

ANTHOLOGY VOLUME EIGHT

Midnight Listening

Jerwood/Arvon
Mentoring Programme

FICTION

Jo Clayton
Martin Kidd
Jemma Picken
Abbie Salter

PLAYWRITING

Rachel Burns
Maevae Clarke
Russ Davies
Laurie Ogden

POETRY

Romalyn Ante
Alice Hiller
Seraphima Kennedy
Yvonne Reddick



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The Graffiti Bunkers © Rachel Burns

White Gold © Maeve Clarke

Buying Time © Jo Clayton

Victor Brown © Russ Davies

album without photos © Alice Hiller

Breakdown © Seraphima Kennedy

Halja © Martin Kidd

No One Thing © Laurie Ogden

The Price of Daylight © Jemma Picken

Desire Path © Yvonne Reddick

How to Mend a Broken Bird © Abbie Salter

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I'm delighted to introduce you to *Midnight Listening*, which showcases a fantastic range of new work by Arvon writers, as well as highlighting the power of intensive mentorship and support for fast-tracking creative development.

The Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Programme is a unique opportunity for emerging writers, combining dedicated time and space for writing with a year of one-to-one mentoring support from leading writers – all culminating in this wonderful anthology you hold in your hands.

One of the things that sets this scheme apart is the fact that our mentors hand-pick their own mentees, considering whether they are the right professional to support this writer in the next stage of their development. This deepens the sense of connection and commitment, and leads to the kind of productive reciprocal learning relationships that our mentors attest to later in these pages.

Another is the fact that the programme is fully funded, thanks to the extraordinary commitment and generosity of our partner Jerwood Charitable Foundation. Enabling any Arvon writer to apply regardless of their ability to pay is a key element of our drive to keep our programmes Open to All.

This is the biggest ever cohort of Jerwood/Arvon mentees with 12 writers benefiting this year – four in each of the categories of Fiction, Playwriting and Poetry. Nearly 300 writers applied, and were interviewed by the mentors after an anonymous shortlisting process. Having seen their submissions at the start of the year, it's hugely gratifying for us to see how far they've all come.

Ruth Borthwick
Chief Executive and Artistic Director | Arvon

This anthology is the eighth volume published through the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Programme. It is humbling to think of the creativity that the scheme has enabled over the years, and most importantly of the growing list of incredible new writers it has supported. These now total 75, all of whom initially caught the eye of their mentors through a tough selection process and, we hope, then went on to have career-changing conversations with them.

Both Arvon and Jerwood Charitable Foundation share an understanding that writers need time, space and conversation support to reach their full potential. The Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Programme provides a supportive structure for emerging writers, with not only critical mentoring but the time to write and the context to build a powerful set of peer relationships.

This year, as with every year, the mentored writers have also generously contributed to this anthology, *Midnight Listening*, a title taken from Romalyn Ante's heart-breaking 'Nightingale Pledge' (p.236). I also wonder if both mentors and mentees did a fair amount of midnight listening over the last 12 months? Certainly the writer's mind rarely switches off and the sounding board of an expert friend can help make the break-through at any hour of the day.

It's my pleasure to thank mentors Tim Crouch, Pascale Petit and Jacob Ross for committing themselves so fully to their protégés. Ruth Borthwick, Becky Swain and Joe Bibby at Arvon, and the team at Totleigh Barton, continue to work tirelessly to make sure the scheme is the best it can be, and we are extremely grateful for their care. And lastly, again I would like to thank and congratulate each of the writers taking part this year whose new work you can read here.

Jon Opie
Deputy Director | Jerwood Charitable Foundation

FICTION | Martin Kidd | from *Halja*

England, 1967, but these Sixties don't swing. The A-Bombs of '51 took care of that. And now, with the Bear struck down and the Eagle in seclusion, the British Empire stands alone once more in a chaotic world. In a moment of bravery, Private Matthew Black saves his commanding officer's wife from a messy end; but when her gratitude draws him into the firing line, he chooses to fight for life. Risking the rope, he deserts – and in that moment his world changes forever. He unwittingly restarts a war that began twelve thousand years ago; a war fought by entities older than the spark of life. Matt Black must learn to kill and prepare to die, stay ahead of a vengeful Empire, and find Halja before he loses his mind.

1

The bronze mushroom cloud rose one hundred and sixteen feet into the Wiltshire sky. A towering edifice of patina bronze, the early morning sunshine gilded its dew-wet surface. The very top of the mushroom appeared to be iced in white. It was, in fact, twelve years' worth of birdshit. Matt stared up at the monstrosity. He'd always felt this was an appropriate crown for the shittiest event in history.

The mushroom's official title was *Ashes of the Phoenix* – written on a plaque, not twenty feet from where he stood. *Should have just called it Death*, he thought.

Matt's musings were interrupted when Jim, stood next to him, hawked up a mouthful of phlegm and spat it

across the white marble chippings at their feet. They were among two hundred other soldiers – all waiting, grim and silent, while the morning sun steamed moisture from the ground and the saliva from their lips. All of them should have been back at Barracks but Corporal shit-for-brains Jones had been disrespectful about Captain Dark's wife, and, as Jim liked to say, “Nothing like a beating before breakfast.”

But it was early yet. Matt returned his attention to the mushroom. Most of this lot had been kids when the real things went up. He remembered his mum's words.

‘What the young don't remember, the world forgets.’

Maybe that's why King Edward VIII unveiled that plaque in 1955. Stuck that bronze fucking mushroom cloud right in the middle of Salisbury Plain, like a pin in the heart of the British Empire. Every man jack in the army at some point stood under its cool shadow and wondered how hot the summer of '51 had got.

Macabre guardians dragged from several Ground Zeroes crowded the base of the mushroom. A Centurion tank sat in the middle, its barrel a flaccid stump – rusting armour blistered and bubbled from the atomic glow. All its hatches welded shut at that moment.

He thought of the crew, their blackened bones lying in puddles of rendered flesh, left to rot in that metal coffin. Artillery, armoured cars even; melted medals, all rusting under the lambent dance of the eternal flame – a reminder of the melted soldiers, melted children, melted families, melted every-fucking-thing.

The old salts – the veterans who said nothing, unless you gave 'em a good drink – *they* would mutter, “Should just put a skillet of bacon over that eternal flame.”

That's what Birmingham smelled like; and Brighton, and Washington, Leipzig, Moscow... the biggest fucking BBQ the world's ever seen. Pity they burnt all the meat.

He was too young to remember. But it had shaped his whole life. In the last sixteen years, a velvet revolution had swept Europe. The bomb-blasted masses overthrew governments, shouting the names of half-forgotten monarchs – as if talismans of old could have done any better. Desperate for a brighter future, they wheeled out inbred relics from the past. Generation Shell-Shock turned to crowns, not votes.

In the sixteen years that followed, the Soviet Union had disintegrated; America shut up shop, isolated itself completely—

Matt spat on the parade ground. Everything changed, except the lives of the people that changed it.

He felt Jim's elbow in his ribs and automatically stood to attention. Dark was coming; another day in His Majesty's army had begun.

*

The twisted fan of hazel hit Corporal Jones so hard it parted flesh. He screamed, thrashing against the ropes that held him, bucking and wrenching till the heavy Birching Donkey lurched from side to side.

Dark brought the birch down again, and again. Sweat-slicked, his equine features twisted into an idiot glee until through overkill, or just plain fatigue, he missed. The tattered birch hissed over Jones, its momentum

spinning Dark around and sending him crashing to the blood-spattered floor.

Standing at rigid attention, Matt and the rest of Four Six Troop watched in silence as Dark landed on his hands and knees. He remained staring at the floor motionless, the birch beside him. No one moved. Not a sound – not even from Jones slumped against his bindings.

Matt exchanged a knowing look with Jim, who just shrugged.

Dark pushed himself up then froze. Yellow liquid began to pulse through Jones's trousers, the stream flowing down one leg forming a steaming puddle at his feet.

“Animal.”

Dark spoke the word under his breath. Matt heard it bell-clear. On his feet now, Dark marched around to face Jones, hand reaching for his pistol.

“Animal.”

Dark drew the pistol and raised it into the air, pulling the mechanism back with his other hand. The metallic *clunk-clack* of the gun loading sent a shiver through the rank and file. A voice cried out; men leaned forward, fists clenched, aware that if they acted, they would be next.

Dark jammed the pistol into the back of Jones's head, straightened his arm for the recoil. It was then that Colour Sergeant Bourne, on cat's feet, caught Dark's hand. Bourne's nose met the top of Dark's ear; he delivered a curt whisper then let go of his Captain.

Dark looked around at the stone faces surrounding him, then up at the sky. Holstering the pistol, he

marched through the ranks and out of the courtyard, men falling over each other to clear his path.

Matt turned. Jim was looking at him.

“Bloody hell, you give me a right start,” said Jim.

“What?” said Matt.

“Crying out like that. Don’t let the bastard notice us.”

“I thought he was going to kill Jones,” said Matt.

“He’s fucking mental,” said Jim.

With Dark gone, Bourne dismissed the troop with a single shout. Matt and Jim were soon walking along the tree-lined path away from Monument Square toward a short set of granite steps that would lift them out of the square’s sepulchral stillness, and back into the real world.

A convoy of Indian army Humber Pigs approached, fresh in their Jungle Green. The Sikh in the lead Humber gave Jim a wave as he passed. Rolls Royce engines thickened the air with exhaust and noise. They waited for the convoy as it rumbled along the rough concrete road – one of the hundreds dividing the vast acreage of Salisbury Plain.

“That was Kalinga. The 51st must be shipping out. Fucker owes me five quid,” said Jim, watching the last Humber disappear.

He turned to say something else, but seeing Matt’s face, rolled his eyes and punched Matt in the arm. “Look, do what you’re told; stay away from Benita bloody Dark an’ you won’t end up like that twat back there.”

Matt glanced over his shoulder; even now he couldn't help but keep his voice low. "Did Dark catch Jones saying them things about her?"

Jim laughed. "Oh yeah – apparently, Jones strolls into the bog with Peters, bragging about Benita. How she'd been giving him the eye and how he was going to do this an' that with her."

"Fucking hell," said Matt.

"I know. Peters said Dark stepped out that shitter cool as you like. Walks right up to Jones – who was still pissing mind – and told him to report at 0700 this morning."

"Captain Bastard."

"Fucking right."

They came to another halt. Land Rovers crisscrossed the road. A Chieftain tank thundered toward them, its escort flashing and beeping to clear the way.

"Gotta run, mate. Looks like the whole Indian fucking army's off."

He gave Matt a mock salute and sprinted across the road earning angry shouts from the tanks' escort.

Matt watched the Chieftain pass; he still felt weird. Not like he hadn't seen Dark's rages before and well. Jones should have known better. Determined to put Dark out of his mind, Matt crossed the road and walked toward the bus stop that would take him to the mess hall, and breakfast.

2

Being on the short and fat side of life, Matt hated training. His mum said he was big-boned. Sergeant Cooper said he was a fat fuck.

Tabbing was the worst – an eight-mile forced march across the plain in full kit with Cooper on his case the whole fucking time, letting him know that if he embarrassed the troop, he'd be in for a kicking.

He managed the march – just. There followed the one training activity that Matt did like: the firing range. He enjoyed the heft and kick of his L1A1 rifle. Relax, breathe, trigger. Bang! The spotter calling another hit – even Cooper gave him a nod.

A mess tent was erected off the road leading up to the firing range – one of the army's few concessions to 'staff' welfare. After his session, Matt stood in the food queue looking around for familiar faces, relieved not to see any.

Taking his plate, he sat near the exit. This gave him a good view of the comings and goings in and out of the mess tent. In the distance he saw a staff car trundling up the concrete road. It was an old Humber Super Snipe. Dark's car. The other officers had Land Rovers. For some reason, Dark was allowed the Humber.

An ugly voice brought his attention back to the tent. Harsh and full of challenge, the voice cut across the hubbub, shocking it into rare silence. Matt heard a plate smash then another. He stood up to see the culprit. It was Corporal Jones.

Tough and soldierly, Jones was a popular man who liked his drink. He was good with his fists and quick to forgive. Jones had spent a week in the infirmary after the birching. There was a rumour that the punishment had left its mark on his mind as well as his body. Dark would have shot him if Colour Sergeant hadn't stepped in.

Jones jumped up, sending his table crashing to the floor. More plates went flying. Hands reached out to grab him and pull him down. The angry voices quickly changed to cries of alarm. Jones now stood in a space of his own making, a pistol in his hand.

Jones started to shout, waving the gun around, ordering everyone to "Back the fuck off!" Men reached open hands toward him, murmuring, trying to coax the gun from him. He was having none of it. He put a round through the tent roof. Everyone went down.

Jones ran for the exit, right toward where Matt was crouching. Matt stared at his boots while the armed twat ran past him. The army didn't pay well enough for heroes.

He stood up, keeping Jones in view. The big man had slowed down now and was jerking his head as if he were not sure what to do next.

Won't be seeing much of old Jones after this nonsense, Matt thought.

Jones spotted Dark's car.

He began leaping about, waving his arms, his mouth drawn down, his teeth bared. A wet rope of drool swung from his chin. Matt thought of the old Samurai mask hung up in Colour Sergeant Bourne's office.

He must be on drugs.

Jones bent double, arms wrapped around his belly. A high-pitched whine escaped him. It became a strangled shout, as if all the rage couldn't quite clear his throat. He jumped upright, thrust his arms out wide and threw his head back so far the tendons in his neck corded against the flesh. Tears streamed down his face. His eyes rolled back, bare white globes filled the sockets.

A wounded futureless roar rose deep from his belly. More than one man took a step back.

Bigby from the 1st Green Jackets (never known for his understatement) for years after would say:

'It was as if Jones coughed up his very soul.'

Bloody good drugs, thought Matt.

The Humber Super Snipe approached the hill toward the mess tent. Jones's head snapped down. With robotic calm, Jones brought the pistol to bear and set off at a dead run toward the car.

The first two rounds missed; the car kept coming. Thirty-odd men stood by to watch Jones have his moment. There wasn't a man there who wouldn't want to see Dark dead. Besides, Jones's peculiar behaviour – the madness in his screams, the way his body jerked about, had unsettled them.

His next shot got the Humber driver's full attention. The windscreen spider-webbed out from the bullet hole that appeared in the top left-hand side. The car swerved hard, tyres juddering on the rough concrete road. Gears ground against each other as the driver tried to mash the box into reverse.

The heavy car began to accelerate backwards through a cloud of exhaust. Jones stopped running, put both

hands on the pistol grip and cocked his head. Five times the gun kicked, its staccato bang cutting through the Humber's labouring engine.

Matt saw the driver thrown back in his seat. The Humber – still going flat out in reverse – lurched across the road, slamming back into a stone road marker. Its front wheels leapt into the air. Steam blasted from the radiator, obscuring the cab.

Bloody hell, looks like Jones is going to get his man.

Matt looked at Jones. He had stopped shooting; instead, he was rooting around in his webbing.

For ammo?

He looked back at the Humber. The steam was beginning to clear. He could see the driver slumped over the steering wheel. Beside him, Dark, furiously wrenching at a door handle.

The impact must have buckled the chassis; he's fucked.

Jones was still messing about with his webbing. Not a man moved to intervene.

Better hurry up, Jones.

Dark's door remained stubbornly closed. More movement caught Matt's eye – there was someone in the back of the car. A face popped up just for a moment. Matt would have recognised that shock of black hair anywhere. It was Dark's wife, Benita.

He never did figure out why he did it. But he did. The moment he saw Benita, Matt was sprinting down the field straight at Jones.

It was a good hundred feet to where Jones stood. If he had turned at any point, he could have dropped Matt without even bothering to aim. Matt was humming some weird tune he didn't know. Sprinting on the balls of his feet, quicker than he'd ever been in his life. Felt like he'd been fired down the field. Felt like he'd hitched a ride in someone else's body.

Jones turned, but too late. Matt hit him at full pelt they both went flying. Matt rolled over onto his knees gasping for breath, hoping some of the lads would step in before Jones beat the shit out of him.

Jones stood up not five feet away. He looked down at Matt and shook his head.

"You prick," he said.

And then Jones exploded.

3

He couldn't move. Panicked, then relaxed. Bed sheets held him down. He opened his eyes. His head throbbed harder than a Soho ladyboy; he was laying on a single bed in a bare room. A small window let the sunshine in. Outside he could hear the rumble of jet engines. Bulford Hospital, next to RAF Wroughton. He closed his eyes, lay still and gently twitched each finger and toe until he counted ten of each.

It was hard for Matt to judge how long he had lain in this state – could have been an hour or a day. Every movement put a hammer through his head.

“Matthew Black?”

The voice though not discourteous, did sound a bit posh. Matt answered, eyes still closed.

“Sir.”

“Open your eyes soldier; let's see what we have.”

An antiseptic-smelling finger rubbed against Matt's eye, dragging at the lid, a smear of light obliterating the quiet darkness. Gritting his teeth, he lay still. His tormentor said something about a nurse checking him later and 'lucky escape', then left. He dozed again, vaguely hoping that the nurse would be female.

Jim's voice interrupted Matt's misery.

“More like a bloody vet than a doctor, him.”

Matt groaned, “What happened? Where's Jones?”

Jim pulled up the only chair in the room and parked himself.

“Jones? Jones is dead. Grenade.” Jim clapped his hands together then spread them out wide. “He took the blast and most of your share. Killed the bugger right there in the field. Never was a clever monkey.”

“Jesus, how the hell did he get a grenade?”

Jim looked at Matt, his brow raised. He took Matt’s hand and spoke in his posh toff voice. “It seems the concussion is worse than we feared old chap, the brain has casseroleed.” Jim sat back.

“Forget about Jones; that’s for the Red Caps to sort out. You, son, is a bloody hero. Might even get some brag tags for that pigeon chest. Did you *have* to save Dark as well?”

Jim stood and gave Matt the mock salute. Then he left.

Time flowed like wet concrete. The faint tap, tap of Blakeys echoing up the corridor brought Matt from his stupor. Someone on a mission was approaching. Matt had a sinking feeling they were coming for him.

A long shadow speared across the tiled floor of Matt’s room.

Dark walked in.

His presence changed the room’s atmosphere from light and airy to one of insecurity and fear.

Matt felt Dark’s gaze on him as he lay ridged in bed. Dark didn’t speak. Instead, he walked over to the window staring out as two Lightings rose up from the airfield. Their deep rumble rattled the window as the planes’ afterburners kicked in, shooting them near vertical into the cobalt sky.

“At ease man, you’ll do yourself a mischief.”

Matt relaxed. The fact that Dark was standing while he was lying down was doing his head in. Dark looked down at him then back to the window.

“Matthew Black, Nottingham bred, born forty-three, joined in sixty-five – the only man on the field with the guts to take down that imbecile Jones. Should have shot the inbred when I had the chance.”

Dark turned to face Matt. “You got me out of a bloody tight spot. If Jones had got that grenade away, that would have been it for me, and the damned wife. Killed by an idiot in the middle of Wiltshire... Not the end I had envisaged.”

“No, sir.”

“Doctor tells me you will be ready for duty in a day or two. I need a driver. It seems Kabir is to return to India, minus a lung.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes, sir, indeed! Colour Sergeant’s office, Monday 0900 hours. Bring all your gear. You will take Kabir’s quarters.”

Dark gave Matt a nod, then left.

Colour Sergeant Bourne's office was a shrine to glory; two hundred-year-old ribbons hung over photographs of soldiers and armaments from around the globe. A musket, its stock charred and cracked, hung above a riddled Zulu shield. Swords, duelling pistols, telescopes and maps covered the walls. A tattered chainmail hauberk gathered dust in one corner.

The remains of a set of regimental colours loomed behind Bourne's desk. Ball-torn during the hurricane of battle, fermented in the blood of those who fought under them. They were grim testament to the quality of the men who had gone before.

It was an old gilt-framed photograph that caught Matt's eye; set apart from the rest, titled: *August 3rd 11am 1951*.

Matt had never seen this particular picture before. It showed the mushroom cloud still towering over Birmingham. World War Two had lasted two thousand, one hundred and seventy-five days. World War Three had taken eighteen hours.

The image brought the heat back to his cheeks. He was nine, staying with his aunt fifty miles away in Nottingham. He never saw the flash but remembered the thump as the Russian bomb split the atom. The cloud had risen to over sixty thousand feet. That one blast extinguished seventy-five thousand lives.

He remembered the revolution that came so soon after and smiled. There were no pictures of that on Colour bloody Sergeant's wall. It happened three days after the

A-bombs fell. Global Velvet Revolution. GVR as it came to be known.

Matt had gone along with his aunt to Market Square in Nottingham. He could sense that something big – something fundamental, was happening. He'd never seen his aunt like that. Her face – it had been so, so set. Everyone he saw that day had that face: not angry, not scared, just resigned.

If the pilots had done their job, the world would have been cinders. Most of them had fought through one World War. Seven years later, they had no stomach for another. Bomb bay doors had jammed, targets lost to navigational error or just radio silence. Some did fall, Birmingham and Brighton died that day as well as dozens of other cities across the globe, but it was not Armageddon. Most planes took their death home. Three days later, the meek rose up and claimed their inheritance.

Britain had been the first to fall, the population flowing onto the streets. A murmur of souls engulfed government buildings, authorities were paralysed by the unbelievable numbers. Everyone felt the same – they were the survivors. Over a hundred million people had died from war in forty years. And that was enough.

Matt had never seen a crowd so big, and when they got to the square, he didn't see much else. Afterwards, he learned how the council offices had been broken into, and everyone turfed out. No shots fired, no arrests made. The collective will for once was in accord and unstoppable. Churchill resigned, unable to quell or inspire. The Cabinet crumbled soon after, opening up a dangerous void.

The Global Velvet Revolution had no figurehead. Incubated during the death of millions, it was a mercurial zeitgeist with no single person, act or event at its heart.

Many could still recall simpler Victorian times. Desperate for a figurehead to lead, tired of rhetoric, thoughts returned to the crown.

A Royal court was agreed upon and formed; old blue blood was wheeled out along with commoner representatives to establish a New Model Parliament. Suddenly the country was a full-blown monarchy again.

This phenomenon spread across the globe. Stalin had died with Moscow. The Soviet Union collapsed; America isolated itself. Within twelve months, the politics of the world had regressed two hundred years.

Seventeen years later Matt found himself staring at the picture, wondering if they had changed anything.

The sound of the door opening brought him back. Colour Sergeant Bourne, a lean six-foot in hobnails, with a face that would make a bouncer blink, Bourne was the ice-cold balm to Dark's fury.

Matt snapped to attention, eyes fixed on the middle distance. Bourne sat down, his back to the battle-torn regimental flag.

“At ease.” The voice held no quarter.

Matt clasped his hands behind his back, chest out. Shoulders square.

“Brave soldier or stupid boy?”

Matt didn't reply.

“Stupid soldier or brave boy, then? Stupid or brave?”

Matt opened his mouth to speak. Bourne silenced him with a wave.

“You do not speak. Action speaks; the rest is bollocks. It took ten seconds to change your life.”

Bourne's eyes never left Matt's face. The room shrank, Bourne blistered on. “You're a waster. You piss about; do just enough to stay out of this office. I didn't know your name until yesterday. There was no point.”

Bourne gently rapped a knuckle on his desk. “Ten seconds changed all that. Your old life is gone. Mess this up, and it will be you on the donkey, and I might not be as quick on my feet next time – now piss off.”

Late, I'm – how the hell?

Matt ground the gear-change, slowing the Land Rover further, slewing it round the corner like a wounded wildebeest. Three days into Dark's service, with Bourne's words still ringing in his ears, He had five minutes to get across base – ten minutes later he pulled up and killed the motor outside one of the many redbrick buildings that populated HQ. Seeing no sign of Dark, he settled down to wait.

The sound of the back door opening pulled Matt from his snooze. Dark climbed into the vehicle, iron-grey eyes catching Matt's in the rearview mirror. "If I catch you asleep at the wheel of my car again, I will have you shot. Take me to the officers' mess."

"Sir."

Matt had been promised a whipping, two birchings and a hanging so far. He duly added 'shot' to the list and started the engine.

They pulled into a spot near the officers' mess. Dark told him he would be an hour.

Four hours later, Matt observed Dark stagger toward him with a man under each shoulder. He got out, opening the back door in preparation for the loading of his inebriated cargo. The two men helping Dark were also pissed. Matt was pleased to see them smack Dark's head against the Land Rover's roof before they finally got him in.

