

# Changing Places



**Changing Places**

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## FOREWORD

Ellipsis was set up in May 2005 as a mutually supportive creative writing group. There are eight members and we meet twice a month at the Quaker Meeting House in Colchester.

In a typical meeting, we review each other's work, take part in writing exercises and encourage each other to produce more and better work. As busy people with jobs, children, grandchildren, allotments, family and friends to take up our time, it isn't easy to fit in as much writing as we would like.

However, we seem to thrive on a deadline, and so eagerly accepted the invitation to be part of the Essex Book Festival again this year. Our chosen theme 'Changing Places' has sparked some exciting ideas - both in content and in form. We have written short stories, poems, flash-fiction and plays. Our characters include market traders, generals, students and artists; and our settings range from Deptford to Hong Kong to Helsinki.

This booklet contains these stories and other pieces written by members of the group. We hope you enjoy them.

[www.ellipsisWriting.org.uk](http://www.ellipsisWriting.org.uk)



**GOODBYE HATTIE**

TOBY PEECOCK

I put my ear to the door and pressed again. Still no answer. I was heading back down the garden path when a pink *Clio* bumped up the kerb. 'You must be Alex,' said the emerging figure.

Surely this wasn't Fiona's dad? He had a bald pate and a curtain of greasy hair that brushed his shoulders. His beer gut pushed his T-shirt out so far I had to walk round him to take in the logo that read: Natural born surfer. Yeah right! And the way Fiona had talked about him, I was expecting George Clooney.

'I'm Frank,' he said. 'Come in.' He led me into a dingy lounge, and I plonked an expensive bottle of red on the table. Wasted here, I thought.

'Can I use the toilet?' I said. 'Been stuck on the south circular.'

'First right,' said Frank, pointing to the stairs, and adding, 'That your *Audi* outside?'

'Yup,' I said, ascending.

The bowl was disgusting so I stared at the ceiling while I pissed. I went to wash my hands, but there was a pair of socks soaking in the basin. I tried the bath, pushing the plastic shower curtain aside while I held the soap - a sliver, shot through with dark fault lines - under the tap. The tap gurgled and water gushed from the showerhead above me. I recoiled too late, the icy baptism making something in me snap. 'I bet I paid more for this fuckin' haircut than you earn in a week,' I hissed at Frank, through the bathroom floor.

I'd snapped like that at Fiona last weekend, and regretted it straight after. There was a party but she wanted to visit her sister and kids. I could've gone on my own, but that wasn't the

point. She used to be a real party animal and I felt, well, a bit rejected.

I took a deep breath, sorted my hair out and made for the stairs. Half-way down, I stopped at the window and saw a pig rummaging in the dustbins. This bloke was unreal! I should have walked, but - I was doing this for Fiona.

'You gonna open that red, or does your man usually do it?' said Frank, who was busy in the kitchen.

'Well, I am a city banker you know, but on this occasion... give us yer cork screw.' He gave a wry smile. I'd handed him that little morsel on a plate, but I was still top dog.

'Listen,' I said. 'I gotta make a call. Do you mind?'

'Be my guest.'

I had to find out what was going on: plates were shifting. Fiona thinks it's the end. 'The end of what?' I keep saying. I mean, we'll always be here - they'll always need us - the whole system can't just go tits-up... can it? But Fiona has an eye for the bigger picture. She's usually right, and that's why I'm brickin' it.

I phoned Kirsty but she couldn't tell me anything other than, 'Maurice wants to see you first thing Monday.' Something in her voice had changed: the champagne had lost its fizz, and my guts were churning like a cement mixer.

There was a familiar meaty smell as Frank came in with a big bowl of tagliatelli and mushrooms. 'Are they porcini?' I asked.

'Yeah,' he said, throwing a large block of parmesan and a grater on the table in front of me.

'What, dried?'

'No mate, they're fresh.'

'Fresh porcini? In Deptford?'

'Yeah, I grow 'em,' he said. Now, it's not often I'm lost for words but... 'Taste 'em, go awn,' he urged. So I got stuck in.

'Listen Frank,' I said, after a few minutes. 'This is bloody good. Have a drop more Barolo.' And I slopped it messily into his glass.

'So, you want to marry me daughter?' he said, through a mouth full of pasta. 'Why ask? She's not asked my permission for anything since she was five.'

'Maybe,' I suggested, 'she saw it as some kind of initiation test.'

'Who for? You or me?' he said, adding, 'Bet you were shocked when you saw this gaff. Hardly yer apartment in Docklands, is it?'

I kept quiet. I mean, what could I say? It was a bloody shock. Fiona's so refined, but then again, this geezer'd just served up something I'd be chuffed with at Da Paolo's.

'She insisted I come for lunch,' I said. 'What's that all about? We could've done this over a pint.' But even as I spoke I was beginning to understand. She knew he'd cook his fresh porcini, and that I'd love it; that it would impress me, and it was the only thing that would.

'You can't get a proper pint in a wine bar, anyway,' he chipped in. His inverted snobbery was really beginning to piss me off.

'You got me all wrong. Just because I work in the city, and look the part, don't think I was born to it. Underneath, I'm the same little shithead that was throwing stones at coppers, fifteen years ago.'

Now, I may have laid it on a bit thick, but it worked. We ate in silence until I eventually asked about the pig.

'Truffles,' he said.

'You're joking? You can't just cultivate truffles.'

He raised an eyebrow, Roger Moore style. 'Next year, maybe.' And he changed the subject. 'You're in derivatives, right?'

'Well, yeah, product diversification, same as Fiona. While others slave in the fields, bringing in staples, I'm snuffling around for valuable nuggets. I gotta nose for it, like the pig with the truffles. And Fiona: she's better at it than me. By the way, your car, the pink one, was it hers?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'I get all her cast-offs. How is she, by the way? Don't see her much.'

I paused. 'She's good - although - she's changed. Like I said, she's good at her job, but her heart's not in it like it was.'

Really, I was scared. I thought it was me she was drifting from. I'd proposed to her because I didn't want her to go.

There was a frantic knock at the door.

'Mr. Crouch. Mr Crouch. Hattie's escaped.'

I shot Frank a quizzical look.

'The pig,' he snapped, opening the door to a load of kids. They all spoke at once:

'She's escaped.'

'She's eating Mrs. Pertwee's front garden.'

'She just tried to bite Jason.'

We followed them into the street and along to a garden where there was a crowd gathering. It was strange to see veg growing in a front garden, although there wasn't much left to see. What Hattie hadn't eaten, she'd trampled. I pushed my way to the front and leant over the hedge. Hattie looked me straight in the eye. She'd just polished off the tomatoes, and there was a skin stuck on her snout. A pig with lipstick - now, where had I heard that recently?

Fortunately, Mrs Pertwee was out, visiting her son in rehab. Frank went straight to it, chasing Hattie in circles around the garden. 'You gonna help?' he gasped. I looked down my Saville Row suit to my handmade Italian shoes.

'Fuck it. Why not?' So I clambered over the hedge, and within minutes we'd corralled Hattie into a coal bunker. Result.

'I'll get the car,' he said, but returned a few minutes later. 'I can't get the bloody thing started.' And then he just looked at me.

'You're not serious? Jeeesus, you are!'

So I brought my car up to the gate. Why was I letting him do this? In the city - on my own patch - I'd have told him to piss off hours ago.

We made a channel with dustbins and the remains of a cloche, and with a bit of prodding we got Hattie into the back of my car. 'That's genuine pig skin,' I told her. 'Make yourself at home.'

Frank climbed into the passenger seat. 'May as well take her straight to the farm,' he said.

'Farm!?'

'Yeah, about half an hour away. She's a liability here.'

'Ok,' I said. And the expression 'Hung for a sheep as a lamb', wafted into my consciousness.

Hattie flopped out across the back seat and Frank gave directions as we untangled ourselves from South London. Finally, free of the city, and breezing down country roads, I had space to think.

It was as if Fiona had engineered this whole scenario to prepare me for something. She was cunning, because in a strange way, I was starting to enjoy myself. I wasn't going to let Frank know, but chasing the pig had been exhilarating; putting her in my car, liberating. It made me think about my own roots. If anything, I grew up in a bigger dump than this one. There were no pigs, granted. But the telly spewed out an endless stream of crap that my parents lapped up, sitting silently together on the sofa, my dad with his Guinness, my mum with her Peter Stuyvesant. At the time it seemed normal, but the greater my success in the City, the more embarrassed I was by my past. Unlike most of my colleagues, I succeeded despite my

upbringing. Got myself to the LSE - got myself noticed at Deutsche Bank. I still felt bitter about my parents' disinterest - but today, I felt that knot inside me loosen, just a little.

We arrived at the farm entrance. 'You can drive right down that track,' said Frank.

'Bet we get stuck,' I said, eager to keep the belligerence levels up. 'And that took more than half an hour.'

'It's your driving, mate!' he said.

I weaved down the track avoiding the biggest pot holes. 'Is this all yours, Frank?'

'No. Just that little bit,' he said, pointing to a triangular pen, one side of which bordered a cluster of pine trees. Of course! Fiona and I had been on a porcini hunt in a pine forest the last time we went to Italy.

I pulled up next to the pen. Hattie had roused herself and was snuffling at the window. Frank got out and walked back up the path a little way to make a call on his pink phone. Another of Fiona's cast-offs, I guessed. I could hear a whirring noise from the wood, so I went to investigate. Around the base of each tree was a low, wooden structure with a hole in the top for the trunk to go through. The sides were slatted; a servo attached to each. A network of cables linked these electronic muscles to a central shed.

'Impressive!' I said to Frank, who had joined me. 'How does it work?'

'Computer! It's in the shed with the generator. The servos open and close the slats to get the light and heat right. You see, it's Kent out here - but in there,' he pointed to one of the structures. 'It's Emilia Romagna.' He turned back towards the car. 'Come on. Let's put her in the pen.'

'Ok, but who's going to feed her when we've gone?'

'No need, she'll be picked up in the morning.'

'Picked up? Why's that?'

'For the abattoir.' A shock wave went through me, and I had to hold the pen to steady myself. Where did that come from? I'm not normally sentimental about animals. Hattie had obviously left her mark; something more than the mud and shit on my back seat.

'What about the truffles? You'll need her, won't you?' I could feel my voice tighten, and Monday's appointment with Maurice - previously eclipsed by the day's bizarre events - flashed into my brain.

'Done more finkin',' said Frank. 'There's a problem with pigs. They're great at finding the truffles but they eat the bloody things; what's the point in that? Dogs are better. You can train 'em and they'll stay faithful.'

'But you named her!' I said.

'Nah,' said Frank. 'The kids did.' I turned back to Hattie. I could barely look her in the eye. This was good-bye then.

On the journey back to London, all I could think about was being with Fiona. Today she'd shown me something beyond the square mile, and that appearances aren't everything. I realise now, she'd set me up because she cared, and perhaps I should rethink my own priorities a bit. Don't get me wrong - I'm not about to chuck it all in to run a sturgeon farm. I know things won't be the same again, but whatever happens, I reckon she and I are solid. She's not drifting away. She's a little further ahead, that's all.

~o~

**SEEDS**

HARRIET MILLER

Daddy shows him the seed packet with the picture of the red flowers, frilly with black middles. He shows him how to draw a little stick through the earth to make a groove. He tips a few tiny seeds into his hand and says *spread them thinly like this*. He copies Daddy and twists the seeds between his finger and thumb. They disappear into the black soil. They fetch water from the tap on the wall in the little green painted watering can and pour it along the line. After lunch he comes again to see if the flowers are growing.

Daddy polishes his boots and Mummy dries his socks and vests across the fireguard, she irons his shirts and folds them. When he wakes in the morning Daddy has gone, Mummy says *he went at the crack of dawn to get the train back to camp*.

Mummy says *don't forget to water the seeds for Daddy*. He fetches the green can from the back step and fills it. The tap is stiff in the morning when it's cold. He gives the seeds lots of water. Slugs eat the paper packet and the picture of the flowers goes pale. One morning he sees little green leaves poking through the black earth, all along the row in ruffles. *Come and look Mummy! Daddy's flowers are growing!*

The stems push up tall and the leaves are big and frilly, pale green. Mummy shows him the fat hairy buds leaning their heads over. She helps him write to Daddy, *the flowers are nearly out*.

Mummy answers the door. He hears her talking and a man's voice answers. He hears her say *oh no, oh no*, her voice frightens him. He goes into the garden. The sun is shining, he

sees the green buds are standing up straight and three of them are showing red. The one at the end is open, right out flat, shiny red and black in the middle like the picture on the packet. He remembers Daddy's breath on his cheek, leaning close to show him.

He picks the poppy and runs inside to show Mummy.

~o~

### **A LAST WALK WITH GRANDAD**

*DOUG SOUTAR*

One day in the month of October when the low autumn sun cast long shadows across the fields, the boy lost someone he had loved. And so he had retreated from the wake, from the adult world of conversation and drinking. He went downstairs and out past the bunker still full of concessionary coal and down into the garden. He walked with no purpose but his steps led him alongside the tight-clipped hedge to the green flaky summerhouse and round behind the dark creosoted shed.

The bench made from old sleepers was, as always, sheltered from the wind and as he sat down he sensed his dead Grandad's presence, saw him fill his pipe from the old leather tobacco pouch and could almost feel his warmth and closeness.

