



GUCW flash fiction anthology

2015

Glasgow University Creative Writing Society
Flash Fiction Anthology 2015

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Please visit <http://gucreativewriting.wordpress.com> for more information, including archives of Flash Fiction February, 2015.

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Edited by Maria Sledmere.

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Intro.

Flash Fiction February is something we started last year as a way of motivating everyone out of the January slump, an encouragement to try and write every day. Each morning, a new set of prompts are uploaded onto our blog, ranging from images to maps to videos and text. This year the level of submissions was pretty exciting, and the blog was active all month with regular submissions.

This anthology comprises a selection of flash fiction pieces from our regular contributors, chosen mostly by the writers themselves. They range in tone and style and hopefully are a testament to the range of material that can be generated within the flash fiction form. Best enjoyed with a cup of tea, a cigarette (don't smoke kids!) or on the subway, these pieces are interesting to read together, or on their own. Either way, they reflect the wide-ranging talent of our members and we hope you find a story that catches your eye - whether in tales of carnival disaster, space lizards, or cultural exchange.

Each piece is grouped in chapters according to the prompts provided throughout Flash Fiction February.



Writers.

Jane Jones known to her friends as 'Sian' and to everyone else as 'Hey You' is at LEAST twice as old as anyone else in the group and should really be an exhibit in the Hunterian museum. Her ambition is to be dead brainy and get a degree before she shuffles off of this mortal coil. Currently this is looking unlikely...

Nina Lindmark-Lie is a 4th year English Language student (though rapidly moving towards graduation and inevitable unemployment) lost in the wilderness of life. Currently putting off adult-life through dance and words, which will hopefully help her finish that novel sometime in the next 20 odd years. In the meantime, flash-fiction is proving to be an excellent way to release some steam.

Annie Milburn Annie is a 2nd year Geography student and when not learning about the various ways in which we are ruining the planet enjoys dabbling in short stories and flash fiction.

Rachel Norris is a 3rd year English Language student who has spent more of this year examining books than trying to write one, but – when she has time – she likes to write fantasy, dystopian fiction, steampunk, and has the occasional awkward dabble with poetry.

Rut Neuschäfer works as a foreign language assistant at a secondary school near Glasgow. Before coming to Scotland, all her texts have been in German but she has now accepted the challenge to write in English, especially since most of the books she reads are in English as well. She reads mainly crime fiction and fantasy – and anything else she can put her hands on. Her slight obsession with Harry Potter makes her regret that she did not come to Scotland to study at the University of Glasgow (After all, it looks like Hogwarts!) but also lets her find magic in unusual places which she then transforms into fanfiction and other types of writing.

Hayley Rutherford is a 2nd year Scottish Literature student and all around badass. She boasts an impressive height of 7ft 6 but sadly cannot claim that her writing ability measures up to her immense stature. Despite her severely sub-par attempts at fiction (don't even get me started on her god awful poetry) she nevertheless has had a good ol' wack at flash fiction and has managed to come up for some stuff for this anthology that some would even say is coherent.

Maria Sledmere just graduated in English Literature and still can't quite believe it. She spends her time reading, writing and waitressing, and likes wandering about looking for streets with pretty gardens, or dreaming about the sea. Although drawn predominantly to inspiration from modernist and contemporary literature, she also loves Romanticism and would like to live in a fairy tale told by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Ailsa Williamson is very much the same short red-haired girl she has always been: except for one thing. In the last half a year she has grown an obsession for bunny rabbits. This, combined with her love of all things tea-related makes her writing a very curious read, especially when her darker side comes out. With an interest in fairy tales she studies pure Scottish Literature, marry her handsome fiancé, have six children and a huge library so she can just read and write until she is wrinkled.

&.

Marcus Bechelli; Louie Houston; Paul Inglis; Louise McCue; Elizabeth Ann Woods.

2

Ecology, Technology, Shakespeare

To Be With Bill or Not to Be?

Elizabeth Ann Woods

Bill Gates-Shakespeare, a secret admirer of the Bard, though better known to the populace as the founder of Microsoft and a leader for many years in maximisation of computer technology, walked into his virtual home in the cloud. He marched up to a console, waved his left hand over a sensor, an open fridge door appeared before him and he pulled out a bottle of water.

Ecology has now overtaken us and it is no longer normal to enjoy such experiences in person. Bill's holographic avatar consumed the chilled liquid in proxy for the man. Bill, meanwhile, ignored his own thirst as he felt compelled to read for the fourth time that day in his "I love Wm Shakespeare Journal" ... "If music be the food of love, play on ...". Inspired, he projected a virtual stage and musicians on the blank walls of his room and began to jam with Clapton and Hendrix.

"Laylah", he wailed to the music as their guitars soared in surround sound in the soundproofed room. Yes, all the ecology had finally achieved that which Bill never could... he'd frightened off his beloved wife. To paraphrase Orsino, "...her appetite had sickened and so died."

House for Sale

Louise McCue

'The empty vessel makes the loudest sound' – Henry V.

She never read a thing that was not stapled and glossy and picked up from the table at her hair salon. My Marigold™ mother, apron knotted neatly. She is in the basement, carefully packed in her gossamer curtains.

“They’re very in vogue dear, Elouise has them up in her dining room.”

The back garden will do, underneath her village of gnomes, below their greedy fish hooks.

“Shoes by the door! Oh, look at how scuffed they are!”

Or maybe the quay behind the mall, shelved between the sinking shopping trolleys.

“Take down those posters, love! Your room ought to match the rest of the house!”

I strip her halls of floral wallpaper, go to the basement and leave.

House For Sale.

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3

The Stereotype Map

Lonesome Elements

Annie Milburn

The wind screamed a hollow song, spectral wailings engaging with a non-existent audience: the few souls that subsisted on the tiny island remained locked behind dilapidated storm shutters chewed away by time. Great swathes of desiccated grass sliced the landscape, blades bowed in a bid to remain unnoticed in the onyx shadows that dripped from sheer iron cliff faces eternalised with expressions of subdued defeat. Heavy clouds choked the sky with a gunmetal glare persistently smothering the wan rays of a despondent, jaundiced sun.

Regardless of how vehemently the wind howled, there was never a reply. The blank countenances of the cliffs became contemptuous in their reflection of the sound, forcing the gale to continually indulge in no other aural pleasure than that of its own voice. Ivory windmills stood high on the hillside. Their mechanical branches revolved steadily with quiet resolve; acknowledging the command of the air but like all else refusing to respond, consuming its lonesome shrieks for the benefit of the silent eyes that sat, waiting, in their small stone cottages.

Skirmishing with Stereotypes

Elizabeth Ann Woods

It was one of those days. Reluctantly, Paula had dragged her weans (she'd heard the weegies call them that for years) on to the ferry at Wemyss Bay to go and visit her Nonna in her pensioner's house on Rothesay. Nonna Maria at the ripe old age of 72, had such a magnetic personality that she still drew everyone to her. The island, so renowned for its gelaterie and summer tourism, had spewed forth its young folk into the bosom of the mainland during the 90's in their own quest for a future. Paula looked forward to seeing Nonna, and making sure she remained a central part in her own children's lives. Toni kicked Giorgio, he figured she was too busy hustling her 6 shopping bags into the lift behind them to see the twins' altercation. "Basta!!", she said rather loudly to them, as the lift doors swished shut behind them.

The twins looked at the floor. It was their first time on the ferry to visit Bisnonna, no one else they knew had a great gran, she must be very old, even older than Mrs Doig their nursery teacher. They managed to reach the passenger lounge uneventfully and sat quietly, fidgeting with their Nintendos as the ferry began moving through the water. They had a good look around through the windows while mama read her latest Kindle download. Typical four-year-olds, they were fidgeting and poking each other under the table, until... it couldn't be!... It looked like it!... It is!... Stereo pre-school age trebles, began uncontrollably shrieking, "Balamory! Balamory!", and climbed over everyone to get a good view as we came into the pier. Paula went red, smiled shyly and grabbing her bags and bambini, and headed off into the crowd for her family reunion. Leaving us all with a good laugh and yet another sickening self-perpetuating Scottish stereotype.

4

Evidence, underwater, amber

Atlantis

Ailsa Williamson

Sitting atop the bookcase, the child swung his legs, battering the volumes beneath the heels of his hob-nail boots. His small hands clutched around the edge of his seat, knuckles white with the hold, and on his face was a bright beam of joy. A gentle but shaggy mane of bright blonde hair fell around his shoulders, framing that round, adorable face that mother's would fall to their knees to caress. To stroke those smooth, pale cheeks would be the highlight of a lifetime, the purpose and the climax, a pinnacle of destiny that one could only dream to achieve in their deepest realms of sleep-time.

The girl studying could have touched them any time – but her interest was never there. She could have reached out with one finger and poked the rose-tinted flesh, but she did not care to. Instead, her eyes were solely concerned with the book before her, with its pages of information and speculation, her hand absent-mindedly tracing over the picture of the underwater tower.

Broken pillars and a half-worn staircase lay around it, whilst fish swam in circles and coral grew up along one side; a picture of ruins, but ruins in the sea. Ruins lost to time, of which no one had a photograph for evidence, only stories and whispers of old pearl-divers and star-struck fishermen.

“What can you see, Cass?” the little boy asked, knocking a book from its place on the shelf. In a shudder, and a thump, it fell to the ground, landing unmercifully on its spine.

Cass, the girl, winced, but her eyes did not stray from the illustration before her.

“I can see Atlantis,” she said, “I can see towers and mermen, and lovers and seekers, and wonders and a city and a dog running through the streets, and a lock of hair, and a

tiny fly caught piece of amber caught in a petrified tree, fallen down, sunken for centuries, then dug up by the excavators as they search for Atlantis.”

“What sort of fly is it, Cass?” he asked.

“It is a wasp,” she said, “An underwater wasp, and it is well.”

The Bad Sister

Rachel Norris

She washed up along the riverbank just as the sun was setting. Amber light flooded the forest and the water of the stream was like molten bronze, the white spray, as it tumbled over rocks and fallen branches, rendered in brilliant gold.

Her body moved remarkably elegantly, twisting and turning as if she were in the throes of a fitful sleep, nothing more. Weeds and dead leaves were tangled in her golden hair, and her skin was grey-white. Her eyes, glassy, staring up at the heavens, seeing far, far beyond the sunset and the sky streaked carnation red with black clouds...out there, beyond where no one on this earth could see even in dreams and visions...

Though there was a lone figure, following her slow progress, hidden by the trees, waiting for a chance, a passing group of hunters found her first. A group of green lads from the town, trussed up in leathers, with their prey strapped to their backs, and strapping smiles on their ruddy cheeks, at first they had thought themselves lucky; they had stumbled on a maid, bathing in the stream – it was not such a rare sight, on a midsummer evening, after a scorched day such as this. It was only when a crow came to settle on her shoulder, and worry at her open eyes, that the boys grew alarmed.

After much deliberation amongst themselves, it was decided that they ought to bring her to the nearest village, and the sheriff there could deal with the matter properly. The two oldest, largest boys carried her between them. Though they were still a little addled with ale, a very sober silence came upon them during this walk. No one uttered more than a sigh, or a shudder as the evening chill descended on the woods.

