

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The QuietManDave Prize 2020

Flash Fiction Shortlist

2020 Flash Fiction Finalists

Pauline Brown

Pauline Brown worked as a freelance film production accountant before turning her hand to writing several years ago. Since then her work has won the Cheshire Prize for Literature, has received an honorary mention in the Fish Short Story Prize, has twice won the quarterly Flash 500 competition, and has been shortlisted in both the Bridport Prize and Fish Prize flash fiction categories. She is currently plotting a television drama and a novel.

Natasha Derczynski

Natasha Derczynski is a writer and healthcare assistant currently living and working in North London. She completed a BA in English with Creative Writing and MA in Creative Writing, both at Brunel University London. Her short fiction has been published by Queen Mob's Teahouse, the Manzano Mountain Review and has won the NAWG's 100x100 flash fiction competition. Natasha believes the best writing is contradictory, entertaining as it challenges, honouring tradition whilst disrupting the status quo and connecting intimacy with universality.

Alanna Donaldson

Alanna Donaldson is a writer from Great Bedwyn whose short stories have been published in print and online. She works in publishing and belongs to an inspiring creative writing group.

Rosie Garland

Writer and singer with post-punk band The March Violets, Rosie Garland's work appears in *Under the Radar*, *Spelk*, *Manchester Review*, *Interpreter's House*, *The Rialto*, *Ellipsis*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Longleaf Review*, *The North* and elsewhere. New poetry collection 'What Girls do the Dark' (Nine Arches Press) is out in October 2020. Latest novel *The Night Brother* was described by The Times as "a delight...with shades of Angela Carter." In 2019, Val McDermid named her one of the UK's most compelling LGBT writers.

Linda Goulden

Linda Goulden was born Scots, grew up in Manchester and lives in Derbyshire. She only recently began to write stories, for the first time since childhood, but has been writing poetry for the past decade or so. Her poems have won prizes (Poets and Players, Nottingham Poetry), have been set for choral singing and appear in magazines and anthologies and in her pamphlet of monologue poems, *'Speaking parts'* (Half Moon Books, 2019). She is currently working on collaborations with artists.

Elisabeth Ingram Wallace

Elisabeth Ingram Wallace is the winner of the Mogford Short Story Prize, Writing the Future, and a Scottish Book Trust 'New Writers Award.' Her work has appeared in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Atticus Review*, *Flash Frontier* and many other journals and anthologies, including Best Microfiction 2019. A founding editor of 'BIFFY', the Best British and Irish Flash Fiction series, she is Submissions Editor at *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and Senior Editor for Flash Fiction at TSS Publishing. She has a Creative Writing M.Litt. with Distinction from the University of Glasgow, and is currently writing a novel.

Emma Jenkins

Emma Jenkins is a new writer from Liverpool. She works as an educator and art facilitator, and has recently completed an MA in Writing at Liverpool John Moores University. Her work is characterised by its hybrid identities. She fuses together the disparate elements of memoir, fiction and philosophy, in order to best reflect the fractured identity of the female.

Niamh Mac Cabe

Niamh Mac Cabe is an award-winning writer and visual artist, with experience as editor, mentor, and collaborator/director on many multi-disciplinary art projects. Dublin-born, she grew up in Paris, in north-west Ireland, and in Washington DC, where she graduated with a BFA from the Corcoran School of Art. She worked overseas for several years in the Animated Film industry, but returned to Ireland to raise her children. She is published in over forty literary journals and anthologies in Ireland, the U.K., and the U.S. She lives with her sons in rural Leitrim, Ireland.

Julie Reverb

Julie Reverb is a London-based fiction writer and former singer. Her short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *The White Review*, *New York Tyrant*, *The Quietus*, *Gorse*, *3:AM* and elsewhere. Her novella *No Moon* was published by Calamari Press. She is currently editing a novel about makeup titled *Blueprint For A Face*.

Helen Rye

Helen Rye has won the Bath Flash Award, the Reflex Fiction contest and third place in the Bristol Short Story Prize. She is a Best Small Fictions 2020 winner and her stories have been nominated and shortlisted for the Bridport Prize and the Pushcart Prize. She is part of the editorial teams at SmokeLong Quarterly and Lighthouse Literary Journal and she helps out from time to time at TSS Publishing and Ellipsis Zine. She is studying part-time for an MA in Prose Fiction at the University of East Anglia, where she is the 2019/20 Annabel Abbs Scholar.

