

# WorldumBO

Volume 1  
Issue 6

May 2012

*Endings*



Word Gumbo: Vol. 1, Issue 6 is a publication of Gumbo Press, May 2012.

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Submissions are open for our next issue. See our website for details of how to submit.

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## Editorial

Welcome to issue six of *Word Gumbo*. We nearly didn't make it—perhaps calling it 'Endings' was tempting fate—but no! here we are again with a wonderful showcase of poetry and prose. The showing this time around was very strong and we are immensely pleased with the wonderful words you've sent for us to publish.

As you may know, real life intervened to slow down the editing process, but we are hoping to get back on track for the next issue.

Also, as mentioned elsewhere, our editorial policy has changed in that we no longer have themes and instead have a rolling deadline. So we are looking for your best work, whatever the topic. So, get writing, get thinking, and here's to the second year of *Word Gumbo*!

**Calum Kerr**  
**Editor**

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I had expected the ENDING theme to bring us death-and-heartbreak poems, but in fact the theme brought out a wide variety of subjects, from the end of a holiday to the last speakers of a dying language and many others. Many of the poems were so nearly there; and if they had one failing in common, it was that the near-miss poets had been too gentle in editing their work. Perhaps that's why the very short poems made it into this issue - they have been edited almost to the point of invisibility. But there were some very fine poems in the 'not quite' pile and I hope that you will keep submitting to us if you didn't make it this time.

**Jo Bell**  
**Poetry Editor**

## So You Think You Can Cook?

Kevlin Henney

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck him. Fuck them. But him most of all. With a rolling pin. The fucker.

“Mmm, cooked in a reduction of quality with a drizzle of mediocrity.” Live. On national TV.

Camilla wiped a tear from her right eye. Then another from her left.

“You know I can’t be seen to have favourites,” he’d said. “I can’t let what’s happened between us affect my judgement.”

“Of course! I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Of course. She hadn’t realised the way he had in mind was live sacrifice. She wiped away more tears. Jason was so practised at living a lie for the camera that nothing had any truth to it, no matter how he’d whispered it in her ear. The fucker.

Besotted, smitten, flattered. He’d made her feel young... like a fucking schoolgirl. How could she have been so blind, so stupid?

No point in wiping away tears, no stemming a stream now sobbed into a flood.

But what could she do? Go to the press? Even if he didn’t deny it, she’d be taking herself down with him. She had further to fall, with narrower shoulders, and husband and children in tow.

How she wished none of this had happened, that she couldn’t cook — well, according to him, she couldn’t — so she’d never have accepted encouragement to apply, to have been overjoyed at selection for a qualifying round, to have made it through to the televised show, to have welcomed time away from home, to have met him, to have looked forward to getting through to the next show to see him again, to have been lifted up by him, to have been smashed down by him. The fucker.

“So you think you can cook?” His catch phrase, delivered with a smug smile and a verdict, “I don’t!”

She’d dammed her disappointment behind a fixed grin until she was off set. She’d held it until she’d found a corner, away from the roman holiday of lights, crew and studio audience.

He’d moved on to the next contestant, Sandy, a woman her age, pleasant enough but unassuming. Her cooking hadn’t seemed particularly special, so Jason was probably well into his clever put-downs by now. But they wouldn’t cut Sandy as deeply, couldn’t reach as far as her heart.

“So you think you can cook?” he boomed. Camilla turned to watch from her corner. “I don’t!”

“You smug bastard, I hate you! How could you do this?” Sandy grabbed the boning knife

lying next to her rejected dish and thrust it into his chest, again and again, repeating, "I thought you loved me, you bastard!"

The set was bloody, the studio bedlam. Sandy staggered back, dropping the knife, her crazed eyes and lopsided smile a fairground mirror to his glazed stare and frothed mouth.

Camilla's quandary had been resolved. She'd simply return home and her family would learn to love ready meals. As if this had never happened, could never have happened. The two-timing fucker.

## **A Midnight Dream**

Nazifa Islam

I once thought of throwing you out  
with the evening star  
for company  
You both kept me  
up too late  
shining  
blazing so  
hellishly bright

## At the Sound of the Chime

Catherine Lanser

The chime on my iPod signals the end of my 10-minute meditation. I am now free to go forth with my day, hoping to carry with me some of the peace I have cultivated in that sparse time period. But as is normally the case, I do not carry this sense of quiet with me. The ringing of the simulated chime might as well be a starter pistol.

I open my eyes and stand up slowly enough, taking a few measured steps from the chair on the landing where I meditate to the top of the staircase. As I begin my descent down my pace and force quickens until I pounce from the softness of the carpeted last step to the hardwood floor beneath. From there the movements quicken. I grab the remote and turn on the morning television news show, pop open my laptop and head to the kitchen. A flurry of cupboards and doors are whipped open, and in seconds, I am heading back to the couch with a bowl of cereal. There I simultaneously eat, check my email, and catch up on the headlines.

The discipline of mindfulness I'd been practicing a few minutes earlier is all but gone now. I am no longer noticing my thoughts, or paying attention to any of the activities I am doing in any particular way, as is the practice. I am not noticing the taste of the cereal, or the sensation of it breaking down into mush as I chew it, or the way it seems to disappear in a lump down my throat. It is the opposite of the exercise we did in my mindfulness group, where we took at least five minutes to eat one raisin, first staring, then feeling, then smelling, and finally putting it our mouth, where we did not chew until we had explored it again.

Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention in a particular way. You are not just aware that you are eating, but noticing, as with the raisin, everything about eating. When you breathe you notice you breathe. And when you notice you've stopped noticing your breath, you bring your attention back to it again. In my post-meditative morning, I can't even say that I was aware of any of the activities I was doing, much less consciously directing any sort of attention on them. They were just activities I had to get through in order to get to the next step, getting dressed, which would lead to my first goal of the day, getting to work.

As a task-oriented person I approached everything in that way. So it was no surprise that I kept track of my meditation sessions as I did everything else, checking them off on a goal sheet and giving myself a gold star only when I did it at least five times a week. I could pat myself on the back as long as each session was accounted for. I didn't have a place to keep track of what happened after so if my mindful attitude disappeared immediately that didn't matter.

I started meditating because as the kind of person who tracks meditation on a goals list, I tended to push myself a little too hard. I thought that by sitting for 10 minutes a day and concentrating on my breathing, returning to it again and again as my thoughts fled, I would learn a less rigid type of discipline. If I could just sit and breathe for 10 minutes a day, certainly I could learn to be more flexible in other areas of my life.

But instead I discovered an app on my iPod, or a few hundred, that helps you meditate by keeping time, creating a wonderful simulated chime when the time was up. And with that as my new gold star, praising me for spending 10 minutes concentrating on my breathing in the morning, I could drive myself even harder the rest of the day. Just get to the end of the 10 minutes, I'd say, and you can go, go, go.

## How to Cope with Drilling Woodpeckers

Sarah Kendall

*The entire species is protected by state or federal law and therefore may not be harmed.*

I have highlighted the line with neon ink, pressing so hard the yellow bleeds through the page and onto my desk. It is late and I must keep reminding myself. The alarm clock glows with a mocking green haze. Andrew left Monday morning and the woodpecker arrived the same night. It seems a cruel trade. I look into the open, empty bureau drawer. I know Andrew deserves the anger that is bubbling up my throat. I know the impulse for violence is for him – but Andrew isn't here, and the woodpecker is.

Earlier when I walked into the building, Phillip was waiting for me by the row of mailboxes. The son of my downstairs-neighbors, he occasionally chatted with Andrew about football, cell phones, and video games. They have the same knack for hoarding an endless supply of useless information. I said hello and he handed me a stapled packet. He'd heard the woodpecker too, and could only imagine what it sounded like for me up on the top floor. I thanked him and held back tears. I have waited until 2 a.m. to leaf through his gift, until no other sound exists on the planet except this incessant rapping. I flip the page.

*Many of the foraging, breeding, and signaling behaviors of woodpeckers involve drumming and hammering using the bill.*

It would help if I knew his motive. I've named the woodpecker Andrew. I wonder if he is starving, furiously banging the wide oak door of a closed restaurant? Or is he screaming a message to a nearby friend? "Come over later to watch the big game!" Perhaps he is slaving away, excavating a love shack for his new mate? I guess the later. I look over the dark room and find the spaces where he used to be. I cannot gulp down enough air. Like the cedar siding taking on holes outside under the steady impact, I am splintering.

I peel back the blinds. Nothing has changed. There he is pounding away. I spoke with the landlord. She nodded with sympathy and waved me away. They were here first, unfortunately. She says this to me as I hand her my rent check, my heavy eyes bearing into hers.

*Boris Dimbleduch, in The Birdwatcher's Companion, suggests as a possible solution harassing the offending bird.*

It is too late to buy a garden hose. I wouldn't know where to connect it anyway. Where would I even find a fear-evoking plastic owl? I do not possess the artistic skills to paint a hawk silhouette. I do not know the woman Andrew has left me for, so I cannot kill her. My small frame and frail fists do not intimidate.

*One woman used a radio (encased in a plastic bag) with a timer set to go on at daybreak.*

I won't give him the satisfaction. But the drumming continues to rattle and I feel the casing of my brain might be shimmying loose. I know what you're thinking: sleep on the living room sofa, get some sleep, people break up every day – move on. It seems logical, but I will not relent. What's next – the kitchen, the toilet, my grandmother's jade ring? I must deal with this alone. Here is my first step in a new life. Surrendering is not an option.

I cloak myself with the nearest blanket and stuff my pajamas into winter boots so the fabric puffs out like a British soldier's pantaloons. And I am a soldier; forging the wintery precipice of the enemy's coop. Outside, the air is biting and I begin to question my decision. But at least the choice is my own. My feet crunch over mounds of snow-cruled grass as I creep below the awning and stare up into the black sky. There is Andrew. His glossy black plumes shine iridescent in the moonlight, and the small patch of yellow on his head reminds me of a shattered star. His strong black bill is poised and ready, and just as I think maybe something inside him has changed, he begins again.

I start to bang the two borrowed trashcan lids together. They crash like cymbals and ring out across the empty yard. I holler at Andrew the bird and Andrew the man, screaming at the top of my lungs for all the wrongs they have done me. It is strange and wonderful. An entire wall of windows begins to brighten like a blinking switchboard and I retreat inside. Safe and warm, I peek out once again. Andrew is gone and I have an hour of sleep ahead. Before I click off the lamp, and draw the curtains closed to shade the room from the fast approaching light, I read the final line on the last page.

