

# WorldGUMBO

## S i l e n c e

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Submissions are open for issue four until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2011. The theme is ‘Water.’  
See our website for details of how to submit.

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## Editorial

Welcome to the fourth issue of *Word Gumbo*.

First I feel I should apologise for the late publication of this issue. Gumbo Press, the people behind this magazine, is run by four editors who volunteer their time and expertise for free. As such, sometimes, the jobs we do to actually make money sometimes get in the way. We try to avoid this (work taking over, that is, not making money) but it is occasionally unavoidable. And, well, this is what happened. November, our reading period, became swamped with real-life and as a result this issue got pushed back. We're sure you understand, and thank you for your patience.

With all that said, here, at last, is the latest issue, and once again it's a corker. We asked for your interpretations of the theme 'Silence' and you didn't shirk your task. Keeping your silence was the last thing you did and we again had bumper crop of submissions leading to another rich issue full of the very best poems, stories, flashes, non-fiction and a script. We hope you enjoy them.

Our next issue—with a deadline to coincide with the end of 2011 (Dec 31st at midnight) - is on the theme of 'Water' and we have already had a huge response. But where's your piece? Yes, you. Have you sent something? Why not? Christmas Day sounds like a perfect time to write. A little quiet... a little downtime... a mince pie to fuel the mind... Go on, write us something and make the next issue as good as it can be.

Of course, with the end of year in sight, we're thinking about 2012 and the second year of Gumbo Press. There are plans in the pipeline to move beyond *Word Gumbo*, and we will be doing our bit for National Flash-Fiction Day too (May 16th, more info at <http://nationalflashfictionday.co.uk/> ), so make sure you are signed up to our Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/gumbopress>) or our blog (<http://gumbopress.blogspot.com/>) for more details as and when we finalise our plans.

In the meantime, from all of us here at *Word Gumbo*, can we wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Here's to a prosperous, successful and Gumbo 2012!

**Calum Kerr**  
Editor

## Istituto Canossiano

Carole Bromley

The house says *Be still and know  
that I am God.*

I say *Can I?*

The house says *Listen.*

I say *What time is breakfast?*

But the house, which does not speak  
my language, says *Fasting is good  
for the spirit.*

I say *I need...*

*Ah yes, reply the walls  
...to check my phone,  
find an internet café, send cards.*

The house says *I make the rules,  
I write them in Italian above your bed,  
in the kitchen, on the walls of your heart.*

I say *Prego?*

*You're learning fast*  
says the house. *Avanti. Piu lentamente.*  
*This is a non-running order. While we walk  
we listen to the Word.*

*Non capisco,* I reply  
and listen instead to the breeze  
in the leaves, leather on stone,  
a plane like distant thunder, trainers  
like bare feet walking on sand.

I hear women's voices, then silence.  
Just my own words queueing  
for release, or rather, in the Italian way,  
getting to know one another in my head.

*Va bene*, says the house.

## Incubus

Maté Jarai

Rain patters on the sheet iron and flows along the rusty grooves, falls in a spray onto the concrete below. The man sits under his shelter and watches the water pour down, and it's like peering through a thin waterfall. The world on the other side is distorted, fluent, easier to take in.

He's dressed in a long duffle coat that he found by the railway tracks. Under it he has a woollen jumper, a baseball cap on his head. His hair and beard are long and thick, his eyes are sharp and blue. He looks old, wrinkled, though he's not that old at all; too many days in skin wrenching sunshine, too many nights in icy, wet wind.

He lights a roll-up with a match, tokes long and hard, warming his brittle fingers. He pulls a watch face from his duffle coat pocket, the straps long gone, the glass on the face scratched, cracked. It's time.

He rises to his feet and passes through the waterfall into the world on the other side. The clouds in the sky are dark and heavy, the rain falls straight, a windless evening. He moves out from the overpass and climbs the stairs to the road above, heads down it towards the city.

The streets are dead, only the occasional car passes by, screeching on the damp tarmac. The man plods slowly but with purpose. Rain water seeps into his worn boots and his feet are soon drenched, his hair soaked, his blue hat turning darker.

He sits on a bench outside the library and waits, watches the buildings in front of him rise high into the sky, checks his watch again. He starts to worry, glances around, and all the while it rains, it pounds down over him, while the rest of the world hides in safety, in dry warmth.

She comes out from the library a few minutes later, a girl, aged around twenty. He sees her immediately but doesn't get up, just sits as she opens up her umbrella and hurries off down the road. When she's a safe distance away he finally gets up and steps after her, moving along the curb, avoiding puddles on the pavement and the road either side.

She stops at the next crossing, waits for a bus to pass, then rushes across, her long hair bouncing up and down on her shoulders. He crosses behind her, moves quickly to keep up, tearing across the street.

She heads down into a pedestrian subway, that tunnels under the busy intersection above. He follows her down carefully, keeping his distance. Below, yellow light is strong and false, the stench of urine strong. A group of young men stand in a circle and stare at her as she moves towards them. Their hoods are up, faces hidden in shadow, but their dark eyes shine in the electric glow, and the man can see their ill intentions immediately.

The girl walks carefully forward, avoiding their eyes, their looming forms.

They call to her, "Hello darling, you look wet. Fancy warming up with us?"

She ignores their calls and one of them steps across, blocking her path through the subway. She's frightened but tries to ignore it, and the hooded figure puts his hands on her shoulders, holding her in place, not letting her carry on. She tries to remove his hands forcefully and they laugh, close in around her.

The man picks a stone up off the ground, rubs his rough fingers over its smooth edges. Then he hurls it, striking one of them in the arm. They quickly turn to face him, giving the girl a chance to run past, out through the far entrance of the subway. There are four of them and they all charge towards the man, who immediately turns and runs up the steps and out into the rain.

His chest heaves and he coughs, gargled and sticky with infection. Back on the surface the rain continues to hammer down, and the sky is almost completely black, illuminated only by the orange light of habitation below.

The hooded figures are stronger, faster, and they catch him, just a few metres from the subway entrance. One of them smacks him to the ground and he curls into a ball. The others arrive and start to kick him; the back of his head, his stomach. He coughs and splutters, moans. They don't stop. They shout abuse and keep kicking. They lean down and punch, with keys between their fingers, sharp metal stabbing into his skin.

Sirens cry out in the dark and the men abruptly stop, charge off into the night like fleeing vultures. The man lies, a wet heap in the road as an ambulance passes. His body aches and he rolls onto his back, writhing, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

He pushes himself up and staggers to the side of the pavement, leans against a metal railing, breathing heavily with his eyes closed. He collapses to the ground again and vomits into a puddle, the liquids mixing and flowing into one another, streaming away down the gentle hill.

On his hands and knees he reaches into his pocket, pulls out his strapless watch. It's almost seven, he must hurry.

He rises again and limps on down the road, through the subway and out the other side. He moves as fast as he can, staggering from his aching head. He coughs and spits blood onto the ground but carries on, un-phased.

He rounds a corner and heads all the way down the lifeless street, passing warmly lit windows, parked cars. At the end of the road he turns onto another similar road. He stops outside the second house and stares up at the windows on the second floor. No lights are on.

As fast as he can, he moves around to the side gate of the house, follows the path to the plot at the back. He cuts straight across the dying grass and pulls himself up onto a brick wall, crying out in agony, his body weak and in heavy pain. He perches on top of the wall and peers through the windows at the back of the house but still, no lights are on, there is no sign of anyone. He stares hard, can barely see past the blanket of rain, the thick haze. But then he spots her, the girl, curled up on her bed by the window, sobbing in the dark. She's clutching something, a photo, though he can't see what it is.

He watches her and amongst the water droplets on his face a tear slides down from the corner of his eye. He aches even more now, a deeper hurt than any beating. But at least she's safe, at least she's out of the rain and home alive, unharmed.

The man climbs down from the wall and straightens his coat, leaves via the gate and trudges back through the rain, towards his sheet metal home. He watches his shadow grow before him as he moves along the road. Another shadow of himself appears and then shrinks, grows, then the next, as he passes under the tightly lined street lights.

He arrives at his shelter and cuts through the waterfall that is thinner now, the rain finally subsiding. He leans against the brick wall at the back and starts to pull apart a pile of rags and blankets. From underneath it all he takes out an old acoustic guitar.

He fingers the wood, the worn strings, rough and frayed. He sits with his legs crossed and starts to pluck a few notes, softly, keeping with the rhythm of the rain, his orchestra.

He closes his eyes and he's years back, a younger man, fresh faced and arrogant, driving on a rainy night like this one. Only it's hotter, the air steamy and thick, as he takes a corner too quickly in his four-by-four.

He doesn't see the young couple as he fiddles with his CD player, trying to find the right song for the moment. The girl steps out into the road and freezes, stunned by approaching headlights. He looks up and spots her, slams the breaks, sends himself swerving. Her partner, a young man, leaps from the pavement and pushes her aside, out of harm's way. She goes crashing down but no longer in his path. But the four-by-four starts to spin and hits the young man side on, at speed.

