



PLAYWRITING
CAROLINE GRAY
CATHY THOMAS
ANDREW THOMPSON

FICTION
SARAH FRANKLIN
SUSIE HALES
GRAHAME WILLIAMS

POETRY
HOLLY CORFIELD CARR
IAN DUDLEY
DEBRIS STEVENSON

JERWOOD/ARVON
MENTORING SCHEME
ANTHOLOGY
VOLUME FIVE

WASSAILING

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Jerwood/Arvon
Mentoring Scheme | ANTHOLOGY
VOLUME FIVE

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After the Group © Susie Hales
In Event of Moone Disaster © Andrew Thompson
Brompton Cocktail Blues and other poems © Ian M Dudley
Samson & Goliath © Grahame Williams
Kate McCrae © Cathy Thomas
MINE and other poems © Holly Corfield Carr

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Wassailing is an old country custom of drinking to the fruit trees in early spring, so that they grow well and produce a good harvest. And so it was that when this year's crop of writers were on retreat at Totleigh Barton in Devon, they were initiated into the rite by Assistant Centre Director Eliza Squire, who walked them through the orchard, with wassail cups in hand. It is tempting to see the wassail as a custom which extends to the growth of these writers, and our hope is that the year of mentoring has laid down strong roots from which great work will grow. This anthology is just the start.

Mentors Jenn Ashworth, David Eldridge and Clare Pollard each selected three budding novelists, playwrights and poets from over 200 applicants. Over the year each of these writers have six contact points with their mentor to receive feedback, and the year is bookended by a week's retreat at Arvon to give them dedicated time to write, supported by their fellow mentees. The year builds to a crescendo with a live showcase at the Free Word Centre, Arvon's London home. The writers also met with Simon Trewin, leading literary agent, and Neil Astley, veteran independent poetry publisher. David Eldridge, with typical generosity, was kind enough to introduce his mentees to his agent. We are grateful to them all for their enthusiastic support.

This scheme would not exist without the unwavering support of Jerwood Charitable Foundation. Shonagh Manson and Jon Opie have a keen instinct for the opportunities artists need to develop their potential and our partnership is built on trust and mutual respect for what we can achieve together to enable new writers. Huge thanks to Shonagh and Jon and the trustees of JCF who understand and support this scheme so generously.

I will let the writers speak for themselves.

Ruth Borthwick
Chief Executive | Arvon

I do hope you enjoy reading *Wassailing*. It bears the fruits of nine exceptional writers' hard work over the last year. They appear in this volume as a group and bound by their experience of the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Scheme, but their voices are strong and clearly independent from the programme. This anthology is an achievement in itself and also a mark of their potential and writing to come. My appreciation goes to the nine writers, their dedication to this opportunity and for generously sharing their work.

Five years of the programme completed, 45 writers paired with 15 mentors. Numbers only tell the bare bones of Arvon's achievements in creating such a rich opportunity for writers taking the first steps in their professional careers. The care taken by Ruth Borthwick, Becky Swain and Suzie Jones at Arvon has shaped this programme, delivering time after time a fertile and nuanced experience for its participants. We thank them for their dedication.

Our utmost gratitude goes to the mentors Jenn Ashworth, David Eldridge and Clare Pollard. The mentoring dialogue that makes this programme unique is entrusted to these three. It is their one-to-one conversations offering encouragement, critical support and advice that the nine writers have embraced and in doing so have progressed leaps and bounds over the last year.

I commend to you *Wassailing* and I raise my proverbial glass to toast the achievements of the Jerwood/Arvon writers over the last year and in this anthology. All of us at Jerwood Charitable Foundation wish these nine talented individuals the very best for their future writing endeavours and hope that they will remember their time with the programme with good cheer.

Jon Opie
General Manager | Jerwood Charitable
Foundation

‘It’s been a really rich, rewarding, challenging, once-in-a-lifetime process for everyone, and I’ve been honoured to be part of it. Thank you for organising such an ambitious, generous scheme – at the reading I will be full of pride for my marvellous mentees.’

Clare Pollard
Mentor | Poetry

Sarah Franklin grew up in the West Country and read Modern and Medieval Languages at the University of Cambridge. After several years overseas, she now lives between Oxford and London. Sarah's features, book reviews and columns have appeared in *The Guardian*, *the Seattle Times*, *Psychologies* magazine and *The Sunday Express* amongst others. Her creative non-fiction has been published in anthologies in the USA and appeared on NPR affiliates there. She is founder and host of popular Oxford literary night Short Stories Aloud and a Senior Lecturer at the Oxford International Centre for Publishing Studies, Sarah has used the mentoring year to focus on her novel, *Shelter*.

Sarah Franklin | from Shelter

This scene comes early in the novel, which is set in 1944. Seppe is an Italian Prisoner of War living in a PoW camp deep in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. He is desperate to find work outside the camp in order to evade a venomous campmate who's threatening to reveal a dangerous family secret. Seppe has convinced Frank, the local timber foreman, to pair him with Connie, a young trainee 'Lumberjill' from Coventry. Connie has her own reasons for wanting to stay in the forest, but she's refusing to share them. Frank is desperate for more timber workers in the face of big governmental quotas and has agreed to bend the rules and allow the pairing on condition that Connie and Seppe are both capable. Here, they go out to fell oaks for the first time.

'Oi – dreamer. Time to start work, you know.'

The smell of earth and birdsong; the woman's voice. Connie, planted right in front of him with that odd stance and half-scowl he was coming to recognise.

Beside the timber pyramid, two women were doing battle with vast logs and chains. The newness of their Timber Corps badges glinted against too-clean uniforms as they twisted this way and that. They'd never get that log secured unless they straightened out the knot. His fingers curled.

Connie followed his gaze. 'Brand new Lumberjill trainees; Frank'll have his work cut out with that lot all right. Caught one of them asking Frank where the ladder was for measuring the beech trees. You'd have thought she'd asked him to drop his keks, the look on his face! I jumped in before he could have her guts for garters and showed her the tape.'

'Tape?' What was she talking about?

'You know how this works, Eyetie, don't you? Measurers go round the width of the tree, not up into the

bloody branches. The daft cow almost fainted with relief when I pointed it out.'

'Oh.' But then how did they know how tall it was? He pushed a shaking hand into his pocket.

'Here, let's get going... If you've done this before, it's going to be a cinch; no need to fanny around learning uses of the wood any more. You take the four-and-a-half pounder and follow me.'

The handle was oak, smooth from years of those who'd gone before him. Was it odd, to use oak to fell oak? Or was it the only natural way?

'What's the matter with you? Cat got your tongue?' Connie peered at him and his stomach constricted, prepared for abuse. But she just shrugged and beckoned him along. 'Come on. One of Frank's precious inbreds left a tree half-felled over here when he nipped off for a fag. Frank'd do his nut if he ever found a tree like that, so we can just sneak in and pinch it for our tally; the silly bugger won't have the balls to clipe on us.'

Seppe stared at her. When was he going to start understanding what she said; what any of them said? Her accent wasn't the same as Frank's; it was flatter, more nasal. She spoke so quickly, and with such certainty; her words slipped past him before he could gather and examine them. She did everything decisively, he was learning, not just speech. No time wasted pondering the consequences. He envied her this lightness.

Connie tutted again, worried his sleeve with gloved fingers. 'If you're this dopey all the time we'll have a right old job getting anything done. Come *on*, willya?' She led him a little way further into the trees and he turned back to see how the new lumberjills were managing with the chains. 'Don't you worry about them, they'll be at it all damn day.' Connie

trampled down brown ferns, pushed away branches. Seppe shouldered his axe as if it were a rifle and fell in line behind her. The desert had been cold like this in the winter; the marching endless.

‘Here we are.’ He stumbled into her. ‘Watch where you’re bleedin’ going, Eyetie!’

Seppe snapped to attention as if on the parade ground and followed Connie’s gaze. In front of them a giant oak tilted as if drunk, a deep wedge cleaved out of its trunk towards the ground. All the way above, unaware of the tree’s fate, little brown birds feathered branches that dipped towards Seppe then reeled back.

‘Is that safe?’

Coward. Sissy. He could hear the words forming, almost see them leaving Connie’s lips. He braced for her explosion.

‘No. Not safe in the slightest, that ain’t. Which is why the silly buggers shouldn’t have snuck off like that and left it. All the better for us though, eh?’ She reached behind the tree, one hand to the small of her back. When she straightened up she was brandishing some kind of saw; a long, many-toothed beast with handles at either end, not anything he’d ever used for woodworking. His mouth became sawdust.

‘The silly sods even left their fretsaw behind. Kind of them, weren’t it?’

Connie paced around the trunk, and peered at the incision. She bent down, one hand still at the small of her back. The oak towered above them. The birds called to each other from the branches as if the tree itself was singing. How were they ever going to bring it down? Its branches were as long as buses and looked thicker than his arm, even from a distance.

‘This lot at least seemed to know what they were doing, which is more you can say for half of Frank’s men. Can’t do without them, he reckons, but the only ones he’s got left are so old or crook that they’re no bloody use in the Forces. And no bloody use out here, neither.’ Connie was still eyeing the incision in the trunk. What was she looking for? He bit hard on his lip when she leaned into the fulcrum, ran her hand down the plane.

‘Right!’ Whatever she had seen, it had galvanised her. ‘Need a few more blows with the four and half pounder and the six pounder, but I can hang on to that one if you like. Or do you prefer the bigger one?’

How should he know? But he was supposed to know; he had told them he could do this.

‘You come this side; doesn’t need much more taking out of it here before we switch to the saw. I’ll just get this out of the way.’ She darted forwards again with that odd half-bend and fiddled at the base of the trunk. It swayed like a drunk.

‘There. Now the bugger will move.’ She looked expectantly at Seppe. Could he bluff his way through this too? What choice did he have but to try? He heaved the axe to hip height, clenched it as firmly as he could in both fists and closed his eyes. Sweat was dripping out from under his hat even though the tip of his nose was freezing cold. The birds seemed to have become louder.

‘What the bleeding hell are you playing at?’ He opened his eyes again. His hands faltered and he thudded the axe back to the ground before it slipped from his grasp. ‘Is this some special Italian trick, doing it blindfold? In this country, Eyetie, we keep our bloody eyes open when we’re chucking an axe around. We’re in a blimming war; if you want to die there are plenty of other ways, in case you hadn’t noticed.’

Seppi flushed, heat sweeping up him. He picked up the axe again. His hands were chafing already from the sweat against the grooves of the handle. Panic chased out reason and his father's voice hissed into the vacuum. *Hopeless waste of space, taking orders from a woman, and an enemy woman to boot. Wouldn't know men's work if it came forward and slapped you.*

The axe was even heavier now. His fingers slipped on the wooden handle and it plummeted into the soft earth. He wrapped one hand over the other and hefted. It swung up unsteadily this time, thumped back down.

'Christ almighty!' Connie strode over to him and wrenched away the axe, pushed something into the tree trunk. 'You haven't got a bloody clue, have you, you dozy sod?' She stared at him in disbelief. It was the most honest look anyone had given him since Alessa died. 'You useless idiot, pretending you can get down trees! You've never done this before, have you?'

He shook his head. Shame swamped him; shame and dread.

'Don't – please – don't tell Frank. Please don't.'

Connie glared at him while pulling off her gloves and hat. She tugged at her hair. 'Don't you bleeding worry about that. If I tell Frank that half his extra felling team is actually a lying sodding Eyetie then I'm done for, ain't I? You heard him – he'll ship me off to Christ knows where to start all over again. And I ain't having that. I just ain't.'

