York Literary Review

Spring 2017

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York St John University – York, United Kingdom

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Front and back covers: Kinga Tóth & Gergely Normal, from *555*

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When the first issue of the YLR came out I more or less missed it all. I missed the overwhelming number of submissions. I missed the student editing process. I missed the staff team working around the clock to read and select from all of the astonishing writing flowing into their inboxes. I missed it all. I had an excuse: I was having my first child and watching in wonder as he grew. I saw the final printing of the issue, which is always a great thrill. It was appropriately gorgeous. That year was a productive one all round for YSJ Writing. Since I arrived in 2010 our Creative Writing programme and community of writers has grown to the point where we are able to look outwards and invite writers from around the world to be part of this exciting literary journal. Conceived by the team, in particular JT Welsch and Naomi Booth, this was always going to be a journal casting its net to catch the very finest work in fiction, poetry, non-fiction and art. Not only the finest, but work that spoke to us of the moment we are living in. JT has moved on from YSJ, but we think he would be proud of how the journal is growing up; with a flash-submission window and a team of slick, talented MA and PhD student editors, this second issue is particularly strong. A special mention must go here to Kimberly Campanello, who has overseen this issue with the calm and understated authority of a perfect midwife.

I am struck by the edginess and strangeness of the selection, but also by its emotional intensity and delicacy. By its animals and its music, its apocalypse and botany. Perhaps motherhood has made me emotional about these things; not soft, I hasten to add. Perhaps I am particularly attuned to it, but many of the pieces here spoke to me of motherhood, directly and obliquely. They explored its pleasures and its joys, but also its potential darkness, its continual grappling with the possibility of loss and its impossible responsibilities. In a broader sense, these works are unflinching in their exploration of what it means to feel the sharpness of being alive. The artworks of Kinga Tóth and Gergely Normal are the perfect illustration of how loving others is about the dark and the light.

There are many things I might say about politics, about our threatened environment, about feminism, about belonging. But I will say: this is a striking collection in which the right words are chosen bravely, about the

right things. I'm proud to have had a small part in its selection, and proud to see this particular offspring growing up so promisingly.

Abi Curtis
Associate Professor and Subject Director for Creative Writing
York St John University

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We thank this year's MA & PhD student editors who embraced the opportunity to review submissions and help bring this issue to fruition.

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from *555*
Kinga Tóth & Gergely Normal

Speaking in Lasagna

Sara Gray

The potatoes were the kind from a box and they coated his dentures. At least they tasted like nothing, unlike the green beans that were smothered in a salty fish sauce. But he wouldn't complain about the food, not to Kelly anyhow.

He saw how other residents in the 'retirement community' were with their children. They pleaded for visits then spent them complaining, resenting, not seeing that, to their children, they were no longer providers of love, food, and critical aid, but an errand to be checked off a list. Perhaps, they did see it. Perhaps, that was the problem.

He never begged Kelly to visit. The thought of asking Kelly to do anything for him was humiliating, and their conversations and visits made him feel sad now anyways. Back when he was somebody, he would take Kelly to his restaurant and the restaurants of his friends, mentors, and protégés. They ate themselves around the world and back again – ostrich, duck confit, matsutake mushrooms, white truffles. Sometimes they even ate at the chef's table in the kitchen, Henry pointing out the technique of the sous-chef as Kelly watched, fascinated.

Now, she was too old to be awe-struck by a flambé. She was a lawyer and mostly ate wilted lettuce with a plastic fork. They didn't have much to say to each other; or rather, he didn't have much to say to her. He read magazines and watched the news, but he felt as though he was looking at a print, a skilful reproduction of the real world, not actually experiencing day-to-day life. He missed having things to say and someone to say them to. It wasn't Kelly's fault. She tried to engage him, but his hearing wasn't good, so the conversation ran in stops and jerks while she repeated herself. Even worse, his passion – maybe even his brain – had atrophied.

After they ran out of small talk, she would ask him what he thought about the food, and he would tell her it was fine.

'Oh good,' she would say, too cheerfully, before moving on to discussing his pills, doctors, and appointments.

Henry looked back down at the pulpy potatoes and drowned beans and pushed the plate towards the centre of the table. One of the orderlies –

Damien, who smiled with all twenty seven of his teeth – came over to retrieve the dish.

'Something wrong with it? You really ought to being finishing it up,' he said as he loaded the dishes onto the tray. The black cross on Damien's forearm rippled, like some sort of omen.

Henry was eighty-seven and therefore was going to die soon. He was fine with this in principle, but could not fathom that the last thing he would ever taste would be potatoes out of a cardboard box.

'No,' he said. 'It's the same crap it always is.'

Damien smiled placidly, politely, and Henry felt even worse. Now he was another cliché: the grumpy old white man yelling at the black orderly.

'Sorry.'

'That's alright,' Damien said. 'Goodnight, sir,' he said, taking away the plates and leaving Henry to stare at the empty table.

Kelly was distracted the next time she came over, even more so than usual. Her half-hearted attempts at conversation were even more strained.

'So the food is alright?' she asked as she pulled nervously at a hangnail.

'You've already asked me that,' he said, feeling annoyed now. He hadn't asked her to come. She didn't have to come and treat him like some sort of obligation. She looked away from the window, her dark eyes, so like his late wife, meeting his. She looked exhausted, more tired than he had seen her in a long time.

'I'm sorry, Dad,' she said, putting her hands in her lap. 'I'm afraid I'm not very good company.'

'What's wrong?'

'It's nothing,' she said, smiling a warped, fake smile. 'Really, it's nothing.'

'I'm not a child, you know,' he snapped back like an agitated dog. 'It doesn't always have to be small talk.'

After months of conversation the flavour of baby food, Kelly looked taken aback. 'You're right. I'm sorry. Jake and I are getting a divorce.'

She looked down at her lap and started to cry. The subject – the tears – had turned him to stone, and he sat watching his daughter cry, uncertain of what to do. When she didn't stop after a moment, he walked into his corner kitchenette and made her a cup of tea.

He made it the way she had liked it as a child, with too much sugar, because she always made her own tea now and he had forgotten what she liked in it. He put it in front of her and hoped this all communicated something that he wasn't quite able to say. She sipped the tea and collected herself.

'I'm sorry,' she said, wiping her face. Even as a child she had never cried long and hard over anything. Skinned knees, boyfriends, her mother's death, she had handled it all well. He had liked that about her then, but now it made him feel frightfully incompetent.

She said a few more things about how it was fine and not to worry, and then hurried out the door. She had become the parent at some point, thinking there were important issues to be hidden from him while he ate his applesauce.

He walked down to the dining hall alone. The worst part about his 'retirement community' was that he had to take meals there, where the conversation slipped, disorganized from one resident to another like a wet balloon. The food was overcooked, under-salted, and for some reason, it always smelled the same no matter what was being served.

'Salisbury steak time!' said Damien, who was the friendliest of the orderlies, but whom Henry didn't trust because of his tattoo.

God, Henry hated the food.

He ate it anyway and, as always, rejected the lukewarm evening activity (board games) for the quiet and solitude of his own room. He couldn't stop thinking about Kelly. She was a grown woman, to some an old woman, but even while he knew this, he felt a responsibility for her life. It was not that he still saw her as a child, but rather that he saw himself as Father.

The next week, Kelly did not discuss the divorce further.

He really did not know what to do. If his wife was still alive, she would have handled Kelly's upset like she handled everything related to their children and their marriage. She was dead, and making their daughter feel better was yet another thing that he couldn't do. His age had rendered him impotent. The next day he didn't leave his room.

Damien came with his pills.

'You didn't come down to dinner,' Damien said, passing him the paper cup full of yellow tablets.

'Wasn't hungry.'

'Still, it's good to eat or those pills are going to be hard on your stomach,' Damien said. Henry really hated how everyone was speaking to him like a child.

'I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself,' he snapped back, taking all the pills in one defiant swallow.

'You used to be a chef, right?'

Henry was surprised Damien remembered that, and he nodded slowly, 'A long time ago.'

Damien's eyes flickered to the kitchenette for a moment, and Henry felt his face burn. Nothing was more embarrassing, more neutering, than the fact that he didn't have a kitchen. For years he had people booking reservations at his table months in advance, now he couldn't boil pasta. Every time he looked at it, he was reminded that his life was over, that he had no more use in the world and was simply waiting to die.

'Well, you like these so they must be good. I got one from the kitchen for you. Just in case,' Damien put the fruit muffin down on Henry's card table.

The fruit muffins were the only decent food provided in the entire place. Most muffins held all their fruit at the top or sunken at the bottom, but these muffins had raspberries, currants, and strawberries equally distributed throughout.

It gave him a thought.

The next night, Henry made brownies – painfully – in his microwave, thinking about the how the thousands of hours of crimping pastry, how his entire life really, had been reduced to cocoa powder and a cheap mug.

He gave it to Damien, when he came again with the dinner pills. Damien had regarded it with suspicion, and Henry didn't blame him. The batter looked clumpy, and Henry had never offered anyone anything during his time here. Damien's suspicion vanished when he took a bite.

'This is so good,' he said. 'So good.'

He sucked on the spoon for half-a-second before letting it out of his mouth with a satisfied pop.

'I was hoping to ask you for a favour.'

Damien had been initially resistant. Rules were to be followed here. People pilfered extra packets of salt and spat out pills like recalcitrant teenagers, but Henry's rebellion was bigger, required more. It required Damien.

'I don't have a lot of special skills, you know what I'm saying?'

He had not said 'no' though. That night after the dinner shift, when everything was closed and quiet and the residents were sleeping, or not sleeping but staring at an unfamiliar ceiling missing their homes, children, and purposes, Damien wheeled Henry into the service elevator.

'Do you think I could get fired for this?' Damien asked as he took out a single key and unlocked the kitchen. Damien needed his job.

Henry didn't answer. He hadn't been in an institutional grade kitchen for years. He had been relegated to Kelly's kitchen and then deprived of one entirely. He was surrounded by the familiar tang of cleaning product and food and the sight of objects – knives, colanders, mixers – that he had missed like old friends.

He started to take out pots, pans, and ingredients while Damien kept a nervous glance at the door.

'Stop staring and start cutting,' he said. Damien threw one last pained look at the door, then came over to the counter and started to cut with a swiftness and efficiency that surprised Henry.

'Where did you learn to cook? Neighbourhood diner or something?'

'No, sir. Army.'

'Army,' Henry said in surprised. 'What the hell are you doing here handing out pills to old men?'

Damien shrugged, mildly but with the clear purpose of defraying any further discussion on the topic.

Henry sautéed the meat then layered the bottom of the casserole dish with sheets of pasta (not homemade, there was only so much he could do). He got lost in the chemistry, in the measuring of cheese and oregano, and then the smell. He had owned a few restaurants, had sampled cuisine from almost every ethnic group, and yet pasta, to him, in all its perfect simplicity, remained his favourite dish.

Henry noticed that Damien's hand was shaking. He was looking out the window and didn't notice Henry watching him. When he did he placed his still left hand over the fluttering right one.

'Alright?' Henry asked.

Damien gave an unconvincing smile and nodded. 'Sure, just don't want to get in trouble.'

Damien pulled a prescription bottle out of his pocket and popped a pill, thoughtlessly enough that it was clearly not his first – or hundredth – time.

'How long have you had shell-shock for?' Henry asked after a moment, looking at the pots he was washing, not at Damien, even though he could feel Damien's eyes on him.

'They call it PTSD now.' There was more silence as they both watched the cheese bubble.

'Please don't tell anyone,' Damien said, his hand occasionally still jerking like he was a catcher sending signals to the pitcher. 'I've already lost one job because of it.'

'I won't.'

Henry felt bad then, about talking Damien into breaking the rules for lasagna. Perhaps food did not have a value outside of sustaining life. Perhaps he had only ascribed meaning to it because he, like all people, was so desperate to look back on his life as valuable.

Henry pulled the two lasagnas out of the oven.

'Want to try some?'

Damien hesitated, but nodded when Henry pushed it closer to him and took a small, hesitant bite.

'Alright?' he asked.

'That's amazing,' Damien said taking another, bigger bite. Amazing was taking it too far. It lacked depth, complexity. This was not great food, but it was the first dish he had eaten in a while that aspired to do more than provide nutrition. Damien focused on it so intently, that soon his hand stopped shaking.

They had not been caught. They were not in trouble. Henry took the second lasagna up to his room to give to Kelly the next time she came to visit.

There were a lot of things Henry wanted to say to Kelly that he couldn't manage to. He had once read that people who learned to speak a language after childhood were never able to speak it quite as well as a native speaker. When they spoke it, they used a different part of the brain and there were some sounds that they could never make. The window had closed.

Henry felt that way about emotional speech. There were things he wanted to say to Kelly, tales of love and pride he wanted to tell her, but he simply did not have the language skills. There was no way to tell her that he stayed up at night worrying about her, that Jason had been worthless anyways, that even though she was in her fifties, he wanted to take her on his lap and hold her.

Instead, he gave her the lasagna. She stared at it for a moment, stunned.

'Dad—'

'I know you're busy and all,' he said, waving her off because he thought he saw tears forming in her eyes. 'You don't have to eat it here, obviously. Take it home and warm it up for the kids one night.'

He didn't want her to feel obligated to eat with him, to stay with him.

'Well, I'm hungry now,' she said, and she made eye contact with him. 'Why don't we eat it together?'