He sat with his back to the ship-lapped wall of the shed as he had during so many boyhood summer days. Somehow it was comforting to smell the warm rotting aroma of the nearby compost heap and as he looked out towards the horizon where the meadow and the pit bing merged in a smoky haze, he was brought as near as he could ever be to a sense of a changing place in time.

He felt the weight of grief pulling him down like an anaesthetic until he had lost his Grandad's presence along with his sweated, wide-brimmed hat and the sleeping-powder smell of his Condor ready-rubbed. Now there was nothing left to see or hear or hold on to. Even the slow movement of the cud-chewing cows a few feet away in the thick green field had dissolved and disappeared.

Time passed and there was no way of measuring it. But when the boy finally floated back to the surface of the world, the air around him felt rough like a cat's tongue and he knew that the threads which had been holding him were cut. 'I have left one place and come to another,' he thought. 'I have stepped out of the time I was in and now I will be here for a while until things change and pass.' He was ready to leave the village for one last walk with Grandad.

And indeed the old man was walking beside him now although at times he appeared to be nothing more than the boy's own shadow. They moved through a blur of shifting colours: green, blue, russet and golden. The rough-pastured hillsides were purple with heather and humming with bees. He walked as slow as old age along a road that was imprinted on his mind while his Grandad's heavy segged boots fell strangely silently alongside.

The sun was already risen as they approached the heavy wooden gate on the track above the village, out beyond the long shadow cast by the towering ruin of Blyth's Folly. The boy stood and gazed at the cluster of stone farm buildings. He peered through windows and open doors. A few of the rooms were occupied by men, women and children but most were already empty with hanging plaster ceilings and rubble on the floors. Nevertheless they were redolent of the stories they held

and in each constrained space he could see the memory of the people who had been there and the lives they had lived.

A loud bellowing and a sudden scream from the clattering cobbled yard turned him to witness. A barefoot child stood rigid, terrified. An old woman cried out and hurled herself at him enveloping him as the bull's lowering horns swept her aside with a sickening thump against the dry-stone wall. The ploughman and the shepherd, armed with sticks, prodded and jabbed at the bull's sweating flanks and a collie snapped at its heels until it took off and they let it run itself out down the farm track and away from the child. The old man's long journey began that day when his grandmother gave her life for him.

They stood then in a school playground, felt only the rain, that small rain of the village with a hint of grey sleet in its slanty falling. The school disgorged its children, among them the shepherd's boy, bright and eager. Bound to his learning, in all endeavours he was, each year, best boy. Today he clutched his scholar's prize, a Wood's Illustrated Natural History with an insert in the copper-plated hand of Mr Spears the dominie - *For proficiency, dux and regular attendance, Standard III*. At home in the lamp-lit cottage his beaming father's shepherd's eyes held hopes for a future untied to farm-bound toil.

Time passed and the tousle-headed scholar marched past him now through a field of corn near Ypres, a proud private in his Scots Guards uniform, upright, ready to serve. The deafening din of battle grew around them and dead comrades sank away in muddied grey trenches, the colour of brains and innards revealed too soon for one so young. All horror absorbed beyond a wall of future silence.

And then his Grandad led him onwards, threading a path through soot-flecked snowy streets until again there was a

sudden opening into space full of the noisy clatter of great machines, the steaming pithead pumps.

Ears popped within the down-rushing cage and they stepped out into the damp black hell and trudged the mile to the sloping face. No time here for claustrophobic caution, only the constant crouching gait and padded kneecapped access to the three-foot seam, hard, black and glistening. Firedamp, sweat and the smothering breath of coal, drilled and blasted, picked at, shovelled, carted. Then rumbling, cracking, pine props splintered. 'Roof-fall!' Crushing rock and stretched men, illuminated in the jerky beams of head-mounted lamps.

At the surface they were welcomed by the wails of ashen wives and snot-nosed boys called early home from school. A trolley stood, its awkward burden of three dead miners, blanket-covered but not hidden. They lay together intimately, vaguely convivial in their companionship yet terrible in their isolation. In the cottages, respectful silence reigned behind drawn blinds, grief spread by word of mouth. That night in other houses couples moved closer together in bed.

And now the pumps had stopped, the roadways, one hundred fathoms deep, flooded in the fight for decent wages. His Grandad's part played out in ugly battles locking out the scabs, defying the police and army pitted on the owner's side.

Returning, decades on, they gazed together on the silent pithead winding gear and the vacant burn-side miners' cottages, empty-windowed, doors removed, the blackened, toothless maw of another dead mining village.

His Grandad's sat now on a deck-chaired summer lawn, his tweed trousers with their puckered knees hitched to reveal, twixt sock and turn-up, the faded combinations worn all seasons. A well-earned pipe, the latest batch of jam all jarred

and stored away in brimful presses. Now there is time for some banter with his neighbour Alec, who anxiously eyes the sky for his best pigeons due home from France.

The boy had a sense then of finality, of destiny, as if the loss had been inevitable from the beginning of the journey, something that was written in a book and all that the passage of time had done was to turn the pages revealing the characters and plots of myriad lives. He stood up from the wooden bench and stepped back out through some sensory cleft and shivered in the chill October air. That was when he finally lost him. Thinking his Grandad must have settled back on the bench as he stood up, he turned to look at him, but his place had changed.

~o~

## **A HELSINKI WINTER**

*PETRA MCQUEEN*

When the phone rang Alekski was glad of the diversion. He was tired of writing and still annoyed about Markku.

‘Hello?’ he said, switching on the speaker-phone.

‘Aleksi!’ Hanna’s voice filled the small apartment with excitement. ‘Have you heard about Markku?’

A stab of jealousy hit him. ‘It’s great, isn’t it?’ he said.

‘Yes! Can you believe he starts so soon? Straight away!’

As Hanna talked he pictured her in her studio, the new series of paintings commissioned by the city, surrounding her. But, as she continued enthusing about Markku’s success, he stopped concentrating and filed the week’s rejection slips.

‘So,’ said Hanna finally, ‘shall I come round tonight?’

'No,' said Aleksi. 'I've got another few chapters to get on with.'

When she hung up, Aleksi stared at the phone, thinking that perhaps he should ring Markku to congratulate him but, in the end, decided he only had the energy to lie in bed, drink beer and watch television.

Two days later, the shrill ringing of the phone woke him.

'Aleksi! Where's Markku? Where's that feckless fucker of a brother of mine?'

Aleksi sighed, 'Oh, hi, Kaapo.'

'Where is he?'

Aleksi sat up slowly. 'I don't know where he is,' he said. 'Perhaps he's at a breakfast meeting.' The comment had a bitter undertone that he hadn't intended, and immediately regretted.

'Some bleeding breakfast. Must've left in the middle of the night. I woke early and found the bastard had hidden my wheelchair,' Kaapo said.

Aleksi paused and then, unable to think of another option, said, 'I'll come round.'

'Hurry up! It's freezing in here.'

The mild weather was finally over and it was biting cold. A flashing red monitor outside Stockmann's showed that the temperature was -15. The tram was steamy with other people's breath and, as he approached the docks, he wiped the window with his sleeve, peered out and saw that the shore had frozen solid.

When he arrived at Markku and Kappo's flat he took the key from under a flowerpot and entered the flat. To his surprise a cold wind was whistling down the hall and, in the living area, he saw that all the windows were open and little mounds of snow had formed underneath.

'Kaapo? Kaapo?'

'In here!'

Kaapo was in the kitchen in his pyjamas, propped up against a lit oven, and shivering dramatically.

'About time! I'm freezing to death and dying for a piss.'

Aleksi quickly shut the windows, put the central heating on, flung a duvet over Kaapo and gave him some vodka to warm him. Then he half-lifted, half-dragged Kaapo into the bathroom, and almost wrenched his back putting him onto the toilet.

'Wait outside!' said Kaapo.

Aleksi did so, examining the postcards of exotic places that Markku had blu-tacked around the hall. Wandering through to the living room, Aleksi found the wheelchair hidden behind the sofa. The brothers must really have fallen out badly for Markku to have punished Kaapo so severely.

Aleksi took the wheelchair to Kaapo.

'What happened last night?'

'Heh?'

'Why would Markku leave all the windows open and hide the wheelchair?'

'How would I know? He's an idiot, that's why,' said Kaapo, wheeling past him into the living room, where he picked up the phone, dialled and started shouting down it. Aleksi shut himself in the kitchen and poured a shot of vodka.

'Ha! Would you believe it?' Kaapo said, banging through the door, his foot rests scraping deeper grooves in the wood.

'Markku never had a job!'

'What?'

'I rang the Opera. They've never heard of Markku Setala.' Kaapo tapped the side of his head. 'Looks like little bro was fantasising again, heh?'

'Really?'

'He'll be on some fool's mission,' said Kaapo, wheeling to the fridge, and taking out some milk. Turning to Aleksi, he did a

cruel imitation of Markku, 'Oh, I must travel the world. I must be somebody. I must do something.'

Aleksi smiled, despite himself, and had to turn away.

'He's an aimless git, isn't he?' said Kaapo, swigging milk out of the bottle. 'Mind you, you're no different. 'I'm writing a novel, a short story, a play. I can't possibly do a normal job. I'm special.'

'Get lost, Kaapo.'

'Na, you get lost. I don't need your help - my sister's coming.'

On the way home, Aleksi made a detour to the Opera House, but as Kaapo had said, they hadn't heard of Markku Setala and in the end, a stiff-haired receptionist made it clear he should leave.

When he told Hanna about the hidden wheelchair and open windows in the flat she said that it served Kaapo right. That Markku was a saint to put up with Kaapo. But she wouldn't believe him that Markku never had a job.

'But he was so... so detailed. There must be some mistake. He'll be somewhere, in a theatre somewhere.'

The next few days passed in a confusion of phone-calls. None of the theatres in Helsinki or the surrounding areas had heard of Markku. His relations in Tampere hadn't seen him for weeks. And Markku's friends hadn't a clue where he was. All of them, however, had an opinion, and soon Aleksi became sick of the endless possibilities.

'Perhaps he's gone abroad - he always wanted to.'

'He's probably gone skiing for a few weeks.'

Aleksi snapped, 'But have you actually seen Markku or spoken to him?' It seemed as though the last person Markku had tried to speak to was Aleksi.

Aleksi tormented himself with the idea that he could've picked up the phone and rung Markku the night before he

disappeared. But every time he played possible conversations in his head they didn't turn out right. What could they have said to each other? That Aleksi was jealous that Markuu's dreaming had become reality? Afraid that he would never feel the same success? And what would Markuu have said? That it was all a lie and that there never had been any job, and that every success was futile and counted for nothing.

Aleksi stopped making phone calls. He stopped seeing his friends, and he didn't write a word. It seemed to be dark, always dark. The sun only rose for a few hours each day, brushing the horizon, and Aleksi never opened his curtains.

For a while, the only person he saw, could bear to see, was Hanna, who arrived at his flat every night or so, snow-dusted, with cheeks of ice. Aleksi was glad to see her as she shook out her coat and slung it over a chair, but soon he became irritated. Hanna seemed to want something from him, and he wasn't sure what it was. He missed Markuu - how he'd lightened the load, dispersed intensity with easy laughter, and talked of crazy schemes that Hanna would encourage and Aleksi mock.

He began to tell Hanna that he was too busy with his novel to see her, but he never wrote a single word and, despite the ice and snow, he took to scuttling from bar to bar in an effort to be out of the flat in case she called. All winter, up until early spring he spent his days drunk. Sometimes, he thought he saw Markuu, his bright red hair visible in a crowd of people. But it never was Markuu, never.

Early one evening, Alexi found himself outside Kuu Kuu and he decided to go in. To his surprise, thinking of Hanna only in connection with himself, he saw that she was there, surrounded by friends. He wanted to leave, but wasn't quick enough because she motioned him over. He joined her at the table and sat down heavily. The chair creaked, and the others glanced at him but turned back to Hanna.

'He's on an island,' she said, 'having a whale of a time.' She stood, lifting her glass high, face flushed from vodka. 'Here's to Markuu!' she shouted, 'Good luck to him.' The others lifted their glasses in reply and cheered.

In the split second of silence that followed, Aleksi drawled, 'He hasn't even got a passport.'

Hanna threw the remains of her drink into Aleksi's face and ran out of the bar. He went after her. The snow was slushy under foot, splashing up his legs as he ran.

'Hanna, wait! Hanna!'

He caught up with her near the Siltasaarekatu, which spanned an inlet. A lorry, with its hazard lights flashing, was blocking the narrow bridge.

'Hanna,' he said, holding on to her. Now that he was with her, he didn't know what to say.

'Get off me!' She jerked her arm away and, losing her balance, sprawled on the ground in front of him. He gave her his hand which, after a moment, she accepted. As she got to her feet, Aleksi could see black rivers down her cheeks where her mascara had run. He looked away.

'Don't pity me!' she said, startling Aleksi, who hadn't realised that his face could betray him. 'I loved Markuu. He was my best friend. People are allowed to love each other, you know?'

He nodded, but he wasn't sure what she was trying to tell him.

'People have... emotions!' she shouted at him.

Aleksi winced. 'Calm down,' he said.

