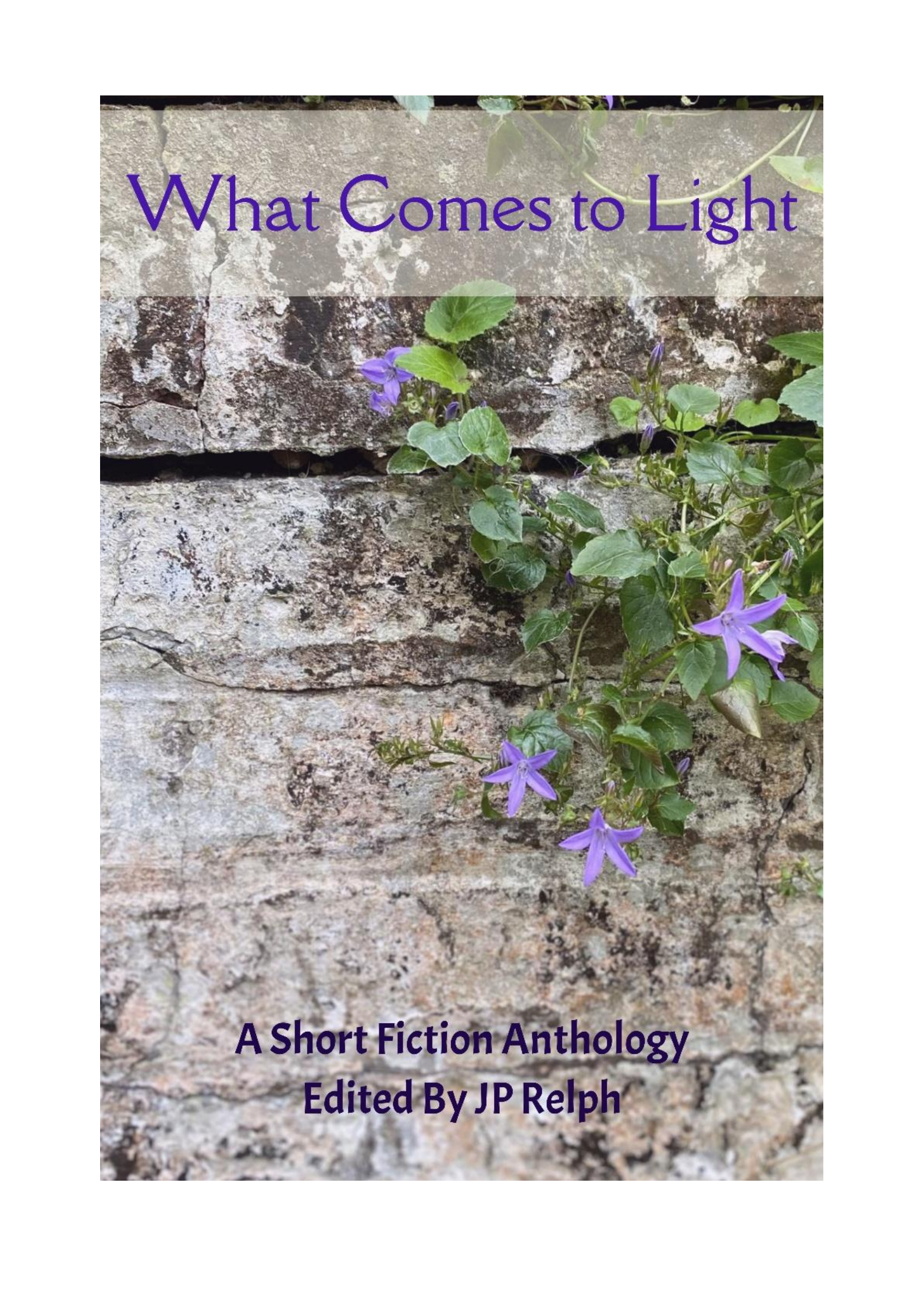


The background of the cover is a photograph of a rough, grey stone wall. Several small, purple, star-shaped flowers with green leaves are growing from a crack in the stone. The title 'What Comes to Light' is written in a purple, serif font across the top half of the image.

# What Comes to Light

**A Short Fiction Anthology**  
**Edited By JP Relph**

# What Comes to Light

An anthology of short fiction about  
finding treasure in unexpected places

Edited by JP Relph

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Book cover from a photograph by JP Relph

## From the Editor

This is Trash Cat Lit's first print anthology and so it seemed fitting to theme it around the magazine's core message: there is always treasure in the trash.

These twenty-seven writers produced stories with truly wonderful interpretations of the theme and earned their place in this anthology.

Fifteen of these writers are brand new to Trash Cat Lit.

Seven of the stories in these pages have been previously published and we acknowledge those literary publications at the end of the book.

All profits from sales of the anthology will be given to UK charity, The Wildlife Trusts. There are no wild trash cats in the UK, but there are badgers and deer and songbirds – and all of them are ably protected by the charity.

I hope you enjoy every treasure in the following pages and if you love what you read, do visit Trash Cat Lit online for more amazing writing.

Thank you for reading and supporting Trash Cat Lit and our chosen charity.

JP Relph

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Two cars cannot pass on the threadbare track that winds up and down across a vicious hillside.

‘Let’s get away, clear your head,’ Sarah had said, so now I’m slumped in the back of Mairéad’s Fiat Punto, every bump bruising. The road keeps us buried in pale dune valleys mostly, though, intermittently it rises to give up a glimpse of a cobalt-blue coastline.

From the car park, I stumble towards picnic tables which line a fenced-off cliff edge. Nausea settles, leaving me with the hollowed-outness of a hangover, like my insides have been slowly scraped bare with a pointed hook. Ireland’s most southern point – enjoy the view!

‘There’s actually a place more south than this,’ Sarah says.

I hope she’s wrong.

People mosey around the visitor centre, fingering pens and magnets. My well-meaning friends peruse the specials board: Hake, Fresh Mussels, Cork’s Finest Chowder. I could join them, but they could do with a break from the mess of me, and a portrait high on the wall – the first lighthouse keeper – has caught my attention. He manned the signal station on nearby Cloghán island a century ago. Isolated on a big rock for months at a time, connected only to the dot-dot-dash of passing vessels. Some life. Who would choose it? Though here I am, paying the fee, passing through the turnstile, slipping out along the path.

After a lonely kilometre trudging through the judgement of foxglove, metal ribs of a retrofit bridge appear, separating cliff drops belonging to the land I have come from and the island ahead.

You were always going to leave me, weren’t you? I made daisy chains as the sun warmed our wine, thumbnail busied with stem splitting, ears full of the music you curated. But your weekend habit was eroding into the sandstone of our weekdays, even then.

Two-hundred feet above churning seawater, I peer through gaps in the bridge’s timbers. The ghost of the keeper navigates the gorge, ties up his rowboat, then climbs the rockface towards his station. I follow. He takes up his position, lights the lamp in preparation for nightfall. Vigilant, he scans the wild ocean. You hid it well, your self-destruction, but somewhere in me, I knew where you were headed. I made a choice to ignore the liner’s four short blasts, glanced away as the blind bend approached us.

Sea pinks and fern guide me onwards until I reach the lookout: the most southern tip of this southern tip. Here, where the cliff path dips, water roars violently, smothering the roil of thoughts in my head. I scream your name into the wind, but my voice is inaudible. For a moment I am free from the pain of you and yet so full of the love of you that I might

burst into pieces and splinter the veil which separates heaven and earth, for the veil is so thin here, and I can taste salt on my lips in this light that is yellow and liminal.

# Passed Down Like Folk Songs

Dreama Weaver

They say if you sing the right song near the old radio tower, something sings back. It doesn't happen every time. Only when the wind leans in and the trees hush and you don't dare blink.

I know because my grandmother told me. And her grandmother told her.

It's a story passed down like folk songs, the kind that change a little each time, the kind that wrap around your bones even after you forget the words.

\*\*\*

The old radio tower has been closed since before I was born. It sits just beyond the tree line, where the brambles get thick and the signs say DANGER in rusted red letters.

Kids used to dare each other to touch the gate. Some say one more disappeared there. Some say he came back wrong.

I never played those games. I just listened.

To my grandmother, humming while she chopped vegetables. To the old cassette she gave me when I turned ten labelled *Mountain Songs and Hollowed Things*.

Track seven was blank, she said. "That's where you sing your own."

I'm twenty-two now, and everything feels temporary. Jobs, homes, people. But the old radio tower. That's permanent.

So, when I lost the latest version of myself, a city life that didn't want me, a girlfriend who left her toothbrush and never came back, I went home.

To the cabin that still smelled like cedar and mothballs. To the woods that still held their breath when you walked through them slowly enough.

To the old radio tower.

\*\*\*

It's twilight when I reach the gate.

I hum the first few notes of the song I think I remember. The one that's about silver eyes and the girl who danced with ghosts.

The gate creaks.

And something hums back.

I don't run. I don't speak. I just listen.

The voice is like static through a radio, and like my grandmother's, only younger.

"I kept it safe," it says.

"What did you keep?" I ask.

"Your voice."

The air thickens, heavy with pine and memory. I step through the gate. My feet don't crunch the gravel. They float.

The entrance to the old radio tower yawns before me, dark and patient.

Inside, something glows: a cassette tape. My name is scrawled on the label in faded ink.

I pick it up. I don't remember making it. But I know it's mine.

I press it to my chest and feel it beating.

\*\*\*

Back at the cabin, I find the old cassette player. Slide the tape in. Press play.

And there it is.

My voice, age seven, singing nonsense lyrics about wind and pirates and not having to cry.

And layered beneath it is my grandmother, harmonizing.

And beneath that, someone else. A voice I don't recognize.

The same song, passed down, layered like sediment.

Like time.

Like folk songs.

I don't remember recording this.

But I believe it.

\*\*\*

In the morning, I walk to the general store and ask the clerk if she remembers anything about the old radio tower.

She says, "Funny. My grandmother used to sing this song..."

And she hums it, note for note.

\*\*\*

That night, I record a new verse.

I don't write it down. I just hum until it settles into something true.

Then I bury the tape in a jar behind the cabin.

Someday, someone will find it. Maybe they'll add their own layer.

Maybe they'll hear us.

And maybe they'll understand that

Some things are never really lost.

They're just waiting to be sung again.

## Wasted on the Young

Jennifer Gunner

The concert was a hard no from our parents. We were too young, they said. And especially not in the desert. Never in the desert. They didn't even feel bad about it, just laughed like we were crazy for asking.

Of course they were going to say no. But this wasn't just any concert - this was Piper Hamelin. She was a better guitarist than Hendrix, better than Prince, better than all our parents' favorites they called "real music." Miss me with that Gen X shit, we scoffed to ourselves.

Seeing Piper onstage was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and this was our lifetime, not theirs. So we didn't feel bad about sneaking out after bedtime and piling into Presley's older brother's car, the perfume of weed and wickedness burning our throats as we sang to Piper on the speakers. Moonlight lit our path as we careened down the empty desert highway, leaving shadowy rock towers and leering Joshua trees in our wake.

At sunrise we pressed into a sandy parking area with hundreds of older brothers' cars blasting Piper's perfect voice. We screamed the words out the window to teens who screamed back, stood on the car and played air guitar to her solo, flung ourselves into the crowd to be caught by hundreds of eager hands. This was what it was like to be adults, we thought. This was how the rest of our life would feel.

All around us was only space, the space we'd longed for. No parental judgment and scowls, just wind and sand and rocks and spiky yucca plants stretching to the cornflower blue sky. The crowd headed into the concert area as a single organism, its outer edges brushing up against prickly pear cactuses and scraggly tumbleweeds. We wiped sweat from our brows and the scratches on our arms and legs as we strained to see any sight of Piper.

Soon there was the stage and there were the lights and there - there she was, descending from the sky with guitar in hand, striking a new but familiar chord.

*They think you're weak, that monsters lie ahead*

*They fear the monsters underneath your bed*

*They fear me too, because I know the truth*

*There's nothing more delectable than youth*

We screamed and sobbed and stomped for the one who knew us in ways parents never would. They had never been young in this way. All they could do was harness us and control us. Not anymore.

We didn't notice cactus arms beginning to twitch, tumbleweeds stirring at our feet, Joshua trees turning in our direction.

*They lured the monsters here, forever banned  
The monsters took their roots in burning sand  
Surviving in the desert's barren heat  
Waiting for a feast so young and sweet*

Our minds emptied and our lungs burned as we sang, sang, sang the song we'd never heard before, Piper's voice surging through our mouths and anchoring our feet. She was our mother now, our mother and father, and we would never leave this place.

This truth echoed through our minds as the plants crept closer.

*And now the monsters take their final prize  
From parents using fear as their disguise  
For what they fear is nothing more than truth:*

"There's nothing more delectable than youth!" we screamed.

Thorny limbs grabbed at our throats and our ankles and our wrists and we didn't care, because Piper was playing her solo with flying fingers and fleeting chords and the last thought we had before the monsters crunched down on our torsos was that she was so much better than Prince, than Hendrix, than that tired Gen X shit.

## What Comes to Light

Gill O'Halloran

My unfaithful husband lobs twenty years of boxes down from the attic, rebuilds them as a high-rise in the living room. I've done my bit, he says, 'You sort through them.' Hours later, the high-rise collapses. Once again, it seems I'm the victim of dry stonewalling.

My body's not a temple, it's a desiccated cave. Uninhabited.

The newly erected *For Sale* sign outside our comfortable family home gives the lie to the roses around the door, the schmaltz of petal-fall on the doormat. I remember how he'd shake the branch, make it confetti over our shoulders like a wedding day.

My unfaithful husband prefers not to talk, moves into the spare room. I hear him and his phone sex in bed together. Our cat starts over-grooming, so I take her to the vet, who puts a medical collar around her neck. She adapts by walking backwards, and I think if I could walk backwards, I'd stop at 2002, before we met. Driving back home, I stop to buy mangos, the only fruit our adolescent daughter will eat. I take one, push my mouth into its flesh so the juice runs down my chin, but there's no relief - I'm dry to the bone. The wind picks up, denudes the rose bush till its thorns rip the sky. When I walk past it, I grip its cruel stems so they'll rip me too, craving the wet candour of blood.

My unfaithful husband doesn't look up when I say I'm going to visit my grandmother's grave. I don't visit my grandmother's grave, I'm playing catch-up. I meet a guy I used to work with and we find a hotel room. The lie's more satisfying than the temporary quench of sex. At night, back home, I'm restless, pass the spare room on my way to get water. My unfaithful husband's asleep naked on top of the covers, the door left open. I stare a moment at his stranger's body, his small resting penis, then I close the door, forget the water, dream of arid plains. Next day, our neighbour's teenage son is in the back garden in his underpants, bouncing on his little brother's trampoline. I tell our daughter to come away from the window, but she says no, she likes watching him. And I leave her to it because I don't know what's right anymore.

The wind blows a hollow song into my bone-cave body, a lament for rose petals, for fluttering. The estate agent says if we want to sell our house, we must swap out any vibrant vibe and repaint the walls a neutral shade, so I kill the wildflower pinks and oranges with my paintbrush, reducing our we-were-happy-once to an undercoat. It looks better like this, the colours were hurting my heart. Come 'n give your mum a kiss, I say, as our daughter enters the room, but she recoils. Yuck, no way! And I imagine my unfaithful husband thinking the same.

I don't sort through the boxes, I drive them to the dump, hurl them onto the stinking heap, and watch our mementos explode: snorkels with fogged-up masks, a teddy with faded hearts embroidered on his paws, camping chairs that no longer fold, a cot mobile with birds that won't sing. They mingle with table legs, rotted cabbage leaves, and mouldy

fridges. I feel lighter, go to leave, but someone's abandoned a print in a frame, the picture obscured by its trash-smeared glass. I'll take it home and clean it.

My new-to-me picture is a pelvis, stark white against an azure sky, a portal to a fresh horizon. I breathe it all in, all the out-of-cave, bright-brave light. I look at it every day, feel the strength in my own bones, know they'll carry me.

Our daughter says she saw a man at the gate with a gas mask. I tell her not to be silly, people only wear gas masks if there's a war. She looks at me, shrugs. I hug her, tell her that all wars end, eventually. The cat is adjusting, he walks forwards again and wraps himself around my legs, perhaps he knows another word for his collar is 'cone of shame.' It's not your fault, I tell the cat, we'll heal from this.