The Blind Queen

Alexander King

The valet pushed the blind Queen through the landscape.

He did his best to avoid the cracks in the warped, shattered roads and provide his Queen with a smooth journey. She must not be inconvenienced.

The blind Queen's wheeled throne was a shopping trolley, the front cut out. Her legs dangled from the front and her shoes occasionally scuffed the ground.

The boy pushed.

The throne and the Queen were decorated with prizes borne of a pair of lives survived – trinkets and baubles scavenged from blown-out houses and the fingers of desiccated corpses. The Queen lived in splendour.

The boy, for his part, was dressed modestly. Torn brown scraps of cloth under a heavy, damp overcoat. Boots held together with the last few pieces of Duct Tape left in the world. He was around 17 years old, give or take.

Rat bones crunched under the small rubber wheels.

'What is that, boy?'

'Pebbles my Queen,' replied the boy, bending slightly to the Queen's ear. 'The most beautiful pebbles. We are somewhat near a beach.'

'Splendid,' said the Queen. 'I do not smell the brine?'

'My Queen, the wind does not favour it.'

The Queen nodded, and smiled. Her milky eyes blinked.

The landscape swayed around them, it swirled and bit at them but never changed. It was light brown and speckled with remnants of the Queen's kingdom. *How many more days*, thought the boy, *how many more*.

A life survived, not lived. A kind of peace, a kind of acceptance. Duty was all that was left. The valet pushed the blind Queen.

Night was falling. Up ahead, the mouth of a collapsed tunnel. Things circled in the air. Pushing the Queen inside and kicking rubble to make space for a small fire, he sat on his haunches and struck at his flint.

'A hotel?' said the Queen.

'A hotel, my Queen. Quite glorious. We have a veranda.'

'A veranda,' said the Queen. 'Keep the windows open, I do love the

breeze.'

'I will,' replied the boy, before returning to his spark.

The fire was enough to dry the front of the boy's clothes and the Queen's legs. Her stockings, mouldy and gnawed, seemed animated by the movement of the modest flames. The boy was silent.

'Tell me, boy,' said the Queen, loudly, 'do you miss your home? Your family?'

'No, my Queen,' replied the boy. 'To serve you is the greatest honour. I scarcely remember my home.'

'Very good,' said the Queen. 'Very good. Is our journey on track?'

'It is, my Queen – we should reach the citadel in but a few weeks.'

This was a lie, of course – the citadel did not exist. But he must serve his Queen. She must travel to the citadel and he must push the Queen.

The Queen wasn't heavy. Her bones were like bird bones. The throne, covered though it was with decoration, tools and equipment to serve their journey, moved freely when the terrain allowed. The boy was strong, with thick arms and wide shoulders – that was, after all, why he was selected.

It was an honour to push the Queen. His father had pushed the Queen's mother, many years ago, and the Queen was always blind. She had to be.

They slept.

In his dreams, the boy was walking through a lush, green forest. Birds sang high in the branches and the sunlight unlocked the green moisture from the leaves all around him. He breathed deeply. A rustle in the middle distance, and low branches were flung aside. A growl. Heavy feet. The bear was on him before he had time to react. He jerked awake, his back wet with sweat.

In the morning, the boy prepared breakfast for the Queen. Meat, charred in last night's fire. A vegetable, still warm in its mushy centre.

'Before we go,' said the Queen between dainty mouthfuls, 'you must give my regards to the chef.'

The boy didn't look up from his meat. 'I will, my Queen. I expect your visit has been quite the highlight of his career.'

'It most definitely has been,' said the Queen, dabbing the corners of her mouth with a rotten handkerchief.

The valet pushed the blind Queen through the landscape. The sun bore into his forehead. The Queen did not perspire. Her class hadn't for

generations. Unseemly. The half-stagnant water in the gallon jug sloshed against the sides of the throne, a reminder more would be needed soon.

'I wish to meet my subjects,' announced the Queen.

The boy pushed the throne. 'I will seek a town, and send word ahead of your arrival, my Queen,' he said, his confidence unwavering.

It was one of the first things he was taught. Your voice, they said, must always be definite. It must always carry the message clearly to your Queen. You must never betray her trust by allowing doubt to enter you.

A strong back. A clear voice.

The boy scanned the shimmering horizon. It was around midday. The sun was heavy on his upper back and shoulders. It shone off the throne and pierced his skull. He raised his head, and on the dust-swept road ahead – humans.

The boy's heart plummeted. He stopped pushing.

'What is it, boy?' asked the Queen. 'Why do you stop?'

'Subjects, my Queen,' said the boy. His voice did not betray his shaking body. 'Your subjects approach.'

'How wonderful!' exclaimed the Queen. Her brittle, snapped teeth crept from her mouth in a smile.

The men were getting closer. They were armed of course. Everyone except the boy was armed, it seemed. It would do the boy no good to carry a weapon. He was not trained to fight, just to push, and to talk.

Three of them. He could smell them already. Hot leather, cracked lips, dried blood on rusted machetes. He kept his eyes on the road.

They stopped a few metres away from the throne. A long moment passed. He could hear them breathing. The Queen could hear them breathing.

'Good day!' said the Queen. Her subjects, of course, could not speak unless spoken to first. The men were silent, save their breath.

The boy was paralysed. He gripped the handle of the throne. His fingers grew numb.

'My Queen! These subjects have come to pay their respects and welcome you to their town!' he said, a little too quickly, a little too loudly. *Remember your training, remember.*

The men looked at each other. They looked at the boy.

The man in the centre was huge. Thick backed, barrel chested with a full beard. Heavy feet. Tearing away branches. The boy swallowed hard. He sought and found the man's eyes. He held them.

'Gentlemen, my Queen is passing through your town. We are grateful for your hospitality.' The bearded man squinted at the boy. The other two men looked to their leader.

'Why do they not speak, boy?' asked the Queen, her smile still present.

'I – they, I believe they are held speechless by your beauty my Queen, and the honour of your presence.'

The Queen gurgled a modest laugh. 'Oh but of course!' She addressed the men directly, 'We are on our way to the citadel. Have you been?'

The men looked at each other. 'No,' growled the bearded man. Above them, some kind of flying creature screeched.

'We must carry on with our journey, my Queen, if we are not to be late,' said the boy gently to the Queen's ear.

The Queen, her smile fixed, seemed to consider this for a moment before responding. 'Oh yes, yes of course boy. We mustn't be late. Well, dear subjects, it has been a pleasure to meet you. Your town is enchanting. Good day.'

The boy looked at the men. The thin, weasel-faced man furrowed his brow. The man with the shotgun lifted his cap to scratch his patchy scalp.

'If you'll excuse us, please,' said the boy, and planted his weight on his back foot, bracing his arms against the throne's handle. 'I must push the Queen.'

He increased the pressure on the handle. The wheels of the throne spun slowly in their sockets, aligning themselves with the road. The wheels started to turn. The throne inched forwards.

The men did not move.

Another few inches on the hot road. The chipped rubber wheels of the throne gently kissing the asphalt.

'I must.' Eye contact.

The throne built momentum. The Queen, the boy and the throne drove slowly through the three men, parting them, the boy's legs like water.

He could feel their eyes burn his back, like the sun burnt his back. It took all his willpower not to speed up, not to run. With every step he could feel

the machete bite into his shoulder and the shotgun round chew a chunk out of his neck.

He kept pushing. He pushed until the men were an abstract, a nebulous fear. He never looked back.

An hour passed. The Queen said 'How were they dressed?'

'My Queen?' said the boy, his dry voice cracking.

'My subjects, how were they dressed?'

'In the finest robes, my Queen,' said the boy. 'Gold and silver and the richest furs. It was clear they had decked themselves in their finery to please you.'

'Of course! How splendid. And the town?'

'Freshly painted spires, my Queen. The townspeople in speechless awe of your presence, not a single one daring to utter a sound lest it offend you. Banners of welcome, a huge outpouring of love for their Queen.'

'As it should be,' said the Queen as she adjusted her crown of crushed soda cans. 'How is the countryside, boy?'

'Ah my Queen! Lush, verdant swathes of thick grass. Cornfields glowing golden in the summer sun. Thick forests…' At this the boy stuttered. A chill ran up his spine.

'Go on, boy,' ordered the Queen. 'You were talking of the forests?'

'The forests, my Queen, they…' The boy's breath had become shallow. He felt faint.

'Well?' said the Queen, impatient.

'I… I feel…' The boy stumbled, jerking the throne slightly to one side.

'Boy! What is wrong with you, this is not pushing fit for your Queen!'

'I… I apologise my Queen, I fear I must rest.'

'You will not rest. You will push. You must always push!'

The boy murmured something, then dropped to his knees. In the shade of the stationary throne, he breathed. The Queen was shrieking at him.

The bear in the forest wasn't real, but the fear was. He had never seen a bear, not even in books, but he had been told stories. As tall as four men, as wide as a cart, capable of ripping a man in two. And fast, so much faster than a Queen in a throne. So much faster than he could push. His hands, still gripping the throne's handles, were numb white gristle.

The Queen's voice came back into focus. He reached the surface and gasped for air. 'PUSH! YOU MUST PUSH, BOY! THE CITADEL AWAITS ME!'

'My apologies, my Queen.' The boy got to his feet, put his shoulder to the handle and pushed.

'Now, the forest,' said the Queen after a few moments.

'The forest is out of sight now, my Queen,' replied the boy.

*

The boy was very young when he was selected for the role of valet. His family line had been optimised for the task over many generations. His ancestors had pushed the Queen from one side of the country to the other, albeit in different circumstances.

When his time came, he went to what was left of the royal buildings and picked his way through the rubble and blood to find the Queen. She sat in the throne room, a few courtiers bustling around her.

'The valet has arrived,' said an elderly courtier with a leaking bandage over one eye.

'Very good,' the Queen said. 'Is he of the right type?'

'He appears to be, my Queen,' said a younger man. He coughed viciously.

'What is your name, boy?' asked the Queen to the air in the room.

'My name is Browning,' said the boy in the clear, confident voice he had been trained to use.

'And you can push?' asked the Queen.

'I can, my Queen.'

The courtiers pulled the throne from a side room. It was damaged. The delicate parasol was shattered and the mechanism to deploy and retract it was exposed. The boy approached the courtiers as they inspected it.

'How is the throne?'

The older courtier looked at him askance. 'It will work,' he spat. 'You must only push it. Anything else is not your concern.'

'The wheels, boy, are intact,' said the other courtier from behind the vehicle. 'You only need the wheels to do your job.'

The courtiers removed the remains of the glass parasol and worked on straightening the golden doors. The hinges were twisted and the bejewelled handles had been knocked off by falling masonry.

'When do we leave?' asked the boy.

'You leave immediately,' replied the younger courtier. He coughed again, and dabbed blood from his mouth with a lace sleeve. 'The Queen is eager to see her kingdom.' He held the boy's eye for a long time.

'I will be sad to leave the splendour of my palace,' called the Queen from her throne. The dust in the air danced in the shafts of grey light coming through the damaged roof.

'We will maintain its splendour for your return my Queen,' said the older courtier, bowing slightly. He turned back to the boy. 'Do you have everything you need?'

'I do,' replied the boy firmly.

The courtiers escorted the blind Queen down from her throne, her feet barely touching the cold grey stone of the palace floor. They lifted her with the utmost grace into the wheeled vehicle, and closed the doors either side of her.

'Now, push,' said the Queen.

The boy gripped the cold ornate bar at the back of the throne, and applied gentle forward pressure. He was surprised by how easily the throne began to move. The courtiers walked ahead of him as they left the throne room, clearing detritus out of the path of the wheels.

*

The boy squinted into the low evening sun. The remains of a farmhouse lay ahead. Stumps of picket fence like broken teeth. It appeared uninhabited.

'Our lodgings are up ahead, my Queen,' said the boy.

'Oh, very good. I am somewhat weary.'

'My Queen is resilient and strong,' said the boy as he scanned the surrounding scrubland.

'I am, I am,' mused the Queen.

The farmhouse consisted of three walls and half a roof. There had been a fire, or perhaps one of the bombs had landed nearby. Stairs led up to empty air. A ground-floor bedroom was mostly intact.

'A glorious lodgings indeed, my Queen. I have requested the largest skylight so my Queen may be bathed in starlight as she rests.'

'How thoughtful! This goes some way towards making amends for your inelegant pause this afternoon,' said the Queen in clipped tones.

'I can only apologise again, my Queen,' said the boy as he parked the throne inside the doorway of the bedroom and started to retrieve supplies and equipment from it. 'It will not happen again.'

'See that it doesn't. Jerking about, stopping and starting, it's not seemly.'

The boy nodded invisibly.

The bedroom contained a bed frame and a small wooden bedside cabinet. The boy opened the drawer of the cabinet and looked inside. There was a slim black leather-bound book.

The blind Queen was snoring lightly, her head lolling back against the shopping trolley's handle. The boy's shoulders relaxed, like knots coming undone. He opened the book. Inside was handwriting – a journal or diary of some kind. He flipped to the last entry. It was dated almost two years ago.

By the light of a single candle, the boy sat and read the journal. It was largely a day-to-day account of farm work, written by the teenaged daughter of the farm owners. Escaping into another's life felt good. It felt like another world, one that the boy would never have had the chance to inhabit.