Chelsea Sutton

Chelsea Sutton writes weird fiction, plays and films. She was a 2016 PEN America Emerging Voices Fellow and a member of the Clarion UCSD 2020/21 Science Fiction and Fantasy Workshop. Her short story collection, *Curious Monsters*, was the runner-Up for the 2018 Madeline P. Plonsker Emerging Writers Residency Prize. Her writing has appeared in *Bourbon Penn*, *The Texas Observer*, *Exposition Review*, *Cosmonaut Avenue*, *Luna Station Quarterly* and *Pithead Chapel*, and is forthcoming in *Blood Orange Review*, *Craft Literary*, *Sequestrum*, and *F(r)iction*. She was a 2018 Sewanee Writers Conference Playwright Fellow and a Humanitas PlayLA award winner. MFA UC Riverside.

Taupe

Pauline Brown

He hears her in the room above, the military rhythm of her assault on the walls. He makes tea in twin mugs and climbs the stairs, fixes his smile in the doorway. But she is flaying the lips from the Man in the Moon and does not turn around; says it's the steam stripper from the shed that she wants more than tea. And hasn't he been asked twice now to dismantle that cot and put it on Gumtree, because, who knows, they might get back what they paid, what with the mattress still in its shrink-wrap and the feet in their corrugated socks?

She says taupe for the walls.

He leaves her mug on the sill.

It's only the spare room.

She feels the thud of the door through the floor, hears his call as he musters his tribe. She moves to the window to sip tea that's turned cold. And she watches him stride past the shed and through the gate, and watches his puppies as they frisk ahead and behind and about him. Watches them all the way across the field and into the trees.

Just one, he'd promised, agreeing that puppies grow big, and big grown-up puppies could spell trouble and grief. But later he'd cradled a box, all bulges and snuffles, down to the hearth rug. The litter, he'd said, and asked her to choose.

She returns to her wall.

Yes, taupe.

It's only the spare room.

Two Boys Together

Natasha Derczynski

You and your boy are clinging together against your reluctant third partner, the factory wall. In the next century you could be in Russia, Yemen, Sudan, Jamaica, Myanmar, take your pick, but right now you are held in the English West-Country in 1954, a palm that slowly tightens to a fist. The Wolfenden report is yet to surface and Sir Michael Pitt-Rivers, wealthy landowner, local celebrity and something of a pin-up for you both, has just been arrested for buggery.

So the factory wall holds your back roughly, he holds the front, 3 o'clock's new morning sunshine is inviting itself in and pressing to your eyelids as you try to straighten your face and your thoughts. You fix your eyes on the bruise still retreating beneath the pale skin on his jaw, blackcurrants squashed into a pavement, and you are ready to tell him that this little fling must end. You push aside the image of his slippers you have never seen, the tea you have never made him. You are going to tell him this is not a love you want to die for, but his thumbs are drawing crescent moons on your hips beneath your slacks. No. Life is about to take you and your double bass away, into clubs with low lighting and thick air, across the country and probably then the ocean. You will lace yourself up into your brogues, slick your desire back with Brylcreem, stand upright, play tight jazz with the well-oiled machine of your band, and offer your lighter to women after each show.

Your father wasn't clipped by a bomb and decorated in your boyhood for you to live like this now, nocturnal and furtive as a grubby fox. Then your lover's bare foot, the only bit of him set free, brushes across yours, leaving bits of grit and bringing you awake to the grass curling between your own toes.

'What is it?'

'What's what?'

'You're not here. Where've you gone?'

'Well, I am going, actually - '

He cuts you off by pulling on the fresh scruff of hair on your chin. 'You're letting yourself go,' he smiles, and tips your face up to meet his.

'I'm getting myself together, actually. And - '

The backs of his knuckles stroke your stubbled cheek. Not what they are supposed to be for. 'I didn't mean to be unkind. I like it.'

This isn't a love you want to take a beating for. Spit it out. 'This has to end.'

At once he says, 'I'm leaving her.'

You say, 'I'm going away. We've got a tour.'

He says, 'Take me with you,'

Before he can finish and you can rearrange yourself you are saying 'Okay.'

He is leaning towards your shoulder with quietness and ease. Then you hear footsteps, far too close to be insignificant. You and your lover start running. For the first time, you forget to run in opposite directions.