Then he began the short drive to the officers' married quarters. The road was quiet. Matt was thinking about how he was going to get Dark out of the car when a slurred voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Black!"

It took him a second to realise Dark was talking to him.

"Yes, sir."

"I have been posted to Berlin. My commission approved today."

Berlin, Fuck!

Matt had heard stories about Berlin; how the British turned it into a fortress city, encircling it with the Berlin Wall when the Yanks left in Fifty-One. The rest of the country was a lawless morass of brigands and fanatics. Decent folk had banded together, fortified their towns and villages, fighting for every resource. It was a shithole. People died like flies in Germany.

"Congratulations, sir, *you* must be very pleased."

"Damn right, I need action. Germany is where a man of action needs to be. Don't worry I shall be bringing you with me."

I'm going to die!

"When will we be leaving, sir?"

"I leave for Berlin in the morning. While I am away, you will serve as my wife's driver. She will need to prepare for the move. Do not engage with my wife, Black. Men die easily in Germany."

PLAY | Maeve Clarke | from *White Gold*

“This is the last time we will be free. Free to do what we want. Think as we want. Say what we want. As soon as we get off that plane back home, we will step straight into our old skins. Our old ways. Our old thoughts.”

On their last night at Harvard, four students promise each other lifelong loyalty and friendship. Back in Tanzania 20 years later, their promises and beliefs are tested in the clash between tradition, superstition and the search for *muti* – White Gold.

Characters

Moses – 22 and early 40s

Sagesse – 22

Jacob – 22

Pablo – 22

Notes

/ indicates speech overlapping

Act One

Scene 1 - Tanzania, 2018.

Rhythmic African drum music plays in background. Blood-stained sawdust covers the stage. Large metal bowls covered with blood-spattered white cloths are on wooden, bench-like tables. This is the 'Chopping Room'.

***Moses**, confident and charismatic, is seated in the audience. Smartly dressed and with expensive accessories.*

His mobile rings to the point the audience is annoyed before he answers it. He speaks as he makes his way to the stage.

Moses As long as the price is right, nothing is too large or too small for me (*laughs*). Think about it. I am here when you are ready (*ends call*).

Moses starts to dance and clap hands, encouraging the audience to do the same. Music fades as he climbs onto stage and pulls a switch. Unidentifiable carcasses hanging from hooks swing into view above his head.

My name is Moses. Moses Muala. But my friends call me... The Magician. (*Removes jacket.*) As for other people, well, they call me many things... (*Hangs up jacket carefully*) which I will not bother to repeat now. And you? I wonder what you will call me.

Takes a pair of gloves from the box.

You know, I can make your dreams come true. Eh eh! You may laugh, but they do not call me The Magician for nothing. (*He laughs as he walks amongst audience.*) What? So you don't believe me?

Points to individuals as he asks questions.

Where are you from? And you? And you? That explains it. What do you know? You westerners have lost the way of the ancestors. Forgotten their divine power.

Each question directed at a different individual.

You want love? I will find you love, even if your heart dried out long time ago. Leave it to Moses. (*Stretches gloves.*)

And you? Never get the promotion you deserve? Maybe you have a bad-minded boss standing in your way. Huh? I can help you. No boss, (*beat*) no problem. (*Slowly pulls on one glove.*)

Maybe you cannot satisfy your lady. (*winks*) Your bamboo bends when it should stand straight and strong. Know what I mean? If you come to me... I can help you. (*Slips on second glove.*) Discretion guaranteed.

Returns to stage. Uncovers bowls. Picks up a slab of meat between finger and thumb and inspects.

Have problems making people listen? I can help you. Eh, when I have finished with you, they will never tire of your voice. I see you don't believe me, but look at you – every single one of you hanging on to my every word. I am proof of what I say.

Mobile rings.

Moses (*to audience*) Excuse me (*answers phone*).

Why are you bothering me? I already told you what is needed. Yes, that includes the thighs (*rolls eyes*). Yes, yes, breast meat is always good.

Another mobile rings which he pulls from a different pocket.

As ordered, sir! Dealing with it now. What is that? OK. OK. Just one moment, please.

(Back to phone 1)

While you are there, make sure you bring the heart and the liver.

(Back to phone 2)

Everything is coming to you, sir. Fresh – Fresh. Don't worry. I will let you know when it arrives. *(beat)* Yes, sir. *(Call ends.)*

(Back to phone 1)

Hey! Take the kidneys too. Why not. I am certain I will find use for them. Any teeth? Good. Take them. All of them. *(Ends call.)*

(to audience) You think I don't see how you look at me? You think I'm just a butcher in a smart suit. Well, let me tell you something. Do not be fooled by appearances. I am an educated man. Ivy League if you must know. You don't believe me? *(He gestures to the audience.)* Come with me. Let me take you back.

Blackout.

Scene 2 – Boston, USA. 1995

D'Angelo's 'Brown Sugar' playing in background. A large 'Harvard Graduation Year 1995' pennant on back wall. Pablo and Jacob slouched on sofa, Sagesse in an easy chair. Party ending. Moses in doorway, back to audience, singing to music and saying his goodbyes.

Moses “I want some of your brown sugar.” I love you too, lovely ladies. Keep in touch. Mwah!

Sagesse Moses! Hurry up. We want to do the libation!

Moses blows kisses to unseen girls, then joins the group.

Pablo Actually, it was neither/

Sagesse Does it matter? Most markets are already sewn up anyway.

Moses There's always a market for some things. You'll learn.

Sagesse Everything is in the hands of a few. Do you really think those in charge want to share?

Moses Fresh blood. New ideas. There's always a need.

Sagesse Muscle in on the wrong markets and there'll be fresh blood alright. Yours!

Jacob Exaggerating... as always.

Pablo We all know you don't need to worry, Jacob. You'll be joining the family 'business'.

They all laugh except Sagesse.

Jacob Laugh all you want, but I bet one day every one of you will want something from me.

Pablo Jacob for President!

Sagesse Nothing to do with ability or a dream of making things better for everybody.

Jacob Here we go. (*Looks at watch.*) It's only taken you/

Sagesse Just a desire to propagate the unfair society that we have/

Jacob Mind you don't fall off that high horse of yours.

Sagesse Maintain divisions, block the poor, the uneducated, women.

Jacob What are you complaining about? You've just graduated from Harvard – one of the world's greatest universities.

Pablo He's right you know.

Sagesse I'm here on a scholarship.

Pablo Isn't that better in some ways? To be here on merit... and you're an equal part of this group.

Moses More than equal.

Sagesse How's that?

Moses You're 25% of this group, right?

Sagesse Yeah...

Moses Yet 75% of this group listen to you 100% of the time!

Pablo and Moses laugh. Jacob pulls a face.

Jacob Make that 50%.

Moses Loosen up, Jacob. Why do you have to spoil the vibe?

Sagesse I'm here (*addresses Moses and Pablo*) because of you and you.

Pablo OK. Let's stop this before it gets out of hand.

Sagesse You still don't understand, Pablo, do you? And that's because you just see people. You see who they are, not what they have.

Jacob Pity you don't do the same.

Sagesse I'm from an ordinary family. That's the problem. No wealthy relatives or important connections.

Moses So? I don't have a wealthy family, or connections.

Sagesse counts the points off on her fingers.

Sagesse One, your family may not be as rich as his or his (*points to Jacob and Pablo*) but they're certainly much richer than mine. Two, you're a man. And three, some might say you have what could be called... a certain type of charm.

Jacob Nothing to do with you being pushy and opinionated, of course.

Sagesse You just don't like women/ who speak

Jacob I do like women.

**Moses/
Pablo** Me too.

Sagesse Women who speak their mind.

Moses I like those women too.

Sagesse Oh shut up!

Jacob I just prefer women who act like women.
Women with a sense of decorum.

Sagesse Decorum! What century are we in?

Pablo She's got a point. It's a little bit old-
fashioned to think this way.

Jacob Old-fashioned. Traditional. What's so
wrong with that?

Moses Personally, I just like women. Especially
the ones who don't act like women. (*He
looks at **Jacob**.*) Whatever that means.

Sagesse Is that all you think of?

Moses When it comes to you, all I can think of is...
*Moses hooks his foot under **Sagesse's** chair and
drags it towards himself.*

Can't you just feel the sexual chemistry
between us, Sagesse? Four long years of
repressed passions, unrequited lust and...
self-administered relief.

Sagesse Are you joking?!

Moses I was talking about myself (*Moses dances provocatively in front of Sagesse, while singing Shaggy's Boombastic*) “Mr. Boombastic – well what you want is some boombastic romantic fantastic lover. Moses! Mr. Lover Lover, hmmm...”

Sagesse Change the music. Quick!

Pablo switches ghetto blaster on. Bobby Brown's 'Two Can Play that Game,' fills the room.

Pablo Bobby B!

Pablo starts to sing and dance. Moses joins in, dancing and singing around Sagesse.

Moses/ Pablo “Stay with me but if you want to leave, take your things, forget all about me. Tell me why you fail to realise, that you might not ever get another try...”

Moses suddenly tips Sagesse out of her chair. She shrieks and then joins in the singing.

Sagesse “Two can play that game...”

Pablo pulls Jacob up from his seat.

Pablo Remember how we used to dance to this?

They do some fancy steps. Banging comes from upstairs/next door. Jacob turns off the music.

Moses What're you doing?

Jacob It's late. My neighbours, including the ones who were here, have had enough.

Moses Who cares?

Jacob I do.

Moses Why? You're leaving soon anyway. You are always worrying about appearances.

Pablo He's right. Relax! Tonight's meant to be special. The last time we'll all be together.

Jacob It was just meant to be the four of us. We'd barely eaten before it turned into the Moses party.

Moses Our last night together without a party? Please.

Pablo To be fair, Jacob, you are the only one with your own place. We couldn't have done this in a dorm room.

Jacob It wasn't the plan... and he didn't ask.

Moses Lighten up, will you. This is the last time that we will be free. Free to do what we want. Think as we want. Say what we want. As soon as we get off that plane back home, we'll step straight into our old skins. Our old ways. Our old thoughts.

Jacob Well, I am looking forwards to returning home. When I land, the first thing I will do is kiss the ground... the earth of my blood... take off my suit and slip/

Moses Into the old ways!

(laughter)

Jacob Slip on a kanzu. And you, Moses? What will you do?

Moses Step off the plane and clap my hands.

Sagesse Calling all your girlfriends?

Moses Jealous? *(to audience)* Can I help it if they all love Moses?

(to group) I will clap my hands with joy. Our world is changing. How can I not be excited to be on the cusp of something new, something different? I will be modern or traditional when it suits me best. What about you, Pablo?

Pablo I'm a little like you both. I'd like to bring the past and present together. Forge a new way forward for our people. And you, Sagesse. What do you want for the future?

Sagesse I... I like the idea of a place where you don't have to hide who you are. A place where you are good enough, no matter your background or skin colour. Yes, a place where you are free/ to be

Moses We all want to be free.

Sagesse Thanks for listening.

Moses Sorry, but it's true.

Pablo Of course we're all going to miss the freedoms we had here.

Moses And such interesting people.

Jacob Interesting is not the word I would use to describe some of your friends.

Moses You might have had a more 'interesting' time here if you'd hung out with a few more of my friends. Anyway, let's talk about important stuff... Me! I'm going into business.

Pablo Let me guess. More marijuana for rich American students?

Moses I don't remember you complaining when we were sharing our... 'pocket money.'

Jacob Really?

Pablo Forget it! It was nothing serious.

Moses True, it was kid's stuff. Let the Jamaicans and the Puerto Ricans and all the other 'icans' fight over their weed market. I am talking big money business, right in our own country. Well! Aren't you going to ask?

Sagesse OK. What's this big plan of yours?

Moses I'll give you a little clue. Something our country is rich in.

Jacob Diamonds?

Sagesse Oil?

Pablo Coffee?

Moses No. These things are all controlled by the same few families.

Sagesse Jacob's included.

Jacob There is always room for those with good ideas.

Sagesse Or the right connections.

Pablo Drop it, Sagesse. At least for tonight.

Sagesse You think the Mafia only exists in Italy?

Moses I guess Jacob won't be offering you a job when he's/

**Pablo/
Moses** President!

Sagesse Taking over from his father.

Pablo Following tradition.

Sagesse That's nepotism, not vocation.

Moses Can we get back to the important business? (*points at self*) I am talking long-term, big money business that will grow and grow. There may even be room for each of you in the future. (*speaks to himself*) That could work very well.

Pablo Well don't keep us in suspense.

Moses My family are business people. Traders. It is in my blood. I have a couple of ideas that if promoted in the right way, will mean there is always a market for the products I have in mind.

Sagesse You're good with the chat, I'll give you that. But I wonder, Moses Muala, are you all talk and no action?

Moses So it is action you want? (*He stands in front of her, hands on hips.*) Why didn't you say? I can show you plenty.

Sagesse (*flaps him away.*) I'd rather see your plan.

Moses (*winks at audience*) You hear how she is begging to see my plan?

(to **Sagesse**) If I show you my plan, will you help me realise its potential for... growth.

They all laugh. Sagesse rises fills her glass, passes bottle around.

Sagesse I suppose I could take a look. Tell you if it's got any... substance.

Pablo Do we all get to examine your plan? Or is this... little privilege reserved just for Sagesse?

Jacob So what is this plan?

Moses Hunting.

**Pablo/
Sagesse/
Jacob** Hunting?

Jacob There are already safaris for the rich. That's nothing new.

Moses True – but this will be hunting with a twist.

Jacob What kind of twist?

Moses I still have to work out the finer points, but I plan to make a lot of money. So much money that even Jacob will cry with envy.

Pablo So, we have Jacob, our future president. Moses, a big money businessman with half a plan, me at my father's law studio, and you, Sagesse?

Sagesse Words. I'm a communications major. Journalism.

Jacob (*sighs*) Just another excuse to give us your opinion on things you weren't asked about.

Sagesse I will write about what people like you do to ordinary people like me.

Jacob You are a Harvard graduate. Hardly one of the 'ordinary' people you profess to be.

Sagesse And you are just a privileged man-boy, with no idea of how some people are forced to live.

Pablo Please! We're here to offer a libation/ to celebrate.

Jacob Look, we don't have to pretend any more. We're just very different people with nothing in common. After tonight, we don't have to speak to each other again.

Pablo (*leaps to his feet*) No, my friends! We will keep in touch with each other when we're back home.

Sagesse One day, I swear I'll expose you and your family for what you really are. Just you wait and see.

Jacob For what we really are? What are you talking about?

Sagesse Enough of this! (*grabs her bag.*) I am going!

Pablo We haven't done the libation yet!

Sagesse For a cigarette.

Sagesse exits. Pablo turns to Jacob, palms held upwards in disbelief.

Jacob What?!

Moses Tell the truth. Is it because she's not... feeling you?

Jacob Arrogant. Opinionated. No respect for others.

Moses Me or her?

Jacob Stop talking, Moses!

Moses I'll go and have a cigarette with her. And you (*points to **Jacob***) keep your mouth shut when she comes back.

Pablo If she comes back.

*Moses exits. **Pablo** stares at **Jacob**.*

Jacob She's just so full of herself.

Pablo So are you at times.

Jacob I am not! (*beat*) Really?

Pablo What did she ever do to you?

Jacob She talks to me like I am dirt. Treats me like dirt. Is that enough?

Pablo Remember when her sister died?

***Jacob** thinks. Recollection slowly dawns.*

Jacob End of our first year? But what has that got to do with anything?

Pablo Maybe you could have shown her a little sympathy, cut her a little slack.

Jacob I did to begin with, but she refused to talk about it or to me. Acted as if I had something to do with it, as if I was worth

nothing more than that... (*indicates dying plant*) over there. I got fed up of trying.

Pablo Remember that big protectorate raid in '91?

Jacob Who doesn't? A terrible tragedy. All those children who were meant to be safe, protected... instead they were/

Pablo Her sister was one of them.

Jacob Her sister! Her sister was/

Pablo And there was talk that ehm, that er...

Jacob That what? Spit it out, man.

Pablo That the government might have been behind it.

Jacob And my father...

Pablo was President.

Jacob Why didn't she tell me?

Pablo What was she going to say? Excuse me, I think your father/mur...

Jacob She thinks my father ordered this? He would do no such a thing!

Pablo But you can understand why she didn't tell you?

Jacob Maybe... but why didn't you?

Pablo She asked me not to.

Jacob So? You and I have been friends since school.

Pablo (*shrugs*) Maybe she was scared for her family too.

Jacob I am the first to admit my father is a strict man. As President he has had to make difficult, some might say, ruthless decisions at times. But he would never have done something like this. To what end?

Pablo paces stage. Jacob follows him.

Something this important! And you didn't say a word.

Pablo What was I meant to do? We both know what it's like back home.

Jacob What are you saying?

Pablo Speak up and bad things happen to the people we love most. Maybe she was worried that you might mention this to your father?

Jacob And why would I do that?

Pablo shrugs.

Does Moses know?

Pablo I don't think so. He's never mentioned it.

Jacob All these years you sat back and watched bad feeling grow between Sagesse and I.

Pablo I promised.

Jacob So you preferred to see us fight? What kind of friend are you?

Pablo I didn't want to betray her.

Jacob So you betrayed me instead! (*Jacob pulls Pablo round to face him.*)

Pablo I didn't know what to do.

Jacob I know you like to keep the peace, Pablo, but sometimes you have to make a choice. Even if it's uncomfortable for you, or upsets people. (*Pablo shrugs him off.*) I had no idea. No wonder she hates me. I couldn't understand where that anger, that coldness towards me came from. It was so sudden. So strong. And all the time you knew. Before all that happened, there was a spark between us, I thought that... hoped that maybe... something might develop.

Pablo I did what I thought was right.

Jacob Well, you were wrong! You knew I liked her. I could have told her that I am nothing like my father. You stole that chance from me.

Pablo *turns away*

I thought I knew you. Now I'm not so sure.
I/

*They are interrupted. Sagesse and Moses enter.
Jacob approaches them.*

Sagesse. I am sorry I ehm... didn't quite get into the spirit of things before. Thanks for coming back.

Sagesse We're here for a libation.

The others nod. Pablo gathers them into a semi-circle. Jacob avoids standing next to Pablo.

Pablo Let's do this properly. Once and for all. We're here to celebrate an end to our old

lives and the start of the new, but a libation is nothing without... (*Pablo pulls a bottle from his rucksack.*)

Moses Palm wine! One tradition that will always get my vote.

Sagesse We can do the libation inside.

Jacob Alcohol! On my carpet?!

Moses Wouldn't be the first spilt tonight.

Jacob (*Jacob gives him a dirty look.*) Your friends.

Sagesse Let's use that. (*indicates plant*)

Moses (*Starts to clear a space in the centre of the room.*) Pull that plant over here. Yes, Jacob, I'm talking to you. A little manual work won't hurt. You're not president yet!

Jacob pulls plant into centre of room.

Moses Make do with what you have until you get what you want. That's business.

Pablo Do you ever talk about anything else?

Moses It's all about the intention.

Pablo Everybody got a glass?

Jacob fills their glasses.

Moses Our last time together. Nothing will ever be the same again after tonight. Who knows who we'll be or were we'll be in 20, 30 years' time.

They form a little circle around the potted plant.

Wait! (*The others look at him blankly.*) Let's take a picture! To commemorate the moment. Sagesse. Your camera.

Moses sets self-timer, rushing back into the frame each time. They take a couple of snaps, then hold their drinks up.

Jacob Make this good, Pablo. We are waking the ancestors.

Pablo We call on our ancestors far and near, to bear witness to what we have done and to thank them for our success. We ask for their support and inspiration so that we may continue our achievements – spiritually and/

Sagesse Morally.

Jacob Honourably.

Moses And financially!

Pablo Spiritually, morally, honourably and financially, to the best of our abilities.

Jacob And to help each other out in our times of need.

**Pablo/
Sagesse/** And to help each other out in our times of need.

Moses

Each person pours their libation into the plant pot/earth and then speaks.

Pablo Let it be so.

Moses Let it be so.

Sagesse Let it be so.

Jacob Let it be done.

ALL To the future!

*They knock back drinks in one, then stand in
silence, lost in thought.*

Blackout.

Scene 3 – The Chopping Room, Tanzania, 2018.

Moses enters dressed as in Scene One.

Moses Do you believe me now? Good! I suppose you're wondering what happened to the others? As expected, Jacob is now our President. He married Grace – a good marriage on paper, but the truth is she is too much woman for a man like him. If I had met her first... As for Sagesse... beautiful Sagesse... a very successful journalist. Haven't seen her for years. She had a husband, but he died or she lost him... I'm not sure which. And Pablo? Steady, safe, Pablo. Always there when you need a favour. True to his word, he became a judge.

As for me, I am many things. You should listen to me.

You know, when I was a child, I did not think I would be working in this industry, with all this blood and offal, bones and teeth. (*Takes off Wellington boots.*) But it is how I make my money. These things can leave their mark on you, that is why I do not get too close. Though I will dirty my hands if I need to. I did not think I would find a woman who would not be repelled by my (*beat*) business. But do you know they love me! And my money. I love them all too – as long as they do not expect my love to

last forever. Eh, Eh. Moses knows how to make the ladies happy.

Now, I only deal with the... special deliveries. Business is good. There will always be a market for this (*indicates crotch*) and this (*indicates meat on table*).

Bad luck follow you like it is your shadow? Maybe you have been cursed. (*Peels off gloves.*) Need protection from evil spirits? I can arrange this.

He starts to walk into the audience.

Talk to Moses. Moses Muala. I can make your dreams come true.

Moses Exits.

POETRY | Yvonne Reddick |
from *Desire Path*

Muirburn

My father weighed a little less than at birth.
I carried him in both hands to the pines
as October brought the burning season.
When I unscrewed the urn, bone-chaff and grit
streamed out, with their gunpowder smell.

I remembered the sulphur hiss of the match –
how he taught me to breathe on the steeple of logs
until the kindling caught and flames quickened.

That night, in sleep, I saw the forest clearing
by the moor's edge, and the ring of his ashes.

A skirl of smoke began to rise –
bracken curling, a fume of blaeberry leaves.
Ants broke their ranks to scatter and flee,
and a moth spun ahead of the fire-wind.
I took the path over the heath at a run.

A voice at my shoulder said, "You'll inherit fire."
And through the smoke I glimpsed a line of figures
on the hillside, beating and beating the heather
as the fire-front roared towards them.

A volley of shouts: "Keep the wind at your back!"

My grandmother threshing with a fire-broom,
Dad hacking a firebreak. My stillborn brother, now
grown,
sprinting for the hollow where the spring once flowed,
the whole hill flaring in the updraft.

And there: a girl, running for the riverside –
she wore my face, the shade of ash.

(First published in the 2018 National Poetry Competition
anthology)

Alpinist

In scarce air, she returns with the small hours,
holding an ice-axe notched with fourteen summits,
her unbound hair dripping snowmelt.

Her eyes auger through me, daring me to glance
at her clavicles bared to the cold, her peaked nipples,
and under her belt of hexes and ice-screws

the skin stripped by frostbite. She rises
before dawn, to strike out above altitude. I wake
with cairn-hard breasts, my tongue snowburned.

Cristaux de Roche

Their gleam haunts my sleep:
the rocks and ores
from my grandmother's trove
in her loft at Lausanne.

When she heard that the clast
in her breast was cancer,
she willed them to me –
they lie dormant in
the box under my bed.

Relics of her grandfather Resteau,
the one with the alpenstock
and geologist's hammer.
My thoughts trail him

up Monts to the cusps
of Spitzen and Corni,
as I touch the points
of clustered quartz, a tiny massif.

Our forebear's dip-pen copperplate
names *sphène* and *galène*,
his labels mapping each to its origins.

We're family, but a man
of his Victorian inkhornisms
would be *vous* to me,

the accented stranger
who picks through his dusty specimens.

Nights, they take root in bedrock:
I see them grow to towering altitudes
of névé and depth-hoar.

Waking, I polish the facets
of a feldspar spire,
cup its lucent Matterhorn
in my palms.

Spikenard

I trailed your flint and bayleaf scent to the porch,
but someone else's perfume was mixed with yours –

coiling with jonquils, spikenard, and something musky.
I paused at your alderwood door.

You were wreathed in the cologne I bought you:
Terre. Its heart-chord silex and bitter orange,

the base-note (which lingers longest) is Atlas cedar.
I remembered how I'd settle my cheek on your chest

to feel the stroke of your heart, until your fragrance
steeped my pores, and I'd breathe you in for weeks.

I pictured her hands at your belt, in that attic room –
my key still sprang the bolt.