The man opens his eyes, the icy blue is wet, like a frozen lake. He strums a few times, cradling the guitar, the worn wood, all that's left of who he once was. The rage in him, the sadness, will never quieten down, there will be no silence, not for him, nor for her. But he must do what he can, to make things right, until the day he dies.

## Broken

Rose Topping

The rain soaks her, drenching her skin, plastering her hair to her face. She can't hear it. Her ears are throbbing too much.

She keeps her eyes closed against the hard light of the street lamp. It's too orange. Blood pounds behind her eyes. She's trembling but she doesn't want to think about why. She tells herself it's the cold.

There is no one else here now. He walked away afterwards. She'd screamed but now she has no voice left. Her throat burns as she swallows.

The tarmac scratches her bare thighs, adding to the fresh bruises. The puddle she sits in is stained pink. The mobile in her pocket presses against her waist. She knows what she should do. She should ring that number, report him.

Her scream echoed for so long but now it has gone. The silence surrounds her. If she breaks it, she won't be able to pretend. It will all become real.

## Cloak of Silence: Superwoman

Janet Ross-Pilla

*"Silence is more musical than any song"*

Christina Rossetti

Silence is a way of life. Mimes make money with it. Librarians insist on it. Husbands and wives use it as a weapon. Preachers command it in the name of God. Monks embrace it. And writers praise silence's profound quality through book and song. Yes, silence is a way of life but not necessarily a choice.

There is power in silence but it is the audience that creates expectations—that has an internal dialog shifting aim to fit into their self-assessment. *What is he or she thinking about me? Why are they so quiet? What is it that they know and I don't?* It is internal perception. Perhaps the silent one is naturally quiet, painfully shy or perhaps the adage: *If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all*, applies. Or perhaps cancer has eaten their voice box to ruin.

The latter applies to my daughter, Jocelyn. 'Too young to have cancer' was her doctor's mantra—over and over for more than a year. 'Who has cancer at 26?' Jocelyn did.

She was in terrible pain that escalated rapidly toward the time of discovery. She was in the process of buying a house, preparing for her wedding and the company she worked for had decided to change employee's health insurance in a month's time. She was beyond frustrated with her doctor's latest professional opinion: "Perhaps you should go talk to someone and find out if this pain isn't psychological." Instead, Jocelyn concentrated on the things that mattered most; after all, who has cancer at 26? So, she decided to wait until after the honeymoon before returning to her doctor and insisting on a closer look, even though it couldn't be cancer, but there had to be some reason why she was barely able to breathe or swallow.

He finally ordered a CAT scan and gave her the bad news that day. No doubts. She, her husband, her father and I were all stunned into silence, as unable to breathe as she had been. That silence held fear beyond imagination, anger constrained to the point of overload. Our silence held vehement disbelief, not of its truth, but that a medical doctor could be so inept, could have the power of voice but deny my daughter's. Silence declares war.

Jocelyn went through a 16-hour ordeal in surgery at the Mayo in Rochester, Minnesota, surrounded by good, dedicated doctors. For an interminable 16 hours I silently paced the halls of the hospital counting my dragging steps, memorizing cracks in white tile, praying thousands of words pleading to a God I now disbelieve and, in silence, I acknowledged and respected the invisible bubble encompassing others

like me pacing and crying and begging their God to have mercy on their child, their mother, their father, their spouse. This floor, this wing, this ward was not one where just any old ailment is taken care of: These human beings all had cancer in some devastating degree. Silence seemed the only thing we could safely give each other in support.

To save Jocelyn's life every organ between her upper chest and tongue was removed. They tried to fashion an esophagus out of a strip of muscle from her leg but it didn't take. She has a permanent tube in her stomach for liquid food. Cancer is an ugly, silent villain.

Despite the big C's return threat to Jocelyn's lung a year after her radical throat surgery—more radiation and chemo—cancer has not won. Eighteen months in remission. She has more time.

Silence is her badge of honor. Yes, she does get angry and frustrated when people, mostly behind a store register, assume she is deaf as well as mute by raising their voices to a level of ignorance as shoppers turn to take in the fuss. Why do people do that? Seriously, I wonder at that oddity because I have been guilty of reacting the same way, as if a deaf person will hear me if I just yell. I am so very conscious of how I interact with people today. I do a quick assessment and make no assumptions. Everyone has a story.

There is so much to be conscious of now in this life, the tactile, the audible, sight, smell and the ticking of time: Take no one and nothing for granted. If I forget, I picture my daughter's intense blue eyes silently communicating a world of frustration to those she encounters: *Really? You are seriously assuming I'm deaf and need to yell and create a spectacle?* Attempts to subtract her dignity in increments are presented daily. She refuses to let the bastards get her down. She is a cowgirl of the toughest breed, a horsewoman that gets right back in the saddle when life bucks her off and life's been a bitch.

My daughter has been involved with horses since she was five years old. They are connected to her soul, essential to her healing. Horses know silence. A 'horse whisperer' knows a horse. Horses instinctively read body language, smell fear or love, hear our hearts beating and guide us into their lives so they can heal what ails us. Trainers talk of 'breaking' a horse but they, like my daughter, won't be broken. They heal broken spirits as they hold their own. This has been so for Jocelyn.

Everyday when Jocelyn wakes, she wraps her cloak of silence tight and wears it with pride. She communicates effectively with every ounce (85 pounds on a five-foot frame) of her body language. She speaks volumes with her hands—it's the Greek and Italian in her. A toss of her wrist dismisses the strife and everyday problems of the world: *You have no idea the hell you can survive. Look at me.* My daughter is my hero: She is a Superwoman.

If you want to know how to be a hero, to live life to the fullest, to come back with a vengeance from the pit of hell, just ask her. She'll answer with silence, but you will hear her.

## **Spring**

Tim O'Leary

forces me  
to use words  
I can't control

until I'm  
overwhelmed  
by silence

and wonder  
how words  
ever came at all.

## Let me tell you a thing or two about Philly (a true story)

Simon Sylvester

Where you from?

Where?

Glasgow?

Glasgow like England?

Holy fuck.

Yeah this is a nice car. This is a damn nice car. This is a Caddy, king of the American cars. This is the best car in the whole damn depot. Hey, I tell you something. Back in the day, if you had a Caddy, a Cadillac, it wasn't the only Cadillac in the neighbourhood. It was the only Cadillac in the whole fucking town. Don't you mind my language. Nowadays, everyone's got a fucking Cadillac. Great for getting pussy. Great. Back in the day, it was tough to get pussy, and I wanted pussy so bad. Boy did I want the pussy.

GET OUT OF THE FUCKING ROAD.

Asshole.

Now, if I was young, had a car like this, the pussy would throw themselves at me instead, I'd have to fight em off. Back in the day it was the other way round. You boys here for the pussy? A lot of people come here for the pussy. There's so much pussy in Philly it ain't real. Look at em. All the pussy on the streets. Look. There. There. How about that. She's a great piece of pussy. Pussy in offices, that's what does it for me. All dressed up smart like that. I always beep em when I'm driving the Caddy, wave em over. Sometimes they come. Look at the skirt, boys. Over there. What a piece of pussy. I love the pussy.

You asshole.

Watch it in the bars, though.

ASSHOLE.

ASSHOLE.

Yeah, I tell you that for sure. A lot of guys don't always hang out with their girls. So if you're talking to some piece of pussy, especially in a titty bar, watch for the quiet guy in the corner. You be watching the titties and you be watching the pussy, when you should be watching that mean-looking motherfucker sittin bug-eyed in the corner. He's the one to watch. Never mind the loudmouth, he's just blowin steam. You gotta watch the quiet ones. Take your eye off him and next thing, he hits you with a chair. Boom, boys. Boom. Back of the head, a chair. That's South Philly style. That's just the way it goes. That's the Italian in us. I get it from my grandmama. She slap me round the head, like every day, make me say my prayers. Keep me good. And it worked, too. I miss the old girl you know, she was a good old girl. She kept me right. Philly's got the best titty bars in America, which is pretty much the world. See that corner? I

used to box in Joe Frazier's gym. You know Joe, boys? Joe Frazier? I turned up once with my brother, got in this argument, knocked this kid out. Joe says to me, he says, you know, you ain't so bad for a white guy. So I drove him everywhere after that, to the fights, helped with his business. He ran a limo business, limousines that is. And a coupla car washes. Used to go everywhere with this dame, they was fighting all the time. She was real hard work but oh, she loved him, too, she was crazy about him. It was so beautiful seeing them together. What a piece of ass. Finest piece of ass I ever saw.

OH YOU FUCKING DICKWAD.

YOU ASSHOLE.

Hey, you see that laundromat? I used to date the twins that owned the place. Both of them. One day one of them, next day the other. Yeah, they knew. They was cool. Never knew which was which. I wanted to do em both at the same time, but they said no. They wasn't into that. They both had amazing snatch. Amazing, boys. I could only tell em apart from the snatch. They give head the same way. How about that, boys? Sounds like bull. It's true. How about that. That is for true. I fucked a lot of pussy round here. A lot of pussy. And I still get the pussy, you know, even now. Going down the boardwalk this afternoon with some prime pussy. I met her on Fourth, she was looking in shop windows and I just had to cross the road to check out this prime piece of ass. What a piece of ass, boys. I got a friend's apartment down there. He give me a key. I take her over there and fuck her for sure. She won't know what's hit her. Yeah, I love the pussy. Philly pussy is the best pussy. I love sucking Philly pussy, the taste of it, I love fucking Philly pussy. Yeah, I love Philly.

