



JERWOOD/  
ARVON  
MENTORING  
SCHEME

# Tell it Again

ANTHOLOGY VOLUME SEVEN

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POETRY

Dom Bury  
Ella Frears  
Elisabeth Sennitt Clough

---

FICTION

Stacey Sampson  
Jean Seeram Ashbury  
Nasreen Rafiq

---

PLAYWRITING

Kim Cook  
Jenny Lee  
Alex Murdoch

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Jerwood/Arvon  
Mentoring Scheme | ANTHOLOGY  
VOLUME SEVEN

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The Way It Is © Jenny Lee  
Sightings © Elisabeth Sennitt Clough  
Sunset House © Nasreen Rafiq  
Light is on a Timer © Alex Murdoch  
Passivity, Electricity, Acclivity © Ella Frears  
The Salt of the Sky © Stacey Sampson  
Carnival © Kim Cook  
Developing the Negatives © Dom Bury

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Welcome to *Tell It Again*, the seventh anthology of work by nine talented writers selected for this very special mentorship scheme, led by Arvon and supported with extraordinary commitment and generosity by Jerwood Charitable Foundation.

Anyone who attended Arvon in 2015 was eligible to apply. Mentors Mona Arshi, Chris Thorpe and Emma Jane Unsworth read all the submissions, each interviewed a shortlist, and each chose three budding writers of their genre to support. No two years are alike, but it is guaranteed that all the writers make huge progress in this environment which supports and challenges and which, above all, gives permission to write.

Our writers came from all over England – Norfolk, Somerset, South Yorkshire and London – to Totleigh Barton, Devon, twice in the year. The space that Arvon holds to inspire writers worked beautifully, creating a place for reflection and bonding that established vital networks of support. Last summer the group worked with Chris Meade of if:Book to write collaboratively as an ensemble, before weaving their voices into an ‘Instability Symphony’. In the autumn they met industry professionals: literary agent Nicola Barr, poetry publisher Jane Commane, and from the world of theatre, Louise Blackwell, Alice Nutter and Madani Younis.

This scheme’s success is dependent on thoughtful attention from Arvon’s excellent team, collaborating across time and space, to make this a truly national project. The skills Arvon has learnt over its lifetime are key, and we are constantly observing our practice, to renew our ability to create the conditions writers need to be productive.

Jerwood Charitable Foundation is exceptional in its support for Arvon’s vision, and I want to thank them on behalf of all 63 writers who have benefited from the scheme so far, who tell us it is a precious lifeline. Now, it’s over to this year’s cohort.

**Ruth Borthwick**  
**Chief Executive and Artistic Director | Arvon**

Each year, I have the immense pleasure of observing the first stage in the selection process for this project. For a day, each of the mentors come together with their own genre submissions and begin to discuss the proposals as a whole with each other. It's hard to express the privilege of soaking yourself in the range of ideas and the depth of passion and grit which comes through in applications to this programme. It's a huge commendation to each of the nine mentees who were selected to say that the quality of work submitted for this year was once again exceptional. We are grateful to everyone who puts themselves forward for the programme; appreciating how personal and how raw and honest much of this work is. And of course to mentors Emma Jane Unsworth, Chris Thorpe and Mona Arshi for their commitment to engaging with such attention to the submissions and to each of their eventual mentees.

The themes within this volume zoom seamlessly from the vast, timeless and devastatingly hard subjects of what humans do to each other and why, to the intricate detail of the world we are in, allowing us to consider things more slowly, more carefully. This is the powerful value of being entrusted as a reader of someone else's words. Trust is an important word in this context; there is such trust needed to build a relationship between mentee and mentor and for both sides to be open to talking about what is important. And such trust evident each time a writer puts their words into the world and the exchange with a reader begins.

So, please do *Tell It Again* – please do tell everyone you know to pick up this wonderful volume of soulfully crafted and challenging written worlds. Our sincere thanks goes to everyone at Arvon who has worked so hard, sometimes invisibly, to support the delicate process through which this writing has been developed.

**Shonagh Manson  
Director | Jerwood Charitable Foundation**

'There really is nothing else quite like this programme – where writers from different genres come together and open themselves up to different possibilities of writing. Perhaps the key to its unique success lies in how quickly the poets accept themselves as professional writers and it's incredibly inspiring to see how willing they are to experiment and take risks with their work and witness first-hand how sure-footed they become with their craft. I feel immensely privileged to have been part of their journeys to see all the potential realised in such moving, powerful, exhilarating poems and I look forward to seeing these talented poets continue to develop and rise.'

Mona Arshi  
Mentor | Poetry



Jean Seeram Ashbury | from *Something  
About a Hat*

*Something About a Hat* is a collection of linked fictional stories related to the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Gods, myths, magic and local folklore form the background: Anansi tales brought by West African slaves, the love story of Rama and Sita which travelled with Indian indentured labourers, and a bunch of home-grown supernatural bad girls who create havoc in the night – like the soucouyant, an old woman who turns into a ball of fire and sucks human blood; and La Diablesse, the devil woman who seduces men and lures them to their deaths. The two extracts in this anthology appear at the beginning of the collection and tell of the kidnapping and enslavement of a storyteller.

\*

### **A man called Story**

West Africa.

Quarter of a day, not far. He would reach the village before the heat of the day sends the children to sleep. He pats the box of stories slung across his chest. All the tales ever told are safe in there, saved by the Sky God and earned for the world by Story's ancestor, Kweku Anansi. Story knows all the tales. He does not need to take the box but he likes having it with him to remind him of his heritage and how precious the gift of story is.

He kisses his wife and holds her close, inhales her scent of shea nut paste and warm sweat. Her face nuzzling his throat is wet.

'Don't go,' she says.

She had had a dream that he would go out one day and never return. She had woken him in the middle of the night sobbing, almost ululating like a woman mourning for the dead.

Just a bad dream, he had said. Only the invisible sprite making mischief again. I am here, not ever leaving you.

He tips up her face and wipes away her tears with his thumbs.

'I'll be back before nightfall,' he says.

He kisses the baby sniffling on her shoulder and stoops down to the two boys holding his wife's legs. 'Be good for your mother.'

Lemon light nudges night clouds from the dawn sky. Story leaves his family outside their round mudbrick house with black lizards, snakes and tortoises painted on the ochre walls. He walks backwards waving until he can see them no longer then follows a red dirt trail past terracotta coloured rocks, man-high anthills and into a buzzing, clicking, grunting wilderness.

Cobwebby mist clings to tree tops. A breeze carries the pungent smell of tree basil crushed in the night by elephants lying down to sleep. Fresh spoors lie on the ground, every hoof, claw and paw cleanly visible. Guinea fowls peck wormy beetley breakfasts, and impala prick up their ears, ready to scamper. Story loves this time of day.

Drums begin talking. Story thinks he hears the word "danger" but the drum beats are weak and indistinct and he cannot be sure. Perhaps it is a warning that a lion has gone crazy. Or a boy elephant in musth is running amok bidding for territory. He would have to take care.

A giant monitor lizard blocks Story's path. As he waits for it to slide by he decides to tell the children how spider Anansi tricked elephant and whale into a tug of war and made them believe *he* was pulling the rope. The story has passed down the

generations. The children already know it but they never tire of hearing about tricky clever Anansi.

Story is wondering about letting the children take turns to act out the tale when a chain falls around his chest and he is pulled from behind.

*Who is this who wants to play tug of war with me?*

'Got this one,' says a voice.

A group of men, solid as trees, surrounds Story. They are black as he is. A welcome party from the next village, he thinks.

He smiles and says, 'Brothers, are we playing a game?'

No answer comes, but the men squeeze his arms and thighs, handle his genitals, and inspect him the way his father used to do when he felled a deer when they went hunting.

The men talk to each other:

'Looks like a good one. Young. In his prime.'

'Check his eyes and teeth.'

'Good price for this one, I think.'

Story is confused by the men's talk but still thinking they have come from the next village to escort him, albeit in a rough manner, he says, 'Brothers, thank you for coming to get me. Let's go now or we will be late.'

One who carries a musket, fairer skinned than the others, and the obvious leader, comes forward. He pokes Story's chest with the muzzle of his musket. 'I am not your brother. We are not your brothers.'

Story looks at the man's fierce eyes and cold demeanour. 'Brother, I walk in peace.'

The brother who would not be a brother rips the box slung across Story's chest. 'You will not need this where you are going.'

'No. Please give that back to me.' Story lunges to grab the box.

The musket butt cracks his skull. A booted foot kicks his groin. Bleeding and whimpering, he is dragged and threaded on a rope with other men like fish on a stick. A wooden yoke joins his neck to the man behind.

‘What are you doing? Why are you tying me up? Why are—’

Another musket blow leaves him gasping.

The haul of men stumbles through the day, urged on by blows to the head, the back, the legs. Rope cuts Story’s wrists.

‘Help,’ he calls, but no one, not even a mouse, comes to his rescue.

Evening. A fire is lit. The bound men are given meagre amounts of water and dry crusts. When they tire, they lie where they fall, on top and beside each other, their guts and bladders performing like babies’, without control.

‘Please untie us, so we can at least pee like men,’ Story says.

‘If you know what’s good for you, you’ll shut up,’ says the musket carrier who is trying to open the box he took from Story. He looks for a clasp, and finding none hits the box with his musket. The lid with its carving of a snake swallowing its tail flips up. The musket carrier expects to see jewels but all he finds are dried leaves and paper with strange marks all neatly folded and tied with string.

‘What the...’

Story pleads for the box to be given back but the musket carrier throws it in the fire.

‘Oh please, no.’

‘If you don’t shut up, I will blow your head off,’ says the musket carrier.

‘That one’s got a mouth. They call him Story,’ says a captor. ‘Come on, give us one of your once-upon-a-times.’

Story watches the box burning, its flame turning from orange to a pale white shimmering nothingness and feels his head and heart emptying.

‘I can’t remember,’ he says.

The musket carrier stands over him. ‘Man wants a story. Give him a story, or I will shoot you.’

‘I don’t... I can’t—’

‘Please Mr Story,’ says one of the captives, ‘do it for us. Help us to pass this night of pain.’

And so Story begins, as he always does: *‘Once upon a time there was a man who had a wife and three sons and he left them to go on a long journey.’*

‘Oh yes, it will be a very long journey,’ chorus the captors.

*‘He came to a river and tried to swim across but a big fish swallowed him. When the man didn’t come home, his sons began to worry and they went looking for him. They looked everywhere but couldn’t find him. At last the wind whispered, “Your father fell into the river and a big fish swallowed him.”’*

‘Wait till you see the big fish we have waiting for you,’ laugh the captors.

*‘The boys went to the river. They saw the fish swimming around with their father inside its belly.*

‘Oh fish,’ they said. ‘Please give us back our father.’

*‘The fish smiled and said, “Finders, keepers. I found him and he’s staying right here in my belly.”*

*‘Give him back or I will drink you dry and there will be no river for you to swim in,’ said River Drinker, the eldest son.’*

‘River Drinker?’ says the musket carrier. ‘Jesus. What kind of shit is this?’

‘Ha, ha, ha,’ said the fish. ‘Do you think I’m a fool? River Drinker indeed.’

*‘But the eldest son was indeed the well known River Drinker and with one great gulp, he drained the river. The fish flapped its tail fin on the dry river bed and gasped. The sun burned its scales.*

‘W-w-water. Please give me water,’ the fish said.

*"You had your chance," said the eldest son. He cut open the fish and —'*

'Shut up. I've heard enough,' says the musket carrier.

'I haven't finished,' says Story.

'You have now.' The musket carrier smashes Story's shoulder.

The bounty of bleeding men stagger from dawn to dusk till they reach the sea. A ship is waiting. The wild-dark sea leaps up and licks its deck.

'Let's see if your River Drinker is up to drinking this one,' laugh the captors.

The captors store the men in a dark fort by the sea until a day when the ship's sails billow, and the ocean is ready. Men shout, 'Hurry along, now. We've got to get going.'

They haul the still-chained cargo of men on deck, and pack them inside the ship's belly.

At nights, in that black rocking womb tomb amid the noise of creaking timber, Story wonders if he is being punished for a long ago misdeed. Was the Sky God unhappy that his ancestor Kweku Anansi had taken his box of stories? Was Onini, the great python mother, seeking revenge for the daughter Kweku had stolen and bargained for the stories? And what of the lion, and the wasps and the invisible sprite who were also part of the bargain?

When he closes his eyes, ancestors pass behind his lids telling him his life was chosen before he was born.

'I didn't choose this,' he whispers. 'I didn't choose this.'

Shackled hand and foot, Story stands on the rolling deck. Ocean behind, ocean ahead, ocean to the sides. No escape except in its blue depths. His captors tell him to walk, to dance.

'We must keep you fit. No one will buy you otherwise,' they say.

'I am a man, not a thing for selling.'

'That's as maybe.'

They bring him food. Beans for horses. He cannot eat. They prise open his jaw and push the food down his throat.

'Eat. We can't sell a corpse.'

They leave him curled up on deck as if waiting to be born. He sees his wife running and crying, a woman bereft. His father had said it was a man's duty to hunt and put food on the table for his wife and children. Who will hunt for his family now? Will they starve, or will his wife thinking he has abandoned her seek out a village brave to be her next husband? And will the man be strong and kind and take her in his arms and make her forget this husband who is now lost? Will the brave be a good father? What will his wife tell their sons? Will she say that their father left them?

He writhes on the deck as if his guts are being drawn through his nose. Will his sons learn to hate him? Will they forget him? Who will tell them stories before they close their eyes?

Sky above, water below, like the beginning of the world and an Ocean Drinker does not exist. Oh to sprinkle earth on this vast ocean and watch it turn into the dry land of home.

'I want to go home home home...'

Home to the house with lizards painted on its walls, home to hold a woman wrapped in a red kente cloth, home to play with the three children in the yard near a forest where lions and cheetahs roam.

'Your home is in the Indies now, my fella. You're going to work for King Sugar and make us very very rich,' say his captors.

'In the... Once a...' He tries to tell himself a story but a beginning will not come. He wonders if he is at the end of a story, or in the middle. Or part of one not yet written.

When the long night ends, Story arrives in another land, among people he does not understand. He has a brand on his arm, put there by a red-hot iron. A man with a cane plantation buys him and calls him Jack. He is brought to live in a barracks and taken to the field each day. His back breaks from planting and harvesting from dawn to dusk. He runs away whenever he can but this place is unknown, its trees unreadable, its caves and hills and valleys secret. He is always caught, brought back to the plantation and flogged.

‘Jack, Jack, Jack, when will you learn? I will always find you,’ says his planter boss.

‘Not Jack. My name not Jack.’

‘If you say so. The important thing is I own you and I can do whatever I like with you. You are a slave.’

‘You say slave. I say man.’

‘You can think that if you like but I have a receipt for you.’

One Sunday when he is allowed to rest Story falls asleep in the barracks yard. He wakes to find a small girl standing over him and watching with serious eyes.

‘Mister, you go sleep in house, not sleep in yard in dirt,’ she says.

She reminds him of someone a long time ago.

‘What’s your name?’ he asks.

‘I be call Eliza. What you be call?’

‘Story. I be call Story.’

## The hot sweet smell of Africa

Iere: Land of the Humming Bird.

The Caribbean.

1810

The hot sweet smell of Africa. That is what Eliza thinks she dreams about. She understands hot, sweet and smell, but Africa is a mystery brought to her by her new friend Story.

Eliza is eight, and at an age where the things people say pile up in her head as puzzles waiting to be solved. Joined in her mind are the words ‘the hot sweet smell of Africa’. This is what Story says when some days the scent rain makes when it falls on parched-dry earth fills the air. Those are days when he inhales and holds his breath, and his lanky body seems to fill like a balloon and rise from the ground. His face takes on a dreamy, faraway look so that even if he is near to her, Eliza knows he is somewhere else. She and Acu run around him then tugging his tattered clothes and trying to grab the calabash slung from his shoulders.

No one is allowed to touch the calabash. Soon after Story met Eliza he had hollowed out the seeds from a calabash and carved on its surface a snake swallowing its tail. He had threaded the calabash with twine stuffed it with scraps of paper (his stories, he said) and slung it across his chest.

‘Not as good as the Sky God’s box,’ he had said when he made it, but he takes it everywhere and reads from the papers in it to children from the barracks who follow him saying, ‘Tell us about Africa, Story. And the jungle and the animals.’

And he tells them about elephants and their huge tusks and when the children ask him what an elephant is because they have never seen one, he draws a picture and stretches his hand in line with his nose and pretends it is an elephant’s trunk and

runs around trumpeting and they too put their hands out and follow him like baby elephants.

When Eliza dreams she sees flashes of red earth, a house with black lizards painted on ochre walls, a woman with rows of beads hanging down to her bare breasts, a baby on her shoulder and two young boys hanging on to her legs. And always when she wakes, there is the smell of hot dust in her nostrils.

Eliza tells her mother about her dreams.

'A house with black lizards? Chile you been eatin too much wild guava an it give you heartburn,' her mother says.

But when Eliza tells Story about her dreams, his mouth forms a big O of surprise.

'That is Africa. That is my home, my wife, my children.'

Eliza wonders why *she* dreams about Story's home and family. She is about to ask when he says, 'You're seeing them because it's your home too. And your mama's, and her mama and her mama before ... and all of us.'

He opens his arms to include everyone in the barracks. 'Africa is our home.'

Eliza is confused, but when Acu comes to play, she draws her eight-year-old self to full height and says, 'I have a other home.'

'Where?' asks Acu.

'In Africa.'

'Africa? Is Africa over there?' Acu points to a haze in the distance where long-legged scarlet ibis sleep at night.

'No, silly, Africa is cross the sea.'

'Who tell you that?'

'Story.'

'Ha, ha. Story be a crazy man. Don't listen to him. My mama say Spain is cross the sea.'

'Spain?'

‘Yes. My mama say people come from Spain in big ships with a man call Cristoforo long time ago.’

‘Does you have a other home in Spain?’