'You're so cold!' she screamed, and moved away from him. Because of the lorry, she couldn't cross the bridge. Rather than run past him, she climbed over the low fence, which separated them from the banks of the inlet, scrambled over the packed

snow, and set off across the ice, slipping and sliding but not falling.

The yellow of the street lamps and the flashing of the lorry, did not cast enough light and she disappeared into the darkness.

'Hanna, come back! Hanna - it's dangerous!' He went after her. Carefully stepping onto the ice, he peered into the darkness, and saw that she was far ahead but standing still, waiting for him.

He was out of breath when he reached her.

'I just don't get you,' said Hanna.

'I know,' said Aleks, and felt something that could've been tears, but could just as easily have been cold wind in his eyes. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

They stood for a long while looking at each other, and did not move until Aleks said, 'Let's go home.' He took her hand and began to lead her ashore. But their combined weight was heavy and a crack sounded clear across night and the ice shifted under their feet. Aleks made Hanna walk ahead and waited for her to reach the shore, before he dared move.

She slept at his flat that night and, because her clothes were still damp when Kaapo rang early in the morning, she had to borrow some of Aleks's to go out. She looked different wrapped in a man's coat, smaller somehow, and when Aleks put his arm round her she smiled at him, and he realised that he never touched her in public.

They saw Kaapo on the bridge, close to where they'd been the night before. Kaapo was a dark hunched figure, against the low morning sun. His sister stood behind him, her gloved hands resting on the wheelchair, in position to push should he demand it.

Aleksi and Hanna were nearly on top of the couple before Kaapo turned to greet them. 'You've come,' he said flatly. His sister said nothing but stared at them without expression.

'Yes,' Aleksi said. 'You said you've got news?'

Kaapo pointed downwards, and Hanna and Aleksi stepped towards the edge of the bridge. Directly beneath them, were policemen on duckboards to distribute their weight. One, dressed in a fluorescent jacket, started hammering a metal pole into the ice, another moved out of his way and as he did so Aleksi saw a shadow of a man, trapped beneath the ice.

Aleksi closed his eyes and stood back.

'Markuu always was a silly bastard, a silly, silly bastard,' said Kaapo.

There was the sound of the hammer against the iron bar, and Aleksi heard the police shouting at each other to stand clear. Hanna and Aleksi leant over the bridge again in time to see the men scatter to the shore as the ice cracked. A duckboard twisted as water seeped onto the surface and set it afloat. Black water became visible. For a moment, the body could still be seen knocking against the ice, then it moved, shifted, bobbed up into a pool of water, and disappeared below the surface again. In that brief second, Aleksi had seen the red of the drowned man's hair, and discovered all that he needed to know.

Hanna buried her head against his chest, and he put his arms tightly around her. 'Oh, God,' she moaned. 'Oh, God.'

He stroked her head, and kissed her gently, then he turned to Kaapo. 'That's not Markuu,' he said.

Hanna looked at him in surprise.

'Of course it is,' Kaapo sneered.

'No,' he said firmly. 'Markuu is travelling. He's gone far from here. Somewhere hot.'

'An island,' said Hanna.

'A tropical one. Full of heat and hope,' said Aleksi.

Kaapo snorted, but they took no notice of him and they left, holding hands and said nothing on the long walk home.

~o~

## CHECK-OUT

*ROBERT MILLER*

Oh, I was so looking forward to going home.

But another customer loomed, sailing out from the confusion of the cluttered aisles, trolley replete, almost overflowing, with bread, and bread, and bread and half a hundred kinds of ready meal, and cereals, and soap, and...

The groceries went sweetly through the scanner, sugar, sugar, corn-flakes, crisps - you had to take a firm hand with those, no messing about, make sure the barcode is good and flat. Loo rolls, loo rolls - no problem, a little sigh of relief - they could be tricky, the barcode buried in the crinkly plastic. Thank goodness the scanner wasn't playing up any more. The afternoon had been dreadful. First the usual rush of customers at lunchtime, impatient, in a hurry; then, in the haven of the quiet period in mid-afternoon, a milk bottle had managed to leak all over the conveyor. Keep the customer happy, call for 'assistance'. All cleaned up, but still there was a sticky patch on the conveyor. Watch the clock, only four minutes to go, nearly half-past, then - freedom, home, Mum and Dad and Kate and Mary and little Louise...

The fire crackled in the open fireplace, sending a soft flickering light into the room. We were gathered around our Mum. She sat on a low chair, we sat cross-legged on the floor. She was thinking about what fantastic tale she would tell us. Our

favourites were the eerie stories which seemed to come from nowhere out of her head - such delight to feel the frisson of fear in the cosiness of the firelight.

'The tower stood alone in the middle of the lonely moor. I had been dared to climb to the top, and to prove that I had done it, I had to count the stairs in the spiral staircase which led to the roof.

'I pushed open the low wooden door at the base of the tower and went into the cold, damp space inside. I felt the rail of the stair and switched on my torch. At first, the stairs led in a simple spiral up to a platform some way up the tower - thirty-four steps. A short ladder led from this platform to one above - ten steps. This pattern repeated, though for some reason, the next stretch of staircase had only thirty-three steps. The third and final spiral gave way to another ladder which led directly to the roof. One hundred and thirty-one steps altogether.

'I stepped out onto the roof and looked around. Since I had been climbing up inside, a dense fog had rolled in off the moors. It was as if the tower were jutting through a cloud. Looking straight down, I couldn't see the ground. I needed to get down before it got any worse, otherwise I would never be able to find my way home.

'Down the ladder - ten steps; the top spiral, thirty-four steps; ladder, spiral, ladder and the bottom spiral - thirty-five steps. No wait, the bottom spiral had been thirty-four. I re-climbed the stairs - it was definitely thirty-five. Shrugging, I descended again. I scanned the torch beam along the wall at the bottom of the tower - where was that door?

There was no door. Instead, there was another ladder. Ten steps. Then a spiral staircase. Thirty-four steps. Then another ladder. Ten steps. Then, a spiral staircase...'

Going up the stairs to bed, we jostled and teased each other - 'Don't forget to count the stairs when you come down in the morning!' - that tale had been one of my favourites.

The scanner beeped sharply and brought my mind back instantly to the real world. I scanned the item again and looked at the clock. Only seven minutes to go.

~o~

## SILVER SOLUTION

DAWN LYON

'There are just some habits you can't get away from. It doesn't matter how long the relationship's been over. Do you know what I mean?' Sandra was looking to Gill for support. 'Look, even though it's like my world is, well, it's like I have a different life altogether now since Gavin, but it's like he's still here too, kind of *in* me. Oh god, I know that sounds weird, only, well, I just, I dunno, I just can't shake him out!'

There was a pause.

'Shall we have another bottle? Or maybe just a glass, what do you think?' Gill was buying time, and, she hoped, something to make Sandra forget the topic of conversation.

'Oh fuck it, let's have a bottle.' Sandra was beyond the point of being sensible.

'Coming up!' Gill slipped off the bar stool and disappeared into the crowd.

Sandra Mason, née Bulmer - she had kept her married name since Mason was a definite improvement; in fact she often wondered if it had been the reason for her marriage - had found herself, at seven o'clock this morning, folding foil. Resentfully, repeatedly, compulsively folding foil. It was *his*

habit, Gavin's, one of an array of small things that had finally finished them off, and now he was gone, here she was doing one of the very things that she had loathed.

She didn't mind that her marriage was over. She liked living alone and not having to make the bed or even get dressed some days. She went out, wandering around markets usually, without having to discuss what time she planned to be home. Or she got drunk, like tonight, without having to recompose herself later on. What she couldn't stand was the way he *lurked*. It wasn't that she felt his presence in objects - she had got rid of most of the things they had bought together, nor even in friends - Jane and Steve were always closer to her than to him, and the gang from Reading were more her kind of people too. No, it was deeper than that - it was in her own body. As if it had incorporated bits of him, and acted them out relentlessly until she felt like she was being replaced by him, even actively replacing herself with him but unable to stop.

It was only now that she realised just how much of a *composite* she was. Back in her twenties, John had changed the way she peeled onions. Since the day he accused her of wastefulness she had cried on many an occasion in her efforts to remove the skin from an onion without losing its outermost layer. Every time, it was the same thought, 'oh, I'll just throw it away', and the same retort - 'don't be so wasteful' - that would shout back at her. He was still there, in her head, in her self.

And then there was Ben. He'd changed her driving. He gave her that slight pause, a kind of lightness of touch, whenever she indicated. She would pick up her hand, carefully, deliberately, and gently adjust the indicator with a precision that appeared to make the sound clearer too. She couldn't help herself doing it, she enjoyed it even. But Ben at every corner? That was no way to get over him, get away from him. Or get him away, out of her.

And even now Mark - whom she'd not seen for a decade or more - could make his presence felt in her bedtime routines. Tired enough to drop, she sometimes lingered in the bathroom as she used to do when Mark called out to her to hurry, to come to bed, and instead she would take her make-up off all the more slowly, enjoying the power of making him wait more than anything they might do once she was next to him. It was one night just like that when she'd realised what this added up to. She had waited for him to fall asleep before getting into the bed in the spare room, comforting despite the chill.

'Sorry love, it was three-deep at the bar there. But I got us fresh glasses.' Gill set the Sauvignon down and moved the finger-smearred flutes to one side. A clean start for a new bottle. The exchange from earlier was still hanging in the air.

'Now, where were we?' Gill liked to tackle things head on. 'Ah yes, Gavin and...'

'Foil,' proclaimed Sandra. 'The man folded foil! He washed it and dried it and re-used it. He folded it into neat squares and put them in a drawer. I moaned about it for years, and I sometimes even threw away his little stashes when he wasn't around. And now, he's not there any more, and I'm bloody well doing it myself. Christ, I can't seem to escape him...'

'Hmm...' Gill could hear that she really meant it. 'I know.' She glanced at her watch, ten-to-ten. 'Come on, we'll make it if we run!'

'What? Where are we going? And what about...?' With a backward glance at the wine, Sandra gathered her coat and dashed out the bar after Gill who was already striding ahead of her. There was a Tesco Express up the hill, its lights shining.

'Hurry up!' shouted Gill as she marched on, increasing the distance between them.

By the time Sandra reached it, Gill was already coming out of the shop. 'Let's go over there.' She was heading to the car

park at the back of the hardware store, squeezing around the barrier locked down for the night. 'This is a good place', she said, 'there's no one else here.'

'Take off your coat, close your eyes and put your arms out.'

'But, what...?'

'Just do it.' Gill was very decided.

'OK, OK.'

Sandra could feel that the air was cooler now but after the walk and the wine, it was just what she needed. Gill was rustling something or other. But Sandra was listening to how quiet it was here and thinking how she'd never really noticed this spot, never at night at least, and how perfectly enclosed and peaceful it was.

Gill started with her ankles. She worked methodically. Sandra felt her tuck the end into the back of her left shoe.

'Ouch, that scratches, what are you...?'

'Shhh.'

Sandra surrendered herself.

Up towards her knees Gill worked, then over and around her thighs, and on to her waist. She had soon wrapped both legs together in neat and even coils. Sandra was remarkably still. Gill moved the roll of foil around her breasts and then her neck, with more slack now, looping it over her head, then back down to wrap one arm and then the other.

Sandra was chuckling now, making her casing shimmer and crackle.

'Go on, look at yourself.' They were close enough to the side of the shop to make out a shining outline in the window.

'You're off your head!' exclaimed Sandra. 'And I must be too to let you do this to me!' They both stared at her reflection for a moment. It was beautiful. There was something complete and serene about it.

Sandra shivered. 'I'm getting cold, hun. Hey, do you think our bottle of wine's still there?' She looked at Gill.

'We can go back and see in a minute. First though you have to get yourself out of that! Just walk. If you take a big step, it should break.'

Sandra struggled at first; the foil was surprisingly strong. It relented once she had bent her knees and in an instant her legs tore through it leaving the shell intact behind her. Next, she ripped pieces from her body and scattered them about her.

'Keep walking!' insisted Gill. 'And just leave it all where it falls, every last bit.'

As she unravelled it from around her arms, for a moment a perfect stream of silver flowed behind her.

Halfway down the hill, Sandra was free. She turned around to see bits of foil jumping in the light of the lamp posts and rolling across the street in the wind.

'Come on Gill,' she was hurrying now, 'let's get back in there. I could do with another glass!'

~o~

## **RECLAIMED LAND**

*NICOLA COTTINGTON*

Celia didn't know if she was doing the right thing coming back to Hong Kong. The descent to the runway was not as thrilling as when she landed at Kai Tak thirteen years ago, but the simmering unease in her stomach was familiar. Then, it had been prompted by the unexpected sight, through the plane window, of a Chinese woman ironing a shirt in her high rise apartment. Next, the plane had undertaken a ninety degree turn above the water before being flown skilfully between the

apartment blocks in Kowloon. Celia remembered thinking at the time that the customary round of applause for the pilot was well deserved. Celia couldn't help feeling that in the construction of the new Hong Kong International Airport on 'reclaimed land', a little of the drama of this place had been lost.

She also remembered the humidity, and thought she was prepared for it, but the damp, sweaty heat was still a shock when she left the plane. Within the two minutes it took to reach the air-conditioned bus that would transport her to the terminal building, Celia's hair had wilted and was flopping against her face, and her cotton top was sticking to her back. She wiped her fringe away from her forehead and shivered as a blast of cold air bore down on her damp face. The young expats had always blamed this constant change, from the moist heat of outdoors to ubiquitous air conditioning indoors, for a variety of symptoms.