Our new home's in a rundown neighbourhood, but my heart leaps when we move in: me, my girl, the cat minus his collar, because comfortable has a different meaning now. I paint the walls an unearthly white and hang my Georgia O'Keeffe print on them. I've moved from flower to bone, to the eternal beauty of the desert - not kind, but keenly alive.

## Dead Water

Jo Clark

She'd walked most of the way along a deep, dry river gorge, its uneven boulders easier to navigate than the treacherous craquelure of parched farmland; a vicious fissure had twisted her ankle.

The desiccated remnants of a lone sheep, fleece intact, the sole sign of life. She'd stroked it, unable to resist the temptation to touch softness, feel a caress. Two years since her parents; seven months since Felix. Some days big-sister guilt was all the nourishment she found. Was what kept her moving. That, and reciting words for rain like an enchantment: mizzle, drizzle, shower, squall; spitting, henting, hoying. Cats and dogs. Bucketing down.

From outside, service reservoirs resemble prehistoric barrow graves: low, man-made mounds in the landscape, covered with earth and vegetation. Inside, the architectural vibe is more Cold War; unembellished functional concrete. No ancestors haunted this one, its sole inhabitant and treasure the 'dead water' Cara sought.

Cara dipped her can, smelled the liquid. Fusty, sure. But uncontaminated. She drank cautious sips, aware guzzling meant colic.

It was hard to believe she'd found the reservoir from clues in the old man's book. He'd passed it to her as his eyes dulled, tongue too cracked to speak. After all the bad luck, finally some good. Last night hardest of all; making herself wait, couched under skeletal trees on the overhanging riverbank, shrouded in leaf litter. Shuddering, alert for the tell-tale growls of those she must avoid. Brittle, wrung out like the shrivelled leaves.

Cara settled in a dry corner of the tank, took off her boot. Felt the structure rumble; it couldn't be rain?

A murmur; a whimper. A wet nuzzle against her cheek; another on her bare leg. A snuffling terrier, a ginger kitten. Miracles of life.

Cara clutched them tight, stunned into sudden, purring hope.

*All small towns have their ghost stories. Forest Hill's folklore has been weaved through the tapestry of time — getting distorted by fallible memories, embellishment — but its core elements persisted: a haunted cabin in the woods, a witch, a hidden fortune. Every year when October sinks its teeth into the collective imagination, the story resurfaces. It stalks through high school corridors. Gets regaled by taxi drivers spiriting tourists through town. It's whispered in excited breaths that rise like spectres in the glow of a campfire. The sprawling forest north of town becomes a menacing presence, a place to avoid. But for some, it's fodder for dares, an opportunity to test their mettle on the chance that maybe, just maybe, there's something to it...*

You arrive on the autumn wind as late October clouds crawl across a gunmetal sky. Crisp air carries the smell of rotting leaves and dirt through skeletal birch trees as the season withers, the woods preparing for dormancy. All looks normal, and yet...rabbits and squirrels scamper through the carpet of pine needles. Alert. They feel it too. Even here, surrounded by a vast army of pine sentinels, a shift: something's coming.

I hear you trampling through the undergrowth, cursing as you stumble over logs and downed branches. Moose glide through this forest with barely a sound, yet you, a fraction of the size, can be heard for hectares. You can't have registered the crows circling above, their throaty caws a warning. Or noticed the way the woods seem to be closing in around you, as if the trees are trying to keep a secret. You ought to pay attention — it's easy to get lost in here — but alas, the forest is just an obstacle to you.

When you finally stumble into the clearing, you're about what I expect: a young man, adorned how city folk think hikers dress. Your boots are pristine and you're walking with a slight limp. You clearly didn't bother breaking them in before embarking on your fool's errand. Your brown hair is tousled with two maple leaves stuck in it. Using the sleeve of your fleece, you wipe the sweaty sheen off your face. As you catch your breath, the steam in your glasses dissipates. You finally tear your eyes away from the phone you're clutching, its artificial light jarring in this natural space, and look around. The forest surrounding the clearing has fallen silent, as if holding its breath. You peer back into the gloom as if trying to get your bearings, as if it's a great mystery how you found yourself here. Disoriented already.

Despite your overexertion, you shiver. Do you feel it? That trickle down your spine as you know, on some primal level, you're being watched? Your eyes dart around, scanning everything yet noticing nothing.

A rotting wood cabin stands before you. The sagging front porch is covered in weeds and half disappearing into the earth. At some point, a thick tree branch landed on the cabin's mossy roof, bowing it, but not breaking through. From

the lichen-encrusted windows, the cabin pulses darkness. There's bad energy here. It's not too late to turn around, go back to wherever you came from.

But, you won't. You fools never do.

I know why you're here.

You think you do too.

Hate courses through my body, anger molten lava in my veins.

You probably think you're clever, trekking all the way into these woods to find this cabin. But you're not special. Many have come before you, stood right where you're standing now, wearing the same self-satisfied expression.

The lava in my veins cools into a bedrock of purpose.

You don't know the mistake you made coming here today.

Groups or singles, young or old, confident or nervous, one truth always prevails...

No thief ever leaves these woods.

*For a long time, I lived a life of peace and solitude. Occasionally, Forest Hill folk would stop by my cabin to buy herbal teas and baked goods, or to check on me after winter storms. I existed on the periphery, orbiting the community but still part of it. As the century changed, so did Forest Hill. In a world that suddenly valued conformity, I became an object of scorn, of revulsion. A cautionary tale: 'be good or the witch will get you'. The same week I buried my dog, I was feeding a crow from the windowsill when a group of men stormed into the cabin wearing burlap sacks with crude eye holes. They violated my sanctuary, robbed me. Feral with grief, and desperate not to lose more, I fought back. In the struggle, one of the men shoved me backward. I lost my footing. The world tilted as I fell, knocking my head against the stone fireplace...*

You twist the rusted handle but the door doesn't open. Did you really think it would be that easy? You push into the door with your shoulder and hear a crack. Emboldened, you throw your body into it and, with the splintering of wood, crash into the cabin, trailing dead leaves in your wake. You take in the space, dust particles floating in the weak light. The cabin is one room with a desk, bed, and dresser on your left. A stained countertop runs along the back wall. To your right, an armchair faces a fireplace. You recoil as two mice you've disturbed squeak and scurry into the wall. Your foot catches on the frayed hearth rug, exposing a dark stain on the floor beneath. You grab onto the armchair to steady yourself, leaving a handprint in the musty upholstery. You wrinkle your nose at the smell and chill emanating from the fireplace. You're breaking and entering, yet have the temerity to be radiating judgment about the state of the cabin.

That irony is lost on you as you wander over to the writing desk and start rifling through the drawers. You're shuffling through brittle papers when something lands with a thud and rolls under the bed. You sigh and crouch down. Your phone proves an ineffectual light as you cautiously reach under the bed. The longer you're snatching at air, the more agitated you become. Are you afraid something is going to grab your arm and pull you into the darkness? With a grunt, you stretch further and, triumphant, pull out a stylographic pen.

'Whoa, Grandma had a pen just like this.'

You've said very little so far and I'm surprised at the emotion in your voice as you roll the pen between your fingers, presumably lost in memory. Then, you slip it into your pocket.

Wiping your hands on your jeans, your eyes roam around the space until they lock onto something on the bedside table. You pick up a mouldering doily, unearthing a family of moths who flutter upward, powdery wings brushing your face. You splutter for a moment and then see what the doily had been covering: a framed sketch.

You inhale sharply, recognizing the armchair immediately. You close one eye, and tongue between your teeth, line up the sketch with its real-world counterpart. When the frame slides into the exact place, the cabin flickers, changes. A scene emerges: a woman with her hair in a neat chignon sits in the armchair. A retriever is curled up on the rug at her feet. Fire crackles in the hearth. The woman is wearing a plain dress and a shawl, but your eyes are drawn to her necklace with its ornate star pendant. The cabin flickers again, returning to its state of decay.

Your eyes bulge when you look at the sketch. The detail that's appeared in it mirrors the scene that somehow just flashed before your eyes. You shake your head and pull the pen out of your pocket, looking in confusion between the two items. You open the back of the frame and examine faint writing on the yellowing paper.

*Shadow and I, 1899.*

'Holy shit, it's *her*...' Colour drains from your face and your eyes are full moons. Then fear morphs into bemusement. I wonder if you're struggling to reconcile the woman in the sketch with the monstrous image of a witch that you've likely conjured to justify your actions.

'Did *she* draw this?'

I did.

'She had a *dog*...' Though the detail is sparse, the companionship shines through. 'Shadow...' you whisper as you trace the dog with your thumb. You look pensive, almost pained — have you loved and lost a dog, I wonder — and I feel a glow of hope.

'That necklace,' you mutter. 'That's got to be worth something.' My hope extinguishes and I watch in dismay as you attack the dresser with renewed enthusiasm. You make your way along the countertop examining every nook and cranny but come up empty-handed. You huff and puff, the physical exertion perhaps not something you're used to or maybe all the black mold is irritating your lungs. Your hair is covered in dust, and your jeans are filthy from crawling around on the floor.

'Where the fuck is it?' You stomp your silly hiking boots, and wince. Then I see a gleam in your eye as your foot catches on a loose floorboard and you bend down to test its strength.

Oh no you don't.

It's time to put you out of your misery.

A sharp caw from a crow outside makes you jump.

Something crashes into the fireplace, the impact like a bomb sending a blast of soot and dead bugs into the cabin. You're hacking and spluttering as you sweep your hand in front of your face, desperate to clear the air.

'The fireplace, of course!' You smack your forehead with your palm, leaving a dirty handprint. You approach the dark cavity with the same trepidation you might a coiled rattlesnake.

'Ugh, that's disgusting.' You're hesitant to put any part of you into the fireplace but your eyes widen at something nestled deep in the gloom. Fear briefly battles with greed, but the latter triumphs. You close your eyes and reach inside. You're trembling as your hand wraps around the object. You wrench your arm back. Your eyes twinkle as you examine the velvet bag, tugging open the drawstring. On a silver chain, the pendant gleams: its star shape holding a brilliant red stone that seems to glow in the weak cabin light.

'Jackpot!' The word has barely formed when you swear loudly, as though you've been scalded. In the time it takes to blink, a red light travels from the pendant, down your arm, and covers your chest. Your eyes mist over. Your face goes slack. Then, as quickly as it appeared, the red glow extinguishes. Your shoulders slump and the necklace falls to the floor, landing between your feet.

You cradle your hand. 'What the —' Examining your arm, you seem surprised it's unscathed. You shake your hand a few times, frowning at the necklace crumpled on the floor. You pick it back up, holding the chain between your thumb

and forefinger as though it's a spider that looks dead but you fear could reanimate at any time. You shuffle over to the bed and sit down, a cloud of dust rising from the comforter.

'What am I doing?' Your voice is smaller, weaker. That steely determination gone. You hold the sketch of the woman and her dog and study it. Truly see it. 'This was her home.'

You look around the cabin. I suspect you're picturing it how it was: full of life, of warmth. Can you picture it? Soup bubbling over the fire, a snoring dog, rain pattering against the windows, a comfortable chair, a pen dancing across a page.

You sigh and put your head in your hands. Nothing marks the passage of time but the wind whispering through the pines outside.

Then, you straighten and walk over to the writing desk. You prop the frame up, placing the pen in front of it, and drape the necklace over the corner of the frame. In the dust, you draw a little paw print. Your voice is barely a whisper as you look into the frame, and bow your head: 'I'm so sorry.'

You pull the damaged door shut behind you and take your phone out of your pocket, mapping the long walk back to your car. You don't notice the crow perched on the chimney, watching you go.

*I died instantly. The men fled. Part of my spirit fractured and latched on to the crow. I was incandescent with hate, desperate for revenge. But, bloodlust didn't change the practicalities: crows can't easily kill humans. The corvid let me share her body as I plotted. In mere weeks, the answer came to me: what if, instead of eliminating those who caused harm, I could change them? Send them back into the world with a new perspective? I've borne witness to enough to know that time is a circle. Despite the myth of progress, human beings continue to persecute, to harm, to put individual desires above all else. After I was killed, the rumour mill fired up; through whispers on the wind, I fanned the flames with tales of treasure. I staged the cabin with artifacts, telling my story and leading each intruder to interrogate their motivations, and see me as a human. I also implemented a failsafe: imbuing the pendant from a piece of costume jewelry with a charm of introspection.*

Today, my story lives on in Forest Hill and, through the internet, beyond. My spirit has become part of the corvid family that lives in the woods. I've retained enough power to reset the cabin after each intruder; but it's dwindling, and I'm tired. What I thought was a bottomless well of revenge is drying up. Eventually, my spirit will depart; but until that day, I will keep doing what I've come to think of as my life's work.

Over a century, innumerable feckless people have come to my cabin, lured by the thrill of a haunting, the promise of riches. While none have ever left with an object, each has taken a treasure with them.

As I said, no thief ever leaves these woods.

The bottom of the cardboard box gives way as I lift it down from the shelf, showering its contents over my head. Scraps of paper. Old photographs of people long dead. Weddings and gatherings. Picnics on the beach. Me, ten years old, wearing a yellow trouser suit. The height of fashion in the mid-60s, cut boyishly severe like my hair.

You loved to buy me unsuitable clothes, mapping all the latest London trends on my skinny young body, all the things you'd grown too fat to wear. We grew apart once I'd left home. I never really felt like your flesh and blood. And now you're dead, like my sad old stick of a father years ago, and I've got a house to clear.

Scattered across the floor are paper wallets of old negatives. I pick one and hold it up to the light, its image ghostly like scum on the surface of a dream. It takes me a few seconds to work it out, but the woman in the picture is you. My mother. Young, standing smiling by the Trafalgar Square fountains in a flowered frock, holding the hand of a little girl that isn't me.

I had no brothers or sisters. No-one to compare or connect with. It's been both sadness and delight, giving me time and space to breathe but no words and memories to share. I've grown up lonely and strange. It's why I've never had children of my own. It's why he left, the only one who could have fathered them, leaving me alone with my history. I have so little to define myself by. Instead I've become a negative shape, inhabiting the narrow gaps around other things, other people, their wants and needs. Maybe I should retreat into this house I've inherited, with its orange wallpaper and its G-plan furniture.

I catch sight of myself in the long mirror on the landing. Still skinny, my dark green dress skimming over boyish hips. They say all women grow to resemble their mothers. I'm you in reverse, a shadow of your frank fertility. The girl holding your hand looks about five, in ankle socks and sandals beneath her little-girl dress, full-skirted like yours. I peer closer at the negative, looking for a likeness between the two dark shapes with bright hair. The interloper is a smaller version of you, with the same thick curls, the same plump frame and generous smile. Who is she?

I take the scrap of film across the city to be developed. I want to see the negative made positive. I want colour, flesh, scale. I need to make up some story to explain who these people were. I need to know where I fit into the picture.

The assistant squints at it, unused to the non-digital survival, and offers me a standard enlargement. Once I'm back home, I extract it from the paper folder and look again at the two figures by the fountain, the woman clothed in blue with yellow sunflowers, the little girl in a dress of pillarbox red.

And then I see them.

They were too small to make out before. In the background, caught in the frame unawares, are two more figures. A well-dressed woman just like you, handkerchief in hand, bending down to wipe the face of a child. The kid's a bit out of focus, wearing green trousers and a Mickey Mouse top.

I remember that top. You tried to throw it out when it faded, but I wore it until it wouldn't fit over my head any more. I was never one for flouncy dresses or shiny shoes. My hair was cut short because I never combed it. I wore trousers because no-one could stop me from climbing trees. I was always in the background, slightly blurred, moving fast.

It takes several days to read through all the documents in the box and piece it together. Eventually I find the letters, all in the same azure Basildon Bond envelopes with your rounded handwriting, all addressed to Violet Booth at an address in Wales. They're silly, giggly letters, written to someone you loved, with whom you shared memories and a history. A girl called Vi. Your twin sister.

I remember the fountains, the lions, Nelson's column. I loved to feed the pigeons, back in those days when they still haunted the Square. I remember the T-shirt. So why don't I remember Vi and her daughter? Did I even know who they were, that day in London?

I can't imagine what schism spun them clear out of our lives. I search through the papers but find nothing more. No marriage records or birth certificates. I try Ancestry.com, looking for connections, but there's nothing but the fact of her, her birth date, same as yours, her maiden name. No marriage. No issue. I run a search on the Welsh address, but it's been turned into a dentist's. Did she ever marry? Was the kid born abroad? Did they change their names? There's simply no trail I can follow.