*To date, no repellent for use on siding has proved satisfactory. The only anti-woodpecker substance exists in a con man's eye.*

## Celtic Idol

Ron Runeborg

With a great prelude accompanied by dancing, prancing and various other animations, contestant “Artemus Prigg III” filled the stage with his presence. His costume was unique to be kind, yet clever in the main; a befeater collar under which a blue silk and brocade jacket hung poorly on a form of more bone than skin...then white tights and red ballet slippers to ‘bottom it off’ so to speak. He was at once seen as a colorful man, a man of brilliance; a dancer, an intellectual, perhaps a man of some limited nobility. In truth, he was a bard and would momentarily show off his most valuable asset by delivering a song specially written for the contest.

“Old King Cole” he began, “was a very old soul, yes a very old so...”

The king stood and waved the entertainer to silence. He seemed not amused.

“What exactly do you mean, I’m a ‘very old soul’ exactly?”

Prigg pondered a moment, then stuttered “Your Highness, I mean that in the most flattering way! You see a very old soul would be a ‘very wise man’.”

King Cole was unconvinced and whispered to his wife that he thought the young fop might be taunting him by making light of his advanced years. Queen Cole then asked the bard if he might change the line that it paint a more pleasant and slightly less weighty picture of the sovereign. Prigg again thought deeply, quickly. “I think this is what you mean” he said at last.

“Old King Cole was a *merry* old soul, and a merry old soul was he.”

The queen smiled, and even his Majesty chuckled quietly. “Yes yes,” he said with another wave of his backhand, “I approve. Continue please!”

But before Artemus could catch his breath and sing the next verse he’d prepared the king’s Bishop scurried into the room with dire news.

“I’m afraid your favorite fiddler has died my liege, the trio has become a duet! And to add to the misery of this day, there has been a great hailstorm that has destroyed the entire tobacco crop; there shall be no pipe tobacco in the kingdom for at least a year!”

For a long time the king wept. He loved his fiddlers dearly, all three were like sons to him, and there was no vice more prized by the ruler than a good pipe full of Cavendish, grown, dried and chopped in his own kingdom’s fields.

“Perhaps good Mister Prigg could cheer you with his song my husband” said Mrs. Cole once the wailing had subsided.

“Indeed” said King Cole, also known as King Cole the Merciless and Petty; “Do go on then sir bard and make me smile in spite of my hidden yet festering rage.”

There were three exits from the king’s suite; one, a double door maintained by three guards, and two windows four stories above the ground. Artemus chose a window and prayed for divine intercession to break his fall.

## End of Story

Tony Brown

“Talk about a *weird* sense of humor,” Susan said, looking at two hard copy short stories that had arrived in the morning’s snail mail.

“What are you talking about, Linda?” the co-editor replied.

“Well, look at these manuscripts. Some nut sent in two copies of the same story with different titles.” She handed her the manuscripts and Susan shook her head.

“No, they’re not the same. Look at the word count. One’s over six thousand and the other one’s only four thousand.”

“But look at the *words*” Linda said.

“They do start out the same way, but down here they’re different. Maybe there’s a good reason he sent them both.”

Their interest was piqued. “Let’s read ’em,” Linda said, “and see what we think.”

After exchanging the stories and reading both versions, Susan said, “Shorter is *always* better. This one entitled ‘The Yellow Sheet’ is the one I like. Concise and to the point.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Linda replied. “Concise is nice, but look here in ‘When Red Turned Yellow to Black’ how he explains the tragedies that have affected the main character and made him the way he is. Look how he has the other peripheral characters that you might see in any bar of this sort. It paves a false trail that helps to make the ending more unexpected. And what a literary title!”

“I see what you mean. It seems like just another karaoke story at first, but you can *see* these people coming to life. Every day people do weird things that make you laugh at their idiocy. The humor balances the tragedy, too.”

Linda threw her copy on her desk. “But on the other hand, I see what you’re saying about the shorter one, too. It eliminates everything but the basics. Straight to the point, no fluff, no puff. It’s like, where’s the beef...*here’s* the beef!”

“But the longer one has these nice little descriptive phrases, more depth. Now, I think *you’re* right. *It is* better.”

“I don’t know, though, Susan. Now that I look at the shorter one, maybe *you’re* right. He gets it said and done, with a quick, concise ending.”

“Speaking of the ending, look how they different. One ends with Trooper Brown asking, ‘Is this Lil’ Bud,’ about the dead man and the other with Raymond talking about Big Bud’s ‘weird sense of humor.’ The first one lets the reader ponder what it means until they understand the dog won, while the other version ends a tragic tale with a bit of humor and gives the reader a clearer understanding

of how the contest ended.”

“Yeah,” Linda said. “Each version has excellent merits worth considering, but I’ve got the *perfect* solution that’ll eliminate further debate. She held the manuscripts over File 13 and let them flutter to a stop. “Problem solved.”

“End of story,” Susan said, tossing her empty Styrofoam coffee cup on top of the day’s latest trash.

## This Extra Day

Angi Holden

Jo had been waiting for this chance for weeks. It seemed appropriate that this extra day, unexpected, unlooked for, should present her with the ideal opportunity. Feigning sleep she listened to the sounds of Alec getting up (the buzz and grizzle of razor and electric toothbrush), having breakfast (the pop of the toaster, the rattle of spoon against mug) and gathering his things (laptop, keys, coat) together for his day at head office.

‘I’m off now,’ he said, dropping a kiss onto her forehead. ‘I’ll probably be quite late; might stop for a drink with Callaghan.’

‘No problem. See you later.’ The lie came easily, slipping into the half-light of the curtained room. ‘I’ll do a casserole. It’ll keep.’

The moment she heard the scrunch of the tyres on the drive, Jo was out of bed. She peered between the curtains, down the avenue. Already she felt furtive. The road was quiet, as though the well-appointed houses, with their landscaped gardens and the block-paved and gravelled drives, were holding their collective breath. It was early, barely morning and she had all day, but there was much to do.

As soon as she’d showered she went out to the Corsa for the pile of cardboard and the roll of parcel tape hidden in the boot. She sat on the living room floor, drinking the first of a series of coffees as she reconstructed the flat-packed boxes. A rough calculation, and she estimated that she could take most of her books and cds. She hadn’t the time to sort through the dvds, though she grabbed a few feelgood favourites – *When Harry Met Sally*, *The English Patient* and a couple of Disney movies. Frankly she wasn’t bothered about the rest.

The clothes she took barely filled one box: jeans, t-shirts, jumpers, a couple of extra pairs of shoes. She pulled one dress from the wardrobe, a slinky scarlet number that had once clung to her curves, making her look a million dollars. She discarded it on the end of the bed, knowing she’d lost far too much weight over the last year. She tossed the contents of her underwear drawer into an overnight bag, along with her washbag, her journal, her passport and the jewellery she’d had before she met Alec. She shook the remaining tablets from the bottle into the toilet bowl and flushed them away.

That was enough, she decided. She had everything she needed. She’d stay in Maria’s flat for the summer; it would give her enough time to decide what to do next, where to go.

In the end, even with the catbox strapped into the front seat, the boxes hardly filled the car. She drove across town her pulse hammering in her throat. The flat had only been empty a month, but it

already smelt stale and musty. She dumped the boxes on the floor, put her Aunt's aspidistra on the table and flung the windows open, letting in the afternoon breeze and suddenly feeling hungry. The cat trailed around after her, mewing.

'I'll be back soon,' she said, rubbing Moggley gently under his chin as she reached for her keys. 'Cat food, milk, bread, cheese.....' She was still adding to the list as parked at the supermarket. 'Rice, pasta, loo-rolls.....' She paid in cash. Alec wouldn't miss the money, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of complaining that she'd used his credit card.

As she took the change from the cashier, her diamond solitaire caught the light. She withdrew her hand sharply, as if scalded, spilling coins across the till.

'Sorry,' she said, twisting the ring on her finger. At the car, she unloaded the trolley and glanced at her watch. Half-four, just turned. If she cut across Victoria Park and took the footpath beside the athletics track she could be back at the house in twenty minutes, no problem. Easier than driving round the ringroad, and she would be able to see Alec's car in the drive if he was unexpectedly early.

Breathing deeply – the walk had been further than she remembered, and there was no shade on the path – she reached the avenue. The coast was clear; too late for the school run, too early for the returning office workers, and as fortune would have it no dog-watchers or gardeners to engage her in conversation. She felt in her pocket for the house key. It was still there, slightly warm from her body heat. She opened the door, smelt the rich aroma of the casserole she had left in the oven for Alec. As she stepped into the hall, Moggley appeared from the living room, mewing his welcome. Puzzled, she bent down to stroke him. The postman had been; a couple of letters and a bill lay on the doormat. She took the post through to the kitchen.

She was looking for a box to put the cat in when she heard Alec's key in the lock. He had stepped into the hall and draped his suit jacket over the newel post before he saw Jo standing by the kitchen door.

'Hello darling,' he said. 'The meeting finished early; I caught the three-fifteen. I thought you were out when I saw your car wasn't there.' He glanced at her; her eyes were glassy and wide, her hand lingered around her lips, her chin quivered.

'Oh no, not again,' he said, reaching out for her and gathering her into his embrace. He breathed in the apple-scent of her hair, shielding her from his disappointment. He took her through to the living room and sat her down on the settee. She stared at the familiar spines on the bookshelves, the racks full of favourite cds, her Aunt's aspidistra by the television and she began to cry.

'Don't worry,' said Alec, wiping the fat, salty tears from her cheeks. 'We'll find it. You've got your keys at least. Let's see, where might you have been? The library? The supermarket?'