Hey.

Hey, did you boys ever try a Philly Cheese Steak? You gotta go to Terminal Market, go to Rick's Steaks. Go there. Tell him Carl sent you. He knows me. He give you the best Cheese Steak in Philly. The best, boys. And there's a lot of pussy in the Terminal, too. A real lot. I love Philly. Pussy and Cheese Steak, best in the world.

## A Terrible Hush

Abigail Wyatt

*I'll be loving you, always, I'll be loving you, always.  
When the things you planned,  
need a helping hand,  
I will understand, always.*

Behind the limp and dingy lace, the same song plays over and over: verse after verse, chorus after chorus, the same schmaltzy lyrics and over-blown sentiments drift through the partly open door. Outside on the pavement, as the last note dies away, Cassandra squares her shoulders. She would like to put a stop to this madness but she waits for the inevitable reprise.

Today the sky is seaside-postcard blue and the grass is picture-book green. A marmalade cat sprawls in a sunbeam, all its four white socks in the air. The whole world has been turned upside down: a blackbird warbles wildly in the hedgerow where an unseasonal rosebush, thrown into confusion by the late October sunshine, unleashes the fury of her pent-up passion in three or four perfect, pink buds.

Cassandra loiters on the weed-bedevelled path that divides the shabby, walled garden. Once a mass of riotous colour now it is rank and over-grown. She has come to know this song so well it may never be erased from her memory. Once, it must have been a big success, the top of the pops of its day. Quite when that day might have been, however, Cassandra isn't certain. Most likely, it was just before – or maybe just after – the war. Mrs Bee is a dear but a poorly old thing, not quite ancient but definitely elderly. Probably this is a romantic ditty she remembers from the days of her youth.

The singer is a tenor and, whoever he is, his voice is rich and smooth as dark chocolate. On the other hand, his old-fashioned diction cannot help but make Cassandra smile. It is clipped and polished, very BBC; every word is enunciated; the *t* sounds in particular explode on the ear like tiny bombs.

*Life may not be fair, always.  
I will still be there, always.  
Not for just an hour,  
not for just a day,  
not for just a year  
but ALWAYS.*

The final note dies away and then there is something like silence, enough of it, anyway, that Cassandra is aware of the distant hum of the traffic. A mile or so distant, on the black ribbon of the motorway, the

evening rush hour is building; and because, despite the warmth of the sunshine, really, this is well into autumn, she is conscious of a darkening sky and a warning nip in the air. A plump red admiral brushes past her cheek on its way to a straggling buddleia. The butterfly, which is a one of life's graces, has even less time than it thinks.

This nuisance, of course, doesn't happen every day: it's more like one in every three. Some days Cassandra's tolerance falters and her patience wears dangerously thin. Old Mrs Bee turns the volume up full, and she must have one hell of a system. In still weather with the windows wide you can hear the music for miles.

Cassandra lives just a few yards down the road, her reluctant nearest neighbour. This is lucky for Mrs Bee because Cassandra doesn't care to complain. Cassandra goes shopping and runs the odd errand. She likes to make a social contribution. Many times she has wanted to but she never mentions the noise.

How Mrs Bee puts up with it herself has always been something of a mystery. Perhaps, she doesn't hear it; perhaps she's as deaf as a post. On the other hand, she *must* hear it else why play it over and over? Unless she *can* hear it, the whole business doesn't make sense.

There was one particular time, for example, when Mrs Bee didn't answer the doorbell. Uncertain as to what she should do, Cassandra crept around the back. But, when she opened the door, expecting the worst, there was the old lady in the kitchen. She was oddly dressed in a long purple robe and the music was turned up really loud. It was touching, really, old Mrs Bee lost in a world all her own, her stout, stiff body swaying back and forth, dancing like a girl. Cassandra stood and watched for a while. It seemed too cruel to interrupt her. She was mouthing the words with her grey head thrown back and her rheumy, blue eyes tight shut.

This, in fact, is the real reason why Cassandra keeps her silence. She is torn between her irritation which she sees as entirely justified and a feeling of genuine sympathy for an old girl who has clearly lost the plot. Cassandra figures it's like that for most of us: our business is, at best, distraction. Any amount of meaningless noise is preferable to the alternative. When a silence settles around us, we may be forced to think.

Of course, Cassandra knows that for Mrs Bee things are infinitely worse. Mrs Bee is seventy-five and she lives with her marmalade cat. Who would want to live out their days bereft of human company and affection? What a terrible, terrible hush must descend when the music finally stops.

So Cassie approaches the unlocked door and she knocks before inching it open. 'Hello,' she calls out upbeat and cheery, 'I thought I'd just pop in.'

There is a soft click, a clunk and a whirr, and the same old ballad starts up again. Cassandra flinches and her heart sinks but still she is determined to be nice.

'Now isn't that a lovely old song? Perhaps you can turn down the volume. Just a tiny bit, you know,

just for a minute, while I'm here. I've brought you in your bit of shopping but they didn't have any ginger biscuits. I got you digestives instead. Now shall I make a nice cup of tea?

Cassie fills the whistling kettle and takes two floral mugs from the cupboard. She unpacks several items of shopping and stores the fresh milk in the fridge. She does not hear Mrs Bee's approach nor sense the awful presence behind her. When the music stops, she looks up in surprise at the bread knife now jammed between her ribs.

## **Me, the Poet, and the Englishman**

Linda Freeman

Shut up.

I am lullabied awake—colors kaleidoscope  
in broken angles, stained glass on the floor.  
I press one into my palm till red runs, ruins.

It is precisely this. Care for tea?

Shut up.

The fantasy of formation, of fusion.  
The blending of the benign—beguiling, bewildering.

Bloody wrong. Matter of fact, correctly incorrect.

Exactly.

Crap is the thing we flee from.

Crap, crap, crap.

Crapola.

If we don't disco in the moonlight, are we still moving?

Has God brought you to this?

Why bring him in?

I have lain in a lane in Ireland. I didn't know what would come of it.

What did?

Nothing. Questions.

I have lain in a lane in Ireland. A man on an ancient bicycle rode by.  
He wore a wool cap and blazer. I heard him squeak. He said something  
I didn't hear.

The Irish tongue, thick.

And it was?

He rode away.

Gone.

Just like that.

Then a small boy with a balloon-like head...

A helium head?

An airhead?

No. Big, like a hot-air balloon.

Ah, it helps to be precise.

Or we don't see what you see.

And the boy with the hot-air balloon head said, Have you heard the meaning of life?  
And I said, no. He laughed, asked if I wanted a ride.

But you know what that means!

Yes. Americans get laid, Irish get a ride.

I have lain in a lane in Ireland. There passed a man on an ancient bicycle  
and a boy with a hot-air balloon head.

And they spoke to you.

And you didn't hear.

And they spoke to me and I heard only one and the other vanished. Only the squeak  
of his bicycle.

The squeaky wheel.

Yes.

But that night in a dream—40 thousand old men on bicycles! They whispered  
the meanings of life.

And?

What is it?

Different. Each one.

## A Guy Just Knows

Ron Runeborg

She was mopey, yet angry. Oh it wasn't exaggerated; she's as subtle as a panther on a hunt.

"What's wrong honey" I asked, flinching a bit so as to steel myself for what would surely be a blow-out. She just looked at me and remained silent. Yea, you know the look. Only this one said so many things if it were a mood ring it'd have a pot of gold and its leprechaun inside it.

I guess I should have investigated further, but I figured her silence meant I was her focus; it was something I'd done. As we sat there at the kitchen table I racked my brain for answers; something I might apologize for before she'd need to fashion it into a 2 x 4 and whack me upside the head with it.

It could have been something I'd said; hell, how many hours go by without my inadvertently saying something to tick her off. But I was reasonably certain that the past 48 hours had been gaffe free. In fact I'd been particularly nice to her of late. Just yesterday I'd given her a little Hello Kitty lip gloss for giggles, and she did.

There was something between us that I'd always suspected was a point of friction; my being friends with women. Sure, we discussed it before we married. I just happen to like women better than men. Yes, their minds, not their breasts... necessarily. (I mean I sometimes like their breasts too but not in that way, and I always like their minds more) She says she's fine with that, she doesn't feel threatened at all, she knows I love her; but I've always harbored doubts, even though she has male friends and I'm just fine with that.

So maybe that was it. Maybe the fact that I spent last evening reminiscing about high school glory days with Cindy Statler made her jealous. Maybe she imagined the two of us, you know, intrawebbing body parts. Well, I don't know what to say about that, it's not like I've never thought about it before. But honestly, I've never laid a finger on her, nor would I; probably because I know she'd tell all her friends. No, no, that's not the reason. Oh that must be it. I supposed I should open a discussion about last night to see if that was the cause of her pout. But before I could say a word, she spoke in a teeny, shuddering voice.