Mrs Veal Knits a Disaster

Alanna Donaldson

Mrs Veal didn't want many things she didn't have, but she didn't have a grandchild and she wanted one of those very badly. When it became clear that none were forthcoming, she had no choice but to take matters into her own hands.

She had a child, of course, but it was not the same: Jeremy was all grown up. He was tall and sarcastic and his skin was often blotchy, and she could never understand the job he did nor why he married that woman. So he was not at all like a baby, who is neat and round and shines like a piece of fruit.

Browsing in her favourite department store, Mrs Veal picked out two yellow wools – one lemon, one canary – and a knitting pattern for a baby's cardigan. When she took them to the till she watched the girl closely and, in the short silence while they waited for the card machine, she said, "It's for my grandchild."

Her husband didn't approve. He opened his newspaper very wide and said things like, "Let him live his own life, Margaret." But Mrs Veal didn't see why she should only get to have one baby, and so long ago, while some women in her Ladies Who Limerick poetry group had brand new babies, grandchildren, who were much more photogenic than Jeremy and not at all sarcastic.

The finished cardigan was yellow striped with ducklings going round and a pale blue ribbon that tied at the waist. Mrs Veal liked to lie it on the bed, its short arms outstretched. She liked to toy with the cuffs, with their smallness, and tie the silky ribbon in a perfect bow. She took the cardigan to the Post Office and sent it her son. She considered putting a note with it, but decided the cardigan would speak for itself; no one could see it, how small it was, and not be inspired. She didn't tell the man behind the counter that it was for her grandchild, as she saw him quite often and it would become complicated.

A week later, Mr and Mrs Veal visited their son and his wife and drank tea in the conservatory. While they talked about the unusual weather, the little dog came in from the garden, announcing itself with a single bark. Mr Veal stared at it as though it had said his name. Mrs Veal followed his gaze and dropped her biscuit in her tea, where it rapidly dissolved.

"Oh yes," said Jeremy, "I meant to thank you. It fits her just right and is perfect for winter. She's chewed the ribbon a little, but then she chews everything."

His wife chimed in. "Some people don't approve of putting clothes on dogs, but we think she likes it. *Don't you, girl?*"

Before Mrs Veal could say a word, the dog, who didn't like it, but didn't know who to blame, jumped onto the sofa beside her and lay its soft, forlorn head in her napkinned lap.

You can knit this lovely garment

Rosie Garland

Select yarn of appropriate thickness.

Your mother spends her evenings clicking needles. Never looks at her hands. Doesn't need to. The TV on, your father shouting over it. *That's not music. Not in my day. Looks like a girl.* Her murmurs of agreement punctuate his opinions.

Increase.

On her lap, a folded leaflet with a colour photograph of a girl your age, wearing a green pullover with a pattern of red horses. K13. *K2tog. t.b.l. Wl.fwd. K1. Wl.fwd. *It's a code, says your mother. It tells me what to do.*

Check tension.

The horses don't have eyes. *Can you change the pattern?* you ask. Your mother says instructions must be followed to the letter. You will be expected to wear it all the time. Blind, skinned horses dragging their hooves across your chest. You will not be allowed to cry.

Slip stitches.

For your birthday, you receive a book entitled *Knitting is Fun!*

Long-tail cast on.

You try something easy. A scarf. It's all right at the beginning, but doesn't know when to stop, even when you can see it's dragging on and on, and winding it round your neck so many times means it's going to get caught in something and throttle you.

With correct yarn and tension, your garment will look like our photograph.

You, however, look like a boy.

Insert point of right hand needle.

The back of a purl looks like a knit stitch. The back of a knit looks like a purl stitch. They are the same stitch, seen from the other side.

Count stitches. Undo to beginning of row. Start again.

Your father asks your mother why she can't do the simplest thing. If you go upstairs, shut the bathroom door, brush your teeth, pull the flush and hum at the same time, it muffles most of the noise.

Make one left, single, left-leaning knit increase.

You leave for a college on the other side of the country. Your mother packs the knitting book. When you call from the payphone in the corridor, she asks and you lie. She wants to see pictures. You promise. Have practised so many patterns of untruth you are an expert.

Double-pointed needles.

You find a picture of a hand-knitted sweater, take a photo and send it to your mother. She writes how you're turning out well; the daughter she always knew you could be. Whatever your father said.

Backward yarn over.

Or did.

Rip out the stitches.

You buy a pullover from a charity shop. Holes in the elbows, torn around the throat. The pink of washed-out blood. You pull it apart, row by row. Wool in a puddle on the floor. Miles of it, kinked with the memory of how you tried your best to knit in regular lines.