It was midnight by the time they arrived. The sheriff was roused, and soon after a crowd emerged, and the empty market square was lit by many hands carrying candles, lanterns, torches. The girl's pale body was surrounded by a flickering glow, and a low murmur of anguished voices.

“She's not from here.” An old spinster said, making the sign of the cross. Relief was in her voice.

“Perhaps she was washing clothes in the river and slipped?” Another offered.

“She looks well bred, perhaps she was a noble girl, a runaway...”

“Running away from her marriage, perhaps?”

“Or a terrible crime! Perhaps she killed her child!”

“Now, now, let’s not condemn her – she might have been murdered.”

“Oh, God forbid! Drowned! The poor creature...”

“But how shall we find out who she belongs to?”

“Enough!” The sheriff boomed. “Go back to your beds, the lot of you. This will be dealt with – she’ll be gone by tomorrow and given a Christian burial. If her family can be found, that’ll be a blessing. But regardless, she’ll not be left out to rot in this heat, so you can all sleep with a clear conscience.”

The crowd grudgingly dispersed, save for a lone figure, who had slipped into the village on the tail of the group of hunters. She was hooded, but beneath, a braid of corn-yellow hair was hidden. The sheriff would not leave the body unattended, she knew. There was no chance of getting back the necklace now, the one containing the lock of jet black hair – her lover’s hair. No doubt the river water had washed it of all its wonderful scent...

She shed a quiet tear, not for her dead twin, nor even for the lost locket, but for the fact that her own life was over now. For, if all went to plan, it would be ‘her’ that they buried tomorrow. While ‘she’ would return to ‘her’ loyal husband, in tears, to tell the news of the bad sister’s death...

Amber Memories

Annie Milburn

Coll raced eagerly towards the foamy water's edge, his tattered tennis shoes leaving chaotic tracks in the grainy sand like contrails blasted from a jet engine. He flicked auburn strands out of his keen eyes, devouring the landscape in front of him; shrewdly scanning for a flash of pale orange, a golden glint. Gulls swooped in swift silver circles in the blossoming rays of the early morning sun, their dull shrieks echoing against the vast undulating expanse of water. As Coll watched the waves began to thaw; pallid icy crests morphed into slick ribbons of royal blue as beams of warm light broke lazily through a supple blanket of misty cloud. The boy inhaled contentedly, tangy brine clinging to his taste buds and cleansing confused webs of dreams and dust from his groggy mind.

His father had been a fisherman: a master of the waves and all that they held. It had been in his tanned, weathered palm that the boy had first laid eyes upon one of the golden fragments, smoothed through the eons, which the water occasionally offered to the shore. That particular evening his father had sat with him, two figures shrouded in warm woody smoke from the crumbling stone fireplace, and shared with him the secrets of time.

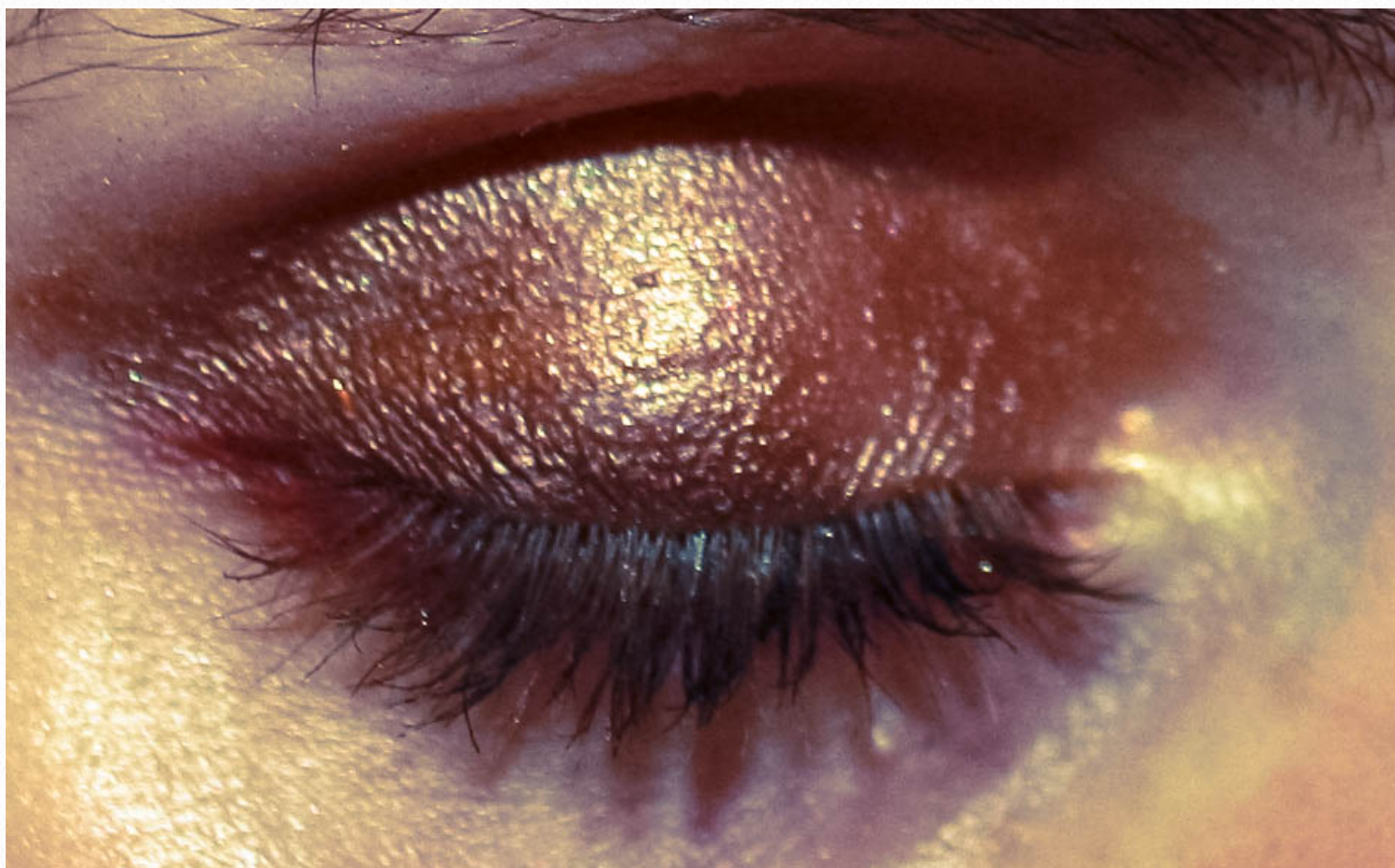
Following his death, Coll had taken to combing the intricacies of the coastline ever more frequently in search of amber. On the occasional days he came across a shining nugget nestled in the soft viridescent caress of an arm of seaweed, or buried half forgotten in the soupy sand, he felt as though he were reclaiming a small piece of his father. The amber contained a molten oblivion of long lost mysteries, nourishment for gluttons of the past; a lense to previous worlds. The boy reasoned that he too should be able to immortalise memories of the man he had adored in such a way: his collection of the ochre gems served as souvenirs of times gone by, proof that memories need not be eternally buried. For he too would die one day, and he feared that his recollections would wither with him.

The sun had risen fully now and melted away the last wisps of moisture so that the sky stretched an uninterrupted azure. Coll had neared the end of the beach and began to pick his way carefully over jagged limpet-spotted rocks, climbing round an outcrop that jutted over the serene waters below. Here the rock pools were thick and close together, full of animation. He crouched and watched tiny fish flit between cracks in the rock, to which

clung a motley collection of coloured anemones swaying eerily in a non-existent breeze. He had always wanted a fish tank, to possess his own tiny marine world, but his mother had refused. She didn't like the sea.

Examining the smooth line of the horizon the boy contemplated the memories he was so desperate to maintain the vitality of. He remembered the first time that his father had taken him out on the ocean in a small wooden boat and cast a line into the swell, illustrating to Coll how to delve for the living treasures of the deep. Each time he was successful the boy made him cast the fish back into the water, unable to watch them turn limp and lifeless in front of his young eyes. Turning back to the rocks he caught a flash of the colour he had trained himself so ardently to hunt for, the only one in his mind worth noticing: forget the blues and the greens and the greys.

In a glassy pool right on the boundary of rock and sea, there lay a small chunk of golden amber winking up at the boy. Slim fingers dived into the salty coolness and snatched it up. He held it up to the sunlight, examining its smooth golden contours; evidence of a time long past but not forgotten. He would not forget either.



The Parasite

Paul Inglis

The parasite has been sitting in glassy stasis for a few million years now. It is a gangly, disgusting creature, rendered in the pallid glow of a piece of amber. The faint buzz of an ancient jungle lingers still in its static wings.

I turn my attention to the other exhibits. A parade of remnants, each given its chance to leap and roar as it once did on lost fields. The gallery of ghosts continues on and on through musty air, passing one horrible epoch after another.

I stop by a monster, a mouth set for cleaving skulls and crunching ribs. Those grand, vacant sockets seem to be watching me. An irrational fear, thankfully. The old beast roams only in shadows and primal memories.

Regardless, I give it one last look before moving on- Just to be sure.

Case #78

Hayley Rutherford

Brooks took a deep inhale, drawing his thick steady hand away from his gruff lips. The smoke clouded around his face shrouding his pensive stare. He watched the divers crawl from the bank of the river dragging with them the limp white remnants of a young woman. The girl was barely clothed but for clumps of glitter and sequins hiding her modesty. Her long hair (most of which was undoubtedly synthetic) was matted across her face almost conceal the heavy purple blotches. She had one pink heel on her right foot, the left was bare but for the chipped polish and the daisy chain tattoo, the rigor mortis had set her toes in an awkward curl. Arnold approached tentatively with his hands logged uneasily in his pockets.

“Not got the stomach for this kid?” Brooks tossed the butt of his cigarette to the ground mashing it in to the sodden ground beneath his feet.

“First person....well.. body I’ve seen.” Arnold ran his tongue along the back of his teeth, they still retained the faint taste of his own vomit.

“Corpse.” Brooks grunted as he approached the sprawling form with its limbs warped strangely as if clinging to the ground. He knelt down pulling back the hair. Arnold gasped feeling the sudden resurgence of bile in his throat. The girl’s eyes were open but the water has caused them to swell giving her a hauntingly powerful stare. The left side of her face was entirely purple and black and decorate with a large gash that ran the length of her skull.

“Ah recognise this girl,” Brooks muttered.

Arnold nodded attentively but refused to break his position.

“Dancer in the Golden Swan a few miles from here. The boys had her in a few weeks ago, apparently one of the punters got a bit handsy so she punched him,” Brooks smirked to himself. “Scumbag dropped the charges though. Her names Amber,” he said rising and turning to face Arnold.

“Well at least her stage name is in any case.” Brooks slid his hand in to the inner pocket of his jacket and withdrew a fresh cigarette.

“What was her real name?” Arnold asked shakily, his eyes fixed on the battered girl’s delicate thin lips.

“Not much difference anymore,” Brooks shrugged. “Get her bagged up. She’s evidence now.”

5

Spring flowers, wistful, deceit



Good Neighbours

Louise McCue

Neighbour died yesterday.