"You know that bible study class I do on Saturdays? You know, with Molly and Silva and Rachel and Steph?"

"I do," I replied. "Ruth's circle isn't it?"

"Yea, well, we don't really study the bible."

My heart sank. Maybe she cheated on me once a week. Maybe it was that guy, what's his name, Gerry?

"If you have something to tell me, please just spit it out" I said forcefully.

"The five of us rob banks" she said.

Well, *there* was something I hadn't considered.

## **Creatures of Dreams**

*a short movement play*

Evan Guilford-Blake

**Creatures of Dreams** employs a cast of three women and three men, of any ages and types. All should move well.

The action takes place on a bare stage. Choreography, music and lighting should be used as extensively as circumstances allow.

**Setting:** A bare stage. MUSIC -- perhaps a passacaglia -- up.

FIRST MAN

In the night we come.

FIRST WOMAN

In the silence of your sleep

FIRST MAN

Through the shadows of your hopes

FIRST WOMAN

The twilight of yesterday and tomorrow

FIRST MAN

We come

FIRST WOMAN

(The stage FLOODS with LIGHT.)

(Suddenly)

In flashes of bright light

FIRST MAN

Like rainbowed silent movies

FIRST WOMAN

Or patchwork quilts of the future loomed on the past

FIRST MAN

In the sound of leaves turning

FIRST WOMAN

(MUSIC changes and increases in volume.)

Or of Hell, burning

We come...

(MUSIC OUT.)

FIRST MAN

We are the creatures of dreams

FIRST WOMAN

(Overlapping)

Of dreams.

SECOND MAN

(Off; overlapping)

Of dreams.

SECOND WOMAN

(Off; overlapping)

Of dreams.

THIRD MAN

(Off; overlapping)

Of dreams.

THIRD WOMAN

(Off; overlapping)

Of dreams.

(MUSIC up. SECOND MAN, SECOND WOMAN, THIRD WOMAN and THIRD MAN appear and interpret the following to movement.)

FIRST MAN

We sing to you

FIRST WOMAN

Songs of silken silence

FIRST MAN

Of showers joining streams

FIRST WOMAN

Joining rivers joining falls...

FIRST MAN

Songs of sougning shadows

FIRST WOMAN

The whispers of a warbler's wings,

FIRST MAN

The cadences of clouds.

(The MUSIC grows increasingly  
dissonant.)

FIRST WOMAN

Songs of murmured secrets

FIRST MAN

Of the dwellings of desire,

FIRST WOMAN

Of the litanies of lust.

FIRST MAN

Songs of shouted terror,

FIRST WOMAN

Of the distant dreamless darkness

FIRST MAN

Of the liturgies of light.

(The MUSIC grows less dissonant.)

FIRST WOMAN

We sing to you

SECOND MAN

Sing to you

SECOND WOMAN

Sing to you

FIRST MAN

Songs of love and longing...

THIRD WOMAN

Sing to you

THIRD MAN

Sing to you

FIRST WOMAN

Songs of storm and stillness...

FIRST MAN

Songs...

SECOND WOMAN

(Overlapping FIRST MAN)

Songs...

SECOND MAN

(Overlapping SECOND WOMAN)

Songs...

THIRD WOMAN  
(Overlapping SECOND MAN)  
Songs...

THIRD MAN  
(Overlapping THIRD WOMAN)  
Songs...

FIRST WOMAN  
Songs...

(MUSIC out.)

FIRST MAN  
We are the creatures - of dreams...

(MUSIC up. COMPANY movement through SLOW  
FADE to BLACK.)

*The end*

## The Grandfather

Linda Freeman

When I asked my older sister  
if he ever did it to her

she said, *Never*  
*ever say such a thing, it's like saying*

*Elvis is a pervert,*  
I said, *He was.*

She said, *Shut up.*

## Quiet...

Melanie Morton

The house was unusually quiet.

In her bedroom, Ellie sat cross-legged on the floor with her Rupert Bear, listening to the silence. She still couldn't hear any noise beyond her own breathing, which was loud and stuffy due to a recent cold.

Ellie held her breath, straining to hear *something, anything*. But there was only silence and that could only mean one thing: something was wrong.

That thought worried her. It made her tummy hurt too. Not like last year when she and Tabitha spent the day with Uncle Brian and she'd eaten too much chocolate ice cream and been sick. She'd never forgotten that day Daddy because he had shouted at her, saying it was her own fault for being such a piggy-porker, and because she had not been allowed puddings for a whole week.

No, this ache was different. It hurt inside like... like that time she got her little finger stuck in the attic door and it swelled up like balloons did when you blew in them.

Ellie held her breath again. Still it was silent. Something was going on. It had to be. Any other Sunday she and Tab would be crouched at the top of the staircase by now, listening to mummy and daddy shout at one another. They were always fighting about something.

Last week it had been her fault. She'd started the trouble during lunch when she'd accidentally scraped her knife against her plate. No one had been allowed to finish their meal after that and she and Tab had been sent to their rooms.

From upstairs they'd heard Daddy shouting: "Come here, you stupid, lazy bitch, I'll give you what you deserve." Mummy had screeched: "Lay a bloody hand on me, Jim and I'll call the police."

Eventually Daddy had left, slamming the front door on his way to the pub as he always did. They had listened to Mummy cry a bit then eventually turn the television on to watch a movie. She and Tabitha had stayed hidden in Tab's room beneath the duvet, pretending they'd gone camping like their school friends did in the summer holidays and were having fun.

The house was *still* quiet. Ellie couldn't remember a time when it had been like this. Not that she *wanted* to listen to the swearing and slamming of doors echo round their house; it just worried her when it wasn't there. She'd become used to it. The same way she was used to sleeping with Rupert tucked beneath the quilt, his face resting on her pillow, his body stretching along the length of her neck. Now, if he wasn't there, she couldn't sleep.

'What should we do, Rupert?' Ellie asked the bear, easing herself up from the floor to tiptoe across the carpeted floor. At the window she peered out, pressing her nose, and the button that was Rupert's nose, against the glass.

Maybe Daddy had gone out. She strained forward to glance across the busy road below. No. The car was still there. He could have gone to the pub though.

Her tummy was beginning to feel worse. She rubbed her hand against it but that just made her want to pee even more and she couldn't risk that. She didn't want to clank about in the bathroom and disturb Mum and Daddy. But she couldn't hold on for much longer.

Tabitha would know what to do. She'd sneak in to her room and ask.

Ellie crept to her bedroom door and turned the brass knob in her hand, *one - two - three* counts to the left, then holding it open she squeezed through. Only then, having turned the lock backwards *one - two - three* counts, she could let go. That way the lock didn't squeak.

The lock on Tabitha's door glided effortlessly in her hand when she turned it, and she hurried in to her older sister's room. Tab was in bed. Only her head, a mass of brown curls, was sticking out beyond the edges of the quilt.

'Tab,' she whispered.

Tabitha didn't move or say anything.

Ellie inched closer, the insides of her tummy feeling now like they were burning. 'Tab,' she said again and patted her hand against the burgundy material.

The quilt flew backwards and Tabitha glared at her. 'What?' she mouthed, tugging headphones from her ears.

'Something's going on,' Ellie said.

'What do you mean?'

'The house is quiet.'

'Shit, that's a good thing. Don't go looking for trouble, Ellie.'

'I'm not. It's just... weird.'

Tabitha shuffled beneath the covers and sat up. 'Maybe Dad went out.'

'Car's still there.'

'Well, I don't know.'

'Tab, my tummy aches and I need to pee.'

'Can't you hold on a bit? Just in case he's sleeping?'

'I'm trying. But it hurts.'

'Don't think about it,' Tabitha said. 'It'll only make it worse.'

'I'll try.' Ellie edged towards the bed. 'Can I get in with you?'

'If you must.'

Ellie scrambled in to the narrow bed and lay facing Tab.

'Don't breathe on me,' Tabitha said. 'You know I don't like it.'

'I'm sorry. I'm just scared.'

'Don't be.' Tabitha clasped her hand and squeezed it. 'Lie on your back and close your eyes and we'll imagine we're going to go camping.'

They pitched their tent near a beach in Cornwall. It was where all teenagers went on holiday without their parents, Tabitha said.

'So, what shall we do now,' Ellie asked.

'How about we go and buy ice-cream?'

'But my tummy hurts.'

'No it doesn't. Not here, not beneath the quilt, not in Cornwall.'

'Okay, I guess. We'll have ice creams.'

'We want two gi-normous Mr Whippy's with flakes please,' Tab said.

Ellie tried imagining it but she was beginning to feel sick.

'Let's eat them how we like,' Tab said. 'We'll be as noisy and as messy as we want.'

Ellie's stomach plummeted as though she were on a ride at a fair. Daddy would hate that. It would make him ever so angry. He didn't like to hear noises when you ate or drank, or even when you breathed.

Below them they heard a bang. A door opened and closed. Then there were footsteps.

They lay still and neither of them spoke.