Peregrines

Peregrine (adjective) – coming from another country.

We thought it was the catch of breath that forecasts
heavy weather:
something restive in the leaves, the weathercocks in a
spin.

When nightingales called *cheer-up, jug-jug*, the grouse
cried out *go-back*;
the hedgerows emptied quickly, in a gale of fleeing wings.

In the spring, a leaflet fluttered through each letterbox:
*Even the blackbirds in your garden came from Eastern
Europe.*

Lairds ordered the gamekeepers to spare goshawks and
harriers,
and fix their crosshairs on migrant snowy owls.

Brent geese wheeled north, oaring the air for Svalbard;
fieldfares left their seafaring, turned tail for the fjords.

A mob in Oxford doused the swallows' nests with DDT –
poachers of French partridges escaped, never prosecuted.

The whole sky dark with them – a rain of down and
droppings.
A year with a silent summer, and our islands cast adrift.

My grandmother's ashes stirred beneath a Sussex apple
tree,
restless for the crossing home to Chemin des
Fauconniers.

I could only name my estrangement in words with distant
origins –
all that was peregrine in me quivered to take flight.

‘This is a charmed and exemplary programme and I can’t praise it enough. It has been an honour to contribute to it, and have the opportunity of mentoring four exceptionally gifted poets for one year. All along I have felt supported by the wonderful people at Arvon and Jerwood Charitable Foundation. It has been a pleasure to play a part in the transformation of Alice, Romalyn, Seraphima and Yvonne, into professional writers. From the first day of the Arvon masterclass week, I knew I had special poets to nurture. We took over the new poetry pod at Totleigh, where we worked, laughed and cried together, fully bonded as a group. There followed a year’s serious but fun meetings, when, one after the other, they made the trek down to my garden den in Cornwall. At each meeting I marvelled at new poems, bold directions, leaps made between each session. I am so proud of their astonishing poems, and excited about their future prospects. They are now all on their way to a stunning first collection, and I’ll be following their progress as a friend. I’m confident that they are in a better place towards getting those collections submitted to – and accepted by – potential publishers. It has been a privilege to work with them towards their goals.’

Pascale Petit
Mentor | Poetry

FICTION | Jo Clayton | from *Buying Time*

Hannah is 13. She wakes up one morning to find her mum has disappeared. Her mum had warned her this might happen and she taught Hannah to be strong, to cover for her, and to look after her three-year-old brother Josh. But now Mum is really gone, Josh is grouchy, and people are starting to ask questions – teachers, social workers, and strange visitors at the door.

Buying Time is a Young Adult novel about growing up skint in South London. It's about family, identity and the thin line between function and dysfunction.

1 Absence Notes

So... I look at the space where Mum should be, but isn't, and I think, "I suppose this is what she meant by 'Not the best time to panic'."

And I look at Josh, and his eyes look even bigger and browner than usual, he's still in his pyjamas with a half soaked pull-up, but he's eaten his porridge without wiggling out so it's not all bad.

I look at the clock and it says 8.18 and I know that's not good because one of us, or both of us, is going to be late for school and if anyone notices that Mum's not around they might start asking questions. And although I am an EXPERT in saying vague and not-at-all-incriminating things that distract people, Josh tends to be more direct.

I don't think "Mummy not come home" or "Where Mummy?" would go down too well at nursery. So, although I am trying to ignore the feeling of TOTAL VOM in my stomach and the deathly, metallic taste that keeps seeping into the back of my mouth, the heart pounding in my ears is so loud that I am finding it really hard to focus on anything. And I see this look come over Josh as if he's about to start bawling like it's the end of the world so I say the first thing that comes into my head.

"Peppa Pig, Joshy?"

Josh's face does a complete U-turn from 'storm coming' to 'beautiful summer day' and he reaches out his hands to be picked up. I stuff his Peppa DVD into the machine, plonk him down on the sofa and go to lie down on my bed and think. Hard.

I am trying to be positive. I am trying to prioritise. Decide what needs to be done first and what can wait a bit. Trying to be responsible like I know Mum would want me to be. I am also trying to fight off the lump in my throat that is threatening to make me start wailing worse than Josh would be if it wasn't for Peppa Pig.

Don't get in a muddle Hann, you can do this standing on your head, without me, just as long as you don't panic.

I can see us sitting down in that posh caff, the day she took me out of school for a 'clinic' appointment last year, but we went to see The Lion King instead; "*Always say 'Clinic' Hannah, it sounds just medical enough to be scary so they won't ask too much about it.*"

OK. I will take Josh to nursery. There's not time for me to get to school for 8.45, but I must take Josh to nursery for 9 or they'll phone and ask for Mum. And Mum WON'T BE HERE.

I rush into my joggers and school sweat top (although I have NO intention of going to school today) so it won't look too dodgy and practically FLY down the stairs with a packet of Pom-Bears.

"POM POM Joshy woshy?" I say, wiggling them under his nose. "Hannah take you to nursery today, yeah?"

Well, if there's anything Josh likes better than Peppa blimmin Pig it's a lovely packet of red Pom-Bears, and if he can sit there, stuffing Pom-Bears and watching Peppa while I sort his stinky pull-up and get him in his uniform, then I say:

'HANNAH 1, THE HANDS OF FATE 0.'

*

"Don't look so serious Hann," says Mum, as she reaches out to smooth my hair down. "What they don't know can't hurt 'em," and she does that thing where she strokes my chin with her finger and pulls a funny face.

I look at her. She's so beautiful. She looks like she's glowing. Like there's an aura of light round her or something. So confident. People turn to look at her in the street. In her red dress, with her beautiful coffee skin all

creamed up with cocoa butter and her hair bouffed up 'til it's huge, a bright yellow flower clip in it and her pumps on. She sashays down the street like she's in an advert. She knows she looks amazing and so does everyone else. It's like she's from another reality. It's alright for her to say that, she's an adult, a grown up. Amazing. Proper. I'm just a stupid too-tall-nobody-nothing kid in my ugly, purple school uniform gobbling up a Danish like a greedy little piggy.

"Don't do that," she says, and I know she can tell what I'm thinking. "You are an extraordinary young woman."

She fixes me with that look, like she can see inside me or something.

"Believe in yourself Hannah. No one else will, if you don't."

I tear off a piece of Danish and nibble it, delicately.

I know it's stupid, but it makes me feel special. Even though I know she's my mum, and I know that's what she does to everyone. A little bit of a lie, to make them feel better. But just for a bit, I like the sound of being *an extraordinary young woman* and I LOVE being sat here next to her so I smile an enormous smile.

"Come on," she says. "Eat up your pastry, I've got another surprise for you."

*

It started in French. I think she did that on purpose. She knows how much I hate double French on Thursday

mornings; all those verbs and everyone looking at their shoes and never, ever wanting to answer questions. Madame Jambert in a state of total agitation while the whole class get quieter and quieter and lower and lower in their chairs, 'til it's practically silent with noses on desks.

“Qu'est que c'est?” she barks. “Qu'est que c'est 9B?” (Cept she doesn't say 9-B she says 'neuf-bay' which sounds like somewhere your gran lives in Kent.)

But then there's a knock at the door and a slip of paper and she calls me out to the front.

“Annah Joseffff. Bureau de l'école s'il vous plait.”

And when I get to the office, there's Mum, in her amazing red dress with her blue jacket but with boots on, and a big scarf. Glowing; but dressed down.

“Here she is!” says Mrs Adé. “Sorry about the wait.”

“No problem,” chirrups Mum, “it's my fault, I should have remembered about the appointment.” She gives me one of her most brilliant smiles and fixes me with her eyes in the way that means, 'go with it, and don't say a word.'

So I go with it and pretend I know exactly what's going on. “Oh the appointment,” I mumble, “is that today?”

“Yes hun,” she beams. “I'm so sorry, it completely slipped my mind.”

“And you’ll bring in the appointment letter tomorrow?” says Mrs Adé.

“Of course,” says Mum smiling. “I’m so sorry about that.” She’s so convincing I almost believe I DO have an appointment and start to worry that I have forgotten about it. But it’s just Mum casting her spell over everything.

*

It was beyond brilliant. Mum in one of her ‘brighter than the sun’ moods. Getting out of double French only 15 minutes in, and then, when we left school, Mum flicking her hand in the air and something flashing in the car park. I was still trying to pretend I knew exactly what was going on, just in case Mrs Adé was looking out of the window, so I didn’t say anything, but I gave Mum a look. She did it again, pressed something on a keyfob and I saw a white convertible flash its lights on and off. My jaw must have hit the floor then, but she scooped up my hand, flicked the key again and the doors unlocked.

“Hop in sweetie!” she chirped, as if this was something we did every day. “We’ll be late for your appointment!”

The car smelt of brand newness and the seats swallowed you up with their buttery leather luxury. Mum was beaming like a lighthouse.

“Wait ’til we get round the corner!” she said. “Give Mrs Adé a wave.”

I looked out of the window but I couldn't see anyone watching.

Mum drove steadily and carefully out of the car park and onto the road, like she'd only just passed her test. Then she went a little further down, still keeping up the act and then, when we were finally out of ear and eye shot of the school, she put her foot down and hurtled down a little side road at what felt like a hundred miles an hour. I screamed. Mainly with laughter, but I was a bit frightened too, and when she stopped we were both whooping with laughter and had tears in our eyes.

"Mum!" I screamed. "What the...!"

She couldn't speak for laughing so much.

"MY DAAAAAYS!"

"Happy Birthday!" said Mum, and flung her arms round me like I was Joshy, covering me in kisses, masses of fluffy black curls swallowing me up in all her excitement.

I looked at her confused.

"You KNOW it's not my birthday Mum," I said anxiously, "right?"

"I know," she said, "but your birthday was such a let down wasn't it? We couldn't do any of the things you wanted to. I thought I'd make it up to you."

Everything was getting so crazy, so quickly, I seriously thought about pinching myself, but then I remembered

that I've done that before in a dream and it doesn't work, so instead, I closed my eyes and took a very deep breath.

“Let's go to town!” she said. “Let's live a little!” and she put the radio on loud and we sang along all the way. Just me and her. Like the happiest people on earth. Not a care in the world. No French, no school, no Josh bawling his little brains out.

Just Mum and me, both of us beaming. The BEST day ever.

When I was still just a happy little kid.

2 Sick Boots

We leg it to school like Mo Farah on a sugar rush; me in my PE kit and Josh on his scooter. I have to make up some Peppa scenario to get him going – muddy puddles/Daddy Pig stuff – and race him down the road, but it works and, to be fair, he can work up quite a speed on that bashed up scooter when he wants to, even though Mum got it on Freecycle and it's missing a brake.

“Joshy win!” he shouts, “I’m the king of the castle, you the stinky poo hole!”

I shush him and look around nervously to make sure no one heard. All the kids are being dropped off, the playground is buzzing and Mrs Overton is sulking in the corner with the bell. I avoid eye contact with any of the adults and nobody pays attention to me. To be honest I’m taller than some of the mums, so I kinda blend in. I swear sometimes people think I AM his mum. Which is, quite frankly, SICK thinking. Janine Fraser got up the duff in Year 11 but Josh is 3, I’d have to have had him in Year 6!

“Kiss for Hanny?” I say, and he plants a fat one on my cheek. He can be a right pain in the butt sometimes, but ignoring that, the boy can pack a punch with hugs and kisses. I give him a hug back and shoo him into class.

“Bye bye lickle man!” I say and leave him on the carpet reading about diggers.

I make my exit.

Do not stop, do not pass Go. Do not collect £200.

As.

If.

Do not go straight to school.

When I get out into the alleyway I think I've got away with it. But when I sit down on the ground there's a whirring space where my belly should be like the insides of a see-through vacuum cleaner.

You can do this Hannah. I'm counting on you.

"You alright sweetie?"

I gasp and when I look up I see Daniel's mum; Daniel is Josh's bestie in the digger army, she's appeared like the witches from Macbeth, out of air; "God Hannah, what's wrong?"

I look at her and she looks so worried I feel like she's looked inside my head and seen everything; like she can read my washing machine head and she knows EXACTLY what's going on.

All I can hear is my heart pounding in my ears.

You will be scared Hannah, so will I, but when it happens you have to stay cool. Don't panic.

"I..." I stammer, "I..." I watch her face getting more and more concerned.

"Hannah?" she says, all mumsy. "Hannah... what's the matter?"

When I've sorted this Hannah. Everything will be different.

Everything shifts, suddenly. A tightening wave in the pit of my stomach takes over and I VOM uncontrollably all over Daniel's mum's red shiny wellies.

Nice.

Wondering if it's finished, and feeling eversoslightly relieved I turn away, but then I do a second vom (smaller and more ladylike) into the clump of nettles by the fence.

Daniel's mum makes a whiny noise like a polite fly caught in a jar.

"Oh, oh dear..."

I feel her hand on my back doing an embarrassed little rubby thing.

"I'll phone your mum to come and get you."

"S'alright," I say quickly, "really..."

"Oh..." says Daniel's mum, looking confused.

"I'm better now. Much better."

I feel like she knows I'm lying, so I try and look pathetic and daft.

"Sorry. Dodgy chicken I think. Mum's sick too. She's at home in bed with a bucket."

Daniel's mum pulls a face. I'm impressed with my descriptive powers, so I keep going.

“I only had a little bit, y’know? I didn’t like the look of it. It smelt a bit... funny. What is it? *Campylobacter* or something?”

“Listen, I’ll drive you,” she says, interrupting my bacteria fantasy. “Stay here. I’ll bring the car round.”

“No really, it’s fine. I feel much better now.”

I give her my best innocent child look, “Much.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure... but... could you do me a favour please?”

The words sort of leap out of my mouth before I know what I’m doing.

Mum was SO right; panic is not my friend; I start to hear her singing Lauryn Hill in my head...

Everything’s gonna be alright... Everything’s gonna be alright...

Daniel’s mum says of course she can do me a favour, “What is it?” and I say (where is this stuff coming from?) could she please phone school and tell them that I’m sick and can’t come in because Mum’s phone’s broken AND we are both sick at home with food poisoning.

She does a great job on Mrs Adé. Even saying “chicken” and “campylobacter” in the same sentence. It’s all going really well until Mrs Adé must ask an awkward question and Daniel’s mum pauses and does that panicky ‘looking into my eyes’ thing again.

“No” she says to the phone, coughing a bit, “I’m her aunt. I’m visiting. Rochelle has food poisoning.” She bites her lip and rolls her eyes to the sky.

Mrs Adé’s no fool, but here is Daniel’s mum in the alleyway next to her son’s nursery bare LYING as if she does this every single day of her life (maybe she does...) and SOMEHOW Mrs Adé is having an off day because she hasn’t started her ‘official speak’ voice where she tells you that she’s VERY sorry but you’ll have to provide documentary evidence *blah blah* Lambeth Council *blah*.

Mrs Adé is NEVER sorry. Mrs Adé is a passive-aggressive *controlfreakcow* with an inferiority complex and a made up job title (or at least that’s what Mum says when she’s peed off).

“Yes, yes. Thank you. Goodbye.” and she stops the call and pulls a face into her phone.

We look at each other as if we are both six and REALLY naughty.

“She’s a bit of a Rottweiler...” she says, her cheeks flushing an embarrassed red.

I smile. Mum’s a total pro, but Daniel’s mum seemed Proper with a capital ‘P’ like she baked her own cakes and went to nursery coffee mornings and stuff.

“I thought if I had to explain who I was and what was going on, we’d be here all day. Will you tell your mum? I hope she doesn’t mind!”

I laugh, a bit of a manic laugh and Daniel's mum laughs too, nervously.

We start off down the alley away from each other. I can do this. Mum is right. I can REALLY do this.

I'm nearly in the clear when I hear the swishy plastic noise of the buggy wheels on the gritty path as she zooms down behind me. My shoulders prickle like someone brushed me with a bramble. I paint on a smile, almost as pro as Mum's, and turn round to face her.

"Listen Hannah, I had a thought... Why don't I pick up Josh this afternoon – give your mum a break? He can have a play at ours and have some tea and you can come and get him about 5.30ish? Give me your number and I'll phone you if your mum's phone's on the blink.

A tiny, urgent alarm bell goes off somewhere in my head, but I ignore it.

She will pick up Josh. He will be happy. He will have a nice play and a nice tea, in a nice house with a nice garden and a slide or a trampoline in it and little wooden plaques in the kitchen saying things like 'LOVE' and 'HOME'. *What is not to like, Hannah?*

"Brilliant, yeah." I say and give her my number.

We say goodbye and I start to walk home. I could make this work! Mum and me are a team; I can be as clever as Mum, and we can work the system and sock it to DA MAN. BABY.

When I turn the corner, my knees give way and I have to sit down on a little garden wall. My hands are shaking.

Do you trust me, Hannah?

I see Mum's face in my head. Her eyes, brown and beautiful and smiling. Her voice soft and sweet as chocolate melting into cream.

We can be a warm breeze in a cold world, baby girl.

A gust of wind sweeps the leaves across the street. It goes right through my sweat top, across my skin and into me like I'm hollow. I feel Summer disappearing and Autumn coming on.

We can do anything Hannah; we're magic.

When I get home I put the TV on loud and curl up on the sofa under Josh's toddler duvet. My legs are too long and my feet stick out the end; I have to scrunch up into a tight ball to get warm. I can still taste sick but I'm too tired to move. I feel like a lump of lead.

Mum always looks after me when I'm sick. And I look after her. That's our deal.

If it doesn't kill you Hann, it makes you stronger.

There's been a whole shed load of stuff that hasn't killed us yet.

3 Fifty 'Cent

“So what’s he like then, your REAL dad?”

Kirsty. She was my best friend from since she was the new girl in Year 4 and that question was in Year 6, when Wayne disappeared, nearly two years ago, when Josh was just a baby and things weren’t the best.

She should have known better, but, bless Kirsty, the gap between her brain and her gob tend to short circuit.

The answer that I gave then, would kind of be the same as the one I’d give now.

“How the HECK should I know! ‘Scuse my French. But. What. The.....!” (‘cept I did not say HECK, because I was, y’know, a little *agitated*).

Mum hates me swearing, although she does it, but when she does it, she makes it sound like she's auditioning for the Royal FREAKIN Shakespeare Company, so you don’t point it out unless you want to invoke the WRATH OF MUM (and trust me you do NOT want to invoke it).

Mum’s got muscles on her like an athlete from all the yoga she does but the muscles in her VOICE! You don’t want to get hit with those babies. Stick that with her BRAIN and you’re in BIG TROUBLE. She goes 0-60 in a millisecond so unless you want to LOSE SUCKER (!!)

there’s not much point starting. She’ll have your argument lying in tatters on the floor before you know it if you’re daft enough to ask her for something you haven’t

worked out WELL in advance. Doesn't stop me of course, but I've got better over the years. I've had enough practice. Wayne was never any good at it. He'd just go all big eyes and quiet.

I remember Mum arguing with my real dad once. She said I was too little to remember, so I shrugged and said 'maybe I imagined it' but I know I didn't. She won of course and in the end he walked off leaving me looking at Mum sitting on a wall like a triumphant angel, all proud and righteous. We were supposed to be going to the cinema. We didn't get to go.

I can remember things about my dad, not just the argument. I know it was ten years ago, but that stuff's important.

First of all he's tall, like me. Second of all he's blonde with blue eyes like me, although I got Mum's CURLEE African hair and her lips.

Third of all he's an actor. Or, according to Mum, a BLEEP-ing actor. When she says it she spits it out across the room and her eyes fill with fire, which is pret-ty impressive, so I'm not about to blast her for using INAPPROPRIATE language.

It's strange, because Mum's a BLEEP-ing actor too (you're not allowed to say 'actress' if you're a feminist like Mum is, which is another thing I don't get, it's like if you're a feminist you have to pretend you're a man? *Whaddawha?* Anyway, don't start with Mum on that one, she always makes it make sense.)

Mum doesn't like talking about him. She goes all prickly and stiff, calls him "THAT man", "that bleeping actor", and occasionally, when she's beating herself up about what a mess she's made of her life, "your father".

Mum and THAT man met when she was a teenager and he was twenty-something on this soap on TV. It's still going. Been going for years. Kennedy Street. Yes, THAT one. I used to watch it when I was in juniors but to be honest I preferred cartoons, it was just what some kids chatted about in Year 6 when we thought we were SO sophisticated and it made Mum a minor celebrity round here. Mum has her episodes on VHS in a box in the seats under the sofa, because it's THAT long ago. The 90s. There's loads of tapes and they take up A LOT of space, but she'll never throw them out. She keeps saying she's going to get them transferred to digital so we can watch on the laptop, but she never has, and TBH the laptop's crap so there's not much point. It's just another one of her brilliant ideas (i.e., something she gets really excited about for ten minutes before she moves on to the next thing).

It's her 'fifteen minutes of fame' she says, and as Andy Warhol said, we're all gonna have them at some point so I'm not gonna get huffy. However, we don't OWN a VHS player, so I've never watched them. The only time I've ever seen it was when they showed a clip of it on some quiz programme, but I only got to see Mum looking really young with LOADS of makeup on and really, weird STRAIGHT hair (it was the 90s) for about 10 seconds

because she was shouting “Turn it off! Turn it OFF!! HANNAH! Turn it off NOW!” and seemed to go a bit demented and left the room. And there on our TV was this tall, good-looking white guy with blonde hair who was obviously supposed to be the love interest.

Turns out, he WAS the love interest; my good old D.A.D. AKA Adam Goldman, actor (36) from Mangawhai, New Zealand (according to his page on Wikipedia).

It’s a bit weird when all you can properly know about your dad is a 10 second clip off a crummy soap in the middle of a cheesy quiz show and some pictures and stuff off Google.

Half of your DNA – ta-daa!

I remember stuff though, from when I was little, I can’t ask Mum because it makes her upset, so sometimes I sit and think about it, and try and get the memories in some kind of focus but the colours are washed out, like an old photo that’s been on the fridge too long. But there’s a SENSE of something that stays with me, a feeling.

I remember walking along grey and pink paving slabs, by the beach, whitewashed walls on one side and sand and pebbles on the other. It’d been raining and we got wet but then the sun came out and the water started to evaporate off the paving slabs like smoke. Magic! I was wearing a little cotton dress and I was cold but he was big and warm and he picked me up and cuddled me.

He bought me a rum and raisin ice cream and I didn't like it. The ice cream was sicky and he was damp and salty like clean jeans and seaside. He gave me a Juicy Fruit chewing gum and told me not to swallow. Mum was working; somewhere by the sea and he was looking after me. Uncle George came down a couple of times too. We were staying in this crumbly old guesthouse with lots of old ladies who were always laughing and eating coconut biscuits, looking out of the window and making jokes I didn't understand. They'd buy me tomato juices at the bar and say stuff like, "That'll put hairs on your chest dearie."

He bought me a doll in a gift shop – Pippa. She was old fashioned and cloth and had woollen plaits. I loved that doll. I loved him. He was shiny like Mum, always making people laugh; he had that way about him and that funny Kiwi accent that made leg sound like 'lig' – "*Ya hurt ya lig did ya?*"

Afterwards, when we were back in London and it was just me and Mum, I remember asking her when Dad was coming back because I missed him. She told me he was never coming back because he didn't love us any more, and she smacked me because I called her a big fat liar. She'd never smacked me before and her hand seemed to burn into my thigh. Maybe I was four then. I don't know. I can't remember. Mum says I stopped talking for a bit and I remember scratching felt tip pen all over that doll's face and leaving her on the balcony in the rain all night to teach her a lesson. Poor Pippa. We put her through the

washing machine, but she was ruined, so we took her to the charity shop. Which is kind of where me and Dad ended up – shoved somewhere between the pretty baby clothes that have hardly been worn and the pile of grubby old bric-a-brac that nobody wants.

We don't talk about him. It never seems like a good idea.

In Year 3 we had this family tree homework and I started looking through the photo album and I found this picture of him holding me. Mum and Uncle George are standing behind and looking daft. It was tucked in the back of the album with some press cuttings about some panto or other Mum was in. They looked like teenagers. Happy teenagers. Mum's hair was a dead straight shiny black curtain; she looked SERIOUSLY WEIRD. He looked pretty handsome though; he was rocking a granny waistcoat. I thought it was funny but when I showed it to Mum she went quiet. I saw this smile flicker across her face and then it died. I knew straight away I should never have shown her, but it was too late by then. She locked herself in the bathroom for ages, ran herself a bath and stayed there. I kept hearing her topping up the hot water. I made her a sandwich, put cheese and cucumber in it and left it on a tray with a packet of Hula Hoops and a cup of tea, but she didn't come out.