## Feedback

Sian Cummins

*Student's comments: I wanted to do something more interesting than just make a doorbell. In Marketing I would imagine that it is the unusual ideas that sell more products. I came up with a puzzle where you would be required to get the ball bearing through a maze to complete the circuit and make the buzzing sound. You would tilt the box from side to side to try to guide the ball bearing through the maze. The maze could be "blind" (or seen through Perspex for younger users).*

*I did fulfil the brief set by Mr Macdara because I designed and built a product that sounds a buzzer when a circuit is completed. I knew most people would make a doorbell so I decided to make a 'Niche Marketing' product by making a product which I knew would be unusual. I used the jig saw to cut the walls of the maze out of balsa wood and spent approximately five hours painting the design for the top of the blind maze. Several pieces of balsa wood snapped when I used the jig saw and so there was approximately £? of waste. My method stated that I was going to glue the box shut so that the maze was functional but I did not have time.*

*Teacher's comments: Of course you had time! The ideas are there but this project is sloppily executed. Disappointing. Signed: Paul Macdara. (Note: Please do not put question marks in final pieces of work.)*

I nearly stack it three times on the way to Music because I'm still looking at his mark sheet in disbelief. Part of this - I admit it - is down to Macdara writing his real full name. It's making my stomach go all apeshit. I'm so angry I could brick the Tech block window. Disappointing!!! OK, but I just need to hold the tears in for another 35 minutes and then I'm going to the toilet for the whole of dinner time.

In the brick bungalow that is Music 1, Harrison makes those of us at the back stand on the tables. The middle row stand on chairs and the front stand normally on the floor. Guess this school isn't too bothered about Safety and Health. It's so she can see our mouths moving, so no one can fail to rehearse for the sophisticated Nativity. The trick is to move your mouth enough that Harrison can see you but not so much that anyone thinks you're getting in to it.

Our year is the choir. The younger kids are acting but it's not towels on heads or anything like that. It's supposed to be more like the historical story (though it's still the usual religious bet-hedging). This is not a religious school. Still, we have to do it. The year sevens walk around Nazareth

and us lot stand on tiered platforms and sing soft rock numbers that narrate the story. It's a bit sad.

Even so, the one we're practicing today fits well with my mood. It's called 'The Angel Gabriel' and it's a gentle, nearly spooky thing in a minor key. All 'begottens' and 'tongues of fire'. It's about how Mary cries when she hears she's prego by the Holy Ghost.

Mrs Harrison gets the idiots in the room to shut up. She has trouble with the posh kids that wear their PE kit to normal lessons. (Why is that? In case they have to do PE suddenly, in an emergency?) We run through the song. We don't sound bad.

As we ascend eerily up the scale to the first chorus, I think about Macdara and I think, *oh yes, I have definitely loved you.*

Shit.

That's why his teacher's comments hurt like hell.

I think tongues of fire might burn me up here on this desk. Well if I did love Mr Macdara it's over now. I'm lamenting handing in such a piece of shit to him. I thought I was too good for a doorbell.

Doing something different was never a way to stand out for Paul Macdara. He's already got his favourites. Indie girls with giant hair and too much blusher. Boys that talk to him like he's their age. Those are the ones he was shouting "I've got a wild one" at when he waggled a metre length of copper wiring between his legs. The rest of us were left out of the joke; the hilarious, illegal joke. We're not stupid enough to get him sacked. Everybody loves Mr Macdara. Paul. But from this day and forever I will never be so revolting as to love him again.

Now I'm glad I didn't faint in his class after the BCG. A few did, some on purpose. They made it all the way back from the nurse's office with their hands over the needle prick and then WHAM! Down they went. He made them lie on the floor with their feet up on one of the tall stools. Pervert! Everyone loved it, blond hairs glinting away on tanned legs and not much work getting done.

With one of the girls it was not so pretty. She went proper candle-waxy and sweat ran under the roll of fat round her neck. He made her lie with her feet on the stool too, but now he was showing real concern. It was cringey to watch, and even involved some touching; on her arm...on her clammy white forehead... just above her heart. It was grim.

I'd never have the balls to fake passing out in his class and there wasn't much chance of it happening naturally. I did what the nurse told me - looked away, kept it covered, didn't insert anything smaller than an elbow into my ear. She said that last part to everyone, as a joke.

The girl who fainted and wasn't faking it has to have a *medical* once a year. It makes me feel revolting. She's only got to have it because she's got hay fever. That seems a weak reason to me. For someone to have to get their clothes off.

Because she has hay fever, they'll look at her *chest* behind that closed door. I feel even weirder thinking about it because she's one of those who's always buttoned up to the neck.

Harrison's going out of the room. I'm not sure why they do that, teachers. Surely not to smoke? I

mean, if a proper adult can't demonstrate 35 minutes of willpower...? Before she goes, she makes us get down off the desks and puts on a CD of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*. She's a sweet old dear and she's as threatening as she can be, wagging an old-style finger (yes! It's yellow!) as she tells us to please listen in silence while she's gone.

Well, obviously we all end up dancing on the tables. We're all up there, not just the tall ones at the back. We bounce around, making the CD jump. It's one of the confident kids who starts it, one of Paul Macdara's mates, but it's infectious and we all join in. We're going to get a bollocking but we're all going to get it together. I need a laugh after having my heart torn out by Macdara.

The confident kid is playing Joseph and has put his jumper over his head like a nativity towel. We're singing along, then we're all singing silly words to the tunes. Soon 'banged my fucking BCG!' becomes 'nothing in yer ear smaller than an...'

'...ELBOW!'

'Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing in your ear...EH-EHL-BOW!'

and then there's a dance move to go with it, crooking your elbow up to your head like a not-right, trying to get it in your ear. We're all doing it. Then it's trying to get your elbow into the ear of the person next to you. The elbows are swinging higher and higher. We're getting over excited. There's a crack like a blunt clap of thunder at the side of my head and the classroom turns to red. *Joseph* is a low whine. As my chin grazes the carpet I wonder what Macdara will make of this, and most of all I hope he's satisfied.

## Changes

Heather F. Reid

It was nothing really, just a cough: the kind which might lead a doctor to enquire, *productive?* as though anticipating that, one day, the humble cough might surprise everyone and prove itself to serve some greater purpose.

'You ought to get that checked,' Gus said. It was a Sunday, hot and dry, and the smell from the cauliflowers had the sulphurous taint of rot. 'Bastard beasties.' He rammed the spade into the loam and dropped to his haunches, insinuating his fingers into the tightly clenched leaves to expose the vivid green onslaught of a caterpillar infestation. On inspection the cabbages were the same, their outer leaves crimped like ancient elephant ears, the inner ones lacy.

'Not again,' Bec said, her tone mirroring his mood rather than any deep-seated disappointment of her own. 'Do you remember last year's broccoli?'

'Remember? I'm scarred by it. Those buggers must've been heat-resistant.'

Bec laughed, whilst at the time she had been equally disgusted when three caterpillars crawled from the steaming vegetables of their Sunday lunch, with hindsight she had come to regard the event as a kind of minor miracle - a resurrection of sorts, performed on their kitchen table. To Gus, however, it served only as an argument for the continued use of pesticides.

'What type are they?' she asked now, picking up a caterpillar between finger and thumb and examining its struggling body. Something about its wrinkled persistence and its bright translucency put her in mind of the time they had experimented with coloured condoms.

'Cabbage whites, I imagine. Bloody pests,'

'Will they be beautiful?'

'Beautiful?' Gus stared, bemused. 'Bec, the crop's ruined!'

The three she rescued she kept in an old plastic fish tank she'd found in the garage, which once housed a hamster but had for the past year acted as mausoleum to the ghostly remains of a house spider. She chose the smallest - ones which had recently hatched from the rash of yellow eggs glued to the underside of the leaves - and added foliage on which they could feed. Each day saw progress: their appetite was voracious and, as they moved across the leaves, scissoring the flesh with their mandibles, their bodies stretched and fattened. Occasionally, when she was emptying out the mass of gravelly waste that accumulated at the bottom of the tank, she came across their cast-off skins and, at night when she was lying next to Gus, his muscles tight and hot from digging, she would describe them to him as *mere shadows of their former selves*, in the dreamy, sing-song voice she always used to turn him on.

She was undergoing tests. The GP - baffled by her cough's persistent nature, after a course of

antibiotics had failed to make an impact - had referred her to the hospital to be someone else's problem. The specialist had shown her a diagram of the chest - the lungs for all the world like a cleaved cabbage, the spine reminiscent of its tough white stem - and pointed to where the tapering twigs of the bronchial tree terminated in a magnified cluster of nodules: *the alveoli*, he'd said, *like bunches of grapes*. By contrast Bec's own lung was mildly disappointing, an early-stage cocoon with some woolly stuff inside, as though on her journey to the hospital she had inadvertently inhaled a cloud. This, the specialist had said, was her problem.

That night she moved the caterpillars up into the bedroom, placing them on the bedside cabinet where moonlight lit the tank, highlighting the bristles on their bodies. They had begun to act strangely, stretching themselves upwards and waving like sea swept kelp. She worried that their behaviour was a sign of discontent: that the tank or the food she was providing was insufficient for their caterpillar needs. She wanted to ask Gus, who knew about such things, but he'd withdrawn into himself so that even when she pressed herself against him -for warmth, for comfort - he was cold and unresponsive. In the morning the caterpillars had changed, two had made their way up to the highest corners of the tank whilst one had fastened itself to the side. They no longer had legs or a head but had become almost dragonsque: plated and ridged, two tiny black horns protruding mid body. This, she assumed, was stage three, the stage she herself was at, a stage from which, according to the specialist, there could be no return.

For ten days nothing further happened and, unlike the caterpillars which had seemed bold and shameless shedding their skins like strip-joint hussies, the chrysalises were still and secretive things. Each morning, when she woke, Bec inspected them for change, holding the tank to the light to search for clues, greedy to understand the physical changes a body was capable of inflicting upon itself. She saw little of Gus who spent his days at work and his evenings in the garden: the brassicas, he said, were beyond help but the carrots and peas still held the promise of a healthy crop. On the nights they made love it was at her instigation, cunning in her desire for him, relentless in her need for affirmation. Sometimes, early mornings, she woke breathless, a sense of having lifted from the bed woozy and light-headed, something frail but urgent beating in her chest; then she would cling to him not just for comfort but for ballast.

The blood was a surprise; she hadn't expected blood, or at least the reddish coloured liquid - just a drop - which must have trickled from the cases when they split. What remained, still attached to the side, were three papery shells: tiny Chinese lanterns, delicate and pale. Now, there were three empty cases but no butterflies. Bec opened the window and called for Gus to come. He was standing by the fence, looking out across the field to where it blended with the sky, his hair wheaten in the sun, his neck burnt above the collar of his shirt.