'Girls, where are you?' their mother called.

More footsteps.

'We'd better get up,' Ellie said.

'Girls?'

Tabitha threw back the quilt.

The door opened and their mother rushed in.

'There you are,' she said and came to a stop. 'What are you doing in bed? You know your father doesn't like you to do that.'

'Ellie's not feeling well,' Tabitha said.

'Never mind that now. You'd better straighten up and come downstairs. We want to talk to you.'

Ellie glanced at Tab who shrugged.

They hadn't done anything wrong, had they?

'Hurry up, girls.'

'I need to pee,' Ellie whispered once Mummy was gone.

Tabitha pushed her hand into her back, forcing her down the stairs. 'You'll have to wait. We haven't time. Not now. And you'd better leave Rupert here, or you'll be for it.'

Ellie followed Tab down the stairs and into the living room. They didn't come in this room often. Daddy liked to sit in here alone, and anyway they didn't like being in here. The ceilings were high and it was always dreary and dark. The walls were itchy too, like the wool jumpers Mummy knitted and that she dreaded wearing. There was no sofa to curl up on like at Granny and Gramps, only brown squidgy chairs with metal arms that dug in to you.

'Sit down, girls,' Mummy said.

Sitting on the floor beside Tab, Ellie crossed her legs and waited as Mummy shut the door and sat down too. She peeked a look at Daddy sat in a chair at the end of the room, trying not to think how desperate she was to pee. But Daddy didn't look so she couldn't read his face. She couldn't tell whether it was her who had done something wrong or Tab, or maybe both of them.

Daddy had always had a 'temper' as granny called it. So did mummy. But granny never said anything about that. Or that both of them could be smiling at you one moment and screeching at you the next their face red and angry.

When she was little she'd never known what to expect or how she was supposed to stand there and not cry. It was why she had learned to read faces, something she could do before her tenth birthday.

Now, she could predict trouble by reading the change in people's faces.

Like the way daddy's forehead rumped, his cheeks flushed and a tremor beneath his right eye started just before he exploded. Mummy's face tightened, her lips pursed and her voice became short and clipped before she got really cross.

It wasn't just this that she had learned. She knew never to complain or argue back, she could eat grapes without crunching, and never, ever allowed her fork to clash against her teeth.

By eleven, she had learned to be silent, to become invisible.

'So,' Mummy said.

Tabitha looked at her, raising her eyebrows. Ellie glanced at Daddy who still wasn't looking up. His fingers, she noticed, were playing with the strap of the navy bag that had been a free gift with some clothes mummy bought, which they'd fought about.

'Daddy's leaving today,' Mummy said. 'So we called you down to say good-bye.'

Ellie's gaze flickered between her parents who looked away. *Leaving?*

Daddy stood then, lifting the bag from the floor, and placed the strap across his shoulder. She could see then that his face wasn't angry, it was sad. He'd never looked like that before and it made her chest ache as badly as her tummy was.

'Don't worry, I'll see you at weekends, girls. Well, once I get settled somewhere,' Daddy said.

Ellie looked at Tabitha, but she was bent forward and her hair was covering her face.

*Daddy was leaving them?* He walked towards the door and stopped in front of them, hesitating as though he were about to say something and then didn't. Instead he carried on. 'See you soon,' he said turning to glance at them from the door.

'Bye Daddy,' Ellie murmured.

Then he was gone and the eerie silence, in a room more accustomed to angry outbursts, became louder. When the phone rang, mummy hurried to the kitchen to answer it.

When she was gone Ellie moved to the window to watch Daddy, through the soot-stained glass, walk along the pavement below. Tabitha joined her and they waited as he opened the car door, lowered himself in and without hesitating drove away.

'Come on, Ellie. Let's get you changed into some dry clothes,' Tab said. 'Then you and me are getting out of here. *We're* going camping again.'

Ellie wiped the back of her palm to her nose, and felt the hot flush of her face. It was a good job Daddy hadn't seen. He got mad cross when she had an accident.

Tab grabbed her hand, stroking it as they climbed the staircase and walked along the landing. At Ellie's room, Tab turned the lock, holding *one - two - three* counts.

'Tab?' Ellie asked as she watched her sister choose clean clothes for her from her wardrobe. 'Can Rupert come camping with us?'

Tabitha turned to smile at her. 'Yeah course,' she said, 'if *we're* going camping, then Rupert's coming too.'

## Signs

Joanne Key

They leave the house and carry the silence between them like an empty frame. The clumsy shape and sharp angles make it difficult to handle; it forces them into a push-me-pull-you motion until they get the feel for it: how to grasp with their fists, balance their distance. They stop outside the gallery and decide at the same time to wander in, not because they are synchronized, but because they know they can rest in this place where absences blend easily into white space.

She finds herself climbing the steps into every portrait; testing the boats in all the harbors. He heads straight to the lighthouse. She scans the seascapes for hidden images in the pages of waves, but all they say is *keep looking*. Turning her head, she catches sight of him, looks for the thing that has captured his eye, stopped his heart, and sees him, in the distance, admiring the rigging of a ship in a bottle.

As she crosses over, she looks to the love stories: the two shadows on the beach who have found all they need under a heart-shaped sunset; night-swimmers meeting at the line the sun has drawn under the day; stick people fused by their hands and marooned inside an island of themselves, but she cannot hear his voice in her head until she reaches an assemblage: an artwork of washed-up flotsam which she understands. The perspective of driftwood is all hers, and she knows he would call it “wreckage” and say it has come to this only because there were not enough fragments to rebuild the boat.

Out on the sea wall they watch the day narrow. Thin shadows linger on rocks like clock hands and the brass bell of sun seems to chime - *There Is Still Time*. He holds a lens to her face and in her head, she practices reaching out from behind glass to say: *I love, I love you, I love this*. Instead, she decides to just smile for the photo, but the camera detects a blink behind sunglasses and he is captivated by its eye for detail. This breaks the silence, creates a space wide enough for him to step though and ask, “*Are we OK?*”

She doesn't say that the blink was a refocusing; a homing-in on the image that has appeared on his shoulder all through this holiday: a creature rising from the surf and repeatedly throwing itself at the shoreline, only to find one breath of form and enough time to leave the same hurried note, over and over, in the sand. Yesterday, she read: *I am more than water*, today it says: *I tried my best to hold on*. She watches his face and takes his hand, because she knows sometimes when there are not enough words to give; you can just grab hold of the signs and quietly run away with them.

## Espresso, or the best cup of coffee in the world

Kate Noakes

will be served in a small white china cup  
with thick sides to hold its heat  
on a small white china saucer  
with vestigial white paper coaster,  
you may be about to drink it even now;

will be so concentrated it sticks  
like treacle or molasses  
and will be the same colour as both,  
as if water is rationed, beans two-a-penny;  
will test you: lemon rind wiped round the rim,  
one lump, two or nothing at all?

and when you lift it to your lips  
and sip, any minute now,  
will rush through you  
like happiness, like all those things  
for which there are no words.

## Eros, the God of War

Amy Goddard

When I was thirteen, the boys were not patient. Our neighbourhood was made of fields and alleyways; before thirteen the alleyways were the Minator's maze or Red Riding Hood's route to grandma's or the strenuous journey from The City of Turmoil to The Land of Far Beyond.

After thirteen, this fictionalised suffering, played out with props and capes, became a concrete reality.

The first boy was strawberry blonde and smelt of liquorice; the steel fence was cold against my back. He gave me a cigarette and ran home for his tea. I wandered home, coldly - imagining I was making my way to the City of Happiness. I saw then, that the true colour of the alleyway is always black; you can see white lights if you close your eyes, but if you don't want to fall hard on the way home, you're going to have to open them occasionally.

Of all the boys; only one requested absolution. He made me angrier than any of the rest, whose actions seemed so devoid of thought, premeditation or consequence. When I refused to listen he cried, got irritated and slapped me. I didn't walk home right away. It got dark and dad came to fetch me. He wrapped his shirt around my shoulders and hid my bloody jeans.

As we grow our ideas about morality shift and wane. They don't evaporate completely, but become fluid; liquid mercury. Malleable - supple and compliant. So, when you make the decision to sleep with a married man, you must rationalise it in some way. Remould the morality, so that it still fits the slot. I sometimes wonder if it was a decision; a controlled, considered action. But it would be erroneous to say otherwise.

This is *his* morality, *his* guilt I told myself silently; belonging solely to him.

Did I repeat it so that it weighed heavier? Maybe even said it out loud - to my cracked reflection. Did I write it down until it was inked and solid? Visible. Palpable. Even so, it still remained a faint whisper.

*His* guilt - Well, at least partly. But it was indistinct. Barely there. Dim. Perhaps not there at all. But if I believe that, then I would surely lock the door and refuse him entry. Mine, although minor, the most guilt that ever appears in the room. A shadow. An unwelcome ghost. Fiercely present at the beginning of the night, barely visible mostly, then distinctly hazy, pinning me with a strangle hold in the early hours, after he has dressed and gone.