‘No, this my home. I born here.’

‘I born here, too, with my mama.’

‘But my mama an everybody born here in the Beforetime with rock and mountains and river.’

‘An my mama born here with... with...’

Eliza cannot think what to say. She concentrates on beating Acu at five stones.

Eliza’s next dream is about a forest. Tall trees arch above her, their branches plaited. Sunlight twinkles like fairy dust. A leaf floats down, a perfect, five-pointed, golden star of a leaf. Eliza catches it, holds it up to the light, puts it in her hair. She trips on a vine she could use for skipping, and runs her fingers in the canals of old, gnarled bark. She feels she has done this before. But when?

Something rustles nearby. A crack. A roar. Eliza crouches behind a tree trunk, her breaths coming in and out as fast as when she is chasing Acu, who runs like the wind. She puts her hands up to her face and squints through her fingers. She wants to see, does not want to see, what is coming to catch her. Something the colour of sand flashes past her. Then she hears chuckling as if someone is laughing at her and it seems to come from the sky from a saucer-shaped cloud above the trees.

Eliza walks on, past basins of crushed bush where Something must have been lying down. She hears a cackle and swear words she has been told not to repeat. Wasps dive-bomb her, and a fat, green snake slithers down the trunk of a tree. She knows this place. She has been here before. Is this Africa?

When Eliza dreams of the forest again, her chest hurts. She feels tied and dragged. She screams, 'Let me go, let me go, let—'

'Liza, Liza.'

Eliza's mother, candle in hand, ghostly in a white nightdress, shakes Eliza's shoulder.

'You sleepin loud, chile.'

Eliza tells her mother about her new dream.

Her mother says, 'You been walking by the jumbie tree again and the spirits follow you home. Best we pray.'

Prayers do not help. Many mornings Eliza wakes with pain burning her neck, her chest, and her legs, and her wrists are sore as if rubbed with rope.

Some days Eliza is not her usual bouncy self and Acu asks, 'You sick?' and Eliza says, 'No. I thinkin.'

'What 'bout?

'Me home in Africa.'

'Your home here, silly.'

Acu waves at the cluster of one room thatched huts in the barracks of Paradise Estate, a sugar cane plantation, once French, now English, and at the church-pointy corrugated iron roof of the Big House where Eliza's mother cooks and cleans from sunup to sundown.

In the mornings, now that she is eight, Eliza is left to put out the fire in the yard, and when she has tidied up the hut, she runs through a forest of mango, plum, soursop and coconut trees, and across a wide lawn, clumped with poinsettias, crotons and ixoras to the Big House. She enters through the servants' quarters before going into the main house to help her mother unshutter the window jalousies in all the rooms. She collects eggs from the hen coop for the master and mistress's breakfast, and later in the morning her mother teaches her how to dust, and polish table tops till they look like mirrors.

A few times Eliza asks, ‘Mammy, why we not live in house like this?’ and her mother answers, ‘Because we be slave.’

‘What be slave Mammy?’ Eliza asks and her mother says, ‘Slave be somebody... slave be slave, Eliza. Rub the wood hard, so. Do properly, Eliza, ’cos you have this to do one day.’

Eliza knows how to set the table with knives and forks and spoons in the right places, but is not allowed to touch the glassware. When her mother’s back is turned, she runs a finger around the rims of glasses. She likes the sound the glass makes, especially when she spits on her finger before rubbing their rims.

Sometimes, in between swish-scraping dead flies and moths and leaves from the veranda with a cocoyea broom, she sneaks a sit down on one of the rocking chairs where the master and mistress of the house sit in the evenings when the breeze is cool, the master smoking, the mistress fanning away mosquitoes. And sometimes she slides down the stair banisters from the top of the veranda and tumbles into the ixora bush at the bottom breaking its blooms and causing the gardener, Spanish Diggo, to shout, ‘Madre de Dios... esta chica... aaarghh!’ and chase her with his rake.

This is home. All Eliza has ever known. And now Story talks about her real home in Africa.

Africa. That is where Story is going on the Lord’s Day.

In the barracks’ yard, children kiss-chase, skip, play hopscotch. Men sprawl against hut walls. Women spread washing to dry on bushes.

Sunday, welcome day of rest, heavy lazy hanging over all, except for Story.

He trudges from hut to hut. ‘Once ’pon time we home in Africa,’ he says. ‘An they steal we from there an bring we cross the sea in ships. Come, let we go home. We not belong here.’

Story tells his Sunday message in slave masters' language that he, and all the slaves in the barracks, have pieced together like children learning to speak. His message brings sadness, and sometime rage, to the empty places in their hearts.

Two overseers on horseback patrol outside the barracks with dogs, whips, and guns. They are ever watchful, warned to look out for signs of skittish slaves, ordered by their planter bosses to 'Keep them down, but don't start a riot. Keep them working round the clock. If they're tired they won't have the strength to make trouble. And stamp out any troublemakers as soon as they show their heads. We don't want another bloody Toussaint L'Ouverture stirring things up here. We can't afford a Haiti here.'

Shouts come from the barracks. 'YesYesYes.'

'We free. They can buy body for work, but nobody can buy heart,' says Story. 'Allyuh hear me?'

'YesYesYes. We hear yuh.'

'I goin home. Allyuh comin?'

'YesYesYES. We comin.'

An overseer on horseback gallops into the barracks yard. 'You slave, Jack, enough of that talk,' he says.

Heads that were nodding before turn away from Story, but he persists.

'Come on let we go home. Is time.'

The overseer says, 'Are you deaf, Jack? I said enough of your nonsense.'

A whip sings out.

Story grabs it before it scorches and cuts his skin. He pulls.

The overseer topples off his horse. The second overseer fires his musket in the air.

Everyone in the barracks freezes, but Story runs.

'I goin. Allyuh comin?'

Eliza starts to run but her mother holds her tight.

'Don't run. Don't never ever run,' she says.

Dogs and riders pursue Story. Barking. Shots. Screams. Back he comes, dragged by a rope tied to his wrists, blood on his chest, bone jutting from his leg, dogs trailing his bare feet.

'This is what happens to troublemakers. Let this be an example to you all,' says an overseer.

Story has lost an eye, the other is swollen shut. His jaw is lopsided, his front teeth missing.

Eliza kneels beside him and touches his face sticky with blood. She hears him croaking.

'... ev... ng... ag... wa... aft... ns...'

She puts her ear up to his smashed lips. 'Talk proply Story.'

'... iks... skiks... ox ...'

'Box? You wants your box?'

Eliza goes looking (*don't never run... don't run...*) Some way from the barracks she finds the snake's head, then its tail. She picks up the calabash pieces, chases (*don't run*) paper that flies off when she gets near, catches what she can and hurries (*don't run*) back with them bunched in her skirt.

'Here, Story. Your box. Is broken but we can stick back.'

Story lies dead still. Eliza tugs his arm. 'Wake up, wake up,' she says.

The hot, bright afternoon darkens suddenly as if the sun has been eclipsed. A wind takes up, howling, lashing, lobbing green cannonball breadfruit from the trees into the barracks yard; uprooting cassava and pigeon peas; spiralling earth and wood, pots, pans, drying clothes, chickens; levitating the old and small; filling eyes with dust forcing them to shut.

'Is end of world. Preacher man say it writ in Bible,' says a new convert.

As suddenly as it came, the wind subsides. A mourning grey light hangs over all.

Voices call to misplaced hens, ‘Here chick, chick.’ Or wrangle over a confusion of clothes, ‘That is my dress, man. Give it me.’

Eliza rubs grit from her eyes. She is kneeling beside...

‘Mammeeee! Story GONE.’

There is a rope and a large bloodstain on the ground, but no Story.

The overseers who were like statues before jump into action. ‘Where have you bastards hidden him?’ They scour the barracks, applying force as they go. ‘Tell me where he’s hiding or I’ll break your arm.’

Answers come fast:

‘Sah, me see ground crack open an hand with red hot nails come out an take ’im.’

‘Sah, me see ’im climb to top of silk cotton tree an fly to Africa.’

The overseers shake their heads. ‘Jesus, you people and your dumb fucking mumbo-jumbo.’

Eliza fiddles with the calabash pieces and papers, which despite the furious wind before, are still on her skirt. In bell-clear voice she says, ‘Bird take Story to sky.’

‘Bird? What bird?’

‘Big bird. Story say man go for walk an fish swallow him an his son cut fish belly an man escape an then big bird see man an pick him up in beak an fly away...’

‘Jesus Christ what the fuck is this pic’ney talking about?’ says one of the overseers.

‘... bird take Story to sky,’ says Eliza.

‘Well, best get your birdie to get him back here, little miss, or...’

The overseer raises his whip. Jacob, a young man with a limp, puts himself in front of Eliza.

‘Get the fuck out of the way,’ the overseer says.

Jacob trembles, but behind him a human wall forms, ready with sticks, stones and cutlasses.

'Leave we,' Jacob says. 'We go find we brother Story an give him bury.'

The wall moves forward. The overseers return to the Big House for instructions

Eliza makes a pile of stones outside her hut. She drags the straw pallet she sleeps on and puts it beside the stones. In her head she hears Story telling the tale of the man who was caught by a fish.

*When man come out of fish bird see him and swoop down an take him in sky but man have son call Stone Thrower an he fling a stone up in sky an it reach up high an hit bird an bird drop man back on ground an his son take him home.*

'Eliza, bring that back in house.'

'Mammy, is for Story so he don't break his bones when bird drop him.'

'Story dead, Eliza. He not coming back.'

Dead is another mystery word for Eliza. Her father was *dead*, her mother had said, but he came back and he went away again, and now he is dead again her mother says.

Eliza throws stones at the sky and waits, papers and calabash pieces spread out on her sleep mat.

One day Acu unfolds some papers and says, 'What be these marks?'

'That be writing. It go like this.'

Eliza has no idea what Story's scribbles mean, but she looks at the paper and says, 'In long time afore ...'

The voice coming out of Eliza's mouth is a deep, dark bass.

Acu jumps. 'Ohhhh, you have Story's voice in your mouth. Is true what my mama say.'

'What she say?'

'She say people don't dead. They come back an live inside somebody else.'

'You silly,' Eliza says. She takes the straw pallet, calabash pieces and papers into the hut.

At night, she falls asleep wondering where Story went. At night, the calabash tries to put itself together again, and the papers attempt to fold themselves with neat ends.

In the morning, the day carries on as before.



Jenny Lee | from *The Way It Is*

*“And that's the way it is...[reads date].  
This is Walter Cronkite, CBS News.  
Good night.”*

Walter Cronkite's nightly sign-off line  
CBS News, 1962 – 1981

## **Characters**

The JOURNALIST and ANNIE.

The JOURNALIST is 28 years old in 1976. He has an American accent.

ANNIE is 23 years old in 1976.

## **Notes**

It is possible that the two actors are supported by a live videographer, video editor, and sound editor who collectively capture and help to tell their story; there is a visual narrative lurking between the lines of this play, hoping to be unearthed by a director.

/ Indicates speech overlapping.

## 1.

### Beirut, 1976

Annie        August 30th, 1976. Mid-morning, downtown Beirut.

A journalist and his crew – a camera man and driver slash translator – go with militiamen to the Green Line, the unseen wall between Muslim factions in west Beirut and Christians in the east. Here, a jungle of weeds has taken root along Damascus Street. Their deadline is 2pm: shoot story, drive to airport, ship film.

For two days there has been a citywide ceasefire. The militiamen, in flares and dungarees, lounge against an overturned bus. A man in fatigues outpaces a tank. Cigarettes are smoked; chunks of rubble chucked through coils of barbed wire; a sheep chomps at the weeds.

The militiamen piss in a line onto the flesh and bones of a burnt-out VW Beetle, cocks in one hand, guns in the other. The crew watch them, bored. A woman – red headscarf, tweed blazer – hurries along the street, lugs her sleeping son towards the steps of an apartment block. She squats for breath, flips her head, shouts in French:

“Cacher vos bites.”

“Put your dicks away.”

They don’t.

She pitches her son onto her shoulder.

Adjusts her headscarf.

Reaches for the door at the foot of the apartment building.

The building is under construction, unfinished.

The masons started work before the war, won’t come back until it stops.

Balconies with no railings.

An opening where a French door might have been.

A stairwell without walls.

The woman starts to climb.

Across the Green Line, 200 yards away, on a roof, an opposition sniper lies topless in the sun, rolling a joint.

Nothing happens.

The journalist turns to his driver slash translator, asks:

“Will there be action today?”

The driver shrugs.

“Tell them,” says the journalist. “Tell them thank you but ‘we’d like to be here whenever you’re in action’.”

The driver translates.

The militamen shrug.

The driver shrugs.

The cameraman shrugs.

Down the road an old man is struggling to wind up the folding door of a metal-framed garage.

Behind it he unveils three coffins with three young woman standing by them.

The journalist makes a parade of being fed up, ready to leave.

The big militiaman laughs, sinks his buttocks onto an oil drum, jams his AK to his shoulder,

fires in close succession over the head of the sheep.

His hair is long. His body convulses like a rockstar; like Mick Jagger.

“Cessez.”

Shouts the woman from the second floor balcony of the apartment building.

“Cessez-le-feu. Arrêter de tirer.”

But Mick Jagger is up, spraying bullets from the waist, the force flinging his feet in a tarantella.

The cameraman dances after him, shooting him shooting.

“Are you getting this?” calls the journalist. “The shot? The sheep?”

Bullets fountain into the hot sky.

“Arrêter. Arrêter.”

Jagger stops, sweeps back his long hair, chuckles.

Under the shadow of the apartment block, he lights a cigarette.

Across the Green Line, on the roof, the sniper, alarmed, misinterprets the show as a real attack, reaches for his gun.

Standing next to the big militiaman the journalist wonders out loud, “Do you guys ever run cross the street?”

“In a line?”

Nodding towards Mick Jagger, he adds:

“I’ll run after him.”

The cameraman puts himself in position.

The militiamen organise themselves into a conga line behind a building, yukking it up.

They jazz-step, single file, running between buildings, on stage, then off stage, parallel to the Green Line.

They swish their rocket launchers at jaunty angles.

First flares, then dungarees, then Jagger, who stops in the middle of the street, fires for show.

From the roof the sniper kills him with a single bullet.

A second shot clips the shoulder of the journalist.

“Fuck.”

“My shoulder.”

“My fucking shoulder.”

They are sprinting now, camera rolling, towards the underpass where their cars are parked.

On the roof of the apartment building, the sniper lights a joint.

“Qu’avez-vous fait? Cessez.”

“Mon fils.”

“Mon fils. Qu’avez-vous fait?”

The plea follows them along Damascus Street from the balcony of the second floor where a boy is lying in blood.

“Qu’avez-vous fait?”

“Brûle en enfer!”

“Mon fils. Brûle en enfer!”

As the crew jerk open their car doors the eye of  
the camera fixes on the apartment block, stares  
impassively as –

From a balcony with no railings –

Through an opening where a French door might  
have been –

A red headscarf and tweed blazer plunge towards  
the earth.

**2.**

## **Beirut, 1976**

Journalist    Most of what happened we never even filmed.  
                  We couldn't.

It was already over.

We're smoking cigarettes over cornflakes at the Commodore, pretending not-to-know-what-to-do-that-day loud enough for NBC, ABC, CBS to overhear, when a man walks in carrying a bag and a gun; and we're doing a fine job of pretending not to care about it or the tray of Danish pastries he's emptying into the bag.

It's August, two weeks after Tel al-Zaatar and the heat is scorpion.

Garbage stacked in the streets, mosquitos banqueting on my thighs so I tuck my pants into my socks.

I look up.

The man is standing next to me. If he shoots, I think, my thighs will stop itching.

Nothing happens.

“Samir sent me,” he says. “He’s outside, with the car. Are there any muffins?”

He holds out a hand. Two tables away a rival network look pissed. I shake it.

His militia are bored. Samir has fixed up a day on the green line.

Sometimes the Green Line’s hot, sometimes it’s not, but there’s a ceasefire on; it’s likely to be uneventful.

Few will take a risk for something that won’t get on the air. This wasn’t going to get on the air.

I think about chasing a different story.

Then I think about his gun. A gun could be a story. We get in the car.

Samir translates like he drives, fast with unexpected U-turns.

Two militiamen on my lap, two on top of my camera guy, three cars follow. Everyone is smoking.

The gunman sits, front seat, window down, sunglasses on, like a rockstar; like Mick Jagger.

Typically, Damascus Street is a theatrical film stage, a jungle of weeds along Beirut's death row.

The props: ruins, guns, sound effects always conveniently there.

TV crews just walk on and start shooting.

Our deadline is 2pm. Shoot, drive, ship the film.

By mid-morning all we have is one shot of a tank and a fucking sheep.

I think of Tel al-Zaatar, inch thick in cartridge cases.

Of burning garbage heaps and men dragged from cars, children from houses.

My camera guy films the militia pissing.

Mick Jagger zips up his trousers, claps me on the shoulder, laughs.

I'd like to punch him but his arms look like cedar trees.

My thighs are mosquito lunchmeat.

"Will there be action today?"

Samir shrugs.

“Tell them.”

“Tell them ‘thank you but we’d like to be here whenever you’re in action’.”

Down the road an old man is struggling to wind up the folding door of a metal-framed garage.

Behind it he unveils three coffins with three beautiful woman standing by them like figures in a wax museum.

Theatre noir, perfect for prime time.

I grab my backpack, start to move toward the women, but Jagger loses his shit, kills the fucking sheep.

I fling myself into the weeds.

From a distance my cameraman follows Jagger as he fountains bullets to the sky.

He knows I know that they know that in 1976 television violence is rare enough.

This could get on the air.

“Are you getting this? The shot? The sheep?”

Jagger stops, laughs, herds the militiamen into a line, motions to us.

We all follow him, running between buildings, like boy scouts playing soldiers.

First flares, then dungarees, then Jagger, who stops in the middle of the street, fires for show and is shot dead.

We're fucking in this now.