I wonder who took the snapshot on that day out in London. The phantom Mr Booth? My father, stiff and disapproving behind the lens? A passer-by? Is it you bending to wipe my mucky face while Vi and her daughter pose for the camera, or have you swapped kids for a moment? Were you there in secret, meeting the sister you weren't allowed to own up to? However long I stare at the photo, I can't be sure.

The truth is that I'm not really part of the picture. I've always been in the background, a bit out of focus, the gap between the spaces taken up by others. They're all gone now, disconnected, dead or disappeared. But I'm still here.

I take the papers to the city dump to be recycled with all the other junk. As I get back in my car, a voice calls me. "Hey," says one of the guys working the facility. "Did you mean to leave this behind?" He holds up the box brimming with old photos.

I don't answer.

White frothing water surges over boulders down the seam of the valley.

“Take it away,” she murmurs over the noise. Bitterness has eaten holes in her like moths. She feels spools of ache wound tight within.

The woman picks her way down the shepherd's path, flat shoes and black stockings poking out of a calf-length black skirt like the legs of a spider.

She squats and dangles one leg down, then the other, till she reaches a cold granite boulder covered with curving fissures like an aerial view of rivers.

A steep hillside tumbles down to the rushing stream, vertical grass trailing strands as long and thick as her hair was, once.

*For it to work, you have to really feel it*, her grandmother told her.

Below, large rocks lie scattered at all angles, as white water streams from every fissure, smothering words and enfolding the valley in a rhythmic white-noise hush. A reprieve from the house that shuddered with his shouts.

At the stream's lip she crouches.

From a faded tweed coat she withdraws an object. Metal and oblong, a lock of hair sealed beneath glass and attached to a chain. The hair is a curl of chestnut-gold summer. A time of fervent promises and emotion flowing heedless as the stream.

Holding the locket, she plunges her hand into swift freezing water, feels the drag of the current. Releases it. Stands back and watches it drift, as the shard of herself attached to it drifts with it and it vanishes into the water's endless flow.

She feels the sense of a knot loosening, of bonds like iron shackles dissolving and falling away. She speaks his name, and in the same breath, “I release you.”

She stands and breathes in air moist with spray. In sure, swift steps she starts up the slope.

The locket shoots down rocks, swirls and eddies and drifts to the lower banks, where a woman with full cheeks and pink skirts gathered into one hand plucks it out of the silt. Turns it over in her smooth unlined hands, and dries it on her hem. She holds it lightward, blesses it with a kiss.

Slips it into her pocket, to treasure as a talisman to summon the man who will love her.

“Bring him here,” she whispers, voice shushed by the murmuring stream.

Tyler discovered it, caked in mud, but still a thing of beauty. Could've been a chick, he reckoned. "Spit on your sleeve to clean it," I told him, "Mind you don't press too hard." He held it the way Ma taught him to carry her wine without spilling a drop. When he was done, he placed it in my palm, shiny and smooth as a pearl. "Do you think we can keep it?", I asked him, worried they'd confiscate our find. Last week, I picked up a heron feather, which Mrs. Miller, our foster mother, threw in the trash. "Filthy," she'd muttered, under her breath, "This is no place for dead things." Ma came home with binoculars once; said we could use them for lookouts. She gave Ty a book with diagrams, which he used to name all the birds.

When we still lived with Ma, she said I was Icarus. "Is that what happened?", I asked Ty as if his frown held answers, "Ma discovered me close to the sun, but she fell and everything burned." Ty shrugged and dipped his hands in the river. He reckoned a rat had killed it. He poked at the riverbank with a stick. Made me think of alligators lurking in the rushes, sent shivers down my spine like talking to girls.

Ty always brought me down to the river. We paddled in the water to cool down when Ma's light was bright enough to blind us. Sometimes we'd wade to the island. In the mornings, it was all ours. I was safe with Ty and we knew every cove, where bottles glistened like jewels. Ty shimmied up the tree and hung his shirt for a flagpole. "It could be a lapwing, fallen from its nest.", he mumbled as he looked for footholds. He pulled me up next to him on a branch, explained nature won't follow rules.

The bird skull was frail, beak open like Ma when she told Ty our people were crazy. I wanted to spread my wings from that tree. Make like Icarus and fly.

# The Memory of Water

Karen Arnold

I am dying. The farmer knows it in his heart but will not let himself see it. He will not look at me, but the woman comes to the green laced edge of me every day. Sometimes she swims in me and then I feel her heartbeat join with the silver percussion of the lives in me. On other days she fills rows of glass tubes with parts of me, carefully labelling each one. She uses a pen that belonged to her father. A fountain pen, green and gold. I remember him, when he was a tall boy, skinny and long limbed. He would visit me on his way home from school, bicycle abandoned beneath the trailing willow, books forgotten. I remember him as an old man, dressed in faded tweeds, who fished from my banks all year round, never really caring what he caught. He loved me and I loved him back. When the woman scattered his ashes here, I embraced him, gathered him in and made him part of me, my currents sending him on into the everything.

The farmer who knows I am dying does not see how he poisons me when he sluices out his chicken sheds, when he spreads waste from the chickens onto his land and congratulates himself on the money he has saved. He is not a bad a man but he cannot forge the links in a chain that stretches between the flaccid chicken breasts that leave his farm wrapped in plastic, a sprig of rosemary tucked beside them to show the shopper how wholesome they are and the white fish bellies floating on my warm, sun dappled surface. On those summer days when blooms of algae crowd out the marsh marigolds and dark green weed, those days when people will not let their dogs drink from me no matter how hard they plead and pant for clean water. There is no respite left in me.

The farmer does not have a memory of water. He did not know me when I was young and so beautiful that poets wrote about me and artists painted me. He has only his lifetime's knowledge of me and so cannot see what I have lost, the thinness of me now. In his mind I have not changed very much. He listens to his father and grandfather talk about the kingfishers and dragon flies, the otters and mallards but he will not let his heart ache for another man's memory of a flash of blue on a summer's morning.

Now the trees weep autumn leaves into me, I have taken to visiting the man and the woman. In the evenings when the mist rolls over my dark brown back and into his stubbled fields. I go on moonless nights, when his grandfather would have fished for eels, on full moon nights when his father would have watched the salmon run, arcs of silver making their way home. I visit his dreams and soften his heart, show him all I used to be. He wakes each morning to a room scented with river mud and damp leaves, troubled all day by the flash of silver scales and the beautiful nightmare of a dragonfly nymph and the laughter of my body running over weed slicked stones, a fallen willow tree trailing long grey fingers in my water.

On these nights when his dreams are busy and time is bending and refracting around him, when he has memories that are not his own, on blue and copper October mornings, he stands on my banks and watches me, thoughtful and still. Last night he dreamed of a woman swimming in green-brown water, and he finally begins to forge a chain.

# The Last Waltz of Arnos Finchley

Laura Cooney

The horses race circularly ... silently. Where there should be an organ there is an empty space and where there should be names on the horses there are none. The paint is long faded though the sad show before you goes on.

One man stands beside the dilapidated fairground ride and one man stands beside the coconut shy. It is the same man. Another man stands beside the skittering dodgems and also stands beside the Sky Rocket, the last of its kind in the world. It is still the same man. He runs this place.

When you play in the penny arcade the lilting music carries you away and the ghostly girlish giggling makes you turn. But there are no people. There is no candy and the ducks bob aimlessly under the canopy. The magic mirrors have distorted your mind and the distant arcade music does not help as it jilts along the air.

The red scarf you wear looks absurd around your neck, you're sure it was blue earlier and you begin to wonder if you're dreaming. You wander around the hall, taking in the distorted noises and the disconcerting hall of mirrors.

A little later, on the ghost train the nails dig into that woman's chest and the coffin opens to reveal gnarling teeth and, as you disembark, you are sure the man that runs the place is watching you. He is here and he is also there and there too.

The horses continue their silent dream-like ride to nowhere and you finger the last of the tokens in your pocket.

When Neville told you that you must visit this place, he told you something important too. Something you were supposed to remember. Racking your brains, you cannot recall ...

You turn once more on your heel and find bewilderingly that you are in a completely different part of the hall. Where you were just at the penny arcade you are now standing at the rifle range and a child's toy ride jilts on its frame. Empty while the music plays on.

The last of the tokens are in your hand and you find you are placing them on the counter. The man, the same man, smiles a graveyard smile revealing his tombstone teeth. He merely points at the rifle and your arm moves slowly as if through treacle. You feel obliged to shoot at the targets. Bang. First the duck and then the clown. Bang. And when you get to the third shot you realise that there is a mirror in the last target and you fire at your reflection which is both there and eerily not there at all. Bang.

And then, it is time to leave and as you make your way to the exit you remember what Nevill said to you.

"Whatever you do. Keep the last of your tokens, you'll need them later."

But you've spent them. No matter, you think. You won't return to this creepy place anyway.

Step out of the door the afternoon sun strokes your face and you suddenly realise how cold it was in there. The tendrils of sun linger on your fingers almost pulling you clear, but you've just remembered. Your scarf! You've left it inside and you will need it later.

You turn for the last time.

The building is huge, made of wrought iron and from the outside you'd have no idea what was inside and the heavy door is now closed. You bang three times. Bang. Bang. Bang. The man appears in the frame. He holds out his hand.

You realise that he wants tokens. You have none! Nevill was right! You shake your head. He shakes his head back and looks at your chest. At first you are confused, Are you are wearing the red scarf you left behind? It takes a moment for you to realise that this scarlet on your crisp white shirt is blood and it is spouting from the hole in your chest where your heart was only moments ago. It's in his hand. And as he closes the door, you hear, again, the lilting child's ride and the giggling laughter. And as you step back inside, more awake than you've ever been, you realise when you see the child's lopsided smile that there were always people in there.

It was only that you couldn't see them yet.

Most days I take my son to the park. To get there, I push his buggy through the grounds of an old country mansion. Despite its grandeur, years of neglect have left it looking like an abandoned Victorian biscuit factory, and the once immaculately manicured gardens are being reclaimed by an abundance of uncontrolled plant-life. It was there we first spotted him, peeking out from a tangle of weeds - a small gnome in the guise of a pirate.

From then on, we always stopped to say 'Ahoy!' to the diminutive fellow. That was until a few weeks later when the ornamental garden gnome vanished. I assumed he'd been pilfered, so told my son he'd returned to sea in his pirate gnome ship. However, the following day, as we were navigating our way through the grounds, we came across an elderly man, dressed in a waistcoat and moleskin trousers, frantically pulling away at some bindweed. He beckoned us closer, then presented my son with the pirate gnome. Despite having never clapped eyes on the gardener, he said he'd observed us conversing with the gnome and thought we deserved to keep him - much to the delight of my boy.

We found a spot back home on our patio, where we could watch him waving his tiny cutlass if we looked out of the window. Then I did something I deeply regret. When my wife arrived home, I told her I'd spotted the missing pirate gnome in someone's garden. My intention was that, at some point, she would notice the gnome and realise the garden I was talking about was ours.

A couple of days later she finally spied the small humanoid creature. It gave her a bit of a shock, as she wasn't expecting to see the pottery pirate outside our house. Unfortunately, I found this rather amusing.

The following morning, when I awoke, I was startled by the pirate gnome smiling at me from a few inches away on the adjacent pillow. My wife was having breakfast, so I went downstairs brandishing the lawn ornament, and congratulated her on her marvellous wheeze. She informed me it was no more than I deserved, then left for work.

I placed the gnome on the kitchen worktop, then after a nappy change, some milk, mashed banana, another nappy change, and several renditions of The Wheels on the Bus, I was finally able to start getting my son ready for the day too. Once that was done, I deposited him in his playpen whilst I had a super-quick shower.

As I was washing what was left of my hair, I happened to glance through the shower door, and accidentally rubbed soap into my eyes. I looked again — I hadn't imagined it — the pirate gnome was standing in the bathroom doorway.

I carried the decorative figure through to the living room, expecting to see my son playing on the floor - but he was still inside his playpen. I reminded him never to climb out when I wasn't there, then put the pirate gnome back in the kitchen. A few moments later I returned and stuck him in the cupboard under the stairs. The pirate gnome, that is, not my son. Then I dressed and we set off for the park.

On the way — and on the way back — I couldn't help casting an eye in the direction of where we'd first beheld the pirate gnome. I must admit, I felt slightly relieved not to see him there.

When we got home, the pirate gnome was standing in the hall. My son ran to pick up the pottery privateer, but I yanked him back. I called my wife's name — to ascertain if she'd come home early and moved the gnome — but the house was empty, save for myself, my son, and the grinning gremlin.

When the doorbell rang, I nearly leapt out of my skin, before realising my wife must have returned earlier after all, then gone out again. I knew there was a simple explanation, and I went to help with her bags. I know what you're thinking - that I opened the door and outside was the pirate gnome.

You're right - there was a pirate gnome at the door.



From around the doorway appeared the old groundskeeper. He'd brought with him a new garden gnome and an apology. The pirate gnome he'd given us was apparently possessed by the spirit of a dead pirate, and should never have left the estate. For it was said that it kept watch over its buried treasure and woe betide anyone foolish enough to prevent him from carrying out his piratical duty.

As I say, I knew there had to be a simple explanation, and when I told the gardener about the mischief the pirate gnome had been getting up to, we both had a jolly good chuckle. I went to fetch the terracotta terror, but when I turned around it was gone.

My toddler toddled out of a room holding his pirate pal, at which point the gardener and I snorted with laughter. Startled by our reaction, my child dropped the gnome, causing it to break in two.

As I knelt to pick up the pieces, a strange phosphorescence began to grow within the shell. Dazzling streams of purple and silver rose and gradually entwined and coalesced into what I can only describe as the form of a sixteenth-century buccaneer.

Before the apparition could become fully formed, it suddenly spilt into a thousand tiny points of light and disappeared out the door with a cry of 'Ahoy, me hearties!' Leaving behind naught save a pungent aroma of rotting fish and seagull shit.

"Well," I said after a moment. "I'd better chuck these bits of broken gnome in the bin before someone stands on them."

"Wait," replied the gardener. "Looks like your young-un's found somethin' inside."

He was holding a small piece of yellowing paper.

"It's a map," I declared, with some astonishment. "And, unless I'm very much mistaken, it's a treasure map."

"I'll take care of that for you, sir," said the groundsman, reaching out his hand.

"My son found it," I countered. "It's up to him what we do with it."

We both looked at the boy, now scribbling on a wall with an orange crayon.

"How about we share the map?"

We shook hands and began a closer inspection of the ancient parchment. It was clear it contained a plan of the estate grounds and, as far as we could make out, the treasure, if treasure there be, was buried in the exact spot where an architectural folly now stands.

Would the treasure still be there after all this time? There was only one way to find out. I agreed to meet the groundskeeper at midnight, away from prying eyes.



The folly was in the style of a mock Graecian temple, but fortunately the floor was bare ground, and it wasn't long before we'd dug a sizeable hole. Indeed, it was so large that we were about to give up on our folly in a folly, when our shovels struck something hard. Moments later we lifted a wooden chest from the hole and dragged it outside. We broke the lock, threw open the lid, and were dazzled.

Gold coins, diamonds, ornate rings, exquisite necklaces, and rubies and emeralds the size of large rubies and emeralds. The treasure was beyond our wildest dreams, but before we could decide what to do we were startled by a voice from the darkness.

"If ye value yer lives, ye'll be a handin' over that thar booty!"

I shone my torch in the direction of the speaker, but could find no one. No one except for a garden gnome. A pirate garden gnome!

"Hand over the loot, or it'll be the cat o' nine tails for ye!"

Again, the torch revealed no one present. No one except for another pirate gnome!

"Be off with ye, ye surly knaves, that treasure be ahar-rrrrrrs!"

All in all, we seemed to be surrounded by a dozen or so ceramic corsairs.

"Rainbow beards men," whispered the groundskeeper. "They've come for their treasure."

"It's our treasure now," I replied, as I greedily bent down to fill my pockets with gold doubloons. But the gold, diamonds, rubies and emeralds were gone. Or rather, they were still there, but were now, inexplicably, made of plastic. Even the chest had somehow shrunk and become rubberised. The treasure was gone, and so too were the pirate gnomes. Then we were dazzled by another light.

"Stop what you're doing," came a voice through a loud hailer.



"Down on the ground with your hands behind your head," barked the police officer.

I turned towards the gardener but he'd scarpered. I pointed my torch in the direction of the fuzz. There was no one there. No one except two police gnomes!