Cast off.

You buy a second-hand guitar, write songs with words that refuse to fit.

Forest Bather

Linda Goulden

She had taken against water, a reaction, no doubt, to the months of care, washing, sterilising, using chemicals and silver, even honey, anything to stop the superbug.

She wasn't sure how long after the funeral it had begun, being merely a matter of increasing gaps between one shower day and the next. No one outside had noticed. No one edged away. The trouble with taking a shower was getting in. She knew she'd like it if she could.

Going out was getting difficult as well. Only an essential bill would take her to the post box, only an empty fridge to the supermarket. Come winter, she lived on tea and biscuits rather than risk walking on ice.

That morning there was so much snow the world outside seemed bright and wide and silent. No one passed by. For the first time (in years?) she thought: *my camera*. It took an hour to find the camera and another twenty minutes for her walking stick. She trod very carefully along the towpath, photographing the thick-layered snow; her footprints; moored, iced-in boats; the bridge. At the weir she turned off into the little wood.

It wasn't silent at all. Snow slid randomly from burdened branches and her feet shushed as she walked. A hint of wind was murmuring in the tops. She put the camera in her coat pocket, stopped still and listened.

She looked up into the branches and let snow fall onto her upturned face. It wasn't even cold. It felt soft, gentle. She could smell bark, leaf mulch, needles and the snow itself.

She knelt under the white showers, scooping up snow with her bare hands and washing her face. She lay down in it. She angelled. She rolled over and swam in it. Above the trees, the high, white, sky just kept on crying its flaky tears of clean, fresh snow.

Granny Smith, Queene

Elisabeth Ingram Wallace

Fluorescent men in high-vis vests hang like fruit in the trees.

I want to pluck one.

Slice him in half, peel off his skin, crunch out his eyes.

This first blue sky day of April, a lorry is reversing, and blue sounds like magpies and a chainsaw cutting down apple trees in the Bluebell woods.

An ancient doodle of wilderness, a dark skinny scrap of me, my parents, grandparents parents, tangling between the cracks.

Next year the wild-flowers here will be gone. No more apples, no more Witches' Thimbles. No more nod and bow, no more great tits fighting worms in the dapples. The breeze will not bruise the fruit sweet.

There is talk of an apartment block, with parking for eighty cars.

The newspaper calls it progress.

I call it murder.

I wonder if I can kill a man with a kick to his ladder?

The beach below the orchard is full of pottery shards, white and blue, as if the Victorians came here solely to break things, or clumsily drink tea.

Jagged flowers, a curl, a tendril, a pale wash of willow trees, temples wonky against cream cracked sky.

Once I trod on a shard here. I was five, I sliced a tendon, couldn't walk for a month, run for a year.

But where would I run to? This place throbs in my feet.

Then.

Now.

Now, I hold the day flat on my palms, a mosaic around my life line. I walk back up to the trees.

“Hey,” I shout

“Hey!”

When you fat-foot down the ladder, yellow-bellied, I pull it out to show you.

A pilchard, still alive.

I hold it by the tail. It swings like the seconds in my Grandfather clock. Still twitching, skin
witching silver in the light, sea water dripping lice down my hands.

You back away, chainsaw in hand.

“Do you know,” I say - I stare at your pink skin -

“Do you know, that if I make cuts in the right places, I can lift a fish head off and pull out the
spine in one?”

“Can I do that with humans?” I say.

“Do you think?”

You run back up that Queene apple tree like a squirrel in a hard-hat, don't you? Don't you,
yellow-belly man?

I cook the fish up for dinner, with magic mushrooms from under the trees. Sip Pippin apple
cider till I'm pie eyed.

I take my bike lock and chain myself to a Granny Smith tree, mother the earth in my hands,
on my knees.

Now, you're coming, fluorescent.

All of you.

I've scattered temples around me, I've drunk from the pilchard, I have a spine in my hand.

Fight me. I'm sea, I'm mushroom, I'm Queene.

The Mother

Emma Jenkins

My name is Jenny. In the summer months I work the tea urn for community fun days at 'Walton Health and Wellbeing Centre'. I work with lonely people. Or people who want tea. I'm not so sure they're not the same thing. One elderly man wearing a Christmas jumper told me I was beautiful today. My mother once advised the only response to a compliment is thank you. I said, thank you. He asked if I wanted to grab a beer after the event. I pointed to the tea urn.