'Yeah, you know, I messed up my exams - air-con flu...'

'Ceels - can you cover my shift tomorrow? I know it's your day off but I've got a rotten cold - this bloody air-con everywhere.'

At the time, Celia had thought that this explanation was unlikely, and that maybe the 'work hard, play hard, drink harder' culture was the culprit in lowering the immune system of the Brits. Even so, as she sat there sniffing and rooting around in her handbag for a tissue, she felt a bit paranoid herself and made a mental note to get some vitamin C capsules.

Before her trip, air-conditioning had been a luxurious novelty to Celia, as it must have been for the poorer Chinese families living in the back streets of Hong Kong, excluded from the cool of the corporate world, save the occasional visit to a bank or hospital. She'd never even been inside an air-conditioned car -

it wasn't a standard feature in the UK then and she hadn't learnt to drive anyway.

Celia had spent the Trinity term before that first trip to Hong Kong working in the dining room at Rutherford College. She signed up for as many hours as she could, in between exams, to save up for the flight. Jill had invited Emily and Celia to stay for the summer - it was easy for young Brits to get a job, no need for visas or anything, after all, it was still a colony. The restaurants were desperate for European waiting staff and were more than willing to hire you for a couple of months at a time. Emily had a job at uni too, in a local supermarket, but had apparently squandered her plane ticket fund on Thunderbird and clothes from Bay Trading Company. Looking back, Celia wondered if Emily's heart had ever really been in it. She was undoubtedly closer to Jill than Celia, but she never seemed as excited about the plan. So Celia arrived at Kai Tak alone, nineteen years old and on a different continent for the first time.

Within forty-eight hours of jet lagged job-hunting, Celia had landed a position as a waitress in an Italian restaurant in a shopping mall on Queensway. She had to wear a name badge with 'Lucia' on it but that was tolerable. She also opened a Hong Kong bank account so that her wages could be paid in directly. Not even casual jobs paid cash, unlike the jobs she'd had at home and people without bank accounts were viewed with suspicion.

The first weekend Jill had taken Celia down to Central. They ate in a cheap noodle restaurant on the twenty-fifth floor of a building opposite the digital clock tower, which counted down the days, hours and seconds until handover.

'So, Ceels, coming out?' Celia looked at Ed across the table they were clearing between them. It was five past midnight and the last diners had only just left, after downing far too many

flaming Sambuccas. Ed was a strapping twenty-one year old Hong Kong Brit who lived with his parents not far from Jill on the Peak. Nice enough, a bit of a laugh, not her type though, whatever that was. She didn't know whether this was a casual come on or just a friendly invite - they were a sociable crowd.

'We're hitting some bars in Lan Kwai Fong - Jack's drowning his sorrows - come on, it's Sunday tomorrow...' Ed nodded in Jack's direction, referring to his break up with Sally last weekend.

'Yeah, sure, why not - are you coming Liz?'

'We're working on her, but she's got some pathetic excuse about seeing a boyfriend.'

'You know the hours we work.' Liz shouted from the other side of the empty restaurant. 'He'll forget what I look like.'

'He might want to!' Jack quipped and winked at Celia.

'Jack, honestly, no wonder you can't keep a woman for longer than a week. Well that's it - I'm definitely not coming now.' Liz undid her apron and headed for the staff lockers.

'Right, just the three of us then! Come on Ceels; let's show you how to have fun Hong Kong style.'

Celia woke from a brief, disturbed sleep and glanced at her travel alarm clock, propped up against the Lonely Planet Guide to Hong Kong. It was ten o'clock in the morning and she could hear Jill crashing around in the main house, getting ready for her Sunday shift at Harry Ramsden's. Her head hurt. She closed her eyes tight in a vain attempt to go back to sleep, wishing for the nightmares that had kept reality at bay. It was no good. The backs of her eyelids seemed to replay what had happened, like a gritty silent film, scenes from someone else's life. Ed mouthing something, offering to share a cab and Celia shaking her head as Jack brought over two fresh cocktails. Jack trying to kiss her and her moving her head away, confused. More drinking. Jack offering to walk her to the main road to help her

find a cab. Jack's hand over her mouth as the back of her head hit the greasy pavement. A cockroach scuttling past. She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, listening to the drone of the air conditioning.

The door slammed and, knowing that Jill was out, she decided to get up. She needed to get up. She needed to have a shower. She'd wanted to earlier this morning when she'd got in, but she hadn't wanted to disturb Jill. Not out of consideration, but just in case she woke up and wanted to chat about Celia's night and swap stories of drunkenness and bad behaviour.

So she forced her body out of bed and into the bathroom. She sat on the toilet and bit back tears. Celia knew she mustn't cry as clearly as she knew there was no point telling anyone. As she bent over to spread a towel on the floor as a mat, the grazed skin on her back was taut and painful, where tiny scabs had already started to form and were now breaking. As she stood up and looked over her shoulder in the mirror she could see tiny spots of blood rising and marking the white t-shirt she'd thrown on to sleep in. Not wanting to see any more reminders, she turned her head back and lifted the t-shirt over her head before getting in the shower.

Back in Hong Kong thirteen years later, Celia was staying in the Hilton. She decided to make sure she was rid of jet lag before doing anything much. She remembered from last time that it can make you feel quite depressed, although maybe then that was due to being away from home, in strange surroundings. So, for the first couple of days she stayed in the hotel; swimming, having her nails done, watching satellite TV and emailing Mandy to reassure her that she was absolutely fine. Then on the third day, a Tuesday, she went out.

Some things were the same. It was busy and hot. The digital countdown timer had disappeared, of course, but those who

worried that the Chinese would destroy the financial success of Hong Kong need not have been so concerned. Bars, restaurants and shops appeared to prosper still. Thirteen years ago, she hadn't seen much of this district in the daytime. The neon confusion of her memories was replaced by a laidback, friendly atmosphere. There were still a lot of European faces, although Celia couldn't tell if they were tourists or not. She took a deep breath and headed to Lan Kwai Fong.

Once there, she recognised the area but couldn't recall any of the clubs or bars. She found a Starbucks and sat in the window with a decaffeinated latte, something familiar from her life now, to centre her. Celia thought about that night as she watched the cosmopolitan crowd breeze up and down the street. For two hours she flicked through the blurry images in her head, indistinct because of time and drunkenness. The longest time she had spent thinking about it ever. By the time she threw her paper cup in the recycling bin outside the door and hailed a cab to take her back to the hotel, she was exhausted, but better somehow.

Back in her room, Celia sat at the keyboard, starting a sentence, deleting it, starting again, deleting it again. She wanted to email Mandy about the overwhelming sense of forgiveness but she knew Mandy would be angry, as well as supportive, of course, if she thought Celia had forgiven him. But what she wanted to say was that she'd forgiven herself. She knew she didn't need to, but for so many years whenever she'd thought about it, she'd given herself such a hard time. She'd told Mandy after they'd been together for five years, but had refused to discuss it again until she came up with the idea for this trip. And now, she'd finally got there. In remembering who she was then, she forgave herself for everything; getting drunk, not being sensible and getting a cab back with Ed, going out alone with two men in the first place, trusting people, not

reporting it because she knew she'd be blamed, being nineteen.

~o~

### **CAERNARFON CASTLE**

*PETRA MCQUEEN*

We pay and enter an amphitheatre  
Of green grass, and thick, high walls.  
Walls inside walls hide spirals of stairs.

“Here! Here! I want to go in here!”  
He’s imperious, demanding, and I love him.  
Exhilarated, I rush to be pulled into the dark.

Unsteadily in his bright flashy wellies,  
he climbs, I follow, on steps worn by  
soldiers, Kings, servants, tourists.

A shallow step. I stumble. My heart beats as  
my head enacts the tumble of us spinning  
in the dark, towards the dank stone floor.

I snap, “Be careful. Go slow! Watch Out!”  
I am dizzy and sick, impatient and anxious.  
I sound like another mother, not me, not me.

Where did I go? The girl who would climb  
a steep, jagged cliff? The woman who  
explored the world, alone and unafraid?

Later, on a wet park bench, I smile and clap  
as he presents for me a fabulous battle  
of bravery and strength. It is his turn now.

~o~

## CHANGING PLACES

*HARRIET MILLER*

I dreamed I was at the old house again last night. The sound of the wind in the ash tree was vivid and my dream was soaked through with my fear that it would fall on the house. It was the 16<sup>th</sup> October 1987, the night of the hurricane. We were a bit the worse for wear after one of John and Sarah's fail-safe lasagnes and lots of red wine, and walked the two hundred yards back to our house. We commented on the strange hot gusting wind and the way the trees were whipping the sky. Then we spent a wakeful night listening to the wind grow stronger and stronger. In the end, because the tree seemed to me to threaten that corner of the house, I insisted we moved the girls out of the back bedroom to camp on their brother's floor at the front. Mike kept saying I was mad, that trees don't blow over in England and that it would be fine, but then he always said it would be fine, there was nothing up. It was his way of keeping the wind of change from rattling audibly at our door until it was at full hurricane force. Of course morning came and the tree was still standing but others weren't, and fear seemed to have entered my life.

I was busy telling myself we were good on the whole. Finances were improving with my part time job, the children were not exhausting toddlers anymore, they were at school, healthy, happy, growing up strong and confident, life was predictable

and regular and, our sex life was ok - a bit same-y and not as frequent as years before - but hey, that's what happens when you've had three kids and been with someone a long time. I was the one who carried the family flag, created the routines, knew where the hair brush was, provided the meals, sorted the socks and ironed the shirts, bought the stuff, arranged family events and holidays, kept relationships with three different class teachers going, baked birthday cakes and shepherd's pies and stuffed the Christmas stockings - and I thought our life together followed a pattern that satisfied most of us most of the time. Later he said he had been bored for too long and had loved me far less than I imagined him to do. With hindsight, and later, I knew this from about then. He was beginning to think treasonous thoughts, beginning to be pulled to someone else, and the wind was changing. I knew it, that's the strange thing - knew it but couldn't, wouldn't let myself know it out loud. Kept the shutters battened against the storm blowing up around our life.

A sad ordinary tale. One evening not long after the following Christmas, when the kids were in bed at last and we were sitting on the sofa after eating a cauliflower cheese - I don't know why I remember that but I do - I was busy telling him about the day, that Danny had gone through the knees of yet another pair of school trousers, that Erin had been asked to be the reader in the end of term class event, that Lauren had turned out to be quite alright and gone to school after all by ten o'clock, the little minx, probably wanted to miss the morning spelling test, when he suddenly said, without cue, without warning -

“Stop. I've got to talk to you about something.” He leapt up off the sofa and started pacing up and down the room. Stupid me, I didn't have a clue what was coming next. I thought he was going to say there was trouble at work or that he hadn't

paid the mortgage this month. He stopped in front of the corner unit and started fiddling with a small accumulation of Lauren's hair bands that I'd put there for the morning.

"I think you know what I'm going to say," he said. "You're a very intuitive woman." I felt far from intuitive, I felt blank although suddenly slightly sick in the pit of my stomach, a clenching feeling that began at that precise moment and didn't let me go, I can honestly say, for about a year and a half to come. "I want to stop doing this. I want to leave. I want us to split up." And then in case I doubted any of that... "I've met someone else."

"What?" The inadequacy of language, how it deserts us at moments of ultimate emotion and shock. "What're you saying?"

"Just what I said." He looked at me for a split second, checking to see how I was reacting. Was I going to shout, to cry, to explode into a thousand pieces? "None of this is you, it's me." God why do they always say that. "I'm really, really sorry." They always say that too. As an afterthought.

I didn't fall to pieces, I had three children to look after so I couldn't, but it was so hard. So hard living without him, so hard knowing he was not dead - as I wished him - but alive and kicking with someone else. So hard getting used to becoming a single parent, managing on less money, realising the house would have to be sold. That lovely house that I'd known since I'd known anywhere. Granny marked off our growth every birthday on the wall by the back door and I had never been able to bring myself to paint over the little pencil marks with A for Alison or S for Susie next to them, and in due course I'd added my own children's little steps of growth. Susie and I made dens in the garden through endless summers, I'd scratched my name on the shed door, and I always slept in the same bedroom that was now Danny's - the funny-shaped one

at the front of the house where you could watch the sparrows on the gutter by the dormer window. I had part-inherited the house from my grandparents and we had scrimped and mortgaged ourselves to buy Susie my sister out of her share - and now Mike was entitled to a half. This broke my heart again. In due course, through a season of pain so real it was a daily, exhausting, relentless, physical sensation through my breastbone, we sold the house and he moved to a large, brand new one, combining resources with the Other Woman (but he had always hated modern houses!), and I moved with the children to a smaller one a mile away and they had to make do with smaller bedrooms and longer journeys to school. I had to go out to work full time and the girls, now they were at secondary school, became "latch-key kids" because I couldn't afford childcare for all three, and Danny went to his friend Alex's after school, bless that wonderful woman my friend Sally who had been through the same, and just assumed she would do this for me until Danny was big enough to join the key-on-a-string brigade.