Well. Was found yesterday. Had been dead for weeks.

Slipped and banged her head in the shower. Lay in the bottom of the bathtub like a sponge, single-handedly soaking up the streets water supply. They rolled her bloated corpse out on a gurney, swollen and soggy. It took six men to carry her out and she had to be loaded into the back of a lorry. Not an ambulance big enough.

Wish I'd known she had been there. Would have rung her body out over my parched lawn. Not that there are many flowers out. It's still winter. But my snowdrops had started to wilt.

Mr. Brockett across the street couldn't wash his car. His custom headlights and chrome hubcaps are filmy with dust, there's bird shit on the roof. The boot is splattered with mud when he lifts it open to unload his shopping, three crates of bottled water. He stood in her yard as she was wheeled out, spat at the wheels of the trolley where they cracked the concrete beneath her bulk.

Mrs Massey's pond dried up. Saw her from the window, prodding the flaccid Koi Karp scattered across the pond bed like loose change. While the emergency services were taping up the front of the house she slipped round the back, dug up a brittle hydrangea and took the sleeping plastic flamingo for herself. Pond's looking better now. Flowers add some colour, the bird looks over the leaping gold fish that have doubled in number.

Yellow tape is still there, though the house is empty now. My snowdrops have died too. No tape for them. She has snowdrops in her garden as well, and daffodils in the spring. And her kitchen is bigger than mine is, smoother floorboards. Mortgage has nearly been payed off, wouldn't be losing that much. And the kitchen is bigger. And there are more snowdrops in her garden. And she died yesterday...



Dust and Melancholy

Marcus Bechelli

Josef woke up to dust and melancholy. Through the slatted blinds, sunlight shone in regimented lines, each illuminating seas of dead life. He sat up, sluggish and sulky, and when he looked in the mirror he saw that his eyes had melted and hardened overnight, like an unsupervised candle left to wilt. For a moment he was sad, for which reason he did not know, but he had awoken in a state of sadness and chose to sustain it. Perhaps he had dreamt an unhappy dream, perhaps his unconsciousness had pondered some buried, untouched emotion. It was not certain, and Josef dug no further.

But Josef had been silly, he slapped himself a couple of times and rubbed his eyes. He had forgotten that he has control over his emotions, a sleepy daze occupied him briefly, deceived by his own delirium. And so now, he moved around the room more forcefully: the blinds were hoisted, the window opened, he sprayed the room with air freshener, a springly scent, daffodils on dewy grass, before leaving to work. He looked once more in the mirror as he left, his eyes promised vitality, albeit in a somewhat artificial way, as though they had been repainted, a glooping, watery honey now rather than the pale calcite of minutes ago. With this final glance toward himself, he departed with a new-found smile on his face – a smile that if were to be inspected further would show possible signs of feigning; the quivering dimple, as though held by strings from unsteady hands, and the slow, resistant transition back to stillness. The scent of daffodils followed him down the stairs, but waned as he opened the front door and stepped into the rain.

The Step-mother's Flower

Hayley Rutherford

“My darlings!” He cried swooping the three young girls in to his arms. His little flowers were sprouting up fast. Annabelle was yet a fledging and Rosy was beginning to bloom but Elsa’s petals had been long since opened. The two younger girls could remain quietly oblivious believing that their step-mother was the warm loving haven they had been promised. But as Elsa, pale, stared wistfully in to her father’s eyes she could not conceal from him her own lies that served to drown the deceit of her step-mother. Elsa was a precious flower. A flower who had been prematurely plucked.



6

Carnival, accident, flashback

The Carnival is Over

Jane Jones

I left the bar on Virginia Street. I won't name it. It's familiar enough to the community who use it. Down Virginia place and onto Ingram Street I was heading for Queen Street Station and home. I hadn't been drinking, I don't anyway. I was just socializing with some friends. It was Christmas and we always have Christmas lunch in ESCA on Chisholm Street then those among us who don't feel like going home just yet go to a bar and sit, drinking and reminiscing on the year(s) past. Then, we disperse mid evening to return home that we might prepare for the coming festive season ... or maybe just continue to drink until the memories go.

I waited at the lights on Ingram Street as the buses and cars flooded the street. No point in risking running across, just wait for the green man. Up North Fredrick Street and into George Square where the carnival is in full flow, I cross St. Vincent street at 'The Piper on the Square' pub and walk into the area of the square where the shows are. Suddenly, I stop at the foot of Sir Walter's Column. I have a sudden flashback. I am standing here twenty years ago on another cold December night just before Christmas. I am not alone. My soulmate is by my side. I don't remember what we're talking about. We are happy. We are looking forward to another year like the last. We both have good jobs. The future is bright. Suddenly I am standing in silence. The sounds of the carnival fade into nothing. It's as if I am standing in a time warp. I look at the ATM across the street. It's not there now. The buildings have been altered in the intervening decades. I don't hear the screech of brakes. Or the impact. The sickening thud. I do hear the words of the seekers 1966 hit go through my head

‘The joys of love are fleeting for Pierrot and Columbine.’

That song was playing on that long ago night. I wonder where HE is. The drunken bastard. I remember him in court. His smart arse QC pleading with the Sheriff not to impose a ‘custodial sentence’ as he had a good job and would lose it.

‘A good fucking job? My partner lost their life ...’

The fat, slimy overpaid bastard got four years of a ‘custodial sentence’ and life driving ban. I hope he’s cleaning a lavatory somewhere now.

I hear a siren approaching, I feel faint. I’m going to fall ... I don’t, I take deep breaths and pull myself together. A modern Rapid Response Unit in the ‘Battenberg’ livery screams out of Queen Street. Someone has been taken ill outside the counting house. The green-clad paramedics jump out with their kit and begin treatment.

The sounds of the carnival come back. I force myself to walk. Across to the station I go. Past ‘Berlin’ that used to be Sadie Frost’s where we first met. I get my pass out and pause at the station entrance. One last look at the lights of the fair before I turn away and walk into the station and the late train back to Kildoran. For me the carnival is truly over.



One Night at the Carnival

Hayley Rutherford

It happened over a cup of coffee. Often the images came back to fluttering back to her through her untrained subconscious. Only in dreams, but that morning as Hera sat in her usual spot in the coffee shop which she frequented every morning at 11 the entire episode cracked forcibly back in to her mind like a bolt of lightning.

It was late. The carnival appeared as a swirling vortex of darting stars against the black curtain of the night sky. The squeals and shrieks subsided as one by one the lights glowing from the rides fell still and were slowly extinguished. The last of the revellers traipsed in pairs with clasped hands or in groups with their arms linked towards the exit. The rest of the carnies set about tending their rides or clearing their stalls. Hera was the only lone figure who trudged wearily through the afterglow of amusement and delight. Although barely yet 19, she was by no means a small girl. She towered above even most of the men at almost 6ft5 and every inch of her carried a substantial roll of weight. In any other setting this may have made her undesirable but beneath the lights of the carnival it made her a statuesque figure of indignation and intrigue. The Gnasher had told her many times that she'd make a wonderful sideshow act if only she were willing to take up a gimmick. Strongwoman, he'd said or perhaps she could take up belly dancing? But Hera had always been most content operating the Waltzers. It was the legacy that had been left to

her by her father and no one could spin the cars quite the way that Hera did. Sure, any carnie could make the kids squeal but hitting the buttons but for Hera it was an art. The turning of each car was like the sultry sway of a tarantella. She could make that ride bend beneath the elegant touch of her fingers. She had been doing the last few rounds of the evening when the pain started. The pain that flew through her stomach and down her legs like the tigers swiping restlessly through the bars of their cage at feeding time. She had reluctantly handed over her controls to one of the dull seasonal carnies and had crawled towards the refuge of her trailer. However she did not make it that far. Less than halfway to her haven Hera found herself crouched behind the throbbing generator to the Ghost Train. Doubled over with the pain Hera opened and closed her mouth as if to scream but only the hoarse squeak of a tearful “Help” escaped her raw throat. Hera could not recall if she tried exactly she lay on her back behind that generator with her nails digging in to the late summers dust. She drew her knees to her chest and before she could even fathom the pain she had drawn the accidental thing from between her legs. But it was barely whole, just sot and pink and limp. So she released it from her awed clutch and let it roll from her. She laid her exhausted head back against the cool rusting metal of the generator, like her eyes roll back in their sockets and wept bitter, silent tears.

Therapeutic Ride

Rut Neuschäfer

“Are you sure that you want to do this?” He watches me half concerned, half admiring. He knows that I’ve been avoiding carousels and especially swing rides for the past fifteen years. And he knows why.

I stare at the column with the rotating chairs and flashing lights in red, green and yellow. I nod. I am sure.

“You know, you don’t have to do it.” He insists.

I know that I don’t have to but I want so much that it seems like an obligation. I can’t avoid fun rides for the end of my life. I used to love them and I love them still in spite of my fear that dominates my mind since this fateful day fifteen years ago.

He and one of the men working with the carousel help me in one of the chairs and fasten the security chain. I try not to think about the fact that the chain will not help in case of a real emergency and bite my lips. Then I feel his hand in mine. He sits in the chair next to me and smiles encouragingly. We can do this together.

The ride starts. The huge round top of the carousel begins to rotate. Faster. Faster. The chairs swing through the air. My hair is blown by the wind. I begin to smile. This is great. I hear the first screams of joy.

Screams. Sparkles. Chairs spinning in the air, having lost the attachment to the rotating platform. More screams. Screams of fear. I cannot make noise. My mouth is opened but no sound escapes. I crash to the ground and feel a sharp pain in my back before I faint.

But not this time. I hold Daniel’s hand and we fly through the air until the carousel slows down and we return to the ground safely. I feel a bit shaky but I’m happy. I’ve done it! After avoiding them for a long time I’ve finally ridden a carousel again.

The carousel-man brings me my wheelchair and he and Daniel help me into it. He waves when I roll off. Daniel walks besides me. Grinning. “Cotton candy as a reward?” Definitely.

Nobody knew what exactly made the swing ride collapse fifteen years ago. I must admit, I never really cared. My fourteen-year-old me’s mind was occupied with the question how my paraplegia would affect me going to school, continuing horse riding and

finding a boyfriend. Whether my condition was caused by an electric fault or corroded metal struts was less important. I was angry with the swing ride's owner anyway and swore never to come near a carousel again. But sometimes you have to overcome your fears and today is the day.

7

Azure blue, fidelity, prophecy



The Azure Sky

Marcus Bechelli

Victor Moore has always been particularly sceptical when pertaining to matters of faith or uncertainty. One could call him a pragmatic man, only interested in the facts, but pragmatic does not quite cover the extremity of such scepticism, for one, pragmatism suggests logic, a certain degree of sensibility, while Mr. Moore's belief's teeter on incredulity. He believes neither in God nor science, on days he will side towards science, but is propelled back by lingering doubts. More recently, he has uncharacteristically toyed with the idea of God, but only in fleeting moments, and customarily followed by a remark of cynicism. His world-views may even be considered close-minded, and often stretch no further beyond that the ground is here and the sky is up there. On the outside however, his

simplistic nature and pessimism with regards to systems of belief is neither displayed nor spoken. Only on the inside, behind the borders of the skull, never to transcend from the throat to atmosphere, do such thoughts accumulate, as he would be certain to offend, if he were to attack the convictions of so many people, especially at a time as tremulous and delicate as this was.