She paced, one hand twisting her hair. *She's like Alessa.* Behind her scowl, the first shimmer of tears.

'I'm sorry.' The words wouldn't come. 'The woods – I want to stay in wood. Frank asks me I can cut tree, I say yes. Is wrong of me, I know that. But I need to stay here.' Did she

understand? Had he conveyed what he needed to? He watched her.

‘Jesus, no need to stare at me like that.’ Connie’s voice softened, but only marginally. ‘You have no idea, absolutely no idea.’ She was still for a moment, then snapped her fingers at him. ‘Right, well, we’ve got no choice then do we? Story of my poxy life.’ She picked up Seppie’s axe and thrust it back at him. ‘Come on. I’ll show you. Frank needs a felling team so that’s what we’ll give him. Get in behind me.’

Connie stood away from the tree and crouched over as if going into battle, axe thrust out in front of her. Like this, her coat was stretched tautly across the swollen moon of her belly. His eyes widened, but she seemed oblivious. She was more advanced than Alessa had been; there was no mistaking what he saw. Was she married? Had he missed that? She certainly didn’t act like any wife he’d met before, but things might be different in England. She’d hadn’t mentioned a child, not once.

Seppie came and stood next to Connie, careful not to get too close.

‘Not there, you idiot. How am I going to show you from the side? Get behind me. Get close in, so that you can really feel what’s going on.’ Connie peered at him and he held himself upright. He mustn’t let her realise he knew about the baby. .

‘Come on! I’m not going to bite you.’ She slotted herself in front of him with barely a breath between them. He made himself as small as he could, but he could smell her, a sharp, tart scent underneath the traces of mud and bark. To be standing, unsupervised, nestled into a woman in her condition – what if one of the guardsmen wandered past, or one of Frank’s men?

‘For God’s sake, relax a bit.’ Connie shuffled back and bumped into him as she resumed the half-crouch. To his horror

he felt himself stir. He tried to inch away. ‘Keep still, will you? And pay attention.’ Connie grabbed his axe and thrust it forward. Terror at what she might do with it next swiftly resolved his ardour.

‘Get your hands on here too; we’ll swing it together.’

He mimicked Connie’s stance, her scuffed boots nestled in alongside his, the sharp points of her elbows needling the crook of his arm.

‘Ready? Three, two, one—’ the axe swung up, up, up above his head and came plummeting down. Seppe was barely conscious of the motion, his whole body focused on staying clear of Connie’s. Her hair was escaping from under the beret and it tickled his nose, shivered away the forest smells and sounds until it was the only thing in his world. Her hair smelt different from the smells he was used to at Campo 61, different again from the whiff of her body. *Clean*. It smelled clean.

‘Not bad, but we need to get it going higher and faster.’ Again and again they swung the axe, each downward motion torture for Seppe as he contorted away from her. At last they stopped, the axe thumping to the ground beside them.

‘Phew! You know what? You might yet crack this.’ Connie swept the escaped strands of hair away from her face, grinned at Seppe. ‘You got a fag?’

‘Fag?’

‘You know – a ciggie. Silk Cut. Oh, for Christ’s sake. I’ve seen you smoking them so you must have ‘em somewhere.’ Connie mimed holding a cigarette to her mouth, taking a puff.

‘Ah – *sigaretta*. Yes, but only—’ Seppe pulled out the carton, held it out to his side so he didn’t have to be confronted with her expression. Fredo had been at his games again, snapping the tubes like so many beheaded flowers.

‘What a waste of bleeding nicotine.’ Connie scabbled around, one hand in the box, until she found a stub which was slightly longer than the others.

‘Still, waste not, want not, eh? Got a light there, have you?’

‘No, but I—’

‘No light – how the hell were you going to smoke the bloody things?’ Connie dug into her pockets for a match. ‘That’s better.’

She yawned and stretched and he glimpsed the bulge of her overalls before she curved back round. He needed to stop pretending he didn’t know – it was rude. But why hadn’t she alluded to it? Or Frank?

He opted for a safer question.

‘Your husband – is he at war?’

‘What bleeding husband? If that’s a pick-up line it’s a pretty shoddy one.’

‘No!’ He whispered it. ‘*Scuso*.’ If only he could fold up and disappear behind the trees. ‘I thought just – with the baby—’

‘What baby?’ She faced him, eyes blazing, arms crossed against her chest, daring him. ‘I’ve got no fucking idea what you’re talking about.’

He held her gaze. ‘My sister – she was also – I think I see—’

‘You want to watch that, thinking you’re seeing things. They’ll cart you off to the loony bin soon as they can say “Mussolini”.’ She glowered at him again. ‘No bleeding husband. No baby. Do you get me?’

Seppi nodded. What else was there to do? The curve of her belly was unmistakable. But he knew about silence; about keeping quiet.

‘I understand.’

She looked at him hard, nodded,. ‘Now – are we going to get this bleeding tree down or just stand about all day creating fairy stories?’

She hefted the axe high and swept the blade down into the side of the trunk, barely clearing the ground. The metal whistled through the bright air then changed tone to greet the wood. Connie’s axe possessed the speed and surety of all her actions, but it must be wearing her out. He leaned forward.

‘Let me do this.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ Connie paused to swipe sweat from her forehead.

‘This – this is big work. You will be tired.’

She rounded on him and he stepped back, fought the urge to bring his hands up to his face. ‘I told you, didn’t I? Keep your trap shut and your axe swinging, got that?’ She pulled another cigarette from his packet and stood off to one side, the lit end flaring against the grey-brown of the mute winter trees.

‘Come on then. If you’re so clever, show me you can do it.’

He swung the axe up until his arms were at shoulder length, aching to feel the axe in motion. He hung on for grim death, just as they’d practised. The head arced, the flat steel glinting. Then, ‘whumpf’. The axe bit, scattering needles of hardwood, tiny darts. He let them stick him.

‘That’s it.’ Connie had left her post opposite and stood, looking in satisfaction at the tree rocking above their heads. It creaked as the wood moaned and tipped.

‘But the tree, it’s not coming down.’

‘No, you idiot, of course not. We need to crosscut now.’ Connie marched off, came back with the two-handled saw he’d seen before. ‘Come on then. Don’t want to leave that bloody great trunk dancing about, do we?’ Relief cascaded in. So she

wasn't completely immune to danger; he might not die out here with her.

The cross-cutting should surely have been easier than the axe, but he couldn't make it work, not at all. The only reason the saw moved at all was because of Connie on the far side of the tree evening out his futile attempts at any kind of regular rhythm. Seppe's hands were raw from the axe; he winced every time it was his turn to draw the saw through the resisting wood. The oak really didn't want to be vanquished; with every tug he could feel the opposite force from the grain. *Stop being so sentimental.*

'Quick – skedaddle! She's going!' Connie scrambled to her feet and ran to the edge of the copse. From above came a sound like the rushing of water. Twig pummelled twig, tendril fought tendril, branch pushed against branch. It rushed on down, waiting for nobody, the whispering of branches at the top only matched by the creaking at the trunk as the weight forced its way free.

'Tim-BER!' Connie roared. She turned to Seppe and clapped him on the cheeks.

'You did it!' Seppe, finding no words, thrust his hands deeper into his overalls. The mighty oak barrelled its way downwards, two saplings folding in its wake. *All this because I took an axe to it.* Tears prickled his nose, his eyes and he pressed hard on the comfort of the whittling knife in his pocket.

As the tree hit the ground with a shattering thud, a cloud of dust and twigs swirled up like a spell. Connie wrinkled her nose and peered through the chaos at Seppe. His cap was between his hands as he stood silently looking at the felled oak.

‘What’ve you gone and taken off your hat for? It’s chuffing freezing out here. It’s not a bleeding funeral; it’s our job. Get that hat back on before you catch your death and I have to start planning your funeral next.’ She slumped down on a moss-coated tree trunk and stared beyond the trunk. ‘Well, you can handle an axe, so that’s something. But Frank’d suss you in a heartbeat if he saw how cack-handed you are with that saw.’

‘Sorry. I am wrong; I shouldn’t—’

‘Too true. You bloody shouldn’t have, should you?’ She yawned and looked at him, head tilted to one side. ‘How easy is it for you to get out of that camp of yours?’

‘It is easy enough.’ Another lie.

‘We’ll meet in the mornings before shift starts – can you do that, Eyetie? Get out here when it’s quiet and start practising. If we get a few extra trees down, well, it’s only helping Frank’s quota, ain’t it? Can’t see him about to make a fuss if we do that.’

‘But you need to sort out that bleeding sawing, all right? I ain’t giving up sleep and coming out here for the good of my health.’

‘Of course I will do this.’ There was no other answer.

‘Good. And we need to get it sorted out sharpish. There ain’t no flies on Frank when it comes to timber work. If he saw you even once in this state, that’d be the end of it.’

The end of it. But this had to be the beginning. He nodded. Connie would keep his secret, and he would keep hers. ‘I understand.’

Caroline Gray was for several years a practising artist in sculpture and installation following an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Art and a Fellowship at the University of the Arts London. In 2012 she completed the inaugural John Burgess Playwriting course in London, which was a radical and exciting change of direction. Following this she was selected to be one of the emerging playwrights who formed the Traverse 50, which involved a year long association with the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh in 2013. Her piece *Hard Shoulder* was shortlisted for the BBC Opening Lines competition and her short play *Nits* was performed at the Arcola Theatre as part of the Miniaturists 45. Caroline has used the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Scheme year to develop *Nits* into her first full length play.

Caroline Gray | from *Nits*

Nits is a darkly comic play charting the relationship of two estranged sisters, Lucy and Rebecca, as they try to find out whether they can be in each other's lives, whilst grappling with work, pregnancy, raising children, separation and the occasional infestation of nits. The play is infused with their personal dilemmas, aspirations and disappointments whilst the presence of Lucy's children, Martha and Molly, forces them to find a new way to reconnect.

*

Scene Two

LUCY's flat.

REBECCA is looking around, picking up photos, not sure what to do with herself. She clears a space on the sofa, sits down, gets a Boots bag out of her handbag and takes out two double pregnancy test packets. She opens one, takes out a stick, studies it.

Enter LUCY.

LUCY They're fast asleep. In my bed. I don't know how Joan does it. I swear she drugs them.

REBECCA Who's Joan?

LUCY She lives next door. She raised five kids in that flat and now they've all grown up so she's started on mine. For which I'm eternally grateful. She's teaching Martha to knit. Look.

LUCY holds up a bit of knitting.

Don't worry, we're nit free.

REBECCA What about Mum?

LUCY What about her?

REBECCA Do you hear from her much?

LUCY Off and on. For the girls. What about you?

REBECCA We keep in touch.

LUCY I'm sure you do.

Silence.

The bathroom's down the hall.

REBECCA Maybe I'll wait a bit. Just in case.

LUCY Just in case of what?

REBECCA In case I can't pee.

LUCY You only need a dribble.

REBECCA I haven't got a dribble.

REBECCA opens up the paper instructions for the pregnancy test and reads.

LUCY Have a drink, it might help. What do you want? I've got juice, Ribena, some flat mineral water.

REBECCA It says here you shouldn't drink before you do it – it might dilute the HCG. Maybe I'll just leave it.

LUCY Human chorionic gonadotropin – I interviewed a woman once, at uni. Her name was Audrey.

Spent all her working life in a lab injecting pregnant women's urine into the fat thighs of African toads. Quite sad really, she never had kids herself.

REBECCA Why are you telling me this?

LUCY That's how they used to do it, test for pregnancy, before these magic little sticks. Someone, somewhere, discovered that if the urine sample was positive the female toad would produce hundreds of eggs. Took weeks for the results. Now you'll know in five minutes. The thin blue line.