But worse than any of that - was watching the children's disbelief, at first that Mum and Dad could be separate, that Dad would want to not live with them, then their trusting attempts to adjust to his promise that it would be better because they'd have two homes instead of one, then disappointment when his calls began to slip from once a day to a couple of times a week, then to once every week or so, then to only once in a while, and the invitations to stay became almost non-existent because he and the Other Woman were always busy doing something. The children struggled - because I told them to - to get on with the Bitch, the Husband Stealer, the Wicked Step Mother - but ultimately they formed their own opinions of her too and they blamed her for getting between them and their Dad. Angela was her name. A nice irony I thought, and the girls did too later

and used to refer to her as The Dark Angel. She was very different from me - younger of course - and at first this made me feel inadequate, but later I took comfort from it. Where I was real, an earth mother, a facer of reality and a constant point for my children, she was superficial, vain, concerned with possessions, a sarcastic bitch, a nag, a harridan. This is what I told myself, although I never actually met her through all those years. When she and Mike got together she had no children of her own, although in due course Damon came along (ridiculous name for the son of an Angel!), a new baby brother for my children as their father tried to sell him to them.

“Who needs one!” said Erin, by now fifteen and queen of the sulks and of the cutting reposte. “One brother is virtually beyond endurance as it is... and if they think I’m going to babysit they can...” Lauren was transiently interested until the confirmation came that it was a boy - a girl would’ve been fun to dress up and buy pink things for and pass the Barbies on to - and her Dad concentrated his efforts to recruit a babysitter on her but I made sure I put a stop to that because I thought she was too young at thirteen to have that amount of responsibility. Granted she did used to sit for the twins next-door-but-one before she turned fourteen but that’s different, I was close by as back up if anything happened... And Danny... Danny didn’t deal with anything verbally. At just turned eleven he was entering the grunting phase, and when I contrived an opportunity for him to talk about what he felt about having a new half-brother and whether he felt displaced in his Dad’s affections and he did know didn’t he that he was the most special boy in the world to me - he treated me as something to be pitied, who was probably trying to say something to him in an entirely foreign language but nothing of importance by definition because, embarrassingly enough already (since presumably he was beginning to get Urges but I really didn’t

want to think about that), I was his mother. He looked at me wide-eyed for about ten seconds across the top of a piece of toast and raspberry jam whilst I attempted to initiate this important communication and then, taking exaggerated steps and with his free hand clutching at his throat, backed out of the room with a pantomime look of horror on his face.

Strange I should have had that dream about the old house last night of all nights, on the eve of Erin's wedding. Here we all are together for the first time, and she is moving through the day in a kind of glowing bubble, you can tell she's just so happy, she radiates it, I have never seen her look more beautiful. Her dress is unusual, not out of Bride magazine, sort of a bit hippy-ish with layers of crusty silky floaty bits and lacing down the back. Her clever sister Lauren made it, final project on her fashion design degree, another beautiful, talented daughter of mine! There I go. It's been such a long journey, bringing these kids up on my own, but today's been like a show case, if there was ever any doubt, of what a strong little unit we are and how much love there is around. And of course it's the first time I've seen Mike again in the flesh since... since some awful door-step row over arrangements for the kids, back in another lifetime, the day I decided to stop seeing him and began to seal myself off from him, to heal. He's come to the wedding with Angela; I'm happy to give her the dignity of her real name these days, the kids have all in their separate styles found ways to accommodate her and have relations with her which are at least civil. Danny as ever has an eye out for number one and Angela's spectacular turn-over rate of cars - she changes them like other women change their handbags - has already benefited Danny twice since he acquired his driving licence last year. His Dad's too soft on him of course and lets him have the cars cheap, but that's how he has a relationship with him, through stuff rather than through real and meaningful

communication or spending any time with him, heaven forbid. But I don't even have a problem with that anymore. Once around the time she went off to college Lauren said to me "My Dad's a git Mum, but I still love him, and I'll have him on any terms I can get." Oh wise child. I thought about that for a while and it was after that I stopped referring to Angela as The Dark Angel or "your Father's second wife," and just began to referring to her by name, which sort of normalised everything at last.

So today... I admit I had built myself up for the meeting after all that time. I'm not sure what I expected but the first thing was to begin with I didn't even recognise him. They arrived after all of us, we were all milling around in the lobby, Danny doing his usher bit with the best man, me shepherding the bridesmaids and waiting for Erin's car to arrive, and I was just beginning to think that Mike and Angela were cutting it a bit fine. They had arranged to meet here, Mike was going to do the giving away, but of course Erin had been at my house all morning doing all the getting ready part, being fussed over by her best friend who was doing her hair and nails. I nearly missed him, he looked so different. This middle aged couple got out of a car and she started finger-combing his hair and still I didn't twig it was them. I was vaguely noticing bad body language vibes between these two, she looked very grumpy, and he looked bashful. Then suddenly I realised it was Mike. The initial greeting was quick and a little stiff, but all I noticed was... nothing. No flutter, no sinking heart. Not even any embarrassment, except perhaps for him.

The ceremony was lovely, everyone said so, Erin and Robbie had written their own vows and they were funny yet serious, touching and private all at the same time. Their eyes remained fixed on each other the whole way through and once or twice I

saw Robbie break into a silly grin like happiness was just bursting out of him. And I cried, of course I did. My beautiful daughter. Afterwards there was a couple of songs, tender quiet ones by bands I didn't recognise but were obviously known to all the younger people in the room, there was some singing along and a spontaneous burst of applause at the end when the signing of the register was over and Erin and her Robbie turned to greet their guests with smiles as wide as the whole of Cheshire, let alone the cat.

It's later now, the meal, and I'm sitting at one end of the top table with my Mum and her chap Peter, and Lauren and her boyfriend, and Danny, looking so handsome in his usher's outfit with the white button-hole flower in his lapel. And Mike and Angela are at the other end of the long table, Mike's sitting diagonally to me and every time I look up I can see him and he can see me. And soon I'm noticing that every time I put my head up he *is* looking at me. And all around me are those I love the best in the world, and the warmth is flowing round our end of the table tangibly. Both Erin and Robbie lean towards us in conversation and laughter all through the meal, whilst Mike and Angela sit apart, seeming like observers rather than participants, and Mike - keeps looking and looking at me.

Later still there's dancing and drinking and in due course I find myself coming round the corner of a curtained archway and nearly walking into Mike.

"You look good, girl," he says.

"You look well too," I reply, deliberately misconstruing his greeting.

"You been well?"

"Yes, good. Thanks for asking." I hesitate, wondering whether to acknowledge the awkwardness, then thinking *to hell...* "Funny seeing you like this after all this time. I suppose

we could've predicted it would be at a wedding!" He nods and then looks down into his glass.

"Lots of things I... should probably say to you... sometime maybe..." he says.

"No need anymore. Ancient history. Water under the bridge."

"Yeah but... you've done a great job bringing the kids up. I know I've been crap... wish I could have my time over sometimes, do it differently, but..."

"But we did what we did," I say quickly. "I daresay we both did the best we could do." I'm looking at him but his eyes are still in his glass. He looks old and sad and much as I don't want to, I feel sorry for him...

"You got anyone?" he asks.

"No-one serious..." I really don't want to have that conversation. I might start on the old bitter stuff that still lurks not too far below the surface. "A few minor skirmishes is all," I say, which makes him smile for a moment. But then his face twists and he rubs his hand over his chin in an old familiar gesture.

"Me and Angela... not so good," he says, and appalled, I suddenly realise there are tears in his eyes.

"Oh?"

"Yeah... I think she's seeing someone. I know she can hardly bear to go anywhere or do anything with me anymore."

I wait not knowing what to say. Finally I offer: "She came here today, didn't she?"

"Yeah but that was 'cos you were going to be here, and the kids. She was always so jealous, so jealous of the lot of you."

Here's the funny thing. Even five years ago I would have given an arm or a leg to hear him say those things. But it left me completely cold. And for the rest of the evening I didn't give it another thought, and I was right there with my lovely kids -

perhaps I should say our lovely kids but it's not what I feel anymore - and I know I wouldn't go back in a million years or have anything that happened not to have happened or change places with that young woman before she went through all that loss and felt so sad and betrayed and abandoned all those years before. Well - except perhaps - I would still have kept my grandparents' house...

~o~

### **SO THIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE**

*PETRA MCQUEEN*

So this is what it feels like.

His legs buckle and he sits down. Gravity pins his head back onto the vinyl of the booth. Taking a deep breath doesn't stop the room spinning upwards. Drinkers at the bar are hurtling to the top of his vision. With effort he brings them back down. They hurtle. He closes his eyes.

"You okay?"

The voice is soft. A girl. He daren't open his eyes. Taking care not to move too suddenly, he gives a small nod. The foam in the couch beneath him breathes and the PVC squeaks as she sits down and briefly places a warm hand over his.

The gesture shocks him. He would flinch, if he could, as though from a slap; but his body remains unresponsive, inert. Her touch angers him, although somewhere in the half-light of his being he recognises that this gentleness is what he craves. Sometimes, late at night, bed ruffled and damp from his exertions, he feels he would give all he owns for a light touch, a tender kiss, his hair smoothed from his brow.

A long time ago, he subverted this need for affection into a longing for sex. He'd spend a week's wage buying drinks, flirting with girls who'd cackle out into the black night. Sometimes he got what he wanted, but it never seemed enough. The girls slipped away from him, no matter how many times he rang or texts he wrote, no matter how many visits he made to their flats. The whole thing was too much effort. There had to be an easier way.

There was. When he was plastering for *McInty's*, high up a ladder, he'd overheard Big Bob and Micky talking about what they'd done the night before. Seemed like everybody was doing it. There were the occasional disadvantages, of course: the odd stretched muscle from trying to move a dead weight; funny looks from the taxi driver, that kind of thing, but nothing that would put him off doing it again, and again.

Until tonight. Now he feels awful. Sweat is beading on his face. Something has gone wrong. But what? The roofies are still in his pocket, so he hasn't taken one by mistake. This time, someone has spiked *his* drink.

He smells the girl's freshly washed hair as she leans close and whispers, "Open your eyes." He does and shuts them again quickly. Her image burns onto his retina. One of his girls. He'd taken a photo of her, trussed up and naked. She'd never know. Where was the harm?

"Remember me?" she asks. The anger in her voice is controlled. "It's my turn now."

So this is what it feels like.

~o~

**CLOSE ENCOUNTER***DOUG SOUTAR*

'It's a snake. At the top o' the close. Must be frae here. Ye'll need tae catch it. Come on quick.'

'Haud yer horses pal. What are ye on about - snakes?' The pet shop keeper eyed you suspiciously. Maybe he'd had to put up with panicky passers-by on a regular basis.

'Aye it's a snake, ye numpty!', you'd shouted in frustration. 'In Clinkscales' windae. It must hae escaped frae the pet shop. Come and see fer yersel'.'

Caged zebra finches jumped nervously from perch to perch and puppies barked expectantly in the window as he came out from behind the counter wiping his big hands on a manky apron. Christ, you thought, he wis gaun tae smack you one. Maybe ca'in' him a numpty wis a bad idea. But then his face broke intae a wee smile and you relaxed.

'We've only got the wan snake. Ah cry her Wilma. She's o'er there beside the goldfish. Jist let me check her tank.'

The shopkeeper turned back towards him, his face now hosting a serious frown.

'Jeesus Christ! Yer right enough pal. The lid's no on right. She must hae slipped oot durin' the night.'

Sticking his head around the greasy door curtain into the back shop, he yelled, 'Ecky, mind the shop will ye. I'll no be five minutes.'

'Come on then son, ye'd better show me. And nae mair o' this 'numpty' business if ye don't mind.'

You fairly louped up the last few worn steps o' Fleshmarket Close and stopped in front of the rounded glass windows of Clinkscales, the Gents' Outfitters.

'There. Look!'

'Where? Ah dinnae see any snakes. I hope you're no windin' me up, son.'

'On that tailor's dummy. Roond its neck. Ah thought it wis a tie at first... Until it moved, like.'

'Jeesus, yer no wrang. That's Wilma right enough. Ah'll need to fetch ma tongs and a wee bag.'

'Is she poisonous, then?'

'Naw. No Wilma. She's a guid natur'd wee snake. Widnae harm a soul. Ye can haud her if ye like once ah've got her oot o' there.'

'No way. Ah dinnae like snakes.'

'Aye well, thanks any way for lettin' us ken. Puir wee Wilma. She'll be fine though, eh? Nae problems.'

'Aye well. Yer welcome. Jist as well she's wisnae one o' thae spittin' cobras or nuthin', eh?'

You'd done your bit and sloped off back doon the close past Jinglin' Geordie's towards the Art Centre. That wis tae be the first o' many close encounters wi' Edinburgh snakes...

~o~

## **RABBIT-SKIN GLUE**

*TOBY PEECOCK*

Kate Peterson perched on the smoker's bow while Rufus Buckle, head of Hermes College, looked from his window onto Mondrian Square. 'I'm sorry, but you know the rules. When you signed the personal injury waiver you must have had an idea as to the general ethos of the school, and Piers - he's not such a delicate flower.' Rufus thumped a bottle of single malt onto the desk causing her to start. 'See it as a challenge! Not for Piers,

you understand - for yourself. You see, I'm wondering why you chose this School.'