The ambush is merciless. A bullet clips my shoulder.

"I've got it, grab your arm. Limp. That's great."

My cameraman is filming me.

All the way to the car.

I didn't see what happened.

Sometimes you don't see the shot.

You write to what the cameraman tells you.

**3.**

**Coffins**

Annie      Three coffins.

Beside them: three women, like figures in a wax museum.

In them: two brothers, one father.

Gunned down.

Mistaken identity.

Three sisters. One blind. One lame. The eldest beautiful.

Three months ago they were walking home from university, killing things along the way.

Mice, rats, mosquitos, spiders; seven stray dogs, injured and in pain.

Sharing the revolver like an ice-cream cone.

When the bomb exploded one lost a leg, another her eyes.

The eldest gained a scar; a slash of purple crossing her breasts.

Today she wears new shoes.

Doesn't cry.

In the street she is surprised to see the man who sold her the shoes on El Qalaa.

She watches him fountain bullets into the air.

Wave his arms like cedar trees.

Laugh in slow motion.

Get shot in the chest.

She doesn't cry.

Now is now.

4.

## In the car

Journalist The car seat is covered in blood.

My shoulder's the story but it's costing us a hospital trip and our deadline.

*The journalist replays the soundscape of the Green Line incident out loud on his tape recorder.*

### ***Journalist's***

Voice (*from the recorder*) Testing, one two three, testing.

### ***On the***

### ***recorder***

*The ambient noise of the largely deserted street: the rumble of a tank; a man's footsteps walking beside it; the sound of rubble being chucked through barbed wire; the distant bleating of a sheep.*

Journalist The goat.

Annie Sheep.

Journalist Says Samir. He insists:

Annie It was a sheep.

Journalist A sheep? Have we got it on camera?

Annie        Yes

Journalist    Says Samir, who turns to my camera guy, who  
                  nods.

                  Outstanding.

***A woman's  
voice***        *(from the recorder) Cacher vos bites.*

***On the  
recorder***    *Footsteps crunching towards the microphone.*

Annie        “Goats’ tails go up. Sheep’s tails hang down.”

Journalist    “Are you a fucking shepherd?”

Annie        “Yes.”

Journalist    He says. He is. He says:

Annie        “Put your fucking seatbelt on.”

**5.**

## **Hospital.**

Annie      Half an hour later.

The hospital is teeming with broken bodies;

Militiamen brandishing hand-grenades stalk the wards, demanding priority for their cousins.

Outside, gun-mounted Land-Rovers coax the traffic forwards.

Shelling has started again.

The hospital tucks its tail between its legs.

In the fluorescent corridor an unshaven prisoner twitches on a stretcher, biting the air in pain.

His prison guards are a teenage boy and girl in combat boots – as young as thirteen.

They flirt over a bottle of Pepsi cola.

The boy twirls a pistol round his trigger finger.

Drops it.

Grabs the cola bottle, chuck it against the corridor wall.

Pepsi detonates across the floor.

The girl sniggers.

At the other end of the corridor the journalist sits on an orange chair.

His wound is right shoulder, uncomplicated, clean.

Next to him an elderly doctor in a surgeon's gown arranges tweezers on a trolley, asks questions.

The journalist confesses.

Journalist I don't understand.

Annie Samir sparks a cigarette over a stack of sterilised gauze, translates:

“He asked how you were injured.”

Journalist Tell him – we knew about the ceasefire but a guy shows up, seems to know otherwise.

Annie Shells crash around the hospital.

Samir exhales.

(*Samir*) “Jasim shows up, bored of the ceasefire. Jasim? Used to sell shoes on El Qalaa.”

A bloat of pregnant women waddle into the corridor, out of the labour ward.

They are dragging their beds into the passageway, away from the shells.

The teenagers mimic them; awkward, vicious.

The doctor threads a needle.

The needle pricks the journalist's clavicle.

Journalist    Damascus Street, says this guy. So we drive.

Annie        Samir fixes the doctor's wrinkled eyes with a confidential gaze:

“The Deuxième, you know, the bureau, has the drivers keep tabs on all these guys.

He thinks I'm a fucking shepherd.”

The doctor pincers the journalist's skin with his tweezers, thinks aloud in Arabic:

“Every ceasefire we have a festival of crime. Last ceasefire, my car was stolen. You went to Damascus Street? My colleague lived on Damascus Street. After he was abducted, I got a new car.”

Samir grins, chiding the doctor: “You understand English.”

The doctor grins too:

“I have a Masters degree from Cardiff University.”

They laugh.

The journalist joins in.

Journalist Exactly – they can’t even implement a ceasefire on the Green Line.

Annie Down the corridor a fresh battery of gunmen stride into the building.

Journalist First there’s no action. We start to leave but the guy loses his shit. Shoots. Shouts ‘run’. So we follow him into the open street.

Annie Samir shrugs:

“Jasim was pissed. He wanted the airtime so he gave them what they came for.”

Journalist Then it happened – three, maybe four snipers.

Annie “One,” murmurs Samir.

The gunmen ripple down the corridor, carnivorous.

The journalist flinches but the doctor explains:

“They are the relatives of the prisoner. They have come to take him. Where is Jasim now?”

Samir spits, admits: “We left him.”

The journalist gazes at the gunmen, pats an empty pocket, looking for his camera.

Journalist What a shit-show. Beirut. Samir, do you have any idea what Americans know about Beirut?

Annie (*Samir*) “Nothing.”

Journalist Precisely. There are seventeen unique religious sects in Beirut.

Annie (*Samir*) “Eighteen.”

Down the corridor the gunmen locate the stretcher, fire rounds into the ceiling.

Journalist Look at this shit. This is our chance to get the audience’s head out of the refrigerator, communicate political processes, ask, ‘Who are these people? What do they want?’

Annie The teenage girl spits at a gunman.

The gunman grabs her head, crunches it against the wall.

The teenage boy is running.

The doctor's tray of medical instruments clatters to the ground.

With one knee on the floor, one eye on the gunmen, Samir passes the doctor his scissors.

Journalist We've got genuine bang-bang. A free pass to get on the news tonight. Show the Lebanese story. There's no way they're not going to use this.

Annie The doctor stoops to light Samir's second cigarette, laughs and says:

This is not a story, it's a farce about a troupe of idiots clowning it up at the Green Line.

Journalist What is he saying?

Annie (*Samir*) "He is saying he couldn't agree more."

Journalist Right? We have a hook. An opportunity to communicate the truth.

Annie The gunmen approach.

Demand morphine so the patient can be moved.

The doctor assembles the drip at an arthritic tempo.

Scalpel in one hand, swab in the other, his heart collapsing under the weight of his city.

“Ask him” he says, fixing the journalist with a passionate finger,

“Why he needs to believe there’s a truth here for him? Truth doesn’t exist in Beirut.”

Samir says:

(*Samir*) “Hospital staff have not been paid in months. This doctor is too humble to propose a fee.”

The journalist withdraws a wad of cash, waves it.

Journalist We speak the same language.

Annie “Shukran,” says the Doctor.

Journalist Shukran. Samir, let’s drive. It’s eight hours to Damascus.

Annie The gunmen follow at his heels, wheeling the twisted limbs of their relative down the corridor. The teenage girl is still breathing. The journalist quietly stares at her; she stares quietly back at him. At his back the gunmen rearrange their

AKs, spit into the silence. As he steps delicately over her combat boots his shoes stick to the vinyl, covered in Pepsi cola.

Elisabeth Sennitt Clough | from *Sightings*

## **Qeqertarsuaq**

The water thirsts for the land  
to come undone, silts its edges  
with a black salty tongue. How above it all we are  
with the fixedness of our shiny new Lexus  
as we wait on a gleaming bridge,  
in the distance skyscrapers' lights dwindling  
like stock prices.

You're neither speaking nor listening  
and I begin reading an article  
with a photograph of three sharks,  
the ocean sifted with shagreen  
mustering towards some distant sun –  
strobed, alive, it draws their deepwater species  
like a spoon lure.

The picture's caption says *Greenlandic sharks*  
*are attracted to low frequencies.*  
My eyes circle the water, its mussel-blue brilliance  
framed by cliffs and cloudless sky.  
Soon I'm snorkelling among icebergs,  
piloting through the opening of a small cave  
that resembles the helix of your ear.

I reach the vestibular depths,  
where the light is dim and fish pulse  
with transparency, passing as shadows  
or refractions of the water. I can barely see my way  
into the farthest chamber – the bony labyrinth  
of the mantle. I swim low and tiny  
bristle-worm hairs brush against my limbs

sending echoes back through the water.

Little by little, I make out  
a horn-shaped seasnail, asleep  
at the inner limits of the cave, packed so tight  
into the fissure it resembles a cochlea.  
I murmur *Qeqertarsuaq*, *Qeqertarsuaq*  
and its great body begins to stir.

## Nadezhda\*

You've forgotten Gornostaypol  
and our cottage by the river.  
You pass time by counting souls  
trapped within the spillage pools:  
*they'd wither like jellyfish in the sun*  
*should they ever leave*, you tell me.

Can you see how green shoots have thickened  
the old forest with new life? Ivy and brambles  
now flesh out the legs of rusting pylons.  
Yesterday I heard Paganini in the trees,  
as branches fluttered against overhead cables,  
leaves bristled to an applause.

Watch me lift my face to the razor  
each morning, to rinse and rinse anew,  
the water spiralling about my ears  
like an orchestra. Let's prepare our home  
for guests: vases of wildflowers on windowsills,  
candles at each end of the piano.

Oil slaps the sides of your buckets  
and you strain the water until it runs clear.  
It tastes sweet as well-water from the village  
where my father mined. At the end of each shift,  
he made his way through the earth  
clawing at light as he abandoned the dark.

\* Slavic female given name, meaning 'hope.' Popular in Russia, Bulgaria, and the Ukraine.

### **Eine Kleines Nachtdrama**

Dream drifts in: a single white cloud,  
then twists me like a hurricane.  
Always uninvited, Dream dangles  
me from sixty stories and lets go,  
second by slow second. Dream  
makes me climb the slippery rail  
of a suspension bridge, stands back  
and howls as the tips of my fingers lose grip.  
Dream's given me vertigo, acrophobia,  
a fear of flying – made me terminally  
claustrophobic. Before bed  
I avoid dream's aides: coffee, cheese,  
port, but I'm still locked in rooms  
with padded walls that close in. Dream  
buries me alive, then wakes me.  
Dream gathers clouds to begin  
murdering me again the next night.

## **Anguilla Anguilla**

*Take every gain without remorse about missed profits  
because an eel may escape sooner than you think – Lope de Vega*

The water delivered bold / lifeless things  
into my gran's nets / a smell / sap  
of Ouse / earth to air / peat to clay / seepage  
through willow baskets / woven the old way.

She spoke downriver / above the spasms  
of diaphanous bellies / her tongue  
pressed itself westward / in arcs and sinews / a mile  
or more / reached without ever being raised.

*There's money in eels / but how to explain  
today's / City Path / mapped in cute  
curlicue elvers / poppycock / she'd say  
Council's peddling the streets / with myths and motifs.*

Even the river / puts on its sleek  
display / a muscled creature / running dark  
as a conscience / between fluorescent tendrils  
as through gleave prongs.

## **Heruvim**

*For Ana*

You were one term  
at our primary: a small green-eyed girl  
whose mother shrugged and smiled  
and said, *oh, I forgot...*  
the day our teacher walked you home.  
The England of your mother's dreams  
inspired such diversions: red lipstick and dancing.  
How unapologetic,  
the skim of her skirt, each move  
inchng the hem higher.

They said your mother climbed in the bottle  
at the end. She had ship ambitions:  
the fold and rig through a narrow throat,  
all her body a galleon, her arms pinned  
to the prow, breasts loud and bare,  
cannons set for war.

Years later I saw you again,  
outside a row of shops on the edge of town.  
You were fourteen, maybe fifteen, pushing  
a blue buggy. *Mummy's angel*, you said  
widening your arms like a horizon,  
*I've got you.*

## **Des Petites Attentions**

Her iron glides with the grace  
of a mechanical heart pumping steam.  
I watch my mother fold, and fold again,  
white edge against white edge:  
stiffness enveloping her fingers.

She lays the *one for show* in a diamond,  
brings its lower point up to meet the top,  
repeats the process, corner to corner,  
his display handkerchief  
is starched and taut.

The *one to blow* is out of sight,  
but when he returns in the early hours,  
she will ease it from his pocket  
and dissolve its yellow overnight:  
one-part bleach to thirty-parts water.

She slips back into bed  
while her iron sits by the sink, drained  
and idle, gleaming in the night air.

'I feel so incredibly privileged to have worked with these three phenomenal women writers. It has been inspiring for me to watch them grow, and read their words, and talk with them about the long, hard but ultimately joyous process of putting a book together. With fiction it's not just the writing, it's the finishing – that's what they all wanted, and that's what they've all achieved. They have all completed a book over the course of the scheme and I'm ridiculously proud of them, and so excited to see where their work takes them next. These girls are gonna blow you away!'

Emma Jane Unsworth  
Mentor | Fiction



Nasreen Rafiq | from *Sunset House*

Riffat Ali is a wife, mother, doll artist and acid attack survivor. When Riffat converts her Georgian family home into a home for the Asian elderly, she cannot foresee that her husband will leave, her son will go missing and the attacker will move in.

\*

The house was steeped in a deep sleep, on the cusp of night and day; too early for birdsong or dawn prayer. Riffat slipped out of bed and eased the window up. The wood, damp and swollen, jarred in the frame. The night breeze swept over her face and crept around her nightshirt. She stared out into the distance, over the tops of the terraces, past the cluster of new-builds as streetlamps and nightlights winked on and off and the day broke.

The shadows danced on the lawn below. Riffat leaned out further. A glimpse of the culprit would stem the bad omen stories and reassure the residents. Her gaze wandered along the moss-covered walls, over the stone statues, further down to the summerhouse where the grass grew in knee-high drifts. If there was any movement she might catch it reflected in the dusty panes. The silver birches rustled, yesterday's washing swayed on the line. No sign of a fox. She was about to slide the window back down when she saw it, collapsed in a heap. The bedspread she'd bought for her wedding anniversary, too heavy for the nylon line, too big for the tumble dryer, lay on the damp grass under the grey-blue dawn. She thought about running down to rescue it when she remembered something her mother had once said; it was bad luck to walk on the morning dew. And yet she had, over and over.

Whilst the women slept Riffat worked downstairs. In the drawing room she repositioned the chairs and settees, dusted

cabinets and picture frames, stuffing her gown pockets with abandoned rosary beads, cigarette lighters, Christine's footfile. She was gathering up odd slippers and scarves, a bottle of mustard oil, a comb studded with knots of hair, when she heard a knock at the door.

She placed the items on the floor, fastened her dressing gown and crept into the hall, barefoot on the cold tiles. Fahmida hurried down the stairs, fully dressed and hair coiffed to show off the distinct band of white.

'Who are you expecting at this time?' Fahmida asked. Riffat held a finger up to her lips, hoping whoever it was might give up and go.

The knocker rang through the house like gunshots. '*Kuri-chowd.*' Fahmida cursed, clutching her chest. 'Scared the life out of me.' She waved Riffat away. 'Go put some clothes on.'

Riffat answered the door to the carcass of someone's belongings. Black plastic sacks and storage bags strewn over the drive and on the porch steps. The driver returned with more.

'I'm sorry, wait, what are you doing?' Riffat called out. He was about Riffat's age; no more than forty though his beard aged him, disguised his sharp features and darkened his olive skin. He dragged over a large roll of fabric and offered it to Riffat. She stuffed her hands into her gown pockets. His blue van was parked so she couldn't see how much more there was. It kept coming. Roll after roll of plastic clad fabric.

'I'm sorry for the trouble, Sister,' he said. 'Boy, you're making a mistake. You've got the wrong house, you *pagal*,' Fahmida replied.

Riffat didn't recognise him. She'd studied the women's photographs enough to know for sure that he wasn't a son or nephew. He did look sorry for the trouble though.

He hauled out more rolls, tossing them so they landed close to the bags. The force made the gravel spit up and sent the dust up in the air. He talked as he worked.

‘I explain to Aunty-ji this will make a problem. I have a wife, you understand? Already too many drama in my family. What can I do?’ He looked up to the sky as if it held the answer. ‘If I do right I’m wrong, if I do wrong it’s my fault. There is no justice. Forgive me, Sister.’

‘Stop talking in riddles.’ Fahmida pushed past Riffat and stepped out onto the porch. ‘*Sister-sister* nonsense,’ she mimicked. ‘Get to the point. Whose rubbish is this?’

Riffat knew the answer.

‘Aunty-ji said bring little by little, one or two. How can I come this far for one or two? Wife is saying take it all. It is expensive to hire the van; you understand I have to think about my own family.’ He slammed the van door shut. ‘Bad weather is coming, Sister. Take it in, *jaldi*.’

Riffat joined Fahmida on the front steps.

‘*Beti*, go put some clothes on.’ Fahmida urged positioning herself in front of Riffat.

Riffat crossed her arms over her chest. The cold wrapped around her bare legs as she looked down on the remains of Gita’s shop. What was she supposed to do with all this?

He was right about the bad weather. The clouds twisted overhead and masked the watery sun. He bowed his head, dusted off his T-shirt and jeans. Grace drove in and parked up behind him. Riffat felt her face flush. The girl was always turning up on her days off. Was there anyone left to see her half-dressed this morning?

‘Aunty-ji has good fortune,’ he said stepping back to look at the house, mouth slack with admiration. ‘*Wah-ji-wah*.’

Grace found a path up to the house. She pushed her sunglasses up onto her head and joined Riffat and Fahmida on

the porch. Mira-Rani padded down the stairs in her jeans and gughroos and joined them. She positioned her bare feet on the stone as if she was about to perform, one foot poised before the other. The smallest movement made the bells quiver.

‘Someone get Aunty Gita.’ Riffat said.

Riffat turned to see red-face Gita wheeling herself down the hall, mumbles turned to shouts.