Every now and then, the girl would turn from harvesting and sowing and write about her feelings. Her wants and needs, her desires. She wanted to leave the farm as soon as she could, and start a life for herself in the city. She wanted to be a writer. She wanted to make dresses. She wanted to get married and have a baby. The boy closed the journal and stared into the candle. It was too late for his dreams. By the time he knew what desires were, they had already been denied him.

He looked at the blind Queen. Just a person. A person dressed in faded, stained lace and velvet with a crown of garbage on her head and scuffed jewelled shoes caked in mud and shit.

He loved her.

He loved her because it was his role to do so, and if he didn't, he would have nothing. The girl in the journal felt trapped by her loving family and the work on the farm which fed them and provided income. What he would have given to live in that trap.

He put the journal back in the bedside cabinet. He didn't want the girl to discover he had read it, even though he knew the girl was dead, just like almost everybody else. He wondered if she'd been out in the fields when the bomb fell. Did she watch it land? Or did the heat reach her before the cloud sprouted on the horizon? Was she in the house, making a thin paper sketch of a dress that curled and blackened just as she did? He would never know and it didn't matter.

He blew out the candle and lay down in the dark, on the cold sharp springs. The Queen's crown shone in the starlight he had promised her.

The Parable of the Pencil

Catherine Edmunds

In the beginning was the Pencil, and the Pencil wrote the Word, and the Pencil was the Word, and nothing was written that was not preserved in graphite. And there was a great sharpening in the wilderness, and the wilderness was without form or void until the Pencil made its mark and divided the darkness from the light by dint of careful cross-hatching; and it was called Art, and the artist saw it and it was good.

But the art teacher came along and said, what's that supposed to be? Rub it out, start again – and the child was distraught. She lost heart, she could no longer draw, but still she loved her pencils, and as she grew she collected more and more and each year she turned to the West and made the pilgrimage to the Keswick pencil museum and bought pencils, everywhere she went she bought pencils and she sharpened them, but some snapped, so she divided them, the snapped from the unsnapped, and the one set she called the Sharpening of Pencils, the other the Peril of Pencils.

Then one day the priest handed a pencil unto her and said draw, and she could not gainsay a man of the cloth, so she drew, she drew a child weeping, she drew the smell of earth uncovered, she drew quietness, she drew love and hate, she drew the way the light flashes on a river. And the priest was amazed and said her gift was God-given, but she knew otherwise, and while she drew she intoned: this is the field, this the wind, this the bending corn. The priest tried to grab the drawings, to claim them for the church, but he became confused and couldn't make out the images, they appeared to him as the scribbles of a child on a page. He took the sheets of paper and he rent them asunder, but the woman took the pencil and she ran to the white-washed walls of the church, and she drew serpents and all manner of beasts, and they writhed and crawled round the pillars, and the priest was afraid and he fled.

The woman looked upon all she had drawn and saw that it was good. Then she left the church and went out into the world with her pencils, and everywhere she went she drew and was loved.

The priest crept back into his church that night while the beasts were sleeping. He had brought whitewash and great brushes on poles, but the animals were beautiful, the draughtsmanship exquisite, and in the twinkling of

an eye, he was changed. He took up a stump of a pencil and drew a tiny flower on one of the torn scraps of paper, and the flower flung out tendrils and drew the other pieces together. Then he took up the Pencil again, and he wrote a Word, and the Word was Love.

Glorious

Catherine Edmunds

After the 'accident', the state surgeons, for a joke, re-attached my hands the wrong way round. I'd be introduced to people, would reach out to shake hands and they'd jump back in shock with a forced laugh – as required under the new regime. I became a modern day court jester, kept as a freak. I gambolled, I pranced. I fell in love.

She was a dancer, a ballerina. Bloody gorgeous. Of course she avoided me, but our Glorious Leader thought it hilarious and insisted on an affair. She would be paid well, but that was irrelevant – no choice.

They gave us an apartment in the palace and I knew there would be cameras, but there was nothing I could do. She could never get over it, the hands thing.

At state banquets she stood in a corner with the other ballerinas and they stroke her hair and comforted her, but nobody thinks about the jester's feelings. That clown phobia – have you ever thought how that makes us feel? It's self-fulfilling, so you get the Joker, you get fucking Ronald McDonald, and he even scares me. Back to front, freak, misfit, crazy in love, porn channel sensation, because the tapes got leaked, didn't they – that was me. My ballerina was anorexic and I knew her brittle bones would snap. I was so gentle with her, and Christ, I loved her so much, but still she cried.

Six months later, the Glorious Uprising tore down the statues of the Glorious Leader. They locked up the glorious surgeons and the new ones, even more glorious, sawed off my hands and re-attached them, the right way round. I was a hero of the revolution, a symbol of how the new lot could fix anything. They put me on a postage stamp, then had to pulp thousands of them because they'd used an old picture with the wrong hands. The State Ballet was declared corrupt, the palace apartments torn down. My ballerina died in a back room, quite alone, and it breaks my fucking heart.

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How to Make Beetroot Soup

William Davidson

Harvest the beetroots in the garden of the house in which you will find yourself living.

A beetroot should be the size of a tennis ball. 'Here's a tennis ball,' the owners will say, 'as a guide.'

Take the tops off the beetroots. 'Save the tops,' they will say.

*

Brush the soil off the beetroots and take them to the kitchen.

Grate the beetroots. The owners will provide you with transparent plastic gloves that will be loose around your hands. The gloves will be fat fingered and medical.

Grate the beetroots by the Aga of the house. The Aga will be a gas Aga that will be on setting number 5 which will be very hot. This day will be in midsummer. This day will be the hottest day of the year.

Look at your hands. You will see that you have grated the gloves as well as the beetroots.

'Where are the tops?' the owners will ask. 'Where are the beetroot tops?'

*

Take off the shreds of the plastic gloves and return to the garden to collect the beetroot tops that lie at the edge of the vegetable patch.

Look at your hands. You will see red scars from the grater.

Look at the beetroot tops.

Look at the red veins of the leaves.

Take the beetroot tops to the owners of the house in which you will find yourself living.

Grate the beetroots. The owners will provide you with a fresh pair of transparent plastic gloves.

'What's for lunch?' someone, somewhere behind you, will ask the owners of the house.

'Borscht,' the owners will say. 'But don't hold your breath. It seems to be a slow process.'

*

Hold your breath.

Look at your hands. You will see that you have grated these gloves too. The plastic of the gloves will look like slivers of glass in the beetroot gratings.

Stop holding your breath.

Take off the shreds of the plastic gloves and return to the garden.

Walk past the vegetable patch.

Walk past the hollyhocks.

Walk past the lavender and catmint, the peonies, the bees settled on the blue phlox.

Walk out to the road. Walk away. Walk.

Tapir

Joanne Hayden

At the end of the stairs she reaches for her coat. Her hand dangles stupidly in the air. She's done it before, opened the hall door to the dark, stepped outside and circled the same dead streets for an hour or an hour and a half. Last time he told her he'd imagined the worst; he'd called but she'd left her phone behind and it had vibrated on the shelf at her side of the bed, waking the baby. He makes a practice of worrying but that's not why she's afraid to go out. She pictures him writing in a secret notebook, incident reports with dates: the time she'd accidentally stayed in the bath long after the water had cooled; the time he'd come home from work to find the baby wet and soiled. She pictures him using the notebook in court, reading from it in a shaking voice, or showing it to a doctor who takes it as proof and signs her into a hospital cell.

He would seem like a grieving husband, a husband who had always done his best.

'As soon as you're better,' he'd say when she asked to be allowed home. 'We're all trying to help. I wish you trusted me.'

The screaming stops while the baby gathers breath. Above her the floorboards squeak. In their bedroom, or what used to be their bedroom, he'll be walking over to the Moses basket and leaning down, reaching in for the baby. She should feel guilty, guilt should be tormenting her, but she feels nothing other than hazy relief and the beginning of hunger pangs. Her life is full of strange correlations. The more he kisses and comforts the baby, the more she eats. Bricks of butterscotch chocolate. Cold potatoes straight from the fridge.

'You'll get there,' he said when he caught her looking at her stomach in the mirror. 'Give yourself a few months. It's early days.'

She couldn't tell him that she's not bothered by her weight. The baby stretched her and she doesn't want to lose the evidence of what happened to her body like she lost the idea of the baby. When the midwife laid the real baby on her chest, the baby in her head died and with it her sense of humour.

She couldn't tell him that she feels thinner than she is, a thin woman in a tiny house, living a series of outsized roles.

'Play with him,' her husband said yesterday, blowing on the baby's tummy. 'He loves to be played with.'

Too young to smile, the baby stared at her with his black eyes.

'See how he responds,' her husband said and pretended to eat the baby's feet.

She closes the kitchen door behind her, trying to shut out the force of the screams. From this distance, with bricks and steel and wood in the way, she can listen to the sound patterns without feeling sick and almost appreciate their charge.

In the bedroom her husband shushes the baby, using the tone he used to use with her before they'd have sex.

She sits at the kitchen table and layers crisps in a soft white roll, crunching through the high flavour, chewing the bread back to dough. Food silences the memories. Women used to be prayed over by a priest to purify them of childbirth. She wishes she could be purified, released, freed from the memories of the delivery room – the frantic bleeping of the monitor, the spiked traps of pain, the forceps that dragged the baby from her ripping through to her sphincter.

When she looks at the baby's face, his hair so much darker than hers, she thinks that it can't be true, he can't be her son. The word son weighs too much, almost as much as the word mother. Yet they share the same hunger, his fist always rammed to his mouth, and while the stump of his cord was withering they both smelled of rotting fish, her body reminding her that he was knitted from her bones and blood.

She fingers the inside of the crisp packet, licking grease and crumbs from her hands, and turns on the small TV. Her husband did not want a TV in the kitchen or anywhere else in the house. He will have the baby playing with hand-carved wooden toys and hiking up Lugnaquilla at weekends. He does not hold with easy options such as television and processed food. He has taken her failure to breastfeed as his own, assuming responsibility for the sterilizer and preparing the bottles before work, though the day they came home from the hospital he referred to the infant formula as cat food.

'I'm joking,' he said too quickly, leading her to think that he had planned the comment. 'It's just a joke.'

She idles through the channels, pausing on a documentary set in Dublin Zoo. An animal is sick, an animal that looks like a cross between an anteater and a pig.

The kitchen door opens.

'He's asleep,' her husband says.

'Well done,' she says, then wonders if he might resent the praise – because he is doing her job, playing the baby's mother.

When they'd gone on their first walk as a threesome, he had pushed the pram.

'I'll feed him,' he'd said on the way home, 'and you can light the fire.'

In their previous life they'd have laughed at that division of labour but there was nothing funny about either of their tasks; he fed the baby powder and water; she lit a log made from paraffin and sawdust, agreeing with him when he reminded her again of just how blessed they were. It would be so much better, she'd thought, if his breasts were swollen with milk, if there was a forest at the back of the house that she could trawl for kindling, snaring rabbits and pheasants as she went.

He comes to stand beside her, leaving the door ajar. She waits for a comment like the one about the cat food.

'A tapir,' he says.

'What?'

'That's a tapir.'

'Is it?'

'I saw one in Brazil,' he says. 'On a midnight hike.'

Before her, he had been a hardcore traveller. For their honeymoon they'd compromised and gone to New Zealand. He'd persuaded her to climb the Franz Joseph Glacier the morning after an electric storm. The guide cut steps into the ice but even with crampons and a trekking pole she'd struggled to stay upright. On the way through a crevice she'd fallen into a waist-deep stream of freezing water. Afterwards he came to accept that she preferred luxury hotels by the beach.

'Gorgeous animals.' He sits on the chair next to her. 'Aren't they?'

There is an invitation in the question, and with it comes pressure to answer well.

She looks for beauty in the creature's stunted trunk and its ears sitting high above its eyes. It lumbers after its keeper who, a voiceover says, has been taking care of it for three years.

'Unusual anyway,' she says.

Two months before, the voiceover says, the tapir had a miscarriage and since then she's been out of sorts. The vet changed her antibiotics twice but her form has not improved.

'She'll have to be euthanized,' the vet says.

The tapir's keeper turns away from the camera. The documentary cuts to a commercial break.

Her husband swings around to face her. 'They won't do it,' he says. 'They're just creating drama.'

She nods, wishing she had paused on a trashy film or one of the American news channels he despises.

They sit out the first ad. He does not ask her to mute the sound. There is some solidarity in the act of watching and she considers reaching over and taking his hand.

'Whereabouts in Brazil?' she asks instead.

He frowns. Place names mean nothing to her unless she is planning or recalling a trip of her own.

'The rainforest,' he says.

'What was it like?'

He stares at the shelves in the corner. She remembers the Saturday he assembled them. He worked bare-chested, listening to the Smiths on a loop, refusing lunch until the shelves were ready. That evening she painted them purple; they'd looked at the colour chart separately and picked out the same lilac shade.

'What?' he says. 'The tapir or the rainforest?'

'Either,' she says. 'Both.'

'Good,' he says like a child who has been asked about his day in school.

The documentary resumes. The vet gives the tapir an anaesthetic.

Her husband stares at the screen without blinking. 'Turn it off.'

'I'm sorry,' she says, killing the TV.

'Nothing can just happen anymore,' he says. 'Nothing is allowed to just happen.'

She takes his hand. 'They shouldn't have let the cameras in.'

'It's not the zoo's fault,' he says.

'I didn't think you believed in zoos.'

'Believe?' he says. 'You don't *believe* or not *believe* in zoos.'

