with a dwarf for a kid and the dwarf got stranded on the reef of cans, microwaves and curtain frills until I couldn't stand to watch her trying to scale the landfill with her subhuman limbs. They picked an old pan out the bank and tipped it on camera and there was a tongue of slime come out that felt like the image of the puke that was gluing my diaphragm. Everything inside me felt past its use-by. The garbage was neck high. I put up her photo and how she moved around a lot and how she was a part-time temp. I joined her up where girls with other profiles like hers were tilting them at all angles, arms outstretched so the flirty cut of their jaws caught the light. I left cute captions, I hashtagged her into place. She liked peeling her boyfriend's sunburn. She liked distressing retro tees. She liked friends that mixed her playlists not even for like a birthday or anything. I nailed her dumb candy chatter, I hijacked her covergirl pics. OMG it was so easy. By the end of the first night I was already thinking about where her tumour should be.

In the café close to the Silver Shores the sky went photonegative, a kind of dark you could not have predicted for the day: until then the funeral was backed by sun. I got the two of us – me and the grief girl – a table by the window with lime vinyl seats, and a dragnet of birds went left with the weather behind them. In the small room her eyes were a liquid compass. A waitress scuffed over to dump a couple of offhand plates, but she didn't want what I'd ordered. She played with the strap on her discount shoes a lot, and said things about the deadgirl that she couldn't end: her throat kept glitching. Her talk was dotted lines. The scenery went so dark it stopped making sense. She stared at her shoes like she never chose their height, just woke up and found herself balancing on them. Grief made her look preloaded, but her breath smelt like the sandwich I told her she needed to chew to keep up her strength: after all she was the BFF – that meant duties, like a matron for death. Half way to her mouth it mostly stopped for memory: losing somebody leaves a slideshow like that. You could see in her face how the images clicked. The deadgirl at New Year's, the deadgirl wagging school, the deadgirl monkeying around after lights out on camp: all the fun lucky stuff that should never have stopped. The deadgirl broadsiding in her boyfriend's car. She could not believe it: she felt so *ripped off*. Outside the place was crawling with clouds. She was talking to me shorthand, like the language of couples. But I knew it wouldn't last. The café looked like a bunker, and she couldn't see me through sobs. I wanted to dip my finger in the tear banked up in her right eye, test it for preservatives.

The deadgirl had been a near-perfect fill-in – if they'd had the lid up I could have shot her headless. They'd probably disinfected her in the right clothes, got the satin lining to ring her in those stagy zig-zags. I could have taken her down from the lapels, her hands stiff at peace around a shrinkwrapped rose, long-stem. But still there was traffic on the feed I set-up. Like I said, they didn't want the aftershots. They wanted her capped in her graduation pose between the silk trees, their beds of high-end pink stone. Her squealing in the dorm when the showerblock housed a prehistoric roach. Her on all-fours playing pekaboo with her sister's brat. But none of it seemed as real as the view from that café. I'd known I couldn't make her stay. The sulky waitress had done another handover of ham-frilled white, but her eyes started drying. The lemon checks on the plastic tablecloth sprawled. The whole place felt pranked by the cat on the neon fridge that kept waving a motorized paw. I went to the bathroom like I could breathe there. But I could smell lotion going cool in her shadows and the plexi-petals fading out in the mini-tub of flowers. The toilet exit told me *Open this Door Carefully*.

Someone May Be on the Other Side. But I knew when I did she'd be gone. I paid and left to the waitress's blatant smile.