Inside the bedroom she showed him the empty pupa cases. The tank was covered with a tightly fitting lid, griddled with ventilation holes and, carefully, Gus removed this and laid it upside down

upon the bed. There, Clustered in the middle were three white butterflies, as darkly flecked as honesty pods, trembling slightly. She moved, as if to touch them, but Gus caught her hand, 'Don't,' he said, 'they'll need time to adapt.' He picked up the lid and placed it carefully on the sill beside the open window. 'Let's just leave them for a while.'

He led her to the garden then, beside the ruined cabbages, overlooked by sunflowers and dazzled by the glare of late-crop rapeseed. Nearby two blackbirds rummaged like widows at a car boot sale in the mulch around the raspberries, and, on the fence, a thrush unravelled its long banner of song. Resting his head on hers Gus turned Bec's gaze to the open window, where the butterflies readied their wings, and pulled her close.

## Nightshirt

Jacob Oet

In the river  
I found myself  
alive as the clam.

Later, sleep struck  
chords in my stomach,  
signaling the body's winter.

I doused the flame of waking  
taking all the particular measures—  
no sense dying without knowing it.

I crawled out  
through a tunnel of parted grass  
bent overhead, one droplet hanging.

Last week, after flood, waking and burning,  
I found myself again  
after the skin peeled like paint.

And after I decided enough was enough,  
I came to a door.  
But this time, I opened.

## Hallelujahs

Jacob Oet

My faith shattered because a flying saucer crashed through my window.

Two red-eyed visitors wriggled out of the debris. They approached me, holding their arms out for balance. A few feet from my bed, they began speaking an alien tongue. I realized it was French.

“English.” I pointed to my ears. In English the aliens apologized for breaking my window and said, *We are going to die now.*

Their gray flesh wrinkled before my eyes. They closed their eyes and from their heads white steam spiraled upward, growing dimmer as it rose, becoming air. Clumps of dirt fell from their skin. Their skin disintegrated into dirt. Soon they were two mountains of dirt on my floor. A voice in my head spoke French.

“English.” I said aloud. The voice changed. It said, *You are not special.*

There was dirt. My window was broken, glass strewn over the floor. Some pieces catching the moonlight. The winter air sucked itself through holes in my blanket. I was still breathing. Steam rose. I pulled the blanket over my head, but cold bit through.

I tried to fall into sleep, to become my bed, to rid myself—by not thinking of—the dirt that lodges in the soul, making mountains when no one is looking...

*You are not special. You are not special. You are not special. You are not special.*

## Buffalo

Jacob Oet

There was Omar, Omar and his sister. She was tall and old and liked mischief. Omar liked inviting me to his basement. We lived in small places, apartments, but somehow he had a large basement. His apartment was a few sidewalks down from mine, swings away on the cul-de-sac, and he had good bread. It was whole wheat, brown and full of grain and when we made it in his kitchen Omar put too much butter on. His sister was interested in us or something, but we weren't interested in her. Always taking her shoes off and smiling big like the long street I had to take to get to the bus stop.

There was Austin. He was in second grade, which meant I was better. I was in third grade. He waited with Omar and me and Omar's sister looking at us from the grass. We waited for the bus and played games like jumping shadows of cars. The shadows were short and I thought winter would help. Winter was cloudy but we jumped and played anyway.

My house wasn't a house. It was a big room I shared with my younger brother and some blankets, bunk beds. I had the high bunk, which meant I was better. He had the floor bunk and was a light sleeper. My house was a big room I shared with my brother and it was in the apartment like Mama and Papa's house. There was a stove for cooking, a toilet for flushing, lights for glowing, and sofas for jumping.

There was this big gear and cog dump in the back of the cul-de-sac. Austin and I would go to it. He said there might be rats living in the dumpster and there were big dead branches everywhere. There was also a haunted house with boarded up windows. Austin kept promising me we would go there at midnight, some day. I nodded or shrugged and said "Yeah." I was afraid a bit.

In Hebrew school I learned about Sukkot. It's a holiday when you take branches and make a house and sleep in it. Austin was Christian or something, but he and Omar helped me carry the branches from the dump to this tree in my neighbor's yard. Omar had a red wagon and we carried the branches there. His sister watched from a window with her hands on the glass and her cheeks pressed to the backs of her hands. My parents said I might be in trouble because I used the neighbor's tree without permission, even though technically it was the city's tree. We lived in Buffalo. My parents made me apologize to the neighbors and ask permission to use their tree. I was embarrassed but rang their doorbell and apologized while the tree shook in the wind in the twilight. Finally I made a wooden tent. That's what it was. When Sukkot was done I took it down. Omar said his sister said it was "ephemeral" or something. I don't know what that means but it made me think of skeletons.

I know I had to move in fourth grade and I never saw them again. I got there in the snow two

years before and that was it. The snow was record: eight feet in three days. Then it melted. It became a puddle and you can't sled down a puddle or excavate a puddle. There was record snow and I moved to Ohio two years later.

Maybe at some time I knew Omar's sister's name. I think so. I hope so, at least. It's sad because I can't remember if Austin had a dog or a baby sister.

Papa said it was the economy that made us move. He lost his job and had to move to Cleveland for a new one. "These things come and go," he said.

## On Staging with No Bows

James B. Nicola

There was no curtain; it was in the round.  
Then everything stopped. No one made a sound  
and no one bowed, which would have let us know  
that it was time to clap, get up, and go.  
We couldn't just leave, what with corpses all  
over the stage and peppering the hall:  
Haemon, at last with his Antigone;  
Ismene, there; there, Aunt Eurydice,  
who, taking her life, made a widower  
of King Creon. Although we knew they were  
just actors, and that they would resurrect  
themselves, none of the audience expect-  
ed them to take so long, or their stillness  
to inflict us with a paralysis  
that strikes me, even now, writing this.

## An Ending Sketch

Daisy Kemp

I catch the train: Bognor Regis to London, Victoria.

It's about half seven in the morning and my eyes itch as I ram the flimsy travel card into the barrier machine. The grey muzzled bloke overseeing this looks rough as hell. He's a big bloke, and he's wearing one of those fluorescent safety jackets which makes him look like a canary on steroids. I can't tell if he's going to say good morning or not until the last second.

I'm the first one onboard.

My hands shake as I plunk my takeaway Costa coffee down onto a little fixed table on the train-surrounded by one of those four seat affairs. Two forwards and two go backwards. I opt for the one which looks cleanest, although the pattern is ghastly with swirls of clashing browns and oranges, like Technicolor vomit. I realise choosing one going backwards will make me feel nauseous, but think it will look stupid to switch. The coffee is lukewarm and bitter with sea-surf cataracts of scum. It tastes like shit.

Some of it has slopped over onto the back of my hand, so I wipe it off on the thigh of my dark jeans as I stash my worn rucksack down by my feet. The hastily ironed check shirt I'm wearing has a huge neglected crease down the torso, and I'm pretty sure I look as rough as the bloke at the barrier. I stretch and smooth my hands through my rakish hair like a guy in a movie. I take off my square glasses and push my fingers into the corners of my eyes until it hurts. I'm really short-sighted. I mean, really. I'm like Velma in Scooby Doo when she loses her specs and mistakes the monster for Shaggy. Funny I guess- but when it comes down to it I'm practically blind and it's bloody awful. A few more people are starting down the platform towards the train now. They are blurred creatures who slur through my squint.

I needlessly wipe a lens with the corner of my creased shirt, and push my glasses back on.

I glance at the few bleary-eyed characters that've started to board the carriage. I decide to name them. There's some ginger guy,(Ron) and a Scottish sounding older couple talking about their daughter where the wife has some sort of lazy eye (christened McWang-eye). Everyone else is pretty unremarkable, aside from this ferret-faced man in his mid fifties with anaemic hair who reminds me of the white rabbit in 'Alice in Wonderland'. I struggle to remember what happens to the white rabbit in the story. I think I see the man tug a little chain watch from his breast pocket, and I feel a slick of cool down my neck like a hunk of snow.

Then a woman sits opposite me. Glancing up from my coffee for just a second, I observe how the dark skirt-suit she's wearing hugs her slender body. She holds a satchel in one hand, and a thick manila envelope in the other which she places on her lap and folds her pale hands over, before

smoothing out a little furrow in her skirt material. When she crosses her stocking clad legs I think to myself that a weaker man may splutter on his poor quality coffee. Although they're probably tights, not stockings, since this is not the 1950's. I would prefer it if they were stockings, however. She has long, dark hair which lays softly either side of her face as she stares intently out of the window as if she's looking for something. If this were a Chanel advertisement, a hotter version of me would wordlessly lead her out of the carriage and into my abode. I can't help but smirk.

Sensing me staring, she averts her eyes and goes to tug something out of the satchel with a little 'click' of the bronze clasp. I stare down at my crappy rucksack feeling like a massive pervert. Then a miracle happens. To my surprise, she tugs out a little book and a gleaming silver pen (which looks damn pricey), before scrawling something on one of the back pages. The book looks like a diary, but the tiny printed numbers at the bottom of each side, and the way the spine's bound tells me it's a printed copy of something. The cover is blank. She tears off the page which bears whatever she's just written, and pushes it across the course table towards me.

It can't be. Oh God, it is. A phone number; namely, hers I presume. I am overwhelmed with a sensation of horror and delight. And nausea, actually; but I put that down to the fact I'm travelling backwards. I glance up at her, probably holding the expression of someone who has just been diagnosed with the bad news that yes, you have cancer, but no, it isn't terminal. She winks at me and I almost throw up in my mouth. I look behind me to check the hotter version of me from the Chanel advert isn't there, and she's grinning when I turn back to her. The front to carriages of the train could easily have been consumed in a mushroom cloud of smoke and fire in that instant, and I would have been none the wiser.

Still holding my bewildered gaze with her dark eyes, she abruptly picks up the envelope on her lap and tears along it neatly, yet somehow brutally with a fingernail, before glancing at a broad sheet of paper inside. It looks as if it's been wedged in the wrong way by somebody, as she struggles to tug it out from the envelope.

'It's breached.' I blurt out, reverting to comedy in a desperate attempt to dowse the awkwardness of the whole situation.