It feels good to inhabit such a physical space; for moments. But this soon passes and I long for his hands to reach further, to touch the soft gossamer layers that lie under the skin, protecting the bones. I took his hand once and nodded for him to run his hands through the webbing, but the cool air caused more movement than his ring finger; the band of commitment to her which he wears throughout it all.

As days and weeks separate us, there are moments of sheer clarity; a sun shining. But I blink and am moved again into silent reverie. So quiet to an onlooker, but crackly with static sound underneath.

I can't handle these subtleties; the oppositional and confusing messages I'm receiving. The point needs to be sharp so I can feel it; a knife's edge. I'm trying to learn some lessons. To make changes - I'm waiting for the epiphany; but atheists don't like to borrow concepts from canonised dogma.

He has never bought me flowers. But he has held my hand in public and kissed me in front of strangers; however, I remain, still, an afterthought.

Growing up, I exchanged few words with my mother. I heard a lot of hers, but soon realised that mine rotted and died before they even bore fruit. The words about the boys I chose not to even bother forming. Instead, I preserved them; like jam or pickles, ready for a later date. Maybe for someone else to hear; secret pots of sugary and vinegary words. Tightly sealed, lest they spill out. Found a dank cubby hole and sealed them in.

When my mother happened upon them, she slapped me across the cheek and mouthed the words "deceitful whore." So strangely silent she was all of a sudden! I reached up to touch the stinging; she had left a sticky film across my cheek. I grappled in the darkness - only one of the lids was loose. I was a 'deceitful whore', for one seventh of my actions. Sitting down, I waited patiently for the silent violence if she ever opened the rest.

He's coming around tonight. The heating has packed up again and I broke the door handle this morning. I am rain water bleeding through the cracks. But his flood defenses are well manned and all I see when I look at him are big steel barricades; he is immune to my tide.

I catch a glimpse of my face and Jezebel winks back at me.

I know I have to stop the rain from falling, it is clogging things up; but I heard utopia descends just before drowning. So I have to say goodbye don't I? (Perhaps when I hear his knock I shall ignore it, but he may peep through the crack and see me.) I have to say goodbye, because what they share is so ornate; all encompassing like Saturn's rings. It's painted eggs and paper snowflakes. Naming the constellations on Bonfire Night. Cardboard angel wings at Christmas and football in the park on Sundays. It's the cradling of sickly, sticky heads up to bed; puffed and patchy cheeked. Creeping into mummy and daddy's bed at night. It's a single look that says "everything will be ok." It's birthdays and Christmas and Easter. It's mother and father. It's Better or Worse and forsaking all others...

I need this all to have some resonance for him, because I feel my mother's reverberations ripple like a hundred pulses from a Neutron Star and because any meaning I once saw in these things has ebbed away, as my family perfected their impersonations of the three wise monkeys; sister saw none, mother heard none and daddy bit his tongue.

I imagine that he held her hand when she bled for him; warm against the scratchy nylon sheets. She was a ripe bulb for him. His Persian Tulip. She unwrapped the swaddling cloth and united them all. But now the corners are frayed; the ascending years do this naturally of course, but his betrayals quicken the process. Everyone is left disfigured, but him. So I need *him* to restore order. I can't countenance the blockades anymore. West Berliners graffitied the wall, but one sided protest is selfish. And the giving of her blood was an altruistic act.

I have heard she is pretty and I'm sure she is. I hope her hair is nice. Mother spoke of love, but never of sex. I thought they were the same thing; but not for long. She told me Eros was the god of love. I learnt quite quickly he is the god of war. The uneven battle played out again and again.

The heat is coming again. I hear the door bell, but it sounds like a distant echo. Hera silenced the young nymph and now she can only mimic. I hear she was quite eloquent before the affair, but I shouldn't think Zeus concerned himself too much with the wretched girl after that. She never did get her Narcissus. Too concerned with himself, that one.

There was a magpie on the train tracks earlier. I saluted her to show respect - because it's one for sorrow. I wish I had been brave enough to ignore the proverb though, because if she attempted to pluck at either of us tonight I don't think I'd mind. I might leave the window open on the off chance. But I won't be able to tempt her in with a shiny pool, unlike Narcissus, she will recognise himself.

Seven for a secret never to be told? No, she was all alone out there. But what if Magpie invites eight siblings? Summons the rest of King Pieride's daughters? He, who foolishly thought to challenge the Muses; wanted *their* names for *his* daughters, but instead with black and white plumage they were all cursed. Ha, Once again the women were the punished. If the nine water nymphs do fly in through the open pane though, I don't think ego or id will be able to resist. They'll carry my visitor off as the sun goes down and I can wave goodbye to all the secrets.

I had fallen asleep on my sister's bed. A party held when our parents were away. I could hear a little laughter from outside; indistinct guitar chords. I heard the door go. I think I opened my mouth to speak, but Eros pierced my tongue with a violent arrow and silenced any declaration. I had stopped blaming the boys long before. When they looked into my eyes they didn't see me. Instead they saw it all mirrored back at them. He had looked into my eyes earlier, in the living room, but not now. Not in the half darkness; in the night without stars. I knew then that in the morning he would panic. Get me alone on the way to the bathroom; whisper in haste. An attempt to convince us both, in the one breathe, that consent had been given. I knew then too, that I would simply nod because his inarticulate blathering would piss me off. I sat in the bath until the water ran cold, shifting my teeth back and forth over the hole in the centre of my tongue.

I have decisions to make. She has found my number. She didn't sound angry. Or betrayed. I am curious. The white rabbit has bolted out the open door. It's permanently ajar these days anyway.

I stand in front of the mirror, but I haven't recognised that image for some time now. She said she would be there at seven. I thought that if I turned it into fiction then I could close the covers. But he reads biographies while I spin the yarn. That settles it. I cannot stare at a blank page any longer. I will go, even if it means I am to write with blood not ink.

It was rather shady where I found her sat; an appropriate killing spot. The people spoke true about her. Her hair hung in curls and kissed her spine. I saw her hands. She pushed the glass towards me by the stem.

She said she had always known. She had documented and recorded the occasions. The ones that lasted weeks and those that lasted years. Collected his stories; was his secret biographer. She did not know if she would present them back to him. Hold up the looking glass. He couldn't resist the cake that said "eat me" and the drink that promised to quench his thirst. But a mirror that reflects is of little use when you have your eyes closed.

So her pages and pages of bitten lips and distilled abandonment are to be left filed. I asked why she wanted to meet me and not the others. She blinked heavily and traced an imagined figure of eight on the table top. If she made a response, I didn't hear it. I don't know if years of betrayal finally plateaued, or if she heard the quiet psalms that I sung after he rolled over and made for the door.

When we left, the sun had erupted and the eastern skyline was alight. I caught sight of our reflections in the window and I smiled, because for once I recognised the girl that looked back at me.

## Ours

Rose Topping

The ground is rough, but you hold my hand as I hobble over it. My legs aren't as strong as they used to be. You're always telling me to use my stick, but I don't need it when you're there.

The bench is in sight, a familiar sight. The flaky white paint, the grooves in the wood, the slight wobble as you sit. The sun shines on it. I'll be lovely and warm when we sit down.

You steady me as I stumble. You always hold me steady. My body lets me down these days, always cold and weak. It used to be so strong. Now it's just tough. We both are, tough and heavy. But when you look at me, even after all these years, I feel light.

I remember when this bench was new. They put it in as a memorial to some Mayor. Nobody but the bench remembers him now. We sit. My little feet fit in the groove they've made over the years.

Our fingers are still entwined. I rub my thumb over your knuckles. Your skin used to be firm but now it is loose and brown. But it's still your hand.

You're watching the sun shine cheerfully over our village, like always. My eyes settle on the squirrel dashing around at our feet. He's not shy of us anymore. The silence settles around us comfortably as we sit and let the sun warm us. There's nothing left that needs to be said. There is just us: our bench, our hands, our silence.

## The Forest

Ian Hawley

The thing that worries me the most isn't the fact that I am alone, but the inability to move my legs and I can feel the panic starting to rise in my gut. What small amounts of memory I can recall as to where I am, are of little help if I cannot get away. I force my training to kick in, the hyperventilation isn't going to get me out of this, but my training might.

I close my eyes and let the darkness envelop me as I cut out the sounds of the forest, slowing my heart rate and hopefully the bleeding from my wounds as I relax. I know I'm bleeding by the warmth and pain I can feel at my side, there's also the smell, a metallic sort of smell you only get with lots of blood.

I recall our ship coming in to land, another routine planetary inspection before colonisation groups could come in. Another boring, tedious job that we had to do time and time again, each time a new location was discovered. Looking back on it now, we shouldn't have been so relaxed about it, routine was all well and good, but we forget why we are doing it.

We must have been a click or two from the landing site when it struck, for its size it was fast, taking out the four at the front before the rest of us had time to stop and wonder what the noise was, and by then, it was coming in for its second attack.

I don't know when exactly I got hit, but I remember the world seemed to spin in slow motion as it hit me and the world went black.

Now, I am alone, and for all I know the rest of my unit are dead. I have to get out of this, I have to get back to the landing craft and send the Red Report back to the mother ship. The Red Report simply said "Not clear, Do not land. Move on." There was no hope of rescue for me, but I would at least save others from being injured.