‘Namaste Aunti-ji.’ He hurried around the van to the driver’s side.

‘Don’t you Namaste me, Birindar-boy. What have you done here?’ Gita yelled. She tried to wheel herself over the threshold but the chair rolled back, her eyes darted over her belongings. She couldn’t push the chair over.

‘Come back and sort this out. Have you no shame?’ Gita’s jowls hung lower, slacker than usual, her whole face looked like it might slide off.

‘Look at me,’ Gita shouted. ‘You think I can manage all this?’

Birindar started the van, sped down the drive and turned left onto the main road. They heard the crunch of his gears as he revved away. The commotion drew the others downstairs and they gathered together on the porch.

‘We don’t have room for this.’ Riffat turned to Gita. ‘You know the rules, Aunty.’

Gita stood up and pulled her chair over. She dropped back down and clasped her hands, her elbows on the armrests, her gaze fixed on her things. ‘I should have a ramp, in the front and back of the house.’

Riffat heard a splat. She saw the rain drops gather on the dust-covered plastic. She didn’t want any of this in the house no more than she wanted a ramp.

‘Twenty-four-five-six.’ Christine pushed her way over to Riffat. ‘Twenty-six. And that’s just the big ones,’ Christine

stated. 'If I'd known I would have brought my Akbar's things, may Allah grant him the highest place in Jannah.'

The rain fell faster.

'Get it inside and then we'll worry about it. Grace, can you help us?' Riffat asked.

'You pay her don't you?' Gita snapped. She lifted herself out of the chair and began passing the black bags up to Christine and Fahmida. 'Hurry, they're getting wet.'

Christine and Fahmida disappeared into the house with a bag each. Habiba worked with Grace and between them they lugged the rolls in. The wall panelling was marked where they leaned against it. Riffat dragged in the last of the bags. She stopped to catch her breath. The entire length of the hall from the front door to the kitchen was lined with Gita's materials.

Every roll, bin liner and holdall would need wiping down before it was moved again. A whole morning's work. Mira-Rani crept around, her gughroos exposing her; ringing with every step. She worked her way towards Riffat, snipping and peeling back the plastic to reveal sequinned cerise, embroidered lime, plum and gold florals. When Gita wheeled back into the house, Mira-Rani hid the scissors behind her back and slipped into the kitchen. Gita swore she would find the *haramdi* who had touched her stock. Riffat suspected there was more than one. Between them they had unzipped the storage bags, torn holes in the bin liners, fingered the spools of cotton, silk and metallic threads, the scissors, safety pins and elastics; hundreds of spools and packets so tightly packed that they had erupted. The holdalls brimmed with cellophane packets containing every shade of dupatta, mehndi cones, bangles and bindi tabs.

Riffat imagined Gita closing her shop for the last time, too ashamed to tell anyone about the repossession; not her son nor her customers. She imagined Gita sweeping her shop into holdalls and bin liners, working long into the night, in and out

of her wheelchair, breathless and hunched over, feeling her way in the dark.

Riffat rolled up her sleeves, put on a pair of washing up gloves and started at one end. Gita wiped down the bags, dabbing where she could. She talked to herself, raising her voice and cursing when she came across another unzipped bag, a hole ripped into the black liners. Mira-Rani crept upstairs and moments later the sound of the Veena drifted down from her room, the same chords over and over. Riffat was half-way along the hall, out of breath, when she felt her phone vibrate at her hip.

Ben.

She pulled off a glove and smoothed the hair from her face.  
‘I was hoping you’d call.’

Gita suddenly wheeled up right behind her and started shouting. ‘Bloody vultures, feeding on my misfortune. Do you see me sticking my fingers up in their business, rummaging around like a midwife?’

‘Hold on, Ben,’ Riffat wanted Gita to know it was him. Let her dare say something to her face. She pulled off the other glove and dropped them both onto Gita’s lap. Let her get on with her own dirty work.

Gita grabbed Riffat’s wrist.

‘Just a minute, Ben.’ Riffat tried to pull herself free. What was wrong with this woman? ‘I can’t hear—’

Riffat realised too late. Gita had twisted her arm, seen enough and released her grip. Riffat held her stare.

‘Are you there?’ Ben asked. ‘Rif?’

Riffat hurried to the office, slammed the door behind her and rolled down her sleeves. Gita wasn’t going to stop. She would tell the other women.

‘Sorry, it’s been a crazy morning.’ She wiped her brow.

‘Sounds like you’re having fun.’

‘Oh, yeah, Gita, she’s a long story.’ Riffat forced a laugh, waited for him to ask her to elaborate.

‘She reminds me of your mum.’ The words slipped out of her mouth.

‘You’ve obviously got your hands full. Forget I called.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ She snapped. She wasn’t in the mood for games.

‘You could have told me you had no intention of coming. Instead of making me look like a bloody fool, pacing the corridor, telling them you’ll be here any minute.’

‘I don’t know what...?’ Riffat sat down. She switched on the computer to check the schedule. She flicked through her desk diary. Nothing.

‘Newland’s Clinic?’ Ben’s voice was low. ‘Ten o’clock.’

It was just gone ten-twenty. How had this happened?

‘Shit. Shit. Tell him I’m coming.’

She jumped up.

‘I can be there within the hour,’ she tried. She looked down at her dirty gown.

It was a lie. They both knew it. Newland’s was at least an hour’s drive. She sat back down. There was no point.

‘Can’t we reschedule?’

‘What the hell was more important than this?’ Ben asked.  
‘Actually, don’t answer.’

‘We’ll go to him; to his clinic in France.’

She closed her eyes.

‘I’m sorry.’ She swallowed the lump in her throat. She wasn’t going to cry.

\*

‘I didn’t know you had visitors, Aunty.’ Riffat walked into Gita’s bedroom. She looked at the red-cheeked boy who was

dribbling onto his damp T-shirt. His fist unclenched around a lollipop, as he passed the sticky sweet from one hand to the other. He let his dummy fall to the floor and replaced it with the lollipop, his hands free to explore the Edwardian chest of drawers. His young mother perched on Gita's bed. She wasn't Gita's relative, not even Indian.

'Aunty, what are you doing? You're not allowed to—'

'Don't be shy, *beti*. Come, hold this.' Gita stepped out of her chair and dragged a roll of turquoise fabric, as tall as her, to the middle of the room and unravelled it. She measured a length from her arm to her nose and then unravelled it further measuring once more. She licked her forefinger, ran her hand down the fold and offered the other end to Riffat. She grabbed the steel scissors from her wheelchair and snipped the air. When the young woman turned to check on her son, Gita's hand slipped further back on the material. She sliced through the cloth, the cold metal touching Riffat's fingertips. Gita stuffed the material into a carrier bag and flung it onto the bed.

'You can't sell from here,' Riffat looked from Gita to her customer, 'you're going to get me closed down.'

'Don't listen to her,' Gita waved Riffat away, 'there's something here for every occasion, every pocket.'

The woman walked over and pressed money into Gita's palm. She said something urgent, her nostrils flared as she leaned in to whisper in Gita's ear. Gita stuffed the notes into the money belt and began winding the fabric back up.

The woman returned to her son ready to leave. The boy collapsed in protest, twisting and thrashing on the carpet. Riffat watched, horrified, as his feet kicked at the drawers. His lollipop fell out and stuck to the carpet. The lamp toppled and fell into the space behind, before Riffat could catch it.

'Jesus.' Riffat fished it back out.

'Jesus-Jesus,' the boy kicked and screamed.

The woman stopped grabbing for the boy and stared up at Riffat. She looked her up and down, nostrils flaring, on the verge of saying something.

She turned back to her son, stung him with a sharp slap on his arm making him surrender. Limp and wailing she hauled him up to her hip, fixed the carrier bag around her wrist and nodded goodbye to Gita.

'Merbani. Shukriya,' Gita shouted above the sound of the boy's cries. She slumped back into her wheelchair.

Riffat heard the front door slam shut; the boy's muffled protests petered out.

Gita cleared her throat. The smile she had worn for the customer had vanished. She spoke before Riffat had the chance.

'I want you to call my Kiran,' her voice low and thick with anger. 'You thought I wouldn't find out?' She bent double and reached around under the bed, her spine pressed up against the flesh on her back. 'I'm not living in some refuge with runaways and *rundiyah*.' The tips of her fingers barely brushed the carpet, her reach restricted by the rolls of her stomach.

Riffat stepped forward, unsteady in her new heels on the thick carpet. 'Aunty, let me help you.'

'Get away from me.' Gita sat back up, empty handed, breathless and dark in the face. 'Kiran said this was a reputable home, not a pit stop for dirty, washed-up women. Call him. Do you hear me?' She dropped onto her knees and padded the carpet under the bed.

'Please Aunty, I don't know what—'

'Don't lie to me,' Gita spat. She sat back on her haunches, her hair dishevelled where it had brushed against the bedclothes. The pleats in her sari splayed around her.

'That *rundi* Javeria has abandoned her husband,' Gita screamed. 'She goes back and leaves food for him. Like he's a dog! All this time, coming back here long-faced and weeping. I

nearly felt *sorry* for her.' She inhaled sharply, struggling for breath. '*Hai*, it's my mistake. All this time I had my eye on the *gori*, but it was our own women I should have suspected.'

'Aunty please, it's not what you think.' Riffat pushed the door closed. So that was the conversation she had interrupted. What other lies had that woman told her? 'That woman has no right, coming to this house and disrespecting the residents.'

Gita wasn't listening. 'That other one, *Professor Fahmida*,' Gita's face crumpled in disgust, 'she went with a *kala* – and she wonders why God didn't give her children?' The words caught in her throat making her choke and cough. She sat back up on the bed having found her slippers. She threw one to the floor and thrust her foot in.

Riffat noticed there seemed to be nothing wrong with her legs today.

'The whole of Tipton knows me.' Gita slapped the slipper against her thigh. She indicated the breadth of the room. 'My late husband's cousins live in Smallbridge, Bexley, everywhere.'

Riffat could hear Gita's rasping.

Gita lowered her voice and muttered to herself. 'That Birindar-bastard he will have told everyone. A lifetime of respect unravelled in one slip of the hand.'

Riffat joined her on the bed.

'I had to undercharge that woman,' Gita mumbled. 'First time in my life. I had a reputation for getting the price I asked. Now she'll tell the others and they'll all come and take advantage, you understand? It doesn't matter who you were before, what you did; people forget. They remember you for *tamasha* and where you wash up at the end.'

A tear rolled down Gita's cheek and Riffat heard her swallow.

‘Kiran’s mother, they’ll say, as they light the match to my flesh – because they won’t let the shame end when I’m dead – no, they’ll pass it onto him. They’ll say she finished up selling *susta-maal* from the whorehouse.’ Her voice cracked and gave way to a choking sob that she smothered into her pallu. ‘You children, you don’t understand. You don’t care for your own reputations, let alone ours.’

‘I understand that gossip can destroy a life,’ Riffat said. She raised a foot, studied her new shoes. A vein bulged where the strap was fastened too tight. She checked the other foot. The vein was flat. ‘So you can listen to her gossip and make judgments about the others.’

Gita stared at Riffat, her face bloated with disgust. ‘You’re no better than them.’ She snarled. ‘You forget who you are.’

Riffat stood up. She’d had enough. ‘Judge all of us. Don’t forget you’re free to leave at any time – but I’ll say this – if any of you had a choice you wouldn’t be here.’

‘There will be no secrets in a house full of women,’ Gita snapped. ‘One by one they will slip from your tongues because nothing can remain hidden.’

‘You’re thinking too much.’

‘Thinking too much,’ Gita snarled. ‘What kind of women are you?’

‘I’ll get the phone and you can call Kiran yourself.’

Riffat heard Gita’s laboured breathing. She glanced around the room; walls lined with rolls of fabric, alcoves stacked with cellophane packets, boxes of bangles and threads piled high.

‘I won’t disturb him at work.’ Gita pulled her legs up onto the bed and lay down. She turned her back to Riffat. ‘Some of us care about our children.’

Riffat took a deep breath.

‘I have to get some shopping. The new lady’s arriving today. Remember, Aunty?’

Gita spread her pallu across her midriff, her sigh filled the air.

'Please, make her feel welcome – the first days are the hardest,' Riffat said as she pulled the door closed.

\*

Riffat returned with the shopping. Her overnight bag packed and ready in the boot of her car. She'd cook the sweet yellow rice, welcome the resident and then leave for the evening. She didn't have the energy to deal with another upset or outburst. She heard the chatter from the kitchen as the women prepared dinner. Riffat carried the shopping through, handed Christine the glacé cherries to slice, Fahmida the coconut and Habiba the cigarettes.

'You didn't make this much effort when we arrived.'

Christine slipped a cherry into her mouth.

'She's going out tonight,' Mira-Rani teased. 'There must be a man. Why else is she wearing those shoes?'

'Because she likes them? Why does there have to be a man involved?' Fahmida snapped her notebook shut. Her eyes widened. 'It's the tandoor boy, isn't it?'

'Don't try to make her loose like you,' Gita snarled. She turned to Riffat, 'Daughter, you don't listen to her, you understand? Education has made her stupid. If she was clever she would be with her husband, not sniffing around us.'

'Aunty, please,' Riffat warned. She didn't want a repeat of earlier.

'It's him, isn't it?' Fahmida laughed. 'You deserve to be happy. We all do.'

'She's a married woman.' Gita interrupted.  
'She has the blush of new love, look,' Mira-Rani teased. 'Oh, to be young again.'

'Young and stupid,' Gita snapped, 'to throw everything away. You should be ashamed, all of you, for encouraging the girl.'

Gita wheeled up next to Riffat at the sink. 'A woman is for a husband's eyes only, you hear me?' Gita ran a finger down Riffat's sleeve. 'Another man, he will not see you the same. He won't know where you've been.' She tugged at Riffat's sleeve. 'Don't forget yourself.'

Riffat filled the pan with water. She put the kettle on to boil.

'Sister Gita,' Fahmida yelled across the kitchen, her tone playful.

Riffat poured out the milky water and filled the pot again, agitating the grains, immersing her hands in the ice-cold water.

'Pehn-ji, tell us,' Fahmida beckoned Gita to the table, 'a woman who owns that much gold must have been someone's Sohni?'

'This is nothing,' Gita jangled her bangles. 'What is there to tell? The bastard drunk emptied my accounts and ran back to India. If he was a real man he would have cut off my hands and taken all of it.'

'It's the water in this country.' Javeria mumbled.

'I pray his body is washed up so I can claim on the life insurance. Even in death I am bound; such is our union.'

'Oh, Pehn.' Fahmida whispered.

'Two years left, before they have to pay me. And then I will be gone.'

'Are you sure he's dead?' Mira-Rani asked.

No-one answered.

When Riffat turned to put the rice on the hob she found herself alone in the kitchen.

Riffat heard the patter of Grace's footsteps in the hall. The new resident had arrived. She checked the time. Five-thirty. Christine hurried in and out of the kitchen determined to impress the new resident with her slow-brewed chai. She emptied a packet of custard creams into a bowl and rushed off again.

Riffat started the dessert. She'd allow them enough time for their interrogation before she joined them. She thought about Gita's warning about there being no secrets in a house full of women.

Half a packet of butter sizzled in the pan. Riffat poured in two mugs of sugar, a pinch of cardamom powder. On the back burner, as the rice water began to boil, she tipped in a teaspoon of Sunset Yellow and watched the water cloud over.



Alex Murdoch | from *Light is on a Timer*

*Light is on a Timer* is three very different stories in answer to the question: what is there to gain or lose on either side of a border? The second story Liberty is about tolerance and freedom of speech set in a France/UK context. The final story is Refuge and is about how we welcome difference. This extract here is from the first story, Nation.

*The openness in the staging is an invitation to the director, designers and ensemble.*

*There is no need for what we see to mirror what we hear. There is no need for fourth wall naturalism or traditional casting.*

*The letters to indicate characters are just a guide. ‘N’, ‘R’ and ‘L’ are referred to as such because they are the main narrators of the Nation, Refuge and Liberty sections. ‘A’, ‘B’ or ‘C’ etc voices are not necessarily played by the same actor throughout.*

*Light is on a Timer* is under commission to the Royal Shakespeare Company.

## **NATION**

### **Come Home**

N      Come home and we will talk about home.  
We will talk and talk and talk about home. We will tell  
you a story about who we are and you will say I know  
and we will tell it again.

### **The position of the toll**

A      Another thing that's typical is, say I go away and I  
come back. I got to pay.

B      Yeah.

A      I got to pay to get in to my own country.

C      £6.60 for a category one passenger vehicle of up to 9  
seats.

B      Right.

A      Whereas. You are English. You don't pay to go home.

B

A      We have to pay to get into our own country.

B      Someone had to pay somewhere on one side.

C      They could have had it £3.30 on each side.

B      But

## Come Home

N You will say I know. We will tell it again.

We will tell you a story about what happened last time you visited. Nothing in particular happened last time you visited. Nothing that was any different. You will say I was there. I remember. We will tell it again.

To take part at least you might try and correct a detail and you might get a detail wrong. That detail has changed over time for some reason or another, and the thing is, you weren't here. Big mistake.

We will have to go through it all again.

Sometimes we will tell the story of an uncle who, in – what must it have been, 1950? – an uncle who saw a famous jazz musician make a joke in the Prince of Wales Theatre in Cardiff – what is the Wetherspoons now. None of us were there. Most of us weren't born. But we will all do the punchline.

And the Aunty. Who is 90. She is bored because she can't hear. Mostly she sings.

In order to make her feel that everything is still how it was, you sing with her. And you tell the stories, shout the stories to her, you say, Do you remember when Roger Williams was after you and he came calling and we were sat on this sofa and you and your sisters said 'oh Christ it's shithead' and you shout this little story, because this little tiny moment made you howl when you were, when it was, when was it, 1982 or something, you shout this tiny story, you shout it in the direction of her chair.

You shout it for her.

And she smiles the warmest and most loving smile you ever saw.