REBECCA It's terrifying. The whole thing.

Silence.

REBECCA looks around.

You've got fridge magnets and everything.

LUCY Fridge magnets?

REBECCA People who have children have fridge magnets.

LUCY People who have children?

REBECCA Oh, you know.

LUCY People who have children have lots of things.

Pause.

REBECCA Maybe I should call Paul.

LUCY Does he know you're –

REBECCA No! He thinks I'm with clients.

LUCY Let me call him. Hello Paul, it's Lucy.
Remember me. I've kidnapped Rebecca and
taken off her tracking device.

REBECCA That's not funny.

LUCY It was a joke, Rebecca.

REBECCA I never got your jokes, remember.

Pause.

It's a shame I won't meet them.

LUCY Yeh.

REBECCA Maybe next time.

LUCY There's going to be a next time?

Silence.

We are going to have to talk about it. We can't
just pick up where we left off.

Silence.

It's not that simple. For me, at least.

Silence.

Did it ever cross your mind he might be gay?

REBECCA Who?

LUCY Paul. Jumpers? Breasts? Babies?

REBECCA Don't be ridiculous.

Silence.

LUCY Your girl. Does she wax everything?

REBECCA What do you mean, everything?

LUCY The whole works. The full Brazilian.

REBECCA She does actually.

Pause.

It's quite normal, you know. Everybody does it. Why are we even talking about this?

LUCY You should see mine. It's so normal I could plait it and give it dreadlocks. Maybe that's where I went wrong.

Pause.

God, when I think of Tom and that – girl – I just –

REBECCA You must feel awful.

LUCY Do you know what's really 'awful'? It's not the fact that he's probably fucking round the clock and seems to have forgotten he has a family. It's that I thought we were OK. I mean, I hardly saw him since he started this new job and went all corporate, but basically, fundamentally, it was me, him and the girls. I thought I knew him.

Pause.

Gorillas mate for life. I thought we were gorillas.

REBECCA Maybe it's just a blip.

LUCY A blip? A blip? There are two little girls next door who miss their daddy.

REBECCA Sometimes an affair can make a marriage stronger.

LUCY Where did you read that? We're not married, Rebecca. We never got married. I moved in here when I got pregnant with Martha – we were barely a fucking item. I don't own a shred of this. Not a stick.

Pause.

Tom's parents can't stand me. They think I'm a gold digger. Me? They put down a whacking deposit for him when he bought this place and now they want it back, so they can bugger off to Sotogrande. We were going to extend the mortgage but there's no way we can do that if he's got to rent a place so I can stay here with the girls.

REBECCA He wants you to move out?

LUCY No, of course he doesn't. It pains me to say it but he's not that much of a shit. He might be fucking a child himself but he's not entirely without scruples. He's a Catholic for God's sake. He wants to 'do the right thing' so that he can

slope off guilt free to his love nest. He wants absolution.

REBECCA She's not a child.

LUCY You know her?

REBECCA I know of her. We're vaguely connected.

On LinkedIn.

LUCY I bet you are.

Pause.

I wish I'd known of her.

REBECCA takes some wipes out of her bag.

REBECCA Stand still a moment. I've got to do this.

REBECCA rubs at LUCY's top.

You're covered in – what is this? Ketchup?

LUCY This is my best top.

REBECCA Really?

LUCY You wouldn't be seen dead in it.

REBECCA That's not the point.

REBECCA touches Lucy's hair.

When did you last have this cut?

LUCY I can't remember.

REBECCA Take off your scrunchie.

LUCY Why?

REBECCA Just take it off.

LUCY lets her hair down. REBECCA holds LUCY's hair up to her shoulders.

REBECCA You'd look great with a bob.

LUCY A nice sensible bob?

REBECCA arranges Lucy's hair.

REBECCA It would suit you. It really would.

LUCY What, like all this suits me?

REBECCA I wish you'd let me help you.

LUCY To do what?

REBECCA Feel better about yourself.

LUCY With your vacuous beauty tips? I don't think so.

REBECCA I've worked bloody hard to look – to be like this.

LUCY Good for you. I clearly don't have your drive.

REBECCA It's not just about drive, Lucy. It's about having a plan and following it through. Come here.

REBECCA tries to hug LUCY but it's awkward. LUCY moves away.

LUCY Leave me alone. I don't do plans. Isn't that obvious?

REBECCA Seriously, you need a strategy.

LUCY Strategy is just a word, Rebecca. It's like – you know – put the past behind us. Where do we put it? I haven't got time for the past. I can barely cope with the present, and by that I mean Martha's teacher's giving me grief because I'm behind with her reading, Molly's wetting the bed now and Tom's parents seem determined to make their grandchildren homeless.

Silence.

Why did you have to invite him to your fucking wedding anyway?

REBECCA Who?

LUCY Tom! You hardly knew him.

REBECCA Paul invited him.

LUCY Paul?

REBECCA He invited him for you.

LUCY You know that's where it happened, don't you? One drunken fuck in a posh portaloo round the back of the marquee and bingo – there's Martha on the way. Thanks a lot. That was really helpful. I had it all worked out. Sort of. I was going to come back and do an MS bloody C. Three more years at Oxford and a nice cushy research job at the Institute of Zoology. Now look at me.

Silence.

What do you mean, for me?

REBECCA You didn't know anyone and our friends were not your – type.

LUCY And Tom was?

REBECCA We didn't want you to –

LUCY Spoil things? That was a bit of an own goal, wasn't it?

REBECCA Yes. My mistake. As always.

LUCY Oh, please.

REBECCA We should have sent you a special invite. Please, wear a disgustingly loud and possibly filthy dress. Please get hideously drunk. Please do not fail to mention Rebecca's acne, her speech impediment, her lack of academic distinction, her puppy fat, her infatuation with Rick Astley, the fact that she told you once, in confidence, that she didn't really fancy Paul all that much. Oh, and please have a massive row with Mum just outside the marquee so all the guests can hear, not to mention the bloody portaloo. Maybe if we'd done that you would have done the opposite. Behaved yourself. You could have saved us nine years.

LUCY So that was it? The wedding?

REBECCA It wasn't just the wedding.

Pause.

LUCY It was a speech, Rebecca. It was meant to be funny.

REBECCA We specifically said no speeches.

LUCY And a dress code. Shades of grey?

REBECCA That was Paul.

LUCY You should have told me.

REBECCA It was on the invite.

LUCY Which I didn't get. And anyway, if I had got the bloody invite I would have thought you were joking. I mean, Jesus, you can't dictate what people wear.

REBECCA It was our wedding. It was meant to be perfect. Paul spent months planning it.

LUCY So, because I stood up and made a speech for my little sister and I mentioned your bloody acne. Oh and my dress was a bit bloody colourful.

REBECCA It was barely a dress.

LUCY I'd been in Thailand saving elephants. What the fuck did you expect?

REBECCA You ruined the photos.

LUCY So? You edited me out. What's the problem?

REBECCA Do we have to do this now?

LUCY We have to do it sometime. Or maybe we don't. Maybe you can just do the test and go. The bathroom's down the hall.

Pause.

REBECCA It wasn't just the wedding.

LUCY What was it then?

Silence.

You're just going to waltz back into my life with your little problem and think we can pick up where we left off?

REBECCA I don't know why I called, OK, I just did it. I wanted to see you. I wasn't going to tell you about the – baby – it just came out.

LUCY You knew about Tom though.

REBECCA Yes I did.

LUCY You felt sorry for me?

REBECCA Of course I did.

LUCY You with your perfect life and mine in tatters.

REBECCA It isn't like that.

Silence.

LUCY What did you tell people, about us?

REBECCA I told them you'd gone off again.

LUCY For nine years?

REBECCA They stopped asking. And when Mum moved to Spain it was – easy.

Pause.

You've really got no idea, have you?

LUCY No, I haven't.

Pause.

I just thought once I had a sister, now I don't.

Silence.

REBECCA The wedding was just the icing on the cake.

LUCY Ha ha. Very funny.

REBECCA That wasn't a joke.

Pause.

LUCY God. We're pathetic. Both of us.

Pause.

REBECCA Maybe we should make a pact.

LUCY What?

REBECCA Like we used to.

LUCY If I remember rightly you never kept our pacts.

REBECCA Most of them involved a Chinese burn.

Silence.

LUCY What kind of pact?

REBECCA I don't know. To try and mend things.

LUCY You really think that's possible? Please, just go and do your test.

A small child, MOLLY, speaks from the edge of the stage.

MOLLY What's a Brazilian?

LUCY Jesus Christ, Molly, how long have you been standing there?

MOLLY What's a Brazilian?

LUCY It's a kind of nut. Come over here. Come and meet –

MOLLY I can't.

LUCY Don't be silly.

MOLLY *(gesturing to her nightie, which is wet)* I'm all –

LUCY goes over to her.

LUCY It's OK darling. Let me – *(she wraps a towel round MOLLY, picks her up and sits down with MOLLY on her lap)* We'll get you sorted in a minute. Is Martha still asleep?

MOLLY She's trying to change the sheets so you won't notice.

LUCY *(to REBECCA)* Welcome to my world.

MOLLY Who's she?

LUCY *She* is my sister, Rebecca. Queen Webecca, come down to earth to visit us.

(to REBECCA) This is Molly. My youngest.

REBECCA Hello.

MOLLY Hello.

Pause.

 Are you really my mum's sister?

REBECCA Yes, I am.

MOLLY Her real sister or her pretend sister?

LUCY I had to tell them something.

REBECCA I'm her real sister.

MOLLY You don't look like my mum.

REBECCA No, I suppose I don't.

MOLLY We thought you had brown hair.

LUCY She did once.

MOLLY Is it real yellow or pretend yellow?

REBECCA It's – pretend yellow.

MOLLY When I grow up I'm going to have pretend yellow hair.

LUCY Not if I can help it.

MOLLY scratches her head. LUCY throws a look at REBECCA.

Enter MARTHA, struggling to carry a bundle of wet sheets and duvet.

 Thanks, love. You're a star.

MOLLY This is Queen Webecca.

MARTHA I know that.

MOLLY No you don't.

MARTHA I do.

REBECCA You must be Martha.

MARTHA Are you really my mum's sister?

MOLLY Her real sister, not her pretend sister.

REBECCA Yes, I am.

MARTHA She wet the bed again. It's so embarrassing.

LUCY Martha, stop it.

MOLLY I'm not embarrassed.

MARTHA You're not old enough to be embarrassed.

MOLLY Yes I am.

MARTHA Why aren't you then?

LUCY Martha –

MOLLY (*picking up the pregnancy test stick*) What's this?

MARTHA Nosey, aren't you?

REBECCA It's a – test.

MOLLY What, like a maths test?

MARTHA Don't be stupid.

LUCY Do you want to tell them or shall I?

REBECCA It's a test that tells you if you're – if you're going to have a baby.

MARTHA Are you going to have a baby?

LUCY She doesn't know yet.

MOLLY Do you want to have a baby?

LUCY She doesn't know that, either.

MARTHA How does it work?

MOLLY Is it magic?

LUCY Sort of. See this little space here – if you're going to have a baby a little blue line appears

and that tells you if there's a baby, growing in your tummy.

MOLLY grabs the test from LUCY and pokes it at her tummy.

MOLLY You're not going to have a baby.

LUCY Thank God for that.

MOLLY (*poking test at MARTHA*) Neither are you. Or me. (*poking REBECCA'S tummy*) And you're not going to have a baby either. Are you pleased or are you sad?

LUCY Molly – it's not quite that simple.