He looks at her hand on top of his. She has never seen him cry. Before the baby she'd have liked him to break down but if he cried now she'd be cold to his tears.

'If you don't want to talk to someone,' he says, 'there are pills that might help.'

She lets her hand fall away. Once they were friends but the friendship has turned and there is something sordid in how they have become like other married couples. She is too tired to fight with him; she needs all of her energy to fight with herself.

'Okay,' she says.

'You'll need to go to the GP.'

The fridge hums into the silence. She pictures its two bottom drawers full of softening vegetables and the selection of cheeses her sister brought. When he goes back to bed she will take out the brie, cut away the skin, and lick the buttery cheese off the knife.

'I can ring,' he says.

'There's no need, I can ring myself.'

He sighs, preparing to say something else, something kinder perhaps, but the baby whimpers above them and her husband gets up. 'He's not due a feed for another hour but I might feed him anyway.'

'I can do it,' she says.

'There's no need. Why don't you go back to bed?'

She listens to the slap of his feet on the stairs and wonders what is to stop her from crossing the kitchen and filling the kettle with water to heat the baby's bottle. What is to stop her from insisting that she feed the baby? His head fits into the crook of her arm, he drinks easily and when he has finished, sucks air through the plastic teat.

She leaves the kitchen, passing her husband who is carrying the baby against his chest and shoulder.

In the bedroom she lies on cold sheets, facing the Moses basket her mother gave them on loan.

When she was eight, warm in bed, with rain battering the roof and the sound from across the hall of her sister running a bath, she had known that everyone she loved was safe – her parents downstairs, her brother asleep on the paisley beanbag. Unless one of them sickened suddenly or a fire broke out from her mother's forgotten cigarette, her family would survive, for another night at least. But she and her husband are not family and no matter what they

do they can't make the world safe for the baby, and they are too spoilt to accept this, spoilt in different ways, so they will spoil the baby in different ways to try and make amends.

She pulls the duvet over her. The darkness is another skin. Three years ago exactly she and her husband were in New Zealand and there was no one in the house. She imagines pausing her life as it is and travelling back in time, soaking up the empty silence, haunting her childless past.

Through the ceiling she hears the baby sneeze and the hum of the fast-boiling kettle.

Carnival in a Strip Mall Parking Lot

Danny Powell

The writer sat down to write a story for The New Yorker. No, that's not right, she was already sitting.

The writer adjusted herself in her chair, set her fingers against the typewriter, and typed A Story for The New Yorker.

It began the way most stories do, with a girl with a tail taking a seat on the subway and adjusting herself because of her tail.

It wasn't a real tail but a fake one attached by a belt cinched around her waist and hidden beneath a black shirt. It was fake but colorful. I can't remember the colors – feel free to imagine them.

The girl with the tail was leafing through a copy of The Holy Bible, adding an S in front of all the He's.

The writer adjusted herself in her chair so that she was sitting on the edge and decided that the girl will leave the Book on her seat when she leaves the train.

The train stopped. A woman with skin the color of coffee boarded and sat on the girl's tail as she relieved her body of the day's burdens. She watched the girl write three S's before leaning in close. 'You're quite clever.'

The girl wrote another S without looking anywhere else. 'Cleverness is boring.' She started her next S. 'And so are stories about writers.'

The girl yanked her tail from beneath the woman and got off at the next stop, Bible in hand. She hiked seven blocks to Bookstore Alley and trudged past the Action/Adventure shop, the Fantasy shop, the Science Fiction shop, the Road Trip shop, the Graphic Novel shop, the Mystery shop, the Religion shop, the Smell-O-Text shop, the Literary shop, the Short Story shop, the Poetry shop, the Urban shop, the Suburban shop, the James Patterson shop, and the 'Foreign' shop. She pulled her free hand into her sleeve and pushed open the door of Romance.

'I'd like to return this, please.' Her book thudded against the well-worn checkout counter.

'But you didn't get that from here,' replied a white-haired woman whose Mrs. Clause-inspired spectacles encircled eyes fixed on the girl's tail. 'It belongs down at the—'

'Library.'

'No,' said the bookseller. 'Besides, it's used.'

'And how would you know that?'

'Because I've seen your work before.'

The girl lifted her Bible with a smile as faux as her tail and walked backward out of the bookstore, never taking her eyes off the woman whose eyes never drifted from her own.

The alley was as hushed as space and just as void of readers and people who buy books. A pigeon marched silently from the bricks and mortar of the Romance shop to the yellow curb and dropped dead into street. The girl made the sign of the cross and headed toward Religion, stepping over every crack in the sidewalk.

Inside the store, the girl wagged her tail as she sauntered up to the counter, holding the Bible in front of her face. 'I need to make a return.'

'You didn't get that from here,' replied a white-bearded man who would have reminded the girl of Santa or God or her Great-Grandfather.

'I did.'

'Thou shalt not lie,' said the bookseller. 'Besides, it's used.'

'How would you know?'

'Because I've seen you before.'

The girl lowered the Bible and exited the store normally. She glanced up and down the alley but saw no one else with a tail or without one. She thought about filing a report with the Persona Police but decided against it before the thought finished navigating her mind.

Only the pigeon's skeleton remained, and the girl with the tail looked over and up at the skyscraper that was the Stories Twice Told shop. There she found a vulture perched two stories high licking its lips and scraping its beak against a gargoyle's. It was the lone sound in the canyon of stores, and it sounded to the girl like the turning of pages in a book. She laughed, and the vulture listened to her cackle until its echo scared the bird to the heavens.

The writer made herself a cup of coffee, peed, and continued A Story for The New Yorker.

The girl skipped to the Literary Journal shop and tugged on the door with a bare hand, forgetting her phobia for half a second. The bright lights inside glared down at her and faint, unfamiliar music seeped into her ears beneath the rattle of the glass. She turned and tripped over a stack of paper

that had not been there before, then choked on the fumes of a delivery jeep speeding away from the scene.

The girl stroked the colors of her tail and stuck her thumb in the air, straight up toward the sky as if raising her hand at school.

'Yes, Maria?'

'That's not my name,' answered the girl. 'But I'll let you call me that if you get me out of here.'

'Yes, Maria.'

And a bus teetered around the corner with a squeal and squeeched to a stop at the girl's feet.

'Thank you,' said Maria-not-Maria.

There was a version of every person in the city on the bus, and they were all shouting various complaints about making an unscheduled stop in Bookstore Alley. The girl spotted a carton of French fries coming her way and blocked it with the Bible.

There were no open seats and the aisle was lined with straphangers, so the girl stood in the back door stairwell despite threats from the driver to stop the bus if she didn't read the signs prohibiting her actions.

The writer bled onto the keys of her typewriter. Her eczema was starting to act up, and red seeped from the cracks along her knuckles.

The bus remained stopped at a green light, and everyone but the girl in the stairwell was protesting the delay. A trail of cars with their hazards blinking sat silently behind the unflinching vessel.

'I'm going to ask you one last time, Miss. You need to move,' demanded the driver.

And the girl with the tail in the stairwell started to dance. 'There's nowhere else to go.'

The back door opened accordionly, and a blast of the coldest air the young girl had ever felt struck her eyeballs like shards of glass.

'Then have a nice day.'

The girl felt a tug on her tail and a shove at her back, and before she could stretch out her hands she found herself lying on the floor of a planetarium, gazing up at her favorite constellations. She reached for them, clutching countless stars until silver and gold inched down her wrists and arms and around her naked shoulders.

All was white when she finally lifted her lids. She was back in her clothes, and although she wasn't quite dressed enough for the arctic, she

wasn't shivering. The environment was surprisingly balmy instead, and she sensed moisture beading wherever skin met skin.

The girl bent toward the snow, clutching countless flakes until they puffed their way from between her fingers and fell back to the earth. The snow wasn't cold or wet, and she stared at the M in her palm until a light went off above her head. One by one, the grid of lights shut down, and the blanket of snow gave way to concrete floors and motion picture cameras and darkness. No one was around and neither were his or her footsteps.

'Action!!' yelled the girl.

And dots of red began to dapple the Faux Snow.

The girl began counting them, then lost track, then connected the spots with an invisible string in her mind. The whirrrrr of a camera fired up and a microphone descended from the heavens, hanging just out of reach.

'A Story for The New Yorker. Chapter One. Where something happens, then something else, then something else.'

The words repeated themselves through speakers she couldn't see, and the girl with the tail didn't recognize the sound of her own voice.

'Chapter Two,' she spoke. 'Where nothing happens, then nothing else, then nothing else.'

The speakers hung silently out of sight.

'Chapter Three. Where—'

The girl was interrupted by the ringing of a telephone she didn't know was in her pocket.

'Hello?' came the girl's voice from the speakers as she reached into her pants.

'Is this *BLEEEEP*?'

'Yes. This is she. Speaking.'

'Great. This is Mary St. Mary from The Agency. We love your manuscript, absolutely love it love it love it, and I'd like to offer you misrepresentation.'

'How wonderful. Thank you.'

A dial tone faded up from the depths of somewhere, growing louder every second until the girl couldn't take it anymore. She grabbed the microphone above her head, ripped the black foam from it, and stuffed pieces into her ears. It was the quietest silence she had ever heard.

A mourning dove cooed outside the writer's open window. 'Shut up!' screamed the woman, but she didn't get up to do anything about the intrusion.

The girl careened through a maze of television soundstages, charging across sets littered with the angry faces of reality show performers and producers. She read on the lips of one man 'Cut! Cut!' and found herself chased by a woman wielding a knife pulled from a block in the mansion's kitchen. The pursuer slashed at the girl's tail, striking one of its colors and bending the knife until its blade touched its handle.

The writer finally leaped from her chair and slammed the window closed, shutting out the dove's call. She paced the perimeter of the room, where a path of missing carpet formed a square. She sipped her coffee, bit her fingernails, twirled her hair, tapped against the wall with her scabbed knuckles, hummed, and cried.

She returned to her desk, sat down, adjusted herself, and looked down at the paper teetering from her typewriter's carriage, flabbergasted to discover that her most beloved character had carried on without her.

She lifted the paper and read out loud, whispering:

'The blade wraps around the green of my tail, and with a forceful strut of my right hip I tear the weapon free from my aggressor's hand. She probably screams, but I hear nothing but the tinnitus in my ears. The studio dissolves behind me, color becoming black, and I pluck the foam to the ground. The world crashes into me – horns, sirens, airplanes, commercials – and I slip through the door of my home.

I take a shower. Eat. Sleep. Dream.

I wake.

I look out my bedroom window and watch as a man turns to check out the rear end of another man's girlfriend, wife, sister, friend. I think, *She'd never go for you anyway*. I'm not sure why, but she wouldn't. I think it's because he's a man who turns.

I get dressed. I go to work. I get yelled at by my boss. I'm not sure why.

I go on a blind date. I get to the restaurant first, as always, and the server ties a paisley doo rag around my head, covering my eyes. I hear the chair opposite me scratch against the floor, and I wonder what pattern he got.

'What pattern did you get?'

'I didn't get a pattern. I got a color.'

I don't like the way his voice sounds. 'Oh, which one?'

'Ketchup.'

I love his specificity, though.

'We do not discuss blindfolds,' says our server with a smile I can hear.

'Excuse me, but,' says my date, 'she can do whatever she wants.'

'No, there are rules here.' The server pours what I assume is water into two glasses.

'They're posted over there.' I hear her pointed finger slice through the air. 'If you wish to stay—'

'We do,' I interrupt. 'We're sorry.' Under the table, I sling my foot toward my date, connecting with one of his shins and rattling the objects in front of us.

'Hey Zeus,' he grimaces. 'What the hell?'

'I think she wants you to apologize,' explains the server, again with a smile.

'Never.'

'Then have a nice day.'

Silence.

'Adios,' she adds.

The chair squeals, sending my tinnitus roaring, and the objects rattle.

'Nice tail,' says the man, and his footsteps disappear into the conversational din of the room.

'He's been here before,' whispers the server into my ear, 'and he's a toilet paper receiver every single time.' I feel her breath on my cheek. 'Do you wish to stay?'

I th—'

The writer stared at the white space leading to the corner of the paper. She glanced to the corner of the room closest to her desk, the corner where her waste basket should have stood, and found the impression of a circle in the carpet. Her pinky stung, and she looked to where a crease on its knuckle had opened up to red.

She struck the keys softly.

The girl with the tail dined alone. As she ate an entrée the server had recommended she thought about being alone and of loneliness, and she concluded that the two are not always the same, like twins.

Then she thought about twins. She wondered if they ever feel alone, concluding that if she had a twin she would never feel alone or lonely.

Then she wondered if twins feel the opposite of alone, and she wondered what that was…

Together?

She was certain that together is not quite the opposite of alone.

The check came and the girl placed her debt card on the table. She wondered what everything totaled but didn't dare peek. She trusted that the honor system would prevail.

Rain pelted her as she stepped outside, drawing welts from her skin and turning her tail into a limp weight that dragged behind her. Everyone hustling past her held firmly onto metal umbrellas, turning the avenue into an orchestra of snare drums.

'Five dolla five dolla! Umbrellas, umbrellas! Just five dolla!!' shouted a man who rammed a folded umbrella into the girl's arm.

'Ouwww!'

She bought it, and as she ambled to the intersection at Bookstore Alley the nylon canopy became riddled with holes, pierced by the drops hurtling toward Earth.

The drum roll without a climax continued. She stopped at the curb's edge, where a river flowed and people ferried across the street in tiny boats.