In the afternoon the children say. Why must you go to London, why do you live there?

And as you drive along the M4 towards the bridge – until you cross it – you wonder indeed why you chose to live in England where the people seem so cool because despite all this you are at home when you are on the Welsh side of the bridge.

Aren't you though? You truly are.

You are at home.

### **Welsh Not 1**

N        He's buying a home in your country because he loves it. It's always felt like home.

B        'Everyone's lush, tidy, cosy, lovely-lovely in Wales, isn't it?'

N        'If you do that voice in my home town, they'll kick your head in, darlin.'

B        'See, why is that voice you're putting on now any different from what I'm doing? Doing a Welsh accent is just the same as doing an Indian accent, isn't it, but you have to keep your head still my lovely otherwise it is definitely Indian and then it is definitely racist.'

N        'And it's not racist if it's a Welsh accent, is it Mun?'

B       ‘No. Who could offend the Welsh? It’s just a lovely-lovely Welsh accent.’

N       Anyway, he always says he’s never really felt like he’s from anywhere. He’s European. He feels like a European man. Or – love him – if he’s had too much wine he feels like a citizen of the world. It’s human nature, actually, do you know what it is a human right, to roam the earth, he says.

And actually do you know what? He’s not English. His mother is German and his dad was from Monaco, or his grandfather was, who was also half-South African of origin, and actually his mother found out she was adopted, so really she’s Swiss they think. Anyway. So that’s. Yes.

He’s not English.

Now your family they clung to this little bit of crag, this rock, to these little settlements, generation after generation, determined little scrum halves, and even when in poverty and oppression your great grandfather’s neighbours were forced to migrate to the Americas, your tenacious wiry ancestors were the ones who clung on, heads down against the rain and wind.

Until you broke that line and went away to university.

And now you are back and you’ve brought him with you and he is buying a cottage near Tenby.

So it’s OK.

Because you are from here, right?

## **Thank you driver**

N        We are coming from viewing the second cottage.

The first village was stunning but there didn't seem to be any Welsh people living there.

The second village you thought had definitely more of a Welsh feel. And it was so much cheaper.  
But.

Anyway, you say, you have lots of thinking to do.

There are sheep in the bus shelter so we stand in the rain.

I find myself looking at you looking at the concrete bus shelter.

The bus is coming.

It pulls into the gravel mud ditch and we jump from the wet grass.

The bus smells of raincoats.

An old lady at the back is having a conversation with the old man and woman in the front.

The bus belts down the lane. I don't tell you that the driver is always stoned.

We pass the castle.

The other hourly bus coming back the other way.

I am looking at you looking at the bus, the castle.

Everything is warmth and chatter and summer rain.

The bus waits for the train.

You become excited that you get to say ‘thank you driver’.

I point out the little Victorian school, where I was in the Infants. You think what the architect has done with the conversion of the property is inspirational.

We miss the train to have a pint in the village I grew up in, why not you say, ‘we are on holiday’.

### **The position of the toll**

B I pay to get into Wales though.

A I know, that’s what I’m saying.

B No but

A Gar. Will you get another two packets of crisps?

B But.

A It’s typical though, do you know what I mean?

B Well, not exactly because

A You can’t see that that is unfair?

B But if you are coming in to Wales, regardless

A You see you are blind to it.

C Why don’t they put the toll on the other side?

B Because they

A It's a slap in the face. Again.

B Um.

## Nice Lads

N You must meet my friends.

No, really you must.

Inside I know I don't want you to. But you're going to.

I will be sitting in the lounge with the girls, not very far away. A pragmatic bottle of prosecco each. Because we don't want to be up and down to the bar all night. Not in these shoes.

You'll be standing in the bar, with the boys. They like a laugh and there's no harm in it. Every one of them works for a charity – Paul Youth Addiction, Gareth Child Poverty, Rob At Risk Single Mothers and Kyle Ethnic Minority Achievement in Wales. So, you know, they're all nice lads at heart. And their jobs are pretty stressful – well they're losing their funding aren't they now most of them – so they're going to be letting loose a bit, letting rip. You can understand that?

There's no harm meant.

And this is it now, you have to meet them.

Don't sideways glance me, these are my friends and this is the real me.

There is no secret 'we', don't be like that.

You must see this is the real me.

So put your coat on.

This is the point where I want to say please, please do not do the Welsh accent. But I think I make that sort of clear when I say instead

No, not that coat, it's a blazer. Just not that one, that's all.

### **The position of the toll 2**

A I know what you are gonna say

B Do you?

A You are gonna say the toll works both ways

B Well yes, exactly because

A But as a microcosmic detail, in the great scheme of things, and by the way there is a great scheme, in the, from a microcosmic perspective

C Here he goes

A No be fair

C Here he goes

A Don't

C Look out

B It doesn't matter

A Oh it doesn't matter does it?

B I don't mean. I don't mean it doesn't matter on a, on a...in the great scheme of things

- A Right
- B On a microcosmic level
- A Right
- B I mean it doesn't matter let's change the subject
- A What you saying?
- B I don't know.
- A We have to pay to get into our own country.
- B Someone had to pay somewhere on one side.
- C They could have had it £3.30 on each side.
- B But – hang on haven't we already said this bit?

*There is a slight pause, as if the script or show has broken down.*

- A You just don't fucking get it do you?
- B Um. Sorry. No I don't really.
- C Look out.
- B Look I don't get it. I mean it's not exactly racist, is it mate, to charge for the upkeep of the bridge and so forth, you could look at it another way and say you are free to go as you please whereas coming to Wales, no that doesn't make any sense, coming to, oh never mind.
- A In actual fact do you know what I think, and calm down by the way man, what I think is

B OK what do you think, as if we don't know?

A What I think is you just don't know what I think.

B Uh?

A You just have this one view.

B Go on.

A I don't see why they have a fucking toll at all.

B Oh. Right.

A Or a border.

B Interesting.

C Instead of all these leisure centres and art galleries I don't know why they don't just build a fucking big wall, keep the English out. And every other bugger if you know what I'm saying.

B

A Eh Prince Charming, shall we move on to the Jolly? It's your round.

*Long pause*

## **What doesn't happen**

C This didn't happen

*The performers stop. It is unclear whether the show is 'broken'.  
This all happens pretty fast.*

A Yes it did.

C No. Nobody said anything racist.

B I didn't say it was racist.

C In that conversation nobody implied anything racist.  
We're not all backward, racist people here. I work for a charity.  
I can't even open my mouth without being wrong.

B Right.

C You are very welcome to buy a property here, my  
English friend. There are plenty of them for you to choose. In  
your price range.

B I don't get what's going on, actually.

A He's saying

C You're not an immigrant

A Ah well there we are

C You are an expat

A Because he's wh...

C Shall we go to the Jolly? It's your round, I believe, Little  
Lord Fauntleroy.

B        Actually, I think it was...yes alright.

## **Fastest Tide in the World**

C        In between my country and yours – which is the same country technically, sort of separated by a channel of water – in between my country and yours is a channel of water and it has the fastest tide in the

In between my country and yours is a channel of water

Fastest tide in the world

If you're a surfer, if you're a surfer, say you live in Porthcawl or something, if you're a surfer

Say you're a surfer and you live in Porthcawl

Which you don't, which you don't, which you don't

But

Say you're a surfer and you live in Porthcawl and if you're lucky they say you can catch a rip tide

I don't know much about this, this is hearsay really, hearsay really

But

If you catch this rip tide thing, rip tide or something, I don't actually in actual fact know the word for it, word for it, let's say rip tide as a kind of, yes rip tide

Say you live in Porthcawl

But you don't I know, you don't I know, I know you don't but  
say you do, say you do

Say you live there man, for Christ's sake, say you live in  
Porthcawl, say for example you do

Say you do

You can get on your surfboard, a surfboard, you have sea where  
you come from don't you?

You can get on your surfboard and if you catch this thing that  
happens

Doesn't happen very often mind, so they say, so I hear

Hearsay, as I say

You can get on the board, the surfboard, it's a board man, for  
the surf

A surfboard

You can, if you're very fortunate, you can catch it on this wave

Not one wave, I mean a wave isn't one thing is it?

You can catch it and stay on your bloody surfboard if you're  
lucky and take you all the way to Newport it will, all the way  
mind you, all the way to bloody Newport

A hell hole

All the way. What I'm saying is, you can get on your surfboard  
from here, from here say, right outside this pub

The Jolly Sailor, or the Jolly as it's known

You can, my English friend, get on a surfboard here, I'll help you chose one

I know a man who, I know the boy who can get you one, never mind

You can my English friend get on your surfboard and if we're both lucky, on a rip tide, this particular rip tide, or whatever they call it, you can take that

take that surfboard, like a bloody escalator, like a moving walkway, right up to, all the way up to bloody Newport, hell hole, you can my English friend take that surfboard and it won't take you long to get there

And that's pretty close to the bridge, you're pretty close to the bridge there, to the border, where the channel becomes the mouth of the river Severn

Fastest tide in the world

## **You did belong here**

N        You don't belong here because you left here.

We welcome you home but you don't belong here.

I am playing the evening over in the taxi rank looking at my chips.

Well. We say you belong here. When it suits us to make you feel guilty.

But you don't know anything about here do you? Anymore.

I left you outside the Jolly. Sorry but I wanted chips and I didn't think anything was actually going to kick off. Although I don't know why you thought it was a good idea to do your Welsh accent in public.

Now I am sitting in the taxi thinking where am I going? And the problem is I want to go home.

You wouldn't be qualified to choose the local government. I mean you don't even know what services we need. You don't need the same services as we do. I mean, you don't even drive cars where you are. Nobody needs cars. But where we are parking is an issue.

We like retail. But you're above all that aren't you? We like to go to Costco and then be able to have a coffee at Costa in the same car park but you think that's naff I expect.

I am drunk in back of the taxi and I just want to go home, and Drive is saying 'you have to tell me where your home is my lovely'

You did belong here. But you left here.

Sometimes we refer to people we went to school with and you're meant to remember who they are. But we chose people from the years after you left. It's like we muddy the issue.

I have nothing with me to take off my make up and look it's all down my face. You said my home is in your arms. But is that a home, is it?

There'll be a welcome in the hillsides  
There'll be a welcome in the vales  
We'll keep a dah-dah-something-dah-dah  
When you come home again to

You don't belong here now you've left here.

And yet we keep on asking you why you don't want to come back.

## Tall Tales

A        What you mean all the way to Newport?  
On a surfboard you say? You don't want to do that man. Does  
he, love?

No, no, who told you that? You were on the sauce were you,  
drunk were you man?

He's a funny bugger. No, did he, did he say you can take a surf  
board from here to Newport?  
He was having you on man. Having you on.

No. You'd drown. Treacherous waters.  
You'd have to be soft to believe that.

He's marking his territory see, like a doggie. Having you on  
man. Tall tales. It's tradition if you meet an Englishman. You'll  
have to get used to that if you settle here, mate. Tell him love,  
isn't it? Love?

No he's not being funny, he doesn't mean anything by it.

Bugger he is. Funny bugger.

They're like that his lot. Welsh boy he is, see.

Yes I know I'm Welsh, man, but he's a Welsh boy isn't he?  
From up the valleys, isn't it?

You'd drown.

Some neighbour's cow escaped and walked over into his  
forefather's field in 17fucking80 or something and his family  
never speak to them again.

Welsh boy he is, see.

Daft.

It's a bore, that's what it is.

You can catch it from up Chepstow, up the Severn, tidal range is the second highest in the world you see, all the way up to Gloucester, past the Aust services.

Magnificent, I'm telling you man. No word of a lie.

### **Welsh Not 3**

N It's 5pm and you were rained off the beach so now might be a good time to take him to meet your Nan and your Bampy.

Bamp is doing the story of how at school they had him wear the Welsh Not and they took a stick to him if he spoke in Welsh. Which you never used to believe could be true, but. You can see it now.

Nan is watching 'Homes in the Sun'.

On the way back in the car he talks about property prices in Cornwall.

B Which exit is it?

N The third, this one.

B

N

B Why can't they put bloody signs on any of the. Jesus.  
No surprise your poor old Grandfather gets confused. I'm going  
to go round again.

N What you mean?

B With his story about the sign round his neck. He must  
have skipped a few generations there, bless him. Must have  
been in his grandfather's time he means.

N No.

B If it happened at all, love.

N No, this happened in

B I think we've been down this road.

N This happened

B I'm going to take the next exit, wherever it goes. Bloody  
hell, no wonder everyone here is paranoid.

N

B Don't you recognise any of these roads?

N Yes. But.

B 'The green, green, grass of home, Mun?'

N

B 'What, can't we do the voice now, we're nearly over the  
bridge? Ah love her, is she grumpy cos she believed her  
Grampy and his daft, paranoid story, ah Love Her! She's twp,  
she's a bit daft, love her, she's only a simple girl from the  
valleys, ah love her she's soft in the head is she? Bit soft.'

'Now your Scot wouldn't have any of this Sign round his Neck hoo-hah cos he's more Fighty, Och your Fighty Scot. Aye, that's his character.'

'But Love Her she's soft isn't she, she's lovely, she's lush. Now in a minute you'll see she'll make a characteristic self-deprecating joke, eh? Won't she eh?'

N And at this point, I'm going to tell him what I think of him. We will have an impassioned debate, and despite being angry I step up and push back, deftly elucidating on his historical position as the oppressor, with an articulacy he's not previously witnessed, and he realises the error of his ways and he says sorry, sorry for all of it and. And.

And he'll say he's not actually, technically English and I say you are though. You are, you are, you are though. I hear myself arguing the toss over that. You are English and I am Welsh.

And I hear that making this distinction is. The most pathetic bullshit in the world. An argument I am perfectly aware has never got anyone anywhere ever. So.

So it's a good job that in actuality I do not say any of those things. Because I know he probably means well at the end of the day, and doing the silly accent, my silly accent is just our couple joke, and my job is to go along with it, to know my place; the stooge to the old routine.

It's not really funny is it? I mean it's unhelpful actually. It's really not harmless. I see all that in this moment. But I've colluded in it too long to suddenly change course now. I could say something but I decide it is better to say nothing and walk away.

B I'll be paranoid myself if I see this roundabout again.

N I think you can turn off over by here.

B How many circles are there meant to be in hell?

N For the last hour of our relationship we loop the same three roundabouts. When he starts talking about inheriting his grandmothers cottage in France if we're still in the EU when she – I tell him to pull over and put me out. Without explanation I slam the door and he sweeps away, fast, as if being sucked by the tide.

I remember standing on the side of the road staring at the grass on the roundabout.

Felt like a decision was being made. Somehow made for me before my parents even met.

Born out by my stubborn heart and not my head.

Moved back shortly after that. It was just that.  
Everything was just. You know. Familiar.

Bought a place near the bridge.

### **Come Home**

N Come home and we will talk about home.  
We will talk and talk and talk about home.

C Here he goes

A No be fair

C Here he goes

A Don't

C Look out

B It doesn't matter

A        Oh it doesn't matter does it?

N        We will tell you a story about who we are and you will  
say I know and

A        Some neighbour's cow escaped and walked over into his  
forefather's field and his family never speak to them again.

N        we will tell it again.

C        In between my country and yours – which is the same  
country technically, sort of separated by a channel of water – in  
between my country and yours is a channel of water and it has  
the fastest tide in the

Ella Frears | from *Passivity, Electricity, Acclivity*

There's been an accident and now  
you have no fingerprints – the skin  
on each tip systematically lopped off.

You are bleeding through your bandages  
but I pretend not to see, I stroke your dusty hair  
and you tell me that you can fit three fingers  
in the crack that has developed in the wall.

\*

Things develop. We measure:

flour into a bowl, softness of an avocado,  
my breasts which won't stop growing,  
(the remainder of a possibility I refuse to measure)

I measure threat, which is a dull ache  
when I am out of the house  
and a freezing immersion at night.

\*

I heard a story about a man who made shoes for spies. These shoes were made to be given to the enemy. At first, they would feel perfectly comfortable. But over time they would change the enemy's gait, making them walk with a slight limp which would register in others as a lack of confidence. Their self-assurance would wane and an ache would develop somewhere deep inside their bones. The enemy would sicken, would have take leave from work. These shoes would inexplicably change the shape of their feet so that no other shoes felt right. The enemy would form an attachment which, over time, would become a compulsion; they would never go anywhere without the shoes, might even wear them in bed. The enemy's partner would grow weary, leave them for someone easier, less fraught. The enemy would drink for the pain, lose hope and wonder why the circulation in their toes was so bad that in the winter they were blueish-black. This condition would spread to their feet, then their legs, and because they were now the nervous type who would not want to bother the doctor, it would all be left too late, and they'd lose something — a toe if they were lucky, a foot if not.

\*

You try to fit three bloodied fingers in me  
as if I'd like that when I'm already so taut,  
already closed off     *you liked it before*

but I don't know which before I was for you.

\*

A boyfriend who thinks I have seen him  
kissing another girl outside the rugby club  
tells me he couldn't bear how heartbroken  
I looked; how he regretted it the moment  
he saw how much it mattered to me.

But I hadn't seen.

I had been tasting the cold air,  
feeling my heart beat  
into the dark car park,  
the thrill of my presence  
under the sky, alone,

or so I thought;

maybe there is always someone watching,  
maybe there is always someone to tell you  
your heart has broken

no matter how whole you feel  
beside the bins  
and under the stars.

\*

My uncle is into healing.  
He has thin lips and when a song plays about God  
he shuts his eyes and reaches upwards.

This is the kind of man you are driven towards by  
the shoes.

\*

For years after my near-abduction,  
I told my mother I could smell him, still,

because that was easier than explaining

that it wasn't so much him I could smell,  
but something new in me.