MOLLY I'm just asking.

LUCY The test, I mean. You have to wee on it.

MOLLY Why?

MARTHA Yeuck. That's gross.

LUCY Enough. It's ten o'clock. You two should be in your beds. Your beds, not mine.

MARTHA Are you going back to Sweden?

REBECCA I don't live in Sweden, I live here.

MARTHA Why did you tell us she lived in Sweden?

Pause.

(to REBECCA) She said you had a wedding and you went to live in Sweden because your

husband was a Swede. She said that Swedes were cold and boring.

REBECCA Well, that's not strictly true.

MOLLY I hate swede.

MARTHA Not that kind of swede. Stupid.

MOLLY *(starting to cry)* I'm not stupid.

LUCY Right, that's it. Come on you two, back to bed. Say good night to Rebecca.

MOLLY Night.

MARTHA Good night, Queen Webecca.

REBECCA Good night. It was nice to ... *(LUCY exits with the girls)* finally meet you.

REBECCA picks up the pregnancy test stick, puts it back in its packet. Starts to fold the instructions.

Enter Lucy.

LUCY So, you finally met them.

REBECCA They're really sweet.

LUCY That's what people who don't have fridge magnets say about kids. They're complicated human beings, just like the rest of us.

Pause.

That's why I walk on eggshells.

REBECCA Why?

LUCY Isn't it obvious? Martha's mouthy like me, and poor little Molly hasn't learnt to fight back yet.

REBECCA Maybe she never will.

Pause.

Is that what I am, your pretend sister?

LUCY I had to tell them something. I couldn't exactly write you out of history. That's the thing when you have kids. It's not just you anymore. Your family is their family. They ask questions, all sorts of questions and you have to come up with answers. And you have to try to tell them the truth, which is not always that easy. Is it?

LUCY picks up one of the pregnancy test packets.

Are you going to do this test or not?

REBECCA I'm not sure I can pee.

LUCY Oh for God's sake, get it over with.

REBECCA Fine. I will.

REBECCA picks up the Boots bag, snatches the test from LUCY and exits.

LUCY starts taking the wet cover off the duvet MARTHA brought in. She gets the towel and dabs at a damp patch. Sniffs it. Sighs. Then she

goes to the washing basket, picks out a clean cover and struggles to put it on.

LUCY Rebecca? What the hell are you doing in there?

REBECCA I'm doing another one.

Enter REBECCA, four tests in hand.

REBECCA It's positive. They're all positive.

LUCY Is that good?

REBECCA I don't know yet. *(sits down)* God, I feel sick.

Debris Stevenson found poetry at 16 in the gut of the Roundhouse, where words enabled her to navigate her dyslexia. After being followed by Channel 4 for 2 years, she was published by organisations such as, Louis Vuitton, Oxford University, Holland Park Press and BBC Radio's The Verb. Flipped Eye published her debut pamphlet, *Pigeon Party*, in 2014.

A social carrier pigeon, Debris has performed her poetry from the National Theatre Zagreb to a street corner in San Francisco. She is particularly interested in the alternative narrative and vocabulary that poetry provides for those navigating identity; race, education, sexuality, disability and mental health.

A trained Zumba instructor, Debris can often be found dancing sober and alone to Dubstep, Dancehall or Moombahton.

Debris Stevenson | *The Long Man and His
Map* and other poems

The Long Man and his Map

“Britain is the only country in the world with a sustained history of child migration [...] The reality of this policy was to remove children, some as young as three years old, from their homes, from their mothers and fathers, from all that was familiar to them, and to ship them thousands of miles away from their home country to institutions in distant lands within the Commonwealth. Many of these children were removed without their parents’ knowledge or consent.”

www.childmigrantstrust.com

Hi, I’m Joe Magpie Mcleary.
Before I tell you everything,
know – you can’t trust
anything I say, okay?

When I was seven, I was from Nottingham
and no other kids at my school
had more brothers and sisters than fingers
or a climbing frame or school-shorts worn by trillions

of kids before them –
my shorts were so big
an elephant could have fit them!
My shorts had lived many lives;

the surnames of the previous
owners written inside with biro.
At night I would read the inside like a Bible.
I lived in a children’s home.

We called the manager, Mother.
Mother had mandarin coloured hair
that spun miles from her pale head.
She had a wavy body and when she sang

she sounded like a goose. At night
she would laugh me and the other kids
into a wriggly sleep. Every night,
the same song:

“Oh smelly children,
With your beautiful toes

your life has smelt of kippers,
And I can't give you new clothes.

But I can give you a bed sheet,
And some sturdy bunk bed rows.

And you can call me Mother.
Although I'm not yours, I know.

Close your woolly eyes.
Close your cold past.

Till I begin your breakfast,
And find a hug for you that lasts.”

Things are different now, although
I often remember my double-deckered siblings,
and the sound of the swing humming in the yard.
I wish I was back there. But now, the sun is too hot

for a metal climbing frame – the multicolored bars
melt into clumps of glass and sand.
I have been stolen, by a country called Australia.
Where I am servant to a beautiful pile of rocks

called Bindoon. There are many other boys here too,
ordered by Priests, Brother Gash and Brother Doom.
Doom is small, and wide and red like a beef tomato,
Gash is pointy and long like a sharpened pencil.

They stand at the top of the pile of rocks, and point
their pens and spit and laugh and cough.
Expecting our midget hands to build, and pull and sew.
Brother Gash bellows “Joe, your hands are bleeding

because you’re day-dreaming, about a life you made up
forget your past, this is your present.
Repent – for talking before you were asked.”
Meanwhile, Brother Doom sits plump and smug,

rubs his packed belly, then pokes me in the nose
hard before flicking a rusty penny in my face and swishing
lemonade round his smelly mouth and spitting,
“your head will burst you know Joe,

This is all you came with from birth Joe,
Your worth less than dirt.”
I wish I was seven again more than I wish
for dinner or healed blisters –

Wouldn’t you? As you’re dragged so hot
your skin rots red. If you were dragged
to this beautiful pile of rocks
called Bindoon, what could you do

but stare up the nose of Doom –
feel the worry of wee welling in your shoe.
There are no bunk beds here, just stone,
My past is becoming blurry, and the ink

inside my shorts is beginning to smudge.
I’m 13 now and working from 6am till midnight
makes it hard to remember or trust anything,
or anyone – that’s why you can’t trust me.

I’ve tried to tell the other boys
about the children’s home or the pieces
I can remember or before then,

when I had a real Mother.

When a long man appeared in my kitchen
and lay a map on the table, drinking
the last of the sugar, he penned together
my future with ink, paper and a ruler.

His knees poked out from the table cloth,
on each side and his trousers
barely stretched past his thighs!
I could see his vastly nasty map

as he hovered like a daddy long-legs by the lamp.
I didn't like him. Neither would you.
So I hid under the damp coat rack
with a hampered view.

But I trusted Mum beside him!
Her body: a hug. Her voice: a cannon.
Her terrible singing as she'd
dance with the vacuum!

She tapped her thumb against the mug.
I could tell her fingers were planning.
I think she could hear my fingers thinking...
I don't eat cornflakes without sugar!

I knew the last cube was in his mug.
I could smell his boot-polish and mud –
I can't believe she didn't ask for his shoes!
She offered him my baked beans as if he could choose!

The long man stopped and stared at me. His voice deep
and warm as a bath. He asked me, "Would you like to go into
space?
Where the sun is bigger and brighter than your face?
Oranges are sweet as sherbet, kangaroos fit in your pocket?"

Maybe the long man wasn't so rubbish?
I had to think about it... Although in my pensive silence
he became impatient – “There is no
beans on the stove nor coats on that hanger.

The mum beside me you *think* you address,
has abandoned you for a deeper rest!
Mum was gone and just the long man stood
as the smell of beans escaped through a mouse hole,

Mum's shadow spread wide like the steam from a kettle.
Motherless wallpaper shot down the hall.
And the smell of the orphanage wedged up my nostrils.
The long man had one last thing to say,

handing me his map and teaching me to pray:
“Joe, this is the only luck you have been given,
look up to the Lord and your Mother in heaven.
This boat is the closest you will come to happiness.”

My memory is broken as an older boy
slings a pair of pants through the air –
they hit me in middle of my stare.
I peel the dirty pants from my face,

Then hold them out in both palms like a page.
I read the blue biro writing within.
Mother's handwriting could not be mistaken.
Are these the block capital letters of heaven?

The Weekly Mormon Shop

I am at a check-out. There is a man older simultaneously a boy. It's a cross between Sainsbury's and Tesco but with palm-trees that look like giant pineapples, and hyenas. The man/boy at the checkout puts his hands up my shirt and claws at my breastless torso and then, he's a hyena too and he tongues at my nipples, and I begin to cry. My mum is bagging, pretending not to look. My father trimming palm leaves by the entrance, whistling to himself loudly. Soon his whistling becomes the sound of the conveyor belt below me. The hyena's tongue flattening me slow.

Over Toast

Dr Masters nudged his thick brimmed glasses
up the ridge of his nose. They moved slowly
like a bulging blue caterpillar up a branch.

He said, “Memorise your revision guide
and get an A, or question everything inside
and blow waves into the concept of grades.”

The rest of the lesson scratched with questions:
In a world of so many, can we afford
another guzzler of fuel and money?

At home, I sat with Mum. Our conversation
sung over four courses of toast;
butter, tuna/cheddar, Spam, then jam.

These are the staples of all good philosophers.
I was too curious for toast, I had to ask, “Mum,
how did you decide to have me? Do you ever feel guilty?”

Before the doctor told me, I saw your wobble.
We were watching each other. Rotund, sausagey,
heavy with gravity, but not alone.

Life can feel the same as birth:
slimier and smellier than expected.
Your pelvis was the shape of a frown to some,

it was the shape of liberty to me.
Blouses graded us behind glass.
The hospital smelt of orange squash.

You smelt of Sudocrem and happiness...
Yes, I guess I am immoral.
You guzzle more fuel than a Honda.

But Emma, you never feel guilty.
Feel buttery now
drink your tea

Stay

We don't have a government, we have Starbucks.
Let's stray to the docks. What if the roads get closed?
Laugh until our ears burn, rum will soften the blisters.
We work too many hours to sleep sober. Dream tractors,
wake in jolts of sweat. Forget. Let's lick loose our accents.
Squeeze soft when the lights dance off. Sorry

I've drowned too much. Downed, sorry.
When you stood, stronger than Starbucks,
on that army truck's hood; sparkling accent,
wailing Golden Brown into the windscreen. Activism felt closer.
That's why I jumped up alongside you, my voice-tank
chugging the chorus on repeat. We stood till our pride blistered

realising the officers were asleep. My memories blistering
apprehending that week. Trampled. Hot. The sorry
faces of passing cars. I found my English Teacher trapped
under a tractor,
mud softly gasping at her neck, light ripping rubber red. A
Starbucks
cup the only thing left full. She knew to be careful – stay close.
I didn't know it would be me with gun barrel to her ear. Accent

frothing at fear as tanks ached towards us. Accents
of blood. Gelatinous black blistering
blood, like I'd ripped a silent baby from her closed
body. The last thing I outlined from her face was sorry.
You know, after 6 drinks; tea, taurine, Starbucks...
your body interprets the caffeine as anxiety. That cup: a vehicle

of work and oblivion. Then, I'm told – Go! Wagon
my car to the border. Kiss my teacher's accent
from my hands...No. Drive back home, to Starbucks:
one name in a list where tourists shouldn't go. My teacher
blistered

for British pronunciation. She said, English solves everything,
sorry.