Red light green light the expressway back from Silver Shores was packed. I tailgated a dust-bowl van that someone had tagged the screen of: *I once saw a woman whose T-shirt read GUESS so I said " ."* You could see the pixels of fingertips, but no answer. It seemed like hours I blinked into the gap. When I pulled home I cut the funeral to bite-size frames, and added cute catchwords. I blurbed the aunt's send-off. I looted every sweet crummy thing that gets chatted on death by people who are safe and clueless, did a remix. But I did think of her eyes marinated, the tangerine polish topping her long nails counting off the forks in the canteen, their failure to glint. And all of the photos that came out her mouth, like details that should have been taped to the coffin. I was happy with the goodbye playact by the time I hit the last key. The trashy grief came in, like after like. #Remember her like she was. #She's in a better place. The thing is: so what. After the service, there'd been a blank book in the foyer, a pen strung on with tassel, the word *remembrance* misspelled with crystal on the spine. You queue up, leave wishes, as if they count for shit. Not like I bothered with a close-up of that. The stage-three ducks went on travelling in pairs, on hazy slalom through promotional heaven. Everyone crossed the consolation sage of the carpet to squeeze each other's goosebumped arms. Nana got anchored on a vinyl bench and cat-napped, making low-oxygen moans. Her head dropped back so you could see the ruts, blue with useless hymn in the chamber of her mouth. The fluoro lights gave a couple of flicks which made everything look like it was loading for an instant. By the time I'd shut her down and gone outside a heavyweight wind had come up. I could lie down to watch it crossfire through all the leaves that could never hope to hold on. I'm no fan of dreams, but I knew if my eyes closed that dwarf would still be in there, rustling her walls of handmade trash with taps of stunted love. Hell isn't other people.

Tracey Slaughter's novella *The Longest Drink in Town* was published in 2015 by Pania Press, and her collection of short stories *Deleted Scenes for Lovers* is due out from Victoria University in early 2016. Her writing has received numerous

awards, including the 2014 Bridport Prize, the 2015 Landfall Essay Competition, and Katherine Mansfield Awards in 2003 and 2005; her poetry was also shortlisted in the 2014 Manchester Poetry Prize. She lives in Cambridge, New Zealand, and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Waikato, where she edits the online literary journal *Mayhem*.

Zero Moment Point

Richard W. Strachan

It was a thing of great resource and efficiency, taken in the round. Everything trundled along on the path it had been given.

He sidestepped neatly to avoid a cluster of leaves that in the autumn morning's uncertain light could easily have been dogshit – the same heaped appearance, the suggestion of heft and substance – then went back to the earlier thought which had struck him as he walked; the body, automatic, its freedom from conscious commands. No need to wake and say 'Breathe', or reiterate before your head hits the pillow that you mustn't suffocate in your sleep. And here, as he walked the cycle path that he took every day to and from work, a fifty-minute hike, he didn't need a specific thought to get himself in motion. The motors kept turning while his mind strolled amongst more interesting questions, or as he consulted his phone, or daydreamed idly and overlaid the imagined scene on this familiar one. All this without once stumbling or getting lost.

Light lanced through trees, setting red and gold against dead leaves. He was coming to the end of this secluded run, and the trees that flanked the path on either side, giving it the feeling of some rural tunnel in the middle of an urban drift, were beginning to fall away. There were more houses ahead, then shops and businesses, office buildings. He crossed a children's playground and headed up onto a residential street of fine Georgian houses, and as the light began to thicken out he felt the usual strain against his heart; the warmth of exercise, the stitch of mild dread at the prospect of another working day. The walk, like an airlock adjusting his soul to the differing conditions, made it all just about bearable, but he looked back on the pathway with real regret. He could still hear the *chip-chip-chip* of the blackbirds, the full-throated warble of a wren.

The motion of the legs, his breathing – the *medulla oblongata* had something to do with it, he remembered – those autonomic actions. He was thinking of this when he realised he wasn't going to stop. Just a few paces from the office door, when normally he would be slowing down to fish his security pass from his pocket (again without consciously thinking about it), he seemed to be speeding up.

He gripped the pass in his hand, but as he reached out to try and brush it against the security panel his body swerved off to the right and stumbled on down the street. Had someone pushed him? Glancing round he saw the pavement was empty. And still he was walking.

He looked to his feet, flapping with as measured a tread as usual. But – and he couldn't quite understand this – there was some disconnect between what he saw and what he felt. The sensation of one shoe hitting the pavement seemed to linger a beat longer in his legs, failing to negotiate the tangle of his nervous system until the next foot had stepped down and the original foot was in the process of repeating itself, the whole situation then producing a kind of reverberating delay in his experience of walking that was not, he felt, unlike the squalls of feedback generated when a guitar was laid up against its amplifier. Although he could see them and feel them, his legs didn't seem belong to him at all. These were not his legs.