\*

There used to be a small theme-park where I grew up called 'Merlin's Magic Land', just out of town. On the roundabout in front, a man would stand dressed as a wizard, waving to all the cars and pointing at the theme-park. This man who was paid to dress as Merlin, began to think he *was* Merlin. He'd hang around town in his costume, just waving and pointing — in the supermarket, on the pier, through café windows. In the height of summer when all the

tourists were out on the beach, pink and near-nude, Merlin would sit on the sand, his face pale under his hat. One day, he picked up a toddler and began to wade into the sea. Who knows what he was trying to do. When the mother screamed he looked surprised to find a child in his arms. He didn't get far. Shortly after, the theme-park shut down. We never saw Merlin again. Maybe he died. Maybe he moved away. Maybe no one recognises him without the costume.

\*

The night of my near abduction,  
the hotel manager took me into the room  
of a man who fitted my description.

We crept in and stood over his sleeping body,  
together in the dark, *is it him?*  
I strain to see, afraid of what will happen  
if his eyelids lift. *No.*

\*

At a party a boy follows me into the bathroom  
claiming that when I left the room  
I nodded for him to follow.

Did I?  
Did he know that I hadn't?

I let him in, because  
why not take what I'm told I want  
who knows, he might be right.

\*

He calls my phone to check  
that I haven't given him a false number,  
leaves me a voicemail with my nipple  
in his mouth.

The next morning, alone, I listen to his voice –  
like a child talking with his mouth full

and then there's me,  
like a dull, distant mother:

*gently, gently, gently.*

\*

In the restaurant, on the roof terrace  
you are facing me and I am watching the moon  
rise against a bright blue sky behind you.

*Baby, I want to say, hold the moon a second  
I'm already carrying so much.*

I order a steak, rare, and try to feel strong,  
the blood coating my tongue as both you  
and the moon intensify.

\*

The evening after my near abduction, I am with my cousins  
in a hotel room, playing cards. They know the rough details  
and are excited and a little freaked out.

When no one is looking I hide behind the curtain,  
wait for a few minutes, then knock softly on the window.  
They scream and suddenly I am more afraid than I have ever been.

\*

I write a letter to the girl who was abducted  
because I failed to identify a sleeping man.

Would she have written me a letter  
if our roles were reversed?

I tell her I'm sorry that she had to see  
those eyes because I couldn't.

\*

*dear girl,*

*I thought I was special, chosen.  
I walked out of that room thinking he was my problem  
to leave sleeping. Please understand.*

\*

I lived in a house for a year with six strangers.  
One of them was a Catholic girl called Lucy.

Two weeks in, though we'd barely talked  
she told the others in the house  
that we'd slept together.

*It was a mistake, I feel sick* she told them.

\*

I overhear Lucy telling a friend how it happened.

There are the usual elements – *wine, secrets shared, laughter, a light touch and then...* and then

there are the odd specifics:

the way I kissed her (*too hard*),  
how I kept saying           *you're fun*

after each move towards undressing her.  
It was so vivid, I nearly believed it.

\*

Oh beautiful you with your fingers tip-less.

Don't worry. Skin grows back and there's love in  
this yet.

\*

The police arrive.

*We've been called by your neighbour.  
Your housemate is hanging out of the fourth floor  
window,  
threatening to jump.*

I go into the kitchen, Lucy is on the window ledge  
barely holding on with two fingers.

*We're going to hell*  
she shouts at me.

\*

*dear girl,  
do we look alike?  
I have always wondered what would have happened  
if I had gone with him.*

*What would have happened?*

\*

I find a Dictaphone taped to the underside of my bed.  
I ask Lucy if it's hers. Yes, she says,

*I just wanted to hear you sleep.*

I have nothing to say. I hand the dictaphone over  
without even deleting the recording.

What can a woman take from a woman?

\*

I return home to see family. It is October 31st. There is a small witch in fishnets at the train station. I take the bus towards town. It is at that point just before dark when the sky looks thin and yellow-pink and everything seems cinematic. I lean my face on the glass. My eye, reflected, is a part of the darkening road outside. I watch it clarify as the landscape fades. As we pause for the lights, I shift my focus through my face and then I see him, on the roundabout in front of what are now new flats – Merlin. Except his face is made-up like a skull. There is no one else around. He looks right into the bus and waves at me. An obscure joke, I think. A quiet one.

\*

Lucy claims to have also had a Dictaphone under the kitchen table, that she now knows all the secrets in the house.

*The others are so awful about you*  
she tells me.

And in spite of myself I ask what was said.

\*

I have this recurring dream:

You tell me you don't love me, never have,  
and I begin hitting you, in the face, in the chest,  
between the legs,

but my fists won't make impact, I can't hurt you.

You look bored and say, *you're only making things worse,*  
*you're only proving my point.*

\*

I can only assume Lucy has been feeding secrets to everyone.

We've all stopped talking, eat in our rooms,  
pass one another silently in the hall.

*Someone is pregnant* says Lucy from my doorway  
*Do you want to know who?*

I'm eating cereal on my bed.  
I don't even look up.

When she's gone I send a text to the others:

*Lucy is a liar.*

The next morning,  
my milk in the fridge has been dyed green.

\*

Asleep I claw, I knee, I hit, I don't stop.  
you walk away, yawning, unscathed.

\*

'I think one of the most important things a writer can hear is – 'you're a writer'. It's felt like much of this year has been about saying that. All three of my mentees were writers when they started, and I guess if there's one thing I've tried to do, it's be there – to remind them of that simple fact. It's been a massive privilege to watch the ideas they started with – of themselves as writers, and in their work – transform as the year went by. I've loved being around Alex, Jenny and Kim as they worked out the why and the how of communicating with the distinctive voices they had already. I'm not sure who got most out of it – me or them. In fact, scratch that. It felt like a four-person team. Who are now four friends. And three of those friends have made some brilliant work, and will continue to do so in future. I learned a lot. I'm proud to have been a small part of this, I'm proud of them, and I can't wait to see what happens next.'

Chris Thorpe  
Mentor | Playwriting



Stacey Sampson | from *The Salt of the Sky*

*The Salt of the Sky* is a middle-grade novel by Stacey Sampson.

*On a remote lighthouse island a Girl lives with only her Father and their dog, Moll. She has never known anywhere, or anyone else, until a Boy is washed up on their shore...*

*The Salt of the Sky* examines what happens when Good and Bad become blurred as the Girl's small, familiar world is suddenly opened up to big questions about who she is and what she really believes.

\*

## One

This morning we did find a Boy.

A real one.

He was washed up on the rocks, broken and bloody.  
Seaweed tangled around his legs, flopful as a new lamb.

A REMINDER.

Like when the dead cow was spat out on the sand. Or the bag full of small bones that used to be kittens.

I will tell you more about this. I will tell you what happens.

## Two

A storm had stirred in the night, like Father said it would.  
Big black clouds filled up the sky all yestersun, followed us  
round while we saw to the chooks and the crop.

He pointed to the clouds like cauliflowers and the ones like  
anchors,

DANGEROUS NIGHT COMING,

He said.

He lit the light early, for the Good Sailors, then sat up  
listening to the wind. Father had his ear right up to the wall,  
then sat whittling wood in his chair.

He always knows when trouble's to follow. He feels it in his  
bones.

We slept some three, four hour then were on the shore first  
light, grabbing cockles. They come up fresh and plenty with the  
storms.

I had my skirt gathered up, brim full of them and more in  
my hands but I dropped them when I heard Father shout,

GIRL.

I could only see his back. He was down on the last rock flats  
near the water, breathing big and looking at something.

I could not tell what.

Fog swirled around my head. I pushed my hands through it,  
moved nearer, but Father shouted,

KEEP BACK.

In that way he does when the crop fails or Moll breaks loose near the Lava Rocks. Angry and quick.

STAY AWAY.

My warm blood was pumping round inside me. The air sodden up with sea spit, rolling off the water, sitting on every bit of my face and my hair.

One more step, careful and slow.

Father hunched down and it's then I saw,

The Boy.

No life in his limbs.

His hair wet black and his skin china pale.

I thought about the Badness. The big dark swirling Badness of the world. It could still be in this Boy, even if he was dead. I could catch it from touching him.

But he looked of small harm, there, tangled on the sand. Drenched and sogged. Full covered in sea scraps and bits of broken shell. His skin dotted with grains of sand like he was a starful sky.

The boys I have seen on photographs are only black and white. He was in colour.

Blue lips.

A deep red gash across his brow.

Father put his hands across the Boy's chest.

Push, pump. Lungs full of salt water.

COME NOW. COME ON BOY.

But the Boy lay still, like a shot rabbit. A gutted fish.

Father told me go for the salts, so I ran fast as I could across the sand. My boots pushing too deep, tripping and scuffing up the dunes. I jumped the fence and skrimmed round the back to the kitchen door.

Father's safebox was atop the high shelf, too tall for me but I dragged the stool over, climbed and reached. Caught it with a fingertip. Back out the door, flash quick.

Father had the Boy up in his arms now, clambering up the dunes. I got to them as they reached the top and Father rested him down between two rocks.

I went to open the box but remembered that I did not have the key.

It did not matter. Rattle smash, Father dashed it against the rocks. I shut my ears, like I do when I swim. Half the world out, half the world in.

The catch gave way. Father's things spilling out across the dune. Papers and pills. Pins and photographs. One of my Mother, young and smiling. Looking up at me from the sand.

I quick put it back and found Father his vial of smelling salts. Little lavender crystals, sparking the light. He uncorked it and held it to the Boy's nose.

COME NOW. COME ON.

The Boy's eyelids were glass, you could see the veins

beneath.

They started to flicker. To twitch. Like Moll when she sleeps in front of the fire and her legs run through imaginary fields.

He was waking up from a dream.

He was coming alive.

I heard Father say quiet into the wind,

Oh Lord, what have I done?

## **Three**

Father brought the Boy into our kitchen. Into the smell of slow rabbit stew and the warmth of the stove. He called on me to fetch blankets and bandages.

I built the coverlets up like a mattress in front of the fire and Father laid the Boy down, gentle. He threw more kindle into the grate and heat roared out.

Into the room. Into the Boy.

Then we watched.

Father chawed at the skin around his thumb nail, as he does.

I held my breath for too long, until a cough spit out of me.

The Boy was still flopful but his cheeks were beginning to brighten.

I saw how long he was then, arms and legs stretched out. Ragged blue shorts and a pale shirt. Once it was white, I think, but now the colour of sea and blood.

Father began the wrapping.

HERE, GIRL.

I am the surgeon's assistant. He can fix Moll up when she gets caught on the snag wire. He can mend a broken bird's wing. He can even bring dead things back to life.

BANDAGE.

He followed his hand smooth over the Boy to find any cuts. Quick fast, wound a poultice on each graze and pinned it tight.

The big gash, next. On his temple, raw and deep.

LIQUOR.

I fetched the heavy brown bottle from under Father's bed and he slugged it onto his handkerchief. The roundness of the sun-shine shape my Mother had stitched into the corner of the cloth before she died soaked it up. Father dabbed at the sore.

The Boy twisted, squinted with his eyes still closed, while Father wrapped soft white gauze around his head.

*Bind the wound fast*

*Make the clasp last*

*Keep the blood in*

*With a signet of gin*

Now the Boy looked like the patients of war I have seen in the photographs. When the Badness was at its most almighty. Women and men falling down dead with it. Even children too.

But this Boy wasn't dead. Not quite. Breathing shallow. Up, down. Sharp not smooth.

But there.

Breathing.

Alive.

In our house.

Father boiled some water on the stove and put a small dash of it in a bowl. He held it to the Boy's lips but he was lain too flat.

GIRL.

He bid me kneel down and take the Boy's head in my hands.  
Tilt him up so he could drink.

Great fear came upon me and Father noticed at once. He told me not to be frightened but take the head careful in both hands, no Badness would come to me for we were doing Good.

I put my hands under the Boy's head. Felt the wetness of his hair and the shape of his skull bone. Two small nudges like sprouting wings, just behind his ears.

An angel inside him, trying to get out.

Perhaps.

LIFT HIM.

The weight of his head felt like the weight of the world.  
Waxed up with heavy thoughts.

Still eyes closed, the water dribbled first off his lips and down his chin. Then,

Second try,

Third try,

Into his mouth.

Only a small amount but Father said it was,  
ENOUGH.

We would do that every few minutes until the Boy awoke.

Father kept the bowl charged and I careful crooked my two hands under his head to tilt him. Each time it seemed a small bit lighter. The bad thoughts must be shaking themselves free. He was coming to be good so that he could wake up into the

world.

Father went out to feed the stock and bid me keep by the Boy's side. Shout him flash quick if he should wake.

He didn't. Snoring soft then, sand in his nose.

When Father came back he fell fast asleep in his chair too. He brought Moll in with him and she was fair troubled at the stranger on her hearth. She snouted round the Boy but I told her stay clear. Not to dab her wet nose on him, not to rub herself on his sea crust bare feet.

So she curled herself around me,

My Moll.

I am the Lighthouse and she is the sea. Black and white softness swirling, and a whip flick tail that tickles the back of my neck, like the high waves that lick at our rocks.

The sky outside turned pink. Sheep dog's delight. Moll burrowed into my lap and went heavy with sleep.

I stayed fixed on the Boy.

Timed my breathing to his.

It was slower now, less troubled.

Easier out.

Easier in.

And with each breath we shared, I felt a very strange thing. That I knew him. That he had always been there. Or always been somewhere and I'd forgotten.

But how could that be when I have never seen nor touched a  
boy in  
All  
My  
Life.

## **Four**

Father put the last of the rabbit stew on to warm and bid me fetch the chook eggs, for we had not done our usual morning rounds.

I went to the bottom of the plotment and let myself into their stink of a hut. The lady of the straw was in her usual spot and the others jumped down from the rafters to see me.

I gave them a handful of meal then felt under feathery arses. One there. Two more buried around. Time was, there used to be a pale-full every day but now I could carry them all in one hand.

When I brought the three out into the light I saw one was bluer than the others. I weighted it in my palm and it was heavier too. I turned it up to the light and that did show me a small crack. A chink in the shell. So I did what was kind and tapped it on the side of the hut to break it more.

Inside were the first specks of red that would have made a chick. Little nugs of blood that would have sparked a life.

I kicked the earth aside to make a hole and buried the blood yolk. I said the Goodness Prayer over it and pushed the soil back.

*We are thankful*

*The earth is kind*

*We are grateful*

*To live in peace*

The two halves of the shell were left in my hand. Small jagged boats with no sailors. No sails.

I put the two good eggs in my apron pocket and wiped the crock off my fingers, then turned back across the plotment and over the dunes.

Back to where we found the Boy.

The water had come closer with the day. The cove that kept the boat was brim full with sea and the cockles we'd picked at first light had been washed back where they belonged.

I looked out onto the water, going silver grey now as the eve dropped and thought about how the Boy got here.

The wind can whisk around the island like a paddle this time of year, beating everything inside, whipping us with its force.

I skrimmed up and down, looking for any wreck. With the way that Boy was battered and the jag of the rocks, any boat must have been split smashed.

But there was nothing.

No panels. No paddles.

Not even a splinter.

Perhaps the sea had claimed it back, swallowed it up like it near did the Boy.

Careful I put the two halves of broken chook shell atop a rock to be taken out with the eve-tides.

Then I spied something. One thing, half hidden in the cairn stacks.

A bag.

Straw made and about as big as Father's hand with a long leather strap.

I picked it up.

It was still wet soaked and teemed with sea scraps. The catch was a bone button and when I looked closer I saw the storm had already jemmied it undone. The bag was open.

I went to lift the flap but Father's voice came on the wind, down from the house,

GIRL.

I stood up, set off walking. There was no time to look for any stray cockles to fetch back but there in my hand,

Real Treasure.

As I walked, I looked. Hid by the dunes I reached inside the bag and something smooth found its way into my hand. Cold to the touch.

I brought it out and held it in my palm, a shell colour thing, long as a razor clam with silver lines that tracked along each edge. At first it did seem quite plain but when I turned it over there sat a symbol, graved into the other side.

Lord knows I cannot read much beyond the weather vane but this shape did feel known to me, as though I had seen it

before.

I ran my finger along. Felt the curve of a circle crossed by the straightness of a line, carved deep into the bone. I pushed on the silver side and fore I knew it, a blade flicked out. Half nearly cut my finger. Made my throat go tight.

It was a knife.

The point of it needle quick and the edge razor sharp. You could use it to cut rope. You could use it to kill something.

Or someone.

I had not seen a knife like that before, such tricksyness. The blades we use to cut fish are solid and strong, they do not take you by your wits.

I folded it safe shut and put it back inside the bag.

The next thing I found was a tin.

Square, inch deep and with a picture on the top. Painted careful with tiny brush strokes.

A scene of a town.

There was a flush of boats in the harbour. Buildings along the front with striped canoops and windows. People dressed in finery, walking along a prom lit with coloured lanterns. It looked to be a very fair place. Somewhere from a figment. Not somewhere real.

The only other land we can see from here is dark and dangerous,

Novum.

The New Island.

We live on Vetus.

The Old.

They used to be one but now they are two, broken by the volcano. Novum sits across from us in the sea and when I ask Father about it he will always say the same,

A PLACE OF NO HEART.

Filled to the very edges of itself with Badness.

Not like the place atop this tin.

The Boy must have come from some other isle, somewhere we did not know of.

Somewhere new.

Inside the box were coins. Round ones with holes in the middle. Money of the new world,

ROOT OF ALL EVIL.

We have no need for it on Vetus. We keep ourselves on our own crop and the harvest of the sea.

Underneath the coins, a sheet of paper. Folded up small. I pulled it out and put the tin back in the bag.

*One fold,*

*Two fold,*

*Three fold,*

*Four*

*Double up the parchment*

*Make a wedge for the door*

I unfurled it from small to big. Butter milk paper and midnight ink. It was nothing like Father's writing. His letters are stout and link together like fence posts. These were more fulsome. Long lines dancing across the page. Touching each other, leaning on each other, sending some message along. Signed with a swirling hand at the bottom.

It looked to be a letter and I never wished so hard that I did have the learning to read.

Father's voice again then, over the fence, looking for me.

GIRL.