I want her beliefs, but I can't feel where life opens and work
closes.

I can't stomach the Rolexes and road closures.

You stood, open-bodied, on that army truck
with something more accurate than news: the sorry
lists of names, some sound too familiar, so we choose a new
language?

Please, lets pick up our memories like bombs. Blister
bright and write because if we don't? Who's left; the poor, the
corrupt, the

immaculately suited trucks? Starbucks!

Starbucks, valued at \$74.23 Billion. Stats blister declarations.
Death tolls surpass imaginations. But my teacher's accent is
still loud as God on my hands. Your words a tractor to this land
– let's not go anywhere. Sorry, we don't have a government,
but we have a dance of stories sparkling close and strong.

Please Leave Keys in the Recycling Box

It's 11.10pm, as I step from work to reception:

We're in hospital, Gary came off his bike.

What?

Peddle or motor? Surgery or plaster? Dead? No answer. No keys and a bare battery. Parents live on a terraced street – razor wire and high-speed trains instead of backdoor or garden. There is no way of getting in, no way of knowing where they are and I'm currently being given the impression my brother is dead. But I've received ridiculous messages like this before –

A slumber party parent said Gary was in hospital. I had to stay another night until I was told he'd snapped his forearm replicating a swan-ton bomb off the sofa. I had a poster of Jeff Hardy on my wall.

Once Mum called at 3am, *Dad's had a heart attack.* It was trapped wind.

It's 11.57pm, Liverpool Street Station. I keep calling – voicemail. Voicemail. Voicemail. Then, somehow, I have a voicemail. It's Mum, questionably quiet for an Italian:

We're at the hospital. Gary's back –

What? An accident? Peddle or motor? Surgery or plaster? Dead? No answers.

Who doesn't identify key information like:

YOUR BROTHER IS ALIVE?

This is Gary.

4 years older.

Got 100% in the 11+ I wasn't allowed to take because Mum thought it'd upset me. Everything Gary said I repeated as fact: *There is a famous World of Cheese Museum south of Montserrat. And I am not dyslexic – Mum's a hypochondriac.*

12.05pm, Dad:

We're at Queens, Romford.

It was a pedal bike.

Dad meets me at the automatic doors:

Gary's just a bit scratched up.

Have you got work tomorrow?

I'm led through steel scented corridors.

Light's invasive as police torches.

Antibacterial gel dispensers disserted.

 Last time Mum was here she got c-dif.,

 then dinners through a trap-door

 like in prisons.

Gary's curtain

I'm confronted with

the edge

Dad grabs

statement settles

original

He's just a bit scratched up.

Curtain peels

to Gary –

Blood and road and black.

He looks at me:

Yo. Gake a kiktcha.

I zoom in with 3% battery.

Just a bit scratched up?

Do you want to see?

He shakes his head.

(This is the picture)

*Do **you** want to see?*

Of my brother, just a bit scratched up...

The nurse fills a syringe with iced saline and begins water-gunning Gary's face. (Blink to fingernail obliterated in an oak door scissor-swing. TCP scolding. The lop-sided attempt at sandwich Gary made to say *sorry*). I look back at him, choking or laughing – elastic slings of blood and spit silly-stringing in opposites. I laugh too as she shoots at him

I
begin to see the amount of road welded to upper lip split to septum.

2 teeth missing. Another 2 to go.

All my friends used to fancy him, till he stopped growing. (He blamed Mum's spontaneous vegetarianism for that). A poke from Dad:

Do you have work tomorrow?

What happened?

Apparently police appeared at the front door with this note:

Gary was found at the side of the road unconscious.

Came off pedal bike, heavily concussed

(thinks he's in Japan).

Awake for Mum's, Gary asked, *Am I still a genius? Did the f'ing banks beat us?* Mum

says, *He must've been concussed, he never swears.* (She's wrong),

999 prompted we'd arrive quicker. Half way Gary shivered for the heating on. Me and your dad were fine. So I gave him the car-quilt and switched on the Tabernacle Choir CD.

I remember when Gary stopped talking to her as a means of punishment. How she followed him around the house crying. She started sleeping in the car. He didn't start talking again until she threatened to divorce Dad, who is still asking –

Do you have work tomorrow?

The nurse still firing at Gary's face,
our laughter persisting.
Gary places his hand in Mum's.
Her fingers are bandages.

And she looks happy –

I've never realised that before.

‘My mentees have been a delight and a joy to work with, and it’s been fun and inspiring to see the way they’ve come together to support each other.’

Jenn Ashworth
Mentor | Fiction

Susie Hales grew up in a small village in the Midlands, a reluctant country-dweller yearning for the city. She studied psychology at the University of Manchester and worked as a waitress, a record shop assistant and a door-to-door researcher before training as a mental health professional. *After the Group* is her first novel.

Susie Hales | from *After the Group*

Prologue

It's just light when she returns home. The stained glass rose on the front door casts patterns of red on the flecked beige of the carpet. The mechanical hum of the boiler whirrs into life as she places her keys into the wire basket they'd bought at the market last Thursday. She begins to climb the stairs, not bothering to take shoes off now. Reaching the top she pauses, her arms clutching tight around herself, the breath sticking in her lungs. On the white bannister, the freckles of coffee that she'd meant to clean yesterday seem to jeer at her.

The door is as they left it, slightly ajar. Her instinct now is to stop, to sit down, perhaps to be sick. Instead she traces the emulsioned grain of the door with her fingers, drawing imaginary lines between the whorls and knots. Once inside she avoids the bed, and comes to sit by the dressing table. The hair brush. She'd noticed it before when she'd vacuumed his room and thought it a strange thing for a man to use: her Pa had always had a comb. Made out of some kind of dark wood, oval in shape and probably expensive in its time, now the surface is cracked and furrowed, the bristles bent out of shape, missing altogether in places. A single silvery-white hair is hanging loose. Gently, she unravels it from the rest and then lays it across her palm. It is hard for her to believe. A moaning sound fills her ears and startles her, and then her mouth brims with noise again before she can stop it. She takes the hair and wraps it once, twice around her index finger. The next one, this one stuck with a white flake, is just long enough to tie around her thumb. Fixated, she plucks the silvery threads strand after strand and numbly weaves them through the empty spaces of her hands, crossing, binding, intent.

The bark of the alarm rouses her with a start and she forces herself to look over to the bedside table, where the radio sits on a white lace cloth, the green digits showing 7:45. There's a glass of water, half-drunk, on the table too, a smear of something on the rim. Her eyes flick to the bed and then away again but it's too late. They'd pulled the green paisley quilt straight when they'd left, a gesture of normality, but underneath the yellowing sheets are rumpled and stained, pooled in the sag of the mattress. The radio begins bleating out *Thought for the Day*, and she moves quickly to silence it. Her right hand hovers, unsure, before reaching down to pick up the glass. If she holds it tightly she can almost stop her hand from trembling.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, she tips away the half-drunk water and places the glass on the side with the greasy plates and frying pan. She reaches underneath the sink for the bleach, turns the hot tap on full, and begins last night's washing up.

One

The bus stops with a shriek outside the *Hope and Anchor*. It's a miserable day. People are huddled under umbrellas or wrapped in mackintoshes, and there are squeals as a car sends swathes of puddle water over a group of schoolgirls, their thighs mottled blue and grey with cold. Her fingers are already tingling, the damp clawing in and causing her fingers to ache. In her mind's eye she conjures up the high street, the shops she'll need to go to and the route she'll follow to do everything as quickly as possible with no doubling back. She checks the return timetable stuck to the grubby plastic of the bus shelter, though there's no need to. She could recite it in her sleep. *Birmingham*

City Centre to Druid's Heath: 5.08, 6.08, every 30 minutes from 7.08 until 9.08, then hourly until 23.08. The 15.08, that's the one to get, before school ends and the buses are awash with teenagers clambering up and down stairs with their bags and sports stuff, knocking people out of the way, shouting to each other in the way that they do – incapable of talking at a normal volume. The thought of all that noise makes her shudder, a worm of irritation trailing its way up her spine and forcing her teeth together. *Don't get yourself into a state already, you need to relax!* A stern voice always did her good, despite what they'd said at the hospital. The list comes out again and immediately a splotch of rain slides through the tiny inked letters, disturbing the regimented lines. A hiss of air escapes from her nose. It's a good job this isn't one of her bad days. She pulls the headscarf tight around her chin to protect her shampoo and set, then turns her head into the wind.

The red brick buildings looming above her have seen better days, the facades caked with grime and bird muck. Metal spikes have been stuck round the ledges to stop people from clambering up, though Lord knows why they would want to. A nightclub has set up where the public library used to be; the door bolted shut and stuck with peeling posters, expletives scrawled all over them in black marker. It's a crying shame the way the area has gone downhill recently, the usual bustle of the streets changed for something else, a feeling that anything could happen, and not in a good way. She passes a scrawny tree hemmed in by a squat wire fence, one of the council's token new initiatives. As if that could make a difference. Initials are already carved into its narrow trunk, and the scraps of polythene tangled in its branches sway ghoulishly in the wind.

She's relieved to step inside the chemists, away from the dirt and the profanities. A bell tinkles to advertise her

presence, and the niggling discomfort in her stomach retreats a little. The shop smells faintly of Dettol, clean and comforting. In the front of the shop, products for babies and children are laid out on shelves: wet wipes, talcum powder, nappies, soothing tonics for colic. Further back are the sections for foot and digestive health, the familiar curses of middle age and beyond. There are plasters for different sorts and locations of blisters, balm for cracked heels, remedies to ease acid reflux, tablets and powders to stop you from going or to help you to. At the very back of the shop lie women's products and prophylaxis devices, tucked out of the way to avoid embarrassment. She walks past these quickly, searching in her bag for the prescription. Mr Pritchett, sat behind the counter on a black metal chair, rises as she approaches.

"Afternoon, Miss Pearsall, horrible day isn't it?"

She nods.

"Just my usual please," she says, handing over the green printed piece of paper. "Shall I sign the bottom?"

He offers her a ballpoint pen a little too enthusiastically.

"Uh, Miss Pearsall, forgive me if I'm speaking out of turn but have you had your meds reviewed recently?" The silence hangs awkwardly in the air. "It's just that you've been on this little lot for a long time now".

This wasn't going the way she had planned. What had happened to minding one's own business? Had that gone out of fashion too?

"I don't like taking it all," she says quietly, "but Dr Adderley told me I better stay on them for the foreseeable. Things didn't go so well for me when he changed them last time." She averts her eyes from his, picks up the pen and concentrates on signing her name.

“I see.”

The tips of his ears have begun to glow pinkly. He pauses, his mouth opening and closing, not seeming to know the right words to select.

“Well, I’d still recommend you make an appointment to talk things through with Dr Adderley,” he says eventually. “There are lots of new medications coming to market now that might be worth a try.” He taps a trade magazine lying on the counter. “Amazing things they’re doing these days. We’re living in exciting times!”

He turns his back and starts pulling boxes and bottles from the neat rows of medicines stacked behind the counter. Each box, each bottle labelled in black type with the name of the drug, its purpose, side-effects. Medicines for every possible ailment, the clean white packaging conveying authority, certainty; a pathway to recovery, remission. The first time she’d been handed a bottle of pills she’d felt a sense of relief, of hope even. But that was a long time ago. Now, the medication dosette in the bathroom cabinet was just a constant reminder that things weren’t right. The daily doses were washed down with resignation, the chalky taste turning her stomach every morning.

Mr Pritchett measures out the pills into four small brown bottles. Then he prints out adhesive labels typed with instruction and fixes them precisely to each bottle in turn, his tongue poking out between his lips with the effort. Finally, he places them in a white paper bag and folds over the top with a flourish.