When I got home I took a long, misty shower. I wrote messages and drew hearts in the condensation on the cubicle door. I broke in a new razor and shaved my underarms, and then my pubic hair into a wonderful little pattern which looked like a Jeff Koons 'dog, if you really squinted. I walked over to Hershey's for tonic. He didn't have any so I bought lemonade. I drank gin and lemonade and listened to the scuttling of the rats. I picked up the phone. I replaced the receiver. This went on until I fell sleep.

The next day I phoned Townie Taxis. The driver's name was Dave. He jogged around to open the rear passenger door. I noticed the change that jangled in the pockets of his two piece velour tracksuit. I'd wrapped the urn in bath towels and held the warm metal close to my stomach the whole way. Dave talked to me through the rear view mirror about his divorce and how he'd been living with his mother in her one bedroom seaside bungalow. It was working out quite well because his mother spent most afternoons at her club, or riding the 41a around town. She liked the seat next to the driver. He sniffed and lowered his head then asked whether I had family. I told him I was married to the job. What is it that you do, he asked.

'I have a tea urn. I make the tea.'

'Let the world go to hell, but let me always have my tea. God bless her'.

'Who?'

'Mother.'

I felt the heat against my stomach and noticed the pink, morning light hover over the river. Cloudy and all-encompassing.

Nesting House

Niamh Mac Cabe

There'll be a house. It'll have all shapes of rooms, stairs up to some, stairs down to others. One big room for everyone, in the middle, and everything in it; sticks, straws, stones, secrets. There'll be lots of doors from this room into all the others.

A door into a room for the girls, a room for the boys, one for parents with different tables (each on top of another), and one for children, with rules on white-board no-one can wipe off, unless someone has a better idea.

A door into a room for a garden. In this room there'll be River, Tree, Hill. Whistling wind there, and a hole in the ground. Somehow it sometimes rains somewhere so there'll be clouds.

A door into a good room, a door into bad where those who break rules go and aren't allowed leave unless they're sorry. There'll be no light-switch there. You shouldn't have asked about that other thing, so, sorry.

Doors into halls joining up the rooms. The halls will all be the same, no turns, see-through mirrors, wallpaper with curly-feathered birds that are fake.

There'll be windows, two in every room. Each one a different view but no view better or worse than the one before; sky with rainbow on top, mountain in the middle, field under. Nothing under the field, nothing over the sky, no windows in the halls.

There'll be people. First, a baby-boy, pink cheeks, two teeth sticking up from the gum. But before that, there'll be a tiny baby-girl that no one except me will even notice, no sound, no teeth, rolled up fast asleep in a cold blanket. Next there'll be a girl who can't speak but can walk, then a boy who speaks and walks but doesn't know much. Next a girl who is able to explain to the talking boy about things, then a boy who of course knows everything.

No one will talk about the used-to-be-baby, this is the most important rule so, remember, don't be sorry, because, remember, no lights there.

The animals will belong to everyone but each has their own names for them. There'll be dogs, cats, magpies, as many as are wanted but worms will have to be found and no-one should worry about that, or worry about anything. Three badgers, a pond with sunny fish, a porpoise who'll take a saddle, seven black horses, (each one a different size, they all fit one under the other), a giant ant farm that can be walked into, but only if no-one touches anything (apart from the ground underfoot), nor no-one touches what's in the ground neither.

And that'll be that, for a long time, until an earthquake makes the house fall underground, upside-down, and then we'll live there, not knowing we're the wrong way round, the doors still closing and opening like we remember before, one on top of the other, and the tiny girl fitting under them somewhere like a good hide-and-seek but that can't be won.

The Female Beatles

Julie Reverb

1. Smoking in bed.
2. Falling asleep while smoking in bed.
3. Painting your walls blood red when the landlord said no decorating.
4. Never letting your cats Lennon and Ringo out of the house.
5. Letting Lennon and Ringo roam in my bedroom when you knew I was a dog person.
6. Stealing my clothes.
7. Staining the ones you returned.
8. Never closing the fridge door.
9. Slicing and eating apples with a chef's knife.
10. Painting perfect eyeliner flicks over speed bumps.
11. Saying my thighs looked chunky in white jeans after I'd worn them for six months.
12. Never tipping.
13. Licking your knife.
14. Scraping your fork.
15. Copying my haircuts.
16. Suiting them better.
17. Never telling me when there was lipstick on my teeth.
18. Your ability to fall asleep mid-conversation.
19. Saying how you wanted to be the quiet genius then talking over everyone in band practice.
20. Agreeing that we would be the female Beatles then insisting on a male drummer because the females who auditioned looked "too butch".