'What choice?' protested Kate.

Eighteen months ago her husband Niall had left her for a traffic warden and, within weeks, Piers had been expelled from school. He was at Hermes because they hadn't asked awkward questions like the other schools.

Rufus twisted the cork from the bottle and poured two glasses, pushing one her way. She took it and swigged.

'Mmm, choice,' mused Rufus. 'Let's face it - it doesn't do us any good. We spend our lives zigzagging the countryside, dropping our little darlings off at their carefully selected hothouses, and then...' he paused to savour the whiskey. 'And then, when the new-moneyed get their snouts in the trough, we're back to square one!'

He turned to face the window while Kate pushed back into the chair, cradling her glass. She'd almost relaxed, but Rufus continued: 'I see you have a number of concerns,' he said, skim-reading her letter of the previous week. 'Hot running water, hang gliding from the Francis Bacon Tower and - girls!' he added with mock horror. 'Kate's head bowed, almost into her drink. 'Isn't that why Piers left his last school?'

'Yes,' she whispered, regretting she'd ever sent the letter and trying desperately to blot out the incident with the chocolate fountain and that awful school nurse who insisted on calling him Pervy Piers. It had been the worst day of her life.

There was a long pause. Rufus appeared thoughtful. 'We're looking for a teaching assistant,' he said eventually. 'Would you be interested?' This was completely out of the blue, and a few months ago she'd have dismissed the offer out of hand. Things were different now, and although there was a trust fund for school fees, she was otherwise broke.

Forced to confront her predicament - resentment bubbled: a traffic warden, for God's sake! (It seemed to vex Kate more than the act itself.) And Piers, despite living near the school, had chosen to board. She'd always done her best for them both, and now they'd buggered off. Despair filled the vacuum left by her retreating anger...

'When can I start?'

'Good,' said Rufus with a smile. 'First things first - we must take a tour. Come on.' He strode to the door, holding it open for Kate, who took a few seconds to find her feet. 'Art, that's my subject. No, not my subject,' he corrected. 'My passion, my *raison d'être*.' He led her down a long corridor gesticulating enthusiastically towards the pictures that lined the wall. There was a fine collection of cubist prints and some originals.

'Did the pupils do these?' asked Kate. 'They're very good.'

'Yes. You've a good eye, I can tell.'

'Thank you,' she said, adding. 'I studied at art school.'

'Yes I know, Ravensbourne. That's why I asked you.'

'The best years of my life,' she went on. 'I hated School - I couldn't wait to get away. I chose art against all advice - parents and teachers...'

Something strange was happening to Kate. She'd got this urge to blurt out her whole life story. Perhaps it was Rufus's little tirade about the school run: it was uncanny how accurately he'd described her. Maybe, sub-consciously, she knew that keeping her cards to her chest was futile. Maybe it was the whiskey.

As the tour progressed, Rufus named each department as they flew by. At Science, a boy was clasping a Van de Graaff generator, his long hair standing on end. And flying past English, she heard a pre-pubescent Henry V above the shouts of men and the clash of steel; she could smell the mud and the blood.

At the end of the corridor they went through a door and into Mondrian square. 'The colours have faded a little but you get the idea,' said Rufus.

'I can see. Wonderful.'

A boy, about Piers' age approached. 'Rufus. Celia needs you in IT.'

Kate was not surprised by the use of first names. Niall had kicked up a fuss sometime ago, and, as usual, she had to deal with the school. It was always appearance over substance with him. And the hypocrisy: he's the one screwing the traffic warden.

'Can't the technician sort it out?' Rufus boomed at the boy.

'Not really. Klaus's lodged a Trojan Horse in the Bundesbank central computer.'

'Ok, I'm coming,' he said with a sigh. 'I'm sorry, I'd better go. I'll only be a minute. That's the art department over there,' he said pointing towards a barn. 'You head over, I'll catch up.' He disappeared into the main building and she made her way slowly round the square taking in the bronze and stone statues that ran its perimeter.

When she reached the barn, Rufus had not re-appeared. Kate opened the huge doors a crack and peered into the darkness. She could hear flapping - like washing in the breeze. As her eyes became accustomed, she saw the silhouette of a boy, older than Piers, spreading a large cloth across the floor. Something hovered, ghostlike, above the sheet. It was snuffling and writhing, and as Kate's vision sharpened, she saw a goat suspended from the roof by its back legs. 'My god!' she hissed, shutting the door firmly. 'It can't be. It must be the light.' She was about to look again, when Rufus approached.

'This way,' he called, making his way down the side of the barn. She slackened her grip on the latch and followed.

'What happens in the barn?' she asked.

'Oh, some of our bigger projects - it's our Turbine Hall if you like. And this,' he said, pointing to some out-buildings, 'is where you'll be working.'

In the first room, there were long tables with screens for printing, and unpainted canvasses. Chicken wire shapes waited for plaster to give them body and bring them to life. 'This is a preparation room,' said Rufus. 'Painting's next door.' But Kate wasn't rushing to get out. She was intoxicated by the paraphernalia and smell. She drew it in, and was savouring it, when Piers burst in with an older boy.

'Mummy!'

'Darling! Don't panic. It's just I'm... I'm taking a job at the School.' For most pupils it would be just the time to panic, but for Piers it was her 'fussing' that had made his life miserable. He could see that having her in the school could be the answer.

'This is my friend, Julian,' said Piers.

The boy proffered a hand. 'Mrs Peterson,' he yodelled with that in-between language of young males.

'Nice to meet you, Julian,' she said, as a chill shot through her.

'Piers! Julian!' said Rufus, pointing towards some scaffold-poles and a coil of steel cable. 'Get this lot over to Circus Skills would you, while I finish the tour'.

The paint room was buzzing: oil and acrylic ladled onto taught canvass, easels dripping with the rainbow splatters of previous endeavours. This was no ordinary school art department, thought Kate.

'Who's the teacher?' she asked.

'In theory, I am,' said Rufus. 'But I don't have the time. We have visiting artists but I want to put my own stamp on things. That's where you can help.'

Kate was intrigued. She wanted the job, but she had to check one thing. 'Would you show me the barn?'

'Yes, of course.' He led her round to the double doors, clicked up the heavy wooden latch, and pulled them open. Straw bales were strewn across the floor. There was a large piece of canvass bunched up at one edge. And there - at the other end of the barn - a goat was munching hay. So, thought Kate, she hadn't been hallucinating entirely.

Kate started the following week. Her first job was to coat the virgin canvasses with rabbit-skin glue. This would protect the canvas from the corrosive effects of the oil paint, to give them strength and resilience. She spread one coat after another with long brush strokes. They sagged with the wet, but the promise of taught fabric straining on the wooden frames was delicious. For Kate, it wasn't just a protective layer - it was the foundation on which self-expression could take place.

After lunch, Julian arrived. 'Can I help? Kate, isn't it?' His familiarity made her uneasy.

'You could mix some more of this,' she said. 'Here's a bucket, and the glue's in the cupboard.' They worked in silence for a while. 'So, Julian,' she said, eventually. 'Do you paint? - or sculpt?'

'Paint.'

'Oil? acrylic? Figurative? Abstract?' This was like walking through custard.

'I paint like Pollock; I throw it around.'

Kate felt tested, but kept her cool. 'So, would you say you were inspired by tragic artists?'

'What do you mean?' He stopped brushing.

'Well', she said. 'When I was at Art School I would spend hours at the Tate. I'd visit the Mark Rothko paintings. Do you know them? They arrived there the same day he committed suicide. There's a room dedicated to these huge canvasses - it's a kind of mausoleum.'

'Tragic?' questioned Julian.

'Yes. Jackson Pollock was a tragic figure too, wasn't he?'

'Yeah, but what's that got to do with me?' They worked in silence until Julian stopped and blurted out: 'My parents don't understand.'

It was such a cliché that Kate nearly laughed. 'How do you mean? She asked.

'When I was five I brought a picture home from school and my mother threw it in the bin.'

'Really?' said Kate.

'Well, she didn't do it right away. She looked at it like this.' Julian mimed someone moving a picture through a series of ninety degree projections, cocking his head quizzically at each. 'And then it just got left on the kitchen table, and then, a week later, it was in the bin.'

'That's terrible,' said Kate, remembering that she'd done the same to Piers, more than once. She thought Julian was being over sensitive. However, it raised the spectre of Niall at her degree show: he'd made fun of her work in front of her tutors, and she was mortified.

'What about your father?' Kate went on.

'He doesn't give a fuck.'

'Oh!' She stiffened.

'He's a priest. He's got time for his congregation, but...'

Julian dropped his brush into the glue and walked off.

Kate caught him up on the square, and when pressed, he really opened up. It seemed his beloved nanny, who encouraged him to draw and paint, was dismissed suddenly and without explanation. He was then passed, like a rugby ball, from one unsuitable appointment to another, and finally on to boarding school. The incident with the picture was a rare interaction with his mother, and, perversely, one he held close.

Kate loved her work. She didn't see much of Rufus, which suited her. It gave her a free hand, and she always felt he was

eyeing-her-up as he might a Braque or Picasso. More disturbing, it seemed that, with his cubist eye, he could see right into her. She might be a snob, but she was dealing with it in her own way. To have a looking glass held up, constantly, was unsettling. Kate preferred Julian's company. He'd become her regular helper. They would make stretchers, clean the printing screens, and talk about great art and artists. He kept his edge, and she grew to like it. But then - she asked about the barn.

'So it was you that opened the door,' said Julian.

'Yes. What was going on?'

'I needed to prove something to my parents, but the door opened and I lost my bottle.'

'To prove what?'

'I needed them to notice... I just...' He turned away, and Kate guessed he was crying.

Next, Kate did something that good sense told her not to. She put an arm round him and whispered into his ear. 'Perhaps you should see it through.'

Three days later, Rufus caught Kate as she came in the main entrance. 'I'm a bit concerned about Julian,' he said, as he led her towards the barn. 'I'm all for free expression, but I feel he's sailing a little close to the wind. I suspect, too, you may have some insight.'

They stepped into the barn, and there was the goat suspended by its back legs. Julian stood in the centre of a large canvas, a knife held to the animal's throat. Without hesitation she went to him and laid her hand gently over his. The long blade of the knife exaggerated his trembling. Kate wasn't scared; she could disarm him at any time. She just had to say the words: OK Julian that's enough - this is not what I meant. But she'd already sabotaged his first attempt, and who was she

to deny him this expression? His parents had done a great job of that, already.

Of course, Julian wasn't going to change his parents now - but Kate knew what it was to 'bottle out'. She should have left Niall after his first affair. Once, she'd even packed and was ready to go, but she dwelt too long on the consequences and talked herself out of it.

Where was Piers? wondered Kate. She looked beyond Julian, still poised with the blade. Through the half open doors she could see him across the square. He was fine; in his own little world, throwing stones at the pigeons.

She recalled the school birthday party where, high on caffeine and sugar, he had dangled his hairless worm in the chocolate fountain, and chased Elspeth Cummins around Pre-Prep. Now, Kate could see the funny side. Inwardly, she was laughing. Not at Piers, the nurse, or anyone else - but, for the first time in years, herself. She felt stronger. She had grown a thicker skin.

Kate could feel Julian's clammy hand quivering under hers. Slowly, and by the merest whisker, she lightened her touch and he slashed into the animal's throat. The force sent it across the barn, blood spraying and gurgling from the wound. They stepped aside like dancers, allowing the beast free movement while the crimson jets spirographed their ever diminishing patterns, and the living Pollock took shape. Yes. This was something for Julian to be proud of; from death had come life. And even Rufus, despite his initial reticence, gave a slow nod of approval as his young charge found his wings.

For Kate - as the art took its form on the canvass - it wasn't a goat she saw swinging before her, but Niall. And as he swung, his life's blood leaching from him, her heart began beating faster and faster until it beat like the wings of a hummingbird,

and, at the point when she thought she might explode, the whole world stood perfectly still...

Then, something in Kate awoke. And in the tranquillity of the moment, she stepped into a new beginning - an exciting new beginning.

~o~

## **A STRONG BROWN GOD**

*PETRA MCQUEEN*

At first it had no name. It was not necessary. Men blessed the water, laid their dead at her side, but left her identity to the gods. Then, homesick perhaps, the first invaders named her 'Sequana', like the river where they had played as boys. New people came, laid roads, built bridges, and renamed her the 'Belisama'. They too left, or stayed, forgot the old names and called their river Mersey. Many generations passed.

A man stands upon her bank.

'Eadgyth!'

His voice rings across the waters. He wades into the marsh but doesn't venture too far, afraid of how reeds mask the river's sudden depth. The strong, brown currents have taken more than one child.

'Eadgyth!'

'Patruus!'

He moves towards her, carries her, holding her precious weight against his chest but when his feet reach dry grass he throws her and marches away. It is only later, when the moon has risen, that he is able to speak to her. His words float to the water and are carried away.

In London, a man dreams upon his palatial bed and hears the frightened father's talk of the river. When he wakes, the man, who is King, Lord, Duke and Count, yet wants more and fears less, decrees a Letters' Patent to a cluster of houses on the banks of the Mersey. From here great ships will sail, conquer new lands, and quell rebellion.

Centuries pass. Like a river fed by new tributaries, the original streets spawn lanes and alleys. New roads are built and majestic, hopeful buildings appear.