But today, his misanthropy is neutered by one azure blue sky, cloudless and without gradient, a solid dimension of blue that reigns from above and trickles behind distant buildings and even more distant mountains further beyond. Opening his curtains, Mr. Moore is filled with a rare optimism based solely on the sky. He smiles slightly, and suddenly the weight of these past few weeks feels lighter, airier, like he is being lifted into the sky and amid its soft breathy vapours. Despite his reluctance to wager on faith, Mr. Moore prophesied the recovery of his sister, the new smell of spring spurning his channels, letting all thoughts of gloom diffuse into the air and be replaced by warm winds and fresh grass. And so at once, Victor Moore had bet all his hopes on the unfurling vigour of a new season.

L'amour est bleu

Jane Jones

So, you came here to forget. To this God-forsaken place you'd never heard of. To heal the pain you felt every day, every single day in life. You carry that weight, it'll never leave you until you occupy that same earth ... You'll remain faithful until that day, *semper fidelis*. There will always be that place in your heart.

Yet you're not unhappy at the place you find yourself. As you stand now, the gentle breeze off of the ocean ruffling your short cropped hair, on the little platform, waiting for the 1315 off of Kildoran and you stand there ready to make the tablet exchange with Helen who'll be driving, you look out to sea. On a day like today, when the sound of Sleat is like a mirror and the cobalt blue of the sea meets the azure blue of the sky, you drink in the fresh, salt tinged air. For a while the pain eases, life doesn't seem so bad. Where will you be in twenty years? Who would dare to prophesy? Maybe your life is not over, maybe the healing hands of time...

A Mother's Worry

Rut Neuschäfer

The joyful event, long awaited as well on court as among the subjects, did not happen. Even five years after Prince Dominic had freed Princess Arianna from the dragon, no promising belly had grown underneath the princess's dress, let alone that a son had been born. First, lords, ladies and commoners had stayed calm, assuring each other – and the royal family – that the young couple still had plenty of time and opportunity in this regard and that the newly wedded deserved some time to enjoy on their own.

However, when Prince Dominic became king after his father's surprising death two years ago, the whole matter became more serious. Especially the new queen felt the pressure as her ladies-in-waiting perpetually gave her advice about exercises to strengthen the body, days during the cycle and positions, hedge witches from the village sent her potions which were supposed to help her conceive and peasant women did not get tired of telling her that they included her in their prayers. Advisors to the king managed to hold back their concern in front of His Majesty but behind closed doors they were discussing how long they could watch this severe situation and whether or not the queen should be sent back to her parents or be disposed in one or the other way. The king's mother observed all these with growing concern. She was fond of her daughter-in-law and knew the pressure she was exposed to as she herself went through the same difficulties thirty-five years ago even though her suffering had been shorter.

So, one day the king's mother found herself sitting in front of Madame Rosalie, a massive woman with an azure blue dress and ringed fingers that were stroking a dark crystal ball.

“You want to know when the king and queen are going to have a child?” the fortune teller asked in a voice that was probably meant to be mysterious but seemed artificial to the king's mother. She only nodded.

Madame Rosalie scattered some incense grains on the glowing coals next to her and the room filled with sweet smelling smoke that made the king's mother cough. The fortune teller didn't pay attention to her but began to hum an incantation. A light lit in the inner of the crystal ball and grew stronger and stronger. Soon the entire ball glowed in white light and the fortune teller's humming seemed to have transgressed in the air and multiplied.

The king's mother felt surrounded by the song as if the entire room was singing. In midst of the humming Madame Rosalie's voice rose: "The queen will not bear a child until justice has been done and fidelity lies where it belongs."

The king's mother took her time to think about these words but no matter from which angles she reflected on what Madame Rosalie had said, there was only possible solution: There was a person standing between the king and the queen. She could not believe that her dear son would break his vows, so she decided to start with her daughter-in-law. Her youngest daughter who was still unmarried and waited on the queen was suited best for the task of spying on the queen. "Do not leave her side unless your brother is with her" the mother instructed her daughter who nodded with a heavy heart because Princess Gabrielle had no doubt that her sister-in-law was loyal to her husband. It should turn out that Princess Gabrielle was right. Even though she reported to her mother dutifully, no lapse could be discovered.

After two months the king confronted his mother: "Why do you make my sister spy on my wife? I've always thought you loved her."

"I do" his mother said under tears. "And that is why I spy on her. You two have been married for nearly six years and still you do not have a son. I asked Madame Rosalie and she made a prophecy that one of you was not honest to the other... and... and... Why are you blushing?"

Indeed, the king's face had turned red while his mother was speaking. "Mother, it is not Arianna. It is me but it is not what it seems to be. Before I left the castle to find a bride, I was already in love."

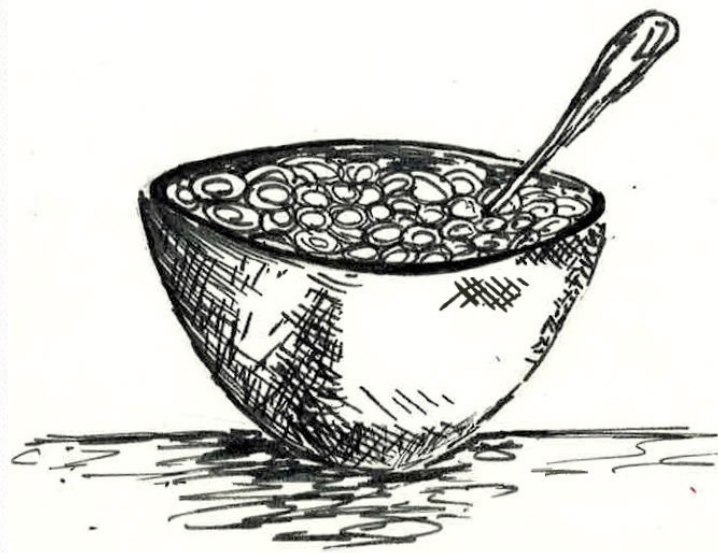
"Why did you not tell your father and me?" the mother asked. "I am sure, we could have found a solution even if she was not our rank. We could have made her father a lord and you could have married her."

"Well... it was not exactly that" started the king. "It was rather the fact... that it is Lord Frederic."

The king's mother stared at her son and he stared back. Then they started to laugh.

8

Breakfast, argument



Cereal Killer

Jane Jones

‘Where’s the milk?’

‘In the fridge where it always is, except when you forget to put it back.’

‘There’s no cereal in this box.’

‘There’s another box in the cupboard.’

‘This is Rice Krispies ...’

‘AND?’

‘I don’t like Rice Krispies, I wanted Coco Pops.’

‘I couldn’t get Coco Pops, Spar only had Rice Krispies.’

‘Why didn’t you go to Tesco?’

‘I didn’t have time. Just imagine they’re Coco Pops.’

‘How the hell do I do that?’

‘Travis, for fucks sake, you’re thirty two, a fucking grown up! Try to act like one.’

'I'm just saying ... I don't like Rice Krispies.'

'Well, you'll just have to lump it. What a sad specimen of an Australian you are! What about all that bush tucker? Witchetty grubs and all that? and you're moaning about a plate of Rice fucking Krispies?'

'Is it too much for a man to ask that he should have a proper breakfast before getting off to work in the morning?'

'GET OUT YOU BASTARD!' The cereal bowl went flying through the air in the direction of Travis's head but twelve years of marriage to Jane had taught him, if nothing else, how to avoid airborne crockery. It was made of plastic anyway. Grabbing his uniform jacket, Travis was out of the door and into his red ford focus as quick as lightning, off down the road in the direction of Kildoran in a cacophony of crashing gears.

'What time is it?' Brenda asked Helen who was standing at the window.

'0730.' she replied without as much as a sideways glance at a clock.

'Jane has just thrown Travis out.'

9

Troll

The Visitor

Nina Lindmark-Lie

‘Don’t go,’ she said, his hand upon the door. ‘There’s a troll there, a troll behind the door.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ he said. ‘They only come out at night and its still mid-day. There’s nothing there, my dear.’

He peeked through the keyhole, saw the empty stairwell beyond.

‘There’s nothing there, nothing there at all.’

She placed a trembling hand on his shoulder, fingers cold and her voice a faint whisper.

‘That’s not the door I mean.’

10

Footprints, curiosity

Tracks

Paul Inglis

I won't bore you with some trite poetic musing on footprints and their latent metaphorical qualities. To be frank, I'm much more concerned about the footprints I've been following for the last day. Have you ever set foot in a smallish forest clearing, only to find that the edges of this clearing are rather, well, toe shaped?

I'm not seeing things, either. The clearing most certainly follows the shape of a colossal foot, complete with a large dent in the ground where the heel would have fallen. And this clearing isn't just some lone foot-shaped anomaly- There are lots of them, all the same shape, and all headed in a single direction.

Fortunately, the tracks are far from fresh. There is no proof of recent devastation in any of the clearings, no torn trees or flattened vegetation. Instead they host thick carpets of grass and adolescent pines, still learning to stretch their arms. The prints may have been left around a decade ago perhaps, but I'm not sure. Certainly a long time, anyways.

The distance between each stride is monumental, and as I walk between them a picture assembles in my mind: A nomad, never satisfied with the gentle rhythms of homes and gardens, ranging forever on blank sands and blue hills.

As the sun begins to falter I come to the end of the woods. The last print has left a sort of indented clearing, half of it within the forest, the other half outside. From here on there are rolling plains and glens walled by craggy peaks. The open lands make it harder to determine tracks now- What once was obviously the depression caused by a big toe now seems like a dimple in the dirt among many other pocks and bumps.

Soon enough I've lost the path entirely. It was going to happen eventually, of course- Ten years of wind and rain does not make for well preserved footprints. Ten years of distance, too- The giant I seek will be long gone by now, wading rivers and roaming valleys on other continents.

That night I set up camp on the forest's fringes, in the last crater left by that grand heel. Next morning I'll be moving on, too- Perhaps some day, in some other land, I'll find these tracks again, and follow them a while longer.



11

Manuscript, rain



Requiem

Nina Lindmark-Lie

It rained heavily when he finally finished. A gust of chilly wind swept through the archway the moment he lifted the quill of the parchment, leaving the last drop of ink on the page.

He straightened up from his crouched position, joints and muscles protesting loudly. The last page lay in front of him, with colourful, swirling patterns and vines encircling the black letters. He had been so intent on his job that his hand cramped and nearly refused to relinquish the quill. Gingerly he moved it away from the precious page and used his other hand to pry it loose and place the quill back in its holder. Massaging the hand gently, he took a moment to squint at the page and check it for errors. Lamps burned on the wall despite it being mid-day, the thick and heavy clouds brought on such a gloom that they all needed the extra

light. Now the promised rain poured down outside, the garden barely visible through the curtain of water behind the archway. The garden was reflected clearly in his work, the leaves spreading out around the text like a living thing. The ink was still wet in places.