21. Buying the vintage guitar I was saving up for.
22. Blaming me for distracting you when you left the guitar on the bus.
23. Never washing up.
24. Ploughing through boyfriends.
25. Flirting with mine.
26. Taking the piss when you found my facial hair removal cream.
27. Gleefully never recycling.
28. Laughing at road kill.
29. Complaining about your expensive education, and the piano and violin lessons which were such a drag.
30. Saying you wished your parents were divorced like mine because childhood trauma would make for a better biography.
31. Turning your guitar up at gigs so no one else in the band could hear their instruments.
32. Moving into your boyfriend Milo's penthouse apartment without telling me.
33. Appointing Milo as band manager without consulting any of the band.
34. Telling Milo I was hirsute and jealous of you.
35. Deciding that you didn't need a band and would prefer to be the new Madonna.
36. Defending Milo when you found out he was cheating on you.
37. Marrying Milo.
38. Not becoming the new Madonna.
39. Settling for a suburban cul-de-sac life.

The Lost Girls

Helen Rye

The lost girls draw up their stitches at the dying of the month, when the night sky is empty. Thimble and needle eye, together they work, alone in the marsh at the edge of town. Over and under they sew – raw skin and tree bark, heartache and hens-bane and long strands of hair torn out. They bind and they loom, hawthorn twig to willow stem. Shuttle dip, corncrake feather, rabbit's pelt, bruise. Spin lace-edge of damselflies. Weave it all up till their handiwork lies shimmering between them in the white of their gaze, till it drapes and morphs and takes on the faint cast of a face – a man they know.

These nights the townsfolk call in their children in fear of the tidal dark pressing their windows; but the bravest go out into the mire in search of the lost girls. Their torches invade the quiet mist, but the lost girls do not want to be found and so they are not found. And the lights move on, loud throats and boot squelch, and the face of the man in the cloth grows clearer as the lost girls weave and stitch, over and under, the things that are torn in each of them. And they do want to find him.

He is smooth skin and promises, he is silk tongue and sweetness; he is the hand that grips her arm and the drink she didn't ask for and sleight of hand and *fizz* and waking up bruised and confused in an alley down the side of the market. He is *this is how you pay for dinner, and why else did you wear that unless, and I know girls like you, I know what you want.*

And they know him.

The town is a patchwork to them. They know every dark stitch and cross-grained sidestreet; they feel in their seamstress bones each house where each human heart lies. And their minds wander, long-fingered, till they find this man out, feel the hum and plush of the place where he sits, alone. For now.

And the lost girls rise up and they surge along topstitch and blackwork, down the curves of the ditch seams where they once walked. They pluck him from his armchair, the velvet grey. They snap threads and rip back-stitches, take sharp little scissors to the knot of him, snip-snip and pull, till the last of what anchors him into this world is severed; draw him free and away, back to where damaged things lie wove in his likeness, in the ribcage shelter of bog oak and reeds.

They hang up their cloth in the marsh-dank, from the branch of a thousand-year skeleton that once was tree. Backwards and forwards it sways on the night breeze. They tilt their heads till they see where to pin him. Tack him into the weft, a tiny motif. Whipstitch him neatly with hamstring and splinter - over and under, over and under, over and under, around and around.

Reel

Helen Rye

Catriona plays the squeezebox in the backroom bar, and it breathes for her when the air deserts her lungs. The men dance, stamping and stumbling, women the same, arms high, a drink spun spilling here; everybody laughing, and Geoffrey the most—she looks away from his face flung back, though it never turns her way. His mouth's wide, shouting at the ceiling, wide enough to swallow her whole.

Breathe in, breathe out, turn the chorus to the bridge and on.