Just when I thought nothing stranger could possibly happen, I felt myself lifted into the air. Then I was flying, as if carried by some unseen force. I was brought back down to earth in what I assumed to be a different part of the estate, for I had dropped my torch and could see only darkness. I tried to move, but I was rooted to the spot. I tried to cry out, but I was unable to make a sound. Hours passed, and I wondered by what process I had become paralysed, and how long it would take for me to recover. Slowly I began to discern the outline of a crumbling wall and dawn confirmed I remained within the grounds. What I assumed at first to be a pond, turned out to be nothing more than a puddle. In that puddle was a sight that will haunt me to the grave.

It was a pirate gnome, with a long white beard and a multicoloured tricorn hat. Yet, this was no ordinary garden gnome - it was my own reflection!



Weeks turned to months as I watched the seasons change. I had little choice in the matter for I was trapped in the body of a pirate gnome. Then one day my tiny ceramic heart leapt - I saw my wife and child. I tried to shout to them, but was unable because, as I say, I was a garden gnome. Then I noticed someone holding my wife's hand. I was furious, but something prevented me from screaming. What was it? Oh yes, it was because I was a gnome!

The interloper was at once strange yet familiar. Then it hit me like a cannonball from a man-o'-war. The blaggard looked like me - yet he was also the living embodiment of the ghostly pirate who'd emerged from the shattered remains of the hexed garden gnome.

As they drew closer, my keen-eyed son began to gesticulate wildly. Whether this was because of his love of gnomes, or because he recognised his real father, trapped in the body of a gnome, I cannot say, but I felt almost human again.

That feeling did not last long, for before he could direct his mother's gaze towards me, the fraudulent freebooter pulled them away. As they strolled by, he looked back over his shoulder — the one without a parrot — lifted his eyepatch and winked. Then he felt my wife's arse!

I realised that while I'd been blindly pursuing cursed pirate treasure, I'd been hornswoggled out of the real treasure — my family! A powerful surge of rage built within me, such that I felt I might explode, or at the very least, my gnome hat fly off with an accompanying jet of steam, and a sound like a swanee whistle. I vowed to reclaim my treasure and wreak revenge on the pirate usurper.



From then on, whenever I saw my son with the pirate, my excited child would run towards me with outstretched arms, and the duplicitous doppelgänger would smirk, mock my gnomish appearance, then drag him away.

When I felt my despair could despair no longer, a change in fortunes occurred. It happened on one occasion when my family were perambulating the grounds with the seafaring simulacrum, but this time I felt myself lifted into the air, just as I had experienced during my transmogrification. I'd been picked up by the old groundskeeper.

"I have summit for the boy," he called to my wife. "Reckon he'd like to take him home."

He presented me, in gnome form, to my son, whose face lit up.

"Nay," objected the horrified sea-wolf. "He belongs 'ere. Forever and ever and—"

Before he could intervene, I was swept up in the arms of my darling child, and try as the pirate impostor might, he could not pry me from his embrace. So it came to pass that I found myself back in my rightful home. Which was back home.



"Arrr, must we suffer that scurvy bilge rat?" bellowed the pretender as he surveyed me, at a teddy bears' picnic, through his telescope.

"He'll not let you throw him out," observed my wife. "It's his favourite toy."

My presence was making the scoundrel increasingly agitated.

"Wouldn't ye rather have a nice shiny cutlass to play with?" he offered, unbuckling his scabbard.

"You can't give a toddler a sword," replied my wife - sensible as ever.

"Then ow's about a nice flagon of grog?"

He slammed a bottle of port down between the teddies and made to grab me, but again my son was too quick and held me fast.

The pirate's patience was wearing thin and with a final yank of his hook, he managed to pull me off (no, not like that). However, in doing so, I fell to the floor with a sickening crack.

As my son began to cry, I felt myself tear down the middle, then rise up from my gnome prison. I grew until I was standing in the middle of the room in my original human configuration. My son danced a jig, whilst my wife stood open-mouthed in wonderment.

The pirate screamed in horror, and began to fade. There was not a moment to lose. I gathered the broken sections of the gnome, and as the bilge-rat became translucent and shrank, I scooped him into the shell of the gnome, and sealed the two sections back together again.

I turned to my family and said triumphantly, "Arrrr - that's better!"

"Eh, what the f— just happened?" replied my wife.

"I can explain," I said. "By means of a short story about a man who gets trapped in the body of a pirate gnome, but first I'm going to return this little buccaneer to where he belongs."



I took the pirate gnome, placed him inside a tiny rubberised chest, and buried him six feet deep under a folly.

There's a crack in the sky southeast of Soho; it peers down at me from behind the crooked chimneystack teetering atop Straight-up Mo's soft-porn shack (girls! girls! girls! boys! boys! boys!); it's right up there next to a fat moon hanging, waning gibbous, lyrical, blue – melancholy, baby, but not sentimental, like mid-period Coltrane

There's a crack in the sky – ripping open the fabric of heaven; it lets in some kind of light, and I see it reflecting in this murky puddle, this oil-flecked pool at the side of the street, ink black floating with rainbow sheen, rippling, sparkling wavelets undulating with passing vehicle thunder, shaking the world

To pieces

Again

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And I see your smile in my face reflected in a grimy window, behind bright lights

Red and white, flashing, window pain

And I look down and I see your smile in the dirty water at the side of the road (you'd say, we're all in the gutter, baby, but some of us are looking at the stars)

And I look down and the soot and grime and oil and dirt and spat-out gum and smeared blood and ripped condoms and discarded dog ends on the pavement smile up at me too

And I see your smile on the faces of strangers that stagger by, in twos and threes, arms linked, laughing

Bright young men, suited and booted, hooting and shrieking, "Not him, oh no! Naff as the chief constable!" and they peel away, cawing, coat tails flapping like a murder of crows

A woman of indeterminate age, slim, striking, blonde, sheet-white under the street light, razor cheekbones, eyes darker and deeper by far than the night, hooked between two sullen cads, stops, looks back over her shoulder, raises her arm, makes a gun of her fingers, cocks her thumb and shoots me dead, with a nod and a wink and yes the play of your smile on her blood-red lips

\*\*\*

Your smile, reflected in that filthy puddle

In a discarded banana skin, turning black

In the windows and the windshields

Under the waning moon over Soho

The crack in the sky lets it through

Red and purple and violet and orange and green and yellow and blue

Like mid-period Coltrane

Baby

But richer

More golden

More bountiful

More true

On the dating app called Gotcha, the tagline reads connecting the unusual, but the mechanics are the same as Tinder or Raya or Grindr. You swipe right for yes, left for no, send winks and pokes and pics. The app has a map thingy that helps you echolocate your date like a bat when you're matched. This is what Nate did the night he met Peta, following a green line along Des Moines Avenue, all the way to Charlie's Kitchen, where his destiny awaited.

In the section marked Philosophy, Peta's said better the Devil you don't know. In her bio, she wrote about how she loved extreme cat vids. Quotes to live by was from Ephesians 5:12 in The Bible, "It is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret." Nate worried that this meant she was religious, but his room-mate Vaughn reassured him it was a commonly understood reference to anal.

"If your date tanks, give her my number." Vaughn gazed down at Peta's profile pic. "She has a demonic glint."

"My date won't tank." Nate flung his messenger bag over his shoulder.

Vaughn's buddies cracked up laughing because Nate's dates always tanked. Then they went back to getting high and watching the game and eating cold pizza, a Sunday ritual Nate was never part of.

Charlie's Kitchen was a typical college bar - dark, dirty, a quick stumble of steps from a White Hen Pantry. Huddled over a pitcher of Sam Adams in a corner booth, Nate and Peta shot the shit about their majors. Four beers down, Nate slid his arm around Peta's shoulders. Rather than object, she put her face up to be kissed. They'd rounded second base and were tumbling towards third by the time the bar closed.

"Back to mine?" That glint of the eyes.

"Sure." Nate was questioning how easy this felt, but she was undeniably hot.

"One word of warning," she smiled over her shoulder. "If we run into my housemate, do not speak to him. Like, literally. Do not."

"Um... sure," said Nate. That wasn't sounding awesome. But, whatever, he didn't have to stay the night.

The house was a clapped-out colonial in Porter Square, haphazardly divvied into student apartments. Inside, the place was a little basic. They didn't spend too much time on the tour, though, because Peta yanked him into her room and shoved him down on the bed, where the warnings of Ephesians 5:12 became fleshly reality.

Nate woke with a jolt at 3:45, when it was both too late and too early to leave. Desperate for a piss and some water, he satisfied first one bodily function, then the other, chugging from the faucet. Either he'd drunk way more than he thought, or those unnatural acts with Peta had dehydrated him.

A blue glow flickered from the den. He padded across the linoleum, bare feet velcroing the sticky floor. Some dude sprawled on the beat-up couch, bong in hand, glued to a college basketball game. Nate loitered in the background, remembering Peta's warning. But the game and the bong called to him, he who was never invited to bro down with Vaughn.

"I'm Nate." He perched on the empty side of the couch.

"Ur," the guy coughed through a mouthful of smoke. "That's my name. Ur. King of the Underworld. Want a hit?"

"Don't mind if I do," Nate laughed.

Nate became a fixture at the clapped-out colonial. He'd meet Peta for beer, then they'd head back to hers to ignore the warnings of Ephesians. In the small hours, when Peta was curled on her side, Nate would go in search of Ur.

If that even was his name. Nate didn't care. He'd never dreamt of befriending anyone as cool as Ur. This was a guy who only ate cold pizza and never wore more than boxers and a Nirvana shirt. He loved basketball, but he didn't get mad if Duke lost. He just chilled on the couch, passing his bong to Nate at generous intervals. Whatever stripe of hash was in that tube was dynamite. Every time a player sunk a solid hoop, Ur slapped the couch, or clapped Nate on the thigh, like guys do.

As for Peta, she was DTF every date and hated spooning. Plus, she went Dutch. Honestly, though, that was all they were doing. Beer. Food. Ephesians. Some nights another Old Testament heavy hitter. There just wasn't much connection. But with Ur... he didn't say much. He didn't have to. When Nate was sitting with him on the couch, smoking, laughing, he felt he'd come home.

Which is why what happened next hurt. One night – and Nate would always regret this – he told Peta he had a headache.

"Whatever," she grunted, rolling on her side.

But she must not have meant it, or maybe she never fell into that deep coma that overtook as soon as they'd boned. Later, Nate was in his usual spot on the couch, Ur cracking up at some Heisman moment of the game, when she padded into the den. Her hair stuck out every which way and she was wearing Nate's Adventure Time t-shirt. There was something so... sad... about the way she looked first at Nate, then at Ur.

Her voice shook. "Didn't I tell you?"

A wild thing happened. Her brown eyes, brim-full of tears, turned blinding white. Searchlights strafing the room, settling on Nate. Her lips shuddered out words Nate didn't understand. Ur's head turned slowly towards her, a stone lid moving from the top of a well. He answered her in ancient-sounding, guttural noises. His deep voice, that had always been easy, was harsh.

Ur's head swivelled back to Nate. "This demon claims you disobeyed her command," he shrugged, speaking in his normal dude-bro voice.

"I... I guess..."

"She says she must now burn you to an ash pile, as is her eternal right." Ur said this gently, like a doctor breaking bad news.

"But... you're my friend?" It was a Hail Mary, for sure. He could have gone with she's my girlfriend, and maybe everything would have ended differently.

Ur nodded sagely. "You speak truth. I, eternally lonely on this plane, have taken solace in your friendship. Yet Ereshkigal speaks truth, too. A law has been broken and amends must be made."

Nate's blood froze. He wanted to be tough, but he found himself squeezing his eyes tight shut and pissing himself a little. In the black space of his paralysing fear, he felt the tremor of an earthquake, heard a bang, like lightning striking a tree, smelled the stench of burned hair.

When he opened his eyes, Ur still sat beside him, as calm as ever. Nate's bare thighs still sprawled on the couch in front of him and his sweaty palms stuck to the fake leather like a couple of tongues. In the corner by the TV lay a smoking pile of ash.

"Fuck," Nate gasped. "Is that...?"

"Ereshkigal broke the laws of our realm and so she was punished." Ur flicked the wheel of his Bic lighter against the bong and breathed deep. Bubbles rumbled in the murky bong water and this time Nate could swear he heard the shrieking of a billion hell-trapped souls.

"As for you human, I have spared you. But you must depart to your own realm, never to return." Ur gave a baleful look, then snapped his fingers, neatly depositing Nate in his apartment.

Nate slept for about a week after that and was crazy thirsty. When he was on his own, he cried a lot. Some of it was for Peta, what happened to her because of him. Honestly, though, most of it was for Ur. He must have looked super bummed, because Vaughn started letting him in on pizza nights.

After a few weeks, he didn't cry, but he didn't show up for work or school either. He was too busy wandering around Porter Square, hunting for that clapped out colonial that had been so easy to find in the dark when Peta was pulling him along by the hand. When he wasn't wasting his time on that one, he was browsing on Gotcha, peering into the eyes of every halfway-hot woman on there. If one of them had a demonic look, then maybe he could find his way back somehow.

None ever did. So, he'd throw down his phone and bend the pillow round his head to muffle the sound of Vaughn and whatever girl he'd just matched with, and that girl's loud, fake screams. And he would stare at a hair-fine, jagged crack that ran along the ceiling up above him and wonder what had changed and why he felt so empty all the time now, even more than before. Had he learned something important? No, he hadn't. He definitely hadn't at all.

## Objects of Sentimental Value

Joyce Bingham

The box is flimsy, the cardboard ripped so its corrugations are visible - but it's all I have. I stand in panic. Where to go first, which room? Do I take the tiny glass animals, fragile like Mam was at the end, or leave them to their landfill burial? I try to pull left-behind photographs from the wall, wrestle with their wires and screws; the others had more sense than to take these. The weddings, the graduations, the family reunions, misery hidden behind the rigid closed lip smiles.

Some items are absent. I'm not the first to be given this supermarket sweep of the house. They came in order. Long ranked by Mam and Dad: the most beloved child down to the one they raised their eyebrows at, the menopausal baby late to the party. Only a mismatch of memories remains, just short of the donation box, not far off a bonfire.

Bookshelves are gap-toothed. I peruse the leftovers but nothing moves me, nothing makes me think of Mam. Outside, men have arrived in a van with 'House Clearances' on the side. They smoke cigarettes and squint at the windows as they estimate the time to empty the rooms, leaving their echoing footsteps, not Mam's or mine. I hope the solicitor my siblings hired told them to wait until my time is up.

I look into bedrooms, but dismiss them. All except mine. I pause at the door as the memory of a crescendo of movement and shouts and laughter runs past me along the landing and down the stairs: I'm in my tenth birthday party dress, with angel wings. I grab the memory and pack it into the box. It takes no space and weighs nothing.

Mam's room is empty, yet the smell of antiseptic and hospital corners lingers. The raised blind shows the wreck of the back garden, the roses overgrown with brambles, thorns everywhere. Nettles thrive now, and a few rampant thistles raising their purple heads.

Only the junk room remains to check, a place so magical it would be my version of heaven if any of my siblings ever thought to ask me. As a child, whenever I went missing, I would be here, deep inside, a den made of a gate-legged table covered with a candlewick quilt, toys and books scattered around. Now the door is stiff and a triangle of mould is already on its way across the ceiling. The smell of damp and wet paper hangs heavy in the air. The trunk is empty next to a pile of broken wood. It once contained the memories of generations, a christening dress, a shawl knitted, inexpertly by Mam, a pair of ballet slippers from a distant aunt. Now a forlorn doll, naked with no eyes, lies across it.

I head downstairs. My time is nearly up. From the kitchen I take a chipped mug with "World's best Mum' on it. I slip my memories into my pocket and leave the empty cardboard box on the kitchen table.

## Westward (1920)

I am a stranger in this place, though once I knew it well. It is not just the wall of rain that hides remembered hills. A stand of beeches grew here, when last I walked this path. Felled for the War, like so many; hedges torn to speed the plough. Before, there was a blessing in the rain. It brings a cold annihilation now. The track is buried beneath a road, where motor-cars churn up the spray. I lost my compass in No-Man's Land. Without sun-shadow to guide me, I don't know the way. A woman selling baskets points me west, then asks:

"Did you see the pasque-flowers up on Church Hill?"

"No." My voice is hoarse. "I used to find them every Spring. The rain has crushed them, I suppose."