He was not sure how long he had been working, but his head was starting to hurt as he began to move his body. His fingers ached and as he started to focus the rest of his body decided to tell him sore it was. They had all been working on this piece for months, so many details and words; but now the last page was done. Even though his joints were burning it was worth it for this moment. He started to tidy up and move his utensils away while brother Matthew loitered nearby. That in itself was an unusual sight, the brothers did usually not have time to loiter anywhere. As he stood up brother Matthew approached and together, in silence, they worked until Matthew slowly and reverently picked up the page. The scriptorium grew silent as it was carried between the benches. The page was no finer than any of the others he knew, but the moment that the final pieces were completed never ceased to feel special.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, the rain outside stopped. He picked up his staff and moved out into the garden to take a short stroll to awaken his limbs and his mind again. The clouds were still dark and heavy above, but the air was filled with the sweet scent of summer flowers and rain on grass. He followed his usual, well-worn path through the garden, beyond the gate and up the sloping hill towards the grove. The trees grew close together with their leaves and flowers in full mid-summer glory. It was quiet. The birds hiding from the rain had not yet returned to their stage and every leaf, bush and tree was saturated with the water. It was a palace of green that muffled all worldly thoughts and enveloped him in peace as he walked. The weather had made the day start gloomy and quiet, but now it had acquired a new character: cleansing.

As the path took him around the grove and back to the top of the hill again – ready to return – he realised just how deep his meditation and jubilation had been. He should have heard them: heard the voices, heard the screams. Unknown riders on unknown horses swarmed the monastery like black ants. Specks of brown clothes gave evidence of brothers he knew down below, but they moved aimlessly, trapped between the black-clad men while flecks of white spiralled in the air.

The bonfires grew high.

It had rained heavily when he finished. When the quill left that last drop of ink. He could see it now, the drop rolling of the tip and nestling on the page: the dark letters and slender leaves still wet. Now they burned.

12

Whale sounds, reward, terror

Whale Fall

Maria Sledmere

This place is a deep black cacophony; you hear the noises, some noises, not all the noises, and you feel the pressuring ripple pulling under you. We've been swimming for so long to prepare for this. 5000 calories a day and five hours at the pool: butterflying, twisting, diving. But that was all under bright lights and floor-tiles, and blue and red lines to guide you along. Your whole life a series of intervals.

I started all this when I was very young. My father wanted me to be an Olympic swimmer, but the point of all my swimming wasn't to win medals or have the best muscles in my class; the point was to enter another world. You reach the bottom of a pool and the light above you is another sun, the gurgling swirls of current reach out from your limbs and this is what it is to be alive; to be alien, to be brilliant.

Down here, the ocean is a dull roar. The university paid for all of it: the travel costs, training, equipment. The transition is easy, leaving land behind you. When you pull on your wetsuit, you morph into another being. I was hoping for whales; everyone is always hoping for whales in America. Maybe it's just their taste for scale, or maybe it's the Moby Dick factor.

Anyway, we were five days into the expedition and still no whales.

Just the vast blue darkness.

Sometimes, though, when you get to a certain depth, you can hear something. Well, it's not hearing exactly; it's hard to put into words – more of a feeling, something passing through you, like that shiver you get when someone walks on your grave. Each trip we always take the same amount of oxygen, but there are parts of the ocean where time

slows and you are down there for longer – everything drags around you, and even the movements of the glittering shoals of fish seem different, prolonged.

As I flex and pulse my body, I imagine all the echolalia around me. I have listened to the whale sounds on countless documentaries. They are like the susurrations of wind or the bleeping of glitched computers; there is terror in the beauty of those long, hollow tones. Or perhaps they are more like songs, or melancholy moans. You think of all you are missing, out here in the blackness without friend or family, your body lost to the whims of the sea. I swear I can feel it, the sonar rising up inside of me, vibrations pressing my brain.

That's when I made it, the Grand Discovery.

They called it a Whale Fall. My supervisor suggested we name it after me, as a reward, but an American scientist got there first. The name makes you think of tragedy and sadness; of the massive carcass, once elegant, crashing down through torrent and wave to land forever at the bottom of the ocean. Americans have a thing for tragedy, especially grand tragedy.

I knew it was a whale immediately, because it had no teeth. Its skeleton seemed to go on forever.

But it was no mere skeleton; it was a malignant village, a cancerous community. Unnaturally-coloured crabs crawled in and out of its spinal discs, and swarms of luminescent worms and anemones coated its yellow-crusting surface. Nature's most brutal carnival was slowly eating up the once dignified bones. I swam cautiously right round it to get a better look. There were a few minutes where I lost contact with the other divers, forgot they even existed. I was part of the ecosystem, my eyes aglow with the rotting carcass and its bright detritus. You could not tell what was once skin or flesh or sinew; all was a composite of ragged weeds and stringy feelers and unknowable, slimy things. I was truly at the bottom of the world. As I stared at this terrible marvel, history itself seemed as perishable as this animal's soul. I saw the whole Earth being eaten up by these nasty, many-legged worms – these disasters of ecology. As I watched them gorge on the skeleton, I saw that they were consuming the future itself. Eating out every second and minute, never growing full. Life and death shuddered before my eyes and I felt my brain swell in its skull.

At the ceremony they told me I had risked my life to investigate this miracle of nature; that I had held on to the end of my oxygen tank, brought back from the brink. I would be rewarded for my efforts, they said, a bright career ahead of me.

But did they not know what became of me? For I too was a skeleton, then; a new ecosystem unfolding as I rotted at the bottom of the ocean.



The Labyrinth

Rachel Norris

The labyrinth was dark. Dark as a starlit night.

The air was blue and cold, and the mist of my breath clouded before me. I could hear my shallow breathing, almost my frantic heartbeat, but all else was silent.

I turned a corner, I turned a corner for the thousandth time and they all looked alike. But this time, I stopped before a pool as clear as black glass, a mirror to the stars above. From somewhere within, a soft light began to glow, nearing the surface. It took form, took a human shape. Limbs unfolded beneath the still surface of the pool and then ripples appeared. A hand came creeping up through the ripples, a white hand that glowed with cool light, the hand of a young girl.

I took the ghostly hand, though I was gripped with fear. My chilled soul grew warm.

As I pulled, the figure floated, light as air, to the surface of the water and she stood upon the glassy pool as though on solid ground.

“What are you?”

“I am light. I am your reward.”

She led me through the darkness for a while. With my hand in hers, all was illuminated. Though the sky above was black and the stars still shone upon a nocturnal world, within the labyrinth the walls and floors were bathed in brilliant light. I flew through the maze, turning, sure of my goal, sure of my direction, but with the fever of hope I grew careless, and reached a wall with no way out but to turn back. It had been so long since my last mistake.

The light snatched her hand away. Her pale, moonlit glow turned to churning red light, her gently floating hair was whipped up in a storm of flame.

“No.” She snarled. “Wrong.”

“What are you?” I breathed.

“I am fire. I am your death.”

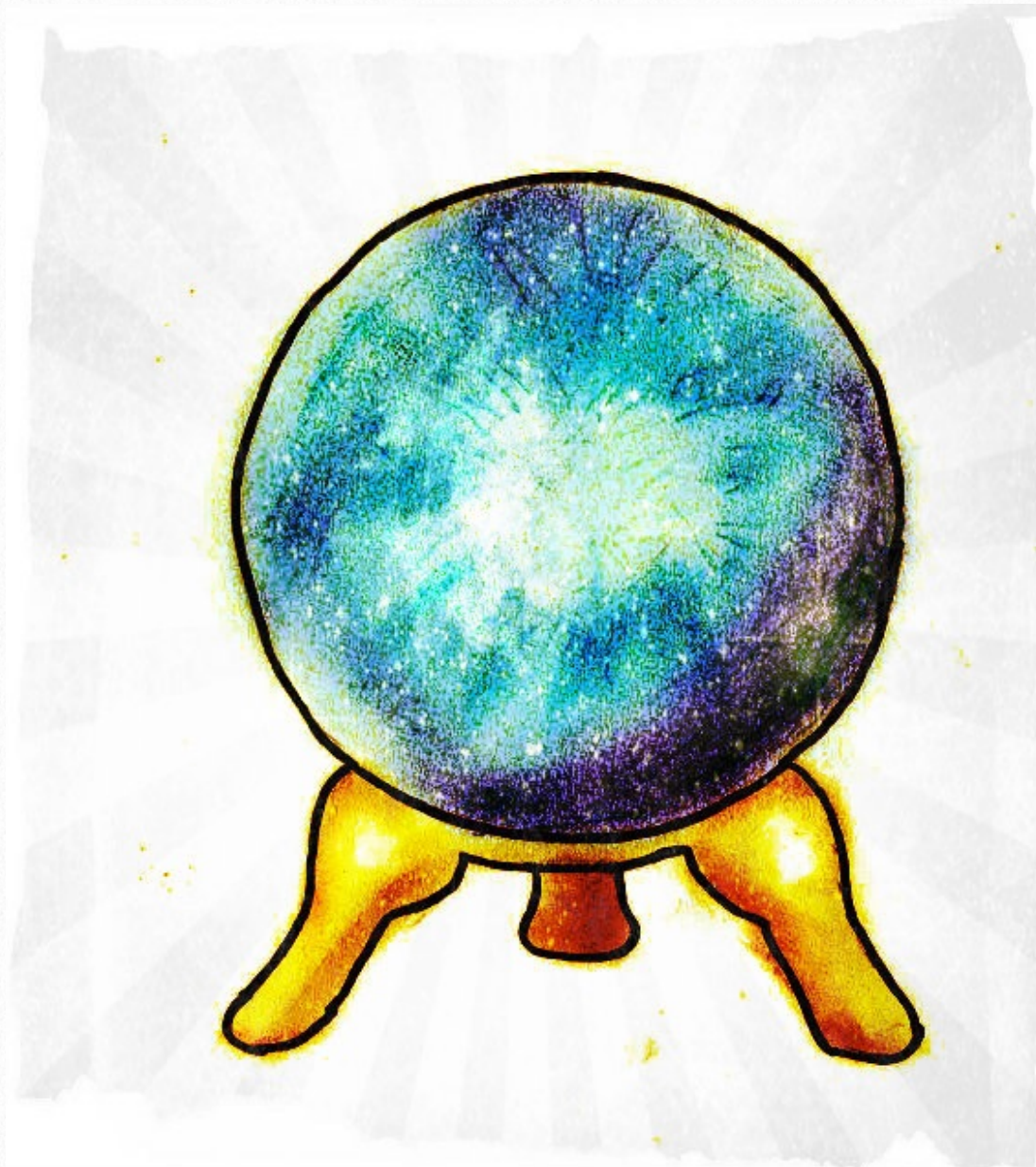
I ran.

Depth

Paul Inglis

The twisted ribs of a cruise liner, clouding over with life. Creeping things with claws and tendrils jut from cracks in the hull, and the deep bears down on bodies, long lost to sun and breeze and laughter. Day and night are foreign whimpers.

The rumble of ancient depths- The loud void unfolds in every direction, hiding buried terrors and towering phantoms. A wail, a magnificent, droning wail, drifts through vast shadows, telling of a titan unseen. The abyss shakes as another howl sounds out over the metal corpse- Perhaps some private elegy for bones that sleep in sand and rust.



Moan Towards You

Ailsa Williamson

Your moaning echoes through the tunnels of my ears and so I slam my palms to my lobes and mutter in pain.