The shake and pound of the floorboards jars the bones of her, throbs the veins in her head, but her fingers know the body of the accordion like they know her own body, how to make each sing, like they know Geoffrey's. *Breathe.*

The familiar of the keys—warm bone and blackwood, the firesmoke sting—these are both a comfort and a dragging fishhook to her heart as they recall her, eyes shut, to her grandfather's hearth. The years-old instrument weighting her—*put to memory the melodies, rhythms winding, over and over, feel the beat, the breath of them, let them into your blood, your legs too short to reach the stone flags as you keep time with your Sunday shoes.*

Fenland peat smouldering. Geoffrey in the visitor's chair—always Geoffrey wherever she looks, then and now—serious chin pressed into the violin rest, the unmoving focus of his eyes on some point she can't see, beyond the black-pin gaze of the crows and songbirds stretched skin and feather over wire by the old man who looked into the flames and far away from them, who beat his stick on the floor, *one, two, three, breathe.* Geoffrey in the old farm barn when they were seventeen, skin slick and wanting. Geoffrey here and now and dancing. *Breathe.*

The second chorus draws them all into one together in the gaslit bar; there's no need to look—she can feel the heave and spin of bodies. She can feel Mary-Anne fly past light, thick hair swinging like a bird alive itself, heel and toe, Mary-Anne's breath in the room, the moon-strong draw of her. She knows which way Geoffrey's eyes are tilted now, same as every time she's seen him since Mary-Anne first took her place in the Sunday pew last spring, him and every other village man, since his letters to Catriona shortened and faltered and stopped.

And the strength of her arms wanes till she fears they'll not carry the lilting triplets of the dance through the silence of her own chest, but in the wheeze of the accordion her grandfather's voice sings to her of courage. Tells her again that life is no fairy tale; that there are things you want that you never can have—voice of the man who cradled six babies and saw but one grow, whose wartime took his thighbone and his livelihood and everything except the *one-two-three* of this. Sings that rhythm can carry you through anything, if you'll only *breathe.*

Fish Bowl: a play

Chelsea Sutton

The scene is a suburban house with white walls, white curtains, white linoleum. The house may have a red front door, though we never see it. It is the kind of red you are scared to look at in the hardware store—the kind that screams at you, the kind only found in B-horror movies. The MOTHER, FATHER, and TEENAGE DAUGHTER are sitting at the dinner table doing what suburban families do at dinner tables. Tap forks. Clear throats. Nod at the nothing just spoken. It is Valentine's Day and we can tell this because of the bouquet of gas station roses in a vase in the middle of the table. The MOTHER picks off the petals and lumps them on her plate, mixing them with her mashed potatoes. The MASHED POTATOES are played by Nicolas Cage.

The GROWN SON enters and claims he will be turning into a fish very shortly and eloping with his goldfish, whom he won at the county fair just last week. The GOLDFISH is played by the GROWN SON'S fourth grade girlfriend, the one with the big eyebrows, the one who moved the summer before fifth grade and went off the grid. Confusion ensues. Dialogue is improvised, but must include, in some form, "my, you have gotten fat," and "don't you want children?" and "they have something for that problem." All members of the family eventually reveal that they too will be turning into fish that very evening, in good time. They argue about who will prove to be the prettiest fish and who will be the most loved. At some point the MASHED POTATOES and TEENAGE DAUGHTER sigh in unison. The lighting, set, and sound designers may wish to stick the house underwater at various instances throughout their conversation. The FATHER recognizes the GOLDFISH for who she really is, but says nothing.

Eventually the whole family drowns in their soup bowls while trying to grow gills.

No one bows at the standing ovation.

The play does not end until the audience is at home, alone.

The QuietManDave Prize celebrates short-form writing and the life of someone who loved to experience new places, art and events and write about them. The Prize offers awards of £1,000 for Flash Fiction and £1,000 Flash Non-Fiction as well as runner-up prizes.

Both Prizes are open internationally to writers aged 16 or over – and we are particularly keen to encourage, discover and celebrate new writers. Sponsored entry is available for those who might not otherwise be able to participate, and you can also sponsor an entry (or entries) for someone else.

About QuietManDave: Dave Murray entertained and informed many through his blog www.quietmandave.co.uk. He was a keen theatre critic, performed poetry at open mic sessions and loved flash fiction. He embraced writing relatively late in life but did so with a passion. The QuietManDave Prize, named in honour of his memory and achievements, will seek to enable and promote new writing. The QuietManDave Prize has been supported through the generosity of family and friends of Dave.

This year's QuietManDave Prize was judged by Kate Feld, Tania Hershman and Shane Kinghorn.

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If you have any queries, or would like any further information, about the QuietManDave Prize, please contact writingschool@mmu.ac.uk.

Press enquiries: Laura Deveney: l.deveney@mmu.ac.uk. The judges and finalists are available for interview.

The QuietManDave Prize will return in 2022.