"Folk say they grow where Danes fell, when they fought great battles here."

I think of chalk stained with blood; corpses sprouting blooms. Time beating down, relentless as rain, turning horror to fairy-tale. How can I outpace the days, how fast must I travel, how far?

Beneath her hood, her eyes are like the blue flint of the hills.

"When you pass by Hexton you might seek the holy well."

She tells me of a shrine, pulled down centuries ago. No trace remains on land, she says, nor on any map. I tell her that I cannot stop, and turn into the rain.

## Eastward (1292)

'Tis a hard day for tramping, like no Eastertide I've seen. Hot as Outremer, and not yet noon, for my shadow limps behind me still. A friar offers bread and water. I'm thirsty as the devil but I want no cripple-dole. I show him my badges of Saint Joseph and Saint Alban. As a pilgrim I can take alms, there's no shame in that. He asks,

"Were you at Acre? Did you lose your leg in Holy War?"

I can't bear his pity, nor his talk of holy war. I want to hurry on, but a herd blocks the way. Hoof-dust makes me cough like a raddled old man. I shout at the drove-boy;

"Move your beasts, yaldson, let me pass!"

He swats the fly-buzzed backs, staring at my stump. As I skirt the oxen, my crutch slides in their shit. I catch myself and stumble on. The drover calls after me, some mockery for sure. I don't stop to hear.

## Westward

It must be midday, though I cannot tell, trapped as I am in the grey cell of the rain. The ridge is only a deeper grey amid the mist. Unreal country. I dreamed it so often in France that it has become a dream. Any moment I might wake and find it gone. Unless perhaps by walking I may come to somewhere real. Out there we moved in jerking lines; rails, duckboards, drills. Places all look the same where a War has been. If not, it's best to look away. A spire, a headstone, initials in bark. A fine-turned gate without any fence. Landscapes beloved, where people belonged, razed to mud and ruin. I fix my eyes on sodden boots and lengthen my stride.

## Eastward

My shadow shortens, then shifts ahead, leading me to Hexton. The shrine is cool and dark. I bathe my brow and kiss the flint set in the statue's toe. Only one foot shows beneath her robe. She looks battle-worn as me. Her stone eyes do not judge, so I tell her my truth. They hacked off my leg to stem the rot, but my heart is poisoned at the root. I am no pilgrim. I seek the road from fear, not faith. I offer my gift: a scimitar, the same that struck my wound. It sinks in the well, a sign of saintly blessing. As I leave, I buy a badge, and pin it on my cap. My pack feels lighter now.

I come to Ickleford, where the track crosses the river. The drover is there with his herd. The oxen splash and guzzle, lowing thirst-sated joy. When I'm halfway 'cross the ford something flit-dazzles past – a rainbird, lapis blue. I turn to look, too fast. My foot slides and with a splash I tumble on my arse. A slim arm reaches down. I look into a smile that is brighter than water. How did I take this drover for a lad? I laugh aloud at what a fool I am, then clasp her hand. She hauls me up, and saves my hat before it skirls away. Clouds mass in the east and lightning darts across the sky.

"Time to shelter," I tell her. "The storm will break soon."

## Westward

I reach the Garden City, with its red bricks and black roads. Its very newness leaves me tired. Even the weather is weary, and wanes to bitter drizzle. Time hurries on. Could I catch up, if I tried? When suburbs end in fields, the rain gives way at last. Rays break the cloud like a blessing from Heaven, and fall on a chalk-pit and the London railway line. Larks sing wild and high; they know the light won't last. I follow the path to Ickleford bridge, beside the ancient crossing-place. I can hardly get wetter, so I step into the river, and pick my way across the stones. A kingfisher flashes in the gold-bright air and snatches away my breath. I stand still. Laughing water ripples round my aching calves. I plant my feet more firmly, so as not to fall.

Something glitters by my boot and I pick it up. A fragment of metal; its stamp is worn but might be a rough-drawn foot. I keep it, for luck. Perhaps tomorrow I'll stop at Hexton and try to find the well. Some trace of the ruin may yet remain.

At the western shore, my shadow follows me from the water. It stretches on the rain-bright grass. I know where I'm going. I walk towards the sun.

Edge of town, near the sandy beach that stretches for miles. Here, in an area of wasteland frequented by alcoholics, wastrels, drug addicts, homeless people, rats and stray cats, stands an old door, propped up against bricks. A white door, almost-new door, what-is-it-doing here door.

Not a door, Tom says, a portal. To another world.

Eric laughs. Are you tripping, man?

Not me.

NARNIA? Fuck Narnia.

Tom has a gift with the spray can. Artistic, his mum says. Teachers say he's easily distracted. Not a bad boy at heart. But needs to focus.

Nothing but litter the other side of that door, Eric says. Used needles and condoms. A black thong. Winter wonderland, my arse. Someone will burn that soon. Bonfire night coming up.

Door's still there. A hole kicked through it. N...IA.

Tom's on a two-week exclusion. Insubordination. Eric excluded permanently. Setting off a firework during assembly.

Today a cold wind barrels in off the North Sea. Eric and Tom are sitting on an armchair close to the door. Smoking weed. Waiting.

What's for us in this dump? Eric says. We gotta go to London.

Not London. I'm staying here, man.

Fucking Narnia, Eric says. I'm off.

Snowstorm. Eric at his uncle's place watching snooker, drinking beer. No sign of Tom. Eric's been calling since last night. No response. Fuck you, Tom. Go your own way.

Tom is perched on the armchair. Edge of town, close to the beach. The wasteland has turned white, the edges of things gone blurry. Even the used condoms look pretty. But it's fucking freezing. He can hardly feel his feet.

Why don't you step through that door, Tom? What are you afraid of? The Snow Queen and her evil heart? Got no guts?

Who is whispering in his ear? The wind, the snowflakes?

Only ten steps and he's through. On the other side the sun is shining. Everything is white and beautiful. Dazzling. Perfect.

**Recipient:** Peter Schimtlead

**Subject:** Mr. Crabkowski

**Date:** Sunday, April 13 (3:28 AM)

Dear Principal Schimtlead,

It has come to my attention of Mr.Crabkowski's horrible conditions at your institution. He is tucked away in a corner of the school, under artificial lights. He doesn't even get his own tank! It's divided into two unequal sections. The first two-thirds are overrun with snails, crawling up the glass, and rockfish. In his one-third section, there are five large starfish all taking up too much space! At least his part of the tank faces the football field.

But this shouldn't be what my hard-earned dollars go to. Our children deserve better, and Mr.Crabkowski, too. I don't know the life expectancy of Dungeness Crabs, but I can't imagine he can last longer from all the mistreatment, and neither can I.

It must be awful that every day of his existence is just that high school, forced to run around the same glass case over and, over your own old molted shells, all the while, trapped in endless homecomings, breakups, and gossip sessions. Is this his life forever? Does he even get a retirement plan?

And I've tried to personally speak with Mr. Crabkowski regarding his situation, but every time I try getting close to him, he puffs up, raises his blunt pinchers, and dances around the glass, ready to defend his little patch. He must be so barraged by students poking at the glass that he can't even have a mature conversation with an adult. It seems that in his current state, I'll never understand him. I wish I could. I wish I could know if he was scared or if he was truly happy. I hope he's happy.

And I am also aware of the discussions about replacing him with an octopus. You will likely hear more from the school board about this if you don't act, so I recommend that you do so swiftly.

With Egregious Disappointment,

-An Angry Parent

P.S. Need I remind you of the chicken situation?

**Subject:** RE: Subject: Mr. Crabkowski

**Recipient:** Martha Valentine

**Date:** Monday, April 14th (7:49am)

Dear Concerned Parent,

Thank you for your ongoing support of Evergreen High School. We are committed to ensuring that all of our faculty are treated with respect and dignity as they inspire our students to become lifelong learners and exemplary individuals - qualities that Malleen embodies.

I appreciate you reaching out regarding Mr. Crabkowski. Please be assured that our staff is aware of his situation. Although we currently lack the resources to provide him with his own tank, we remain committed to fostering his health. His presence enriches our community and our students' educational experience.

While we understand your desire to discuss personal issues with Mr. Crabkowski, please note that he may have chosen to maintain a professional approach to his work-life balance and did not directly engage in the topic.

We recognize your concerns and will take them into account moving forward. Mr. Crabkowski is well cared for, and we are taking steps to ensure that incidents like the past 'chicken situation' do not recur.

Thank you again for your thoughtful feedback.

Sincerely,

Petter Schimtlead, Principal of Evergreen High School

**RE: RE: Subject:** Mr. Crabkowski

**Recipient:** Peter Schimtlead

**Date:** Friday, April 23 (9:00am)

How DARE you mention my daughter's name! She is an exemplary student who excels in all of her courses and has an outstanding GPA of 4.0.

Your blatant disregard for my concerns and robotic response does NOTHING.

We both know that the chicken situation erupted from the lack of attention and neglect of animals, resulting in the death of 15 chickens overnight. They were then cleaned, cooked, and fed to the students. This all led to a lawsuit between Evergreen and the Clarkison School District.

And Mr.Crabkowski is yet another nail in the coffin of your outrageous mistreatment of animals. Will he, too, meet the same fate? Does your lack of care know no bounds?

I will not allow it.

You have been warned.

-An angry Parent

**Subject:** Urgent: Missing Mr.Crabkowski

**Recipient:** Evergreen High School mailing list

**Date:** Wednesday, April 29th (9:00am)

Dear Evergreen High School Community,

We want to inform you of a recent incident that occurred on our campus. On Monday night, Miss Martha Valintine, a parent of one of our students, was arrested by local authorities for unlawfully entering the school premises around 11 p.m. and removing Mr. Crabkowski from his enclosure.

Security footage shows Ms. Valintine breaking through the staff lounge window, taking a coffee mug from the communal sink, and proceeding to the saltwater tank. During her attempt to access the tank, the top of the enclosure shattered, along with the blue lights. After thirty minutes, she was able to remove Mr. Crabkowski and exited the building, where her daughter acted as her getaway driver.

Ms. Valintine later confessed to releasing Mr. Crabkowski into West Mukton Bay. She also noted that, following the incident, she and her daughter celebrated by smoking a celebratory cigarette and going out for burgers.

We have sent a search team for Mr. Crabkowski, and will be returned home if possible. Should that not be feasible, we have considered other marine animal alternatives to continue offering our students an exceptional educational experience.

We will keep you updated as more information becomes available.

Thank you for your continued support.

With Warm Regards,

Peter Schimtlead

Principal, Evergreen High School

Please see the attached Weekly Newsletter and the link to Mr. Crabkowski's GoFundMe page.

With a vespertine face and shattered-mirror eyes, you swear you will take back the night.

Your expression is liquid like moonlight, your grey eyes reflect starlight, and you are a child of Lilith. There is no time to think, in a flash of lightning you race towards the train, quick as the nighttime wind you leap. Straddling a side rail, you fall over the edge, laughing like a madwoman. It is all I can do to push my legs onward. I cry out as I dive towards your outstretched hands.

For a moment I am suspended – caught between you and the roaring gale that is trying to swallow me. I am thrilled by the danger of it all: flirting with Death. We struggle to get my hovering body over the rail, women versus Zephyrus. Finally, the wind relents and we are safe, two sisters on that fabled midnight train, going anywhere.

The city fades away, like a shrinking violet in the dead of winter. All that we have known, histories we have made, vanish. With siren cries, we are two Amazons, Queen Boudicca and Joan of Arc, Isis and Nephthys defying fate. No one wants us anymore; our golden age of conquest and ruling is over. I wonder if all shield maidens retire, buy quaint houses that smell of lavender and mothballs, and knit their days away surrounded by cats. Cats that should be lionesses. We aren't ready to forsake the wild yet, too young and spirited to be tamed. You are my treasure in the wilderness.

Your eyes light up and lips curl into a smirk as you flip the bird at that city one last time, an appropriate farewell to a place of iron cages and crushing gravity. Where smog coats dreams and people forget their names. I scream at it with all my lungs, the sinuous night coursing through my blood. The track makes spark rush against steel, the best high no drugs can replicate.

I am drawn out of my **RAGE** by your piercing eyes – two dead planets with their own gravity. You cast your pupils into my mind, coaxing the thoughts from my skull like a fisherman's lure. I follow their inky black glimmer and suddenly, you know, tilting moon-dove lips into the archaic smile of the Iron Queen. You lean forward, a chthonic murmur flowing from your mouth to caress my ears.

"Be the Eurydice to my Persephone," you whisper, and kiss me like rain. I clutch your mismatched fishnet gloves, and sigh happily.

Your words linger on the air like mist, illuminating the velvet heavens with the feeble light of truth. I extend slender fingers, brushing the dissipating imprint of your whisper. The particles of shadow bond weakly to my flesh; they will forever resonate throughout my being.

"Okay," is all I can breathe, cradled in the crook of your arm, two hobos in the trash can rail car. But all I can see is your stormy eyes, black hair, pale skin, and grime'ed beauty.

“You have to fall to find yourself,” you whisper, and light creeps into existence, a glimmer of promise on the edge of the horizon. Something is waiting at the crossroads of dawn and destiny. I feel it in the marrow of my bones. What it is, only the wind knows.

We stand to face the sun, then hop off, treasure in the darkness.

Billy says, 'Deer,' and for a moment I'm too surprised to follow the direction of his outstretched finger. Billy hasn't said a word since we left Mom. 'Deer,' he says again.

It's a young buck, almost invisible in the overgrowth of hawthorn lining the road. It must've been hit a glancing blow by the red truck, which lies upside down in a ditch. I get busy with the knife, peeling flesh back from the bone and filling the backpack with bloody slabs, while Billy gathers kindling.

Back in the early days, Mom'd send us out mornings with a lidded pail, for snails. We'd find them, sticky and glistening, pluck them like fat berries. She'd grown up on a farm and had learned how to forage with her brothers. Billy was just toddling back then, so we couldn't walk too far each day, but she taught us to dig for roots, showed us which leaves were good to eat, and which were better brewed into tea. She taught us how to trap and skin a squirrel, or a rabbit, and how to butcher anything bigger found at the roadside - fox, badger, dog. As pickings got increasingly slim, she'd climb the razor topped security fences and raid government gardens for beets, carrots, caged hens. That's how she tore open her leg.

In the dim safety of the woods I chunk the pink, sinewy flesh on a flat stone, while Billy builds the fire. I wrap spilled guts in big sycamore leaves. They'll poach in their own juice at the embers' edge. Nothing is wasted.

Billy's eyes gape as the roasting meat cracks, drips, and blackens. Mom drew a map and reckoned it'd take us another few weeks to reach her brothers. Her ripped leg had shifted, by then, from angry red to creeping grey mottle with a gagging stink. 'I'll head back to town,' she grimaced. 'You take Billy and send for me when you get there.' I nodded. We'd both seen skinny dogs skulking ever nearer, both stared into the knowing eyes of crows. Billy was too young to understand.

Rabbit flesh is sweet and fragrant, while badger is tough as leather – earthy and murky. You can use a squirrel rib as a toothpick after sucking its marrow, while fox meat is stringy, chewy, pungent. Evenings, Billy likes to study the map, trace the road Mom marked out. We no longer count the days. We don't even know if we're following the same road.

The deer had been dead for weeks, black with flies and crawling, already mangled by foxes, dogs, cats, corvids. The man in the truck, though, must've been alive all that time, maybe unconscious, certainly unable to escape the wreckage. I just had to yank open the door and he fell at my feet; cloudy-eyed, but fresh.

'You keep yourselves alive,' Mom had whispered. 'Do whatever you have to do, girl.'

Billy's eyes close as he bites into the meat, grease shining on his chin. 'Tastes good,' he says.

My grandmother left generations of collected items behind after her protracted death, stuff now tranquilly scattered across the state. Like falling graupel, her possessions landed quickly in our lives. Some items of more exquisite craft were destined for hope chests or pawn shops, but most of the lot landed in dark drawers, obscure donation piles, and shelves in rooms that rarely see company.

For myself, I took very little. On that day with family gathered, we sorted through a lifetime of goals accomplished and dreams abandoned - plastic souvenirs from the county fair, curated collections of mouse figurines, framed landscape puzzles on display, a hearty private assortment of lingerie (and, to my surprise, several leather harnesses in only “acceptable” condition), and album after bound album of lignin-yellowed photographs dating back to the Truman administration.