“Go and watch TV,” she said, and that was that.

Usually her reaction to TV was ‘turn that off now’ so I wasn't too upset by her 6 hour bath. I went back to check

on her a couple of times but the sandwich was still outside, curling up at the edges. Every time I knocked she told me to go and watch TV. So I did. Then, finally, I heard the door click open and she was stood in the bedroom in a towel, staring out of the window and shivering.

I was looking through the crack in the door and I wanted to say something to her, but I didn't know what it was, so I didn't.

I wished I'd never found that picture, or at least that I'd kept it to myself.

I felt bad. Like I'd made him come back and then taken him away again, all in one go.

So I stabbed his eyes out on the photo with my school compass.

I knew she loved him and he'd broken her heart.

PLAY | Laurie Ogden | from *No One Thing*

‘Some people are very English and talk too much about the weather. Some are very Northern and carry it inside them.’

The storm cloud that was Eleanor’s childhood is still spitting, and she worries about passing the impact on to her daughter Jess. After her soon-to-be-ex-husband is admitted to hospital in critical condition, Eleanor is stuck with an impossible decision whilst the rain tries to get back in.

Now

Eleanor, mid 40s

Jess, her daughter, early 20s

Omar, Jess’ boyfriend, early 20s

Michael, Eleanor’s ex-husband late 40s

Cameron, early 40s

Then

Joy, Eleanor’s mother, late 30s

Young Eleanor, mid teens

Notes:

The weather should very much feel like another character. Young Eleanor moves comfortably through time and place and serves as a guide to the audience.

Recommendations:

The stage is always set as a ward in a hospital in Bradford (even in the moments where the action takes place in a gym or a park, or Eleanor's front room).

The actor playing Eleanor doubles as Joy.

Stage directions that are underlined should be read by Young Eleanor.

Scene One

Young Eleanor tries to creep in unnoticed. She is completely soaked and covered in mud. The following text is spoken as one character's thought flow.

Then. Rain.

Eleanor

When I hear rain it vibrates through my whole body. I wanna hide from it and stand in the middle of it at the same time. It's as if, cos I know it's there, I might as well let it pummel me until I am all bruise. I've been this way since young, and the older I get, the more likely I'm gonna kill myself off with pneumonia.

You used to be able to forecast, you know, if you were a sailor, farmer, fisherman. You'd know what were coming with a tingle in the shoulder, a shift in wind, dampness on your cheek. Now it's a science, a million calculations, computers playing away. Meteorology, they call it. But they can't figure everything out – night-time thunderstorms, they're still a mystery. They form, and they pour, and no one knows why.

When I were about fifteen, my Dad got his new house with slaggy Sheila

Young Eleanor who I weren't allowed to call slaggy in his house, but not allowed to forget she were slaggy when I got back to Mum's.

Eleanor I tried to visit him there whenever Sheila were at work. Going home after, it were like clouds were waiting to open on me.

Young Eleanor freezes in her tracks. Eleanor voices her mother, Joy.

Joy You been 'cross back fields.

[Beat]

Well. How is he then?

Young Eleanor I don't think he were in.

Joy Course he weren't. You know, he used to turn up his nose like that when he were lying too.

You've got his face my girl, and if you know what's good for you, you'll scrub it right off.

Young Eleanor moves away from Joy as if trying to avoid a wild animal.

Eleanor I would try to go there on the way home from school so she wouldn't know but I trailed mud like evidence.

Young Eleanor I reckon even if I scrubbed my boots till my knuckles bled she'd still know. It's never really worth it. Half the time he's not even in. But I go anyway.

Eleanor Joe, a Yorkshire man with a wobbly spine and Joy, a curled fist of a mother. It's a wonder I didn't grow up a complete pile of mush. But here I am.

Never left here but I did move three streets down. Technically still married if only for another couple months. Still working at the Morrisons in town, wishing I could retire right now, and trying to chase my daughter into going somewhere and doing something fucking great. But she's getting quieter and angrier by the minute, and near everyone

looks at me like I might jump off a cliff at any moment.

I'm here. But I wouldn't exactly say I've come up roses.

*

Now. Hospital. Eleanor sits by an unconscious Michael. The machine beeps.

Eleanor Could have looked after your heart a bit better. An annual spring clean at least. You complete and utter tit.

Omar enters.

Omar Michael's partner arrived. On his way up from reception.

Eleanor Right.

Eleanor realises what Omar is implying.

Eleanor Oh, right.

Eleanor stands up.

Omar What do we do now?

Eleanor Bugged if I know.

Omar waits awkwardly. After a moment Eleanor sighs.

Eleanor Give them their privacy. Wait outside for Jess to arrive.

Scene Two

The park. Months before Now. It might be summer. Well, it is not raining.

Jess I want you to meet my mum.

Omar Oh yeah?

Jess Yeah I reckon you'd really like her.

Omar I was thinking about dating other people so—

Jess Shut yer face!

Omar slings his arm round her and pulls her in.

Jess I just thought since I've met all your family...

Omar Hard not to, you can't even have a shit in peace at mine. Always somebody in.

Jess You're right lucky.

Jess goes quiet.

Omar You can borrow one of my sisters if you like, I could definitely lose at least one of them.

Jess I mean it.

Omar Well now you've got me too. Unless I leave you for your mum.

Jess You're horrific.

Omar I'm promising nothing till I meet her, I heard she's proper fit.

Jess You are a dead man!

Play fighting starts, ends with Omar grabbing her and smushing Jess' face before planting a kiss on her nose.

Omar Alright, I'm game.

Jess She'll probably get over-excited so just ignore everything she says.

Omar Remember to mention med school, that's a good boyfriend trait right?

Jess No way, she'll start on me about my plans. Anyways, she won't care as long as you're not an arsehole.

Omar Tricky.

Jess Yeah you better work on that.

Jess goes quiet again.

Jess You know it's really not long till you leave again.

Omar It's only Leeds. It's a short drive away.

Jess You don't drive. I don't drive.

Omar Well I've got to be back at least every other weekend or my mum will strangle me with my own washing, so don't think you'll have any choice but

to see me. If you can wait that long to see this bodaaay.

Jess Fuck off. As long as you remember Leeds is shit.

Omar Everyone knows Leeds is shit.

Jess As long as you remember to come back.

*

Scene Three

Now. Hospital. Omar joins Eleanor in the corridor.

Omar Got Cameron a coffee.

Eleanor Everything OK?

Omar No. Upset. Panicked. Confused as to who the fuck I am.

Eleanor I meant Michael.

Omar No change. Not as far as I can see and they've said nothing more.

Eleanor You done much work on heart attacks?

Omar Only in theory. I only done one proper A&E placement. Spent all of last year stabbing pigs with scissors

Eleanor What kind of—

Omar It was a project. Not everyone had to do it. I was looking at wounds.

Eleanor Right.

Omar So like, how much damage can I do with primary scissors, you know those ones that look like they are made of Play-Doh, what kind of wound with—

Eleanor I get the concept.

Omar No yeah sorry it is a bit grim.

Eleanor Maybe you could say that was why you knew before anyone else. You were on extra placement.

Omar Weird coincidence that.

Eleanor Not as weird as, 'I've been hanging round with yer estranged dad, and oh, even your mum knows now, just you in the dark.'

Omar Yeah. Sounds worse when you say it like that. But she's not daft.

[Beat]

Omar You okay Mrs B?

Eleanor I told you, 'Eleanor.' No.

Omar Yeah.

Eleanor You?

Omar I feel out of place.

Eleanor Michael's not really my Michael. All these doctors keep acting like it.

Omar You know if there are any decisions it'll be you still?

Eleanor What?

Omar If he doesn't wake up. Legally, it's still you innit?

Eleanor Yeah. Yeah no that's [right]. Well fuck me.

[Beat]

Eleanor Looking forward to that conversation

Omar Maybe it won't come to that.

Eleanor Mmmm...

Uncomfortable silence.

Omar Jess can't be long now.

Eleanor If she's coming.

Omar She will. I explained how serious his condition is.

Eleanor Well, if she said. But she's stubborn as shit, my girl. You of all people ought to know that by now.

*

Young Eleanor drags a sleeping bag behind her.

Then. Rain.

Joy He's two days early dropping you off, Eleanor.

Young Eleanor Storms got too big. It weren't safe to go up walking; all the locals said so. And the tent kept getting knocked about so, well Dad said it didn't make no sense to carry on.

Joy Your father's the sodding storm.

Young Eleanor (*quietly*) Why do you have to spoil it?

Joy Say that again.

Joy grabs and holds Young Eleanor's wrists.

Eleanor [*To audience*] The way she'd scream in your face, you could see spit on her teeth.

Young Eleanor flexes away from her and begins to tear up.

Joy Oh look don't get all emotional, I barely touched yer – look just – just get upstairs to bed alright.

Eleanor It was different at night when she was alone and thought I was sleeping.

Young Eleanor She sounds like when that fox got stuck under Harry next door's fence, and his dogs got it. And we just wanted someone to put it out of its misery. When they did the silence were almost worse. I don't know if I'm imagining things. I wish he would come back, I wish a million he would come back. He said didn't he? Not for always.

Scene Four

The park. Months before Now. It might be autumn. The sky is a bit grumpy.

Jess You know you've lost weight?

Omar Stressing about patients and surviving on Super Noodles will do that to a guy. Still buff though.

Jess It's weird.

Omar You say that every time I come back.

Jess I've never said you've lost weight before.

Omar It was the haircut last time. A little change, you do a double take.

Jess I just don't like it.

Omar Short hair Omar, or thin Omar?

Jess Just when you don't look like you.

Omar If you stare at me for long enough I'll look like me again.

Jess Yeah?

Omar Yeah.

He pulls her in towards him, she struggles away

Jess Prove it.

Omar I can't, you have to do it.
Jess What do you mean?
Omar Close your eyes.
Jess And trust you? No chance.
Omar Go on.

After a bit more encouragement, Jess reluctantly closes her eyes.

Omar So think of me. There's a photograph of me in your mind, right?
Jess Sort of.
Omar Okay, so that photograph, that static me, that lives in your head. But it's not me. Not actual me. Get it?
Jess No.
Omar Don't open your eyes! If you have a photograph of someone they won't be exactly the same the next second, never mind a day or a year later. They'll have a bad hair day, or wrinkles, or... stuff just changes. True?
Jess Well yeah, obviously.
Omar But if you were actually looking at them the whole time your eyes grow with them. But if you were staring at the photograph, the one you carry in your head, you'd look up and you'd be shocked. You'd be all – I don't know this person.

Jess I guess.

Omar Well I'm saying maybe you, you've been staring at the photograph in your head, the one of me. So it makes you feel weird when something obvious changes and forces you to look up. At me.

Jess opens her eyes.

Jess Well don't you have a brain photograph of me?

Omar Course I do. Everyone has one of everyone else, and it stresses everyone out. I reckon that's why it's satisfying when you watch a time lapse, watching it speed up.

Jess You mean you watch it rot and die quicker.

Omar But it feels right doesn't it? Because you see all these stages closer together. You almost see all that it is, all at once, like you finally have a full picture. Like you can't say a flower is just a flower like. Think of a flower. But that flower is also a seed, and a flower eaten by a bug, and compost all at once.

Jess So you're saying... you'd like another haircut.

Omar I'm saying I'll still be everything and nothing at once and so are you.

Jess And we'll be worms' meat yadda yadda. You like to talk a lot, you know that?

Omar I know. Words are shit sometimes.

He is quiet for a moment before jumping up excited.

Omar Like two-faced, that's easier to explain maybe, like two-faced if two-faced wasn't a bad thing.

Jess I fucking hate two-faced people.

Omar But at its core – someone surprises you with something different than what you thought. You were presented with contrasting images. But can't both those be true?

Jess thinks for a bit.

Jess Richie, he's an arsehole, but he gives you a lift back and forth from Leeds every time he's back.

Omar Exactly. Like you're my girlfriend, but if I think of you as my girlfriend too much, I'm staring at the picture in my head and I don't get to see you living and breathing in front of me.

Jess I get you.

After a moment, Jess jumps up and flicks him on the nose, hard.

Omar What was that for?

Jess Just reminding you that I'm alive.

Then. Rain.

Eleanor

When my dad owned a shop – which was long before he died and longer before he ran off with slaggy Sheila the cleaner from the local barbers – when my Dad owned a shop I'd stare out the front window and stare at the people passing by. My grandma used to say you can tell a lot about a person from the way their shoulders slope, the burdens they carry. I didn't give a monkey's tit about that, cos I knew that if you squinted your eyes and focused your stare enough, you could see whatever you wanted to see. Dad was a quiet man, jokes told so quiet if you breathed too loud you'd miss them. We'd watch people trundle along. In those moments in the shop he felt unusually, beautifully *mine*.

Young Eleanor

It's the same people who go past really, day after day. So that I won't get bored, I imagine things onto them. Like Josette, the snotty posh woman from Clayton Hill, I imagine her face suddenly reflecting her insides, curled up, purple and nasty, see her having to come in and ask us for something, anything to cover her horrid face.

Young Eleanor mimics the posh women and makes herself laugh.

Oh nooo, my face!

Eleanor

But all that, that were before my father sold the shop and longer before he ran off with slaggy Sheila. The day he left rain came down in sheets, like sleet, running down the windows of our house and off my mums cheeks and I stayed up all night worrying about where I imagined he'd be sleeping. I prefer to remember him tragically looking out the window, wishing he were home with Mum and me, stooping next to me with a bucket, helping pour the flood right back out the window where it came from.

One day the rain stopped falling down her cheeks, the storm had moved deep inside her. She turned to me, dusted off her hands like they just had a bit of muck on 'em and said:

Joy

(to Young Eleanor) Well, that's that then.

Eleanor

And that were all that was said of him for weeks.

But it never stopped raining, I'll tell you that for free.

Scene 5

Months before Now. Eleanor's front room. Omar is waiting for Jess to come home.

- Omar** Thanks Mrs B.
- Eleanor** I just sent her out for milk. Sit yer butt down. Hear the studying is going well.
- Omar** Yeah, just found out about a new placement actually.
- Eleanor** Oh yeah?
- Omar** London. For a couple of months. There's a quickish train to Leeds now, so I could come back and visit easy I reckon.
- Eleanor** Only good thing to come out of Leeds is the road to Bradford.
- Omar** Yer not wrong.
- Eleanor** What's our Jess reckon?
- Omar** I haven't told her yet. Tonight I'm gonna.

Pause

- I know this week is weird for her.
- Eleanor** I didn't think she paid attention to the date. That's funny, I forget.
- Omar** Well, it's in her diary.

Eleanor It is?

Omar I never looked or nothing, she showed me the X for every day she hasn't spoken to him.

Eleanor I never knew she did that.

[Beat]

 I don't think I did any counting when my dad – but I was a bit younger than she is. And I did see him.

Omar Mrs B, it's not my place but I was hoping you'd let her talk to him.

Eleanor What do you mean?

Omar She misses her dad. I can tell. She goes all like a clam when I try to ask her about him.

Eleanor What do you mean *let* her? Nobody's ever been able to stop our Jess doing anything she wanted to do.

Omar She said she hasn't got his contact details or nothing.

Eleanor Yeah cos she binned them. I dunno who you reckon I am love, but I'd never stop her seeing him. Wouldn't want her having same as me. I've even seen the bugger a couple times myself when he's popped into Morrisons. Too awkward to come to my checkout like, acts as if I'd throw cans of beans at him. Like I'd embarrass myself more.

Omar I don't understand.

Eleanor Well his boxing club, the community wotsit, its only flipping on Mythroid Way too isn't it. You know, if the man feels too awkward to say hi, he could walk a bit further to a different shop for his milk. But does he hell.

Omar He doesn't live in Spain?

Eleanor Michael? I don't think he's ever been to Spain, never mind lived there. Or I dunno, maybe him and Cameron do plush holidays now. I suppose he could have become the sun sea and sand type, all Stella and sunburn. But I can't quite picture that. I was with him for years, you do know a person. Well, you hope. *[Beat]* But then I could never picture me being left behind and here we are, history having a lovely little giggle at me. Didn't give your mum enough sympathy? Right, here y'are, try it on for size. Course everyone knew.

Omar I'm sorry. Is Cameron his new girlfriend?

Eleanor looks at Omar, baffled.

Eleanor Omar, you've been with our Jess nearly a year now haven't you?

Omar Yeah.

Eleanor Do you not listen or owt?

Omar I don't/ understand.

Eleanor Or does our Jess chat shit?

Omar doesn't answer.

Eleanor Well it's not exactly a state secret.

Omar What do you mean?

Eleanor Jess chooses to have no contact. Michael has never pushed it. I'm certainly not holding no sodding keys.

[Beat]

He didn't leave me for a younger model, elastic girl Cameron Diaz. He left me for Cameron who sells cars up in Idle.

Omar isn't following.

Eleanor Cameron the bloke.

Omar Oh.

Eleanor Well don't looked so bloody shocked, you're worse than the women in the village.

Scene Six

*The Park. Weeks before Now. Maybe it is winter.
The sky is a stern mouth.*

Omar Why don't you come with me to London?

Jess I can't.

Omar Course you can. You hate the pub.

Jess And just sit around whilst you doctor about, wait for you to come home. I don't know no-one in London.

Omar You could work too.

Jess stares off into nothing.

Omar I just reckon you're not happy here.

Jess Course I'm not happy here, it's fucking Bradford. I'm not gonna find owt better in London am I.

Omar There's a real weight to you nowadays.

Jess Oh weight, yeah?

Omar You know I don't – you just – you carry this thing with you a lot.

Jess I dunno what you mean.

Omar This thing, this weight.

Jess Weren't I laughing the other day? Weren't I telling jokes, and smiling?

Omar It's not clear cut like that.

Jess Oh right yeah, I see, it's a mystical thing that only you, mighty Omar, can determine.

Omar Sorry.

Jess One that I'm not even aware of. Fan-fucking-tastic.

Omar I think you must be a bit aware of it.

Jess Great.

Omar I mean, you feel it. Cos you're the one that has to carry it. [*Beat*] You don't bring up your dad anymore, you never do.

Jess I don't have nothing to say, that's why.

Omar Right.

Jess Don't 'Right' me. I don't know when you learnt this psychologise shit but you can leave it at uni/ cheers.

Omar Psycho-analyse.

Jess Alright, yeah sorry Omar, sorry your girlfriend isn't a doctor. Sorry I don't shit out academic crap. You know if that's/ what you want

Omar I know I'm not a/ psychologist.

Jess I'm sure there are loads to choose from on your magical fucking course.

Omar You don't let yourself believe you can do anything you want cos you've got this weight you carry around. You're not trying to be anything.

Jess We don't all want to leave and get fancy jobs like you.

Omar You can do anything. You just, right now, you don't.

Jess Oh what shit are you chatting now?

Omar Like what if, what if your dad was right here. Now. What if he was here now and you could say anything/ to him.

Jess I'm not gonna play this with you.

Omar You can say anything, anything in the world, but if this is the very last time, it's your last chance, what would you/ want to say?

Jess Just cos your dad's dead doesn't mean I have to play happy broken families with mine, alright?

The silence is heavy.

Jess I/

Omar Don't.

Omar leaves. Jess speaks half after him, half to herself.

Jess She never got out of bed for a year. She was stuck in and slow and her eyes were closed windows with the

insides battering against them. And I couldn't talk to nobody about it, and I promised not to let Gran round when Mum were like that. She never got out of bed, and he wasn't there.

*

Scene Seven

Outside. Weeks before Now.

Omar

The fog is rolling in thick tonight. I don't care – I'm not looking where I'm going anyway. Just one foot in front of the other, like breathing. Right left right left. Jess ringing in my ears. Can you breathe fog in? Or does it just stay around us like a blanket and we only suck in the oxygen we need? [Beat] Before I know it I'm on Mythroyd Way, right in front of it. The windows of the building are like lighthouses against the waves of closed shops. A couple of sweaty figures are dripping in the window. I walk up to right outside the door, stare at the rusted paintwork.

Michael comes up behind him, making Omar jump. Michael does not know who Omar is.

Michael You a member or just sizing up the competition?

Omar Sorry?

Michael Are you coming in or what?

Omar I'm not sure.

Michael You got kit?

Omar gestures to what he's wearing – trackies and a top.

Omar Just this.

Michael That'll do. We've got some spare trainers in the back. Come on lad.

Omar shuffles his feet awkwardly.

Michael Shifty on, I've got half a mind to be offended if you don't.

*

Then. Thunder.

Eleanor Sometimes she's raging and I see a glimpse of my mother and sometimes I'm afraid storms are hereditary and all I'm doing is shoving my head in a holiday brochure, nose deep in paper sunshine but still feeling all the rain. Hurt's been forming like a scar over her face. Maybe more like a birthmark.

I don't talk about my Michael much to people. I guess my Michael only really ever existed in my head.

POETRY | Seraphima Kennedy |
from *Breakdown*

Firemouth

I have been driven half-mad

I have slit my own gills to take in more of the sea

I have scraped around in the gravel and the muck of tides

I have pulled fish hooks from my stomachs
the long wire wet and shining with mucus

these days I have fallen into nothing and nobody knows
me

I do not know myself here, stuck in this dark hole

I have this scene many times and it is always still coming
in ways innumerable

I have been forced to consider
myself

against dark, against the hot red crescents of eyes

against the door's locked jangle

I have swum up to the surface, a wriggle of sinew
blubber and hot scales

you, who have never been desperate, tell me
what can a woman say

give me a sharp knife hands
language

a tongue to speak
a mouth on fire

(May 2017; first published in *The Rialto*, 89 Autumn 2017)

from Breakdown

In memory of Sandra Bland and Philando Castile

#1

Remember back in the heft of 2001?

7,227 items were delivered

to an old C&A in Oxford St –

Landy sets up

a conveyor belt

industrial shredders

*drills, saws
clawhammers
the violence of it*

and in them he puts

his jeans

his socks

old shirts

a stuffed toy bear

family photos

his *car*

artworks

his *passport*

he becomes *unidentitied*

un-thinged

by white-gloved handlers

who place his belongings
gently into the shredder

or throw them into the trash compactor, joking
as if they're on a production line

and they are, in fact, on a production line,
and then he is mediated by blades

and then, when he is
six tonnes of rubbish

it's as if he has never
lived

all he can feel is his body
his blue overalls

shock of cold air
on his neck

his eyes open

his mother's disappointment

his father's sheepskin jacket
gone

how could he

he did

afterwards,
his scalp is a buzz-cut tingle

his feet are holograms
he has never felt such

who is the self where is he

he is there and he is not there

he is disappearing
the way men are always
disappearing

in novels, and in pregnancies
and here, in the gallery

*a man looks into
his own life from outside
dissolving –*

He makes a book
lists all the things
300 pages

a life

he exhibits
words

(This is an extract from a longer poem shortlisted for *The White Review* Poet's Prize in 2017)

Pogrom

*Take a suitcase
full of your thirsty mountains
they will thrive in the rain.*

Choman Hardi

<i>What did she bring?</i>	her mother's cooking pot
<i>What did she bring?</i>	her language, wrapped in a cloth bag and tied
<i>What else?</i>	a village where skies turned to pitch at night
<i>What else?</i>	her brother's footsteps as he walked away to school
<i>Will she thrive?</i>	she will speak three languages
<i>Will she thrive?</i>	she will take three names
<i>Will she thrive?</i>	she will bear four children
<i>Tell me, will she thrive?</i>	she will lose her accent
<i>Tell me, will she thrive?</i>	her tongue will take root in a granddaughter's brain

How will she thrive? her husbands will die

How will she thrive? her children will leave

Answer me: will she thrive?

in the snow

she unpacks latkes, fig rolls, broth
for her children

a small forest

three bandits

an uncle's body

a child

hiding under the floorboards

holding her breath

The Passion
a motet in fifteen parts

1.

april, as you know, a cruel month
veers from rough slate

to crash in milk-white frills
over black rock

out there, the depths
are endless

but there are days
when sunshine heats

the flat expanse
to a calm white horizon

and an old man cycles gently
along the *lungomare*

past a row
of empty blue chairs

2.

ask me and I will tell you
how these memories
 flicker in the cavern
 of your skull

a projector on an overturned hull
 a sheet spread out so flat
 you could bounce right off it

*I saw the soprano's belly
 tighten*

*a foetus kick
 against her ribs*

3.

Saraghina, la rumba!