I open my eyes and look at the sky, the leaves in the trees, apart from being a deep purple remind me of home, and the planets equivalent of birds squawked and chirped invisibly far above me. I try to recall how many suns this system has so I can calculate when night will fall. Out here on my own at night isn't my idea of a survival scenario.

I try to move my legs, to gain some sensation in them, but they refuse to cooperate with me. It's such an odd feeling, I know how to make them move in theory, but now I have to think about it, I don't know how it actually works. It's like trying to explain to someone how to wiggle your ears.

I sob unintentionally, it's a sign of weakness I know but I just can't control it. It wells up from my stomach and seems to press against the back of my eyes and my vision blurs for a second before I can wipe them tears away with my blood covered hand. No time for weakness now, not if I am going to have to drag myself out of this.

My wrist indicator tells me the general direction of the landing site, but not the distance and I just hope it's not too far. I breathe in a few times to try to gain some energy before I try to rock myself over, trying to prepare myself for the pain that will certainly come. On the count of three then, One, Two, Three, Go...

The scream that ripples from my mouth shocks me, the pain feels like hot poker being twisted inside my gut and I roll back onto the grass. The sweat of the exertion mixes with the tears, no amount of training prepares you for this and I realise how weak I actually am.

The creatures above me cry out, mimicking the sound of my pain and I close my eyes against them, going back into my memories before the panic takes over. We'd walked about four clicks to the south of the landing site, but the trees had been thinner than these, the thing had come at us from... damn it, the creature had come from...I open my eyes in frustration and listen to the birds again. They've settled back into their normal routine now at least.

"Hello, anyone around?" I shout, not really expecting any answers and the birds once more mimic my voice like a thousand echoes. "Help, I need Help.". Still nothing but the repetition from the creatures above, "Someone, please help..."

This time they don't answer back, there is no repeat of my call, no mockery, the trees have dropped silent and I sense rather than feel something watching me, although it pains me I try to twist, to see what's coming, with my weapon long lost I have nothing to defend myself with, but I must see it.

I manage to block the pain this time as I twist, and there it stands, just on the edge of the trees watching me silently, its red eyes filled with a look of pure anger and hatred at us disturbing its planet, it stares at me for a moment before it moves in for the kill. It seems a shame to destroy the silence of the forest, but I just can't help myself.

## Ockham's Razor

Vineet Kaul

*"The simpler of two competing theories is to be preferred."*

*- William of Ockham, English Philosopher*

My -  
each phonetic was a lasso  
each catch was a prize.

I start. She said "Stop!"  
I start. She said "Stop!"

stopped me  
                  fanned her brows  
into a frown that said

"Can't you speak with your fingers tonight?"

She -  
sounded coy chords of laughter  
          begged silence for an encore

## The Fourth Picture

Dan Peacock

Alone in another hotel room with his hopes and dreams.

The floor is delicately garnished with souvenirs of his visit; crumpled pieces of paper, cigarette butts, a full can of deodorant. His mobile phone lies undisturbed on the bedside table, nineteen messages in the outbox and four in the inbox. One missed call.

Echoes of late-night episodes reverberate through his senses - the room has seen a lot of life and love. A newly-wed couple stayed in the room en route to their honeymoon after their flight was cancelled; a trio of drunken overnight vandals trashed it three months later. The night before his visit, a man about his age and his height sat down on the edge of the bed, calmly picked up his phone and told his wife he was having an affair.

The man is not here for any of those reasons. He is simply here to be alone.

A tattered leather messenger bag lies on the floor with everything the man needs for his single night of tenancy in the room. In the next few days, a forensic investigator will determine the contents of the bag to be as follows; an empty bottle of whiskey, some stationery, four crumpled photographs and three unopened boxes of prescribed antidepressants.

A cool breeze has blown through the open window. The hum of the city accompanies it; the distant purr of a thousand cars driving home in the glow of fluorescent streetlights, a million people sleeping securely in the arms of their husbands and wives. But the man is alone.

The bag is pulled up onto the bed. The room's inhabitant rifles through it until he finds the items he needs. Four photographs are gently pulled out, contorted and frayed with use. Which literary figure was it, he wonders, that said a picture was worth a thousand words? He cannot remember, but he knows the truth in the statement.

The first picture is of a lonely house standing atop a hill looking out onto a lake. The house is a lot like him, he feels. A house is nothing without inhabitants, without essence, without lives lived within it and memories planted in its every room. A house is nothing but a home is everything, he thinks to himself bitterly.

He turns the first picture over. On the back a faint message is scribbled in pencil:

*Our first day at the new cottage.*

The second, third and fourth photographs are of the house from different angles, showing the surrounding vistas; the rolling hills and baby-blue autumn skies reflected in the still waters of the lake. In

the fourth picture, a woman stands in the foreground, chestnut hair flowing radiantly down in acorn twirls to her shoulders. She is smiling, wearing a small silver ring and holding it up so the camera can see.

Searing sepia flames snarl out from the photograph; the deep, internal blazes of nostalgic years spent gazing at crumpled photographs in strange hotel rooms. But he knows this will be his last night of melancholy, knows it very well.

The man has seen enough. The photographs are his companions; his only supporters, but he cannot face them tonight. Thrusting them back into his bag, he pulls out a half-empty bottle of whiskey and gulps the fiery liquor down, stinging his throat. There are pills in the bag that can take his pain away, but he finds himself repulsed by the thought of relief. Relief, he thinks, is for those who believe they can be saved. The man is not here to find relief or solace - he is here to be alone.

He sold the house by the lakeside four months ago. The memories of the place - the same memories immortalised in the four pictures - were too much for him. The past kept calling and he found himself unable to answer, and unable to ignore it. He has faded away into a shadow world where memories and photographs of a place he once knew are more real than the four walls that surround him and the bed he lies on. A world where two-dimensional monsters rise unheeded from dark cerebral mists, scratching away at his waking sanity; surfacing at night to eat him alive with teeth made out of photographs and venomous claws dripping with memories.

He pulls out an assortment of items from his black messenger bag. A pen and a sheet hastily ripped from a notebook are the first he comes across; he pauses to scribble something down then sellotapes the note to his chest. He adjusts it like a man straightening his tie.

The scrap of paper hanging lifelessly from his shirt, he reaches forward - the messenger bag has one final gift for him.

His mind trembling but his hands reinforced with some hysterical mental steel, he pulls out a small, black handgun - cold to the touch. He is overwhelmed by the power in those bolts and pins, the tiny hammer in that god-machine that will send a cartridge screaming from the chamber in excess of two thousand miles per hour.

He raises the pistol to his temple with the last unspeaking seconds of his life, his pulse drumming out in silent protest as the arctic gunmetal poises over it - cold to the touch.

The message on the paper:

*My name is Eddie Miller and I have gone to see my wife*

## The Experience of Silence

Angi Holden

When I could hear, I mean really hear, I loved silence. It's rare, I know, but just occasionally you can pinpoint a moment of pure quiet: no distant traffic; no background hum of a fridge or a computer left on standby; no dog whining two doors down; not even a blackbird mapping out its territory. I can remember being on the top of a Welsh hillside, the night thick and dark and chill. The not-quite silence settling around us as we rested, our breathing gradually slowing after the exertion of the climb. A few hundred feet from the road maybe, yet far enough above it to be unable to see our parked car. The outlying hills were dotted with the huddled forms of solitary sheep; too late in the year for the mournful bleat of lost lambs. It was probably the nearest I ever came to an experience of silence and I strained to hear the minute sounds of the hillside: the rustle of small rodents in the bracken and the flight of the hunting owl that we'd glimpsed as we scrambled up the path. The irony doesn't escape me.

It wasn't long after, a few months maybe, that my hearing failed. It didn't 'begin to fail', like some old lady progressively losing muscle tone, or that ancient Cortina engine which grew more sluggish every year. No, this was digital failure, consistent with the electronic age: the burnt-out resistor; the capacitor in melt-down; the blown fuse. One moment it works, the next it doesn't. End of.

One night, going to bed, I could hear. The next morning, waking up, I was partially deaf. Or to be precise, totally deaf in one ear.

Of course, my experience isn't on the same scale as someone who is wholly deaf. But I do share some of the sense of isolation and frustration. I can hear you calling, but without stereoscopic hearing, I can't locate you. For the rest of my life, your voice will always come to me from the right. In a busy room, I'm unable to follow a conversation; as sound levels rise, I zone out and can appear disinterested or aloof. When I meet old friends for lunch, the updates and gossip from the left of the table remain a mystery; next time we meet those same friends may be offended when I seem to have forgotten earlier narratives.

Alongside the silence, is the noise. Tinnitus. My constant companion: the perception of sound within the ear in the absence of corresponding external sound. If hearing is defined as the faculty of perceiving sounds, then tinnitus is the perception of sounds that simply aren't there. The name is misleading, almost twee. It may be derived from the Latin for 'bell', but this is no tuned instrument, no Indonesian gamelan, no percussive inspiration for the teenage Mike Oldfield.