I hadn’t seen most of my family in several years due to long-forgotten fights about things not worth remembering. I took only two items: one of the frayed albums that Aunt Tricia pushed on me, everyone too guilt-laden to condemn them to a trash grave, and a pair of crystal champagne flutes said to have been from her wedding. As her oldest granddaughter, I likely could have taken more, but, in the end, I didn’t really know Grandma Beatrice too well, nor did she know me.

In a single trip, I chauffeured the solemn parting gifts back to my airless 2-bedroom apartment in the city, a long trek from the modest country home she left to her children, her husband having died a handful of years earlier.

I added the emerald cloth-bound photo album to one of my bookcases and displayed the glasses in a mahogany curio cabinet with its other siblings of significance: shot glasses from *recherche* trips around the world that my family could never know about, a handmade gift or two from my daughter, and an empty bottle of Meerlust Rubicon from when I kicked cancer’s ass for the first time.

For a week or two — I don’t recall exactly — I passed by the cabinet and allowed my nostalgic gaze to rest on Grandma Beatrice’s flutes. When I was a child, we would play card games together - mostly *canasta* - to combat the loneliness I felt being both an only child and, at the time, the only young child in a family of enthusiastic hunters and Pentecostal church-going women.

“I should have thought to take a deck of cards,” I said loudly to myself like any good philosophy professor, having grown accustomed to speaking to absent audiences at home: the virtuous man wishes to converse with himself, Aristotle once wrote, the hexis nexus of daily life reforged anew through every uncertainty managed and each tired fire survived.

One by one, memories both surged and trickled back to me, mental postcards big as billboards of banal but now meaningful objects: the Stir-Crazy popcorn maker used on those rare sleepovers at my grandparents’ house. The folding

card table used for wheelin' and dealin' at garage sales and flea markets. That old banana bike I spray painted blue, which used to shuttle me alongside my grandma down the country dirt roads. I also remember popping wheelies on large oak tree roots that rose from the ground as if they desired to enjoy summer's breeze with me.

After returning from campus one day, I discovered another item had appeared.

"Where did this come from?" I asked my partner, Heloise, eyeing a small pile of matchbooks atop the curio cabinet.

"Max dropped them off today with some papers," she said momentarily shifting her glance away from her work crafting a miniature book nook replica of the Iolani Palace's posh Throne Room. "He thought you'd want 'em."

"How was he with you?" I asked, knowing my family - especially my uncle - had met our relationship with restrained objection through a series of well-placed silences. Not openly hostile, but staunchly committed to repressing knowledge of my bisexuality.

"Fine," she said, her eyes not deterred this time from the intimate work of artistic externalization. "He met my eyes this time," chuckling a bit.

"Progress, I suppose," I offered rotely as I fingered one of the matchbooks in my hand.

The Pearl. That's what the matchbook said alongside an image of an empty oyster shell and an address and phone number with an absent area code.

"I wonder where this is from."

"Couldn't tell ya," she replied.

I placed the matches in the locked curio cabinet next to pleasure mecca artifacts - shot glasses of Jessie and Rex from Toy Story and a pair bearing the name Cap d'Agde - if only as a prophylactic measure to prevent our daughter from accessing them. Now 10 years old, she is a highly-skilled detective-scientist who loves conducting experiments using all manner of stuff foraged from around the house.

Week by week, new items from the estate arrived at our home.

One week, a silver microcassette tape recorder and accompanying tapes appeared containing notes for a novel never written. Another week, some handwritten letters were delivered by mail, ones signed from an Ada in Catawba Falls, Colorado. How Grandma Beatrice even knew someone as far west as Colorado was a mystery to me; the bowling alley in her tiny Midwestern town was the farthest I ever saw her travel, besides that yearly, sun-filled pilgrimage to Myrtle Beach with my grandfather.

I saved the recordings and letters for another less hectic time of the term.

And then one day, a single deck of tattered cards appeared within the curio cabinet.

“What’s going on, Ellie?” I asked my partner, “Where’d these come from?”

“Haven’t a clue - didn’t you put them there?”

“Nope,” I said. “Julie?”

My daughter just shook her head and half-rolled her eyes: “I don’t have a key, remember?”

It was in that moment that I noticed the cards shared the same logo as the matchbooks, and a timeworn memory began to sidle its way to my conscious mind.

Grandma wanted me to know but couldn’t tell me, I thought.

After some digging, I discovered that The Pearl was a long-foreclosed lesbian bar in the city during the 1980s.

“Look at Great Grandma drinking champagne with her friend!” Julie announced one day, thumbing through the photo album as curious as ever.

Could that be Ada? I thought, having since read the letters that left little doubt that my grandmother knew more about love and passion than I had given her credit for. The posthumous revelation left Heloise speechless and my daughter tickled, and I felt equal parts admiration and hurt, especially at first, with a lingering seabed of questions I knew that now I could never ask.

As though Grandma Beatrice had curated and couriered these objects after her passing, they came together in that sacred cabinet to remind me that, perhaps, she and I were not so distant in some ways after all.

And each year thereafter on our anniversary, my wife and I would enjoy a glass of champagne in those time-tested city flutes in honor of Grandma Beatrice and the secret lives we all live.

## For a while there, we were weightless

Mathew Gostelow

The first time was an accident. Jogging on pre-dawn silent streets, bleary from another restless night. My fists were clenched, braced for the sardine-can commuter train, the relentless conveyor-belt of underpaid stress. I was pounding troubles out on the pavement, when I pitched forward, foot clipping a wonky slab. Time slowed. I floated — momentarily weightless — a tumbling astronaut.

Of course, those guys drifting in orbit are not hanging suspended at all - that's an illusion. The upsetting truth, the thing nobody likes to think about, is that they are plummeting uncontrollably through a vacuum at terrifying velocity.

I crashed down hard, wind forced sharply from my lungs in a choked groan, fists crushed beneath my chest.

It happened by the underpass. Constellations of broken glass twinkling in the gutter. Piss and concrete. I ran there every morning, past its yawning cave mouth. At 5am you couldn't even see what was on the other side. The darkness was impenetrable, infinite – the wide, black void of space.

Standing, after the fall. Gasping for breath. Knees bleeding. Palms throbbing. Gravel-shredded skin, tiny stones embedded deep in flesh. I limped back and forth, wheezing. Coming to terms with the pain.

The hurt bloomed, igniting a wildness inside me, exploding from my throat as a scream. I roared into the underpass. There was a pleasing reverberation that spurred me on. As I shrieked the pain out of me, a new sensation came — a dam bursting in my chest — and before I could stop it, everything flooded out.

I screamed my rage and fury and my sadness. I screamed long hours and shrinking pay. I screamed the headlines and the deadlines. I screamed global pandemics, climate crisis, food banks, and billionaires. The government sleaze, the backhanders. The lies and lies and lies. I screamed it all out into the darkness of the underpass. The empty, endless space swallowed my pain.

My head spun. Galaxies of white dots swam before my eyes. I panted, hobbled home, and went about my day.

That night, I slept better than I had for years. Gone were the greasy, jaw-clench hours of staring at the glowing clock. I slept deep and clear and undisturbed.

On my run the next day, I slowed approaching the underpass, drawn to the cold solace of the black hole. Looking around to be sure I was alone, I stopped, stared into the void, and screamed. I screamed until I was spent, then ran on, lighter. Springs in my step, like grainy footage of astronauts bouncing on the moon, joyfully celebrating their reduced gravity.

This routine, my morning orbit of running and screaming, continued for a couple of weeks. I felt good. Happier at work. I woke refreshed and could read the news without feeling crushed. The migraines stopped. Roaring into the impassive concrete ear of the underpass was therapeutic, healing.

One morning, I saw a stranger standing at the entrance to the tunnel. A woman screaming into the dark space, leaning forwards, one hand braced against the wall, spewing her fury into the inky black. I waited at a discreet distance, eyes averted. When she was finished, I took my turn.

Weeks passed. Word spread. Soon there was a modest queue each morning. A clump of lost souls waiting in the half-light gloom. We didn't speak. We shared meaningful looks, awkward smiles. We stood patiently, gave each other space. We recognised the sanctity of the ritual - one after another, shrieking into the echoing dark of our concrete confessional.

Over time, the queue grew longer. Teenagers, pensioners, everyone took their turn to scream into the tunnel. There was an older guy who came every day, at the same time as me. Sometimes, when he had finished roaring into the dark, he'd meet my eye, grin bashfully, and give me a thumbs-up.

This is how it was, and it was good. Until the day when I rounded the corner to find the underpass ablaze. Jets of orange flame and rolling clouds of thick black smoke roared from the concrete maw. The tunnel was finally screaming back at us. The morning congregation stared. Supernova heat held us back like an invisible wall. We choked on the acrid stench of our burning pain. My eyes filled with tears.

Through the bleary screen I recognised him. The older man, the one who used to smile at me. He saw me too, nodded sagely, like he knew what needed to be done, and then he walked into the blaze, completely calm. His thinning grey hair burst into a crown of golden fire as the darkness swallowed him.

I dreamed about him later. I dreamed that he offered himself as a sacrifice to appease the angry underpass. I dreamed that he walked out the other side, reborn. I dreamed he was reduced to scattered particles by the forces inside that black hole. I dreamed him floating free in the cold black void of space, smiling, serene, giving me a thumbs-up.

I changed the route of my run after that. I never screamed into the darkness again. The familiar clench returned to my jaw, the slump to my shoulders, the tightness to my chest. Once again, we were plummeting at terrifying speed towards the surface of a strange world, where the atmosphere was toxic and heavy gravity would crush the life out of us all.

But for a while there, we were weightless and it was good.

## The Badger's Tale

An Mu

All of a sudden, the clouds descended and covered everything in soft, damp whiteness. I heard heavy sounds of hooves running by. Tiny paws skittered above my head, and wings flapped around me, abruptly getting close and changing directions. Then came the barking and frantic chirping, and I felt my paws leave the ground.

Flying in an irregular, jolty manner, I was soon out of the clouds. All around me, I saw two-headed creatures. There was a raccoon with a pair of brown wings and a mallard's green head sticking out of his neck, a Persian cat with black leather wings and a bat's head half buried in her long white fur. I was joined to a barn owl whose head must have been on my back since I could not see it. I remember feeling calm and vaguely happy. I liked the sensation of flying, and the sky was blue and beautiful.

After we came back to the ground, birds and land mammals became separated again. But humans had disappeared.

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They used to be places of danger and wonder, full of big, strangely-shaped objects, alien textures, myriads of colours. I remember hiding in bushes and looking through the gaps between the leaves, watching the lemon-coloured bottle and its blurred reflection on the silver tap, counting the bricks and all their different shades of red. The eyes of the houses were made of still water, unmeltable ice. Sometimes, dogs would pop up behind them, and the birds would get frightened.

The dogs, too, have forgotten. No one even remembers the day of change. They looked very hard when I pointed out cars and pavements and entire flocks of buildings, but saw only forests and lakes and mountains.

\*\*\*

Everybody is very kind and polite. However, they never talk to me about what I said to them. Perhaps they think I am mad. Perhaps they simply do not care about lost creatures or invisible places. Everybody is quite polite, but I found it very hard to pretend that nothing was wrong. So I started to spend more and more time wandering alone in the hidden zone.

Many trees burst through the floors, leaving big ragged holes, grey concrete turned over the white tiles, windows broken by boughs. Torn off by the wind, doors lay on the earth, twined in ivies. The houses and the cars grew skeletal - plaster crumbled, sheets of metal disintegrated, and snowflakes with the shades of fallen leaves covered their bones of steel. Rain came often, washing away all the bright colours, the teal of the curtains, the pink of the gauze, the fluorescent orange of the candy wrappers. Soil softened the scattered bits of plastic and chunks of stone.

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It took me quite a long time to understand, if I ever managed to understand at all. It is so impossible to know anything for certain.

At first, I spent days and days wondering if I was watching a battle or a love affair - if the plants love the human things, why do they tear them into pieces? If they hate them, why do they hold them so tightly with their green vines? Is the world sad and angry with itself for making humans disappear? Did it create the hidden zone for the plants to convince themselves that they are stronger than the human things?

These questions made my head ache, but what really drove me crazy was the mystery of my position. I just could not bear the thought of me being a small, unfortunate mistake, a slip made by the world while it was getting rid of humans. But at the same time, the idea of me being chosen for a special purpose made me very sad, for I thought I had failed the world by not knowing what I was meant to do.

Anyhow, one day, I was just looking at a long piece of glass that protruded from the earth. It was half covered in ivies on the bottom, and there was a faded plastic bag hooked at the top. It looked like a very strange mushroom, and all of a sudden, it occurred to me that I could try to make a real mushroom out of it. I used my long nails to cut the plastic bag into round pieces. Then, I stuck a small straight twig into the earth and layered the pieces of plastic on top of it. I took the glass, climbed onto a tree, and threw it down. It smashed and turned into tiny shimmering bits. Licking them to make them stick, I made a pattern on my plastic mushroom with the broken glass and pieces of dead leaves.

I thought nothing of it at the time. But soon after, more plastic mushrooms, identical to the one I made, sprang out of the earth.

I realised then that perhaps it is a very complicated feeling. Maybe the world loves humans, but is angry with them at the same time. Maybe it is very sad about having to remove them, so it kept their things in hidden places.

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I think my mushroom must have cheered up the world a little since it made more of them. So I started making other plants, like flowers of torn fabric, trees of rubble and rusted metal. The world duplicates everything I made, though it seems to like the mushroom much more than the others.

It is a bit like the growth of plants, very gradual and quiet, but so powerful too. Every day, I feel a little happier. The idea of me being the confidant, a kind of caretaker of the world, is still sinking in. I still find it so hard to believe, but it is in a good way. And the hidden zone starts to look a little less sad, less empty, as glass flowers and metal trees emerge among the natural plants, replacing the decaying buildings.

CRACK!

The thunder rattles my skull.

'Let's go!' I say.

'No,' says Liv, her face hidden in the gloom.

It was fun ten minutes ago, when we pulled the cover over the rusty, musty, battered swing seat with us still inside it, like caterpillars in a cocoon. Back then it was just a summer game, like the ones we played every year. Now even the skeleton trees outside in the garden have stopped pointing accusingly, and are hunkering down.

Pat, says the rain. Pat-pat. Pat-patter-patter-patter. Too many slick pennies on our garden hideout to count. We lie, heads at opposite ends of the seat, feet touching in the middle, rocking in the wind. A crackle comes from Liv's end of the seat.

'What have you got?' I ask, sitting up.

Something small and hard lands on my chest. I hold it up to a fingernail of light poking through the ripped rain cover.

'Holy fuck Batman!'

Liv laughs.

The weathered gold wrapper still glints, and I can read the faint words 'Treacle Toffee'.

'Where'd you find these?'

She stops laughing, and I don't ask again. I just hold the sweet to my nostrils and inhale. It smells like plaster dust at first, but on the second breath it smells like watching an old film, or sitting in front of a warm fire. I scrape the paper off and hold the sticky hardness to my tongue. Reds and greens and blues go off in my head. I must have made a sound because Liv laughs again. I can't remember if it's been longer since I heard her laugh or since I last ate sugar - probably about even.

'They were in a tin under my gran's bed,' She sucks on her own sweet. 'She probably hid them from Mum. Too many of these would've put her in a coma.'

FLASH!

I shiver, and count. 'One...two...three...fou-'

RUM-RUMBLE-BLE-KABOOM!

'Chill out. It's miles away Hannah,' says Liv.

I hope she's right.

She's usually right.

When she walked into the playground at five years old she said we'd always be best friends even though she climbed trees and I couldn't, she shouted and I whispered, and she always left the path when I wanted to stay on it. We're like apples and cheese, jam and peanut butter, my old cat and dog - we just work somehow.

Seven years later, here we still are. What's left of us.

I finally pop the toffee into my mouth. The rush is nearly too much.

Another rumble shakes the swing seat.

'It's just God playing marbles,' I say.

Liv snorts. I'm glad it's too dark in our makeshift tent for her to see me blush.

'God's a bastard,' she says.

'You can't say that!'

'Who says?'

'Well... God I suppose.'

The rain hammers harder and the wind blows, but I daren't look out through the rain cover in case God blinds me.

'You've annoyed him now.'

'Idiot!' Liv shouts, sitting up and tickling my foot. I lunge at where I think her armpits should be in payback, setting the whole seat swinging like a tyre on a rope.