'Five dolla five dolla!!' the familiar voice faded up from behind her. She turned to see the umbrella man carrying a tiny boat on his back. He smiled in her direction, and his gold and silver teeth blinged even without a sun in sight.

'I'm good,' promised the girl.

'No, you're cold and wet and heading toward death.'

'Toward death?'

'Well, one day anyway.' The man marched up the Alley, a boat with feet shrinking in the distance. 'Five dolla five dolla!'

The girl sprinted as fast as her tail would allow, chasing the bobbing boat until it became a dot, a speck, a flake of dust, nothing. She slowed and stood in front of the Literary Journal shop, where the stack of stories had grown into a tower as tall as the still-locked door. The store's music couldn't be heard over the snare drums, not even when the door swung open and a baby-faced man hurried onto the sidewalk, a tiny boat slung over his back. He flipped the vessel into the river and moored it to a fire hydrant, then grabbed as many pages as he could muster and tossed them into the boat.

'Excuse me!' shouted the girl, but the man either didn't hear her or chose to ignore her. 'Excuse me!!'

The young man made quick work of it, tossing and tossing until the stack was a scattered pile in the nearly sinking boat. He untied the rope and pressed the sole of his loafer against the gunwale, giving it a nudge and sending it out to the sea of commuters.

'What are you doing?!'

The man strolled almost right through her and into the building, locking the door's numerous deadbolts – click, click, clack, clunk – seven in all by the girl's count. She pounded on the door, adding a bass line to the snares, and the lights inside dimmed to darkness. Backing away from the store, the girl felt a thud at her heels and tumbled over a short stack of stories on the sidewalk.

'Careful now,' said a voice that floated away as quickly as the words were spoken.

The girl jumped to her feet and flung the stack against the door, shattering the glass and setting off an alarm louder than the storm. She jammed her fingers into her ears and ran.

'Don't run,' said the writer.

But the girl with the tail ran faster.

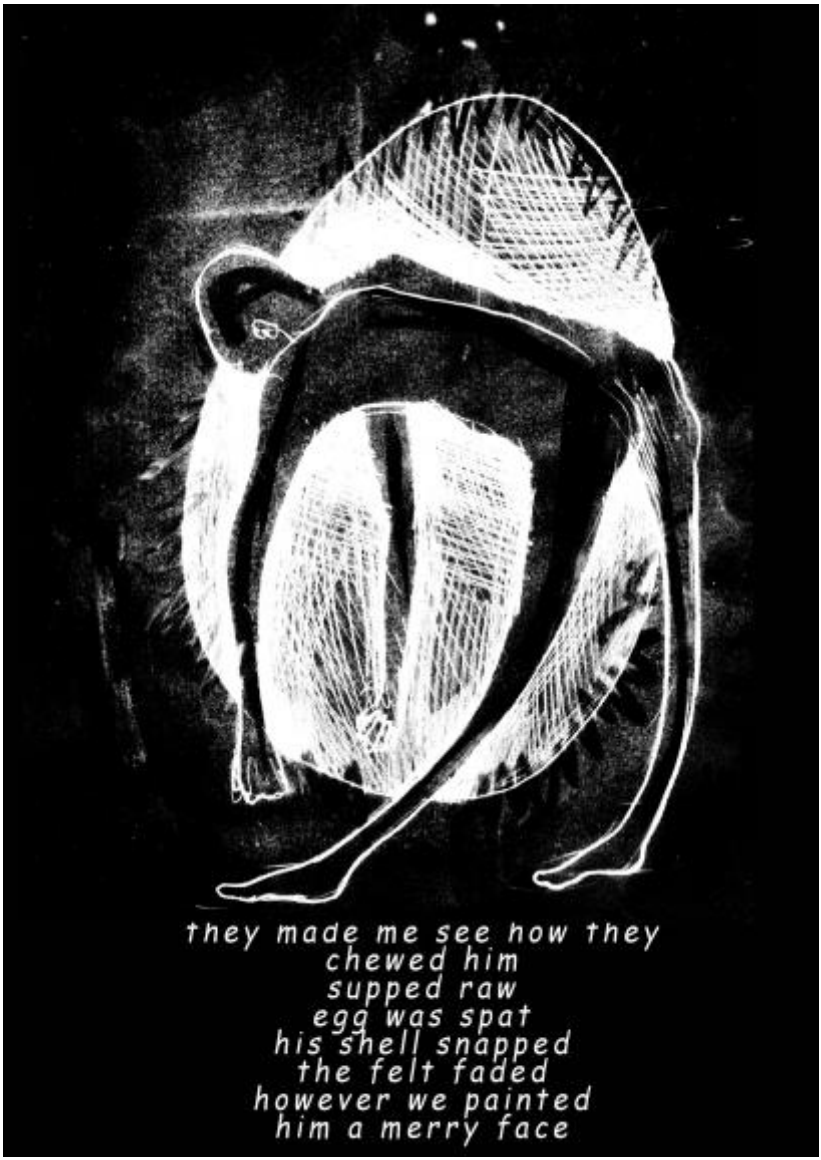
She plucked her fingers from her ears and ran faster, faster than the writer could type.

She ran out of the writer's head and plunged to the typewriter, smashing the keys with all fours and her tail – wdiughaondfva8aoerh;i – before leaping to the window, where she crashed through the glass, scaring the dove to silence and flight, bounded down the tree's trunk, grabbed an acorn, tossed it to a squirrel, mounted the rodent's back, and rode off into the sunrise.

The writer experienced another moment of flabbergastation. She sipped her coffee. She wiped her brow.

She lit a cigarette. No, that's not right. She had beat cancer years ago and wasn't going to let it in again.

She paced the room.



from *Eggman*
Kinga Tóth & Gergely Normal

Spuff

Carmen Marcus

Her radio waves smoke through the kitchen,
black the bird, blue the sky, flour the table.
The yeast breathes in its cotton bag,
the putty pinch of it, pale as cat-skin,
my finger dents all over it. 'Don't touch,
watch', the heel of her hand fold and roll
and turn the bowl around.
The bowl, our clock, winds back
all the way to her watching her
mother, watching her mother
watching her mother. 'Watch-it'.
She eases out the moon of dough –
warm and breathing, boneless bag,
all suck and sticking. She flours the knife.
'There's a fistful for you to play with'.
I use my hands like her.
I heel and fold and roll – a little girl –
a pretty poppet out of dough,
I raisin her a belly button and just below
I pinch a crease with my fingernail.
'Don't touch', she raps my knuckle
with the wooden spoon.
And when my bun-girl's done
she comes out swollen –
cloven to her belly button.
I hate her –
crack her open
eat her hot white feathers.

To Sara (from Kingsford)

James Croal Jackson

I scratch at doors because I hear a creature
moving in some box I have yet to lick.
Cardboard has the faint taste of forest, of hungry
bark. I have never ventured deep but the deep
knows my name, and when alone its voice
is sometimes distant but so heavy, I claw
the door's painted wood until the woodlands stop
speaking, or someone lets me free. I explore dark
spaces and in this home I look for monsters
to flee – I run from shadows, sprinting through
the wilds of rooms wanting a chase to give
my motion meaning. Don't get me wrong.
I'm grateful; I'm safe; I'm running from myself:
I've loved like vacancies in the clothes hanging
in closets. And loved like in your arms, eyes closed,
no more dark but in searching for the predator
to emerge in you – but on your bed, in this room,
in this home – there is only breathing and calm
I can't sense in that outside world of creaking
and footsteps, of clouds rolling into thunder,
of multitudes of other things
I trust far less than you.

I Will Take Your Silence As Assent

Janet Dean Knight

Weight of everyman, sweat of other men on her face,
on her teeth, blood of all of them. He hovered on her lips,
from his mouth pumped his stinging breath,

she was a rag doll; poked his stabbing tongue,
jagged teeth ripped against a blooming cheek,
exploding peonies, pink and bloody, swiftly rusting.

Her mind returned to the peonies, pink and bloody,
rusting as the summer inhaled towards its peak,
over before they could absorb the therapeutic heat;

he had brought his sting, described his figure eight
inside her. If there was honey nearby, she might have been willing
to taste it, brought on a waxy platter with sugar words,

but she had turned,
and he crossed the room, smiled his empty greeting,
touched her hand, rubbing his thumb in the pit of her palm,

circled the throat of her wrist, keeping her back.
Her will was leaving when he said, I will take your silence
as assent. He said, I will take your silence as assent.

Oil on Canvas

inside the mind of Joan Miró

Janet Dean Knight

Women and birds are what it's all about,
femmes et oiseaux. A canvas black as night,
with constellations.
Sometimes there are *personages* that look
like sparring cocks, but most are *femmes.*
And always birds.

La partie de pêche, des amoreux,
a woman now in black from head to foot,
he rails against the pastoral,
his black daubs shout:
OISEAUX EN FACE L'HORIZON!
Oli damunt tela. Oil on canvas.

Life-birds and stars *en coleur damunt papier*
Sense títol, sín titulo.
Long black marks on a roll of white;
he wants to follow where they go
naturally, without pressure.
Forever, they make female forms.

The black night, a blue moon,
a clot beyond the ridge of the egg,
the red issue from a white womb,
edged in black. In sky blue, sperm dances,
leaving ever weakening trails.
Oli damunt lona sense bastidur.

Oil on an unstretched rag.

Residency

Jonathan Creasy

Something below the surface
when the current shifts

I sleep where great poets
slept

& scratch at the same table

eyelids heavy
with heat

Dances

for Lily Ockwell

Jonathan Creasy

I

an energy forming
off the page—

something tentative,
turned around

in forms
somehow related

but altered, altering
in patterns

broken by scattered
winds

the home you
knew knows

for now
a certain silence—

turbulent, this energy
of words

found off-centre,
a mimic

of horns blown-
out

by years, and
repetition

*

I work toward
an acceptable structure

of reality—
a view that history

takes shape as
a column of air

the poet (and poem)
passes through

II

A mountain scene:
Ft. Davis at midday—

endless variation upon your
theme; the oldest stories

we've been told
live in our bones

and drive our minds to dreams
we can't control

tell me, dancer, how
the limbs move in perfect

freedom, how the toe points
reflexive of long training

practiced to exhaustion,
these mobilities

a music prompts you forward
& side to side

an elongated reach
fingertips toward

heaven, your critical gaze
breaks the sky, my heart—

the sound: your stage

A World of Miniature

Penny Boxall

This little
cap (thumbnail
copy of
one in
real life)
is riddled
with
flowers

five colours to each pansy
five stitches to each leaf
a hairline stem
a flea-sized hem
a millimetre long

exact the perfect detail
with microscope and thread
the tweezers grip
the needletip
your fingers couldn't hold

your eyes are playing tricks of light
the blindness setting in
but you suppose
it's worth the loss
to make a world so small

The Night Mare

Penny Boxall

How he slips (under cover of the dark)
his lamest mare or ribcracked neuter,
caved by a long-off brutish kick,
into the team; creams off the tiring entire horse
and, with a wink, smuggles in this poor excuse.

No one would suspect the halting
workshy lungs, the boiling lips,
until the coach starts its resisting roll
back down the hill and everyone
must disembark and trudge.

An inconvenience to everything:
only the sullen luggage getting any lift;
demoted passengers making footwear of the wet;
the brokenwinded horse aching for its rest
and the stableboy's not unfamiliar fist.

Poor Mrs Finnegan

Roberta Francis

Such sport in a small alley,
beneath the windy Dublin mountains.
Cracking the corners of her chimney.
Poor Mrs Finnegan.
Aiming for wood where the ball sounded loudest
                an eye
where a whiff of turf smoke crept.
        When we hit the spot it clattered
like hard-feet
            thrashing hollow-heels.
But poor Mrs Finnegan.
Tips of my fingers smashed sapling
branches about to snap,
missing a target
that looked as wide as the sky.
Oliver had the leather glove, the twisted smile.
I flipped and hopped,
    and he caught each bounce.
But Poor Mrs Finnegan.
Thinking the endless hammer
might be Mr Finnegan's ghost.
Poor Mrs Finnegan
screaming to a pitch as a Garda car wailed;
stopped by a stick –
beneath the windy Dublin mountains.

Three Poems by Radosław Wiśniewski

Translated from the Polish by Anna Hyde

Dream 14838 or the Return of the Dead Poets Society

Legendary Mr Keating has decided to come back to school
after all. There is no Society anymore, the boys have grown up
and the school has been closed down together with the county
administration in the valley. Anyway, even if people still write poetry,
nobody reads it. England behind the window, springtime,
modernity and ecology, train cuts through meadows and
lets smoke out. Journalists don't give up, they want to know
why he came back 30 years later, seeing that even Robin Williams,
who played him, is now dead. *It doesn't matter if people still*
read poetry, I don't think about winning or
losing. All I want is to understand.