Again you grumble out, no words but I can decipher the meaning. Joining you I groan in unison, a harmony to your melody saying that I have no desire to come to you, no matter how much you might beg.

Beg for company as you lie in that bed, striving to rise. Around you there are whispers of the haunted thousand voices of those who came before. You try to interpret them, wailing to me, but I remind you, with a shout, that I hear them too, silly soul, I have always heard them too.

I do not want to look around the corner and watch you. Despite your cries. For I know I will look and become enthralled once more in the terrified depths of your eyes. The fear is much and great, without resolve, but it captivates me to the extent where I just want to stare, stare, stare.

So abnormal, my rabbit bunny tells me. So I stopped. A long time ago. And now I just attend to your needs with a long pole and a mirror as you moan once more. If I was another person maybe I would have abandoned you with your chains and straps holding you down, and shoved the pillow over your face and held it until I could no longer see the terror in those blue blue eyes. Held you down as you danced, danced, danced a little jolly dance, a reward for all your good deeds.

Maybe, if I was another person. But I am not. Instead I take your noise, and greet it with my own, then roll another bottle of water towards you. Another catheta towards you. Another tin of soup towards you.

And scream at the ghosts with you.

13

Pancakes, knitting, sun

Hats

Louie Houston

I like Shrove Tuesday.

My husband's making the pancakes – Joe does that now. Has been for about five years; since the day I saw that wonderful cross on the test.

“You sit out there and you relax!” he had smiled. I liked that he was proud of me. It was hard to see any of the work my body had done back then, strange not having a bump. I didn't even get sick. Joe lets me sit out on the porch, because he knows how much I like seeing the sun in winter. I like to see warmth and feel cold. All the beauty, none of the heat.

I learned to knit on that day too. I made a hat for the baby – first thing I ever knitted! Joe was even more proud.

“Blimey, you've finished!” he had cried, “Well done darling, I'll put it away safe”. I felt like a proper mum. Didn't even know what that was then, but I guessed it had something to do with protecting the baby from the cold.

If I twist my head round enough I can see him through the glass doors. He's frowning, but I think that's just him concentrating on the pancakes: they can be quite fiddly. That first Shrove Tuesday he was far too pleased with me to stop smiling for anything.

I turn back to my knitting. I knit a hat on this day every year. Each year it gets just a bit bigger, and my knitting is always much improved from the last time. Joe keeps them all in the desk in his study. He takes them out sometimes and looks at them, all four of them.

I spy him crying into them sometimes, all salty tears mingling with the fibres. He's just so proud of me, and I cry too behind the door. It's because we did such a good job.

I hear the hiss of cold water on the hot pan, which means the pancakes are done. We'll all eat together.

Joe brings out the pancakes and smiles at me. He goes back into the kitchen, then comes and sits with me. He hands me a plate, then takes his, and halves the pancakes between us. He notices my knitting.

"You've finished," he smiles sadly, takes the hat from my hands and kisses my forehead. I blush with pride.

"Well done darling. I'll put it away safe".

Exchange

Rut Neuschäfer

It was the worst punishment his parents could have given him. Spending the best part of the year far away from his beloved city of Cologne, locked up in a small Scottish town to improve his English. Yes, he had always wanted to be an exchange pupil. He knew that English was an important language but didn't come along well with his teacher and never achieved as high as he would like to. But first of all, why had his parents chosen Scotland? The people here didn't even speak English! At least it was not the English he was used to from school. And second – and worse – why did they make him go during the second term knowing that he would miss Karneval, the big street party with people dressing up, huge parades with flood that were full of sweets and a lot of music and dancing? What else could it be than a punishment for his stepping over the line last Karneval, when he had more beer (one of the few alcoholic drinks he was allowed to have at his age) than he should have had, ending up in a police station for doing stupid things he didn't even remember properly?

They could have given him any punishment: take away his mobile phone, lock him up in his room for a month or two or even make him accompany his grandmother to her weekly knitting circle. But they had not done any of these. His father had shouted at him the next day, his mother had told him how disappointed she was and his older sister had looked at him with disdain – nothing new here – but that had been all. Until half a year later when he got accepted for the exchange programme and he had noticed that it would be during the Karneval season. “Well, at least we don't have to pick you up at the police station” had been all his father had said and he knew that this was the punishment his parents had planned for him.

The last five days had been the worst of his life. All these pictures of his friends on Facebook wearing costumes, celebrating Karneval in school and on the streets and watching the parades in the brightest sunlight. If it only had rained. But no. There was not justice in this world. At least it would be over this day. Once the big straw figure called Nubbel was burned, Karneval would be over and lent would begin.

He got up and put on his school uniform. It still felt unfamiliar, as if he had been wearing a costume for the last two months. He went downstairs and heard his host mother being busy in the kitchen. There was a delicious smell in the hallway. Was it pancakes?

“Pancake Day!” His host brothers, an eleven-year-old pair of twins shouted with joy, running into the kitchen. What?

He followed them and spotted a huge pile of pancakes in the middle of the table. Why did they have pancakes on a – as far as he could think of – ordinary Tuesday? Usually all he got for breakfast was a wide range of cereals. Nothing to complain about but pancakes were far better.

His host mother must have noticed his confused looks. “It’s Pancake Day today. Don’t you have it in Germany?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“See, the day before Ash Wednesday we eat pancakes because lent is about to start and traditionally you can’t have them then” she explained.

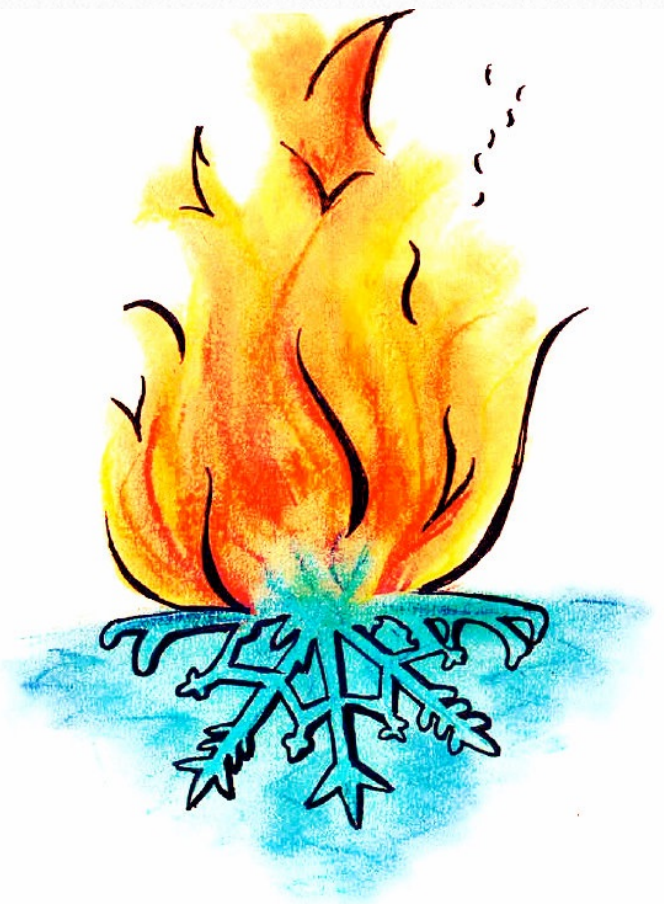
Eating something sweet before you had to fast – that sounded a lot like the main idea of Karneval. He grinned and helped himself with some pancakes. Pancake Day would become his second favourite day – after Karneval of course.

14

Frozen fire

Sophie

Louie Houston



Sophie had always been sunny. Born in June with sunlight locks and seared cheeks. Like those old Italian paintings, she was the female cupid – all cherub-like and delightful, whacking great smiles on the stiff, oil lips of the heroines. She sang single lines of nursery rhymes with greater warmth than any heavenly choir could muster.

“Fetch the engines! Fetch the engines!”

Ever curious and on the hunt for anything new, Sophie would take things without me knowing, just to discover them herself. She didn’t like being told what was the wrong way or what was the right way: she had confidence in HER way, and nothing else could matter. She’d tell me sometimes how to do things “properly”, with the imagined wisdom of someone ten times her age.

“You can’t make tea like that”.

“Mummy, put the milk in the pot before you warm it”.

“I can warm the milk better”.

I am nothing like Sophie. Quiet and safe, I don’t explore or discover or try anything new. She was adventure enough for me, my little girl. A supernova. When I tried to explain action and consequence she couldn’t listen to me, and it grew more difficult as her audaciousness increased.

It’s a strange thing, to see the snow of Winter and think of her. The way she tramped about the garden in her boots in Summer – chasing the frogs and the damselflies – made her stand vibrant, even against the blue sky. Snow seemed to restrict her from her adventures, the clouds dulling her buttery curls with the sky.

The heating broke last month. I hadn't the money to replace it, having spent it all on hosting the family for Christmas. We were surviving on hot milk and multiple blankets.

Sophie had grown entirely contrary. I was never right, always to be questioned, always doubted. I held my quiet patience until two weeks ago, when I was heating our milk before our bedtime.

She had reached to touch the pan, and I warned her to be careful because of the heat. She asked me why, indignantly, and I explained carefully that she could burn her fingers on the fire, because it was very hot. She was insistent. Fire wasn't hot, it was cold. I bickered with her, against usual practice, but she wouldn't give in to my gentle reasoning. And though I knew she was fully aware that fire wasn't cold at all, I broke.

I screamed at her, hysterical with frustration. Frustration at having my family for Christmas, at being a single parent, at not having any bloody heating in January, at having to constantly, constantly battle with a child telling me left was right. I don't know how much I let out at her, only that it was too much. She cried and apologised and looked so heart-breakingly beautiful I could hardly summon words to address her. I managed to tell her everything was fine – that there was nothing to be sorry for, but despite my efforts, we both went through the motions of her bedtime routine in guilty silence.

For Sophie, having to sleep with three extra mismatched blankets was a fantastic game. Warm milk and soups and cuddling was something special to her, she couldn't have known how unhappy the boiler was making me as I emptied kettles and pans of hot water into the bathtub for us.

I can imagine her making the connections. Mummy was suddenly angry, and it had something to do with her, something to do with the cold and something to do with the fire.

Sophie always had to figure it out for herself, I thought, stood in the icy presence of my black-clad family. The police had asked me why I hadn't heard her before the alarm, as I slept in the room beside her. I could feel the scrutiny and suspicion through my own guilt like a salted wound. They found my matches hidden under her bed like a secret diary. She wouldn't have cried for me: quiet and safe, I had taught her that when Mummy was right, she was scarier than anything she had ever seen before.

And for once, my little girl had proved me right. Fire was hot.

15

Firefly, vertigo

The Firefly That Woke Up Too Soon

Nina Lindmark-Lie

Coco was in shock. Her world had suddenly been turned inside out and upside down, and her many legs clung desperately to the branch while she stared around her. Coco was one of many suns, illuminating the thick darkness of the swamp. She was also new sun, only now learning her route, the dances and the power of her light. The universe around her was a dark mass that she and her kin illuminated every day. Her world was simply made up of light and dark: but not this kind of light.