God confirms how upset he is with more lightning, spotlighting the black circles under Liv's eyes, her dirty fingernails, and her mud-speckled feet. I want to get a hot cloth and Mum's green apple soap and clean her up, but I can't think about that too hard because it hurts my chest. We stop tickling and sit next to one another.

'Will it strike us?' I ask.

'Nah. Anyway, our p-parents are only in the h-house. We're safe.'

‘But—’

Liv puts her finger on my lips before I can burst our bubble. ‘Finish your sweet sweetie.’ She leans into me, humming random notes like she used to sometimes in class, and rests her head on my shoulder.

CRASH-RUMBLE-RUMBLE!

She hums louder.

I push the toffee against my teeth with my tongue. For as long as it takes to melt, we hold each other and we make believe.

We make believe there’s still a street beyond this garden, with just-washed family cars parked on liquorice tarmac drives next to neatly-mown lawns watched over by red-brick houses.

We make believe we dreamed the wildfires and the floods.

We make believe we didn’t lose everyone else we loved.

Under our swing seat, the useless soil sucks up yet more rain. Around us, the empty ruins of our old world — the skeleton trees, Liv’s old house, the burnt-out cars — crumble just a little bit more.

Overhead, God ignores us and plays his game.

# Happy Birthday, You Geriatric POS

Jan Johnson

*A more burning issue for straw voters in Dover, perhaps?* [ten letters]

Dave mulled on the clue, one hand down his denim cut-offs, grooming his wild mane of pubic hair with finger combs.

The gory Rorschach residue of his *eggs ala Brenda* (poached eggs swimming in hot sauce) was giving some exotic peninsula (*the Cape of Good Horn?*). The thickly striped lawn beyond his dangling sandal was giving centre court, its crisp emerald slithers runwaying to the garden's centrepiece - a spidery apple tree garrotted by cheese wire vines – the applaudable swinery of next door's ivy.

Brenda swept across the patio, stooping to conquer his dirty plate. Dave treated his wife to a playful smack on the arse. She turned towards him on his prized recliner in the suntrap corner (North Facing), unleashing an appreciative wince.

*Odds on for that afternooner.*

"Jesus", he thought, "Fifty-eight and I've still got that in my locker."

He smirked his glasses foggy so he couldn't see the mostly blank cryptic crossword that had foiled him again. He didn't really get the logic, but he'd wade in regardless, fumbling around for red letters in the smoke.

"What's the plan for today then, Bren' Bren'?" he bellowed.

"Erm," she hesitated, amateurishly. "I thought we'd get you a takeaway later? From 'A Taste of India'?"

*It set her IBS off, but they did do chips.*

"Ooo, full marks! Breakfast should have worked its way through by then. What else?"

"Well, what would you like to do, darling?" she grinned and grinned.

"I rather thought you might surprise the birthday boy," Dave pouted, the first flicker of doubt cast on his stirring perversions.

"You said you wanted to do a tip run?"

"Nooo, I said I'd *have* to do a tip run. Those Ikea boxes in the garage you somehow missed with the recycling - they're a fire hazard y'know?"

His wife's footsteps receded, rocking the loose patio slab she knew full well to avoid.

*Was she having a go?*

He regarded his tree through the blur of agitation. It snaked and writhed skyward, shucking at the ivy shackles wrought by the injustice of proximity. It was primordial and arresting in its cruelty, like some barbed-taloned bird and razor-tongued pike locked in a mortal battle, spiralling above a bitter, rusted ocean. Still, it persisted, and come Autumn, it would be lousy enough with apples, not a prolific crop like the glory years, but enough for Brenda to polish off a Sunday lunch with one of her trademark crumbles.

But no, Dave didn't mind the ivy, as long as it was understood that it would be a boundary issue if he *chose* to mind it, which he'd made clear to John at number six when he'd collared him washing his clearly leased car, spraying suds on Brenda's anniversary roses.

"Morning, Dave," John's breezy boom seeped through the fence cracks.

All he wanted was a bit more control and recognition that if it was a problem, it was his problem specifically.

"Morning yourself, John," he rallied magnanimously.

*Woke up bald again?* he appended mentally.

The storybook playhouse jammed next to the tree ruined the moment. It was peeling, the rubber roof ripped off half away by an unseasonable storm (*which had always been part of the climate, but let's blame motorists and hard-working farmers, and bloody cows, even!*).

They'd inherited the plywood monstrosity, painted gloopy green with a pink trim, from the former occupants. Seb (the toddler) was taken by it, turning it into a little cottage-cum-kitchen with floral curtains, their solitary little boy becoming fixated with cupcakes and customers and his own make-believe company. Dave had put a stop to that, chiding Barbara for raising a fantasist. Now, it was a shed, on stilts, the stairs rotted away, the floorboards damp and treacherous and ripe with tetanus.

*It needed skipping.*

He could see an ornamental pond there, infested with fat carp. He could see himself barefoot, under a floppy straw hat, poking at them with a long droopy stick.

His phone buzzed. It was his perfectly calibrated *Ring* doorbell app – coveted by the neighbourhood *WhatsApp* group (which he was the main admin for).

The postie rattled the letterbox, trying to force the junk and the bills through with his cards, no doubt. Dave was up, clearing the patio with a spritely jog, a subtle gut poking at his polo shirt, but he could still walk around with his top off to mostly positive reviews.

*Looking trim Dave, they'd say at the rugby club.*

“Yes thank you!” Dave shouted at the postie. “Happy to help you do your job if you’d only knock!”

He not-quite-slammed but certainly didn’t *not* close the door in the young man’s face, which had an actual tattoo actually on it. He shook his head at Royal Mail’s screening process as he shuffled through the pile, binning the letters stamped NHS for the lady who used to live here and surely must be dead by now, coming at last to a red envelope. A straggler.

“Ah, I’ve got one from the young prince, Bren Bren!” he projected upstairs. “Our last-minute Larry, quell surprise!”

“What?!”

Dave refused to repeat himself, settling back in the suntrap. He savoured the moment, feeling the quality of the paper. *Not a Cardzone job this.* It was clearly bespoke, from a family run independent shop, most probably, specialising in Egyptian cotton twine and healing crystals.

He slid the offering out with forensic glee.

*Happy Birthday, You Geriatric POS.*

The words blazed in a thick serif font, punching him repeatedly in the face.

His hands quivered as he prised inside.

*Happy Birthday, Dad. Love Seb.*

It was plainly put. No kiss.

He closed it. Scanned it, front to back, in case he was missing something.

*Happy. Birthday. You...*

The last part was an assumption, he realised. He was missing the meaning.

*POS?*

*Point of sale?*

*Point of sale!*

*Point of sale??*

*It was a joke!*

*Was it a private joke? Was he supposed to be in on it?*

Seb didn't really instigate conversation these days. Dave would quiz him on what he knew. What his nine grand was paying for. What exactly Sociology was and what jobs it would get him.

But they did laugh. They had laughed, certainly. Together, or in close proximity.

*But if it's a joke, you surely say it's a joke?*

"Dave..." Brenda trilled from the kitchen. "Is it a nice one?"

"Yeah. Well, it's just a card."

"Alright, do you want me to put it with the rest?"

"No. I haven't finished reading it."

"Right. Fine. I'm going to the shops, do we need anything?"

"Just do a quick cupboard audit, keep our stocks up. Hang on, you're going to the shops now?"

"Yes. Is that alright?"

"It's my birthday."

"Yes. And I said if you want to do anything, we can. And then you said you were planning a tip trip. That's hardly a two-person job."

"Alright, well, don't be forever."

"I'll be back in an hour. I'll text if I'm going to be longer."

"See you in one hour."

The front door closed. Slammed, even. *Was that a dig?*

Dave watched her pull away on his phone app. The odds-on afternoon withered.

He tensed the card in his trembling grip. *This was beneath him.* He backed out of the rip, flip-flopping to the bin.

*If Brenda found it there...*

His sinuses stung. He beeped on the cooker's induction hob, trying and failing to warm a corner.

He followed his lurching stomach to the garage, crab walking along the immaculately labelled boxes of his filing system - F for firefighters. They were out. His domain - he couldn't blame Brenda for a sloppy audit this time.

He stuffed the loose cardboard stacked against the wall into the hollow of a fire pit, lugging and scraping the concave metal cauldron to the back of the garden.

In the kitchen – a matchbox – one match. *That was sloppy. That was on Brenda.*

He weighed the probability. The wind. The agency of the measly phosphorus head.

The petrol lawnmower winked at him from under the defunct playhouse.

He wheeled it backwards, unscrewing the cap, lugging it over his head like a circus strongman, tipping the pungent fuel onto the strips of *Kleppstad* and *Vilhatten* packaging. His back twinged. He dropped the machine, slopping petrol on the blameless grass and his stalwart tree.

He *hated* the ivy. The vines, *the swines*. They *were* a problem. They were an intrusion, an abomination, beyond the velvet rope of his curation.

“Hey, John!”

Nothing.

“John!”

Dave dipped a nearby stick into the petrol hole, flicking the noxious liquid on the ivy. On the fence. On all the unforgiving, hairy feelers groping at his private place.

He struck the match. Held his breath. Dropped it in the cauldron, closely topped with the slur from his progeny.

*Happy Birthday, You Geriatric...*

His phone trilled. Dave saw the name, which he’d changed after a fortnight’s worth of radio silence over an obvious joke anyone would have taken as such.

## PRODIGAL SON

“Hi Dad.”

“Hello Seb. How are you?”

“Good! I’m just ringing to say happy birthday! Are you having a good one?”

“Not bad.”

“Did my card come?”

“Yes. I got it,” Dave replied like a Turing Test automaton.

“Right. Cool. Did you scan the QR code?”

“Err, no. No, I didn’t see it.”

"You know QR codes? You point your phone and --"

"Yes, I know QR codes. I'm actually pretty tech savvy. I had an iPhone before you. I've set up a *Ring* doorbell, all by myself! You've heard about teaching your granny to suck eggs?"

"*Eggs ala Brenda* is that, Dad?"

Dave bristled. "I don't know what you mean."

"Well, I got you gardening vouchers, anyway. I hope you can make use of them."

"I'm sure."

"You still like your gardening?"

"I like lots of things, Seb. I have lots of interests, as a person and... and feelings as well. I rather thought you might be coming back to show your face, with it being a bank holiday."

"Dad, I live in Brighton."

"No, you *study* in Brighton. You *live* here."

"It's a long way! And it's expensive! Come on, Dad, fifty-nine isn't a big one."

"Fifty-eight! And I was more talking about seeing your mum. I would have paid for your ticket if you'd only asked, no matter the cost. I mean, off-peak. Within reason."

"I promised I would help Josh move."

"Ah," Dave pontificated. "*Now* we get to it. You could have brought your boyfriend here. Your mum would love to meet him."

"Is mum there?"

"Well, this is my phone, so if you want her you should call --"

"I have! She didn't pick up! Hence...this!"

They sat in the guts of the silence, listening to each other erode.

"She has met Josh, by the way," Seb broke.

"When?!"

"Dave!" a middle-distance boom interrupted.

“When she went to stay with Auntie Christine in London, to help her after the operation. She popped over for the day.”

*“Dave!”*

“Why wouldn’t she say?”

*“Dave! What are you --?!”*

“I’m on the phone to my son, do you mind shutting up, John?!”

Dave flounced inside, sliding the patio door closed – too smooth a mechanism to be a slam, but as good as.

“Dad... you sound pissed off about something?”

“And you know me so well, do you?”

“Is it... is it the *card*?”

“The card? The card is... just a card, Seb. I thought I’d see you, at least. I wanted for us to --”

“Oh listen,” Seb cut him off at the knees, “just... enjoy your day, okay? Send my love to mum. Tell her I’ll call later.”

“Seb, hang on. Hang on, I...”

Dave turned to the garden for inspiration.

It was all on fire.

The lashing flames from the metal pit had lapped at the emancipated tree and the grass and the playhouse, flickering and strafing from fence to fence, nibbling the icing of the accelerant and sinking its blackened teeth into the whole bucolic cake.

“Shit!”

“Dave, man! What the bloody hell?!” John’s muffled protestations ebbed through the double glazing.

Dave skittered across the laminate, searching vainly under the sink for a bucket. He ran the tap, soaking a tea towel of Brighton pier, the provenance of which he could now trace to his traitorous wife.

“Shit... shit...”

*A bath towel. The hose pipe. Think logically, you fool.*

*You shit.*

*You piece of shit.*

He remembered Sunday rugby in the rain. Seb at seven, sodden and caked in mud, burying into his mother's endless shoulder. Dave had carried on to spite him, coaching other people's children, pints with more resilient kids' dads in the clubhouse on long weekends and extended tours without him.

*You geriatric piece of shit.*

His own dad hadn't made fifty-eight, with his welder's lung, and his small yard, and his pebble-dashed end terrace in the pit village he was born in. He wouldn't see him take the torch and turn it to soft office chairs, and suburbia, and early retirement to enjoy the spoils. How far he'd carried that flame. How carelessly he'd fumbled the home stretch.

Dave climbed the stairs, then kept climbing, up the ladder, to the loft.

He sat on the floor, boarded and carpeted in anticipation of their conversion. He'd just secured planning permission for a dormer on appeal, a battle he'd won with the council, ousting the overly officious Chair of the Planning Committee for good measure.

Black smoke belched into the sky, wistfully tarmacking the quilt blue squares of the skylights.

His phone buzzed. His *Ring* app filled with John's fat folded baldy head, glowing ruby red as he hopped across the yellow brick driveway. More heartless neighbours with pitchforks congaed behind him.

Dave scanned the sea of boxes - *Christmas, Easter, Halloween*. The one at his elbow was a memory box, curated by Brenda, dedicated to their son - the bits of him that stuck around.

He prised open the hermetically sealed plastic lid. It brimmed with Seb, the relics of his becoming. Photos and notebooks and certificates of their studious little boy with his unsnuffable light, and unfathomable inner life, and surplus sense of self amidst the cryptic crises of triviality he'd endured.

Through the ascending squeals of sirens, the more burning issue resolved itself.

Dave didn't comprehend how he was supposed to get there, but it fit, like straw voters in Dover.

Ten letters. Ten white squares, cajoled uniformly, going south, buffeted by the voided charcoal verges.

*I-M-M-O-L-A-T-I-O-N*

Beck is standing at the bedroom window, looking out across stunted crop fields at the spring-into-autumn sunset lying leaden on the horizon, when Sareh comes in and tells him she wants to leave.

This first time, he's startled. In the days ahead, when the intensity of her need becomes clear, all he can do is settle into a kind of helpless fugue as if he doesn't even hear what she's saying.

\*\*\*

It's summer she needs, of course. Something that Threequarter Lane can't provide. The year persists with three seasons picking up the slack of an absent fourth: winter subsides into spring which builds softly, taking its time, teasing its promise, only to tumble again into the arms of autumn.

The residents live in low homes set far back from a single-track road. They see each other rarely. The mile-long curve both begins and ends at the rook tree; there are no other roads, no side streets or shortcuts or signposted trails, and so the place has no other name.

Beck and Sareh had arrived separately, almost a year apart. They encountered one another by chance and fell easily into whatever has been between them since. She holds deep admiration for his courtesy and restraint, then as now. He envies her limber wit and easy laugh, edged with melancholy as it has been since that day. Each of them has held tight to the reasons for their presence. Unsolicited honesty, here as anywhere, brings risk.

People find their way to the lane for many reasons. A few, Beck and Sareh have mused more than once in the quiet of each others' arms, are lost in dissociation following some kind of trauma. A handful maybe did unthinkable things, out there in the world in the swelter of July or the long drag of August, and have no intention of being reminded.

Maybe the rest of them just hate the warmth and the brightness. Maybe they found out it was never for them.

\*\*\*

Do you love me? Sareh asks, the fourth or fifth time Beck tries to dead-end the conversation.

He half-shrugs. You know, he says.

She weighs him down with a stare, but won't walk away.

Help me go, Beck, she sighs. It's been years. I'm ready.

\*\*\*

But by the time they reach the carving at the extremity of Threequarter Lane - the great rook on its hedgerow elm, wing unfurled along one branch, half-swallowed by moss now and dismal in the rain – Sareh has become inconsolable. She raves and rails and curses Beck for bringing her there. The explosion of emotion paralyses him as she takes her bags and hurls them into the ditch.

All he can do is let her go, watching hopelessly as she turns and races back up the lane as if hunted.

\*\*\*

They try again and keep trying, always in vain. They talk about it in small verbs and brittle nouns, blaming setbacks on the non-season, assuring each other that things will realign in autumn proper. It doesn't happen.