“There you are, Miss Pearsall,” he says, handing it over as if it were a gift she should be delighted about. “Mind how you go and do think about getting that review booked in, won’t you?”

She nods tersely, shoving the package deep into the bottom of her handbag, then steps out of the shop into the grey drizzle of the afternoon.

A little further down the high street is the hardware shop, where she buys two 40-watt bulbs from a bent over man whose skin matches the yellowing grey of the peeling wall. The smell of Calor gas surrounds him, coming from a heater too close, no doubt, to his legs. Next door at the grocers neat rows of boxes have been placed outside the shop. Navel oranges, Cox's apples, zingy lemons, the last of the blackberries, a sheen of wet making them glisten in the light coming from inside. She picks up an orange and holds it in her hand, stroking the waxy dimpled skin with her thumb. At school they said that sailors would take barrels of oranges and lemons on their voyages to protect them from scurvy, and she'd been shocked that something so ordinary could save a man. *If only everything were that simple*, she thinks.

Keeping the fruit in her hand, she pushes her way through the chain curtain into the main shop, where the run-of-the-mill produce has been put out. On shelves covered with newspaper, muddy potatoes have been piled up next to pallets of brown onions. Punnets of mushrooms are on special offer: fifty pence for half a pound. The look of them makes her a little queasy. Huge cabbages, too big for one person, jostle for space with misshapen carrots and turnips and cauliflowers, their creamy protrusions already speckled with brown. The proprietor appears from out the back. He is thin with a ruddy face, whether from drink or the outdoors she can't tell.

"What can I do you for?" he asks, smiling. "Great mushrooms in," he adds, gesturing towards the mulchy growths with a nod of his head. "Straight from the woods this

morning – fry ‘em up in butter and stick ‘em on your toast: fit for a king. Or queen, for that matter!”

His manner is over-familiar, jarring.

“A pound of potatoes please,” she says stiffly, “the smaller ones. And two onions and a half pound of carrots.”

He busies himself with weighing up. Dirt is ingrained under his nails, and in the dark spidery lines marking out the creases of his hands. She resolves to wash everything well when she gets home.

“Anything else, duck?”

“I think that will be all.” Then she remembers the orange in her hand. “Oh, and this.”

“Something to stir up the tastebuds, eh?”

There is a teasing tone to his voice and she feels a flash of hatred for him.

“For the vitamins,” she answers primly, hurriedly putting the brown packages in her shopping bag, wanting to get away from him. She checks her watch: 2.46. Just enough time to get to the butchers and back to her stop for the 3.08 bus.

The red and white striped awning of *M. Cole and Sons* is flapping in the wind. It’s busier than she expected, the queue stretching almost to the door. She could go home, but then there’d be nothing for tea. The strip lighting illuminates trays of glossy brown liver, plump chickens, neat stacks of bacon. A family of rabbits have been slipped out of their skins and arranged in a snug row: flesh pink, eyes staring, brazenly naked. The air is rich with the stench of offal and salt and deadness. The woman at the front is dithering, changing her mind back and forth between pork chops and lamb neck until the tssk of the customer behind prompts a decision. When her

turn finally comes she asks for a pound of stewing steak – the economical kind – streaked through with globules of fat and cut into lumps of bright red and dirty brown and grey. Plastic green fronds circle the meat in its tray, and she’s suddenly struck by this display: the lifeless decoration surrounding the lifeless flesh, like plastic flowers on a grave. A shudder trickles through her.

The butcher picks up a handful of the meat with his bare hands and shoves it unceremoniously into a metal weighing pan, then he tips it into a plastic bag and seals it closed with a tag. A bloodied hand extends towards her, and she drops the coins into his palm from a height to avoid touching him. When he returns with her change she indicates the charity box placed on the counter, one of those yellow miniature helter-skelters where the coin goes in at the top and slithers down the zig-zaggy slides into the box at the bottom. She watches the first penny slide downwards and then realises with a start that the money is being collected for the local firefighters. In that instant the present begins to recede away.

“Oh no, not here, please,” she whispers, fear clutching at her stomach.

The smell of burning clothes fills her nose and she struggles to quell the sickening stench of smouldering hair and flesh that she knows will inevitably follow. Looking down, an orange-swirled carpet has replaced the sawdusty floor she thought she’d been standing on; a child’s comforter hangs from one hand where she’d sworn her handbag was a minute ago.

“Stop!” she says, audibly now, her breath ragged, heart clunking against her ribs, the hair on her arms standing stiffly upright. Disoriented, she staggers blindly towards the fresh air, trampling over feet and bags, cries of “Mind out!” and “Watch it!” raining down on her like blows.

By the time her breathing has slowed to almost normal, she realises that in her confusion she's travelled much farther up the high street than she'd intended. The shops are less familiar here, newsagents with posters advertising cheap telephone calls to Bangladesh, pound stores selling dented tin cans and washing lines and mop handles. She looks at her watch.

“Damn!”

The dial shows 3:10. The bus has gone and the next one, not for nearly an hour, will be filled with schoolchildren. She wishes she had never come out. A wave of wretchedness comes crashing down, her shoulders sagging under the weight of the shopping bags, her face crumpling – it's always like this after an attack of the nerves. She squeezes her fists tightly together to try and stop the flow of tears. *Enough! You'll not embarrass yourself like this*, she thinks. To her left is a café, bright lights twinkling in the windows. Not the sort of place she'd normally like to be seen in, but at least it will be dry. And a cup of tea always takes the edge of things.

The café smells of damp steam and cigarettes, the tables populated with pensioners in pairs, mothers with pushchairs, a couple of solitary men reading the papers. The counter is empty, the serving girl busy clearing plates and empty cups from table, the surfaces given a quick flick with a cloth. As she waits to be served she looks around at the bulk-produced prints of fauna and flora on the walls, the corn on her left foot throbbing. The sound of the door opening draws her attention and she turns her head. It is then that she sees him, sat at the small table next to the cabinet where the cutlery and sauces are kept. Immediately, she picks up her bags to leave, but he's looked up too and their lines of sight collide. He raises his hand in greeting, a grin breaking over his face, and she

returns a nervous smile. By now he's squeezing through the tables, headed in her direction. He looks older, a little heavier in the face.

"Patricia!" he says. "What a surprise! How've you been?"

"Oh, not so bad, thank you," she replies. "And you?" she adds after a pause, remembering her manners.

"Well you know, so-so, but we have to do our best to keep going, don't we?" he says cheerfully – a little too cheerfully, she thinks. The group analyst was always pointing that out to him. He said it was a way of not dealing with what was really going on. There was a fancy word for it, what was it? A defence mechanism – that's what he had called it. He said that everyone in the group had their own special ones.

"What are you having, love?"

She turns, startled by the voice of the serving girl.

"Oh, just a tea please. To take away."

The girl reaches for the polystyrene cups, but he gestures for her to wait.

"Listen, why don't you join me for a cuppa, it'd be good to catch up."

He raises his eyebrows and she nods despite herself, unable to decline.

"We'll have it for here, please," he says. The girl purses her lips and puts the cup back.

Before she can reach into her handbag for her purse he has produced a crisp five pound note. She opens her mouth to protest but he stops her.

"Patricia, it'd be my pleasure, please."

A fierce glow spreads across her chest and throat, mercifully hidden by her scarf.

"Thank you, that's kind."

The girl drops two tea bags into a small steel teapot and fills it from a hot water boiler fixed to the wall, then places it on a brown tray.

“Eighty pence. Sugar and milk’s on the table.”

He picks up the tray and begins making his way back to the table he’s left, glancing back at her from time to time to check she is following. With effort, he levers himself through the mess of customers, lubricating his way with a greeting or a witty comment for each table. His hair is thinning a little, and there are threadbare patches on the elbows of his jacket.

“So, what brings you here?” he asks.

“Oh, just my errands, the usual weekly shop.”

“Well, bumping into you has made my day, I’m not ashamed to say. I’ve had a bit of a time of it, I tell you! I moved away last year to be closer to my son, help him look after his little ‘uns after his missus upped and left them. Unbelievable how much trouble that woman has caused! Thought I could help, you know, get to know them all a bit more, do the right thing by them for once. But now he’s met someone else and, oh I don’t know, you feel like a bit of a spare part, don’t you? Not really my thing either, country life. Only so many nice walks you can go on without starting to feel like you’ve lost your place in civilisation.”

He chuckles to himself. He was the type of person who could carry on a conversation without putting any demands whatsoever on the other person. She liked this about him, and in fact she’d always felt quite warm towards him in the group. But meeting like this? Well, it wasn’t right, was it?

“Should we be doing this?”

His forehead furrows quizzically.

“Sorry, I’m not following. Doing what exactly?”

“You know...meeting, and talking.”

“Are you *nervous* Patricia? Goodness. It’s been over a year, really. What harm could come of a friendly cup of tea?”

She fidgets uncomfortably.

“It’s just that Dr Stirchly said we shouldn’t see each other outside of the group, not even afterwards,” she says in a small voice.

“Well maybe that’s because our venerable analyst friend just wanted to spoil our fun! Dr Stirchly – a barrel of laughs! Remember how he used to sit stone-faced when someone made a joke!”

She giggles at this, a girlish sound that seems foreign to her and yet familiar, like a distant half-recollected memory. She thinks of the analyst’s severe face, the way his nose used to wrinkle before he made an interpretation. Emboldened, she looks up and raises her eyes to his.

“I suppose it can’t hurt,” she says.

Andrew Thompson studied English at Northumbria University before winning a scholarship to study Acting at the Webber Douglas Academy. He has worked as an actor for the last 10 years. Andrew has written short plays staged at Theatre503, Arch 468, Northern Stage, Theatre41 and Sheffield Theatres, amongst others. Longer works include *The Merchant*, shortlisted for the Kenneth Branagh Award, *Promises*, winner of the Sell A Door Branching Out Festival and recently staged at The Bridewell Theatre, and *The Allotment* - currently in development with Poleroid Theatre and Live Theatre Newcastle.

Andrew Thompson | from *In Event of
Moone Disaster*

Starting on the night of the moon landing, and spanning through to the moment the first woman sets foot on Mars, this play covers the lives of three generations of the same family. Dealing with issues of memory, fertility and ambition, it is about striving for what we can and can't achieve.

*

Prologue

1969

Moonlight

The night of the Moon Landing.

The Astronaut stands centre stage, visor down, looking out towards the audience.

We hear radio chatter from the Apollo 11 mission.

Sylvia enters slowly, watches him, then walks into the arms of The Astronaut.

He picks her up gently and spins her round before placing her back on her feet.

They look at each other briefly.

She starts to undo The Astronaut's suit.

The radio chatter increases. Building in volume and intensity.

They are both now fumbling and pulling at each other's clothes. A faint, slow countdown starts coming from another room, '10... 9... 8...'

Sylvia jumps up and wraps her legs around him, '7... 6...'

She grinds her body against his. (It is the greatest sex imaginable), '5... 4... 3... 2...'

'1...' He holds her up into the air.

Sylvia floats there. She opens her arms in ecstasy. A moment of beautiful silence. She continues to float upwards, above the head of The Astronaut.

Neil Armstrong's speech fills the room:

'One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind.'

The Astronaut slowly turns, moves away upstage, and disappears.

We hear a cheer from within.

Sylvia drops suddenly to the floor.

Blackout.

Part 1

1969

A Party

[Earlier that same evening. Dennis is dressed as an astronaut]

Dennis: Is it just me or is this bloody amazing.