SEN 14838 ALBO POWRÓT STOWARZYSZENIA UMARŁYCH POETÓW

A jednak legendarny pan Keating postanowił wrócić do szkoły. Nie ma już Stowarzyszenia, chłopcy dorośli, a szkołę i tak zamknęli, kiedy likwidowali starostwo powiatowe w dolinie. A zresztą, nawet jeżeli jeszcze ktoś pisze poezję, to nikt jej nie czyta. Za oknem Anglia, jest wiosna, jest nowocześnie i ekologicznie, pociąg przecina łąki i dymi. Dziennikarze nie odpuszczają, chcą wiedzieć, po co wraca 30 lat później, skoro nie żyje nawet grający go Robin Williams. *To nie jest ważne, czy ktoś jeszcze czyta wiersze, nie myślę o tym, czy wygrałem, czy przegrałem. Chciałbym po prostu coś zrozumieć.*

Mule or Lamentation Number Three (Stormur Again)

Bitter hills stand, because green is bitter where
a night wolf runs and a fast daytime deer.
They will never meet in the moving space,
a wolf into a deer, a deer into a wolf will turn.
Tadeusz Nowak, Introduction

There is no chapel where I could pray to you,
announce your death in the idolatrous way, declare first
words, describe every mishap just in case. For example
a cut you bring from the nursery, your finger displayed
in the accusatory manner, and nobody but you and I
will see anything. There is no address where I could
take all cats we buried together, wringing dirty water
and sand out of their furs, find the remains of toys
we made for Christmas, while the cat climbed
the tree, not yet knowing it was not allowed. There is no –
three simple words like three shots of the *kommando der nicht*,
coming in steady steps after me. And then I think with relief
that they won't take you away, won't give you a cancer,
won't gas you, smash your head against the wall, the tree,
won't hide you in a microwave, freezer, sauerkraut barrel.
Because the earth is mute and the hills are bitter, over them
a broken dome sails. Dark, empty

just like the sky.

MUŁ ALBO LAMENT TRZECI (STORMUR AGAIN)

Stoją gorzkie pagórki, bo gorzka jest zieleń
gdzie przebiega wilk nocy i prędki dnia jeleń.
Nie spotkają się nigdy w ruchomej przestrzeni,
wilk w jelenia, a jeleń się w wilka zamieni.
Tadeusz Nowak, 'Wstęp'

Nie ma kaplicy, w której mógłbym sie do ciebie modlić,
bałwochwalczo głosić twoją śmierć, wyznawać pierwsze
słowa, opisywać wszelki wypadek. Jak na przykład
skaleczenie, które przyniesiesz z przedszkola, wystawiając
oskarżycielsko palec, na którym nikt poza mną i tobą
nic nie zobaczy. Nie ma adresu, pod który mógłbym
znosić wspólnie pochowane koty, wyciskać z ich futra
brudną wodę i piach, odnajdywać resztki zabawek,
jakie sami robiliśmy na choinkę, a kot wdrapywał się
na drzewo, bo jeszcze nie wiedział, że nie wolno. Nie ma
- dwa słowa proste jak dwie strzały *kommando der nicht*,
które idzie niezachwianym krokiem po mnie. Wtedy myślę
z ulgą, że nie zabiorą cię nigdzie, nie wszczepią raka,
nie zagazują, nie rozbiją głowy o mur, drzewo, nie schowają
w mikrofalówce, zamrażarce, beczce na kiszona kapustę.
Bo niema jest ziemia i gorzkie są pagórki, nad którymi
płynie pęknięta czasza. Ciemna, pusta

jak niebo.

Kora/Bark

I'm tired fighting for the country
I have never seen
Tenzin Tsundue

Every day you see this inscription on a concrete post by the end of the road.
In large letters: 'Kora' and a telephone number you are scared
to dial. Yet concrete doesn't grow bark. So this word, which in the language
of the non-existent country means circumambulation, pilgrimage, revolution.
So this is your *kora*, circumambulating an invisible mountain, which is the centre
of the road you take to circle around your life like a monk with a prayer wheel
around
Kailas, Sawayambunath, Jokhangu with such regularity that you don't even notice
when you
become the bone rattle inside the prayer wheel. Cheap watches made in China
could be set according to your monotonous movement, children woken up
to go to school or frightened before going to bed. And the way back
is not the way you take to get to work and the way you take to get to work is not
the way back. Because *kora* is a circle, not a pendulum. And a circle needs to be
closed
and sworn. Then a holy mountain becomes water, embankment, empty channel, a
bridge
thrown over a river which doesn't flow there yet.

KORA

Jestem zmęczony walką o kraj
Którego nigdy nie widziałem
Tenzin Cunde

Codziennie widzisz ten napis na betonowym słupie przy wylocie ulicy. ‘Kora’ napisane wielkimi literami i numer telefonu pod który boisz się zadzwonić. A przecież beton nie porasta korą. Zatem to słowo, które w języku nieistniejącego kraju znaczy okrążenie, pielgrzymkę, rewolucję. Zatem to twoja kora, okrążenie niewidzialnej góry, która jest centrum drogi, po której okrążasz swoje życie jak mnich z kołowrotkiem wokół Kailas, Sawayambunath, Jokhangu tak regularnie, że nie widzisz kiedy sam stajesz się grzechotką z kości wewnątrz kołowrotka. Według twojego jednostajnego ruchu można regulować plastikowe zegarki made in China, budzić dzieci do szkoły albo straszyć je przed snem. I droga powrotna, nie jest drogą, którą jedziesz do pracy a droga, którą jedziesz do pracy nie jest drogą powrotną. Bowiem kora to okrąg - nie wahadło, a okrąg trzeba domknąć
i zakląć. Wtedy święta góra staje się wodą, wałem, pustym korytem, mostem, jaki przerzucasz nad rzeką, która jeszcze tędy nie płynie.

Lilies, by David Hockney

Tiffany Anne Tondut

I wanted my father to die.
He was in the oncology ward, collapsed lung,
Stage IV.

Your father's awake and he wants to see you.
That was Tuesday. By Friday he was sitting up,
joking, tipping the nurse.

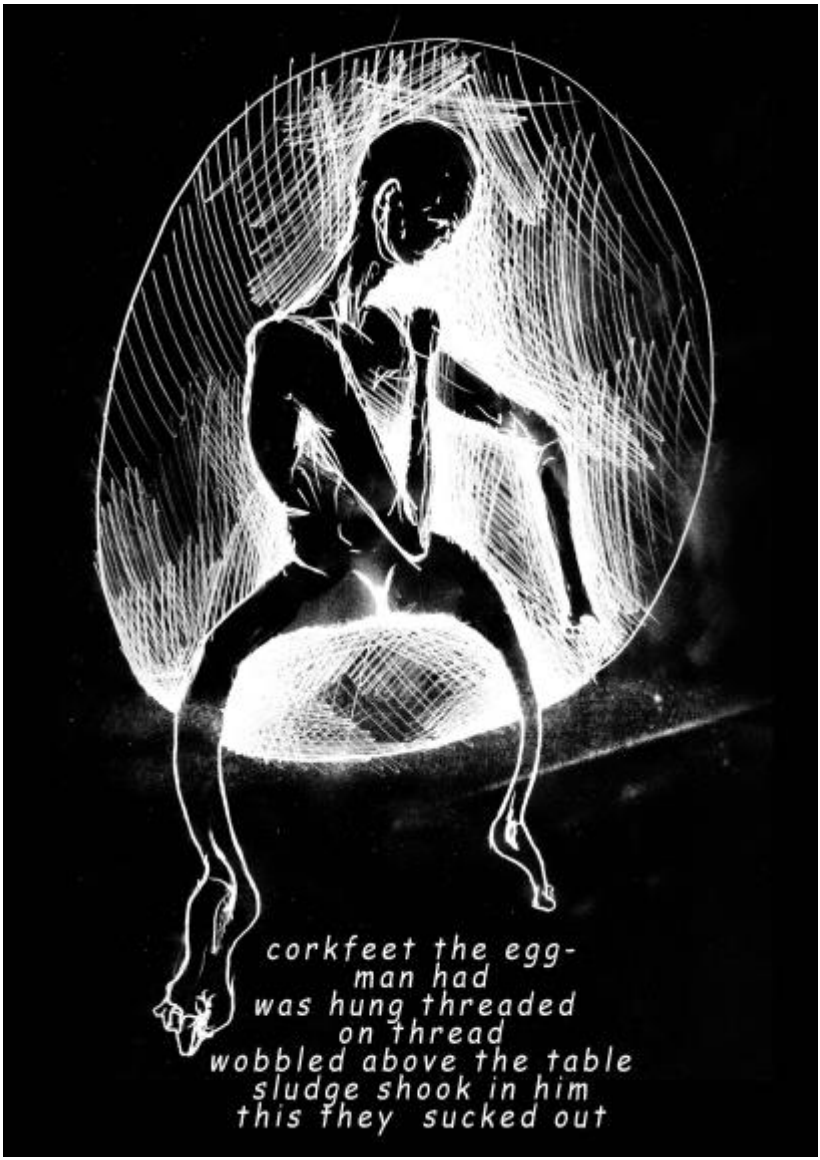
I took her outside.
'He *is* dying' she assured me, 'it's just
a final surge.'

At last I could say, *here's death.* And breathe.

Pareo

Jeni De La O

Teeth sunk into tart flesh are
the crossing of a threshold that cannot be
uncrossed, unprayed, uncried away.
That trickle of sweet juice that waters the mouth and
smacks the lips and curls in your belly is a machete's thwack:
cut off from, given over to what is holy and unholy,
what is Godly, and what is ungodly.
I Loved my Mama first, then Jesus, then mangoes.
I Loved God next, then I loved a man,
grew to Love that man, thwack:
cut off, given over, now
unholy and now alone.



from *Eggman*
Kinga Tóth & Gergely Normal

The Split in the Road

Kathy Kehrli

As my boyfriend Bob and I plod our way up Campspear hill, twittering like two goldfinches, I abruptly stop talking. Because I am a product of Pennsylvania's remote countryside and have now lived in cow country for over forty years, my senses are acutely attuned to the slightest crunch of a snapped-off branch, the minutest rustle of a tall blade of grass, the merest dip in atmospheric pressure. My nature radar on high alert, I halt and shush Bob into silence. My instincts are proven valid as a doe flashes across the field to our right, the white stripe of her tail a floating apostrophe across the meadowed page. A mottled caramel fawn brings up her rear, young, inexperienced, as evidenced by its spotted coat and inability to keep pace with its mother. Bob and I don't speak or move, but it's too late. Both deer have caught a glimpse of us and now they're skittering in opposite directions, the doe flying in high, graceful arcs in front of us into the field across the road and the fawn retreating into the woods from which it has just emerged.

*

'What kind of car was it?' I interrogate Carl, my eleventh grade classmate. He has just managed, at the last possible second, to steal aboard the bus bound for our high school's away football game. Thanks to an accident that's just occurred a mile down the highway and is blocking one lane of traffic, he almost missed the student transport. Before he even responds, I already intuit the answer and I'm trembling as Carl confirms my worst premonitions.

'It was a dark brown sedan with a light brown roof,' he replies. 'A Dodge,' he clarifies. I turn to my friend Dina, who is sitting in the seat next to me, and choke out, 'That's the kind of car my mom's driving.' And then I start replaying the previous fifteen minutes in my head, over and over, how I might have done them differently, how I might never have a chance to mend my words and actions.

*

'Just drop me off here,' I hiss at my mom as we pull up to the school grounds. Rain falls in thick, heavy drops, plopping in staccato beat as they hit the windshield in front of us. Wanting to shield me from the downpour, my mother endeavors to deliver me as close to the front door of the school as she can, directly under the covered portico serving as a frontispiece for the main entryway. Now sixteen years old, though, I find myself thinking I'm too mature for such protective efforts. Embarrassed to be caught by too many of my peers being chaperoned direct to door, I bark, 'This is stupid' as the car rolls to a stop out of rain's way. I then leap out the passenger's side and slam the door shut behind me without so much as a second utterance or glance at my mother. In fact, I don't even watch as she angles the car down the length of the building and then semi-circles back around. I just lunge for the silver metallic doors that will deliver me inside, as far away from my babying mother as possible.

*

When a baby opossum leaves its mother's womb just eleven to thirteen days after conception, it measures about the size of a honeybee. To put this figure into perspective, the size of infant opossums at birth is so small that twenty newborns can fit into a single teaspoon.

Although five to nine is more common, a mama opossum, known as a jill, can have this many babies or more in a single litter. While they are so microscopic, the newly minted marsupials are not fully developed and must complete their maturation inside their mother's pouch with their siblings.

For the next 100 days, the newborn opossum is completely dependent on its mother for sustenance and protection. This timeframe represents about one-sixth of the average opossum's entire lifespan. During the first two to three months of its life, the young marsupial never leaves its mother's pouch. Only as it grows older does it emerge from her nurturing built-in pocket. For the next month or two thereafter, the mother will often carry her offspring on her back whenever she leaves the den to forage for food. The opossum is a solitary creature by nature. Because of the animal's quiet and reclusive tendencies, the opossum spends much of its lifetime alone. The deviation of this mother/infant bonding phase from the animal's instinctual isolated behavior attests to just how precious the relationship is.

*

Bob and I continue our ascent of the hill but my mind is off the stroll and fixated on the deer separation we've just created.

'I hope the baby can find its way back to its mother,' I bemoan.

'Me too,' Bob agrees, more to appease me than out of genuine concern. As a city boy, he is not as emotionally attached to such matters as I am.

We turn around at the hill's summit and head back down its slope. As we pass by the scene where the doe and fawn parted ways, I'm saddened by the fact that neither mother nor baby has re-emerged. What if they never see each other again? I'm so distraught by this notion that I'm still talking about it the next day, when I relate the incident to my brother, Rich. 'They'll find each other,' he asserts, pooh-poohing my prognostications of eternal detachment.

'But how? They went in completely opposite directions…and fawns can't make noise.'