Quick fast I pushed my hand into my apron pocket so he did not see the paper. Stepped up and out from the shelter of the rocks.

His eyes had found me,

SUPPER.

He went back into the house and I pulled the letter from my apron. It was blotted with chicken crock from the eggs. Yellow brown smears over the blue ink. I had spoiled the folds. Put creases in the nice words. Father would know straight sharp that I had looked at it.

So I left it there. In my apron.

Over the fence, through the plotment. Through the kitchen

door.

Father looked at me and asked me where I had been for,  
ALL THIS TIME.

I told him truthful, I fetched the eggs then went down for  
the cockles we forgot.

But then I found a bag.

A bag that I thought might belong to the Boy.

Father took it from me flash quick and went near the  
window for some light. I placed the two eggs upon the cook-  
board while his back was turned and pushed the crinkled paper  
down deeper into my apron.

He saw that the bone button was already undone and he  
raised his eyes to me,

DID YOU OPEN THIS?

I kept my hands in my pocket, fingers flat against the letter  
and told him my answer. Honest as it was,

No Father. I did not.

## Five

We chawed at the rabbit stew with no words passing between us.

Father had put the bag under his rocker and spoke no more about it. He did not ask me where the cockles were. I did not have to say they'd all been washed back into the sea. Or that I saw no trace of the Boy's boat.

When dusk came Father said I must go to my bed. It was early still but I did not quarrel. I was glad to take the letter somewhere safe.

I went up to my room and could hear Father take the rest of the stairs, past the Watch Room and up to the Lamp.

I took the dancing words out of my apron, smoothed them back the best I could.

*One fold,*

*Two fold,*

*Three fold,*

*Four.*

Rattle, clank, above me. Father ground the machinery into work. Sounds I do know well as my own spit.

The winding of the rope.

The cogs as they stir.

I have never seen them but I can picture. From the sharp pencil drawings in the old Keeper's books and from listening to my Father's tellings.

One day he will teach me proper and I will keep the Good Sailor's safe from the Badness all by myself. Until then I must listen. Wait to be grown.

Through the chink in my wall I saw the light begin to turn.  
Casting its whiteness right out to the sea.

Dip, flash, dip, flash.

Circling round to warn,

ALL THAT'S THIS WAY IS ROCKS.

I did not lay on my bed, I lay on the floor. One of my eyes agen the cracked boards and an ear to the ground. I could see down to the red tiles of the kitchen.

To the Boy, who still slept.

Father was not long with his duties and soon back to his chair. He took the straw bag from underneath it and I felt my heart go tight.

First he did take out the tin.

He studied the picture on top as I had done. Ran his rough hand over the boats and the people on the prom. I longed to ask him about it. Where such a dreamful place might be. Perhaps one day we could go there.

He lifted the lid away and saw inside to the coins. He pushed them around and it felt to me, in my belly,

He knew.

That there was something missing.

The letter.

Burning a hole under my pillow.

But soon he returned the lid and reached back into the bag where he found,

The knife.

He traced along the plain side first, feeling the smooth bone. Then turned it over where the symbol sat, graved into the handle.

The second he saw it Father's big shoulders fell in and his hand went to his mouth. He made a sound like a cough. The air gone from his chest.

For a moment I did think it was a cry, but I have never seen Father shed a tear.

THERE IS ENOUGH SALT WATER IN THE WORLD, GIRL

He always tells me,

WITHOUT ANY MORE FROM US.

Everything inside our round walls sempt to go still.

And then to start again.

Moll looked up from Father's feet, how she does when she smells a rabbit, ready and full of blood.

He found the silver line as I had done and flicked the knife open.

He held it in his hand. Then stood.

Moved closer to the Boy.

Moll followed behind him and he knelt down near. Brought

the sharpness of the silver close to the Boy's sleepful face.

He held it there a while and I did hold my breath. Hoping that he would not harm him.

He brought the blade to rest on the Boy's cheek and the Boy leaved out a small groan in his sleep. Moll barked and it broke the feel of the air.

Father moved away.

He clicked the knife shut and reached his safebox down from atop the high shelf. He pushed the knife and the tin down, deep inside. Amongst the pills and papers and photographs.

He tried to lock the clasp but remembered, as I did, that it was broken now from being dashed against the rock.

My eye followed through the floor.

Father put the box back then threw the Boy's bag onto the fire. The sand scraps in the straw sparked blue as they burnt. The leather twisted up and filled the room with dead skin smell.

Moll barked again and he shushed her. The Boy was still flopful, still asleep. Father put his hands beneath him and shooned him up though he were just another blanket, a rag over his arm.

I kept still, breathed quiet. Eye pressed to the cold wood.

Father looked up at the ceiling then turned away,

Opened the kitchen door,

And took the sleeping Boy out into the dark.

## Six

When I woke my cheek was still pressed hard against the floor and my bones did ache like split wood.

I stretched the night out of me then looked again, through the crack, to see where Father was.

Not in the kitchen.

Not nowhere to be seen.

Flash quick I put my over-clothes on and was down, out the door. Moll jumped up from her spot. Came with me, shadow at my leg. Down the path and through the plotment. Nothing to notice there, just the usual smell of crock and cabbage flowers flicking in the air.

I followed on, through the spook dwellings. Said my cantations as I always do. Hands over my head so the old spectres couldn't land on me.

*Be gone, dead devils*

*Keep thee away*

I daresay none of them could this time, even if they wanted to, for I was moving too quick.

I went toward the Foal Yard and there saw Father, coming back our way with a pale in one hand and a pitch-fork in the other.

He had a knotted look on his face and told me,

GO BACK.

I stopped walking but kept my eyes moving, looking for any

sign of the Boy.

#### BACK TO THE HOUSE.

I turned on my heels and Moll did too, paws scrabbling in the dirt. Father's big steps came up fast behind us until we were walking level.

The sound of our feet moved in time, toward home.

He had something to show me.

Father reached his safebox down again from atop the shelf and brought out the small knife. He held it in his palm as I had done. It looked smaller in his big hand.

I tried to look at it as though I had never seen it before. That was not too hard, for I was still brim full of wonderings about it. The meaning of the symbol shape graved into the bone and why the Boy would bring such things with him out on the sea.

Father ran his finger along the silver line. Showed me how it worked, how it flicked open with its sharpness for things that sharpness is for.

#### A REMINDER.

This was proof, he said.

This was Badness pure as it comes.

It was here, now, on the island with us. It was asleep in the straw.

Father boiled up the two chook eggs I'd found with the last

of some salt cabbage for breakfast. He chawed each mouthful for too long and I could see his eyes were misted up with thinking.

When he'd mopped the last of his yolk he stood, quick, and went for his slicker coat. He took off his farm boots and put on his sea boots instead.

I started to feel my nerves prick then, for I know what those boots mean.

I thought of the Boy.

Father said he was morticed up in the stable block. Cracked wattle walls, creakful doors, piles of old tools on the chalk peat floor. They are filled with the echoes of colic dead foals that never grew to be horses.

If I close my eyes sharp tight I can remember the last one to be born. Long spindle legs that looked as though they might break and a coat the same colour as the dust. It came out in a sack of blood and I thought it was dead straight then, but Father saved it. For a day.

We did not give that one a name. It wasn't on the earth for enough hours to carve a soul.

IN AND OUT THE WORLD BEFORE IT MADE A PRINT

The spirit of it rolled straight back into the sea.

That's where Father was going. Off out on the water.

He said he had left the Boy with blankets and something for

his thirst, should he wake. All anybody needs to stay alive.

He said,

STAY AWAY.

He would be back before dusk.

Father readied the boat and I stood behind cover of the cairns, watching. The sea was grey-blue and the sky above it clear. Faint whisp clouds just quiet, moving slow. The westerly winds biding their time before night.

He unwrenched the clutch-knot from the iron ring in the stone-face and pulled the rope into a coil at his feet.

I knew the feel of that. Father casting off into the sea. The same as many hundred other days when he has gone to fish and I wander the island by myself. I know every bit of broken rock and every grain of sand. I know every sound and every silence and I am not afraid of any of it.

But this day came a change.

This day,

I was not alone.

Kim Cook | from *Carnival*

Set in a small fictional village in Somerset, the play follows a carnival club preparing for the annual illuminated carnival that takes place in November, and tours around various towns and villages over two to three weeks.

The Mudlarkers are made up of largely family, and as such have their fair share of ups and downs. It is when a newcomer from London moves in to the village and joins the club that the problems really start.

Edward has a mission, to seek revenge on the headmaster of his old boarding school, the father of Phil. When he discovers he is dead, he decides to stay in the village. However he is torn between his growing friendship for the family and his misguided desire for revenge.

\*

## **CAST**

Edward – 30s

Mandy – 30s

Phil – 39

Rita – 70s

Sally – 40s

Sam – 17

## ACT 1

### SCENE 1

*(Edward's house. Interior living room of a new build. Edward is unpacking books etc. and putting them on shelves. He takes out a photo, the long narrow 'whole school photo' type. Doorbell rings, he puts the photo down to answer the door. It is Phil come to snag. Subdued greetings heard off stage. Edward comes back on, followed by Phil carrying a tool bag. Edward picks the photo up holds it for a while, opens a drawer and puts it in, turns to Phil as if to speak.)*

### SCENE 2

*(A barn, bits of machinery. Tools, haybales, paint, costumes. Mandy is sewing a pink lady jacket. Enter Sally.)*

Sally:           OK. Don't shoot the messenger.

Mandy:          What?

Sally:          *(Sally's phone rings)* Sorry, got to get this.  
*(Sally is talking on the phone)* I'll be back in the office in about ten minutes. Call you back then.  
*(hangs up and starts to input something into her phone.)*

Mandy:          Sally?

Sally:          Sorry. Young Farmers, they're doing Grease.  
Ulrika overheard it in the pub last night.

Mandy:          Great.

Sally: Anyway. Let me know what you come up with and I'll...Well, I'll be back, later. Obviously.

Mandy: Obviously.

(enter Phil with a large case)

Phil: Sally in a rush as usual.

Mandy: Yeah.

Phil: She is one busy woman.

Mandy: We're all busy Phil.

Phil: I know. (*starts unpacking the bag*) Got the new lights.

Mandy: Great.

Phil: They look good. Really bright.

Mandy: Yay hay.

Phil: It's going to be a real spectacle this year Mandy. The best ever. What you up to?

Mandy: I was doing the jackets.

Phil: Was?

Mandy: Young Farmers. They're doing Grease.

Phil: No way. Yeah course. You wouldn't have said it otherwise.

(enter Rita, with earphones on)

Rita: It's Greased Lightning. Been listening to the tape on my new player.

Phil: Ah.

Rita: New lights.

Phil: Yeah. Saying to Mandy, I think it's going to be the best year ever.

Mandy: Mum, where were you yesterday?

Rita: When?

Mandy: Yesterday. I came to pick you up.

Rita: What for?

Mandy: The shopping. Oh Mum.

Rita: Yesterday.

Mandy: Yes. Don't you remember? It doesn't matter now. Tell her Phil

Phil: Ah, yeah. Bit of news. Young Farmers, they're doing Grease.

Rita: Greased Lightning.

Phil: Yes. We'll need to think of something else.  
*(Rita's wandered off)* Rita?

Mandy: Why can't the Young Farmers do something else?

Phil: I don't mind. I'll think of something.

Mandy: Something with pink lady jackets?

Rita: Pink ladies. Have you finished them Mandy?

Mandy: Nearly.

Rita: Well done.

Mandy: Not well done now, is it?

Rita: Not well done.

Mandy: Someone else is doing Grease, Mum.

Phil: Adapt and utilise. That's what carnival's all about.

Rita: Adapt and utilise.

Mandy: I'm making a drink. Mum? Tea or coffee?

(enter Edward)

Phil: Hiya mate. Come in. No need to stand on ceremony.

Edward: I wasn't sure I was in the right place.

Phil: Yeah. This is it. Mudlarkers central.

Edward: Impressive. Quite isolated.

Phil: Suppose.

Edward: Probably a good thing. Power tools and the like.

Phil: Yeah. Can't disturb folks. Anyway, introductions. This is Eddie. My wife Mandy, and mother-in-law Rita.

Edward: A pleasure.

Rita: Hello Eddie.

Mandy: You're joining the club.

Edward: If that's okay with everyone.

Rita: It's lovely to have you Eddie.

Edward: Edward. If you don't mind.

Rita: Eddie was my husband's name.

Edward: Best to get it out there early on, I find.

Rita: He died, my Eddie. Didn't he Mandy.

Edward: I'm sorry.

Rita: Pardon.

Edward: About your husband.

Rita: Eddie.

Edward: Is there any other family?

Rita: Oh yes. Lots of family.

Edward: Phil's (*nods towards Phil*). Family. Mum and dad.

Rita: (*whispers*) Dead. Accident.

Phil: Right Eddie. Let's give you a quick tour. Main barn. Kitchen through here, very important. And outside is the lady herself, the cart. Now notice we call it a cart not a float. (*exit Edward and Phil*)

### SCENE 3

(*Mandy in the barn faffing, enter Edward*).

Edward: Morning Mandy.

Mandy: Morning.

Edward: You busy as usual.

Mandy: Should be. Waiting for mum. Thinking I might go and fetch her.

Edward: Would you like me to go?

Mandy: No, thanks.

Edward: I'd like to help.

- Mandy: No. She's...
- Edward: I picked up on it. (*Mandy nods*) We were having a nice chat.
- Mandy: Some days she's pretty good.
- Edward: If I can help.
- Mandy: Thanks. I'll go round in a bit.
- Edward: So, Carnival?
- Mandy: Carnival.
- Edward: Oh dear.
- Mandy: I've had years of it.
- Edward: I suppose you have. Phil still seems keen.
- Mandy: Phil loves it.
- Edward: He certainly seems to.
- Mandy: Even more now he's in charge.
- Edward: It's in his blood I suppose.
- Mandy: Carnival? Not really.
- Edward: Taking charge.
- Mandy: You mean the builders yard. He's in charge of himself I suppose.
- Edward: I was thinking his parents. Teachers?
- Mandy: His dad was. How did you know that?
- Edward: He told me. At the house.
- Mandy: Right.
- Edward: My house. He came to do the snagging.

Mandy: It's just he doesn't normally talk about them.

Edward: Really?

(pause)

Mandy: Anyway. What brought you to Somerset?

Edward: Fancied a change.

Mandy: Funny place to pick.

Edward: Do you think?

Mandy: Dullsville, Arizona.

Edward: You ought to have a spell in London, then you'd see.

Mandy: I'd swap you any day of the week.

Edward: Maybe.

Mandy: Scuse me. (*dials her phone*) Sally, could you pick Mum up? What again? Alright then. Yes. I'll go. Again.

#### SCENE 4

(*Sam in the barn, enter Edward*).

Edward: Morning Sam.

Sam: Hiya.

Edward: What are you up to?

Sam: Just fixing these lights on to these pieces of wood.

Edward: Do you...want a hand?

- Sam: Okay.
- Edward: Right you are. (*looks around wondering where to start*)
- Sam: Do that one if you want.
- Edward: Okey-dokey. (*they work in silence for a while*)  
Did I see you with a girl last night?
- Sam: Maybe.
- Edward: Pretty, blondish, red coat. At the bus stop.
- Sam: Yeah, probably.
- Edward: Very high heels. I thought, how an earth does she walk in them.
- Sam: We're you at the bus...
- Edward: No, no. No I was just driving by. Just caught a glimpse. Thought, that looks like Sam, with a girl. Probably his girlfriend.
- Sam: I didn't see you.
- Edward: No. Like I say I was just driving by. Coming back from the Co-op.
- Sam: Right.
- (carry on working in silence)
- Edward: So, that's your girlfriend then? High heels girl.
- Sam: No.
- Edward: Just a friend.
- Sam: Yeah.

Edward: Good. I mean, good to have friends. Of either sex. It doesn't necessarily mean anything. A friend who's a girl, or a boy. Whatever. (*pause*) I haven't got a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend.

Sam: Okay.

(enter Phil)

Sam: Dad.

Phil: Alright Sam. Eddie.

Sam: (*to Phil*) He prefers Edward.

Phil: Just seen Sal. Sound of Music's off.

Edward: No.

Sam: Mum's gonna flip.

(enter Mandy)

Mandy: I've finished Lisle's dress, and I'm on to the lederhosen. No Mum?

Phil: (*to Sam*) Are you telling her.

Sam: Mum. Eddie, Edward's got something to tell you.

Mandy: What?

Edward: Apparently, some other carnival club have also selected the Sound of Music.

Mandy: Have they put you up to this?

Edward: Not at all.

Mandy: Brilliant.

Edward: (to *Mandy*) However, I have an idea. Back to the Future.

Mandy: Tell Phil.

Edward: Don't feel it's my place.

Mandy: Why?

Edward: New boy.

Mandy: So what?

Edward: Might be best coming from you.

Mandy: If you like.

## SCENE 5

(*the pub, Edward is at the bar looking at his change, enter Sally*)

Sally: Amazed at how cheap it is?

Edward: Something like that.

Sally: That's one thing about our quiet little village.

Edward: Yes.

Sally: Do you want to join me? I'm waiting for Ulrika.

Edward: Thank you.

Sally: How you settling in?

Edward: Very well I think. Everyone's certainly made me welcome.

Sally: To tell you the truth it's a bit of an occasion when someone new moves in.

- Edward: Really.
- Sally: Especially when they join carnival.
- Edward: That's nice.
- Sally: Between you and me, I think Mandy's hoping you're going to liven things up a bit.
- Edward: I'm not sure I'm the livening up type.
- Sally: Well I won't tell if you don't.
- Edward: Deal.
- Sally: So what brought you here?
- Edward: (*pause*) Sorry, in a dream. We used to come on holiday here.
- Sally: Compton?
- Edward: Somerset.
- Sally: You obviously liked it then. Good memories.
- Edward: Yeah.
- Sally: It's not a bad place. There's worse.
- Edward: What about you? Africa, isn't it.
- Sally: Yeah, Kenya, the BOMA project.
- Edward: Sounds very worthwhile.
- Sally: Supporting women in small business.
- Edward: Wow.
- Sally: So they can support themselves, and their families in times of crisis.
- Edward: I admire that. Really doing some good.