Saraghina lives
 in a cave beneath the sea

her hair is a serpent's nest
 eyes flecked with kohl

dress ragged
 over powerful thighs

she'll dance for a lira
calves kicking

in the slit of her skirt
then fold the black-caped boy

into her arms
but look, here comes the priest

chasing the boy into the sea

Saraghina, la rumba!

4.

o month of sweet lilacs

calm winds, flat seas

of new boats arriving

the quick, slow, old, metal

rubber dinghies full of holes

engines filling with water

hulls of faeces

vomit

cries

*ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah
hail Mary full of grace
our lord is with thee
wa ashhadu anna
give us this day
rasulu Allah
save us now*

dissolving as the coastline
wears away

an ocean vanishing
under the weight
of bodies

5.

in the brack a fan of empty quills
the hollow bones

a skeleton picked clean
its sharp bill grinning like a sword

6.

It was a complex culture, privileging ideas of innocence and suffering. Each year they worshipped a lamb – or what they called a lamb – sacrificing it with garlands of flowers, and sweet desserts made from the cocoa bean.

7.

not rock or calcium
into water
but the idea
of water into a grave
body upon
body

8.

It was important to be afraid. They told each other stories of brutal murders, constructed vast plays. Remarkable technology, for their time.

9.

med
medi
médi-terre

mid way this life
yes this medicinal life
yes yes in this medulla oblongata
in its mediocrity, stunning

yes, grinding its molars
tonguing its outer membranes
sweat meddling its brow

metatatatarsal yes a crushed and broken
bone

10.

They loved the brutality of it: stripping and skinning,
stabbing every surface of the skin with thorns. They
worshipped lyric symbols – the robin, the lamb, devoured
them like rain. We are more enlightened now, of course.

11.

ai!

ai ai!

ai – ai – ai – ai!

ai – ai – ai – ai – ai –

12.

Fellini! Fellini!

I have had enough of you!

Thomas Stearns, Thomas Stearns,
your son of man has not delivered!

what can you teach me
about the ideal woman?

what can you tell me,
of broken images

what can you teach me
of a man

you,

with your mistresses,
you,

with your life
like a bad Russian novel

I have had it with your despair

nihil desperatio

d e s p e r a t i o

estio

otise

sotie

the man

besotted

En vive! Vivant! Vivis! Viv! Vivienne!

13.

though we are changeable

as a shoal

of glinting fish

we will sing you to sleep

it is the people

sending you

to your death

deported,

back to battlefields
and sniper towers
and police cells

your city
falling
the way cities
always fall

14. **chorale for a rabble**

have lightning
and thunder
forgotten
their fury have lightning
and thunder forgotten their fury have
lightning and thunder forgotten their
fury

have lightning
and thunder
forgotten
their fury?

15.

Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba hail mary full of
grace assalaamu 'alaykum save us now **inna lillahi wa inna
ilayhi rajioon** and at the hour of our death. Amein.

“I’ve been struck by the way Jemma Picken, Martin Kidd, Abbie Salter and Jo Clayton became such meaningful parts of my writing life during the 2017-2018 mentorship period. The reading, the comments and mark-up, the discussions; indeed the interrogation of text and storylines at the sentence and broader structural levels, were as much a valuable learning experience for me as I hope it was for these four talented writers. I’ve emerged from the experience with a deep sense of gratitude.

“If it is true that ‘the books we write educate us’, then so do the ‘mentees’ we work with.

“Over the past 12 months, there have been many gratifying moments; perhaps my most satisfying were the times when each of these four writers hit her/his stride: when the language, style and all the other narrative elements that make for great writing, came together in what felt like an effortless, seamless flow and I was so drawn into the world of each story, I lost all sense of my role as ‘mentor’ and simply became an engaged reader.

“So yes, thank you – to my four mentees and to the Jerwood/Arvon team for coming up with a formula that I experienced more as an exercise in sharing and collaboration than as a simple ‘mentoring scheme’.”

Jacob Ross
Mentor | Fiction

FICTION | Jemma Picken |
from *The Price of Daylight*

Elinor, a Caverner and a trader in black market goods, has lived her entire life far below ground. When her infant twin sons Will and Jake are kidnapped, she has nowhere to turn for justice – but now, ten years later, she has discovered their whereabouts and ventured Skyside to free them herself.

Injured and far from home, she flees with the boys back toward the Cavern; in close pursuit are the powerful Light Mages who think her sons too dangerous to live. Elinor must smuggle them all to safety underground, or lead them to their deaths up here in the light.

This extract begins halfway through the story, in the tunnels beneath the city.

Circling the reservoir was a painfully slow process. With both the boys' support, she could manage the steps, but in several places they had to descend ladders and she was on her own, then. She was panting with pain by the time they reached the platform and she could see from her sons' anxious glances that her pain was written on her face. They seated her on the platform, and she looked up the tunnel to see stairs rising steeply in the distance.

"Take a breather, Mother."

"We don't have much time."

"Just take a break."

She frowned at Jake's tone, but didn't argue as he pulled Will to one side. She closed her eye and tried to focus on blocking out the pain from her ankle. Her breathing had just settled when the boys came back, Jake leant over her; Will hung back.

“Do you trust us Mother?”

“Of course.”

“Then we’re going to try something.”

She was about to question him, when an odd pressure surrounded her.

“What the...”

She reached instinctively for the knife in her sleeve, but found she couldn’t raise her arm.

“Don’t fight it Mother.”

She found herself rising from the floor until she was bobbing in her seated position level with the boys’ shoulders.

“Are you doing this?”

“Will is; he’s better at delicate things than I am.”

“Delicate?”

“Oh yes, it would be much easier to crush you with air, rather than make a cocoon to carry you.”

With that image in her mind she held her tongue and tried not to think about the process by which she bobbed along with her sons as they climbed the steps. They followed the tunnel as it rose towards the surface, then made a series of turns that took them under surface grids. When they reached a fifth grid, she brought them to a halt. “This should be it. Now when we’re up there you’ll have to let me walk again.”

She put up her hand to stave off her sons’ arguments. “There is a danger if we’re seen by a casual passer-by

anyway, but if I'm floating about we'll draw attention, and attention is the last thing we need."

The reluctance was clear on their faces, but they nodded. Jake climbed the ladder and opened the grid, which he seemed to do with just a flick of his wrist; then Will floated her up through the darkness before depositing her on the earth alongside the grid. Once clear, they reclosed the grid.

She took stock of their surroundings. They were deep in the industrial part of the city and it was still dark, which gave them time to find the right warehouse.

They made their way slowly along the roads of the industrial complex. She steered them away from the main guarded factory entrances as much as she could, but they still passed people. She forced herself to walk as normally as possible and tried to get the boys to do the same, but she was certain some of those they passed noticed their little group, and whilst there was nothing about them to make someone raise an alarm, they were likely to be remembered when the Light Mages started asking questions. There was no help for it. They had to get to the warehouse as soon as possible.

They approached warehouse 395. She would have liked to observe the building in advance, but they didn't have the time. She found herself gripping her sons' shoulders as she leant on them, as if by holding on to them this tightly, she could keep them safe from the dangers ahead. If her fingers hurt them they gave no sign of it and walked her forward steadily. The guard rather ostentatiously turned his back on them, leaving them to pass through the gates supposedly unobserved. They crossed the narrow space to the front of the warehouse;

then from the corner of her eye, she saw a man at the side of the building gesturing to them. They followed the rapidly moving figure through a side door.

Inside, the warehouse was brightly lit, but mostly empty. She peered around, blinking in the light, and saw only three men. Further back, two men in workmen's overalls stood beside three huge packing cases. A third in a nondescript brown suit came to meet them.

"You're late, but you're here. Good! We don't have time to talk money. You will be contacted later."

She recognised the voice from her meeting with the Madog brothers, but she gave no sign. She nodded and allowed herself to be guided over to the packing cases. Within the case lay shiny pieces of machinery surrounded with packing material. The man leant across her and brushed some of the packing away to reveal a plain piece of wood. He levered it up, and underneath there was a cavity that ran along the base of the case, just large enough for someone to lie in.

"The other two are the same. This is mine equipment so it'll be opened as soon as it arrives in the Cavern to be checked before being transported to the mines. Our men will be there to get you out. Then you're on your own. Understood?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"Let's get you in then."

"Do the boys first."

He raised an eyebrow, nodded and turned away to where Will stood by one of the cases. She hugged Will tightly before he was lifted in, and kept eye contact with him until they closed the lid. When she turned to Jake,

he was shaking. As she embraced him, he whispered into her ear, "I don't want to go in there."

She pulled back and looked directly in his eyes. "If there was another way, if we had more time, then maybe we would have a choice, but as it is..."

"We don't," Jake said.

"I wish there was something I could do," she said, hugging him tighter, "but there isn't and we need to go. I'm sorry my love."

He nodded and dropped his head. She brushed her lips against his forehead, and then stepped back. He was lifted into his case and she reached in to stroke his cheek before they closed the lid on him.

"We need to hurry now."

"So pick me up. It'll be quicker than waiting for me to walk."

She had spoken flippantly, but large hands grabbed and hoisted her into the last packing case. She yelped as they dropped her in and she landed on her injured foot. She rolled into position and watched as the lid was lowered over her head. As the world was blocked out, she had a moment of panic, but she calmed herself and settled into the darkness.

*

The journey was hot and sticky. She tried to keep moving as much as she could in the confined space, but even so she felt herself becoming stiff. Any movement of her lower left leg sent waves of pain all the way up the

limb. She eased her fingers into the top of her boot. The flesh was hot and swollen. She didn't dare try to loosen the boot for fear that she wouldn't be able to fasten it again. She had to keep her thoughts away from her sons. When she started thinking about them she found her heart rate increasing. She couldn't afford to panic.

She ran through her options for when they got out into the Cavern. She had enough Lucre and drugs hidden in their coats to set them up comfortably and relaunch her business, but the bigger concern was keeping the boys hidden.

She had fallen into a shallow doze when bumping sounds from outside disturbed her. The lid cracked open and light poured in. A pair of hands reached in and she was hauled out of the case and plonked on the floor by a thickset man. She steadied herself and was relieved to find her sons standing to one side, their arms around each other. They looked shaken and pale but unharmed. She tried to smile at them and was rewarded with a faint response from each.

“You need to get out. Now,” the man behind her said.

He grabbed her and pushed her away from the cases and down a corridor. She stumbled, and only just managed to catch herself. The boys rushed to meet her and supported her as they were hurried away. They reached a narrow door and were abruptly pushed through. As the door was closing on them, she pressed her shoulder against it and held it slightly open.

“Wait, what's going on?” she shouted back through the door.

“They're looking for you, Skyside. If I was you I'd go to ground and stay there.”

She nodded and released the door. It slammed shut. She turned back to the boys.

“What do we do now, Mother?”

“We need to get moving, and I need your help.”

Leaning on Will and Jake, they set off, but it soon became clear that the condition of her ankle had gotten worse, and even with their help she couldn't walk far without stopping.

“Should we carry you, Mother?”

She shook her head. “No, we can't risk drawing that much attention.”

She cursed under her breath and looked around; they were too far away from the streets where she was most comfortable, from all the places she had identified as potential hiding places, but there was somewhere nearby – someone she knew. She didn't want to take her sons there, but she couldn't see any other alternatives.

They were on the service road which had once taken fresh produce to the kitchens of the grand houses, in the days when there was fresh produce. That meant they were crossing behind the walled gardens, and eventually she found the lopsided gate she was looking for. As she ushered her sons into the Apothecary's house, she hesitated. Straightening herself so that she wasn't leaning on their shoulders when the Apothecary came, she lifted a finger at the boys. “Don't say anything, when he comes. No matter what he says or does don't answer him, don't respond to him. Leave that to me.”

They nodded. The unmistakable sounds of the Apothecary were approaching. The dirty, bent figure

entered the room and stopped. "You! You're meant to be dead!"

"You mean your family didn't tell you about me?"

"What do you mean, family?"

"I got the impression the Madogs were a family business. Why else would they give you the monopoly on the drugs they bring in through the official shafts?"

She could tell from his expression that her guess had hit the mark, and she smiled.

"You've got more lives than a Demon, girlie. What do you want with me?"

"Somewhere to lay low. And some medical assistance." She gestured towards her foot.

"This is no doss house and I'm no healer, but you'd better come up to my parlour."

He turned away and they followed him to the first floor. Her sons' noses wrinkled and she had to resist the urge to tell them that the rest of the Cavern didn't smell this bad.

Once they had settled her in the parlour she peeled off her boot, exposing the red swollen mess that was her ankle. She tried not to squirm as the Apothecary ran his fingers across her skin, but his grin told her she had been unsuccessful.

"You need painkillers."

"You're not knocking me out."

"Suit yourself. I need to get a few items. Stay in this room."

He slunk from the room. The appalled expression on her sons' faces as they watched him go were almost comical.

"Who *is* that, Mother?"

She shrugged. "Just someone I've done business with."

"He's not our father, is he?"

"Light and Dark! No. Give me some credit at least." She shuddered at the idea, then sighed. "Please boys, don't start asking me if every man we meet is your father."

They nodded and she saw just how fatigued they were.

"Come here, both of you, come and sit by me." They sat on the couch either side of her and with their arms round her, their heads sank and they drifted off to sleep. Her own eyelids began to droop and in the warmth of their embrace she too drifted off to sleep.

*

She was woken by a clattering sound. She sat upright, waking the boys. Disorientated, she tried to stand, but hampered by her leg she slumped down again. She couldn't judge how long she had slept, but instinct told her it was longer than it would have taken the Apothecary to get supplies. Any hope that he had let them sleep out of some sort of benevolence disappeared as she heard someone running up the stairs. This time she managed to get to her feet and staggered forward a few steps towards the door. She pulled the knife from her sleeve and was ready to lunge when the door slammed

open and in stepped Henri. His jaw dropped when he saw her and he took dazed step towards her, pushing the knife aside.

“El! They said it was you we were coming for, but I didn’t believe them, I...” He shook his head. “I’m only just ahead of the rest of them. You need to come now.”

“Henri, I can’t.”

She stepped away from him, her injured leg almost buckling under her. She was caught by Jake who’d suddenly appeared at her side. Will stood on the other side of her.

“Boys, if the Watch are coming then you need to run. Go with Henri, I’ll slow you down too much. Even if you carry me, I’ll slow you down.”

“No, we won’t—”

“We can’t leave you here, Mother.” Both boys were shaking their heads.

She crouched so that she met them at eye level. “Listen to me, everything I have done from the moment I found out I was pregnant has been to protect you both. If you stay here and get caught then it is all wasted. I need you to go with...”

She hesitated and looked up at Henri. “I need you to go with your father.”

“Father! El if this is some sort of game—”

“Do we have time for games, Henri? Because I don’t think we do. We don’t have time for explanations either; so please, I beg of you, take them, keep them safe.”

He stared at her blankly, but then his survival instincts seemed to kick in. He shook himself, reached forward and grabbed the arm of each boy. He took a long look at her and then half-led, half-dragged them out of the room. She heard them clattering down the stairs and had to resist the urge to go to the window to watch them go.

She needed to buy Henri and the boys time. The longer the Watch spent looking for them here, the better the chances of them getting away. Henri had obviously known to look for her here in the parlour, so she had to assume that the rest of the Watch would look there as well. She had to move.

She hobbled onto the landing and hesitated. She couldn't get far, but if the Watch came to the parlour and didn't find her, they would fan out and check this and the ground floor before heading upwards; so that was where she had to go. She started climbing, using the banister to haul herself upwards. She reached the second floor and turned to begin the next flight of stairs. She was halfway up when she heard shouts and crashes from below. She threw herself up the remaining stairs, knowing she was exposed in the stairway. She scrambled onto the third floor landing and lay there panting. She listened to the shouts below as the Watchmen reached the Parlour. She heard orders to search the lower floors. Now she crawled as quickly and quietly as she could to the back of the landing and found herself in a gallery that seemed to run the length of the back of the house. She followed the gallery to the left and finally pushed her way into the furthest door she could get to. She pushed the door shut and looked around. The room was empty, but the far wall was lined with cupboards. She climbed into the cupboard

in the corner, pulled the door shut and, her knife in her hand, settled down to wait.

*

The creaking of floorboards, the screeching of the hinges and the shouts of the Watchmen grew closer. She found herself smiling at the thought that the Apothecary wouldn't be happy that they had gone through his property – not that he would be punished for anything they found. She shifted her grip on her knife; she wouldn't escape being sent to the Pit again, but here, she was taking her fate into her own hands. She could choose a quick, relatively painless death over one filled with terror and the endless horror of being a Husk. She ran her fingers along the blade and lifted the knife to her throat, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

She lowered the knife and went back to waiting.

The footsteps reached her room. They made a quick circuit and then faded. For a moment she believed she would be lucky, but then the footsteps returned – this time with others. The sound of cupboard doors being opened and closed got closer. The searchers were laughing, clearly not expecting to find anything. She tightened her grip on her knife and tensed. The door of her cupboard opened. The Watchman looked at her in surprise; she launched herself at him, slashing to the side. The blade sliced into his stomach and then her momentum took her crashing into him. He fell onto his back with her on top of him. As she hit the ground she rolled to one side and crouched, looking up at the other Watchman. He had cried out as his colleague hit the floor

and footsteps from further down the corridor told her that there would soon be more of them. She was balanced on her good foot. The pool of blood from the fallen Watchman seeped across the floor to her boot. The blood from the knife trickled down the handle and made her grip slick. He smiled slowly and kicked out at her. She couldn't stop his foot from striking her chest. She was thrown backwards and struck the back of her head against the wall behind her. Dazed, she struggled to get up, but the Watchman had already stepped over his fallen colleague. He knocked the knife from her hand, then kicked her in the stomach. She collapsed forward, spluttering. She could see the man drawing back to kick her again. She threw herself at his standing leg. Realising what she was doing he tried to regain his footing on the blood slicked floorboards. She sent him sprawling over the body of the first Watchman. She rolled away, spotted her knife in the corner of the room and began to scramble towards it. She had barely managed to move when she was grabbed from behind. Strong hands turned her and slammed her onto her back. More hands gripped her shoulders, lifted and slammed her into the floor again.

“Enough of that, Frankie. The Light Mage wants her to answer questions.”

The Watchman released her and the rest of the room began to fill with more men. There were angry words when they saw the slumped form of the wounded Watchman, but she was grabbed by both arms and dragged from the room. She was hauled down two flights of the steps, her ankle screaming as it hit each step. They dragged her into the parlour and dumped her in front of the empty fireplace.

“Leave us.”

Astraleus's voice cut through the fog of pain in her head.

"But sir, she's already injured—"

"I think I can take care of myself. Now get out."

She kept her head down and her eye closed, as the footsteps of the Watchmen receded.

"Look at me, Elinor. I know you're awake."

She peered up at him. His lips were compressed into a thin line; his eyes burned with anger.

"You made a fool of me, Elinor; and now you and your sons will pay. If I could conceive of a greater punishment for you than the Pit then I would. Not just for your deceit, but for Dedaleus. He may have been one of the least of us, but he was still a Light Mage and you left him dead in that park like some sort of vermin."

He waited as if expecting a response, but she looked blankly at him.

"If I had my way you would see your sons die in front of you, but the consensus is that they are too dangerous. The orders are for them to be killed on sight."

She flinched.

"I have every expectation that I will be able to show you their dead bodies before you go to the Pit. I want you to know exactly what you have brought them to, before the Demons take you."

He got up and leant down over her. He brushed the hair away from her face. His touch was gentle, but it sent chills throughout her body. She tried to squirm away

from him, but he took her head in his hands, so she had no choice but to look him in the face.

“Where are they, Elinor? Where are your sons?”

He spoke so softly she barely heard the words, but she found her mouth opening against her will.

“I... I don't... I don't know where they are.”

As she spoke, the tension holding her in place released and she sagged back onto the floor.

“No, apparently you don't.”

He leant back.

“No matter, the Cavern is no place for a pair of children on their own. They might even be dead before we get to them.”

He got up and walked out without looking back at her.

Watchmen came back into the parlour. They hauled her up and half-dragged, half-carried her from the room. She was thrown onto a cart and tied up, the ropes digging into her flesh. She twisted to see the buildings they were passing. It didn't surprise her that they descended through the town and out through the gates. They turned towards the Pit and she thought for a moment they were going to take her there straight away, but they turned at the last moment and entered a tunnel beneath the stands. She remembered that they had holding cells for the condemned below the Justices' platform.

She was pushed through the door into a dark, damp cell and then left, the Watchmen walking away without a word.

PLAY | Rachel Burns |
from *The Graffiti Bunkers*

“I’ll tell you about people at parties Hal. People at parties, they dance and drink and screw. I guess you would know that if the cocksuckers invited you.”

On a small island cut off by the tide, two socially ostracized teenage boys, Hal and Fable, decide to crash a party. Fable is hell-bent on seeking revenge on those he feels have wronged him. Recently bereaved, Hal misguidedly follows Fable's lead. But as the boys' plan unfolds, Hal must decide where his loyalties lie.

This extract forms the mid-section of the play.

Characters

FABLE, 17

HAL, 17

TESS, 17

Notes

... within Hal's dialogue indicates a stammer.

– at the end of dialogue, indicates an interruption by another character.

/ indicates where one character talks over another character.

LIGHTS UP

HAL holds the urn containing Nana's ashes; in the other hand, a bottle of vodka.

HAL: I will have blood... blood on my hands.

FABLE: What the fuck you on about now?

HAL: Blood. I... I will have blood on my hands. Out... out damned spot.

FABLE: Fuck me, Hal. How much vodka you drank? Out damned spot? What the fuck's that?

HAL: Mrs Mac... Macbeth.

FABLE: Hal you've lost me.

HAL: Out... out damned spot.

FABLE: Give me that fucking vodka you numpty.

HAL glugs defiantly.

HAL: Fable, I will have blood on my hands.

FABLE: We all have blood on our hands Hal, every last one of us. Should I tell you why?

HAL: Why Fable?

FABLE: Because we live a fucking lie. Why aren't we in Syria now? Why aren't we kicking Isis' butt?

HAL: Cos we couldn't get... get passports.

FABLE: Fucking passport people tried to rob us blind man.

FABLE takes a stick and draws a line in the sand.

FABLE: See that's the biggest divide of all.

FABLE draws stick people. He points to the stick people on the left-hand side.

FABLE: That's them fucking people who can afford fucking passports, and travel to anywhere they fucking like.

He prods violently at the stick people on the right-hand side.

FABLE: And that's fucking us. Going fucking nowhere, fucking stuck.

(beat)

Tell me how is that fair?

HAL: Nana didn't want me going overseas Fable.

FABLE: She wrapped you up in cotton wool, kid.

HAL: Did I tell yer like, that Tess danced with me.

FABLE: Behave Hal.

HAL: She was with her sister. The one... you were caught... with sex pictures of.

FABLE: Fucking hell Hal, shut up will yer.

HAL: *(sulky)* You told her I was... I was... mental didn't you? She said... she said you hurt her sister.

FABLE: You are fucking mental. I didn't lay a finger on her fucking sister.

FABLE snatches the vodka bottle and finishes it.

HAL: I'm not... not mental.

FABLE throws the bottle into the sea.

FABLE snatches the urn.

HAL grabs the urn back from FABLE, he hugs the urn to his chest.

HAL: Nana, Nana, Nana!

FABLE: Shut up Hal!

HAL: Nana! (sobs) Nana.

FABLE: Nana is dead. Ash and dust. Do you want to go to Sandy Bottom Care Home? Do you?

HAL: No... No... I'm scared, Fable.

FABLE: I fucking told you not to dance with her. I told you.

HAL wipes his nose on his sleeve.

HAL: I'm scared. It's not like those... like the stories Nana told us.

FABLE: You and your bloody stories Hal.

HAL puts his hands on his head, rocks back and forth.

FABLE kneels on the ground, and holds HAL, who blubbers, tears and snot.

FABLE: It's going to be OK, Hal. You are a warrior now, remember Hal. A fucking warrior.

HAL sobs.

FABLE: Hush. I've got you now.

FABLE picks up the backpack. He straps it to HAL's back.

FABLE: We put on our backpacks.

He hands HAL the mask.

FABLE: Then our masks.

HAL puts on the mask.

HAL: We shoot as many as we can.

FABLE: Then push the button on the detonator.

HAL: Boom!

FABLE hugs HAL.

FABLE: Boom! I love you like a fucking brother man. Together we're Jules and Vincent, invincible remember. A fucking team.

HAL pulls up his mask.

FABLE takes a spade and begins to dig a trench.

FABLE: The tide is coming in. It's time.

FABLE takes the urn and starts to empty it into the trench.