Coco had woken up early. The cold light around her was nothing like the fire she carried around everyday and the world suddenly seemed so large. Everything around her now stood out in sharp, weird hues that she had never seen before. Crawling forward, still in shock and still dazed, she reached the edge of the branch and looked down. Coco shuddered and her body flickered uneasily. The world spun around her as she attempted to judge the distance between her and that thing called ground. She dared not look up, as the stories she had heard – but never believed – invaded her mind.

The ‘other’ sun. An even bigger sun than they, which shone a very different kind of light on the world, but a sun that never came out during the day. Coco had never really believed it and now she was afraid that if she looked up it would all be confirmed. She closed her eyes for a minute, then opened them again. The world started spinning, the vertigo gripped her so fiercely this time that she had to back away from the edge. Coco attempted to flex her wings, surely in the air she would be safe? – it was her element after all. But only hovering over the branch proved impossible. Bewildered and scared she crawled back under her leaf and settled down, blatantly ignoring the light and the colours

around her. Feigning sleep she waited for the hideousness to go away, for the darkness to return and her day (and her universe) to be restored once more.

The darkness came not long after and it did not take long before Coco started to forget the light and the vertigo. Although the memory never completely left her. It resided as a faint echo in her mind, occasionally surfacing when she touched down on a new branch or settled down to sleep. It was the faint notion that something else, something bigger, was waiting just beyond the darkness and the trees. But even that soon moved into the realm of legend.



16

Rorschach blot, haunted, glitter

The Viscosity of Thought

Maria Sledmere

“I want you to try something new today.”

The therapist let the statement hang in the air, chewing his pencil in thought. Jemima sighed. She had not slept for seven nights, and the grey office walls did not soothe with their neutrality but rather reminded her of the inside of her eyelids. Old, swollen, shell-like.

“Well, will you?” She wished she could eat his enthusiasm; then she would chew it and spit it out like rotten food. But she hadn’t the energy to do so. Blinking slowly, Jemima murmured her vague acquiescence.

“Great!” The therapist pulled open his desk drawer and fumbled around before carefully placing a sheet of paper on the wooden surface between them.

“I want you to tell me what you see,” he said. “Be spontaneous; be truthful. Be crazy, if that’s what comes to you.” Jemima raised her eyebrows.

“Unfortunate word choice,” she muttered.

“I – I’m sorry. I didn’t mean –”

“No, you meant quirky and creative and honest!”

“Anyway,” the therapist ignored her sarcasm with an urgent glance to the clock, “just have a look.”

Slowly, Jemima pulled the paper towards her and held it up so the dim windowless light could shine through the whiteness. It was a black gelatinous mass of indefinable shapes; the kind of thing you’d stumble across at a surrealist art exhibition. She was sick of the old man thrusting his avant-garde tricks upon her.

“It looks like... a vagina.” She said bluntly, thinking she knew how to please him.

“Come on, don’t be so obvious – you can do better than that!”

Jemima huffed and squinted again at the picture. There was something peculiar about the internal pattern of the outlines, something about the way they curved around each other in weird intersections. A hazy sense of familiarity seemed to hover around the gaping middle shades.

She dug her fingernails deep into the soft wood because she was feeling everything slip away; the particles were splitting and the room was coming undone. A gasp provided the sufficient portal through the trauma. She heard the old man speak to her, but only as a swimmer gurgles through fathoms of water, his sound swallowed by the churning current. The walls were closing in...

Silt stuck between her toes and in the clammy air she sniffed the iodine stink of seaweed... Gulls whooping above her in endless, trailing circles. Chunks of wood eating into her nails; almost like flesh they tenderised under her touch.

“Mum!” she shrieked. She loved the sound of her childish voice. The shrillness of sweet innocence. And why would her mother not reply? The beach rang clear with its silence. Just the gulls and their cry, cry, cry. She began running, finding her body weightless and airy. She wanted to make it to the rocks. She leapt over slimy detritus, shattered glass, dead crabs, clusters of washed-up jewels and driftwood.

It was night now and a howling came from the end of the bay.

“Mother, I’ve been stung!”

She thought she saw a ship coming deep from the waves; a ghost ship which glowed with the midnight moon. A blue, curious glow from a curious moon. Jemima was a child, alone under the midnight sky. She closed her eyes and all of it glittered; all glittered in fragments of distant pictures.

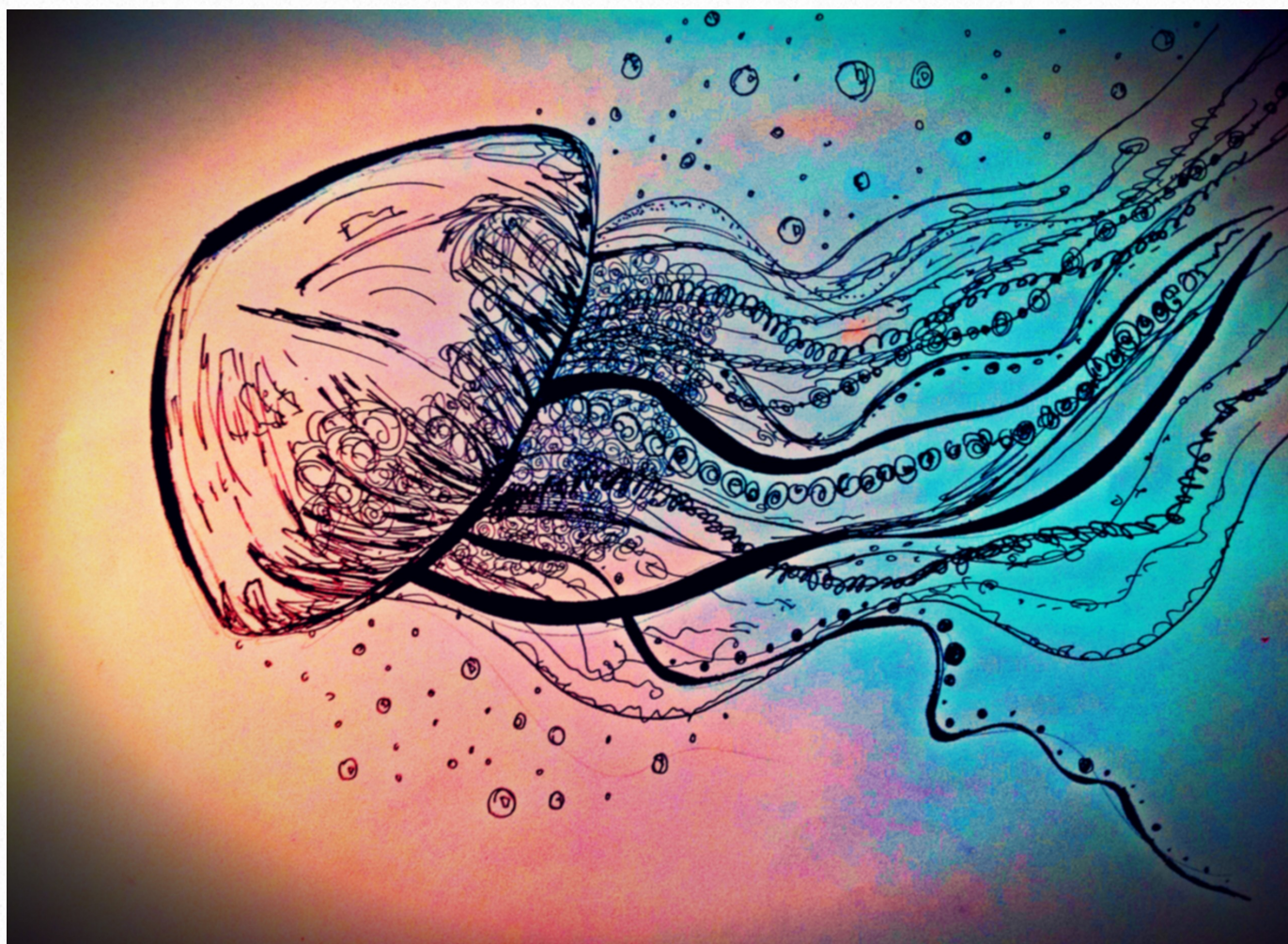
She looked at her feet where the beached jellyfish still lay. It was a piece of molten mousseline glass, coloured inside with claret and lilac ringlets, the fine membranes strung from the centre like spider-silk. The white light would dance upon the crystal shell, and Jemima could just about make out her reflection in its shimmered surface. In this image Jemima saw her body distorted and bloated. So venomously with a stick she would poke it; piercing a stake through this picture of mockery. But then it became a wobbly, oozing thing: splayed and ugly as a laboratory experiment. Her leg throbbed with the sting and as she glanced at the shredded jelly meat she felt the becoming of her monstrosity.

The wood splintered thinly through the membrane of her fingertips. Something slammed upon the ocean. She looked up and saw the ship collapse through the water in hoary flakes of ash. The waves kept breathing, soft and sullen, hurling up.

“Jemima!” He was shaking her arms, shaking her as if to send shots of voltage down her nerves.

“What is it you see?” Not bothering to conceal his frustration, the therapist gestured angrily to the picture that lay in front of them. Jemima pulled her nails out of the desk and seized the paper. Without a glance at its contents, she crumpled it into a ball, feeling her heart fall with the weight of lead.

“I miss myself before,” she said.



Blood, Sweat and Tears

Ailsa Williamson

“How many times?” you scream, “How many times must I tell you?”

I try to ignore you. My face is turned to the ground, trying to ignore you.

“All this!” you yell, “All this ... for nothing? You are worthless you are.”

The spilled glitter on the floor is nothing to comfort me by. The myriad of thousands of specks of brightness are not enough echoes of starlight to make me feel happy. Maybe in another time, maybe in another place – but right now they are nothing but wasted sparkles, thrown around by an impatient hand.

“How could you?” you finally quieten, but your voice is still incessant with anger,

“How could you honestly think that there was one more chance?”

My hands are clasped on my lap, like they always are. So they do not rise to defend myself as you slap me, hard, across the back of the head and send me careering off the chair onto the floor.

There I lie, amongst the glitter, staring into silence and oblivion as you walk around the large, minimalist, square clean room in your high-heels. Clackity, clackity, clack.

“You are a waste of time and space,” you hiss, passing by my ear once more, “I never should have even given birth to you.”

As your stiletto heel comes down to hit me in the ribs I tense, knowing the pain can be eased this way. I remember the times when we got on, those first few years of my life before you failed the psychotherapy test, then took me and ran away to change our identities. I am haunted by the month that followed, in which I, still a toddler, was told that school was not for me, that I was too dumb, too ridiculous, too easily manipulated by all the other children and that all I could do in life was help you create your sycophantic art.

You kick me again and again, spreading bruises all over my already bruised body but careful of course not to puncture my lung again (that time in the hospital was messy when it came to declaring our names). Blood – there will be blood. It comes out of my mouth as you kick my jaw, conjoining with the glitter on the floor as a sort of glue.

Eventually, after a while, I begin to piss myself, and that is what you like, I know. The urine will soak up into some of the floorboards, making dark patches here and there.