Sally: It's very rewarding. I miss it.  
Edward: Back home now? Sorry, none of my business.  
Sally: No it's not that. Just not sure yet.  
Edward: Drink?  
Sally: Lovely.

## SCENE 6

(*Phil, Mandy, Sam and Edward working in the barn*)

Phil: Right. Back to the Future.  
Mandy: You sure.  
Phil: I've checked with Sally.  
Mandy: So, this is it?  
Phil: Yeah. Final answer. What's up now?  
Mandy: I've got headache.  
Phil: Again.  
Mandy: What do you mean again?  
Phil: You had headache, yesterday didn't you? And the day before.  
Mandy: I can't help it if I I've got headache.  
Phil: I'm not saying that.  
Mandy: Sounds like it.  
Phil: Why don't you go home. Lie down.

Mandy: You trying to get rid of me?

Phil: No.

Sam: Not again.

Phil: Do you want me to walk you home?

Mandy: I can go myself.

Phil: Okay love. (*he kisses her cheek, and nods at Sam*) Just stay with her for a bit.

Edward: Happening a lot.

Phil: Sorry.

Edward: The arguing.

Phil: No. Yeah, I don't know. We seem to be.

Edward: Part of married life I suppose.

Phil: Yeah.

Edward: If you need to talk.

Phil: Cheers.

Edward: We all need someone to talk to... Don't you agree?

Phil: You're alright.

Edward: I know I do. Need a friend – sometimes.

Phil: Yeah. Okay. So, we need a clock, A big one.

Edward: Clock?

Phil: Back to the Future.

Edward: Yes, of course. Shall I get on to that?

Phil: That would be great.

## SCENE 7

(Rita is sat in the barn holding some sewing but asleep. Enter Edward holding milk, and singing, at first he doesn't spot Rita and puts the kettle on).

- Edward: Oh Rita, you made me jump. Rita. (*He stands and looks at her*)
- Rita: Hello.
- Edward: Are you okay?
- Rita: I was away with the fairies for a minute. Do you want a cup of tea?
- Edward: Do YOU want a cup of tea?
- Rita: I don't know if we've got any milk
- Edward: (*Edward holds the milk up*) Got the Larkins routine down to a T. Now, are you sure you're alright?
- Rita: Just a bit tired.
- Edward: It's a busy time...
- Rita: Yeah.
- Edward: Everyone puts a lot of work into carnival.
- Rita: Didn't sleep very well last night.
- Edward: I know the feeling.
- Rita: Had a funny dream.
- Edward: Oh.

- Rita: Funny peculiar I mean. I dreamt – that I was a homosexual mouse
- Edward: A homosexual mouse.
- Rita: And I was doing it with my friend from church.
- Edward: Church?
- Rita: She doesn't really like that kind of thing.
- Edward: Right.
- Rita: Anyway, I'm sure she'll get over it. (*Rita picks her sewing up and starts sewing, Edward brings the tea, Rita pats the haybale for him to sit down*) Thanks for the tea.
- Edward: No problem.
- Rita: How you liking the club?
- Edward: It's wonderful. I fear Phil might think me a bit of a klutz. Not used to manual work.
- Rita: Phil's a good teacher.
- Edward: I hope you're right. I'd hate to be a thorn in anyone's side.
- Rita: Don't you miss home?
- Edward: Sometimes.
- Rita: It's very quiet here.
- Edward: Certainly quieter than London.
- Rita: Very quiet.
- Edward: I've met such warm and wonderful people.
- Rita: That's nice.

Edward: The family, I mean and you.

Rita: Thank you. People talk to me.

Edward: And, why wouldn't they?

Rita: Sometimes I forget things.

Edward: I see.

Rita: Not always.

Edward: I wouldn't want to burden you.

Rita: I don't mind

Edward: I couldn't.

Rita: Okay. If you change your mind.

Edward: It's my father.

Rita: Oh. You've changed your mind.

Edward: Sorry.

Rita: Don't be sorry. Your father?

Edward: Well, not my father.

Rita: Not your father.

Edward: It's complicated. You see, I've recently found out that the man who I thought was my father, he's not my real father.

Rita: I see.

Edward: And my real father.

Rita: Real father?

Edward: He's dead.

Rita: Dead.

Edward: Died. About six months ago.

Rita: But your other father is still alive.

Edward: Yes. I'm sorry. This sounds mad.

Rita: Some would say you're lucky to have two fathers.

Edward: Well they would be wrong. You see the man who brought me up.

Rita: The live father?

Edward: Yes.

Rita: Not your real father?

Edward: No. That's right. Yes, he's not my real father. Look at me. I'm just getting used to it myself. I didn't know. My father didn't know. No one knew, except my real father and my mother.

Rita: Your real mother?

Edward: Yes. At least... I hadn't thought of that.

Rita: What has she said?

Edward: She died when I was a child.

Rita: I'm sorry.

Edward: I barely remember her.

Rita: You still miss a mother though.

Edward: You're right. I have missed her. But my father, he did his best. And we've been okay until the bombshell.

Rita: How did...?

Edward: The will.

Rita: Will

Edward: My fathers will?

Rita: The dead father.

Edward: Yes. I was invited to the reading of a will of a man I've never met. There it was, a DNA result and a big fat inheritance. At first I didn't want it, it didn't feel right. And my father, my other father persuaded me to keep it. Said it would set me up for life.

Rita: Good advice.

Edward: Then as it all sunk in, he started to distance himself. Till he barely wants to see me at all.

Rita: You poor boy.

Edward: I've written. He wrote back, once. I feel like he's disowned me. I can't blame him.

Rita: But it's not your fault.

Edward: No. It's not Rita. Thank you for listening.

(pause)

Rita: Why Somerset?

Edward: Honestly. A pin in a map.

Rita: You could have ended up in Newcastle. It's freezing up there.

Edward: Luckily, I ended up here. With your wonderful family.

Rita: Well, its lovely to have you.

Edward: Rita, I have a secret.

Rita: Oh.

Edward: You see my father, he's not my real father.

Rita: Yes, you said lovey.

Edward: When?

Rita: Just then.

Edward: Are you sure?

Rita: Yes.

Edward: That's funny.

Rita: I'm sure you did.

Edward: Well I must have then. Ignore me, Rita.

Rita: It's fine.

Edward: Rita. Do you mind, just not, I mean, keeping it between ourselves?

Rita: Of course. You mean about your father, don't you?

Edward: Thank you. We're going to be good friends. I can see.



Dom Bury | from *Developing the Negatives*

## Hiraeth

The town tonight is like a little scuttled ship – the river closed with ice and each road, each roof frost closeted.

Still, in spite of this, in spite of snow, the roses push up blade by blade to shake out their small white fires, and will not close.

And I must confess this stirs in me now another road, an ice-clutched path which, despite the winter, would not close.

Further down it I have walked, past the harbour locked into the hills to where the sea turns in its sleep, its one white eye half-closed.

And though I name this *home* I feel it as a roof stripped off – a scab, an old wound which, despite the years, will still not close.

Still I cannot say which map or scroll of sky I'd used then to guide me back, or which alternate life I'd then had to close.

And though it moves in me still – the sea, I know I can't return to that same shore the tide, that time has now dragged closed.

## Brother

They're still amazed – the surgeons, who had to perform  
my little brother's autopsy – still stunned  
to one by one peel back his spine to find

in each small cavity not marrow but a seal  
of salt and grit, the blood in its return  
not laying it. The residue still hot but not leaving

in the bone a single burn. They say he'd turned  
small fires in his sleep, that when  
he woke, just for a moment, he'd hear –

a crackling. That sudden hiss of magma  
dousing in the waves – the way the tide  
drags back to leave a mile of beach and sky still

shifting overhead – a feeling he'd always  
gone back for – *an emptiness* I could not believe.  
I couldn't help but shake the cockles from

my little brother's skin. Or take out from his throat  
the gulls eggs he'd attempt to smuggle in.  
Even the dock children began to notice how he'd stank

of *ocean itself*, how when he came back from the shore  
there was more than boy left flapping  
in his chest. This was the first time I'd attempt with my fists,

*my only gods* – to beat the strangeness out of him.  
He wore then shadows deeper than  
the sea itself, and still he'd disappear for days only

to return changed, each time a little more  
estranged. He thrashed and bit and spat –  
*There is no line between the sea and sky.* He'd said then

in a smaller voice – *no matter if you throw away the key,*  
*it will still come* – I left him  
shaking in the dark until his skin became

so thin it showed not bone but each pebble  
of his spine. Until one night  
I'd woke, quite suddenly to hear waves

knocking at the door and from his cave not  
his small voice but a harsher cry – I  
threw back the door to find the whole room blown

to sand and sky, how as I'd slept he'd called  
the whole sea in. My little brother opened then  
like a prayer to show there not muscle but

a length of chain and with each fist I felt in  
my own chest each blow come back.  
Where in our bodies do we store it – all that *shame*?

How do feel it – as a knot? The gut all gone to rope  
or how we sense only in the abdomen  
our loss. How when the surgeons took him out

that last time to examine him, there was nothing  
in his throat. They'd said –  
*he choked on air itself* – I knew the truth.

## **Spring Without Voices**

*“there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields...”*

Rachel Carson – *Silent Spring*

I am what I have stolen. I am what I refuse to spit back. Tell me  
the starling thrilling in my throat was not mine to set teeth into.

Even when its small chest opened into mine to sing I would  
not release it. I would not. I would not hack up its song.

Even its hatchlings eaten out by ice are mine to bite down upon.  
As is the moor I have splayed my slight weathered life across.

Knowing it only to set tracks into, set traps upon, to take  
in my mouth its entire emptiness and crush it – until it yields blood.

Such is what my father taught me each blank sky bears: the beak,  
the wing gristle, these inch hollow flutes I suck the flight from.

Muscle becoming muscle, lung becoming lung, building the house  
of my body brimful of song – leaving, the whole sky wrung.

## On the Theme — Fire

*Love*, at noon,  
a bud, a vowel catching fire in my throat  
and the school is \_\_\_\_\_ bombed.  
*Love*, inform me.

*Love*, forgive me \_\_\_\_\_  
but in what tongue does a child keen as his street detonates?  
In which religion does he call *mère*, *mamma*, *madre* as he leaks out, say  
*this war is my final emptiness* my son  
kneels outside our opened house watching  
the last cherry blossom split, petal by singular petal  
from the burnt trees,  
from his hands \_\_\_\_\_ *love*, his hands like a small  
bird, moulting  
*yes!* a starling in his fist  
singing, then rupturing into flame.

I carry him into the garden where  
the stripped wood stands and press his body flat to it  
for him to see  
far off  
wild  
deer  
grazing through the forest, on another continent glaciers

grating their molars  
over the slats of the fjords. *Look!* I tell him – *this was*  
*our world once – listen, how inside us*  
*still, it continues — frozen and unclean.*

A creaking of wings  
and as his lids beat open reflected in the black glass

of his eyes men on fire,  
hung like beacons  
in the rigging of the wood, their bodies  
like snow falling,  
their flaking bodies snow — *love blossom, falling.*

## **All I Can Offer You is This**

How one evening each autumn,  
a little after dark, the swallows return home.  
How you can hear then in the roof their wings  
clicking closed, their hive mind shutting down  
each map that followed without intention  
another map to these eaves, this house, I  
come alive here, then I heal.  
But this autumn the swallows have not come home.  
The kitchen is silent but for the click  
of the clock and the whir of the drum  
and the hum of the stove and the drone  
of the telephone and the world is now lighter  
yet somehow, somehow also more heavy.

## Biographies

**Dom Bury** lives between North Devon and London and has worked as a motorcycle factory machine operator, a Nanny and as an Advertising Creative. He has been published recently in magazines and anthologies including: *Poetry London*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Poetry Wales*, *Magma*, *Ambit*, *Iota*, *The North*, *Oxford Poetry*, *The New European*, and *Best British Poetry 2014*. He has won the *Magma Poetry Prize*, 2nd Prize in the *Resurgence Ecopoetry Competition* and was the recipient of a 2016 *Eric Gregory Award*.

**Kim Cook** was born and bred in Yorkshire and now lives in Somerset with her husband. During her time on the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Scheme, she completed her full length play, *Carnival*, produced it at her local theatre and is now working on a darker version. Last year she received a paid commission for a short family play which was performed during December in Lapland. She continues to combine her day job as a podiatrist with writing every day, ‘even if it is only ten minutes’, and is currently producing three of her short plays scheduled for performance in May 2017.

**Ella Frears** is a trustee and editor of *Magma Poetry* and has had work published in *Poetry London*, *The Rialto*, *The Moth*, *The Emma Press*, *Brittle Star*, *Poems in Which* and *The Stockholm Review of Literature* among others. She was shortlisted for Young Poet Laureate for London 2014 and has completed residencies and commissions for the National Trust, Tate Britain, Tate St. Ives, Newlyn Art Gallery and most recently in the Observatory spaces in Buckler’s Hard, New Forest with SPUD. Ella was shortlisted for the Jane Martin Poetry Prize 2015 & 2017, the Bridport Poetry Prize

2015 and was highly commended in the Brittle Star Poetry Competition 2016. Ella was recently awarded a fully funded scholarship for the MA in Creative Writing at Royal Holloway University, where she is currently Poet in Residence writing about the Cassini space mission. Her pamphlet *Passivity, Electricity, Acclivity* will be published Autumn 2017 with Goldsmiths Press.

**Jenny Lee** studied acting in Paris with Philippe Gaulier – a formidable teacher who regularly reminded her she was so bad she should be “made into a British sandwich for the imperial lions at the circus.” She started writing in 2014. Her work includes *Super Ordinary*, an illustrated musical, at Soho Theatre; *Neon Nights*, which won an IdeasTap Inspires/BBC Writersroom Award, and *Heartbeats & Algorithms* at the Edinburgh Fringe, which subsequently toured to London and the regions. Jenny is a member of the Royal Court writers' group. “A writer who knows how to push all the right buttons” - Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*.

**Alex Murdoch** was born in Cardiff and trained as an actor at École Philippe Gaulier. Her theatre company Cartoon de Salvo devised shows for 20 years touring nationally and internationally. She recently began exploring her practice beyond the company, working as an actor with Improbable, NIE and Young Vic. Encouraged by a commission from John McGrath (then at National Theatre Wales), she began to write plays and was invited onto the Royal Court's 26+ writers programme. During her mentorship her play *Light is on a Timer* was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and she signed with Ikenna Obiekwe at Independent Talent.

**Nasreen Rafiq** attended her first Arvon course in 2015. Later that year, at The Festival of Writing in York, her submission was met with excitement and the manuscript requested. With only a few thousand words written she vowed to complete *Sunset House*. Months later she was awarded a place on the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Scheme and began writing her first draft. In 2016 she was awarded Joanna Cannon's Goat Bursary Award (Notable Runner-Up) giving her the opportunity to attend the literary festival and meet with industry experts. Under the guidance of her mentor she is well on her way to completing *Sunset House*.

**Stacey Sampson** is an actor, writer and mother from Sheffield. She has worked in theatre and television since the age of 15 and combines this with teaching performance in a variety of settings. She creates plays in collaboration with communities and theatre companies and is currently on tour with Third Angel, with whom she is an Associate Artist. Over the past two years she has completed a fellowship with the BBC and represented the UK at the international ASSITEJ gathering as an emerging writer for young audiences. *The Salt of the Sky* is her second novel. It recently won a Northern Writers' Award and the Mslexia Children's Novel Competition. She is represented by Hardman & Swainson Literary Agency.

**Jean Seeram Ashbury** comes from Trinidad in the Caribbean and now lives in London. She is a teacher, traveller and writer. Her writing has appeared in anthologies published by Kingston University, Writers Abroad, Bradt Publications, and She Voices writers' group; in *Wanderlust* magazine and in travel e-zines. She has been commended and highly commended in national competitions, including the 2012 & 2014 Bradt-Independent on

*Sunday* travel writing competitions, and was on the long-list of The London Short Story Prize in 2015. She holds an MA in Creative Writing and is currently working on a collection of stories set in Trinidad.

**Elisabeth Sennitt Clough** was born in Ely, but spent two decades living and working abroad. Elisabeth's pamphlet, *Glass*, was a winner of the Paper Swans inaugural pamphlet competition. It went on to be a Poetry Society Young Poets' Network Summer 2016 'pick' and sold its first print-run in two months. In 2017 it won Best Pamphlet at the Saboteur Awards. Her debut collection *Sightings* (Paper Swans) was nominated for the Forward Prize 2017. Elisabeth's poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Poem*, *The Rialto*, *Magma*, *Mslexia*, *The Cannon's Mouth* and *Stand*. She has won prizes in numerous poetry competitions and has been widely anthologised. [www.elisabethsennittclough.co.uk](http://www.elisabethsennittclough.co.uk)

## **Acknowledgements**

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## 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.

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**JERWOOD CHARITABLE FOUNDATION**





A boy washes up on the rocks. A gunshot rings out in downtown Beirut. A cloud of cherry blossoms is engulfed in flames. In poetry, prose and playscript, we follow the threads: a storyteller's descent into slavery; a young girl eluding her would-be abductor; a relationship ending on a grassy roundabout. Within these pages memory, history and imagination intertwine.

*Tell It Again* showcases work by nine writers who have taken part in the **Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Scheme 2016/17**. Delivered by Arvon in partnership with Jerwood Charitable Foundation, this programme offers emerging writers the chance to develop their work with the support of experienced mentors in Poetry, Playwriting and Fiction.

This year's mentors were **Mona Arshi, Chris Thorpe**  
and **Emma Jane Unsworth**.

“We will tell you a story  
about who we are and you  
will say I know and we  
will tell it again”

- from *Light is on a Timer*, Alex Murdoch

**JERWOOD** CHARITABLE FOUNDATION



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