HAL: Wait... wait... wait. I'm not ready. I wanted to say some... something, shit.

FABLE: Fuck, hurry up then.

HAL kneels down.

HAL: I... I love you, Nana. I can't... can't wait to see you again... *(breaks down)*.

FABLE puts his hand on HAL's shoulder.

HAL: Nana. I... I know you don't like Fable... and you... you rue the day... the doc sent me to... to the sex offender group... but... he's my friend Nana... he's my only friend.

FABLE: What kind of pussy speech is that, Hal?

HAL: Sorry... Sorry.

FABLE takes a bag of pills. He passes the packet to HAL.

FABLE: Mickey says these are buzzing kid.

HAL takes a handful, throws them down his throat.

FABLE: I'm Jules to your fucking Vincent. *(feigns American accent)* Oh! Oh! You ready to blow?

HAL: (feigns American accent)

Yeah, I'm ready to blow.

FABLE: It's time. It's fucking time.

HAL and FABLE put on their masks.

FABLE: (*feigns American accent*)

And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know My name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee.

BLACKOUT

*

LIGHTS UP

TESS dazed, a strip of shirt tied around her bloody arm. She has a sprained ankle.

HAL agitated, emotional, coming down from the drugs and adrenalin.

HAL: I dragged you... out... out of the bunker, there was shooting and... and fire and people screaming, lots of screaming.

TESS: Aw god, it hurts. My leg.

HAL: I dragged you out... I... I saved you I'm... I'm like a hero. I'm a hero... I'm a hero. Like I'm... a... I'm a... a fucking hero.

TESS: My leg, it fucking hurts.

HAL: I... I saved you.

TESS has a coughing fit.

HAL takes a can out of the back pack and offers it to TESS.

HAL: Here.

TESS: Oh god. My head. Where's Abby? Have you seen Abby?

HAL: Are you... OK?

TESS: Do I look OK?

HAL: Here take... take it.

TESS: No, I don't want it.

HAL: Drink. You... you'll feel better.

HAL thrusts the can at her.

HAL: You... you need a drink.

TESS: I don't need a drink. I need to find my sister.

HAL: Please... take... take it.

TESS pushes him away.

TESS: You drink it.

HAL opens the can, drinks.

TESS: Where is everyone?

HAL: I... I brought you here.

TESS: I'm asking you. (*slowly*) Where the hell is everyone?

HAL: I... I carried you in a fireman's lift. You... you would have died. I... I saved you.

TESS stares at HAL, weighing him up.

TESS: Who are you?

HAL: I told you. I'm... I'm Hal, we danced... at the party. You... you would have died. I... I / saved you.

TESS: OK, you saved me. Thank you. (*slowly*) Where's Abby? Do you know where she is?

HAL: I dragged you... out... out of the bunker. I'll be a hero. They'll ask me to go on... This Morning... to talk to Phil and what's her name? The... the girl?

TESS: We need to find her, you have to help me.

HAL: She and Phil are always giggling?

TESS frustrated, bangs the side of her head with a clenched fist.

TESS: Agh! Are you on something?

HAL: I'll sit on the couch and Phil... Phil puts on his serious voice and the girl she'll look... look all doe eyed and concerned—

TESS puts a fist to her mouth, bites down on her knuckles.

TESS: Agh! Stop talking I'm trying to think. Please just be quiet. Please.

Long beat

HAL: And the girl she'll look... look all concerned—

Beat

TESS: What did you say?

HAL: The girl... she'll—
TESS: Holly. Are you talking about Holly?
HAL: What?
TESS: Holly Willoughby?
HAL: I'll tell her how I saved you.
TESS: Oh god! You keep saying over and over!
HAL: I dragged you... out... out of the graffiti bunkers.
TESS: (*slowly*) I know you said like fifteen times already. (*angry*) You dragged me out of the fucking graffiti bunkers!

HAL offers his can to TESS.

She shakes her head.

HAL: I... I carried you away from the... from the gunman, bang, bang, bang. Everyone was panicking and screaming but... but I didn't care.
TESS: I saw the gunman. He wore a mask.
HAL: I did the... the fireman's lift.
TESS: We thought it was fireworks.
HAL: I'd learnt how to do it... at the... at the... the Fire Station, on the visit with Mrs Smith and they let me sit up front... in the fire truck and sound the siren—
TESS: Abby, (*shouts*) Abby, Abby.
TESS tries to stand, she shrieks in pain.
TESS: Shit my ankle. (*shouts*) Abby, Abby.

TESS hops across the sand. Weak and in pain, she sits back down.

HAL: It was fucked up cos... cos... Freddy was sick all over, cos the noise freaked him out.

TESS stares at him, frustration etched on her face.

TESS: (*slowly*) Please stop talking and listen—

HAL: We had to leave cos the... fireman had to clean up the sick in case anyone phoned 999.

TESS: Are you even listening, you have to help me, we need to go back, we have to find Abby.

HAL: There's bodies. I'll... I'll puke. I found you in the bunker, it was on fire—

TESS: Hal. (*beat*) You're his friend aren't you? The bastard who made Abby—

HAL: I... I... I.

TESS: I remember you.

HAL: I... I danced with you.

TESS: I told you to stay away from us. Do you remember?

HAL shakes his head.

TESS: You know what Fable made her do? You know what Fable made my sister do?

HAL: He's gone. He... he's gone over to the other side... to get help.

TESS: I need to find her.

HAL: Who?

TESS: I told you – my sister.

HAL: Your sister?

TESS: Until they come.

HAL: Who?

TESS: (*slowly*) The rescue team, duh.

HAL: But–

TESS: They'll send lifeboats and helicopters, armed response units.

HAL: Oh I... I didn't know.

TESS looks at him in disbelief.

TESS: Course they will. They have SWAT teams to take out the gunman, they'll be coming. Help will be coming.

HAL: You... you sure about that?

TESS gives him a hard stare.

TESS: (*slowly*) Help will be coming.

HAL: Like on the telly, like for... for real?

TESS: No, not like on the fucking telly! People were running, screaming! I saw bodies, bits and pieces–

HAL stands up. TESS stares at him, unsure.

He leans forward, puts a hand to his mouth, pukes through his hand.

TESS gags.

HAL: Nah, don't talk about no bodies.

HAL wipes his hand on his jumper.

TESS: Oh god! I promised Mum I'd look after her.

HAL: I closed my eyes.

TESS: I've got to find her.

HAL: Fable he... he will be back with help.

HAL thrusts a can at TESS.

HAL: Here have one, may as well—

TESS: No... no, I don't think so.

HAL: Take it.

TESS takes the can reluctantly.

HAL opens his can, drinks it in one go, crushes the can, tosses it.

TESS stares at the can in her hand.

Beat

HAL stares.

HAL: Smart Price. Fable said I had to stick to the budget.

TESS: Just don't fucking talk about him, OK. He's evil. My sister is only fourteen. Fourteen for/ Christ's sake.

HAL: Stop. Stop.

TESS: And now she's missing. She's fourteen. I have to go back for her.

HAL: No. No you... you can't... you can't... do anything for... her now.

TESS: She's my sister.

TESS cries uncontrollably.

HAL talks loudly over her.

TESS: Oh god! This is my fault, I never should have brought/ her here.

HAL: I once had a girlfriend/ who was... was fourteen.

TESS: I told Mum/ I'd look after her.

HAL: You gonna tackle a gunman... a gunman on your own.

TESS: No I, I—

HAL: You'll get fucking killed, and there's... there are... bodies everywhere. Gives me the heebie jeebies.

TESS: We both go. You're going to help me look right? We have to do something. We can't just sit here. People need our help. You saved me right?

HAL: I... I... I can't go back there. I'm not... I'm not going back there... no way... anyway she's dead... your sister is—

TESS: No! Don't you fucking dare!

HAL: They're all dead!

TESS: No, no, not Abby!

HAL: (*wipes his eyes*) You can't go back... look at you... you're bleeding. You can't even... even walk... your leg's done in. It's sprained or broken or twisted or summat. I can't carry you... it's too far.

TESS: I can make a crutch. We can find a branch from a tree or a bit of driftwood.

HAL: No... no... that's bad.

TESS: Help me, please.

HAL: You're sick.

TESS: I can cope. Mind over matter.

HAL: No.

TESS is silent for a moment.

TESS: (*softly*) Please Hal. Help me look for a stick I can use as a crutch. I bet you're really good at finding things.

HAL: There are no sticks.

TESS: There are!

HAL: Is not.

TESS: I can't go and look but you can. Please.

HAL: No.

TESS: Pretty please.

HAL: You're sick. When I... I... I was sick Nana used to make me a hot water bottle and buy me Lucozade.

TESS: For fuck's sake.

HAL: She used to take my temperature with a glass ther... mom... eter. I had to keep it in my mouth for a whole minute.

TESS: Agh! I don't fucking care.

HAL: You're a canny bonny lass, you are.

TESS: Shut up you, you, oh! I'll look myself.

HAL: Abby is... is dead probably though.

TESS: No, no, no Abby's smart, she would have hid. She'll be scared. You have to help me find her Hal, please you're my only hope, you have to help me.

HAL: I... I... I'm you're only hope... like Obi-Wan... / Kenobi?

TESS: It's my fault she's in this mess. It was last minute, we found sleeping bags in the loft.

HAL: I... I... don't have a... a sleeping bag.

TESS: Oh god Abby be alive please.

TESS weeps silently.

HAL: I dragged... you... out of the bunker.

TESS: I know you fucking did, Hal. You keep saying over and over again.

HAL: Sorry—

TESS: Jesus Hal.

HAL: I'm... I'm sorry.

TESS: He's not supposed to come anywhere near her. There's a restraining order. How did Fable find out about the party?

HAL: Everyone... knew about it. Everyone was invited... except for us. He said... he had some pictures for... for her.

TESS: That fucking creep!

HAL takes off his hoodie and gives it to TESS.

HAL: Keep... keep... keep you warm.

She puts the can down, and pulls the hoodie on.

TESS: I'm going to need to lean on you Hal. You ready. Let's go find Abby.

HAL: OK... but first, one... one drink huh... won't hurt none.

HAL pushes the can towards TESS with his foot.

TESS opens her can abruptly and drinks.

TESS: Happy?

HAL: It's good to have... a drink together. Like what normal people do.

TESS: You are going to help me, aren't you Hal?

HAL opens another can, and clinks it against TESS's can.

HAL: Course I'm... I'm your... only hope.

HAL beams ear to ear.

TESS looks at him, creeped out.

HAL: Cheers Tess.

TESS forces a smile.

TESS: Cheers Hal.

POETRY | Alice Hiller |
from *album without photos*

ancient Rome in the temple of Venus

what was it to sit in church dressed
in my best beside a naked robber

to kneel on a hassock with my anus
as red as the braid round the altar

to sing gold-numbered hymns while from
the grates in the central aisle heat crept

the cold is over everything

people are picking it up
and throwing handfuls
the sun is falling
down over the edge
of the earth to escape

the cold has stolen
all the colour
and made the trees take
their clothes off

the birds have nowhere
to shelter little
ones fall off branches
and lie without moving
their claws curled tight

the cold says
you are not loved
you are not wanted

in the middle of the cold
a grey tower stands
finely crafted by skilled masons

the birds lie in their iced coats
the stone blocks of the tower lock
like tied tongues

I am the tower and the tower is my silence
I am the cold and the cold
is all over me

but I am also
the sun that will return
and say to the tower
speak daughter
inhabit me

archaeology

plaster dog of Pompeii
belly up
looped like a hula hoop

who bends your neck
how was your arse split

I want to release that heavy collar
dog of my underworld

charred hound
which surge
 caught you

was your howl buried
under forty meters of ash and pumice

from my mother's house
where the garden
 hides dark sheds

hung with dead pheasants
where rhododendrons
 flash pink petals

where the stone bird bath
coats my palms
 with orange algae

owls call me to the pulled
back lace counterpane

to air close as the space
between the bedsheets

I smell the fish smell
I enter the slime thighs

my mouth tastes
wet flesh hair

I stand *here*
naked

while the finger

moves into me

I throw red rubber balls
for you dog of Pompeii

free now
my playmate

embedded

she lies under her Bed with her nose almost touching the dry sAcking. it smells dusty and splintery. she Counts rusted nail heads so all her thoughts Keep busy. she holds both arms close to her siDes and her legs together. in their school the tOilet paper is scratchy. if she wipes her bOttom blood comes. at break she walks to the libRary and then sits sideways.

nine year old

a china heart
enamelled with violets

lies in a black leather box
lined with white silk

the heart shuts
with a golden clasp

on a doily
these words

*I once belonged
to someone dear*

note: this memory comes shagged with flies.

escape

when I was the far side
I saw no bridge

my feet crossed
the planks of my bones

my hands grasped
the curls of my hair

there was no other route –
I opened the door of my flesh

uprising in blue and silver

my anger rings the anvil
which shoes the mare

where I was ridden
hooves crescent the sky

“In the past year I have not only mentored four brilliant writers, but four brilliant writers have stealthily mentored me. I don’t get to spend much time in other writers’ heads, but this year I’ve had that opportunity and it’s been a revelation. New stories, new voices, new approaches, new forms and new places. I’ve been taken to a crumbling B & B in Sunderland, an estate in Lewisham, a presidential palace in Tanzania and a hospital in Bradford.

“Playwriting is not an exact science. There are no simple answers. The past year has been a shared process of finding good questions and then charting together their influence on the work. I’ve watched stories grow and blossom, structures change and tighten. At times I’ve felt like a bystander – on hand to shout encouragement or to warn of potential danger. At other times, I have been swept away by the energy of my four mentees – their openness, their enthusiasm, their individuality. It’s been a privilege.”

Tim Crouch
Mentor | Playwriting

FICTION | Abbie Salter |
from *How to Mend a Broken Bird*

When sixteen-year-old Bass finds Sammy – enigmatic, ethereal and mute – lying at the bottom of Twizzler’s Hill, it feels for him like she has fallen out of the sky. For Sammy is nothing like anyone Bass has known; a welcome distraction from his dad’s increasingly militant involvement in the Miners’ Union and his seemingly inevitable life down the pits.

But as the teenagers’ relationship intensifies, so too does the threat of strike action, and when Sammy asks him to help her keep a secret, Bass finds himself torn between his father and his first love.

Set in Yorkshire during the mining strikes of the 1980s, this is a coming-of-age story about fierce love and loyalty, and the importance of making your voice heard.

Chapter 1

She looked like a broken bird with her face up to the sky and feathery white hair spread all around her in the grass. Apart from the rise and fall of her ribcage, she were dead still, and I started to think she might’ve hurt herself on the way down. She wouldn’t be the first. Only last year, I’d cut me lip rolling down Twizzler’s Hill, and Jip broke his collarbone trying to beat his personal best. Twice. His mum went crazy the second time; but look, you’ve got to get your kicks somehow, with everything going to shit, or heading that way.

I looked about to see if anyone else was around. But people in these parts worked mainly on the high street or

down the pits. At this hour, most folk were likely opening up shop or kissing goodbye to daylight as they sank below ground. And with only two weeks left of the summer holidays, most normal kids were still in bed. So I guess that means I wasn't – normal I mean.

I made me way over to where the girl was lying. Someone had dropped a load of posters on the grass and they'd gone all soggy. I'd seen them around town, stuck in windows and on lampposts, telling Thatcher where to go. The election had been over for weeks but I guess no one could be bothered to take them down.

'Y'oreyt there?' I asked. 'Shit, yer were goin a fair lick.'

The girl didn't move. Didn't say anything. Bear cocked his head to one side, then licked a smear of what was probably sheep poo off her forehead. When she didn't react to this either, I realised something were wrong.

I got down on my knees and pushed Bear away. Bent over her face. The girl's eyes were closed. I got closer and put me hand under her nose. Her breath tickled me skin and I let out the one I'd been holding in. She weren't dead at least, but it were bad right enough. She were out cold.

Even as I realised this, I couldn't help meself stopping a minute just to take this girl in. Everything about her was dead pale. Not the sick kind. More like a ghost – but not that either. I'm no good at explaining it. I'm making her sound weird or made up. And Sammy's one hundred per cent real, realer than most. It was just that even as I sat there at the bottom of the hill, with her body right in front of me, I started to imagine that if I reached out further and touched her, me hand might just go straight through.

She were lovely-looking. But in a sad way. A bleached inside-of-jeans sort of way. As though she were born inside out.

I was just trying to get me head round it all, when the girl's eyes snapped open. I didn't realise till too late that I was hovering over her. Our noses no barely an inch apart. It didn't look good. I watched her face come alive and change. She blinked twice and her eyebrows folded, making a small, deep crease above her nose. One corner of her mouth twitched.

We stared at each other. Then I sprang back, my hands in the air in surrender. 'Sorry,' I said, batting Bear away from her again. 'I thought . . . well I thought yer might've hurt yerself.'

She still didn't move. Her eyes remained on me.

'Like I said, I'm sorry if I scared yer – Bear, pack it in!' I yanked the dog's collar hard. 'D'you, err, know where you are?'

The girl raised her right eyebrow so high it looked like it were making a break for freedom into her hair.

'I think yer knocked yerself out fer a bit there, yer were goin that fast... I watched yer come down. When yer din't move at bottom, I thought yer might've... yer were dead still, so I thought I better check yer were okay.'

She still hadn't moved and, all of a sudden, the idea that she might not be able to crept into me brain and sent a chill through me whole body.

'Are you okay?' I asked again, trying to keep me voice calm. 'Can yer stand? Tek me hand if yer like.' I held it out to her but she shook her head.

I remembered Dad telling me about a mate of his down the pit. Part of an old tunnel had collapsed in on him where he were working. They managed to get him out but he kept shouting that he couldn't feel his legs. I looked back up the hill where bits of jagged drywall held on, half-hidden in the grass and ferns. If you didn't know the best place to start from at the top, you could easily crack your spine on a hard edge.

'Right,' I said, 'don't panic.' This was more for me than for the girl, who didn't seem to be panicking all that much. I took a breath. I needed to be completely sure she couldn't feel anything. I'd be needing an ambulance of me own if I wasted their time. Hospital was strapped as it was with the tensions turning into bust-ups all over Yorkshire. 'I'm goin to tek off yer shoes, okay?'

She was still looking at me with that raised eyebrow. I decided to take this as a yes. I began unlacing her boot and easing the sock off her narrow foot. Our eyes met again. It felt weird. Kind of sexual if I'm honest. Me pulse began to race, bashing at the inside of me skull. I focused on her foot but I felt her eyes drilling through me. I dug out me pocketknife from me coat and pulled out one of the blades. I held it out to her. Rubbed the edge with me thumb. 'Blunt,' I said. 'It won't do nowt.'

I couldn't believe how calm she was. I guessed it were the shock. Holding her by the heel, I pricked the middle of her big toe with the knife, gentle as I could. I watched the tiny dent fade, then looked up at her. 'D'yer feel that?'

She shook her head.

'What about this – and this? Feel that?' Each time she shook her head and each time, I swear, me heart rate doubled. I looked at the foot and its toes lying in me lap.

All speckled. I felt sick. The realness of it all had kicked in.

Then, quick as anything, the foot flicked up to meet the underside of me chin, jerking me head backwards.

I leapt up, heat rushing to me face. 'What the –' I stared at the girl still laid on the grass. She bit her lip like she were trying not to laugh. 'Spose yer think yer funny, do yer, lettin me think – Christ!' I could feel meself shakin with anger. Vibrating with it. 'Bear,' I roared, 'get ovver here.' I looked about for the dog's lead while he bounded around both of us. Happy as Larry. Like he was determined to pound me pride into the mud.

The girl held out the length of chewed rope to me. I told her to forget it. But she shook the lead so that the end jangled. I looked about again, just to check no one was around, then grabbed it. I noticed that she were smiling now. A wide, lopsided grin.

You know sometimes, when the sun's been stuck behind a big cloud for a while, and everything's dim? And then, from where you stand, you can see this shadow being peeled back from the edge of where you can see? And you can watch the light coming closer and closer until the heat touches the nearest part of you, then slowly reaches *every* part of you? You know that feeling? That's what that smile felt like. That's what it felt like every time.

Sammy's face was dynamite. In both the good and the bad way. One moment it could make you feel like the centre of the universe. The next it could slay you, I swear. I don't mean her looks so much; it were more her expressions. Sammy's face could speak more words than there are in the dictionary.

‘Yer fuckin enjoyed that, din’t yer? Think yer a right bloody comedian?’ I said. I meant it to come out more forceful, but I could feel me temper dying. ‘Seriously, what sort o’ sicko are yer?’

She stood and brought her hand up. Across her palm, in blue pen was written Sammy.

‘That you, is it?’

She nodded. I sized her up one more time, then held up me own hand. No one likes a sore loser. ‘Well, yer got me good, Sammy, and there’s not many as can say that. I’m Bass.’

She stood there in front of me, dress damp and stuck to her thighs, sheep shit on her face, eyes still on me. And I felt something change in my gut. Suddenly, I found meself thinking that whatever I said next mattered. I shifted on me feet, smiled, sucked air through me teeth.

And then, as I was about to speak, the ash began to fall. I looked towards the coking plant, chimneys just showing above the tree line. Grey belches of smoke poured out of them. Flecks settled in Sammy’s hair, and Bear started whining and pawing at me boots. I bent down and stroked his ears. ‘Okay, boyo, yer daft dog. Yer okay.’

When I straightened up, I noticed Sammy had taken a few steps back.

‘It’s nowt to worry about,’ I said. ‘It’s just sometimes, when the wind blows in’t wrong direction, yer know?’

She creased her forehead and turned her face up to the sky. Suddenly, Bear howled and bolted for the road.

‘Bear!’ I bellowed. ‘Stop. Yer fine, yer daft bastard. Heel!’

With his tail between his legs, he hopped about at the roadside like a kid holding a piss. I swore and ran after him, grabbing him by the collar and looping the lead. But in the time it took for me to reach and drag the quivering, hairy lump off the road, the girl had vanished. Like a ghost.

Chapter 2

I hauled Bear back to the spot where we'd been standing two minutes before, blinking the falling ash out of me eyes. I scanned the hill. Nowt. Bear whined again.

'Cummon then. It'll be clearer up top.'

Me lungs wheezed as I climbed. Me eyes and throat burned as I looked around me, trying to spot the girl. Bear was doing his best to rip me arms from their sockets. But he were spooked and I didn't want to risk letting him off the lead just yet.

'No chance o' sendin you down the pit, eh pup?' I said.

Finally, I started to gulp down fresh air. Me thoughts became clearer. No wonder Dad had gotten so crazy lately, with a head full of that. I felt the anger fire up in me as this morning's argument came to mind. Different day. Same shit.

Bear stopped at the top of the hill, tongue out, gulping down the good air. I sat next to him and looked out over the Dales, coal-dust clinging to it like a kind of shadow. Only heavier. I watched a pit bus wind its way towards homes from the direction of Orgreave and wondered if Dad were on it. I fished out a squashed fag from me pocket and lit it. I wasn't keen to get back in a hurry, but it would be worse if I didn't.

The bus stopped and a few miners piled out. Smudges on the roadside. I imagined the grime on their faces. Black sweat. Folks walking back home, full of the aching bones Dad always complained about. I always knew I was headed for the pits, but I never thought he'd want me to

start working so soon. I didn't know how much longer I could stand him pressuring me.

I blew out a lungful of smoke. Watched it disappear. Where had the girl gone? Sammy, she said her name was. Well, not said, exactly, although it felt as if a lot *had* been said. By what she didn't say, I mean. I shook meself and flicked the fag. This was madness. I levered me foot under Bear's arse. 'Cummon yer sissy. It's blown over.'

By the time I reached the outskirts of the village, Bear had crippled me arms from pulling.

'Is it not enough that yer med me look like a total pillock back there? Be'ave!'

At the end of me street, I gave up and let him off his lead. Watched him run, barking and whining for the gate. I took me time, swinging the rope against the wall. Me mind kept returning to the girl's face.

The smell of Mam's menthols met me as I got to the house. Brought me out of me head. I bent down and swept at the top layer of mud in the plant pot by the door. Four butts smoked to their ends. I patted the soil back in place and wiped me hand on me kegs. I felt bad for leaving Mam this morning. She were always getting it in the neck from Dad, and it weren't her battle.

The sound of the telly filled the dark hallway. I stepped over the pile of Dad's dirty workwear and put me head round the sitting room door. Dad were sat in the faded armchair. On his third beer already – one can already crumpled at his feet; Bear with the other in his mouth.