He was now a block east of his office. How quickly he had covered it... Briskly he moved out of the way of other pedestrians, and when crossing the road he managed to weave between the cars without getting hit, but it was not *him* who was doing this. Whatever was making him walk didn't seem to have anything to do with him at all. He wanted to laugh, but he didn't remember how.

As if taking in hand a wayward child, sternly he told himself to stop. The words were on his lips – Now stop this! – but his legs wouldn't obey. Striding along, block after block devoured by his hungry tread, he pushed his panic aside and tried to break everything down to first principles.

How does this thing work? How does this creature actually work? I am trapped inside it.

He tried to isolate the signal that made the legs stride forward, buried deep inside some ancient cluster of the brain, inaccessible. He pictured it as a worm, a grub retreating into its mucoid burrow.

He was breathing hard through his mouth. His arms still seemed to work, his head too. He took out his phone and called the office, telling them he was going to be late.

... The traffic, he said. It's out of my control.

He reached out and tried to grab a passing lamppost, the metal chill against his fingertips for the brief moment he was able to hold it. Another approached. He resolved on a firmer grip, but when he hooked it to his elbow the force of motion almost threw him into the road. He felt like the rag on the rope in a tug-of-war, and it was almost like a punishment when his legs (or 'the legs' as he now thought of them) began to speed up. He made a noise like a sob and looked with despair at the people he passed. Couldn't any of them see what was wrong? A woman caught his eye. She spoke but he couldn't hear, he was too far up the road.

The sweat was thick against his face. There was an ache in his calves, in the joints of his legs where they plugged into the hip. He loosened his tie and undid his collar. He was now in an unfamiliar stretch of town, part of the older city, where iron roads gave way to cobbles, and the straight avenues began to narrow and curve. He lived in the north and walked south to the centre for work; now, as far as he could tell, he was heading east. He visualised his route as a vast inverted 'L' laid down against the gridlines of the city, his warm, comfortable office now a good mile or two behind him.

It took a while, but at last the real fear broke through what remained of his reserve, and he began to ask people for help. Not a single one found the courage to stop. He was strenuously ignored, or was met with faint and embarrassed smiles.

I can't stop, he kept saying. I can't make myself stop, please help me!

He bent double, a burn in the muscles of his back, but his legs still powered on. He tried to grasp his knees and stop them bending, but the muscles of his thighs beat the muscles in his arms and it made little difference. The remorseless body, always righting itself, continued.

For a while, like a passenger staring through the window on a long and boring journey, he drifted into an idle state and gazed on the landscape that surrounded him without paying it real attention. Some isolated little spark of consciousness burned away inside, trying to rationalise what was happening and understand why he had been ejected from the control of his own body like this, but for the most part he just accepted the view. The suburbs next, rows of semi-detached houses, then play parks and leisure centres, then newsagents and corner shops, and then, heading ever eastwards with the weak autumn sun on his back, came the barn-like supermarkets and wholesalers. He passed a golf course and waved to the players; they waved back. He screamed at them and they brandished their clubs. Ahead was the first curve of the motorway.

He slung his bag from his shoulder and unpacked his lunch. Munching on his sandwich, gulping his bottle of water, he became a spectator of himself. He looked with cold interest on the verdant grasses of the sidings, the lines of brisk Scots pine, the glittering commuter towns laid out across the floor of the valley. In the distance there was a frame of hills. He could see the bloated superstructure of the clouds above the valley, darkened here and there with the promise of rain. He seemed to be heading for those hills.

He kept on. He had no choice over direction. Cars thrashed past on the road by his side. When the traffic slowed he thought about crossing the motorway, but no matter how fierce his concentration he couldn't make the legs obey. He kept on, eventually walking away from the line of road and heading down into the fallow fields. His city shoes were nothing on this ground. Before long he was ploughing ankle-deep through mud. He kept on. The grass was a narrow crop of faded green around him, and the wires that marked the fields were slack enough for him to pass through. He kept on.