Other liquids from my body – a little snot, tears, sweat – they all fall out of my system as you use me as your punching bag and form dark patches on the ground. Some of my unwashed dirty hairs stick around, but nobody will ever do tests on them because they are obviously from an animal. Some of my skin might go too, depending on if you use the knife in your tool switchblade, which is, of course, used only for creative purposes.

After a while you stop, and after another while I am allowed up. You grab me by the scruff of my neck and tug me out from the room and lock the door behind you.

Tomorrow you will lock me in the flat and then come back here and thousands will pay hundreds to see your new artwork. They will gasp in awe at “how real it looks” and how its “all about child abuse, hmm yes I get it.” And you will stand there, smiling sweetly, nodding like the blonde haired beauty you always were, alluring and fake, telling them about the horrors of what you read on the telly about child abuse. Little do they know that you own me like a slave and you are a monster yourself. Little do they know the true dark eyes behind the mass of makeup. Little do they know about the lies you spin daily like a black widow spider, evil and thriving and basically the devil incarnate.

Little do they know about me, as I sit in your million dollar apartment, biding my time with trying to teach myself to read and making you dinner, ready for the evening when you will come back and prepare to plan your next piece of artwork all over again.

17

Strawberries, waterfall

Strawberries and Cream

Marcus Bechelli

Water cascades from the convergence point of the two lids, at the cusp, where the milky white of the sclera turns red and fleshy. The bottom lid puckers slightly, so to allow the liquid to flow in quicker succession. Where the cheekbone protrudes, the drops fall from the face and carelessly into the bowl below, each trickle making a dot in the cream and exposing the corpulent red of the strawberries beneath. The body's water fuses with the cream, and dilutes it until the consistency wanes. But it does not matter, for her appetite is gone, and her menial portion teases voluptuousness. The stream ebbs now, blotted by a damp and crumpled tissue, which is subsequently tossed aside, to a pile of similar endeavours.

The man stares upward to the ceiling of his room, his fulfilled desire had transpired to sickness; a momentary slip through the fabric of sanity, his senses, for a minute, a separate entity. But they had come together again now, and the realisation tormented him, for he had forced the soul of another unto his, and had stained the inner walls of its cavity. He got up and opened a whiskey bottle, and drank until it dribbled from his mouth. The alcohol deluged him, and cleansed his defiled innards. He continued to drink until the bottle was finished, and not long after did it fall, from the released tension of his fingers.



18

Space, lizard, spatula



Space Lizards

Rachel Norris

He had been sensing strange fluctuations in the magnetic rays recently, and something was raising his hackles. He knew that the invasion was imminent – he had known that for years – but for the past week he had been spotting Earth-based agents of the invaders everywhere. They were hard to spot, masters of deception and disguise, but to the trained eye small inconsistencies could be seen. If the skin looked a little tight, almost rubbery, that was a sign of caution. They often had strange, beady eyes, and would disguise their lack of hair with hats or elaborate toupees. Several newsreaders and members of parliament were high on his list of suspected infiltrators: a sign that the claws of the Space Lizards were deep into the Earthlings' society, even at the highest levels. It had been common knowledge (amongst those who weren't too afraid to admit the truth) that several members of the British royal family and of US congress had long ago been replaced with reptilian impostors.

That was not the issue now, however. The Space Lizards had been spying on earth for centuries, and only causing minor societal imbalances (wars, financial crises and that sort of thing), preferring to remain in the shadows, watching and planning. But if they were planning an imminent invasion, David P. Speddle would not be caught out and imprisoned. Slavery on an unforgiving alien world was not on his agenda.

He retrieved his protective headgear from on top of the wardrobe and re-attached the sticky-tape which had come loose around the antenna. Placing it on his head, he already felt safer, but now he could feel the magnetic rays even more intensely. The signals were out of control.

So it had been a landing he'd seen.

“David!” A shrill voice called from the kitchen. “David, where the fuck is my spatula... if you've taken it and glued it to one of those stupid costumes I will wallop you so hard you'll wish...”

Her voice was drowned out as he opened the window to a howling gale outside. Packing a few provisions (and weapons) into his rucksack, he slipped out onto the bit of flat roof above the front door, and then clambered down the ivy trellis to the side. He ducked under the kitchen window, jumped the garden fence, and made for the hill where he'd seen the flash of light. It was a couple of miles' walk, and the night was freezing, but there needed to be a witness to the invasion, or the authorities would continue to deny the existence of the Space Lizards, and pass the whole thing off as another bizarre conspiracy theory. With video evidence, they could hardly bury their heads in the sand any longer...

When he reached the base of the hill, David could clearly see the flash of lights again. There was no sign of an aircraft yet, even a concealed one, but they no doubt had advanced cloaking technology, or the lights may have been a signal for ships waiting just outside the atmosphere to land. This remote, elevated area would be as good a spot as any, and no doubt they would chose to send ships to the outskirts of London, so that the captains could meet with their comrades in Westminster and Buckingham Palace. He stayed low to the ground, and kept in the cover of the bushes and tufts of ferns dotting the hillside. There was a small wooded area near the top of the hill – the perfect vantage point. David made for it, as fast and quiet as possible, and leaned against a tree, catching his breath. His heart was pounding and he was breaking out in a cold sweat. This could very much be his last day on earth – one way or another.

He received a tap on the shoulder, and spun around in horror.

“Excuse me, lad...” He looked into the placed eyes of an old lady, carrying a rather powerful torch. “I’ve lost my dog. We’ve been out looking for him. I don’t suppose you could help?”

“Oh...” David said, gasping for breath. “Er...well, I’m a bit busy at the moment...”

“That’s an odd hat...” The elderly lady narrowed her eyes. Her black, beady, cold, reptilian eyes...

“You’re...” He backed away. “You’re one of them!” He reached for his camera, but a hand with a grip of steel closed around his wrist, and it fell to the ground with a crunch of broken glass and plastic. He twisted his body, and looked up, in horror, into the scaly face of a seven-foot Space Lizard general.

The Deserters

Maria Sledmere

They found themselves lying on baked ground that, upon closer inspection, turned out to be grit and sand. Their bodies throbbed with thirst and only a rasping sound escaped their throats. They were like lost children, stumbling in the light of a new horizon. Sam and Tina had no idea how they had got here. They had just...woken up.

Only a moment ago, they were asleep in their bed with the chilly wind rattling the walls. Messages flashing on their phone, gloriously ignored. Now they were here in this unimaginable space, the feverish heat clawing at their bodies. There was nothing here; only endless, yellow desert and a sky so pale it seemed to become the ground they stood on.

What's more, Sam and Tina were naked, utterly naked, and already their skin was starting to peel from the sun's glare.

"How the hell-?" Sam croaked, shielding his eyes.

"This *is* hell." Tina kicked a stone and looked up to the sun. She was angry, that was all. She didn't think this would happen.

They began to exist in this torrid landscape, their bodies slowly crisping, shedding flakes of skin like snakes, living off the charred bodies of lizards who had dried up in the random desert fires which occasionally flared up in the afternoon sun. They ate the lizards' eggs too, cracking the shells with their scaly knuckles and trying not to gag as they swallowed the runny contents. They got used to it, though they could never feel at home. Everything they did felt like an intrusion, like they were stomping over holy ground. This was a place stripped pure of everything, and only the lizards and snakes and scorpions remained; the hard, scabrous creatures left upon a parched planet.

Their bodies shrank and withered and so did their brains. Soon they had no memory of who they were or what their lives had been like before this dream. All thoughts were of survival. Sometimes, Tina wondered what she had done, but the thought soon slipped away. The bare heat cleansed them of their confusion.

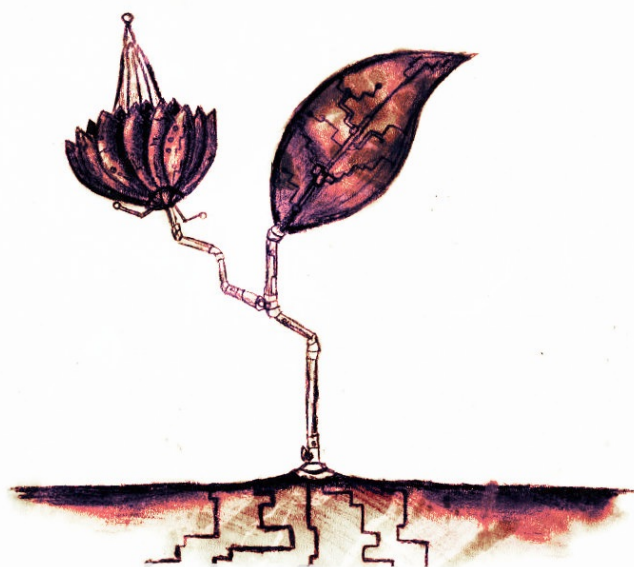
They walked along endless dunes under the relentless sun; they walked until they knew death would be there at last, clutching at them. For they were hungry for an ending; to death they would be hospitable.

And yet every time they thought it would happen some miracle saved them. One day they stumbled upon a clump of strange roses with spiked, shrub-like clusters underneath them. The pinkness of these flowers was almost too much for Sam and Tina: how luxurious it seemed against the acrid sand and sky that seemed to blend together. They scrabbled at the ground and soon they found a pool of water from which they could drink. It tasted of memory.

Sated, they lay back to wait for the cool relief of evening.

You might think Sam and Tina were dreaming they were Adam and Eve, atoning for some worry or other in their dreams. You might think somebody was writing about them, forcing them into a repenting situation, painting the scene of their fate. You might think this desert some symbolic landscape, a projection of psychological space. Probably, you would be wrong.

They are destined to wander forever. For they are not some relic of original Man. They were the people who stole all they could from each other, who burned and burned in their brutal desires until they were both starved, any trace of sentiment stripped from their skeletons. It is a harsh thing to wake up beside the same person every day and wish you were dying. But it is a harsher thing to wander forever with this person, to feed off what bare necessities the world will leave when your mind is gone and there is nothing but your mortal body to fill the time. To fill the final space, to spread out your life among the sweepings and leavings of the blind and forsaken. To be the selfish ones, the deserting.



Space

Louise McCue

She clings like cobwebs to the corners of the room, pieces that once were 'mother'. Outside, the street lights splinter through the trees and cast spindly fingers across the floor of the bungalow as rain drums a mocking heartbeat against the window panes. It had been light when I had arrived, weary after the wake, but I had sat long and in silence until the night fell about my shoulders like a shroud. I settle in the centre of the room, fingers running through the carpet as if digging through soil. It had been easier before, in my happier home. Now I nest in the bedroom, surrounded by fragments of her. A paperback book, spine bent, rests on her pillow. A thin tortoiseshell comb sits by the mirror, dark hair from a too-harsh tug wrapped around its teeth. A solitary sock trimmed with lace lies redundant near the foot of the bed. Already, motes of dust slowly spiral through the air like falling stars in the soft orange glow of the lamp posts. Tomorrow I will fold away this room and clear away the remnants but for now, I sit, silent in the epicentre of what recently was. The front door creaks open- my brother returned at last, but too late. I call out and my voice feels hollow in the muted space, as if the walls and the dust and the skeletal limbs of the trees seek to entomb this room. He shadows the doorway, hesitating at the boundary between the hall and her room. "Where were you?" I whisper, but it is lost as the wind outside, bolstered by some unknown rage, sweeps through the village.