She laughs like it's the funniest thing she's ever heard, and I imagine how this would make her lovely face light up if the sun could filter properly through the grainy window. She seems pleased with whatever the contents of the envelope reads as she scans it, and then slides it wordlessly into the satchel. The little book she keeps grasped firmly in her hands. I wonder what it is. Her knuckles are white.

'I thought you looked a funny one.' She offers, easily.

I am unsure whether to be horribly offended, or immensely flattered. She doesn't look like she either cares or expects an answer, which makes two of us. Then she leans across the table towards

me, and gives me a peculiar and evasive look. I feel both flattered and threatened.

‘So, if you had to shag a Mr Man, who would you shag?’ She asks quizzically.

Damn. I knew this was too good to be true. But the churning in my stomach and the soft rumble of the train below me tells me she has actually just asked me this question.

‘Mr Bump,’ I reply, triumphantly, ‘so that I could kill him afterwards and make it look like an accident. That way nobody would ever know.’

She seems impressed. At this stage, I wouldn’t be surprised if Mr Blobby came strolling down the gangway and high fived me. What the fuck was in that coffee?

I notice that she checks something in the little book before she gives me a little glance of approval and giggles at my response, which is strange. I throw up in my mouth a little again. The feeling of nausea persists as she asks me the next few questions. These included whether I thought that Boris Johnson looks like a Little Britain character(yes), and the most crazy thing I’d ever done(getting a temporary tattoo on my face when I was thirteen). It starts to feel like an inquisition, and I don’t like it. Each time she checks in the little book before laughing.

She suddenly says she needs to go to the bathroom, and winks at me before saying she trusts me to protect her things; even the little book, so long as I don’t look inside it. The last part is spoken with a severe tendency which alarms me. What alarms me more is the fact she trusts me with her things.

Of course I look.

On closer inspection, the cover is warm from how tightly she’s been clutching it. It’s dark and rather smooth, but not like leather; moleskin perhaps. Feeling guilty, I flick to the back of the book where a page is turned down. I presume this to be the place she kept referring to. Today’s date is printed neatly in the top right hand corner, and it seems to be a set of questions and responses set out with a different font corresponding to each, like a script. No, wait; it’s actually a joke book.

In type ink, each of the jokes I made in the last few minutes stand in bold on the page. How is that possible? I think I may vomit onto the seat next to me.

I flick back a couple of months, and it’s the same thing. Stuff I can barely remember saying that made someone or other laugh. And it’s all here in this book. Suddenly, the content of the envelope slips out from between the pages. She must have put it inside here for safe keeping. It’s a letter confirming a publishing contract for this material- the little book. All my material.

Hearing a voiceover make the announcement of the next stop, I grab my rucksack and jolt out of the door, not caring which stop it is or where I’m going. I think that on my own two feet I can go wherever I chose, and I laugh all the way sprinting down the platform towards the exit barrier until the sound distorts into a curdling sob like a drowning infant.

I throw up on a rough looking bloke at the barrier.

## Final Score

Jane Røken

Surely the dawn  
has never been as gorgeous  
as this morning.

The moment the sun  
breaks free  
of the horizon,  
a golden sign appears  
in the sky:

~ *GAME OVER* ~  
*Your total score is 23,805,119.*

Then  
the light is turned off.

In the dark  
you have three seconds  
to consider  
whether your score  
is sufficient  
and  
for what.

\*

## Before the Party

Thomas Wallis

I'm sleeping and she wakes me, not with the blaring regularity and cliché of an alarm or the 'shake, shout and drag bedding to the floor' of which my father became an expert in my teenage years, but with kisses. And there's something about the way each one slightly misses my lips that stirs me.

I let out a long, bear-like groan. She jumps out of bed to turn on the shower before returning to continue gently stroking my hair and kissing my neck and face, ever so softly.

I'm late: ten minutes to get ready and be out of the house or I won't make the train, and the resulting delays will have me arriving a full half hour later than I'd said I would. In the back of my mind I've already assessed my situation and know that there's no way the friends I've arranged to meet will be anything other than tardy. This being the newest and brightest in a string of failed pseudo-relationships, she hasn't yet had the pleasure of being introduced to the people I'm meeting. She isn't yet aware of the frequent failings of my closest friends.

"The shower's on. Getting it right can be a little tricky, but it should be fine now."

Still too sleepy to form a coherent sentence, I plant a lingering kiss on her lips as a sign of gratitude before stumbling to the bathroom.

Ten minutes later I'm alert and far more fragrant, having washed the smell of bed from my skin. Leaving the steam-filled bathroom to return to stand by the bed, the only thing preserving my dignity is a purple towel fastened around my waist.

"That's a lot better," I say, looking up to see her wearing nothing but underwear and reaching the top shelf of her cupboard.

I'm conscious that I'm staring at her bottom. She turns and gently smiles at me.

"I like it when you look at me like that,"

"Sorry." I avert my eyes to the bed. She giggles.

Just fifteen minutes ago I was sleeping so soundly in that bed, comfortable in the embrace of this beautiful figure, now laughing at my awkwardness.

I notice the clothes I had decided to wear tonight have been carefully taken from my bag and laid out on the bed. I briefly weigh the thoughtfulness against the invasion of privacy before shaking the evaluation from my mind.

"I put them out for you. You've got like..." She pauses to check the watch on her wrist, "Five minutes before you've got to go."

Suddenly a slew of previous encounters: failed applicants for the ownership of my heart, come rushing through my mind. Each one tells me I'm 'emotionally unavailable' and something akin to a slab of granite when it comes to expressing feelings.

"You'll never move on unless you can let someone in... you're so guarded; no-one stands a chance," the most recent, albeit brief, liaison's words echo in my head.

I must keep telling myself to let people in, to give them a chance. Any doubts I have about this girl, in fact any girl over the past eight months, have stemmed from the heartache of my previous relationship: the big one.

Her warm smile and irrefutably beautiful, brown eyes bring my thoughts back into the present and are slowly melting any doubts away. I glance back up at her as she slides dark leggings up over her hips before pulling the body of her jumper down to cover her bottom.

For this perfect weekend I am not only staying in her house, but sharing her bed. The offer to stay, although heavily suggested by me, was something of a surprise after just one date and a brief, but memorable initial encounter at a house party.

It's clear she's becoming concerned I'll annoy my friends with my tardiness and moreover, that the inevitable response from them will be that she has made me late. She can't have that. She has ideas for us that reach somewhat farther than this weekend.

As I tighten the black leather belt and button my dark shirt, she brushes past me to stand in the doorway, placing her hands on my hips as she passes and kissing me softly on the cheek. A chill runs down my spine.

She stops and turns to stand in the doorway, softly leaning against the frame as she begins to push the door gently against the wall. The dressing gown hanging on the hook creates a cushion that sends the door slowly swinging back towards her outstretched hand, ready to be pushed again. As she continues to toy with the door she slyly watches with an intriguing sparkle in her eye.

"How do I look?" I adopt an awkward stance as I straighten the edges of my dark jacket.

"Looking like that, I don't want you to go." She smiles and flirtatiously shifts her glance to my crotch before looking back into my eyes.

I notice she's now adorned with running paraphernalia and move to pass comment.

"Are you...?"

"Off for a run," she says, "then I'll get down to researching the project for work. It'll give me something to do whilst I wait for you to come back."

I'm conscious that I'd like nothing more than for this beautiful new light in my life to join me for the evening; however the bar will be filled with my closest friends. It's perhaps too soon to unleash them on her, with their innumerable questions about how we met, what she thinks of me and whether we've had sex yet. Also my ex will be there.

"I really would like you to come." I say in an apologetic tone to help sell my sincerity.

"I know. But it is a bit too soon. And tonight's going to be difficult enough for you without me

being there.”

In the new found spirit of honesty I’ve adopted in recent months I’ve already told her everything: how my previous relationship crashed and burned and how little I was looking forward to seeing my ex-girlfriend for the first time since the break-up.

“It’s ok, really,” she says, “And you’ll be fine. Just be polite to her, have fun and drink with your friends. Then come back home to me. I’m going to need some serious cuddles after the boredom I’ve got in store.”

Her confidence is effortless and reassuring. She can see how comfortable I am around her even after such little time together.

“Well I shouldn’t be too late back...” I begin to explain before she cuts me off,

“Look... you were telling me you haven’t seen these guys in ages. It’ll be good to catch up with them. I know she’s going to be there but this was going to happen eventually. Don’t run away from it. Make sure you have a good time with your mates and have a few drinks. I’m looking forward to seeing you drunk later anyway.”

“I will, I promise. But I don’t want you to wait up and be all tired tomorrow,” I plead.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she replies, “so don’t worry about what time you come back. The longer you’re gone, the more work I’ll get done anyway, so really you’ll be doing me a favour.” She glances down at her watch for a second time,

“Now you *are* late.”

“They won’t be on time anyway, but you’re right,” I kiss her as I move past into the hall and step towards the front door.

As I step out into the street the cold wind hits my face. I throw the scarf I’ve brought with me around my neck in a loose knot; a vain attempt to keep the January cold from reaching me. Turning back to face her, now standing in the doorway, I plant another fervent kiss upon her lips. Her eyes close and she sighs as I clasp her waist. Her hands slowly stroke upwards, along my back. I run my fingers softly through her hair, tilting her head upwards, towards mine. Our lips interlock again briefly before I tip my head, letting our foreheads gently touch.

“You’ve got to go,” She breathes as she slowly opens her eyes.

“I know.”

I offer one more longing kiss to her lips as a last goodbye before releasing her from my embrace, turning to head into the darkness of the night. As the door closes behind me I lift the collar of my jacket; a further ineffectual effort against the relentlessness of the cold. It’s going to be an arduous few hours.

## **Shortcut**

Tracey S. Rosenberg

Easier to write  
a suicide poem than go  
to all that trouble.

## Excerpts from Gemma's Diary

Charlie Britten

### Wednesday, 7 September

I'm going to write my diary in this sweet little notebook I bought yesterday. Perhaps the lined pages, between the flowery pink cover and the shiny yellow ribbon, will believe me.

We went back to school today. GCSE year, the big one. Whoo-hoo. I'm in Mrs Whitely's class. She asked us to write her an email telling her something about ourselves, so I told her I had cancer.

When she called me out of maths this afternoon, everybody looked up and, as I went to the door, I heard that prat, Connor, asking, "What's she done? What's she done?" Hannah told him to shut his mouth. Hannah's great, always looks out for me, the best friend ever. She knows about it. Obviously.