When he came to firmer ground, crossing a more level sward, he tried to run. In some bitter renunciation of his imprisonment, like eating richly on a delicate stomach, he wanted to punish

himself still further. Furious at the original betrayal, he wanted the body that had pushed him so far out of control to be run into the ground, to be utterly demolished, but no matter how hard he bared his teeth or tensed his muscles, screaming now into the wind that kicked up amongst the grasses, the legs plodded on, set to their course. He wanted disintegration, a splitting and a falling away. He howled, shouting at the empty land around him, the high plantations of forest, the far steel line of a passing train. Above him was the shimmering phantom of a falcon, falling into its stoop.

He realised how much he needed to piss and had no option but to open his zip and let it dribble out into the grass in front of him, most of it splashing back to wet his trousers. He gave a silent prayer of thanks that, at this stage, a piss was all he needed. But what would happen later, once the sandwich had been processed and the bowels began to assert themselves? The ghost of his breakfast flickered into feeling. He pushed the thought away.

Again, he slumped into himself, a bored commuter. The hills were closer now, but the legs were taking him around the side of the shallower slopes.

He was crying, although he couldn't say when he had started. It was beginning to get dark. He had a thudding headache in his left temple, as if the force of the hike had slobbered his brain against the inside of his skull too many times. It was bruised, shrivelled with the need for water. He hooked up a handful from a cattle trough as he trundled past and sucked it down. The legs made him leap against drystone walls until he had no choice but to raise his arms and clamber over. He threw away his bag, his tie. There must have been twenty miles behind him.

Black night saw him walking still, the moon a dim sliver half elided by the clouds, and up there not even a suggestion of the stars. It began to rain, a steady spitting that had him raising his collar and regretting that he had thrown away his bag, his umbrella inside it. His mouth was dust, the tongue like a scrap of cloth.

He could see practically nothing, but the legs made no concession. Every few yards he tripped on the ragged ground and fell, but even sprawled in the mud and grass they gave him no quarter, kicking at the dirt until he was on his feet again, lumbering onwards, sobbing and breathing hard until the next fall, the next stumble, the next 3mph stagger into some shadowy obstacle – a hay bale, the foundations of a ruined barn, a hidden ditch.

All through the night he walked, blood on his face, hands scratched and cold as bone, a range of bruises against his shins. His coat was torn, his throat on fire with the need for water. His clothes were lank with sweat. He kept going. They kept marching him onwards, and so relentless was the pace that in time he gave up completely, surrendering to it. He was spent. His mind, now thoroughly ousted from what had become to him no more than a runaway vehicle, ranged instead over vague sparks and flashes of memory and desire, the mute instincts that lurched and rumbled under the surface of his understanding, and of which he had so structured his life that not a hint of them ever rose any further than they needed to, always to be immediately quelled and as instantly dismissed. Food, shelter, the walkway, birds skipping from the path, his desk, the shoes, water, his tie, bread and water, water, cold and hot, sweat in his face, onwards and onwards, food, betrayed by this, betrayed, this treason.

Light inflamed ahead, the shimmer of coral and lemon rising up from the horizon. Stalks of grass gained shape and definition, the bright ruffled undersides of the clouds grew bolder in the sky. A plain of grassland, and in the air salt scents and the grit of passing sand. Each step now a knife to the sole of his foot, his shoes sloshing in blood, skin of his thighs rubbed clean away and weeping, and coming at last to where the land finally finished, the dunes that fell away to a stretch of yellow sand and salt grass and the wind blustering around him as he pitched to the ground, motionless, reduced now to a heaving, present-tense perception sucking in the smells and sights and sounds, hair black with sweat, breath roaring in his chest slumped down beside the raging sea, and in his flattened mind the sensation still that he was walking onwards, onwards, ever on.

Richard W Strachan lives in Edinburgh. He writes book reviews for *The Herald* and the *Scottish Review of Books*, and has had short stories printed in magazines such as *Interzone*, *Litro* and *New Writing Scotland*, amongst others, and by Galley Beggar Press as part of their 'Singles Club' digital list. He won a New Writer's Award from the Scottish Book Trust in 2012.

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