At the Canning Graving Docks, a man is looking to and fro, searching for something. Workmen pass, black with dirt. The stink of soldered iron pervades the air.

'William!' he shouts. 'William!'

He climbs upon a crate in order to survey the dock.

Gladstone spots William and runs to him. 'Where were you?'

'I was in the hold of the ship.' His eyes are shining. 'The negroes used to be laid side by side like spoons.'

'Home!' Gladstone barks. 'You will not walk with me again.'

What is evil must not be forgotten. The songs of the slaves who jumped in leg irons, to the crack of sailors' whips, until their ankles were bleeding flesh, can still be heard today.

Yet the river is a strong, brown god. Regardless it surges. A flood destroys yet if we wait, patiently, the waters will nourish the ground and bring forth a different future.

A man stands on the Albert Dock. It is dusk.

'Amy!' he shouts. He doesn't yet dare to look into the waters below.

'Daddy!'

He turns round and opens out his arms. The fireworks begin. An explosion of sound celebrates their reunion.

'What are those for, Daddy?' she asks.

'They're for Liverpool. City of Culture.'

They look into the sky. Below them, beneath the thick iron rails, fireworks ripple on the surface of the river. The Mersey does not stop to reflect as she pushes her waters silently by.

~o~

## WAITING FOR THE RIGHT TIME

*NICOLA COTTINGTON*

I can see you through the glass front of the Spanish bar as I cross the road from the cash point at the hospital. You haven't seen me yet and I watch you bite your nails and look at the menu. As soon as you clock me your face settles into its lazy smile. Crooked, like the slight curvature in your back that you had to point out to me that first time, that I then sought out and explored, initially delighted by its strangeness and later because it was so familiar. I realise that I haven't seen your back or any part of your body for two years and won't again, ever. We are catching up as friends, both in happy relationships, mature enough to move on from any latent physical attraction. I walk over to the tall table where you're sitting and you lean over to kiss me. I offer my cheek but somehow you move your head at the same time and our lips touch. Just briefly but long enough so that when I absentmindedly bite my lower lip I can taste a combination of spearmint and white Rioja that make me wonder whether this was such a good idea.

That last evening we were together we ate in the restaurant at the Royal Academy, off Piccadilly. We'd seen an evening exhibition of nudes. You smirked and giggled like a schoolgirl, whispering in my ear when you thought one aspect or another looked like me. I blushed and refused to answer.

The restaurant at the RA was a favourite of ours. Lit only by candles, we were anonymous, as were the surroundings - it was too dark to see anybody else clearly and the pianist played classical music neither of us could name. I think I ate the risotto that night; I remember the silkiness of it. Whatever it was it felt luxurious in my mouth. It was a fixed price menu on Friday evenings - three courses for twenty quid. We drank champagne of course, despite our nurses' wages. We always did that summer. We'd start off with a glass of house white then one of us would order a bottle of champagne while the other wasn't looking. It was a boast, not of wealth but of hedonism, of the here and now and who gives a fuck. It made us laugh at our recklessness, and the drunker we got the less we cared about our overdrafts or how we were going to get home. The evening inevitably came to a crescendo with rushed sex in a bar toilet. If it struck us as squalid that just added to the thrill. It was always about the sex, eventually, I thought. I told myself you tried it on with everybody, and maybe you did.

But now you're telling me that what you loved most of all was the talking. The endless cups of coffee at Starbucks after work, delaying going home.

I remember how warm it was that night when we left the restaurant and stepped into the balmy August air. The sun had set, it must have been about ten o'clock and the last train to Paddock Wood left from Charing Cross at half past. The London streets were as light and busy as day, crowds of office workers roaming from one bar to another. Some friends of yours had gone to Tiger Tiger and you wanted us to go too.

'You're going to leave me alone on a Friday night?' That dangerous cocked smile was inviting, too tempting.

'I've got to go home- I can't just ring her now and say were going clubbing.' I'd done worse before but for some reason that

night I couldn't. 'You won't be on your own anyway - Claire and Fi will be there.'

'But I want you.'

'You always do...'

We kissed and as usual, I was the one who pulled away. *Don't fall in too deep. Not yet, it's not the right time.*

'Don't... please don't go now...'

'Are you begging me to stay?'

'If that's what it takes.'

'You know I can't.'

'You can.'

'Erin, I've got to go. I'll miss the train. I'll see you Monday.'

You stood on the kerb, watching me cross the road and hurry towards the station. A ten minute walk or a five minute run.

I thought there was nothing behind it, that it was always the champagne, the coke or the sex talking. I chose to forget that you told me you loved me, once in my flat in Wapping, before I even moved in with Linda. You were drunk, it meant nothing.

On that Monday, you were unusually coy, distant at work. You waited until we were in the coffee room, surrounded by other people to tell me that you'd spent the weekend in bed with Claire, the two of you suddenly realising that you were soul mates having been friends for years. She hadn't even been with a woman before. I knew I had no right to be jealous and I told myself it was good, if it brought an end to our affair. And it did.

And now you're still with Claire, and sleeping with a doctor from work. I finally left Linda and am in love again and am very happy. I settled down. After a couple of glasses of wine you try it on which is flattering, disappointing and frustrating all at the same time. I say that things are different now. I get a text from

you while I'm on the train home, saying thank you for turning you down, you know it would have been a mistake. I wonder whether we're still waiting for the right time.

~o~

## **CHANGING PLACES**

*DOUG SOUTAR*

*"A wild and dream-like trade of blood and guile,  
Too foolish for a tear, too wicked for a smile!"  
Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

*Autumn 2018, Dunwich Heath, Suffolk, England.*

General Richard Sandoz sat on a cliff-top bench looking out over the steely grey of the North Sea. He knew he ought to be heading back to the cottage; instead he was lingering, wishing to catch a few more minutes of the late afternoon sun on his back when a fellow walker sat down on the other end of the bench.

'You don't mind if I join you, I hope,' said the man. He was muffled up against the cold wind and the hood of his cagoule and a scarf partly hid his features. A bit Arab-looking, thought the General.

'No not at all,' he replied. 'It's such a peaceful spot, don't you think?'

The newcomer leaned over towards him proffering an open bag of Werther's Originals. But as the General smilingly declined the offer he saw the revolver in the man's other hand and instinctively recoiled.

'If you value your life General Sandoz you will do exactly as I say. And please, I am not alone. My brothers are watching. So

no foolish sudden moves. It will only make things worse for you.'

'But... How do you know my name? What the...?'

'No questions. We will walk back to your cottage slowly and with no nonsense. We are just two people returning home after an enjoyable autumn walk on the heath. You understand? And believe me, I will not hesitate to hurt you if you try anything. I not only know your name but also the names of all your children and grandchildren and I am sure you would not wish them harmed in any way. So please, let us move.'

The General rose, gripping his walking stick firmly and only momentarily contemplating striking out with it. Another glint of the gun and he thought better of it. He felt his sphincter muscles tighten in a sudden spasm of fear. His mind raced to and fro - the old combat training instructions - how to deal with crises, armed hostage-takers, ambushes. It all seemed so long ago: Texas boot camp, Beirut, Kabul, Baghdad. He suddenly felt his age, weak and terribly afraid. Talk - wasn't that it? Make small talk, try and engage them. Be natural, create some semblance of normality; wait, be patient. Wait for the right moment. Play the game; cat and mouse; wait.

They walked; not so fast as to appear hurried or too slow that it would seem odd to any passers-by. The General's eyes had swept the horizon but there were none. Only the corner of his eye kept the awareness of his captor two steps behind him.

'My name is Adam, by the way. Yours is Richard. I already know. Just keep your hands where I can see them and walk naturally. It's not far; well, you know that of course, so just keep moving and you'll be fine.'

The heath was drawing a cloak of gloaming around itself; another half an hour and it would be dark. From far off, near a

clump of oak trees on the horizon, the bellowing of rutting stags carried towards them on the breeze. An open sloping area of rough pasture spread away to their left and the General realised that, despite the horror of his situation he was still registering the minutiae of his beautiful surroundings. He observed a small covey of ground-feeding green woodpeckers and dozens of foraging rabbits. All this rural pleasantness going on oblivious to his danger and the gun that he knew was aimed at his back.

They passed through an old metal kissing gate and emerged onto the unsurfaced track which led down to the cottage. He only rented it once a year but as far he was concerned this was his cottage. It had been his and his wife's Suffolk secret. Its history, their history, unfolded in his mind. After the unfortunate events in Iraq his US army superiors had passed him over for any further promotions and had brought him back for a final posting in Germany. Normal 'staff rotation' they'd called it. His bitterness had faded and in the remaining three years till his retirement, he and Elisabeth had spent every holiday they could exploring the East Anglia countryside. An old air force friend at Lakenheath had invited them for Thanksgiving one year and they had rented a cottage and fallen in love with the place. Two years into his retirement, Elisabeth had died but he still sought the comfort of the solitude and memories this cottage gave him. He loved the fall colours of the heath and had even developed a taste for the local beer and so every year of the last decade he had rented the same cottage and spent the same two weeks walking, bird-watching, and reading in front of the wood burning stove. But now his long love affair with the seclusion and quietness of the place had suddenly turned sour as he desperately wished for some lost driver or group of walkers to offer a possible salvation.

'I like this place,' said Adam. 'You have made my job much easier. So nice and quiet. No, no, don't go toward the house. To the barn. I want you in the barn. My brothers are waiting. Relax. It won't be long now.'

The General eyed his four-wheel-drive rental car parked beside the barn and consciously felt the car keys rubbing his thigh through his pocket; ready for any chance of escape.

Adam gave a shrill whistle. It reminded the General of the local shepherd he'd seen a few days earlier coaxing his collie to gather the unwilling ewes towards some new and greener pasture. But this was no rural idyll being observed from afar. He still hadn't seen Adam's face too clearly, half hidden in his cagoule. Dark blue, Berghaus. He'd made a mental note in case such information might be useful beyond this nightmare.

One half of the barn door swung open and a shaft of yellow light pierced the gloom. The General faltered, hesitated just for a second as a voice called out from inside. 'Yella, Adam. Quickly'. Adam prodded the General roughly in the back. The first actual physical contact between the two men and he felt a firm grip on his elbow guiding him into the barn.

It was searingly bright after the dusk of the heath but before his eyes could adjust, a damp cloth hood was thrown over his head.

'Remove your clothes, General,' commanded Adam. 'Everything!' His tone was much more threatening now. Two pairs of hands half helped, half tugged at him and he staggered a little as his feet caught in his trousers and then he stood hooded and naked shivering and scared. 'What are you going to do? Please don't make me...' But his arms were now being pinned roughly behind his back and his wrists looped with a sharp plastic cord. Once tightened it would be impossible to loosen until cut free. He knew the type. Standard issue. A chair was thrust under him and a hand on each shoulder forced him

down on to the rough wicker seat, sharp against his naked buttocks.

'You are General Richard Sandoz. That is correct is it not? You will answer every question. Your refusal will make it worse for you.'

And then it began. The blows to the side of the head. He could not tell how many of them there were. At least two, maybe three. Only Adam spoke but the hood meant the next blow was always unexpected and not knowing which direction it would come from meant he could not brace himself for it. And then it would continue. The questions flew at him. About his family, his wife, his children. Personal questions, military questions, questions about his beliefs, his faith, filthy probing questions about endless varieties of sordid and abhorrent desires they claimed were his perversions and for which he would be sure to suffer in hell. Adam smeared him with a vile and verbal vitriol, a venomous hatred, all the time interspersing the interrogation with hard, jarring blows to the head. His ears rang and he felt the warm blood trickle to his chin beneath the hood. The blows toppled him from the chair more than once and he was roughly set back up again. He lost any sense of time passing. He knew from his special forces training all those decades ago how the process went. Beatings, sleep deprivation, lulling the victim with soft friendly words then thrusting them back into the terror. But what did they want? He was retired. He held no useful information, could offer no bargaining cards. Why him? What did they want?

After a short pause Adam thrust a plastic beaker of water up under the hood and made him drink. The water was icy and stung his bleeding lips. He swallowed painfully then spat out a shard of broken tooth and winced as the cold water touch an exposed nerve.

'What do you want from me? Why are you doing this?'

‘Why do you think we want anything from you? You are hurting now, isn’t it? But it is not over yet my dear General.’

Without warning, two pairs of hands hoisted him up forcing him to stand on the chair. A blade was thrust between his wrists severing the plastic cord. But the sense of release was fleeting as each hand was outstretched and wires attached around the ends of his middle fingers. A bucket of cold water was thrown over him. He felt the noose looped over his head and tighten as one of the men took the strain on the rope slung over the oak beam above. Forced onto tiptoe now, he choked and urinated involuntarily. The rope eased slightly and he could focus on keeping his balance.

The questions had stopped. The pain now was excruciating and his arms were unbearably heavy. His calves screamed with the strain of supporting his body and his chest heaved but could not draw enough breath to sustain him. He silently prayed and tried not to pass out.

‘Are the wires connected?’ asked Adam. ‘Yes. Everything is ready,’ came the reply.’ A flash of light penetrated even the sodden hood and the General wept.

‘Christ, just finish it. Finish it now for God’s sake.’