Dad's eyes were fixed on the screen. Thatcher the Milk Snatcher's smug face stared back out at him. Visiting a

pit by the looks of it. Some idiot had kitted her out with donkey jacket and hat, like she were planning on getting her hands dirty.

‘Have yer sin this, then? Eh?’ Dad jabbed a finger at the screen. ‘Pretendin ter be all interested. All concerned. It’s all fer show, this. It’s bullshit.’

‘That up Wistow?’

‘Aye and she’s lucky she din’t pick our pit. She wouldn’t’ve got past gates.’

‘Where’s Mam, Dad?’ I asked, looking away from the telly.

‘I meant what I said this mornin, Bass. I know yer mam doesn’t think yer ready but I know yer’ve gorrit in yer. And if that bitch has it her way, there’ll be nowt left by time yer leave school, mark my words.’

I nodded.

‘Bass.’

‘Aye, I know.’ I paused. ‘Where is she then?’

‘Said she were goin to give yer sister a bath.’

I waited for a minute longer but he seemed to be done talking for now. I turned back up the hall, picking up his overalls as I went. Narrowly avoided a gobful of broken teeth from slipping on one of Bug’s picture books left on the stairs. Mam were knelt on the bathroom floor, sleeves rolled up past her elbows. Her arms looked thinner than I remembered. I watched her cup Bug’s ears, all gentle like, as she rinsed the suds in her hair. Me little sister chatted away in her weird, two-year-old version of English, all the while dunking a one-legged doll’s head in

the water. Her red-brown curls stuck to her forehead and around her ears, like lots of little question marks.

‘I don’t think he’s goin to drop it this time, Mam.’

She poured another mugful of water over Bug’s head but my sister wriggled out from under it at the sound of me voice. Sent a small wave over the side of the bath.

Mam sighed, ‘I’d almost got through one bathtime without her floodin the place.’

‘Sorry, Mam.’ I passed her a towel.

She bent to mop up the spill. ‘Don’t get the muck on them overalls all ovver place, neither. I haven’t got the money to be washin clothes any more’n I am doin.’

‘What d’yer want doin wiyem?’

‘Just leave em in’t sink,’ Mam said. ‘Right, lass, I think yer’ve caused enough mayhem fer one day.’ She fished the plug out first. Bug second. Her wriggling stopped as Mam wrapped her up in the towel on her lap. Same way she used to do with me.

‘Dad says I’m lucky they’ll even tek me now.’

‘Yer dad says a lot o’ things, Bass. But he rarely thinks before he opens his mouth. Yer education comes first. End of.’

I picked the flaking paint on the doorframe. ‘It’ll get him off me case, Mam. And yours an all.’ A big chip of paint and wood came off in me hand. ‘Yer wouldn’t have to keep sneakin fags.’

‘Funny.’ She turned round to look at me. ‘I got em from under *your* bed.’ She dumped Bug in me arms. ‘Get Bea dried and to bed.’

‘Mam!’ I moaned. ‘I din’t mean it like that.’

But she had already closed the door of their bedroom behind her.

Chapter 3

I shouldn't have told Jip about Sammy. That were a mistake. The first day back at college, everyone was asking me about me imaginary girlfriend.

'Yer dead to me, mate,' I muttered as heckles and jeers followed us down the corridor. 'Jesus, Jip, why do I even bother tellin you owt?'

'Oh cummon, mate, stop bein so mardy. I was genuinely worried for yer.'

'Give over, yer daft bastard,' I said as we took our seats in the classroom.

The truth was, I'd been walking around with a head full of this girl for days. I'd kept an eye out for her every time Bear and I were out of the house, which was a lot, what with me trying to avoid Dad and all. But there were no sign of her and it's not easy hidin in a town as small as mine. I'd started to doubt meself. But I wasn't about to tell Jip that.

'Hey, Riley,' someone called from two rows behind me.

Mike Ralston. I closed me eyes and gritted me teeth.

'Riley, where's yer girlfriend, then?' Ralston and his band of idiots started jeering and whistling.

Jip stood up. Chest puffed up the way it does when he's spoiling for a fight. 'What about yours, Ralston, eh? Saw she'd paid a visit ter't Wistow t'other day. Gets about, doesn't she?'

There were a lot of reasons why Jip was my best mate. He hated Mike Ralston as much as I did. That kid loved

himself. And that had to be a job because Christ on a bike, he was an ugly bastard. And everyone knew his family was Tory scum.

Ralston got to his feet. Squared up to Jip right next to me desk.

‘Michael, Julian, sit down, please.’ Nobody had seen Miss Buxton come into the room. ‘And try to act your age.’

Jip and Ralston eyeballed each other for a moment longer, then backed down. Before he went back to his chair, Ralston hissed something in me ear. But I didn’t hear it. All of a sudden, I didn’t give a toss.

She were standing in the doorway like she’d just appeared out of nowhere. She looked even smaller than she had on Twizzler. Maybe it were the uniform. Baggy second-hand jumper. Still, she sort of glowed in the corridor lights.

I blinked. Sat up. Kicked Jip in the shin.

Miss Buxton looked up from the register. ‘Oh good. You’ve found us.’

The room were dead quiet. I realised I were holding me breath.

‘Everyone, please give a warm welcome to Samantha,’ Miss Buxton said. ‘She and her family have just moved to Hiverton. Samantha, you can use that spare desk in the third row.’

‘Sammy.’ I heard it before I even realised I’d spoken. Everyone turned to look at me.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘It’s err... well I think she prefers Sammy, Miss.’

'Well fuck me,' Jip said under his breath.

'Oh.' Buxton looked surprised. She turned to Sammy. 'Is that right?' A small nod. 'Lovely. Well then, take a seat, Sammy.'

As she passed me desk, her eyes met mine. *Thank you.*

I gave her a quick wink and then, as Miss Buxton carried on with the register, I put me arms behind me head, kicked back and basked in the glory of the moment.

*

You might've guessed that the girl that didn't speak were all that everyone else could speak about. Where I'm from not a lot happens. Sure, the Union stuff were building up all the time, but I mean something different. Someone different. Like Sammy.

After she arrived that morning, I couldn't get close to her. Didn't seem to matter that I'd met her first. Every time I caught sight of her, she were surrounded by people. And it made her uncomfortable. I could tell.

Ralston were front of the queue. Slimy beggar. It was driving me mad thinking what he might be telling her. Probably painting me out as a head-case. She didn't know Ralston yet. That he couldn't be trusted. What if she thought I *had* been telling everyone she were me girlfriend?

And the more I thought about the day we met, the more I started to feel like maybe I'd made it into something much bigger in me head. That maybe she weren't thinking about it all the time like I was. One way or another, I needed to find out.

Monday morning, the week after, I made sure I got in first before anyone else. I spotted her easy, from way up the road. She looked out of place around school. Something wild about her I decided, as I watched her coming towards the school gate. Too small for the uniform. Too bright for all the grey.

I'd never come to school this early in me life but I'd skipped breakfast for the chance to speak to her before everyone else latched on. Stubbing out me fag, I grabbed me bag and jumped off the wall I'd been using as a lookout. Hands in pockets, head down, I dropped an old can to kick along the pavement to make sure it didn't look like I'd been waiting for her. Nice touch, I thought.

'Oh, hiya, Sammy,' I said as we met at the gate. 'Din't see yer there.'

Christ on a bike, that face really was something else. Her eyes narrowed just a smidge. Looked at the can. She saw through me.

'Err,' I cleared me throat. 'I mean, I thought maybe I'd bump into yer, at some point.'

She nodded slightly. I took out me fag packet and offered her a smoke.

She glanced at the pack. Shook her head.

'Filthy habit,' I grinned.

We'd reached the building. She went to push open the entrance door.

'I din't tell anyone about yer,' I blurted out. She paused.

'Okay. I told Jip. But that's it, I swear.' She didn't move. 'He's a clown. Can't really help it, and in his

defence, he din't think yer were real,' I laughed. 'Began to wonder meself to be honest.'

The corner of her mouth twitched.

'I'm right glad you are.'

Definitely a smile. More people were filling the schoolyard. Arriving in groups or finding ones on the benches or on the edge of the football pitch. Most of them were looking over our way. Whispering.

'They'll give yer some space in a few days. And whatever they're sayin... I mean, if you hear anything about me...' I had to move to let someone past me into the building, 'me and you. Some people round here like to stir shit, is all.'

A line appeared down her forehead. The one just above her nose. She pointed at my chest. *You*. Pointed at hers. *Me*.

'Yeah, it's stupid. Obviously, we're not coppin off. We just met for chrissakes!' I chuckled. Tried to make out like I didn't give a shit.

But Sammy's face had fallen. Literally. The corners of her mouth and her eyes. Everything had dropped.

'Yer know it were nowt ter do wi me, don't yer? I never said owt. Sammy. Wait. Sammy—' I tried to stop her but she slipped through the door before I could say any more.

Chapter 4

I'd ballsed it up. Getting to Sammy became twice as hard. Everyone else was getting in me way and she were definitely staying out of it.

If I were one side of the room, she'd find her way t'other. I got to school early and she'd be late. I called her name in the corridor. She pretended not to hear. But I'd already worked out she could hear stuff the rest of us couldn't.

I knew I was driving me mates half mad with it and all. Going on about how unfair it was. Zoning out in the middle of them telling me something because I'd seen her come in the classroom. But I couldn't help it.

'Look at em. Swarmin round her,' I said, as I watched her walk across the yard, surrounded by people, for what felt like the ninety-ninth time that week. 'Them are the ones that stirred this shit but I'm the one she won't go near. How's that fair?'

'Bass, lad,' sighed Jip. 'I'm askin this as yer mate. Will yer shut up about the Sammy thing?'

'How'd you like it if you'd bin med to look like a desperate tosser?'

Jip shared a look with our mate Gaz.

'What?' I said.

'Well you *are* actin a bit like a desperate tosser,' said Gaz.

'Fuck off.'

‘Mate, yer’ve bin mopin after her all week,’ Jip offered me a fag but put them back in his pocket when I didn’t take one. ‘All we’re sayin is—’

‘Yeah, what are yer sayin?’

‘Grow a pair. Put yer money where yer mouth is. Go and explain yer not a psycho and fer chrissake give us a break.’

‘I’ve tried to talk to her.’

‘Try again then,’ Jip said.

They were right. I didn’t want to get the brush off again. But I didn’t want her believing I was desperate either. She seemed to have mastered the art of avoiding me, so I picked the lock on her locker the next morning and stuck a note on the inside of the door. It probably weren’t the best way of convincing her I wasn’t a creep but I’d run out of options.

I was sure she’d come. I’d spent ages over the message. But after sitting for an hour – under the apple tree, behind the school building – where I’d asked her to meet me, I gave up hoping. I kicked a rotten apple hard at a bunch of pigeons. Sent them flying in all directions. I started to think I’d need a bloody miracle to have another chance with the lass.

But it turned out all I really needed was Mike Ralston.

Dinnertime, I was sitting a few tables over from Sammy and a bunch of girls. Tina Jefferies was stroking Sammy’s hair the way girls do for some weird, unknown reason. I kept glancing over, in case she looked my way. Prodding the flabby custard with me spoon. Jip and Gaz were debating something pointless as usual.

'I promise yer mate, under six seconds.'

'Bullshit.'

'I swear.'

'Funny that happened when no one were there to see it.'

I saw Ralston get up from his table of whooping mates and walk over to Sammy's table, wedging himself right between her and Tina.

'Lads, pack it in a minute. Lads!' I waved me hand in front of their faces.

They both stopped to look at me. Then followed the direction of me eyes.

'Oh, I should've known,' said Jip. 'When are yer goin to give it up?'

I ignored the question. 'What's he sayin to her? Look at him breathin all ovver her. Bloody creep.'

'Well you aren't goin to hear from ovver here, are yer?' said Jip

I looked back at Jip for a moment. His ideas hadn't been working in my favour recently. I turned me attention back to Ralston. Watched as he pushed Sammy's tray away; put his elbow on the table; leant in towards her.

Sammy didn't react. Her eyes were fixed on the spot where her tray had been.

'If he touches her,' I said.

'He's goin ter,' said Gaz.

'He definitely is. Can't help himself,' said Jip.

Ralston was talking all quiet, his face an inch from Sammy's. Then, he raised his hand and moved some of her hair out the way of her ear. Moved closer as if he were about to whisper something that only she could hear. Sammy flinched and pushed him away.

I felt something come over me. Hairs on me neck standing up, the way you see on animals in wildlife programmes. Before they pounce.

I jumped up from the bench. 'The dirty bastard.'

'Better get over there and save the day, Bass lad.'

'Gaz is right, pal. This is yer moment. Seize the day. Carpe whatsit. Yer've gotta get in there before Ralston gets his claws in.'

I took a swig of water and headed towards the table. As I got nearer, I started to make out some of what Mike was saying.

'Go on. I'm a good listener,' he smirked. 'Well, obviously that's the wrong word but yer know what I mean.'

Sammy's face looked hard. Jawbone so tight yer could cut glass on it.

'Go on,' he said again. 'Yer can tell me.'

'Ralston, lay the fuck off,' I said. Half the cafeteria looked up.

'How about *you* quit lurkin where yer not wanted, Riley.'

The next thing he said to Sammy were quiet so I couldn't make it out but I could tell straight away she'd

had it. She stood up quickly and stepped over the bench. Her mouth had disappeared into a thin white line.

‘Well done, Ralston. Pointin yer nose in other people’s business again. She doesn’t owe yer jack shit and now yer’ve spoilt her dinner an all.’

‘Ralston. Riley. What on earth is going on?’ Mr Lloyd had clocked the situation and started to make his way across the room. People around us kept blocking his route to slow him down

Ralston were fuming. The whole cafeteria had stopped what they were doing. Even Sammy had frozen where she was. I prepared meself for Ralston’s next shot.

He glared at me. Then, after a few seconds, his face became a sneer. ‘Yer welcome to her, Riley. Silly cow must’ve been dropped on her head.’

Before anyone could say anything else, Sammy grabbed her dinner tray and tipped the entire contents over Ralston. I let out a whoop as I watched him gasp and spit through a thick stream of gravy.

Mr Lloyd’s voice boomed out over the eruption in the cafeteria. I peeled my eyes off Ralston. Saw Sammy striding towards the door. She’d be in for it. Come to think of it, so would I.

Hurdling a table, I ran after her, sending a few trays flying. As I caught up with her, I grabbed her hand and pulled her back from the door and through the hatch to the kitchens.

‘This way. It’s faster.’

She seemed willing to be led. Di was already by the back door, serving spoon still in hand.

‘All clear out back, duck,’ she said.

‘Thanks Di. Still me favourite!’ I shouted as we ran through the door that she held open for us.

We were away then, running across the playing fields and away from the school. I looked over at Sammy. Her hair flew out behind her. Her hand was still in mine.

PLAY | Russ Davies | from *Victor Brown*

The backdrop to the play is the Barrier Block, a Brutalist design council estate in Brixton, which is often mistaken for Brixton prison. The roots of the trees here grow in concrete. The play follows Victor from being an impudent ten-year-old to becoming a cocky fifteen. His ambitions for superiority, and later fame, are pushing him away from his friends and family.

Within the family there are growing tensions as Victor's mum, Kendra, feels her dad, Elijah, is too busy socialising rather than supporting her in guiding Victor.

At the start of the extract, which comes midway through the play, Victor and his school friends are now fifteen and are attending Michaela's party, where they have promised not to cause trouble...

Scenes move between being in the open yard at the front, to a basketball hoop on the left, to inside a ground floor flat in the centre. At either side of the backdrop, built into the wall are two large speakers which play the voice and music of DJ Ray, presenter of Barrier Block FM's Twisted Melon Hour.

Characters

VICTOR	15 years old
REECE	Victor's best friend, 15 years old
MICHAELA	Victor and Reece's school friend, 15 years old
KENDRA	Female in her 30s, South London/Caribbean accent, Victor's Mum

ELIJAH Male in his 60s, Caribbean accent,
Victor's Granddad
DJ RAY Male, late 30s, South
London/Caribbean accent
MARVIN Male in his 60s, Caribbean accent,
friend of Elijah
DEREK Male in his 60s, Caribbean accent,
friend of Elijah

*In the basketball scenes the actors will be using an
imaginary ball.*

*

*Balloons popping very loudly in the dark, sound like
gunshots, but there is laughing and screaming.*

MICHAELA (offstage) My turn! Give it here, leave
it still, that's it. Hold it there.

CROWD (offstage) 3, 2, 1.

Balloon pops, Michaela screams ecstatically.

MICHAELA (offstage) Again, again!

CROWD (offstage) 3, 2, 1.

*Balloon pops, Michaela screams even louder this
time.*

MICHAELA (offstage) Oh my days, enough! I need
some air! Who's coming out?

*Street light comes on. Enter Michaela into the front
yard with a balloon in her hand, followed by Reece.*

MICHAELA Wanna go?

REECE Nah man, I'll be sick.

MICHAELA Ga'an!

REECE I've just downed a bottle!

MICHAELA I've had three!

REECE Hold it still then, just there (*points*).
Michaela squats down and holds the balloon by the tip, waiting for Reece to sit on it.

MICHAELA You ready?

REECE Yeah, you count.

MICHAELA OK. 3, 2, 1.
Reece jumps and lands on the balloon popping it. Michaela screams again.

REECE Wow, nearly burnt my arse!

MICHAELA Feels good eh?

REECE If you like that kind of thing.
Stands up.

Do you like that kind of thing Michaela?

MICHAELA Oh yeah Reece, that's how I get my kicks, sometimes I buy a whole packet from the pound shop and bang myself to sleep at night! (*howls with laughter.*)

REECE Jeez Michaela don't go giving a man ideas, you don't know where his imagination can get to.

MICHAELA Why don't you tell me then?

REECE You know.

MICHAELA Go on, enlighten me.

REECE Well, when your booty goes bang like that.

MICHAELA Yeah? Tell me.

REECE *(pause)* Dun't matter.

MICHAELA *(pause)* Are you afraid Reece?

REECE No way.

MICHAELA Wanna touch?

REECE Touch what??

Michaela holds out her hand.

MICHAELA Give me your hand.

REECE What are you pulling?

MICHAELA Girl ain't pulling nothing, give me your hand.

REECE OK, but only cos I trust you Michaela *(offers hand)*.

MICHAELA Good. Now close your eyes.

REECE Wha? This a honey trap or sumthin'?

MICHAELA Trust Reece, eyes, you have to close your eyes.

REECE Then what?

MICHAELA Close them first.

Reece closes eyes reluctantly.

REECE What if someone comes out?

MICHAELA Who like?

REECE I don't know, anyone.

MICHAELA Victor? You're not scared of Victor are you?

REECE Na, man's not scared of no-one.

MICHAELA Didn't think so. OK, who do you like Reece?

REECE (*opens eyes*) Thought you said man was gonna touch?

MICHAELA Reece, you have some questions to answer first.

REECE OK Inspector (*closes eyes*).

MICHAELA That's better. So, question one, and I want the truth: Who do you like?

REECE Nobody and everybody.

MICHAELA That's not an answer.

REECE It's the truth.

MICHAELA So you like my Auntie Jean?

REECE No way!

MICHAELA Right, so you don't like *everybody*. Who is your favourite?

REECE (*pause*) Jennie's fine.

MICHAELA That's good, Jennie is fine. Question two. Have you ever spoken to Jennie?

REECE Of course.

MICHAELA What about?

REECE Is that question three?

MICHAELA No, it's a sub-question, answer please.

REECE We spoke about earthquakes.

MICHAELA (*chuckles*) Earthquakes? You spoke to a girl about earthquakes?

REECE Yeah, Jennie likes earthquakes. We sit together in Geography.

MICHAELA What about earthquakes?

REECE How things might be peaceful one minute.

MICHAELA Right.

REECE Life going smoothly on the surface.

MICHAELA OK.

REECE But underneath, deep down in the mantle, there's all these tiny vibrations, just building and building, like a kettle that just won't boil, until...

MICHAELA Yes?

REECE Until, the vibrations get too much, the switch gets flicked, hell breaks loose, buildings collapse, roads rip apart.

*Police sirens wail then fade into the background.
Their faces are lit blue by the flashing lights.*

MICHAELA That's deep.

REECE Just physics.

MICHAELA (*becoming more interested*) Does Jennie like physics?

REECE (*offhanded*) Yeah, she likes everything.

MICHAELA I just don't get it.

REECE Get what?

MICHAELA Anything, school. I mean, I get it, I understand, but I don't care about it. You care about it.

REECE Yeah, I like school.

MICHAELA I like it, just not the lessons.

REECE How you gonna get to college if you don't learn?

MICHAELA Who said I want to go college? College is for neeks.

REECE What you gonna do then?

MICHAELA Be a doctor or a lawyer.

REECE And how you gonna be one of those without going college??

MICHAELA My mum says I don't need to worry about that now, 'wait till next year' she says (*swigs her bottle*).

REECE Why not start worrying about it now?

MICHAELA Reece you ask *too* many questions, probably why you ain't never had a girlfriend.

REECE Who said?

MICHAELA We girls talk you know.

REECE And?

MICHAELA And you haven't had a girlfriend.

REECE Why you lying? Me and Tara went out.

MICHAELA For how long?

REECE (*hesitates*) Three weeks.

MICHAELA Doesn't count.

REECE OK, I went out with Jessica.

MICHAELA In year 7, null and void.

REECE Why you so bothered anyway? Are you interested?

MICHAELA Ha, yeah, I am interested.
Victor enters.

VICTOR Guys and gals.

REECE There you are, where've you been?
Michaela looks puzzled at Reece.

VICTOR Been talking with Kenny.

REECE King Kenny?

VICTOR The royal one (*looks at Michaela*) He loves you!

MICHAELA (*shyly*) What's he saying now?

VICTOR That you his princess.

MICHAELA I am, always been his princess.

VICTOR Yeah, so he's your mum's brother right?

MICHAELA Nah, just good friends.

VICTOR Oh OK, you reckon he leaves his toothbrush round there?

Reece laughs.

MICHAELA (*annoyed, looks at Reece*) Nah man, they are friends.

REECE With benefits.

MICHAELA What's your problem? Cos you ain't getting nothing?

REECE Just jokin', innit Vic?

VICTOR Don't bring me into this.

MICHAELA Fight your own battles.

REECE It was just a joke.

MICHAELA Yeah well you should stick to talking about earthquakes.

VICTOR Oh no, not you too?

MICHAELA Yes boy!

VICTOR I told you, nobody wanna hear your earthquakes story.

REECE Michaela did.

MICHAELA Only cos I wanted to know what you and Jennie talk about.

REECE No way, you was interested.

VICTOR Did it go, (*impersonates*) 'underneath, deep down in the mantle, there's all these tiny vibrations, just building and building, like a kettle that just won't

boil, until, until, until World War Three!' (*laughs*) Man, if I had a dollar for every time I heard that!

REECE There he goes again, thinking he's in the Bronx, 'If I had a dollar...'

VICTOR Yeah well if I had a dollar I'd roll it up and smoke it up yo' ass!

REECE You'd smoke a dollar up my arse? Why you wanna go poking your mouth round there?

VICTOR God knows, I know it wouldn't be the first thing to poke around down there.

REECE Why you saying this shit again?

VICTOR Come on Reece, just get it out man.

REECE Get what out? What's your problem?

VICTOR You're like one of your earthquakes, you're repressing yourself.

REECE Man's going to erupt on you in a minute.

MICHAELA You two are like a pair of babies, you know that?

REECE Stay out of this Michaela.

VICTOR Wow dickhead, you better watch who you start giving advice to.

REECE Am not giving advice. That was an order.

MICHAELA Who the fuck you think you ordering about?

VICTOR Let me do this Michaela.

MICHAELA I don't need a bodyguard.

VICTOR This isn't just for you, this is for Reece's own good.

REECE You threatening me?

VICTOR Nah man, no threat – that was a promise.

REECE OK then boy, let's see your promise.

MICHAELA You two better stop now.

VICTOR Stay out Michaela.

MICHAELA I'm telling you, you two ain't ruining my party.

VICTOR Only thing getting ruined is this boy's face.

REECE Bring it on.

Victor confronts Reece and knocks him to the floor with one punch. He then straddles his chest and rains down blow after blow. Michaela tries to stop him but Victor pushes her away. She screams and screams then runs inside to get help. Victor lays one more punch then runs off stage to the left.

Lights down. Reece and Michaela exit.