'Yes, they can,' he insists. 'They bleat like a lamb. Besides, even if the mother can't hear it, she'll track it down by its scent.'

*

As our bus rolls to a stop at the bottom of the hill atop which the high school sits, our driver is forced to turn in the opposite direction from his intended one. The accident has closed the highway to the south, where my mom headed after dropping me off at the breezeway next to the bus lane. I could hear the sirens blaring prior to our departure, just before Carl hopped on board, and now all I want to do is get off this bus and run to my mother's aid. I don't care that it's a dangerous thoroughfare for pedestrians to traverse. My own personal safety is the farthest thought from my mind. But there will be no risk-taking heroics. Instead, I'm trapped inside a vehicle carrying me farther away from my mom rather than closer to her. So I do the next best thing and begin praying. 'How bad was the accident?' I continue grilling Carl. I can tell he'd like nothing more than to pretend to have not witnessed what he's inadvertently seen. But he can no more escape this interrogation than I can escape my vehicular shackles.

'It didn't look too bad,' he says, weighing his response carefully. It's not good enough for me. I have to know what I can't bear to know…everything.

'How bad was the car?'

'It was dented in on the side.'

'Did it look like anyone was hurt?' I wait as Carl thinks hard about how best to answer this one.

'It wasn't smashed up that bad…It looked like they should be okay.' The wavering tone of his voice reveals he's not as assured of his answer as he'd like me to believe.

*

Opossums begin breeding in February. There is no specific timeline during which birthing takes place. Rather, litters stretch out over several months spanning early spring into summer. That means at the end of the fall season, when the early sunset slices short the day, the late bloomers among the year's offspring will still be riding atop their mother's back, snuggled securely in the black and gray fur they've come to know as home safe home.

*

My brother is right. Knight & Hale, the manufacturer of bleat deer calls, explains, 'A fawn bleat usually results from fawns attempting to keep in contact with does or [from their] calling for help when in distress. Hearing this call causes deer to come running to protect the young.' Likewise, 'a doe bleat…usually occurs in social situations as contact call with fawns.' Bob and I heard no animal noises as we left the scene of the deer disengagement, but maybe, just maybe, if they both cried hard enough they'd be reunited. In the days ahead, I hang on to this thought each time I stroll past the field where my intrusion resulted in an uncoupling of mother and child. As I do so, I remain ever watchful for evidence of their homecoming.

*

When word quickly spreads through the bus that a strong likelihood exists my mom was part of the accident barring our way, the bus driver takes pity on me.

That being the case, he has just allowed me to disembark at the country store at our next pickup stop so I can use the telephone. I call home first, telepathically begging my mom to be the one to say hello, but no one answers. At this hour, my dad is in the barn milking, my brother Bobby is helping him, and my brother Rich is on the band bus bound for the same football game I am. When my mom doesn't pick up on the other end, I try to talk my mind out of going where her not being home yet wants to take it—down a blackened path from which it will never emerge. She probably stopped at Alice's house on the way, I tell myself, not believing a word of it. My aunt, her sister, lives just a half mile away. It's common for my mom to drop by there on her way out and in. Even if she just paused to chat with my aunt or cousin through her rolled-down car window, it might have delayed her return. And so I dial Alice next.

'Is my mom there?' I say into the receiver. My hand is trembling as my aunt offers the response I wish I could backflow through the telephone wires and change to a yes.

'No, she didn't stop here,' Alice says in response to my question.

'I think she was in an accident,' I tell her before hanging up.

'What's your mom's name?' the store ladies quiz, nearly salivating over this insider's scoop before it goes public.

'Darlene Kehrli.' The words hang foreign in the air as I utter them, as though the woman they belong to is already distancing herself from me. Then I push out the door and mount the stairs to my bus-bound prison once again.

*

I'm returning from writers' group late one evening when I'm in my early forties. It's nearing the end of autumn and as I turn off the highway onto the back road that will take me home, I flick my headlights to high beam. With hunting season right around the corner, and bow season already in session, the sudden leap of a deer into one's driving path is a common occurrence in these rural parts. It's this potentiality I have my eyes peeled for when a glow up ahead causes me to ease up on the accelerator. As my car lazily rolls closer, I see that the gleam my headlights have picked up is emanating from a furry creature parked in the middle of the roadway. I'm almost fully upon the animal, steering a bit to my right to avoid hitting it, before I can make out its species. It's an opossum and there's a reason it is not running for cover from

my blinding headlamps. Another ball of fur, this one smaller, blood pooling around it on the asphalt, is splayed out on the center line, and the opossum is doing its impossible best to stir its partner. As I maneuver around the scene, the opossum looks me piercingly in the eye as if beseeching me to help. A tight sickening spreads up my intestines as I come to the realization that the mother marsupial is attempting to rescue her baby, steadfastly refusing to give up. Why was the infant off her back? Did the force of the collision throw it off, or did it decide, just at the moment before impact, that it was too old for such childish transport? Did it conclude, right there and then, that it no longer needed its mother? I consider turning back to slow down traffic behind me, but I can't bear to witness the carnage and, even more so, the opossum's heart-wrenching inability to accept her loss. And so I keep going, knowing no amount of distance will efface the vision.

*

My mother died that late afternoon out on that highway while the school bus conveyed me in the opposite direction. Had I known I'd never see her again, I'd have stayed in that car, asked her to get me even closer to the entrance, sat in her lap if I had to, not caring how many of my peers saw. I'd have done anything – ANYTHING – to delay her from the fate that awaited her. Barring that, I'd have bleated at the top of my lungs, hurled myself out of my safe confines to get to her, risked the dangers of the world around me just to be with her one last time. That's what I wanted that fawn to know: cry, baby, cry, bleat until you're hoarse and then bleat some more; don't ever give up the wailing until you find your momma, until you're united with her once again. For years, I believed my mother lay in a stretcher in the middle of the highway that day, blood pooling around her, already dead, while the paramedics worked to save the man who killed her. Only two decades later did I learn from my cousin, who identified my mom's body at the hospital following my frantic call to Alice, that there wasn't a mark on her flesh to support the impact of the crash. There'd been no blood or bruising, only internal trauma so severe she died instantly upon impact. The moment I locked eyes with that opossum, I understood the terror behind her entreaty. Although there was really nothing I could do for her anyway, a large part of me didn't go back to save her because I knew – knew that her being struck by an automobile approaching in my wake would be the kindest fate she could

suffer. The alternative would require her to forever leave behind the being not only with whom she'd shared her womb but also whom she'd failed the most sacred of mother/child covenants: to safeguard from harm. Even if she summoned the strength to tear herself away, although it would likely be beyond her ability to process such high-conscious thinking, that kind of emptiness and guilt would never abate. No one comprehends that better than I do.

What My Father Kept

Beth Browne

My father kept paper clips in a rusty tea tin. He kept a Civil War bullet wrapped in Kleenex in an envelope in a dresser drawer. In a faded wooden cigar box, he kept a handful of letters his mother had written home from the hospital just before she died when he was eight. He kept outdated train schedules. He kept tiny pencil nubs with pocket-sized notebooks he always carried in his breast pocket. I never saw him without one. He never threw one away.

He kept an extensive collection of Laurel and Hardy memorabilia, including programs from every fan club meeting he ever attended and a pair of porcelain dolls. He kept a ruby cut glass decanter with a glass stopper I never saw him use. He kept a file on a woman in Norway named Anne Marie, including sixty years of Christmas cards, letters with pictures of her children, beautiful Norwegian postage stamps still affixed to the envelopes. We visited her on a cruise to Scandinavia in 1984, but I had no idea how much she meant to him or why.

In a file next to his income taxes, he kept a copy of the divorce decree, including a heartfelt letter to his attorney saying how much he desired reconciliation. In the same file was the prenuptial agreement for his second marriage three years before he died. He kept a small leather box lined in purple, monogrammed with the initials HGK. I have no idea who this person could have been. Inside the box is a gold tie clip engraved with the same initials, three pearl buttons, four military bars (red), a cheap tin American flag button, a bunch of straight pins and one gold cufflink with an enameled white dove on a blue background.

Deep in the closet, he kept a box full of pornographic VHS tapes. There were girly magazines from the 1950s, a collection of sex-related pamphlets, still in a tiny paper sack, from a trip to New Orleans in 1968 and a tiny rubber penis and breast, less than an inch long. In a dresser drawer, he kept a Xerox copy of a check written by Robert Louis Stevenson, front and back stapled together, along with a letter from a handwriting expert, attesting to its authenticity. I never found the actual check. On top of a pencil was a Donald Duck eraser.

My father kept gauze pads in every room, sometimes with tape and Band-Aids and the occasional sterile-wrapped syringe. He had more than a hundred promotional pens from pharmaceutical companies, numerous pairs of scissors and stainless steel calipers scattered all over the house. He saved Art Garfunkel's x-rays (I destroyed them) and a postcard from Paul Simon's girlfriend, which I kept. He kept a hardback copy of Katherine Hepburn's 1991 autobiography inscribed and signed in her almost illegible shaky hand, 'For Dr. McLemore, ever gratefully.'

He kept seashells and bowties, receipts and plane tickets, two silver tea sets, although he never drank tea unless it was sweet and iced. There was an ancient Argus slide projector, which blew its bulb ten minutes after I plugged it in and a gingham-lined wicker picnic basket full of travel slides in Kodachrome from the 1940s, 50s and 60s. I got a replacement bulb online and looked at slides for hours with my kids. My father made watercolors on his travels and kept a green cardboard box of watercolor paints labeled, 'This cardboard paintbox conserves metal vital to the war effort. With proper care it will give satisfactory service.'

In a box at his sister's house, he kept every one of his notebooks from his pre-med degree at UNC through medical school at Harvard, including detailed colored drawings of various anatomies. There was a scrapbook too, papers crumbling, college boys mugging for the camera, from his years at UNC, which I donated to the library there. I donated my grandfather's medical bag to the Country Doctor Museum in Bailey, NC. He kept every school report card I ever received, from preschool through graduate school. Most of the early ones contain some variation on 'If only Beth would apply herself…'

On a torn scrap of paper, scratched hastily in his best doctor's handwriting, he kept the few words he said at my first wedding in 1988, beginning with 'I didn't know 'til yesterday that I would be asked to say a few words on this wonderful occasion.' He kept more than a dozen matted 8X10s of my coming out at the Ritz Carlton, for whom, I cannot imagine. I never liked the way I looked in those photos. He kept a self-portrait I made in 1970. I was six. I found every letter I ever wrote him, still in their envelopes, with photos enclosed. Nearly every letter contains thanks for a check.

There were several cut out magazine articles containing house designs, getaway homes mostly, and documentation for getting his grandfather's farmhouse on the Historic Register, which never happened. He

kept a file on getting the farm registered as a Century Farm, farmed in our family for over a century, including a metal placard we nailed on the barn. He kept the receipt for the farmhouse roof, replaced in 1989, which saved the house.

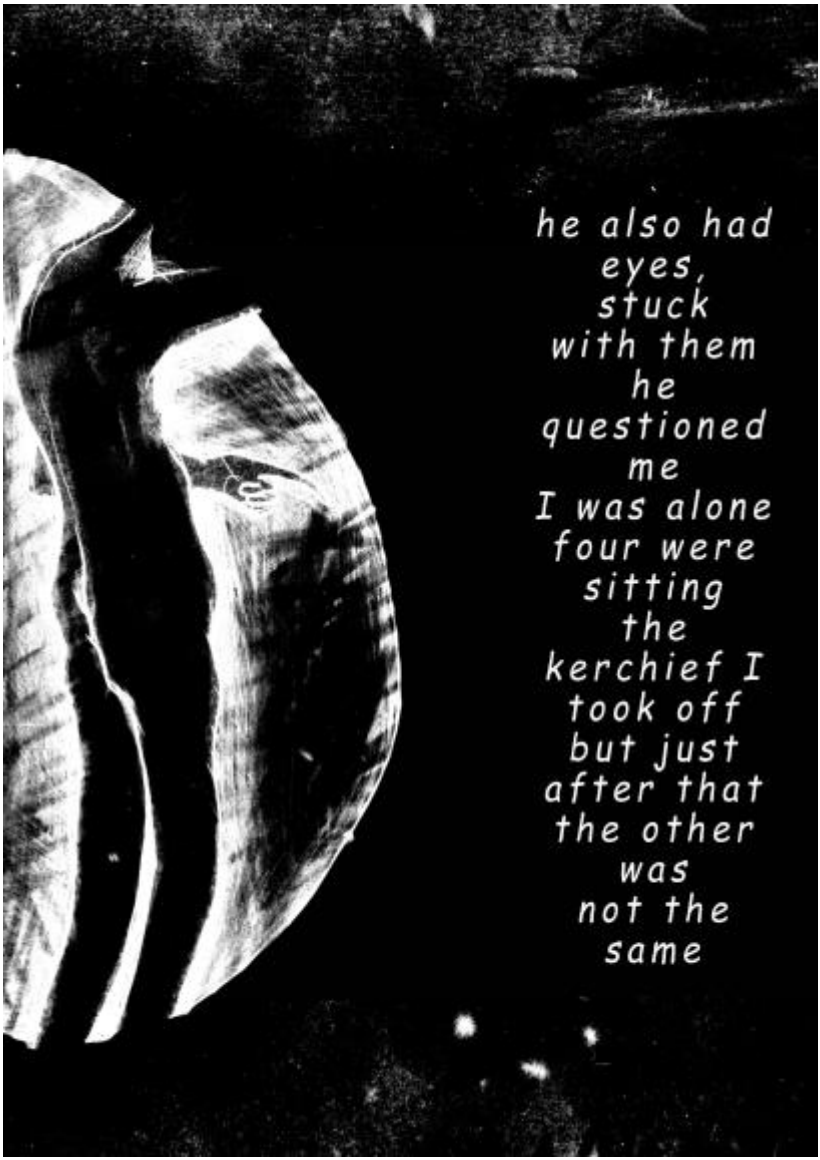
In the kitchen, we found a set of toothpicks topped with tiny seashells for entertaining. He had several books on strategies for playing bridge, one heavily annotated with the binding falling apart. There was a gold Tiffany alarm clock, broken, and a sterling silver stamp box engraved:

L.B.