Eventually Sareh can't even make it to the rook before something inside her breaks. She can't explain it. Her desperation sits raw and mutinous on the surface.

I need the sun, she whispers. The real sun. I just need to see her again.

Days pass, weeks, and she becomes more and more absent. Beck can't understand where she goes when she leaves. It can't be anywhere good.

He also can't tell her that he's seen all this play out before, and knows how it ends.

\*\*\*

It's not easy to accept that Threequarter Lane is his own ending. But even though it catches and rakes at his insides, like swallowing something bird-sized and barbed, there is no other resolution.

When he's made his peace, he waits for one of Sareh's absences. She doesn't walk out any more; she just fades when he turns his head, and is gone when he turns back.

Beck doesn't think she notices the quick catch, the falter, in his voice during their last exchange.

He searches numbly for a knife in the kitchen, realising as he does that they've never eaten in this house. It doesn't matter. He doesn't need one.

Beck sits at the window in the deepening dusk and lays his forearm along the sill. He takes a breath and presses hard into the palm. Wan light pools around his fingertip. He feels the flesh part, draws his finger all the way up to the elbow, watches it come spilling out.

There isn't much in him. He hopes it's enough. When Sareh resurfaces, he won't be here, but the house will thrum with summer just this once and he imagines it suffusing her, awakening her, giving her all she needs.

Tomorrow she'll reach the rook again. Tomorrow she won't stop. Beck believes it.

He smiles as the light in the room begins to build, obscuring his reflection in the window.

He believes it, because he has to.

## Words That Have Carried Across the Water

Sam Alex

Somewhere on the exposed Antarctic shelf, that flat expanse of Precambrian bedrock that was once under water, stands a boy named Bird. He is named Bird because birds are magnificent; the folklore says so. Red birds once spread the tidings of the dead to their grieving relatives. Speckled, sooty, and smoke white gulls led men thought lost to the seas back inland. Yellow birds went underground and ate up all the bad oxygen. The birds were wonderful, they were everywhere - in the trees, on the plains, and on the tongues of waves. You could not be alone in a world of birds. You could be alone now, of course, because there are no more birds. The soul of everything that dies is just its story, and the story of the birds went on and on and someone told bird souls to the boy's great great grandmother, then great grandmother, then grandmother, and then his own mother. And so, his mother named him Bird.

"What have they brought you today?" asks Fawn.

A fawn is a word for the young of a type of extinct mammal, but Fawn is much older than Bird. Fawn is an elder, but she is not Bird's elder, that is to say they are not blood relatives and do not live in the same limestone cut shelter. Fawn comes to the edge of the continent just as Bird does, just as everyone does, to look for messages from the Highest Ones. They could not run fast enough from the world flood, the Highest Ones, or they did not have the means to board the great machinery of old to leave earth as the Ascended Ones. The Highest Ones took their refuge on the tallest slope in the world, on Sagarmatha, with the last of the snow leopards. They are waiting there now, but it is thought that they have forgotten all their mechanics and their sciences, that they cannot remember how to cross the Ocean of Earth. The Highest Ones have never stopped sending messages. It is up to the Found Ones to decipher the messages and to await their return. The Found Ones are descended from those who were sequestered in a forgotten station of research. Their forbearers were ocean minded people of instruments that survived the flood. Here, on the last continent, a blue, metal capsule became an unexpected incubator.

In Bird's wire basket he collects words that have carried across the water, he is still learning to read them. Fawn bends down and pulls from the basket a small, hard circle. There are many such circular messages found, in various reoccurring colours, but this particular message is green. You can fit your thumb inside these messages like a minuscule hat, and the messages have inner threads you can run your nail along. These specific messages mean wait, it must be so because there are so, so many of them. The elders will like that another has been found, they are such a comfort these days for all that is plentiful is saline water. There is such little seed to spare and what is planted brings such small harvest, and occasionally what is harvested is eaten by the insatiable and explosive population of gnats. When they are desperate, the Found Ones, they wade into the coursing waters off the peninsula and chew on cochayuyo; the forests of kelp that do thrive. It is not the easiest fare to obtain, the waters can be changeable, and none seem able to predict their will as their forbearers could. Bird runs his hand in the water's lapping edge. His fingers are like pincers, needling the small hiding spaces in the metavolcanic rock. He is a beacon that never stops searching. He feels something malleable

embedded in a crevice beneath the cold water. This message feels like toughened skin. He pries it out with both hands. He looks behind himself and sees Fawn is looking up at the fissured sun. It is a message he has not seen before. The message is small and covered yellow, though its yellow is pulled away in places exposing a dulled beige beneath. Bird knows by its shape, by the encyclopedic drawings at the base of the Antarctandes mountain range, that this message is shaped in his namesake. But he does not know which one - which bird is this? He does not know its species; he does not know its story. He runs his fingertips along the rubber shape from its beak to its bulbous head and sloping neck, flaring out to a wide base and short tail. Is this a message just for him? What does it say? What a terrible thing it is to not be able to speak in a language you are spoken to. But who has spoken to the Highest Ones, that they should know his name? Perhaps they are watching. Bird looks out at the water expectantly but sees only dark waves.

"We will have a story tonight, after the fire," says Fawn.

Bird hides the rubber artifact, covers it with his hands. "Which one?" he asks.

"Which one would you like to hear?" Though Bird longs to be unsupervised, to be free to explore the edge of his world, he knows Fawn to be kindly.

"The one about the ship captain painted in his coat, who sailed and found the seals and walked on ice." This is Bird's favourite story. The man in the story is called James and that is an unusual name to have. There was nothing of sustenance that grew on the once known trees nor any mammal that ran wild in the once common meadows that was ever called James that Bird had heard of. Bird also liked to imagine the ice sheets that stretched so far and ran so deep they could be walked upon. Fawn beckons Bird to his feet. As Bird stands, as he reverently lifts the shoddy wire basket full of precious messages, he slides the rubber message in his pocket.

They walk in silence, Fawn and Bird, towards the familiarity of gray stone cut jagged and stacked, a labyrinth of small dwellings on the horizon. The shelters grow larger and larger - an optical illusion, the shelters are not growing at all, only Fawn and Bird are moving closer. A man in bundles of cloth, wrapped over and over as though he himself were a wound, is ambling on the shoreline just before the domestic sprawl. He is a familiar sight. His name is Lichen, and he is building a raft. Fawn looks past Lichen, towards home. It is not understood why Lichen is impatient to meet the Highest Ones. The Highest Ones have never asked those of the Found Ones to leave; to meet them. The messages say wait, they say floods, they say unsafe. These houses they are safe, they do not flood, and there is time enough to wait. That is what Fawn and Bird do, they go back to their respective houses to be safe, to be dry and to wait for nightfall.

That night Bird lays on his mat holding the mostly yellow message, the one that feels as though it's meant just for him. He endures his least favourite kind of sleep, he doesn't know what it is properly called, but it is the kind where one does not remember falling asleep at all and when their eyes surprise them by opening, they feel less rested for it. The message is still clutched in his hands when he wakes. And when he readies himself for the day, when he is out of the sightline of his family, he slides the message again in his pocket. It seems too special a thing to leave behind. A thing that would feel forlorn trapped inside, all alone, throughout the day. No, that is silly, the message doesn't have feelings.

But it was hard to remember it didn't, when it looked like an animal, a thing Bird knew did. When Bird pulls back the layered carpets of door covering, he finds his world in the lull between the morning and the night. The midnight sun holds fast the sky. The midnight sun reigns the duration of summer here, night's completeness is banished for six months.

Bird walks between the close-knit homes, few people are awake. He walks to the figure crouched at the edge of the world who is checking the knots atop their raft, and he asks:

"Are you leaving?"

Lichen looks up from his handiwork and smiles, "Are you staying?"

Bird doesn't answer, it is a given that he is, the ocean is too big and too wide, and it may be full of horrific things or worse yet, it may be full of nothing at all. Instead, he says, "Do you think you will meet the Highest Ones, all by yourself?"

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that," says Lichen, but he is relaxed and untroubled.

"Then why go if you are not sure?"

"Something is telling me to," Lichen answers.

Bird's eyes go wide, he hovers a hand over his pocket, "A message?"

Lichen smiles knowingly, "No, not a message."

"What if you do not meet the Highest Ones?"

Lichen's strong hands pull on a rope that crosses the raft comprised of jetsam as a chain.

"Someone must go find out, mustn't they?" Lichen says with a playful wink.

Bird understands this to be true, how could anyone know anything if they didn't search for it? He thinks of James, and how James saw a specific kind of seal first, and how James only knew he could walk atop the ice because someone had done so before him. Bird reaches into his pocket; he pulls out the message and hands it to Lichen.

"What is this?" Lichen asks, holding the message as an infant or fine and breakable jewel.

"Something I found."

"And you are willing to part with it?"

Bird nods. He found the message comforting and wants to share that comfort. Somewhere deep, down inside Bird feels a pang, he would like to keep the message and give it away at the same time, something he knows to be impossible.

Lichen leans forward and ties the rubber message onto the raft, securing it in the mass of ropes, it is now either a prisoner or a benevolent figurehead on the prow. Lichen says nothing to Bird as he casts off out into the ocean. Lichen has a pair of metal oars, but he does not use them, relying on the mild current for the moment. Bird watches the raft drift slowly, but soon he finds this makes him sad, so he turns and walks back the way he came. Bird's hand brushes against his empty pocket as he walks.

The morning is only really known by the notation of hours, marked by sand bottles spun upside down each hour at the settlement, otherwise the sun could lie. After all, the midnight sun commands the sky at dawn, noon, and dusk. This morning Bird is not the first to wake, he has allowed himself the luxury of an extended sleep. It is not the light of the midnight sun that wakes Bird but the murmurs. Murmurs of people huddled, people auspiciously talking, people learning, people commiserating, people sharing. Bird finds his family has already risen and left the domicile. He too leaves home, and he walks, curiosity fuelling him, towards the crowd gathered on the shore. Some are crouching, some are standing, some are holding now familiar objects. The dark water is burst with yellow. So many messages. The messages are also in hands; are being passed back and forth and taken in by wide-eyed people. The messages that ebb along the shore, that are taken out a few feet and thrust back in, are hundreds. Some of the elders are crying. Some of the children are wading dangerously in the tide, desperate to scoop up every message lest the currents take them away forever. Bird thought he had lost something yesterday that he was only briefly able to love. His love is now multiplied on the choppy sea, where it smiles, where it is bright. Bird takes off his boots and then his socks, he walks across the rocks barefoot. Does it matter who sends the messages, or just that they are sent? That someone, something, or even just the current remembers small boys who spend their days imagining wings? Did these messages send one of their own ahead to scout the land - just like Lichen on his raft? Bird reaches down and picks up one of the rubber ducks. He can tell by looking at it; this one is tired, this one has come a long way, this one wants to be kept.

## Acknowledgements

Several of the pieces within this anthology were previously published in various literary publications. Trash Cat Lit would like to credit them as follows:

Ellipsis Zine – *Discarded Treasure*

Free Flash Fiction – *Dead Water*

Fairlight Books – *Narnia*

Highlands & Islands Short Story competition – *A Crossing*

Olney Magazine – *For a while there, we were weightless*

Oak Tree Journal – *The Pearl*

Roi Faineant – *The Last Waltz of Arnos Finchley*

## Contributor Bios

**JP Relph** is a comfortably-weird writer and editor from Cumbria, NW England. She loves cats (regular and trash), zombies and thrifting treasure. She's had a crush on Gillian Anderson since the X-Files.

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**Karen Arnold** is a late-blooming writer from Worcestershire via the Black Country. She loves dogs, yoga and the music of Nick Cave. She once saved a man from drowning.

**Sam Alex** is a wandering writer from Canada. She loves forests, beckoning cats, and vintage salt and pepper shakers. She has kayaked the seventh-deepest lake in Ontario.

**Joyce Bingham** is a Scottish writer living in Northwest England. She loves talking to her cacti seedlings, her tomatoes and mandrakes in her greenhouse. She likes going on motorbike holidays but hates having helmet hair.

**Lucienne Cummings** is a hermit-ish writer living in Northeast England. She loves cake, hummingbird hawk-moths, and art galleries. She recently painted her garden shed to look like Frida Kahlo's house.

**Jo Clark** is an unruly writer from the North. She loves crisps, cats and nature wees. She once nearly died in the desert.

**Laura Cooney** is a writer from Edinburgh, Scotland. She loves painting, music, coffee and thrifting. She loves the sea more than any other landscape.

**Malina Douglas** is a curious writer based in Tbilisi, Sakartvelo. She enjoys fog drifting across the mountains, autumn forests with crumbling stone ruins and pumpkin spice lattes. She once visited a snake temple where no incense burns because it irritates the snakes.

**Mairead Fagan** is currently an itinerant writer from both the South West, and North West, UK. She loves mugs, coffee, and mugs of coffee. She recently stood within touching distance of a hare and can't stop telling people about it.

**Shayla Felix** is a homesick writer from Seattle, Washington. She loves tide pools, partly cloudy afternoons, and is addicted to collecting stickers. She has also almost perfected the perfect seagull scream.

**Mathew Gostelow** is a bearded writer from Birmingham. He loves Twin Peaks, cooked breakfasts, and swimming in the sea. He once witnessed Bungle from Rainbow admitting to a violent road rage attack.

**Bronwen Griffiths** is a writer from East Sussex. She loves listening to reggae, drawing cacti and visiting Venice. She once flew in the cockpit of a Hercules aircraft from Libya to Rome.

**Jennifer Gunner** is a coffee-fueled writer from Santa Barbara, California. She loves 90's disaster movies, musical theatre and correcting people on their semicolon usage. She once literally ran into Samuel L. Jackson.

**Terry Holland** is a shambolic writer from darkest Essex. He loves seminal Manchester post-punk group The Fall, Kuon and his black cat, Mackem. Every day he photographs his afternoon cup of coffee.

**Kate Horsley** is a fiction writer from Southwest England. She loves tea, cats, and time travel. She has a side hustle drawing pet portraits with her toes.

**Ian Johnson** is a new writer from Northeast England. He loves Leeds United, Scarborough, and big old castles. He lost on the gameshow 'Pointless' because he thought the former German Chancellor's first name was Andrea.

**Leigh Loveday** is an undisciplined writer from South Wales. He loves old computer games, cats and Highlander. He once interviewed David Tennant while stuck behind a large potted plant. David Tennant was delightful.

**Allan Miller** is a humorous prose writer from Edinburgh. He loves satsuma throwing, tiny lighthouses, and correcting people on their pronunciation of diplodocus. He once spent the night in a non-haunted castle.

**An Mu** is an awful writer from somewhere by the river. She loves forests, Pegasus, and contrapuntal music. She dreamed about riding a blue whale once.

**Allister Nelson** is a queer, neurodivergent writer from Northern Virginia. She loves to drag men to their doom. She has every intention of kissing Mothman someday.

**Clare O'Brien** is a rural writer from the Scottish Highlands. She loves old books, big dogs and wild swimming. She once shared an 18th century house in Norfolk with a mischievous poltergeist.

**Gill O'Halloran** is a thalassophilous writer from London. She loves birdsong, peanut-buttered toast, and artistic licence. She once laughed so much her belly button went from innie to outie.

**Kate Peel** is a mostly diurnal writer from the Mixedwood Plains. She loves cinnamon buns, fur-bearing trout lore, and the raucous laughter of seagulls. She's convinced that she's met cat sith.

**Emma Phillips** is an easily distracted writer from Devon. She loves the sea, car boot sales and crisps. She once shook the Dalai Lama's hand.

**Mike Piero** is a bisexual writer from Cleveland, Ohio, USA. He loves his partner and daughter, video games, and tinkering around the house. He built his daughter's crib and full-size bed by hand out of pine boards.

**Sarah Royston** is a semi-feral writer based in Hertfordshire. She loves badgers, lichen and plant-lore. When practising Aerial Tree Yoga, she likes to imagine she's a bat.

**Justine Sweeney** is an Irish writer from Belfast. She loves chickens, is highly suspicious of cats, and collects selfies with Daniel O'Donnell. She drinks her Guinness with a dash of blackcurrant, but shhhhhhhh don't tell anyone.

**Dreama Weaver** is a historical fiction writer from Florida. She loves Taylor Swift, Dungeons and Dragons, and The Sims. She bet herself that she would get published if she just kept submitting, and here we are!

You can find more about our anthology contributors on our website.



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