DJ RAY (V.O) Earthquakes are destructive. They destroy people, they destroy lives. But

don't worry peeps, this is only a story, no animals were hurt in the filming of this. Maybe though, something like this is happening right now, somewhere in a place near here. A boy is getting beaten to a pulp. By his friend. And when someone gets beaten up off their friend, they usually get mad. And they usually want to get revenge. And this might be happening right now, in a place near here. A boy getting revenge on another boy. Somewhere your bus goes past tonight.

*

Lights fade up during DJ RAY's voice-over. Inside the front room, Elijah, Marvin and Derek sit at the table with a newspaper spread across it which they are inspecting.

DJ RAY

Good morrhning Brixton, it's another scorcher, the sun just keeps getting hotter so I'm going to try and cool you down with some lickle numbers, some mellow lickle numbers right now. I can't talk too long cos I got a tip for the 2.10 at Cheltenham, my big man Barry says number 7 is a dead cert so don't say I never do nothing for you!

And don't forget ya all God's peoples!
PRAISE THE LORD!

Enter Kendra who walks to the kitchen behind the three men. None of the men look up. Kendra dries cups off the sideboard, looking over her shoulder at the men with two quick glances but they carry on reading the paper. She clears her throat. She closes a cupboard louder than necessary and curses. The men turn the page of the newspaper.

KENDRA Have you seen Victor?

ELIJAH Went down the court. Got a big match coming up.

KENDRA Can't make 'is mind up, that boy.

ELIJAH Just a kid Kendra, kids like playing out.

She carries on drying plates off the sideboard. Inspects one of the plates.

KENDRA Would you look at that? Only had it five minutes.

ELIJAH *(without looking up)* Buy cheap, ya buy twice.

She slams a cupboard.

ELIJAH You auditioning for percussionist in church again?

Marvin and Derek chuckle. She doesn't answer.

KENDRA So you're in the bookies all day today?

Elijah doesn't answer, turns a page with a deep breath.

What is it this week? The Queen's 'Royal Hurdles'?

Marvin and Derek snigger.

What time's it start?

ELIJAH Cheltenham Festival sweetheart, the most prestigious festival in the racing calendar! (*still looking at paper*) And it started on Wednesday.

KENDRA Festival?! They got floats an' jerk chicken there this year?

They snigger again.

ELIJAH I hope so.

Hee'ar, would you go for black an' yellow stripes or red with white spots?

KENDRA Black an' yellow stripes.

ELIJAH I wa' thinking the same thing.

KENDRA Like a wasp, flamin' parasites.

Elijah turns a page.

So how much ya laying today?

ELIJAH Depends how much I win.

KENDRA S'pose you win *nothing*?

ELIJAH Then not much.

KENDRA And if you do?

Elijah just shakes his head, turns a page.

Well I'll be mopping in here in ten minutes.

ELIJAH *(without looking up)* Ya trying to drive us away girl?

Kendra ignores this.

KENDRA *(without turning round)* I couldn't sleep last night.

Marvin and Derek squirm. Elijah nods for them to leave, which they do uncomfortably.

ELIJAH You couldn't sleep?

KENDRA No.

ELIJAH Be that full moon.

KENDRA It wasn't that.

Elijah turns a page, carries on reading.

You ever see him down there?

ELIJAH Who?

Kendra stares at the back of him, then turns to put another plate away.

KENDRA Well?

ELIJAH *(deep breath)* Not for a while.

KENDRA I an't heard no mention of him either.

ELIJAH Why you wanna hear about him anyway?

KENDRA Just.

Elijah turns a page and scribbles something down.

And there you go.

ELIJAH Kendra.
KENDRA Lost in your horses.
ELIJAH A bit of fun on a Saturday.
KENDRA And a Monday, and a Tuesday.
ELIJAH Maybe you should try it.
KENDRA Don't patronise me.
ELIJAH It might help you unwind.
KENDRA Maybe you should try doing something *other* than having a bit of fun.

She slams a cupboard on 'fun'. The silence after the slam is long.

During the silence Kendra takes a load of washing out of the machine and puts it on the top of the sideboard. She begins folding the clothes and placing them into piles of belonging. After making four piles she picks up one of the T-shirts, it's Victor's. She holds it up to the light before burying her face in it, taking a deep breath.

ELIJAH Black and white stripes or all green with a yellow star?

Kendra shakes her head, still with the T-shirt over her face.

Black and white stripes.

Kendra starts to sob.

He looks up and swivels on his chair so he's facing across stage.

Hey, what's going on girl? It's that full moon, got you all worked up.

KENDRA It's nothing to do with the moon. It's here, it's this, it's that! (*points outside.*)

ELIJAH What now? Is this about that ring still?

KENDRA Look at this (*holds up the T-shirt*) 14 to 16 years old it says. Look at the front, 'D'ya like my ting?' '*DO YOU LIKE MY TING?*' He's a baby. This is a baby's T-shirt. He's my baby. He's still learning, growing.

ELIJAH (*turns back to his newspaper*) The world is the best teacher, he will learn.

KENDRA What if he doesn't?

ELIJAH You have to have faith.

KENDRA How long can you have faith?

Elijah is focused on the newspaper again, turns a page. Kendra carries on folding clothes.

Reece appears and walks to the door. His knock startles Kendra who instinctively calls 'Victor' and runs to the door.

KENDRA Reece, how are you? Haven't seen you? Are you looking for Victor?

REECE Yes, is he home?

KENDRA He's down the court, he'll be so happy to see you, he's missed you, you know?

(notices something) What's happened to your face?

REECE Nothing. Playing basketball.

KENDRA Looks like you been fighting. Is that why we haven't seen you? Reece?

REECE Don't worry Kendra, thanks, I'll be seeing you.

Reece exits.

KENDRA Alright, see you soon *(turns to Elijah)*. Bruises on his face.

ELIJAH Just kids *(turns page)*.

Lights down. All exit.

*

Lights up at the basketball court. Victor is shooting hoops, singing to himself.

VICTOR I'm death-defying, I'm electrifying, I'm everything you wanna be, I'm everything you ain't, I'm flying, I'm blinding, I'm never gonna stop, you know I'm never gonna wait, for no-one.

Enter Reece.

Hey Reecey boy, I was just talking about you.

REECE Who with? Your imaginary friend?

VICTOR Just a little birdie.

REECE (*pause*) You training for the big game?

VICTOR Man gotta stay sharp you know.

REECE People saying they've got a real star player this time.

VICTOR They've always got a real star player, still don't make no difference.

REECE Apparently had trials for GB under 16s.

VICTOR Everyone knows someone who had trials, hell you could get trials for GB (*waits for a reaction*).

Why don't you ever come training? Team could use someone like you.

REECE Too busy studying.

VICTOR Reading about them earthquakes again?

REECE Pass the ball.

VICTOR (*as Reece shoots*) Thompson receives the pass, he shoots... he scores (*passes the loose ball to Reece who shoots again*).

From downtown for three... he makes it! (*passes the loose ball again, Reece shoots*) This man's on fire, can he make it three from three?

Reece shoots.

Oh yes, that's why all of the scouts have been talking about this man, he really is that good!

REECE Easy game, just throwing a ball in a hoop.

VICTOR You think so? (*has the ball now*) You think it's easy when there's one second left on the clock, the crowd are screaming for you to score, you feel the sweat trickle off your nose and your legs are dead, two defenders breathe their bad breath down your neck, if you miss you lose, you win and you're the hero. You think that's easy? (*He shoots, he scores, runs around the court in celebration.*)

Victor Brown, in the last second, to win for the Chicago Bulls, the crowd are on their feet, can anybody stop him?

REECE (*pause*) How long we been friends?

VICTOR (*stops and looks*) Since Primary... been in the same class ever since.

REECE Did I ever do anything to hurt you?

VICTOR (*pause*) Trapped my finger in a door once.

REECE Intentionally?

VICTOR What?

REECE Have I ever done anything to hurt you, intentionally?

VICTOR I don't remember.

REECE What you did was out of line.

VICTOR That was just a slap.

REECE Oh yeah... well this will be just a scratch (*pulls out a knife*).

VICTOR Man what you doing with that?

REECE You need protection round here when you've got *friends* like I have.

Lights down.

POETRY | Romalyn Ante |
from *Antiemetic for Homesickness*

Nightingale Pledge

Before God and those assembled here, I pledge:
I will check the screen tracing your heart rhythm –
the beep steady as a bird's call from the shadows.
I will tie your gown, so faithfully strong
it won't show your bare back, your leaf-like keloid.
Only filtered air will stroke your unwashed hair.
I will carry out to the best of my ability
my nocturnal duties – the warm Horlicks,
the call bell, the ajar door. I will devote
my midnight listening to you, hum the song
that lessens the weight of my eyelids.
I will attend to the sound of your bare feet
as they touch the sticky floor. In the morning
I will explain what the cylindrical bottles are for;
without a word, you'll unbend your arm to me.
My fingertip will search for the strongest vein.
I will not do anything evil. The defib pads
will fly out of the metal drawer, I will slap them
on your chest: one on the right, below the clavicle,
the other on the left, just under the armpit.
I will be the first one to greet you, *Welcome back*.
Even if I know you'd rather go, I will not reveal
the story of your life, how your daughter left
when she learned your diagnosis.
I will devote my hours listening to things
you do not have to say. I will maintain
the prestige of my profession, but release
a wild laugh when I find you pretend
choking on your egg-white tablets
so I will rub your back.

Transform

The nurse tells stories of her country –
the kapre and espiritos in dipterocarps,
the tale of Mount Makiling, and now
I no longer count the pills she puts in the pot.

I call her Maria, goddess of Makiling.
She charms all the doctors who visit.
Her smile as loud as daylight
that engulfs the lounge.

Soon, this home trembles into a jungle
and the wall rails in the hallway
bloom into ivy and balloon vines.
The coat stand at the corner transforms

into a ficus, and when the lights go off,
glow-worms rally on its aerial roots.
Today, Maria dribbles the therapy ball
which bounces into a sarimanok –

a blast of ruby feathers.
We jump out of our wheelchairs
and race to capture the harbinger of luck.
But there are days when Maria doesn't come,

and the wind sounds like 'Annie Laurie' on flute.
There are days of silence, when a comrade
permanently moves across the road –
a spider traces his name on the headstone.

The Making of a Smuggler

(after Zilka Joseph)

It is never 30 kilos. Wherever we travel,
we pack the whole country with us.

We have our rice terraces as folded garments.
We plant pillars of trees – a rainforest

on a hairbrush. We dig bright orange crabs
out of white sands and use them as tabs

to zip our bags. We immigrants
are experts in packing. It's in our genes.

We know how to fill the landing card
but we're always ready for *No English*.

If the officer stops us, we let the smell
of old socks swirl up to his face like bats.

We'll let him dive into our belongings
like a man trying to fish in an ocean

ruled by sharp corals, stinging anemones.
He can squeeze the yellow packet harder

and not know it is pig's blood. He won't
hear the squeal as he chucks it aside;

he wasn't there, mud-soaked in a pen,
with the boy trying to catch an erratic swine.

The officer may ask, *No sauce?*
No chicken feet? in a Chinese accent

as if it would be easier for us to understand,
but he can't sniff my hand, see the sediments

in my nails: fermented fish and all
we dip in it. He can't cup his ear

with my palm, and discover the waves
of the Pacific. He can't follow me

through the gate – even with his gaze.
He'll miss the gleam of a red quill

in my lug sole, like when he didn't hear
my uncle's knife back and forth on a whetstone,

the way he slit the neck of my rooster, King Arthur,
giving me tips on how to cook for survival.

The officer did not feel the pot
of hot water getting lighter

when I poured it over the carcass.
He wasn't there, at that moment –

that perfect pause
before I plucked out all the feathers I used to stroke.

Way back home

(The way home is a thousand leagues – Yi Yang-yon)

This is the most important secret
my father told me:
*Whenever you are lost,
you must turn your shirt inside out.*

As a family, we inverted
our tropical print vests
when instead of white sands
we found a barren land
of black stones,
wrecked plastic bottles
like a smack of jellyfish.

I did it again with my blouse;
in childhood, when my siblings left me
by the rice-sack swing; when the blue-eyed
dragonflies darted off and my heart
became a ripe makopa with ants
instead of seeds at the core.

I followed my father's advice,
and survived the hypnotic gaze
of a pavo, and the buffalo
standing as a gatekeeper
between me and the path home.

Soon, I found the landmark:
the chapel
where my father confessed
his feelings for my mother, where
scents of sampaguita emanated
from Christ's stigmata.

Now, in a foreign land,
all the red buses are stranded.

I stroll in ankle-deep snow
back to the piss-scented flat
where my parents discuss
the divorce papers.

I stop under the lamp-lit flurry,
almost take my coat off
and turn it inside out.

Antiemetic for Homesickness

A day will come when you won't miss
the country *na nagluwal sayo*.
You'll walk on gritted streets, light snow
will shawl you like a protective mother.

A vertigo of distant lights will not deceive you.
You may bury all the kisses of yesterday
in the fold of your handkerchief, the illuminated
star-shaped lanterns, the tansan tambourines.

But keep the afternoon your father sold his buffalo
to rent a jeepney to take you to the airport, keep
the driver who spat out phlegm, with the same
trajectory of a grasshopper landing on the ground.

Keep the list you wrote the night before you left,
promise you won't return till you become *someone*.
Keep the cassette tapes – your children's voices
shrill as the edges of winter stars.

Keep the booklet of *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*
in your uniform pocket, powder-blue
like her robe. Say the rosary,
feel each kamagong bead.

Rest on a pillow where you can hear the waves
of your lover's heart. Listen to Tagalog songs.
They will help you sleep through
the cold scratches of December.

Here's the tea-stained smile of a kababayan,
inviting you to a party. Go no matter how heavy

the day has been, and how many corpses
you have carried within.

Enjoy the home-cooked pansit,
the roasted pig's head, the blood-red apple
in its mouth. A day will come
when you won't need an antiemetic

for homesickness. You will accept,
wholeheartedly, the patient who always buzzes
for a commode, the search for the missing boot
of an A&E *habitué* – the village's drunk.

You will learn to heal
the wounds of their lives,
and the wounds of yours. Love, even the smoke
of a Black Country accent on your face.

So here's the karaoke mic –
sing your soul out till there's El Niño
in your throat, and you can drink
all the rain of Wolverhampton.

Glossary

<i>espírito</i>	A Tagalog word (derived from Spanish) which means spirits.
<i>jeepney</i>	A four-wheeled public transport in the Philippines. They are known for kitsch decorations and paintings, crowded seating, and for belching black, thick smoke.
<i>kapre</i>	(Philippine mythology) A hairy giant who lives in trees and smokes cigars.
<i>kababayan</i>	Can be translated to ‘town-mate’ or ‘from the same land’. It is an appellation used by Filipinos to other Filipinos who they encounter when in a foreign land.
<i>kamagong</i>	A type of wood from kamagong tree. (velvet apple or velvet persimmon)
<i>na nagluwal sayo</i>	This phrase literally translates to ‘who gave birth to you’.
<i>pansit</i>	A Cantonese-style noodle dish, introduced to the Philippines by early Chinese settlers.
<i>sarimanok</i>	(Philippine mythology) A bird from the province of Maranao, whose feathers are extremely colourful and is said to bring luck to anyone who captures it.

Notes

Versions of the poems 'Nightingale Pledge', 'Transform', and 'Antiemetic for Homesickness' were part of the prize-winning manuscript in the 2017 Manchester Poetry Prize.

A version of the poem 'The Making of a Smuggler' was commended in Battered Moons Poetry Competition 2017.

'Way Back Home' won the Creative Future Literary Award for Poetry 2017. 'Antiemetic for Homesickness', 'Way Back Home', and 'The Making of a Smuggler' appeared in *Primers 3* (Nine Arches Press/The Poetry School).

Biographies

Romalyn Ante grew up in the Philippines and moved to the UK in 2005. She is joint-winner of the Manchester Writing Competition, winner of a Creative Future Literary Award, and commended in Battered Moons Poetry Competition 2017. She is also a Primers Volume 3 poet, and was recently chosen to attend Silliman University National Writers Workshop, the longest-running writing workshop in Asia. She will travel to the Philippines in 2018 to hone her craft as a Silliman fellow. She is working towards her first full collection.

Rachel Burns completed a screenwriting talent scheme with Northern Film and Media. Her plays have been longlisted in several playwriting competitions, including Verity Bargate and Papatango. Her screenplays were longlisted in recent BBC Script Rooms 11 and 12. During her time on the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Programme, she completed two darkly comic plays. Rachel has also had several poems published in literary magazines, as well as a short story in Mslexia. She volunteers with a prisoners' charity supporting defendants and their families at Crown Court.

Maeve Clarke is a teacher and writer from Birmingham. Her first novel, *What Goes Round*, and her short story, *Letters a Yard*, were both published by Tindal Street Press. She has also written educational

readers, *Give us the Money* (OUP) and *The Real Deal* (writing as Sam Carter). In 2016, she was shortlisted for WriteNow (Penguin Random House) and won first prize with *Sewing Flowers* (flash fiction) in the Creative Future Literary Awards. Her monologue *Night Games* was published in 2017. She has had rehearsed readings of her work at the Birmingham Rep and the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry. In 2018 she was awarded Arts Council funding to further develop her Jerwood/Arvon play, *White Gold*, and to work on her second novel.

Jo Clayton is a professional storyteller, director and workshop leader. She trained as an actor at the Central School of Speech and Drama and has performed and directed in the UK, Europe and New Zealand. She led community projects at the Globe Theatre for 3 years and has told stories at the Southbank Centre and numerous schools, festivals and events. She was instrumental in setting up The Point, an award-winning Community Association on the Lambeth/Croydon border where she lives with her husband and daughter.

Russ Davies is a teacher and writer from Rochdale, Lancashire, living in Lewisham, London. Originally a singer-songwriter, Russ started writing plays in 2016 and with his first submission was awarded a bursary to attend the Introduction to Playwriting Arvon City course at JW3. Alongside teaching English to secondary school children, Russ has spent the last year completing his most recent play *Victor Brown*, whilst also collaborating

with the Brixton Youth Theatre on an original play idea to be performed this spring.

Alice Hiller was Commended in the 2018 Hippocrates Prize, shortlisted for the 2017 Bridport Prize and longlisted for 2017 Primers and Fool for Poetry pamphlet competitions. She is working towards her first collection, *album without photos*, which responds to her direct experience of sexual abuse in childhood – and its aftermath. She has reviewed for the TLS and Poetry Review. She founded and runs the Covent Garden Stanza, a closed workshop for emerging poets. She holds a PhD from UCL, and published a history of the T-Shirt with Ebury Press. She is researching a critical biography of Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex.

Seraphima Kennedy grew up in west London. She writes poetry and creative non-fiction about family, migration, conflict and music. Last year she was shortlisted for The White Review Poets' Prize, and performed at Ledbury Poetry Festival and Poetry in Aldeburgh Festival. Her work has appeared in magazines including The Rialto, The White Review online, Magma, and And Other Poems. Seraphima is a proud member of the collective Malika's Poetry Kitchen.

Martin Kidd was born in Leicester, raised in Plymouth, seasoned in Nottingham and is now marinating in the far South Western reaches of Cornwall. He is a songwriter, traveller, cat scratcher and all-round reasonably nice guy.

His huge love of fiction and wordsmithery in general has had him working on his debut novel *Halja* for several years. Working with Jacob Ross has helped Martin create a more visceral work. Funnier – with stronger characters, richer world building, crisper violence and very bitter ends.

Laurie Ogden is a writer and performer from Merseyside, now living in south-east London. She is a Barbican Young Poet and recipient of the Outspoken Performance Poetry Prize (2016). Previous work has been published in Mud Press' WOMAN anthology and she has created work for organisations such as BBC, Roundhouse, Nationwide, Barnardo's, and the Barbican. Her plays include *TWIX* **** 'A new writing triumph' (A Younger Theatre), and *Colder Water* *****. She graduated from Goldsmiths in 2017. Laurie is currently developing *No One Thing*, her first full-length play, and her debut poetry pamphlet.

Jemma Picken is an Assistant Insurance Claims Manager for a large construction and facilities management company in the West Midlands. She has obtained BSc Archaeological Sciences, MSc Forensic Archaeology and Crime Scene Investigation and LL.Dip. Jemma has written for her own enjoyment since she was a teenager, but has only begun to share her work with others in the last 3 years. One of her short stories was the British Fantasy Society's story of the month in February 2017. Jemma has used her year on the Jerwood/Arvon

Mentoring Programme to complete the first draft of her first novel, *The Price of Daylight*. www.jemmapicken.com

Yvonne Reddick's pamphlet *Translating Mountains* (Seren, 2017) won the Mslexia Magazine Pamphlet Competition and was selected as a favourite pamphlet of the year in the Times Literary Supplement. She has received a Northern Writer's Award (2016), a Hawthornden Fellowship (2017), the Poetry Society's inaugural Peggy Poole Award and a commendation in the National Poetry Competition (2018). Her work appears in magazines such as PN Review, Stand, The North, The Compass and Mslexia. Her book *Ted Hughes: Environmentalist and Eco-poet* is published by Palgrave Macmillan. She lectures in Creative Writing and English Literature, and has reviewed poetry for the Times Literary Supplement and PN Review. She has been invited to read her poems at the Scottish Poetry Library, the Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre and Lumb Bank..

Abbie Salter was born in Bristol and studied English and Creative Writing at the University of London. She works at a publishing house, marketing books from authors like Cecelia Ahern, Dawn O'Porter and Joanna Cannon. Previously, she volunteered as an editor at For Books' Sake, an organisation that champions women and other marginalised writers. Abbie has a laptop full of short stories and poems, but this novel is the first piece of writing she has summoned the courage to publish publicly!

Acknowledgements

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A special thank you to the team at Totleigh Barton who hosted the 2017 Masterclass and the 2018 Writers' Retreat.

Arvon

Arvon is England's leading creative writing charity, celebrated for its unique ability to discover and develop the writer in everyone. It has been described by Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy as 'the single most important organisation for sharing and exploring creative writing in the UK'.

Arvon runs an annual programme of residential courses at three writing houses, in Devon, Shropshire and Yorkshire. The week-long courses, led by highly respected authors, include a powerful mix of workshops, individual tutorials and time and space to write. Covering a diverse range of genres, from poetry and fiction to screenwriting and comedy, Arvon courses have provided inspiration to thousands of people at all stages of their writing lives. Grants are available to help with course fees. We also offer non-residential city-based creative writing courses.

At the heart of Arvon is the desire to encourage anyone, regardless of their background, to find their voice through writing. About a third of our activities are with groups from schools, youth and community groups and arts organisations, many from the most disadvantaged communities in the UK.

www.arvon.org

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The Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Programme is a year-long development scheme for emerging writers in the categories of Fiction, Playwriting and Poetry. Delivered by Arvon, England's leading creative writing charity, in partnership with Jerwood Charitable Foundation, this programme offers unpublished writers the opportunity to develop their craft with the support of experienced professional writers in their field. All Arvon course attendees in the previous two years are invited to apply – including those who attended courses on our Learning and Participation programme for schools and groups.

The year is launched with a spring Masterclass residential week at Totleigh Barton, Arvon's writing centre in Devon. One-to-one mentoring sessions are held throughout the year both remotely and in person, in which mentors give close feedback on mentees' ongoing projects. In the autumn mentees are offered consultation sessions with industry experts who advise them on their future path to publication.

At the end of the year mentees attend a final Retreat week back at Totleigh Barton without the mentors, as a stepping stone to their lives as independent writers. The mentees then contribute extracts towards an anthology showcasing work produced on the scheme, launched at celebration events in the following summer.

Now in its eighth year, this programme has supported 75 writers to take their work to the next stage. For more information on the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Programme visit our website or contact **learning@arvon.org**



Will you follow duty to the barricades or love out onto the moor?
What price would you pay for the power to cure all ills? And when
life takes you far from home, will you remember to come back?

From voices in the darkness to suitcases tumbling open,
a promise of laughter to a plot sketched in wet sand,
stories emerge from between the cracks.

Midnight Listening collects new work by twelve writers who have
taken part in the **Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Programme** 2017/18.
A partnership between creative writing charity Arvon and Jerwood
Charitable Foundation, this programme – now in its eighth year
– offers emerging writers a unique opportunity to develop their
writing in the categories of Fiction, Playwriting and Poetry.
This year's mentors were **Jacob Ross**, **Tim Crouch** and **Pascale Petit**.

“I will devote
my midnight listening to you, hum the song
that lessens the weight of my eyelids.”

– from 'Nightingale Pledge', Romalyn Ante

JERWOOD CHARITABLE FOUNDATION



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