Sylvia: You're so pretty Dennis. Has anyone ever told you that?

Dennis: There is a *man* on the moon, our moon, as we speak and we know cos we can watch it on a television.

Sylvia: Has anyone ever talked to you about your eyes?

Dennis: A box. A *box* is showing me pictures of another man actually *in* space.

Sylvia: I mean *really* talked to you?

Dennis: Are you alright?

Sylvia: It's just amazing as you say. What about your lips?

Dennis: What?

Sylvia: Your lips.

Dennis: What about them?

Sylvia: Exactly.

[Beat]

[She kisses him]

You taste like... red. Like poppies.

Dennis: You taste like... have you been sick?

Sylvia: A bit, yeah. Earlier. It's fine now though, I'm sober. Soberer.

We landed on the moon you know.

Dennis: I know. I'm trying to watch it.

Sylvia: It's *amazing* isn't it.

Dennis: That's what I told you.

Sylvia: What we can do. What we people can do.
We should celebrate.

Dennis: You have been.

Sylvia: What do you think it's like, the surface of the moon?

Dennis: It's a rock isn't it.

Sylvia: Wouldn't it be weird if it'd turned out to be sticky. Or if they'd got there and there was like, one random cow just stood there staring at them. And it just starts grazing.

Dennis: What would it graze on/ Dust

Sylvia: Will you do it with me?

It'll be romantic.

[She points to the television]

Under the moonlight.

[She kisses him again. This time Dennis responds]

[They continue to make out sloppily throughout the following]

Oh God.

Dennis: Yes!

Sylvia: No, I just thought. What happens if they don't come back. I mean, what would they say?

Dennis: Who?

Sylvia: Everyone. That'd be so sad wouldn't it. Everyone gazing up at the moon and worrying if they'll see a body.

Dennis: They won't.

[Sylvia stops]

Sylvia: But think of it.

[Dennis continues, kissing her face and neck]

All those lovers staring all wide-eyed at the moon. Those moonlit walks and picnics in the park. You and me doing it. They're all of them washed with blood.

[Dennis stops]

Dennis: Is this happening or not?

Sylvia: I'm just saying, did we think of that, before we sent them.

[Dennis goes to kiss her again but she stops him]

Did we realise how much they'd steal from us, those future people all looking badly at the moon. That poor moon. All that time looking longingly at us, dreaming of attention. Touch. Then it happens and they die. The first time you do it with someone and they die on you. I suppose everybody's first time dies don't they. Eventually. Aw, you've made me all sad now.

Dennis: I haven't said a word for about five minutes.

Sylvia: *[To the television]* Please don't die moon people.

Dennis: Oh God.

Sylvia: We love you.

Dennis: Have you taken something?

[Beat]

Sylvia: Bagged it from Bobby/

Dennis: I knew it/

Sylvia: It's a funny word/

Dennis: You always do this/

Sylvia: 'Bobby'/

Dennis: Next you'll say you're seeing colours/

Sylvia: I am seeing colours!/
/

Dennis: Every time/

Sylvia: It's like the whole world's in colour/

Dennis: The whole world *is* in colour/

Sylvia: My eyeballs are fizzy/

Dennis: You can't handle it/

Sylvia: It's amazing.

Dance with me.

Dennis: Not anymore.

Sylvia: Have a drink with me. Let your hair down. We conquered the universe tonight. Those astronauts, they want us to. They're on that... sticky moon, and they're looking down and they're thinking just... *fuck*. All of you just, everyone just, *fuck*. For us. The whole lot of you. They'll be able to see the earth like, pulsing. I LOVE THIS SONG! Someone turn this up I want the astronauts to hear it. Do you think they will? Do you think they'll hear it? Will we get them dancing?

Dennis: It would take hours to reach them.

Sylvia: [*Indicating TV*] They're right *there*.

[*Pause*]

I'm going to run away. Join a commune.

Dennis: You won't find one.

Sylvia: Doesn't matter. Start a commune.

Dennis: Again.

Sylvia: This time I mean it.

Dennis: It'll fall apart/

Sylvia: We'll experiment with love/

Dennis: At the same point/

Sylvia: And states of consciousness/

Dennis: When you really want a shower.

Sylvia: A commune in a nice, warm, heated house.
A commune on the moon.

I'm going to America.

I'll do it one day soon. I will.

Dennis: You're on your way down.

Sylvia: It's wavy.

Dennis: Why do you take these things?

Sylvia: It takes me away.

Dennis: Do you want some water?

Sylvia: Do you really find me attractive?

Dennis: You know I do.

Sylvia: I like hearing that from you. From your mouth.

Dennis: You never used to.

Sylvia: People change.

[The lighting state flickers]

Will you fuck me please.

[Dennis doesn't respond. He is frozen. Staring at the television]

[The Astronaut emerges]

[Sylvia turns and notices The Astronaut as he reaches out his hand]

[She is drawn towards him]

[She takes his hand and follows]

2015

A Bathroom

[Julie is sitting on the toilet while Neil sits on the floor]

Neil: Let me hold your hand.

Julie: I need both of them.

Neil: I'm a part of this.

Julie: All you've had to do is wank into a plastic cup.

Neil: Please.

Julie: I don't want your first memory of our baby to be of me peeing on a stick, now get out.

Neil: But it's momentous.

Julie: Only the outcome. We don't put the tester in a scrapbook and call it baby's first photo.

Close your eyes at least.

[He does]

Neil: You used to let me watch. Never minded before.

Julie: This is different.

Neil: Remember when you were reading your book. And you wanted to finish the chapter but I was desperate. You just opened your legs and let me go in-between.

Julie: Uhuh.

Neil: Impeccable aim. Would that help?

Julie: Not right now.

Neil: We could see if I'm pregnant.

Julie: You're not helping.

Neil: I suppose we're lucky it's possible at all. Our parents, our grandparents, would have just had to do without us. We would just never be.

Julie: Could you talk about anything else.

[He opens his eyes]

Neil: Like what?

Julie: Eyes!

[He shuts them again]

Neil: My great-grandparents didn't have Grandad until they were nearly our age. That's quite impressive back then.

Julie: Neil.

Neil: Sorry.

Julie: Could you maybe sing or something.

Neil: #Ground control to Major Tom# –

Julie: – Whistle maybe.

Neil: You know I can't. You can. Which is interesting. It probably comes from your great uncle who worked on the docks and –

Julie: Oh God, I don't care about the bloody family tree! Not now. I'm sorry but can I just focus on this for a second.

Neil: I like learning these things.

Julie: I know you do.

Neil: I like putting the family together. It's nice to think we might matter to future generations.

Julie: I'm trying. To piss.

Neil: It's about having a family that's mine.

Julie: And what am I?

Neil: Flesh and blood. I've none of that. I want them to know who their dad is.

Do fountains help? Or taps? Mum used to say she'd think of Niagara then end up bursting.

Sylvia: Your mum's still here you know.

Neil: Sort of.

She also claimed I came from an astronaut so... It's bollocks obviously but she loved to tell it.

Julie: It's a good story.

[She removes the test, places the lid on it and waits. Watching it]

Neil: I used to believe it was true. She said he'd died on the moon. I'd look up and speak to him and know my dad was watching me sleep. Was always there, just not always visible. I still prefer sleeping with the curtains open.

Julie: What happened?

Neil: You said the street light pissed you off.

Julie: To the story.

Neil: I got older. Realised my mum had never left the country. Read books and learnt that no one had ever died up there.

Julie: What happened when you asked her?

Neil: She just shrugged and smoked a fag. Now she doesn't remember it. It was never the loss of my dad I missed. It was the loss of the story.

It would be nice to know him. I never used to think that.

Julie: Find him.

Neil: Would help me with ours I think. If I met him. Knew him a little.

Julie: You've got time.

Neil: Suppose.

[Beat]

Julie: You've got nine months apparently.

[He opens his eyes. She holds the test out to him]

Starting now.

During his mentoring year **Ian M Dudley** had poems published, or accepted for publication, in *Oxford Poetry*, *The Dark Horse*, and *Wasafiri*, and won the 2015 Oxonian Review poetry competition. He wrote *Business Class*, a pamphlet-length sequence about work in a multinational company, and worked on a collection of poems under the working title *Heartbreak Tattoo*.

Ian M Dudley | *Brompton Cocktail Blues*
and other poems

Brompton Cocktail Blues

Woke up this morning—
I was sad as a party—
I was wild as a wake—
How many miracles—
can one body can take?

Don't know how I got here—
I want to go home—
the party never ends—
and they won't let me go.

And the barman says—

Try a Brompton cocktail
A Brompton cocktail
Will make you feel at home

The hat check girl—
says leave your coat.
Here's an empty box—
I can keep your hope.

I say:
Where's my family?
Where are my friends?
Where's this all gonna end?

And the barman says—

Try a Brompton cocktail

A Brompton cocktail

Will put your mind at rest

All I want is a moment
a moment to catch my breath.

All I want is a moment
I'm not thinking about death.

All I want is a minute
a minute to be me in it.

I tell the barman
I've got no time,
he says: How long do you want?
You've had a life.

Weeeeeeeell
I'm going to drink
I'm going to drink my fill
I'm going to drink until I'm really ill
I'm going to drink until my organs fail
I'm going to drink until the barman says—

You're looking awfully pale

You should try a Brompton cocktail

A Brompton cocktail

Will set you straight

Pompeii

Solid ground quakes
like a membrane,
the living and dead
shaken together

like oil and water.
For an instant
we are all angels,
suspended

open mouthed
between hell and grace,
and then we fall.
Hot pumice skins us.

Our moist lungs
glue with ash, stiffen
like the wings of a book;
the blood boils inside

our statues.
In the bath house
the fresco of a girl
empties a man's purse.

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Quine

I've lost my meeting in a mirror of rooms,
of platters of catered food, wide-
screen TVs and conference phones, the young
and eager. Today we are training the trainer.
And I?

Am I a player or the prince?

If I'm stabbed will I get up
to take a bow or lie on the floor bleeding out?

Ian, can I stop you there?

I stare into my coffee and it's full of stars.
Leaning back in my chair I notice a photo:
I'm surrounded by the team and holding a photo
of the team surrounding me as I hold a photo...
It's trainers all the way down from here.

Martinique 1941

L'œil existe à l'état sauvage. Andre Breton

Stately tectonic plates
rip the seabed jagged,
jelly magma crowning

a scabby island
in a sea bright as zinc.
Or so I imagine.

The lazaretto
rejects my qualifications,
welcomes my soft

abraded reality.
In the morning
I am refreshed:

I drink from the breasts
of Joséphine de Beauharnais.
I am poet in residence!

Lampposts wilt in the heat.
The town is a museum
of more catastrophes

than I can document:
the mountain held
together with hairpins,

flowers of burning lips,
the constant surprise
of being yourself.

Farewell Photography

The perishable chemicals I
left to expire; the glass bottles I
rinsed and put away; the camera I

discharged (stale batteries change
metal into sweat and fur). I could
-n't bear to ditch the film and

kept one undevelopable roll
of Kodachrome for your wedding.
The hardest thing was to hood the glass

and shut the drawer on eyes round as
hawks', knowing they would starve for light.

Farewell photography. Even though

my hands fall flat and thoughtless
- aperture - exposure - focus - I
was never a photographer only

a photographer's apprentice,
printmaker, technician, chemist,
witness, poet, archivist, priest.

Spleen

after Baudelaire

I am like the king of a rainy country,
pimped and impotent, young but so fucking
old.

Courted by condescending MPs,
bored witless by Facebook and Twitter,
he watches videos of beheading.