Stereocilia, the sensory hairs in the inner ear, vibrate in response to sound waves and these minute vibrations are converted to neural messages. For patients suffering from aural nerve damage, these messages never reach the hearing centre of the brain. To continue the electronic analogy, the brain turns up the automatic gain. This is white noise in a constant feedback loop.

Just as your ears hum when you move from the nightclub or concert venue into the quieter city streets, so my ears hum ...or buzz ...or whistle. All the time. And sometimes, as I lay awake, listening to the gentle shifts of the night-house and the incessant rumblings of my aural corridors, I remember that Welsh hillside. The inked darkness; our breath steamy and irregular; around us, the cloak of not-quite silence.

## The Unknown Warrior

Maggie Stevens

I had wanted to take my flag to wave, but Mother said no. Not this time. So I stood between her and Uncle Bertie, right at the front, and we waited such a long time that I was tired with standing. And at last there came six black horses pulling a gun carriage. Then the King made the flags fall from the monument, Big Ben chimed eleven-o'clock, and everyone stopped talking.

I'd been told I mustn't say a word for two whole minutes. So I started counting, like when you're waiting to hear the thunder, after seeing the lightning, and you count to see how close the storm is. I counted the seconds slowly in my head, the way that Harry had taught me: one-and-two-and-three-and-four. I meant to count all the way to sixty, twice. But I lost count somehow.

Then the bugles started to play and I knew I could stop.

I said to Uncle Bertie, this was after the silence, that I would have to go to the next war. With Father, Harry and Albert dead, it would be my turn next. A lady standing near us knelt down and shook me, really quite hard.

'Dinnae say that,' she said. 'Never say that.'

Then she started to cry.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, wee laddie,' she said, 'but you mustn't say that.'

She picked up the bunch of flowers that she had dropped, and held them out to me. There were dark prickly stems, like holly, and big red and purple flowers.

'You see these?' she said. 'They're from a garden we planted, my wee son and me. To celebrate the first year of the new century. He could hardly hold the shovel, him just a lad of six years old then. But he dug away. He worked so hard.'

Uncle Bertie helped her up from the ground.

'They cannae even tell me where he's buried,' she said. 'Though they said he was killed instantly. He'd have known nothing about it, would he sir?'

My shoulders ached from the shaking, and my hand hurt where Uncle Bertie held it so tightly. With my other hand I tugged at my mother's skirt, but she didn't look at me. Like everyone else, she was staring after the gun-carriage as it moved on towards the Abbey. She stroked my hair, and I tried not to pull away.

'Hush now,' she said. 'Be still. That could be any one of them.'

And far beyond counting, another silence fell.

## Author Biographies

### Carole Bromley

Carole Bromley has two pamphlets out with Smith/Doorstop (*Unscheduled Halt and Skylight*) and they published her first full length collection *A Guided Tour of the Ice House* in October 2011. She lives in York where she teaches Creative Writing for York University.

### Linda Freeman

Linda McCauley Freeman has an MFA in Writing and Literature from Bennington College. She was the poet-in-residence for the Putnam County Arts Council for five years overlapping with an eleven-year corporate career as Executive Director of Global Communications for an international firm. She is a columnist for *Living & Being Magazine* and a three-time winner of the Talespinners Short Story contest, in which she finally was asked to be a judge alongside Simon & Schuster editor Michael Korda and children's book author Da Chen. Her works have been published in literary journals and anthologized in *GIRLS: An Anthology*. She is working on a novel.

Since 2004, she and her husband, Chester, have been full-time swing dance instructors in the Hudson Valley, NY ([www.got2lindy.com](http://www.got2lindy.com)).

### Amy Goddard

Amy Goddard recently turned 30 and celebrated by enrolling on an Open University creative writing course. She has worked in Education since graduating in 2003 and currently lives in East London with two close friends and two very mischievous cats, but dreams of one day owning a house by the sea. This is her first published piece.

### Evan Guilford-Blake

Evan Guilford-Blake writes plays, fiction and poetry. Forty of his plays have been produced internationally, and have won 36 competitions. Award-winning stories and poems have appeared in numerous print and web publications including *Flashquake* and *Soundings Review*. He and his wife (and inspiration) in the southeastern US. More info: [www.guilford-blake.com/evan](http://www.guilford-blake.com/evan).

**Ian Hawley**

What can be said that others have not already said? Handsome chap with beautiful hair and deep brown eyes, the build of an Adonis of old with a wit and charm that makes people feel inferior and unworthy. Well it's true enough, no one has ever said that about Ian.

**Angi Holden**

A university drop-out, an accountant, a lace-maker, a mum, a ceramicist and glass-maker and a creative writing student are just some of the experiences Angi stumbled through on her way to becoming a writer. She keeps a journal and loves to create stories from overhearings, so be warned.... she's listening.

**Maté Jarai**

Maté Jarai was born in Budapest, raised here and there. He studied Film and English and writes stories that will take you away, as well as the occasional poem on a stormy night. He's currently living in Southampton, working on several projects, including his first novel. Follow his progress on [twitter.com/MateJarai](https://twitter.com/MateJarai)

**Vineet Kaul**

*Troubadour Kaul* is a collaboration project between two artists who indulge in poetry, travelogues, prose, photography and music. Despite the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominations, a finalist spot in The Best Short Writing in the World in 2011 and winning the Golden Sparrow Poetry Prize 2011, their ranking remains dismal in the Indian *arranged-marriage-market*. While Vineet Kaul rents out his vocabulary and cynicism to his partner-in-rhyme, the Troubadour brings his imagination to the table. Neither of them, however, is bringing any bread to the table. Maybe that is what happens when you collaborate with your alter-ego. Their first full length collection of poetry *Letters to Samara* will be out in 2012 and a monthly column by the same name appears in *The 22 Magazine* (New York).

**Joanne Key**

I'm 42 and in the middle of an identity crisis. I was happy minding my own business writing poetry, until I woke up one morning and found myself writing Flash Fiction. It appeals to me because it's sometimes described as a "grey area". I like "grey areas". I am one.

**Melanie Morton**

Mel Morton is a full-time writer based in Hampshire who works as a freelance journalist and copywriter. Mel has previously had a short story published in *Vortex*, and is currently writing a historical novel set in the Victorian era. Her work can be seen at [www.MelMorton.com](http://www.MelMorton.com).

**Kate Noakes**

Kate Noakes divides her time between Paris and Berkshire. Her most recent collection is *The Wall Menders* (Two Rivers Press, 2009). She is a member of the Welsh Academy and blogs at [www.boomslangpoetry.blogspot.com](http://www.boomslangpoetry.blogspot.com)

**Tim O'Leary**

Tim O'Leary is a photographer and former archaeologist. Previously, he appeared, with biog, in Word Gumbo Issue 2. The poem published here is from the sequence *Rite of Cancer*. His b/w photography is typefied by the project *The Italian South*, which can be viewed at [timoleary.eu](http://timoleary.eu)

**Dan Peacock**

Dan Peacock is a second-year Creative Writing student at Manchester Metropolitan University. He writes short stories, poetry, and the occasional blog in his spare time, while juggling several ideas for novels and being too daunted to approach any of them. This is his first published work.

**Janet Ross-Pilla**

Janet Ross-Pilla writes in many forms, creative non-fiction being one she always comes back to. She reads almost every minute of her waking day; it's her drug of choice. She moved recently to Wisconsin to be closer to her daughter, Jocelyn. Time is unreliable: Don't ever take it for granted.

**Ron Runeborg**

Ron Runeborg is a mostly unpublished writer living in the tundra of Big Cityville Minnesota where he doodles textual blatherings in crayon; periwinkle usually, though he's been known to use puce when context requires a more serious rendering. He is a huge fan of atta-boys and couldn'tasaiditbettermyself-ses. Oh, and pie.

**Maggie Stevens**

Maggie Stevens lives in rural Essex and is a part-time mature – very mature – student currently studying 20<sup>th</sup> century literature; a previous OU Creative Writing course encouraged her to dabble with writing fiction, and she finds it an interesting pastime and an extremely useful way to avoid housework.

**Simon Sylvester**

Simon Sylvester was born in 1980. His stories have been published in *Smoke, Gutter, Fractured West* and other magazines. His flash fiction collection *140 Characters* is a print-on-demand ebook by Cargo Crate, and he writes new stories daily on [www.twitter.com/simonasylvester](http://www.twitter.com/simonasylvester). He lives in Cumbria with the painter Monica Metsers and their daughter Isadora.

**Rose Topping**

Rose Topping, 25, is studying towards a Creative Writing degree at MMU Cheshire. She primarily writes fiction but also dabbles in poetry and scriptwriting. Her favourite genres are fantasy and romance, however she loves to explore characters in many genres. She writes romance and adult fantasy as Tanwen Coyne.

**Abigail Wyatt**

Abigail Wyatt was born in Aveley, Essex and now lives in Redruth in Cornwall. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in a range of outlets. Her poetry collection, *Moths in a Jar*, appeared in 2011. She is currently working on a collection of stories and researching a radio drama.