Mrs Whitely was nice, asked me whether I was in any pain and when I had hospital appointments. She thought it was funny there was nothing on my records but she expected my parents would ring school in the next day or two. I told her there was just Mum at home now and we didn't have a good relationship, but didn't seem to hear that bit. "Your mum's one of the receptionists at the Hillside Medical Centre, isn't she?"

"Yeah."

"This must be really awful for her as well."

I repeated that we didn't have a good relationship but she didn't get it. I had to spell it out, that Mum doesn't know.

Mrs W told me I must tell Mum at once, which I suppose was predictable, from an adult and a teacher. Just as she was walking away, she added, "She's lovely, your mum."

Everybody says that.

### Thursday, 8 September

Our family used to go to church. We stopped when my sister, Sophie, and I got too old for Sunday School. There was some youth group, called 'TECS', which we could've gone to, but we didn't bother. I never found out what 'TECS' stood for, although I think the C was for 'church'. After that we just went at Christmas and Easter and we even do that now.

I dreamed last night I was at one of the services, at the bit where they pray for people in the village. We were kneeling, our heads bowed, the carved wood of the pew in front pressing into my forehead. I was wearing this soft woollen scarf with pink candy stripes, which I'd seen in *Accessorise*, and I was just thinking how cool it would be to wear a lace mantilla, like the Catholics do, when I heard the vicar say, in his solemn, churchy voice, "We pray for the sick and the suffering. Lord, we lift up to you Gemma Hilton who is battling against cancer." And do you know what I did? I turned round to wave at everyone in the congregation, like I was a Royal or something.

The service turned into my funeral. Mum was in the front row, wearing that manky blue anorak of hers and chatting to Sophie, the two of them turning their heads to each other, then their shoulders - rabbit, rabbit, rabbit - until Mum had her back to the coffin. Sophie is the favourite, the golden girl at university. Dad was there too, sitting across the aisle, his skinned tanned by the Australian sun, his eyes darting between Mum and the floor. They didn't look round at him, which was hardly surprising, after everything. The Cow wasn't there, though.

I looked down upon them from the ceiling. With all the other fat-bottomed cherubs, I was puffing out my cheeks into this trumpet thing and had just a bit of white diaphanous material draped over my rude bits. I don't know what diaphanous means, but it sounds good. The choir was singing this anthem, which starts off 'God be in my head and in my understanding', and then it gets more and more serious with each line, finishing with, 'God be at my end and at my departing.'

### Friday, 9 September

I went round to Hannah's after school. Her mum cooked us spaghetti bolognese - you know, real spaghetti bolognese, mince, onions, tomato cooked in a pan. It was so nice. Mrs Granger commented on what she called my 'good appetite', which was embarrassing, but there was nothing I could do about it since I'd already eaten it. She said I was 'so brave'. I loved the way she squeezed my shoulders as she asked me when I was going to start treatment.

"She went to the City General after school yesterday," said Hannah.

"I thought all the oncology was at the London Road Clinic," replied Hannah's mum.

I nodded. "Yeah."

She switched the kettle on, saying she was making a cup of tea for herself and would we like one? Hannah wanted to go upstairs, to get ready to go out, but I just wanted to stay in the warm kitchen, listening to the home sounds, the burbling of the dishwasher, the television mumbling away in the background, Hannah's brothers playing in the next room. My mum always used to have a cup of tea with me and Sophie when we came home from school.

"She's lovely, your mum," said Mrs Granger.

Wednesday, 12 September

I hate parents' evenings. All the teachers who're usually horrible to you suddenly start being nice, although Mr Pearson did say Hannah and I messed about in science. We saw Mrs Whitely last. Mum started talking about the sixth form and my 'future', but, as she said that word, Mrs W swung me a look. "Gemma, you've spoken to your mother?"

Mum did her horrible frown, where her eyebrows rise right up into her fringe. "About what?" She swept her hair out of her eyes. She's always washing it, every morning, with that cheap, supermarket shampoo which makes it dry and lifeless.

Mrs Whitely turned to me. I stared into my lap, wondering why the undersides of the creases around the crotch of my jeans were going white. At the next desk Mrs Oakley was going through Connor's ICT grades and Connor's dad was saying, over and over again, that computers were everywhere nowadays. It seemed to be happening a long way away. "Gemma?"

Mum broke the silence. "Gemma and I have a very good relationship. She tells me most things. I'm not expecting any surprises."

Mrs Whitely raised her eyebrows. "Gemma? Shall I?"

"If you want."

Then she did.

Mum didn't say anything as she marched out of school with long straight strides, as if I, scuttling along behind her, didn't exist. The journey back to our house by car is twenty minutes and, for all that time, she didn't utter a word, just stared at the red tail lights of the car in front. When we reached home and she opened the front door, she muttered "Get inside," in a tight voice.

I was about to go upstairs to my room, as I always do, but she called me back. I said something about changing out of my outdoor shoes, but she snorted. "Why don't you leave them in the middle of the floor for me to fall over, like you usually do?"

I kicked up one foot then the other, tossing my flip flops into the air. One of them caught on the door handle, which was well funny but Mum, crouching down to reach inside the kitchen units, didn't even notice. She reappeared with a shot of vodka. "Don't do this to me, Gemma. You don't have cancer, do you?"

I knew she'd never believe me, not even when I told her about the lump on my breast. In fact, she went off on one, about how Hannah and I had been thumping around in my room last night like two baby elephants (We'd been dancing to Adele, hadn't we?), and how, during the August Bank Holiday, I'd been sunbathing in the garden in what she called a '*eeny-weeny* itsy-bitsy' bikini. I told her I didn't see what was wrong with that. I want to have fun while I can. I tried going upstairs again but she shouted at me not to. I asked why I shouldn't. This house is like a morgue. Deathly silent. I

might as well be in one.

“Gemma. Don’t. Please.” I heard the catch in her voice. “You haven’t seen the doctor about this lump, have you? I haven’t seen you in there.”

“You’re not always working. It just seems like it.”

“Can I see this... lump... then?” I noticed she drained her glass first.

We went into the bathroom. Sitting on the edge of the bath, I peeled off my t-shirt then unfastened my bra. It was the pink one that’s gone grey-mauve and the wires have started poking out at the armpit, like all my bras do eventually. “There.” I prodded under my left boob with my finger.

“May I touch?” She frowned, furrows like dunes forming across her brow. Did she believe me now? Was she afraid at what she might find, even a little bit?

I felt the softness of my own skin and flesh and my bony ribs underneath. “Er... it must’ve have gone.”

“Has it indeed?” Her raised hand dropped, slapping down upon her thigh. Pushing me aside she flung open the bathroom door, stomped across the landing into her room, then back across the landing to my room. “Don’t do this to me, Gemma.” She went off on one again, all about Dad and the Cow and us not having any money except what she earned at the doctors’. She reminded me about how I’d got her to call the emergency night doctor last June about the ‘appendicitis’ pain in my side. She recalled how last Christmas, just after Dad had gone off to Australia (because he couldn’t ‘handle the English winter’), I had had a ‘heart attack’ which had turned out to be indigestion through overeating Christmas pudding. (I love Christmas pudding. I wish I was eating it now.)

“Gemma, you... are... not... ill.”

I’m not. It’s so boring.

“I’ve got enough to cope with. Why do you do this to me?”

I stared back at her. I don’t know, do I?

### Thursday, 13 September

I felt strange at school. Maths, English and all the rest, I would have to keep doing them. This was life. In the summer, I would have to take the exams.

I sat with Hannah on the way home as usual but I didn’t say much. I wasn’t ready to ‘fess up’ yet. The bus goes past our house before I get off, so I spotted Mum’s car in the drive, also a light on in the kitchen. I wondered why she wasn’t at work at the doctors’, if she was off sick. I thought maybe I’d made her ill. With stress.

The back door creaks terribly but I tried to open it gently, thinking I could slip in without her

noticing, but then I caught the teashop smell. Mum was in the kitchen, taking some scones out the oven, and behind her the kettle was rustling and generally getting ready to boil. She asked me if I was all right, I asked her if she was all right, and then she hugged me. For about five minutes. We sat down around the kitchen table, drinking tea and eating scones, and talking, about many things, a lot about Dad. When she eventually got up to make dinner, she said, "I do need you, Gemma."

"What? Me?"

"Yes."

"Because I'm not Dad, or Sophie, I suppose?"

"No. Please don't say that. Because you're Gemma."

Something ended that evening – my childhood.

## Morbid Anatomy

Joanne Key

I open the hatch, release the ladder and climb into the cavity. It's a tight squeeze: birth in reverse. I snatch at the cord and the light appears in front of my face.

Everything in the attic seems so distant, hastily packed, as if I'd once scooped up armfuls of someone else's life, flung it all into cases ready to make a run for it and leave a faint glow and shadows swaying in my wake, until something stopped me dead.

I open a chest and pull out handfuls of storybooks, baby shoes, strings of broken puppets and my son's crayon pictures of *My Family*. Deeper in, under the houses with picket fences and lopsided chimneys, in between fairytales and monsters, I find our wedding photos. I flick through images of people I barely recognise. They are enigmatic; tight-lipped about love and happiness. I close the lid, sit down and move on to a rucksack; inside, I discover my old school reports that look like chequebooks. I flip through the slips and find *daydreamer*. I stretch out; let my mind wander, hoping to stumble across one of those dreams - drafted, un-cashed, stashed in the eaves. But, there is only wood and insulation.

They said I was *more art than science* while Jim was logic and structure. Everyone told us we were too young, badly matched. I held tight to *opposites attract*. Eventually, he found the exception to the rule. But now she has been underlined as *a silly mistake*. He wants to come home, and it's my turn to find the answer.

I sit up, crack open another chest and dig my way through a jumble of Shakespeare and Freud. I take a lucky dip and come up with a battered biology text book. The first page is decorated with my own childish sketches: elaborate vines of abstract flowers exploding out of straight lines. Looking for plain wisdom, I flip through and find a diagram of the heart - defaced, altered. I remember talking to Jim about the way our hearts work. He went on to explain the mechanics of a pump. He was hypnotic, persuasive. As I listened intently, I used my pen as a scalpel, sliced into the artery, let the blood ooze, pool into his name and drip-fed myself into him from the open mouth of a vein. I never understood the complexities of circulation. I snap the book shut and start a mass tidy up. I label and separate: divide the once loved from the broken; the sentimental from the practical. It's satisfying because *looking through* is easier than *looking for*.