ILY

S.H.

When I asked my mother about these mysterious initials, she told me the story about her pet cockatiel and how my father came to call her his 'Little Bird' and then she sighed and said, 'He was my Sweet Heart.'



from *Eggman*
Kinga Tóth & Gergely Normal

Notes on Contributors

Penny Boxall holds an MA with distinction in Creative Writing (Poetry) from UEA. Her collection, *Ship of the Line*, was published in 2014. She won the 2016 Edwin Morgan Poetry Award. In 2017 she will be a Writer in Residence at Gladstone's Library and a Hawthornden Fellow. She won first prize in 2016's Elmet Poetry Competition and second in the 2014 Jane Martin Poetry Prize. Her poetry has appeared in *The Sunday Times*, *Rialto*, *The Forward Book of Poetry 2015*, *Magma* and *Mslexia*, and is forthcoming in *The North*.

Beth Browne's work has appeared in many fine journals, most recently in *Cruising World*, *Walter Magazine*, and *Fine Linen*. In addition to writing and photographing, Browne manages a large farm and home schools her two teenagers. Most weekends, she sails the North Carolina coast with her sweetie, Eric. For more information visit http://bethbrownebooks.com/

Jonathan C. Creasy is an author, musician, editor, and publisher based in Dublin. He was born and raised in Los Angeles, where he studied music under jazz legends Peter Erskine, Jeff Hamilton, and later Charlie Haden at CalArts. Creasy is Editor-in-Chief and Publisher at New Dublin Press. His book of poems and essays, *The Black Mountain Letters* (2016), is published by Dalkey Archive Press. www.jcreasy.com

Steve Clarkson lives in York, UK. As a journalist, he's appeared on BBC News and written for MSN, Metro and Press Association. As a speaker, he's presented at the global Pecha Kucha Night and regularly performs spoken word pieces. As a short story writer, his work has appeared in *The Review* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*.

William Davidson's stories have been published online at *Synaesthesia Magazine*, *Cheap Pop*, and *The Puffin Review*, and in print in the anthologies *Solstice Shorts* (Arachne Press) and *Rattle Tales 4*. He won the inaugural Bath Flash Fiction Award in 2015. He is studying on the MA Creative Writing course at York St John University.

Jeni De La O was born and raised in South Florida. She traded hurricanes for Polar Vorticies seven years ago. Her writing has been featured in the *Oakland Journal* and *Five:2:One Art and Literary Journal*. Jeni has performed as a story teller for the Moth Story Hour and Mouth Piece Stories. When she's not telling stories, she's engaging economically depressed communities through her seasonal writing collective #3x3stories. The girl is really into stories.

Catherine Edmunds was educated at Dartington College of Arts, and Goldsmith's College, London. After twenty years as a professional musician, she re-invented herself as an artist and writer. Her published works include a poetry collection and four novels with Circaidy Gregory Press, and a Holocaust memoir. Catherine has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, three times shortlisted for the Bridport, and has been published by *the Frogmore Papers*, *The Binnacle*, *Butchers' Dog*, *Ambit*, Nine Arches Press, among others.

Roberta Francis is a transgender poet/writer living in London. She is a graduate in English and History from Roehampton University. She is currently studying for the A802, MA in Creative Writing at the Open University. She is working on her first novel.

Sara Gray a writer from London. She studied creative writing at the University of British Columbia, and somehow ended up working in corporate law. She used to be angry about gluten-free brownies, but is now angry about Brexit. The three C's – cheese, chocolate, and cats – keep her sane.

Joanne Hayden is an Irish writer and arts journalist. Her work has appeared in publications including the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Business Post*. She was shortlisted for the Francis MacManus Award in 2014 and 2015 and her stories have been broadcast on RTÉ radio. She has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia.

Anna Hyde (Anna Blasiak) has translated over 40 books from English into Polish, as well as some fiction and poetry from Polish into English. She worked in museums and a radio station, ran magazines, wrote on art, film and theatre. She run the European Literature Network in the UK and write poetry in Polish and in English. More at annablasiak.com

James Croal Jackson's poetry has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Rust + Moth*, *Isthmus*, and elsewhere. He lives in Columbus, Ohio. Visit him at jimjakk.com.

Kathy Kehrli is owner of The Flawless Word (http://www.theflawlessword.com) where she focuses her energies on math educational, financial, business, and marketing copywriting and editing. She is a graduate of the Pan-European MFA program in Creative Writing at Cedar Crest College. Her creative nonfiction has been published in the anthology *In Celebration of Mothers* and in *The 3288 Review*. She was a finalist for the 2016 Penelope Niven Award in Creative Nonfiction. At present, she is immersed in sculpting her collection of personal essays into a nontraditional memoir on her heart themes of loss and love.

Alexander King is a writer, actor, musician and artist living in York, England. When not writing, he composes music for theatre and film, plays guitar in a rock band and acts on stage and screen. He lives with his long-suffering wife Lucy and his son Marlowe, who was named after the private detective, rather than the writer.

Janet Dean Knight's poetry has appeared in print in anthologies and magazines, including *Skein* published by Templar, *Ours* edited by Maureen Duffy, *Hysteria 3*, *Ariadne's Thread*, *Paper Swan's Letters Anthology for National Poetry Day*, and online in *The Morning Star*, *Clear Poetry*, and *York Mix*. She was shortlisted in the Bridport Prize in 2012, and commended in the Stanza Poetry Competition in 2015, and in 2016 co-edited and launched *The Friargate Anthology*, a collection of creative work by York Quakers and their supporters. Janet has an MA in Creative Writing from York St John University, and has recently completed her first novel *The Peacemaker*.

Carmen Marcus was awarded a New Writing North northern promise award for fiction and became a BBC Radio Three Verb New Voice in 2015 for poetry. She lives and writes in the Victorian seaside town of Saltburn.

Gergely Normal is a visual and sound artist from Hungary. His creations are on extraordinary materials, like old wood doors and used furniture components as well as abstract expressionist paintings. He has had several exhibitions in Hungary, Austria-Wien and also in the U.S.A. He also writes

poems and started to publish them in several literature magazines in Hungary and abroad. Normal has been working with Kinga Tóth since 2006, performing music and video art in their audiovisual duo Tóth Kina Hegyfalu and working on illustrated texts. They are currently working on their first visual-text album *Village 0-24*, which contains their texts and illustrations from the last 8 years. www.tothkinahegyfalu.blogspot.de

Danny Powell is a writer of fiction and a director of motion pictures. He has been an Edward Albee Fellow and a Tofte Lake Center Emerging Artist, and he currently is the writer-in-residence at Art & History Museums – Maitland. His fiction has appeared in *Blunderbuss Magazine*, *Pea River Journal*, *Pretty Owl Poetry*, and *Fantastic Floridas*. He is the creator of *Fo(u)nd Memories*, a short story series inspired by photographs gleaned from antique dealers, flea markets, and elsewhere. More at dannypowell.us

Tiffany Anne Tondut is an editor and founding publisher of laudanum. Her poetry has featured in *The Rialto*, *Magma* and *Poetry News* amongst other titles. In 2015 she was an additional winner of the Troubadour Poetry Prize.

Radosław Wiśniewski was born in 1974 and is author of several books of poetry and a member of a few bands. He works for a wholesaler of cables and aerials. In the evenings he sings blues without words and writes blues without music.

Kinga Tóth is a philologist and teacher of the German language and literature. She is a (sound-)poet-illustrator and the songwriter and frontwoman of the Tóth Kína Hegyfalu project, as well as a member of the leadership of the József Attila Association for Young Writers and an active member of several other projects and associations. This year she is in Villa Rosenthal, Jena (DE) and for the GEDOK program in Lübeck (DE) with her upcoming visual-sound-written text project, *Mondgesichter/Moonlight faces*.

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ITEM	DESCRIPTION
AIR FRESHENER STRAWB	For his 12-year-old Corsa. The worn-in, oily smell was the least of his problems.
LONG RIZLAS SILVER	When he was a stoner and the guy at the checkout asked: “for those extra long cigarettes?” with a smile. After that he just bought the normal-sized blue ones and learned how to stick them together.
PLAIN NOODLES	No kidding, he just put cheese on them, during his first year at uni. He later learned how to cook.
CELEBRATION CAKE	He’d found it in the reduced section. It was a birthday cake and he was celebrating nothing, but he was high for the first time in ages and had a sweet tooth.
NIGHT NURSE	That didn’t help him sleep when he was starting his career and was working 80 hours a week for a 40-hour salary. And even then, after the busy commute home, he couldn’t switch off at night, which felt like part of the next morning.
BABY SHOES SMALL	He felt uncomfortable taking them off the hanger, because they’d only been together a couple of months. But by the time they got to the till they were both swooning over how small and cute they were. One year later she was pregnant.
PHOTO FRAME	Just after getting the keys to their first house. They’d printed out six or seven of their favourite selfies. The one they chose was taken at a bar in Mexico.
ROSES BOUQUET	Not for an anniversary, or to say sorry, but just midweek, for no reason, back when they did that kind of thing. Later she told him she didn’t like bunches of flowers because they were dying.
DOOR MAT	Which ended up in three different homes. It was where the postcard, sent by the woman at work, landed. And changed everything.
CHOPSTICKS	For one of their date nights. They tried a few times before looking at each other as if to say: “Forks would be better, right?” Years later their kids snapped them while doing a scene from Zorro.
POPCORN SALTED	For film night, which they did every Wednesday for five Wednesdays. And then one Thursday, and one Saturday. And then never again.
CONCEALER	He always said she didn’t need it, but she had bad acne as a kid and was still in that mindset. That night he had the idea in bed to write her a poem about each one of her features. He wrote one about her nose, then her eyebrows, then her lips. He printed them out and gave them to her on Valentine’s Day. The poems led to an argument.
SMOOTHIE MIX KALE	After the baby came along he needed some time out, so got into cycling. He felt better than ever. That was probably their best time.
LENS WIPES	Because the baby loved taking his glasses off and playing with them.
WEIGHING SCALES	“You don’t need it!” he said. But now she was a mother of two and she didn’t feel great about her body.
LINT ROLLER	For the wedding he was going to. His all-purpose suit – which he’d worn for every wedding, funeral and job interview he’d been to over the past five years – was covered in cat hairs. He asked her to do the rolling on his back, and he could tell by the way she touched him, or didn’t touch him, and by the way he felt, or didn’t feel, that something was missing.
NAPPIES SIZE 4	He spent his last fiver on these on his way back from the pub. Holding them between his hip and his wrist as he stumbled home, he remembered the way the woman from work looked at him across the table. From then on his head was turned.
PLASTERS WATERPROOF	For emergencies, like when she was on her own, drunk in the morning, and the wine glass she was washing up smashed in the sink.
BOX OF TISSUES	Originally for a cold, but they lasted through the whole month of the breakup. When she took the last one and sobbed into every last millimetre of it, they took that as a sign they both needed to move on.
SINGLE BEDSHEET GREY	He bought it for himself when he moved out of the house. The single bed was much cosier and comfortable than any bed he’d ever slept in. It was where his teenage son slept when he came to visit, four years later.
CHINESE MEAL FOR ONE	The very same meal he used to look at with pity when he was with her, he remembered, seeing the packaging upside down in his recycling bin, as he felt a tingle run up his spine and into his eyes, and the microwave went ping.
SMALL BOTTLE SHIRAZ	Just one of the 35cl bottles, for weeknights, as he struggled to find a way to unwind on his own again. He’d loved to have had a normal-sized bottle, but could no longer deal with the hangovers.
WHISKAS TURKEY	His mother’s new cat didn’t like the chicken, beef or tuna flavours, she told him on the phone. So he bought this on the way to visit her. The next month she died, and after that he looked after her cat. It was a great climber, and in its old age became a fighter.
12 FIRST CLASS STAMPS	He wrote her a lot. He knew he’d made a big mistake. But by now she had a new family and another child.
FIRELIGHTERS	From the only place in town that was open that snowy Christmas weekend. He stayed alone in the same countryside cottage they’d once rented out together.
DE-ICER	He was getting up at the crack of dawn to drive down to see her, to ask her one last time to come back to him. She felt sorry for him. He slept in his car outside her house that night.
ALL DAY BREAKFAST TIN	Beans, sausages, egg and mushrooms, all in the same tin. It was disgusting. But he’d kind of given up on his health. He liked easy.
BLANKET	Even with the heating on all day he felt cold.
COUGH SYRUP STRAWB	It reminded him of his mother spoon feeding it to him in bed. He remembered it warming his throat as she hugged and kissed him goodnight. He’d never felt as safe. He took a spoon and shut his eyes. It was the last thing he ever bought.

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