‘Ah, General Sandoz, that would be too easy. This thing is never finished. There will always be torturers after all. As long as your people keep training them, isn’t it?’

The flashes continued and the General realised they were taking photographs.

‘If you fall from this chair you will be electrocuted or strangled. But no, General we will not kill you. Martyrdom is not for your kind. But by tomorrow night we will be long gone and you will be famous. Your picture will be in every newspaper, the footage of your humiliation and your whimpering pain will be viewed again and again on websites around the world.’

'But why me? Why? I don't understand.'

'Ah, you Americans are even more stupid than I could imagine. Vengeance, my dear General is like an expert lover; slow in coming but oh so sweet. My father was in Abu Ghreib. On your watch, General, on your watch. He died last year, a broken and demented man. We will go now General and leave you to take his place.'

~o~

## **RED VOLVO**

*ELLIPSIS*

*Here are the rules. Someone starts with a hundred words. The next person contributes another hundred words using the last sentence of the previous snippet as their first sentence. Carry on for everyone contributing - the last person must make sure their final sentence is the same as the first sentence of the first piece.*

## **THE RED VOLVO**

*DAWN LYON*

The love of my life drove off in a red Volvo. It was a sunny day and I stood by the front door, watching him go. He climbed into the car, started the engine, and left. I've not seen him since.

I didn't know I was in love with him at the time. I stared and even smiled, compelled to do just that, then went inside with the shopping. I'd noticed him around the week before too, and took it for granted that he'd always be there.

Two years later, I still look out for that car.

**NUDGE, NUDGE***DOUG SOUTAR*

Two years later, I still look out for that car. It held so many memories. Windows down on summer trips and winter days scraping fungus from the carpet beneath the pedals. But I had to get rid of it before the baby arrived. No rear seat belts, and the wipers kept falling off. The radio was worth more than the car and the buyer was dead chuffed that the heater still worked. Said his girlfriend would be pleased with that. 'Nudge, nudge,' he'd smirked, hinting at what I already knew. That car was built for comfort not speed.

**GRATIFICATION***HARRIET MILLER*

That car was built for comfort not speed. And I'm into comfort now. Curious how you change as you get older... a few years ago I'd have said 'speed' every time for the cheap thrill, the instant gratification, the blast to the senses. But now I'm more allured by the long, slow stoking of desire, lingering in pleasure, opening to repeated touch that soothes and thrills and arouses until every bit of me is tingling and rises up to meet it. Give me a Cadillac not a roadster for the journey ahead! Come on, make me purr.

**AWKWARD PROPOSITION***ANGUS DEWAR*

'Come on, make me purr'? Not a line I'd leave a friend to carry on with (especially not a fragile one who's got so much woe and heartache that he can't possibly deal with it).

No, I'd leave a friend with a line like 'Then the door opened,' or 'Fortunately, Auntie wasn't completely dead' or 'Are they my fingerprints or yours?'

But 'Come on, make me purr'? (*And* from a newly wed!) It's enough to make a guy blush.

And - shit I'm running out of time, looks like bad start lines and me are linked.

We are each other's destiny.

### **CLICHÉ RIDDEN**

*ROBERT MILLER*

'We are each other's destiny.'

'No man is an island.'

'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good.'

'You shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.'

'While the cat's away, the mice do play.'

'Let he who casts the first stone...'

'There is a tide in the affairs of men...'

'There's no fool like an old fool.'

'There's one born every minute.'

'To err is human, to forgive divine.'

'It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle...'

'At the end of the day...'

'You take the high road and I'll take the low.'

### **UNTITLED**

*TOBY PEECOCK*

You take the high road and I'll take the low, and I'd like to think I'd be in Scotland afore ye. But in this heap, with its rusted wing and porous sump, there's no chance. And anyway, what I'd really like is a lift so I can put myself in your hands - totally -

unconditionally. Although it may seem unhealthy - to turn my back so gratuitously on my independence - my old jalopy is done for, and is, like this tale, disappearing up its own exhaust pipe while you, the love of my life, drive off in a red Volvo.

~o~

*First of all, Angus didn't quite get the point - but it really doesn't matter!*

### **CHRISTINE?**

*ANGUS DEWAR*

'We are each other's destiny...'

'If you're talking to me buddy, I may just have to punch your face.'

I was rudely dragged from my daydream by a wizened old man who had magically appeared by my elbow.

'I'm sorry,' I said with a smile, 'I didn't mean you - I meant *her*.' I nodded toward the decrepit, aged car; rusty, its' former red glory green with lichen. The missing bonnet made it the very picture of abandonment. 'She's beautiful isn't she?'

'*It's* a Volvo,' came the reply, 'two fifty cash. No haggling. Buyer arranges collection.'

I stepped forward and ran my hand across the dull red wing and down toward the pitted chrome headlight surround. 'Ow! Shit!' I waved my lacerated hand frantically.

'Yes, *she's* a bit rusty - *she's* probably just given you Tetanus,' snickered the old fool.

'Whatever,' I snapped, 'does the radio work?'

Totally in awe of this splendid steel beast, I jumped behind the steering wheel and turned the radio on, aching for 'Bad to the Bone'.

Nothing.

'Battery's flat,' said Rumpelstiltskin, 'like I said - you'll have to tow it away.'

I climbed slowly out and the drivers' door fell off. Perhaps this really was just a rusty old red Volvo.

'It's a shame,' I thought, 'but...'

'Did your brother kill his own wife?' I asked eagerly, 'Did he die in this car? Did he spend every hour polishing her, cleaning her? Did he love her like no other thing on earth? And did she tend to fix herself if she got a bit bashed...'

'Get lost weirdo - you've got ten seconds or I'll strangle you with my bare hands. Go on, clear off.'

The old man was obviously quite cross, it must have been something I'd said.

Reluctantly I began to walk away, but something made me stop and take one last look.

The world stood still.

The Volvo's wing lights had glimmered into life...

~o~

### **CHANGING PLACES: AN ELLIPSIS 'WORD COLLAGE'**

DAWN LYON

*Inspired by William Burroughs and others, this 'poem' was made from three phrases chosen, for no particular reason, from six Changing Places stories (Part 1). Next, one line from each story was put together in three 'verses' (Part 2). Then words were knocked out here and there and lines moved around a little to create a poem (Part 3).*

### **Part 1: Phrases**

#### **Reclaimed Land**

She'd never even been inside an air-conditioned car  
But mostly it was so busy they didn't stop until around  
midnight  
It was no good

#### **Silver Solution**

Back in her twenties, John had changed the way she peeled  
onions  
In an instant her legs tore through it  
It was beautiful

#### **Changing Places**

I thought he was going to say there was trouble at work  
A clenching feeling that began at that precise moment and  
didn't let me go  
'A few minor skirmishes is all'

#### **Helsinki Winter**

He slept the next day and then drank too much again the  
following night  
The temperature was minus 15  
But every time he played possible conversations in his head  
they didn't turn out right

#### **Changing Places**

Another glint of the gun and he thought better of it  
Near a clump of oak trees on the horizon  
A shaft of yellow light pierced the gloom

**Good-bye Hattie**

I had to find out what was going on: plates were shifting  
We ate in silence until I eventually asked about the pig  
I pushed my way to the front and leant over the hedge

**Part 2: 'Verses'**

She'd never even been inside an air-conditioned car  
Back in her twenties, John had changed the way she peeled  
onions

I thought he was going to say there was trouble at work  
He slept the next day and then drank too much again the  
following night

Another glint of the gun and he thought better of it  
I had to find out what was going on: plates were shifting

But mostly it was so busy they didn't stop until around  
midnight

In an instant her legs tore through it  
A clenching feeling that began at that precise moment and  
didn't let me go

The temperature was minus 15  
Near a clump of oak trees on the horizon  
We ate in silence until I eventually asked about the pig

It was no good

It was beautiful

'A few minor skirmishes is all'

But every time he played possible conversations in his head  
they didn't turn out right

A shaft of yellow light pierced the gloom

I pushed my way to the front and leant over the hedge

**Part 3: Changing Places all over again**

Inside an air-conditioned car  
in her twenties  
trouble  
slept the day drank the night  
glint of the gun  
shifting

Feeling began at that precise moment  
minus 15  
around midnight  
her legs tore through it  
silence about  
oak trees on the horizon

No good  
beautiful  
skirmishes  
possible conversations didn't turn out right  
yellow light pierced the gloom  
pushed to the front

~o~

**ENROLMENT**

*ANGUS DEWAR*

We're a happy little bunch of ferrets,

*(What?)*

who hardly ever bite

*(Little bunch of what?)*

and have fun writing our stories and poems,

*(Speak for yourself - I sweat blood getting  
this stuff out. Ferrets?).*

although our nest

*(Oh come on!)*

is quite small, we sometimes have room for newcomers.

*(Well yeah, but not terriers obviously if  
you're going down the 'ferret' track)*

Have you already been on a creative writing course or similar?

Are you

*(Bored to death yet?)*

wanting to spread your wings?

*(How many ferrets have you seen that've got  
wings?)*

Do you need an avenue for your creative talent?

*(Ok - I give up - do you wanna buy me a  
pint?)*

Then get in touch through our e-mail contact. All we'd ask for is  
maybe 500 words of prose

*(What a bunch of Nazis! I just want a  
pint...)*

or two poems

*( ... maybe the bus fare home ... )*

whichever suits.

Hope to hear from you soon

*(Yeah, 'coz me glass is empty).*

~o~



**BIOGRAPHIES**

**Nicola Cottington** Although I enjoy writing when I actually get round to it, I need peer pressure to motivate me. I joined Ellipsis following a course run by Dot Schwarz in 2006. I aspire to write short stories that actually tell a story, which is somehow quite tricky, and I appreciate the friendly critiques provided by my fellow writers. When I'm not writing I work for the NHS, look after my little boy and grab precious moments with my partner.

**Angus Dewar** grows his own potatoes and sprays shaving foam over speed cameras. He is a habitual drinker and a career smoker who was amazed to discover that one short story he wrote didn't have the word 'fuck' in it. He is married to the most tolerant, beautiful being ever created, has chosen three of his Desert Island discs and ruptured one of his own. His liver, lungs and giblets are understandably checking the wording of their respective contracts. In spite of his bloody awful approach to fellow human beings, Angus Dewar knows he is blessed with a small group of friends who, after all this time, still smile and tolerate him. Angus Dewar sometimes collects his daughter from school on Fridays.

**Harriet Miller** I'm surprised to discover that I'm a middle aged grandmother who works for the local authority as a senior education manager... when I still feel like a child of the peace and love generation and what's more still believe in it! How did that happen!? I guess as John Lennon said, life is what happens when you're busy making other plans. I have been imagining myself to be a writer all my life but only started doing anything about it four years ago when I joined Dot Schwarz' famous Innovations class, and then went on to be one of the founder members of

Ellipsis. I have discovered that writing is really hard work but also immensely satisfying when it goes right (write?). Oh and I met Robert...!

**Dawn Lyon** is not big on plot. I have recently discovered that there is a term for what I write: *short shorts*, stories of less than 1000 words basically. I mostly write about small, and sometimes strange things that do - or don't - happen in everyday life. After writing fragments of stories for years, I joined Dot Schwarz' class in January 2006 where I made progress on beginnings and endings. Being in Ellipsis means I write things I didn't know I could, and I get to hear stories about worlds I could never imagine.

**Petra McQueen** spends her time looking after her young boys, teaching drama, selling books, and writing. She writes short stories and poems, some of which have been published, and at present she's working on a novel, which she hopes to finish soon. Besides writing, her favourite thing to do is reading, preferably with her feet up, in reaching distance of a large glass of wine and a Fry's chocolate bar. She has recently set up a blog, which records the history of the books she sells on Amazon. Check it out at [storycollectorpetra.blogspot.com](http://storycollectorpetra.blogspot.com)

**Robert Miller** Having made the mistake of joining one of Dot Schwarz' evening classes on creative writing, I realised that, not only would I have to write something - I would have to read it out in front of a bunch of strange people who seemed to have about 300 years of writing experience amongst them and hope they wouldn't throw things at me; happily for me they didn't (having run out of vegetables that night), so I carried on writing and some of the bits I've produced (a bit being a short piece, since my pieces tend to be that way) are on the website. If you read that

sentence in one breath, you should now be dead.

**Toby Peacock** I started writing short stories when I joined Dot Schwarz's Innovations writing course. It was a little daunting at first, having written very little since O-level English. Dot inspired and encouraged me, and I did the course for two years running. At Innovations I made some really good friends. Some of us went on to form the Ellipsis writing group. Meeting regularly, Ellipsis offers a great opportunity to get, and give, constructive criticism for the work we bring in, and the work we do in the sessions. It's also a great chance to catch up over a pint. I've sent some of my stories to writing competitions and, although still unpublished, have had some work 'highly commended'. I am working on writing longer stories, and developing my characters.

**Doug Soutar** is a founding member of the Ellipsis group and another offspring of Dorothy Schwarz's Creative Writing classes. I do it (writing) for fun but still harbour the daydream of becoming a published author of gritty and powerful short stories drawn from a still photographic memory of a Scottish childhood and education followed by thirty years working in overseas development in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. Being in Ellipsis keeps the daydream ticking over while I also juggle being a husband, father and allotment-holder who knows how to string his onions if not his words.