With everything organised, I dust myself off, waft the bulb out of my path and head for the ladder. As I climb down, I see my handiwork: a space where everything is contained, uniform and exists only when given one simple beat - on/off, begin/end, black/white - under the sway of a single faded light. I wrap the cord around my hand, and pull tight.

## Famous Last Words

Peter Wyton

*Not so much a found poem, as a poem found - on deathbeds.*

Now I am the master of myself.  
I want no one distressed on my account.  
You cannot cry for me so much as I  
Have made you laugh. I love the rain.  
I want the feeling of it on my face.  
How sweet it is to rest. Shortly,  
Everything will be turned upside down.  
It matters not, where I am going,  
Whether the weather be cold or hot.  
Give the boys a holiday. Turn up the lights,  
I don't want to go home in the dark.  
I am very tired. Let me fall asleep  
To the sound of delicious music.  
It has all been very interesting.  
I am going to seek the great perhaps.  
Open the gates, open the gates.  
It is done. The rest is silence.

## It Wasn't Really About The Snow

Robert Graham

After Kerry stormed out of The Bell, Will paid the bill and then trudged through the night in his walking boots. The moon was new and reflected off the blanket of snow which covered the streets. In a way, he blamed the snow. It made everything more difficult, but he persisted and kept walking.

The bus came towards him as he was making his way carefully along the white, impacted pavement. He couldn't miss it: the interior lights were on, and when the chunky vehicle came closer he saw the driver's face, the head lit from above, the features dramatised by the glow of the instrument panel. The man was talking as he drove, talking and laughing when it passed by. The bus was only small, a 20-seater, perhaps, and it was empty apart from the woman on the seat behind the driver, who was Kerry.

It started with the cat and it wasn't really about the snow. The doorbell rang and when Will opened it, their neighbour from across the road was framed in the doorway.

'Ian,' Will said.

'Is your cat around? Only I ...'

'I'm pretty sure he's asleep in one of the bedrooms.'

'No, I thought it might be your cat that's in our back garden. And she doesn't look so well, if it's a she. The cat...' Ian pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and rubbed his hand over the back of his stubbly head.

'Shall I take a look?'

'Oh, would you? We're not very good with cats, Sal and me. More of a dog family, really.'

Will fetched his overcoat from the cloakroom. 'What's wrong with it?' He pulled his thick woollen beanie hat on, his *Rocky* hat.

'It's just been sitting there since early in the afternoon, not moving. And it's got its back to us.'

'You think she wants to be alone?'

The cat mewed in the passenger foot well, staring out through the bars on the gate of Will and Kerry's cat-box. Will drove slowly, as if that would help it.

'Easy, chief. Everything's going to be all right,' he said, although the animal looked like it might die long before he managed to find the pet hospital.

At reception, a middle-aged woman too tightly packed into her green scrubs approached him. 'Can I help?' she asked.

Will set the cat-box on the counter and explained the situation.

'Okay,' she said, when he had finished. 'If you wouldn't mind taking a seat for a few minutes, the duty vet will examine the cat.' She hefted the cat-box off the counter and lugged it off through the doorway behind her.

Ten minutes later, she beckoned him back to the counter and handed him the cat-box, empty now. The cat didn't look good, she explained, but the vets would do all they could.

Julia looked the exterior of The Bell over and checked her watch again. Shivering in the cold, she wondered if in fact they were supposed to meet inside. She retrieved the flyer from her bag. It didn't specify. Low-budget flyer – thin paper. The business was probably some government-sponsored start-up, doomed to die at birth. Who wanted to pay for guided walks in Manchester?

She didn't like standing outside The Bell alone and in the cold. On the other hand, she was pushing herself out of the house and back to life, like the chorus in that M People song.

She stuffed the flyer in her pocket and reached down and patted Dolly on her wiry head. 'Not to worry, hon,' she murmured. 'You'll get your walk whether anyone shows or not.'

As she straightened, Julia saw a face appear above the frosted half of The Adam and Eve's central window. Dark eyebrows furrowed and shadowy eyes peered out into the gloom – peered out, it seemed, at her. The figure moved away from the window and someone emerged. He approached and said, 'I'm sorry,' not sounding it. 'The idea was to meet inside.'

There, The Bell looked less ordinary than its exterior. The neutral colours were well co-ordinated and the handsome prints and shelves of books suggested the involvement of an interior designer.

He held out his hand. 'Vince,' he said. 'And you must be Julia.'

'I am. But how did you know?'

'Only female signed up for this evening's tour.'

Beard and tinted glasses, she thought; what's he got to hide?

The restaurant area was filling up. She wondered why nobody else seemed to have turned up for the walking tour.

'How many people are you expecting?' she asked.

'Should be another fourteen. Popular, this one.'

His smile and the smug way he wagged his head as he spoke put her in mind of George Clooney. Not that he was good looking.

If this was what came of getting herself out of the house, back to life – an evening with an awkward, unattractive man – maybe she should just pack it in and resign herself to needlepoint and nineteenth century novels. After all, she still had the Russians to do.

She sat down and when Dolly did, too, she patted her head.

'We don't normally have dogs,' Vince said.

He wasn't going away. 'Is it a problem?'

'I'm allergic to them.'

'There isn't much I can do about it now.'

'You're the typical redhead, aren't you?' he said. 'Got a bit of fire.'

He called for everyone's attention and introduced himself as 'Vincent Jigger'. As he spoke, Julia thought of Mick Jagger, who for her was twinkling sexy. Anyone less twinkling, less sexy than Vince Jigger she could not imagine. With George Clooney, that was two international sex symbols Vince had something in common with, without even remotely approaching attractiveness himself. He outlined the couple of hours ahead of them, promising a guided walk around some hidden gems of Manchester's city centre – a mill Lowry painted, a bar Engels and Marx drank in, the site of Rolls' first meeting with Royce – before being dropped back at The Bell.

They tramped outside and boarded a small bus which hadn't been there earlier. On the drive into town, she pulled out her purse and found the piece of paper she had by now unfolded and refolded several times. 07910 385612. She still held to the theory that this was his new number, and that the reason he had a new number was something to do with her.

The paper had been torn from a notebook – squared paper she recognised: the notebooks he bought were always in this style, and usually from Paperchase.

She saw the little folded rectangle sitting neatly on the passenger seat as she got into her car the morning before. She only needed to wonder for a moment or two before she spotted the slim gap at the top of the passenger door window and realised how he had managed to post the note inside her car. She saw the forethought: he had been in the habit of telling her as they got out of the car that she had left this or that window open. She wasn't in any doubt about what the purpose of the note was: he wanted her to call him. She told herself she couldn't.

Will and Kerry were working on their relationship; that was the idea of going out a couple of times a month for a drink or a meal.

When they sat down opposite each other in The Bell that night, a Grand Canyon of space opened up between them. When their starters came, Will concentrated in an exaggerated way on filling his spoon with fish chowder and delivering it to his mouth.

Kerry thought about how much more enjoyable it was to be at the falling-in-love than the working-on-our-relationship stage. As she chewed she kept looking at this or that point over his shoulder.

'You never used to have a starter,' he said. 'D'you remember?'

'Didn't I?'

'No. You always said you were saving yourself for a pudding.'

'Oh well. I must have got saltier.'

She checked her watch; it was only 9 o'clock. Kerry looked at the lines on his face: horizontal, diagonal, sometimes deep lines with tributaries running off them and surely his nose was getting bigger the older he got? There was grey amongst the dark stubble. During the main course, their conversation dried up. It occurred to Kerry that if she were to introduce the subject of the MG Owners' Club or what he liked to call motoring holidays, Will would be able to prattle on for hours – but she wasn't going to do that. This working on their relationship business really was work.

'Oh,' she said. 'Did you ring the pet hospital about that cat?'

He nodded, holding up a hand to signal that he needed to finish chewing his food before he could answer. 'Not good, I'm afraid. The cat had cancer of the liver and they put it down this morning. There was nothing they could do.'

She shook her head and stared at her plate. She glanced up. Will was looking distressed. He was funny; he could sometimes be quite tender-hearted. But no, he was looking at something and now a dog appeared and set its wiry head on his lap.

'Friendly mutt,' he said, flushing.

The dog kept its head on Will's knee and moaned in an imploring way.

'Do you know this dog?' Kerry asked. She scanned The Bell to see if its owner was apparent – and then she saw her, with her unmistakable red hair, the woman. 'Oh for goodness' sake!' she cried.

'You're reading too much into this,' Will said, his voice tight.

She got to her feet and plunged an arm into the sleeve of her coat. 'You're ridiculous,' she snapped, the last sound like a gavel striking wood, passing final judgment, and turned and fled.

Kerry shot out of The Bell and found a little bus parked in front of her, its door open to the cold night. She had half a mind to jump straight on and tell the driver to take her anywhere, just away from here. Instead, she crept over the downtrodden snow. Where had her life gone? Inching over the pavements, she tried to walk faster, but the icy conditions wouldn't let her. She wondered if Will was still in The Bell. She wouldn't be surprised. Why let a marriage-threatening bust-up interfere with a good meal?

She cut through the park and she was no more than out of sight of the road when the sound of voices, loud and agitated, erupted ahead in the dark, startling her, and a gang of young people burst out of the trees, racing or chasing after something. As they passed, one of them, a lanky guy in a balaclava, slipped so dramatically on the ice that it looked as if he were performing some kind of martial arts kick. His feet were in the air, he seemed to fly three feet off the ground and then he hit the grass with a whom. His friends all laughed and he did, too, quickly getting up again and brushing snow off his clothes.

The other side of the park, she came to a crossroads and the little bus from the pub was there, ahead of her now, waiting for the traffic lights to change. This time, she didn't hesitate. She knocked on the door and when it opened, she asked the driver for a lift.

'Where to, love?' he asked.

'Wherever,' she said and got on.

'I'm running away,' she told the driver.

He snatched a look at her. 'Did you read that story in the paper about that pair of women in Liverpool who did a *Thelma and Louise*?'

The driver kept laughing as he told the story, although Kerry couldn't see anything funny about it. Nor did she see Will as the bus trundled past him and it began to snow again.

## Elusive Butterfly

Tony Brown

First, he saw the sort of curly brown hair he liked. Then, when she turned and smiled like an angel, he was hooked. He watched her closely, hoping she'd wander close to him, but she went out the back door of J.J.'s.

Soon he was surprised to see her standing next to a pregnant girl with blonde hair whose face was turned away. Tommy kept his eyes on the brunette as she chatted with her companion. When they turned him, he was shocked.

That was no woman she was with.

Still, she sent electricity through him. The moment she made eye contact with him, he knew they'd be together. The woman-turned-man she was with walked outside and Fred was happy to see the object of his desire heading toward him.

"Hi!" she said, making him tremble.

With one word, his heart was no longer his.

"Who's Mister Prego?"

She laughed. "Don't worry about him."

The look in her eyes as she said it, the inflection of her soft voice, was all Fred needed. She was interested, alright.

"Name's Fred. What's yours?"

"Donna," she replied. "Like Richie Valen's song.

"You look a lot better than him."

A grin filled Donna's face, her eyes glittering like the summer's sun. "Me?"

"You're hotter than the Fourth of July."

Donna blushed and pointed at his computer. "What's with the laptop?"

"I'm a writer, though you wouldn't know it from the rejections. I'm working on a new short story."

"What's it about?"

"How you and I meet and get married."

She laughed, her eyes twinkling. "Oh, *that* story! How's it going so far?"

He pointed at the laptop's screen. "Says here Fred got you to kiss him."

"You really *are* a fiction writer!"

Fred laughed and said, "I've been thinking about making it nonfiction," as sure as the morning sunrise she'd proffer her lips without a second thought.

But surety on his part did not translate into compliance on her part.

Her eyes twittered yes, but her mouth said, "There's nothing I'd rather do right now, but *he's* here."

"So?"

"Let's go!" the hippie yelled.

"*Tomorrow* night," she told Fred. "You and I have unfinished business."

"Think it'll be a romance?"

"Better be, writer man. I'll see *you* later," she said, walking toward the exit.

The rest of the night Tommy watched the door, thinking she might return, only to face disappointment each time. He went back to his laptop, but as he started a new story about a romance in the bloom, he couldn't help overhearing a woman saying "Donna's mother just died. "She's moving to Georgia."

She was not coming back.

Fred's love had died as quickly as it had begun and he thought of the vagaries of life that allow happiness to so easily slip through one's fingers. His interest in putting words into the laptop vanished. He closed it and went into the cold, dark night, alone again, as usual.

Love, like Bob Lind once sang, is indeed, an elusive butterfly.

## Author Biographies

### Charlie Britten

Charlie Britten lives in southern England with her husband and cat. She writes because she enjoys it and has had her work published in *FictionAtWork*, *Mslxia*, *Long Short Story*, *Linnet's Wings* and *Radgepacket*. In real life, she is a lecturer in IT at a college of further education.

### Tony Brown

USAF veteran Tony Brown, an East Carolina University journalism program graduate, has won contests by Art Forum and Union Writers and received honorable mentions in *Writer's Journal* and *Writer's Digest*. His work has appeared, or been accepted, in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Sleeping Cat Books*, *Leodegraunce*, *Foliate Oak (University of Arkansas)*, *Vapid Kitten (UK)*, *The Write Place At the Write Time*, *Short-Story Me*, *Gemini*, *One Forty Fiction*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Midwest Literary Review*, *Blink Ink*, *Postcard Shorts*, *Whortleberry Press*, *The Storyteller*, and *Righter Review*, *In Between Altered States*, *Notes*, *Long & Short Review*, and *Short Story Alley*. Brown is a former writer for The East Carolinian and numerous North Carolina publications. He's also the former editor/main writer of *Rock & Roll Monthly* and is a proud member of the North Carolina Writers Network.

### Sian Cummins

I live in Manchester and I'm writing my second novel while the first one goes house-hunting. I'm a writer for my day job too, which is nice. I also like my fiancé, my cat and my three rats.

### Robert Graham

Robert Graham's short stories have appeared in magazines and on Radio 4. He is the co-author of three Creative Writing handbooks. His other publications include a novel, *Holy Joe*, (Troubador, 2006), a short story collection, *The Only Living Boy* (Salt, 2009), and a chapbook, *A Man Walks Into A Kitchen* (Salt, 2011).

**Kevlin Henney**

Kevlin Henney writes shorts and flashes and drabbles of fiction and articles and books on software development. His fiction has appeared online and on tree with *Litro*, *New Scientist*, *Word Gumbo*, *Fiction365*, *Dr. Hurley's Snake-oil Cure*, *The Fabulist* and *FlashStories.net*, and has been included in the *Jawbreakers* and *Kissing Frankenstein & Other Stories* anthologies. He blogs at [asemantic.net](http://asemantic.net), tweets as [@KevlinHenney](https://twitter.com/KevlinHenney) and lives in Bristol, UK.

**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.

**Nazifa Islam**

Nazifa Islam grew up in Novi, Michigan. She has been published by *Anomalous Press*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, and *Flashquake* among other publications. She regularly updates her blog *Thoughts Interjected* and will be attending Oregon State University in the fall to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in poetry.

**Daisy Kemp**

An English Literature A-level student from Norfolk, Daisy spends her free time tutoring GCSE English and has loved penning all things comedic since her days spent writing for her high school. However, her past is shadowed by her tendency for compulsive lying. Consequently, she was forced to resign her post as President of the United States.

**Sarah Kendall**

Sarah Kendall is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Writing program at Johns Hopkins University. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Dragnet*, *Smalldoggies Magazine*, *Front Porch Review*, *Ink-Filled Page*, *Bluestem*, and *Eunoia Review*. Her dream dinner party includes Tobias Wolff, Frances McDormand, Michael Chabon, and Mighty Mouse.

**Joanne Key**

I graduated from MMU Cheshire last year - as a mature student - with a BA (Hons) in Creative Writing. Since my graduation, I have developed a passion for Flash Fiction. When I think about my life, these things appear as some of the "shiny stuff" among a landfill of regrets.

**Catherine Lanser**

Catherine Lanser is a writer and sometime meditator who lives in Madison, Wisconsin, USA. Her writing has appeared in *Word Gumbo* and the following anthologies: *Stories of Strength*, *Classic Christmas*, *Chick Ink* and *Christmas Traditions: True Stories that Celebrate the Spirit of the Season*.

**James B. Nicola**

James B. Nicola has had over two hundred poems appear in publications including *WG* #5. A stage director by profession, his book *Playing the Audience* won a CHOICE Award. He also won the Dana Literary Award for poetry, was nominated for a Rhysling Award, and was a featured poet at the New Formalist in 2010. His first chapbook of poems, "Still," will be out in 2012 from Stasia Press.

**Jacob Oet**

Jacob Oet lives in Solon, Ohio. He is the author of two chapbooks of poetry: *Metamorphosis* (Kattywompus Press) and *Peeling the Apple* (NightBallet Press). Jacob's poetry appears in *Cream City Review*, *Illuminations*, *Yemassee*, *Straylight*, and *Sugar House Review*, among others. His awards include the 2011 Younkin-Rivera Poetry Prize and the 2011 Ohioana Robert Fox Award.

**Heather F. Reid**

Originally from Oldham, Heather F Reid now lives in Perth, Scotland where she chairs the Soutar Writers. Her short stories and poems have been widely published and also broadcast on Radio 4. A short collection 'Kiss and Other Stories' is available from Amazon Kindle. Her website can be found at [www.soutarwriters.co.uk/heatherreid](http://www.soutarwriters.co.uk/heatherreid)

**Jane Røken**

Jane Røken lives in Denmark, on the interface between hedgerows and barley fields. She likes to think of herself as an internationalist. Her writings have appeared in *Antiphon*, *The Flea*, *Snakeskin*, *Mobius*, *Shit Creek Review*, and several other online magazines.

**Tracey S. Rosenberg**

Tracey S. Rosenberg's first novel, *The Girl in the Bunker*, was published in 2011 by Glasgow-based publisher Cargo. She is currently completing a poetry collection titled *Secondary*, thanks to a New Writers Award from the Scottish Book Trust. She blogs about writing (mostly) at <http://tsrosenberg.wordpress.com>

**Ron Runeborg**

Ron Runeborg writes for the love of the craft alone. He lives in Lakeville Minnesota where his wife Linda and little dog-child Montague work tirelessly to appreciate his eccentricities.

**Thomas Wallis**

Winner of the coveted Fiction Award at primary school aged five; it's safe to say Tom's writing career peaked early. This Class 4B wide competition was such a high that some twenty years later it seems he remains bathed in the shadow of that initial success. Tom can often be seen writing with either a biro or HB pencil.

**Peter Wyton**

*[Rather than a bio, Peter supplied us with the credits to his poem. Enjoy! – Ed]*

'Now I am the master of myself' Marcus Portius Cato the younger (95-45 BC) Roman politician.

'I want no one distressed on my account' Gen. Ulysses Grant (1822-95) U.S. President.

'You cannot cry for me so much as I have made you laugh' Paul Scarron (1610-60) French author.

'I love the rain. I want the feeling of it on my face.' Katherine Mansfield (1886-1923) N.Z. short story writer.

'How sweet it is to rest' John Taylor (1578-1653) Gloucestershire 'Water Poet'.

'Shortly, everything will be turned upside down'. Diogenes (c410-320 BC) Greek philosopher.

'It matters not, where I am going, whether the weather be cold or hot' John Scott, (1751-1838) 1st Earl of Eldon.

'Give the boys a holiday' Anaxagoras (c500-428 BC) Greek schoolmaster.

'Turn up the lights. I don't want to go home in the dark' O.Henry (1861-1910) U.S. author.

'I am very tired' T.B. Macaulay (1800-1859) British historian.'Let me fall asleep to the sound of delicious music.' Honore Riqueti, Comte de Mirabeau (1749-91) French politician.

'It has all been very interesting' Lady Mary Wortley Montague (1689-1762) English traveller.

'I am going to seek the great perhaps'. Francois Rabelais (c 1494-1553) French physician/novelist.

'Open the gates, open the gates' Mary Wesley (1710-1781) Methodist.

'It is done.' Horace Greeley (1811-1872) American newspaperman.

'The rest is silence' Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, in Shakespeare's play.