Even a kitten in a blender
can't twist his bastard lips into a grin.
The duvet wraps him like a winding sheet.
His doctor prescribed the internet
instead of benzodiazepines.
If he came across his sister
fucking the camera
he'd yawn; the website
that stiffens his prick can't raise the dead,
ignite the black sun in his head.

If he had his time again a playground
bloodbath of all his friends
would lighten his regrets
by less than a feather.

I felt very proud of the achievements of each writer; in their own way they had each taken a massive step forwards in their professional development.'

David Eldridge
Mentor | Playwriting

Grahame Williams was born in County Down, Northern Ireland in 1978 and now lives and works in London. He studied English Literature at Cambridge and then Computer Science at Bristol.

He has spent the mentorship year completing his first novel, *Samson & Goliath*, as well as working on a series of linked stories related to the novel. One of these stories was short-listed for the Fish Short Story Prize 2015. A letter to the imaginary girls of *Samson & Goliath* will appear in issue 6 of *The Letters Page*.

Grahame also co-runs the Kinder Stories creative writing project and has led a number of workshops in it over the course of the mentorship year.

The rules:

1. Be brave.
2. Be kind.
3. WLAMF

Grahame Williams | from *Samson & Goliath*

Samson & Goliath is a coming of age novel set in Northern Ireland between 1990 and 1993. The following extract is from the third chapter when the narrator, Aaron Vannan, is 13. Aaron, Sorcha and Nibsy are the three main characters in the novel. In the first scene, Aaron meets Sorcha face-to-face for the first time. He is wearing his murdered grandfather's marching band jacket. In the second scene, Aaron and Nibsy get drunk for the first time.

Sometimes magic things happen right when you're ready for them. Sorcha is there at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall with her eyes closed, head tilted back as if she's looking at the stars. The beat of the music from the party is in time with my steps as I walk up to her. I'm not even trying to make it that way.

I get to the top and a boy and a girl come out of the bathroom holding hands. Sorcha doesn't move. Her eyes are still closed so I stand and watch, rubbing my fingers around the cuffs of Nornie's jacket. Her clothes hang off her in all different lengths, blacks and greys, an oversized jumper and scarves knitted, twisted and torn. Black boots go up almost to her knees, two big buckles at the top. Yellow stitching edges the soles.

I cough. She keeps her eyes closed.

'Are you waiting to go to the toilet?' I ask.

'Girls don't go to the toilet,' she answers without opening her eyes.

She has a ring in her nose I haven't noticed before. Perhaps she only wears it to parties. Her skin is so white and pretty she doesn't need a ring in her nose. Getting it put in must have hurt, a third hole.

‘Can I go in then?’ I ask.

She breathes out long like she’s blowing smoke from a cigarette.

‘Be my guest,’ she says.

She hasn’t looked at me yet.

‘I’d like to be your guest,’ I say.

I move past her into the bathroom and I’m feeling for the cord to turn on the light when the door closes behind me. The light comes on with a click-clack and in the mirror above the toilet I see that she’s in here with me.

‘Now you’re actually my guest,’ she says.

She’s staring right at me in the mirror. If I turn around I’ll be close enough to kiss her.

‘I know you,’ she says.

‘It’s me,’ I say.

‘Who’s you?’

‘The one you wrote the letter to.’

‘The letter? Oh yes. That one. You never wrote back.’

‘I did. I definitely did.’

‘Was it one of those invisible letters?’

‘It was real.’

I can tell by her face in the mirror she doesn’t believe me. Her brown eyes blink back but it’s her skin you notice the most. She’s so thin and so white you could look nearly right through her.

‘What are you going to do now?’ she says.

‘In here?’

‘That’s where we are.’

‘Nothing.’

‘Why did you come in then?’

‘But you’re here.’

‘Sure I’ll turn my back and you can go.’

'I can't go if you're in here.'

'I'll turn my back. It's a natural thing. You can go and then I'll go and we'll only need to flush once.'

This isn't the way I imagined it would be. I don't want her to leave so I lift the seat of the toilet and undo my belt. Bent cigarette butts float in the water.

'Close your eyes,' I say.

She turns away and goes to the bath in the corner.

'I'm not closing my eyes. You have to trust me not to look.'

I unzip my trousers and aim for the curve of ceramic just above the water. The cigarette butts spin and roll as the water colours yellow. On the tiled floor on either side of the toilet are little puddles where people at the party have missed. I never miss. I check in the mirror to make sure she's not looking. She's leaning over the bath.

'I call it The Shoot to Kill Policy,' I say.

'What? Call what what?'

'Nothing.'

There's a heavy rush and she's turned on the taps. I finish and do up my zip. The water has gone dark yellow, almost brown and I don't want her to see it. I put the seat down and watch her in the mirror, swirling her hands in the bathwater. She reaches for a purple bottle at the end of the bath, unscrews the top and pours. She holds the bottle upside down until a last thin drip of purple comes out.

'By the way, I won't be putting anything in my mouth if you've just gone to the toilet,' she says and drops the empty bottle into the bath.

'What?'

'You heard. You'd need to get clean.'

'I am clean.' Maybe she's talking about us getting in the bath together. 'What's that smell of?'

'It's invigorating,' she says.

'Is it flowers?'

She fishes the bottle out and reads from the label.

'It's sodium laureth sulphate, butylene glycol, limonene, sodium benzoate, citric acid and aqua.'

'Sodium benzoate is my favourite,' I say.

The mirror has steamed up so I can't see her reflection. I go over to stand beside her at the bath. The water rises, the bubbles almost at the top.

'May I piss now please?' she asks.

'You said girls didn't go to the toilet.'

'This will be my first time.'

'Be my guest.' This is the best and cleverest thing I've ever said.

'That bath could do with some more invigorating. Put some of those ball things in it.'

At the foot of the bath is a bowl of shiny pink balls.

'How many?' I ask.

She's lifting the toilet seat and unbuttoning her jeans. I shouldn't look.

'All of them.'

I turn off the taps and tip the bowl into the suds that have risen over the top. The balls make a hole in the cloud of bubbles and the bath crackles and fizzes. Then there's the sound of her pissing straight into the water. She mustn't care if I hear. I don't care. Perhaps we'll always share everything with each other like this.

'I like your nose ring,' I say.

'I like your coat.'

'Thanks. It's the reason I got hit that time but.'

I fix Nornie's jacket so it sits square on my shoulders.

'Because they didn't like the cut of it?'

'Because it made them notice me. It's better if those guys don't notice you. But you want other people to notice you. The right ones,' I say.

'We can fix that. Almost done.'

The pissing slows to a trickle.

'You can look now,' she says.

She's standing up with her jeans round her knees, the legs bunched at the top of her boots. Her jumper hangs over her thighs.

There's a knock on the door and someone tries the handle.

'We're busy,' she calls to whoever it is and makes a shocked face at me. She jiggles her hips as she pulls her trousers up.

'Don't forget to flush it,' I say.

'We'll wait to flush. Let it percolate,' she says and frowns. 'That bath is still missing something.'

'It needs more sodium benzoate.'

She walks to the bathroom cabinet while she does up her buttons. There's a red cassette-stereo sitting on top of it, the cool kind with two tape decks that can play one tape and have it go straight on to play the second without you having to do anything. She reaches it down and drops it into the bath. There's a clunk when it hits the bottom, speakers facing upwards. I should put my hand in and pull it out but I'd be scalded. The bath is too hot, too hot for us to get into. The bubbles close over the stereo.

'Would you do me the honour of flushing?' she asks.

'I would.'

I walk to the toilet, look at the browned water and push down on the handle. The flush swallows the cigarette butts and makes the water clean again. Now my hand has her germs on it and my germs on it, all mixed together. I rub it over my face where the bruise was, put the seat down and she claps.

‘That’s my kind of man,’ she says. ‘I want to show you something outside. But you need to lead the way.’

‘Okay.’

After the gurgling of the toilet has finished I unlock the door and pull it open. Steam streams out and a buzz of music comes in, Anthrax or something rubbish like that. I step into the cooler hallway air and breathe. A girl is waiting by the door.

‘Are youse done in there?’ she asks, looking past me at Sorcha.

‘Yes, we’re all done,’ I say.

Sorcha follows me out and puts her hands on my shoulders as we walk down the stairs. I can’t tell if she’s pushing me or leaning on me but it feels good. The bathroom door closes and clicks locked behind us. The girl will find the bath full up and the stereo in it. She’ll tell the twins we were in there and it must’ve been us who did it. People will find out we were together. That would be worth any trouble I might get into.

We reach the bottom of the stairs and Sorcha keeps her hands on my shoulders. I should find Nibsy so we can get ready for the song we’re meant to be playing but he didn’t give her the letter and now I’m being pushed by her and she’s leading me through the party, past the people in the hallway sitting on the floor and the people in the kitchen sitting on worktops, people smoking cigarettes, drinking Coke, dancing, kissing. I

breathe deep the smell of cigarette smoke and smile. She pushes me towards the back door.

The garden stretches out in the light from the kitchen and goes dark where it dips down to the beach. Across the Lough the Belfast street lights reflect orange on the water. When we step onto the grass I can smell salt in the cold of the air. Our breaths make mist together. With her behind me there's only one long shadow for the both of us, growing shorter on the grass as we get closer to the dip and to the beach.

I'm sure she's squeezed her fingers into my shoulders. Just once. She must have. That's what I would do if it was me walking behind her. When she pushes me like this I don't need to think. She leads me where I need to go. We drop down into the dip and now there's no shadow, only us in the darkness. She lets go of my shoulders.

'We need to get you to the edge of the water,' she says and gives me a gentle push.

'Should I write you another letter?'

'I don't know, should you? Who would be your messenger?'

'I'd deliver it myself. We can't trust that other messenger.'

'He can't be trusted at all. You could come and find me.'

'I did try. I couldn't find you.'

'You didn't try very hard then. Come to my work. You'd like where I work.'

There's no way she can know what I'd like but I do like that she said that. From now on I'll say things like that to people all the time.

'Where do you work?' I ask.

'On Saturdays. At least until Christmas.'

'But where?'

‘Up by the cathedral. In Belfast. It’s a special shop.’

We cross the soft part of the beach and reach the harder wet sand at the shore.

‘Don’t get too close to the water,’ she says.

I lean forward and helicopter my arms like I’m going to fall in. She laughs. That was easy.

‘I think it’s time for that coat to come off,’ she says.

‘It’s not really mine.’

‘I can tell. It doesn’t fit you right.’

‘I thought it would bring me luck.’

‘I hope you don’t believe in luck.’

‘Only kids believe in luck. I don’t believe in it after I got punched. I grew up after that.’

‘What about magic? Do you believe in that?’

‘What do you believe in?’

‘Well there’s not much magic left. Not here. Not in this awful place. Here, give me the coat.’

‘I think it’s awful here too.’

I drop my shoulders and let her pull the jacket from me. She hands it to me to hold. The light from the lighthouse sweeps over us and the evening cold feels heavy across my back.

‘Hold it out over the water,’ she says and takes something from her trouser pocket.

The jacket sways in the breeze. The second sweep of the lighthouse shows she has a lighter in her hand.

‘Keep still,’ she says and lights the lighter.

The flame blows out. It takes her four goes to get another and this time she curls her hand to protect it. My arms ache. She raises the flame to the cuff closest to her, holding it against the fabric until the lining catches light. The cuff burns slowly and at first there’s more smoke than fire. The flame

stutters and the wind blows smoke in our faces. Sorcha coughs. I have to hold my breath and my eyes sting. There are shouts from the party. Sorcha coughs again. My right hand gets hot and I breathe out. When I breathe in all I can taste is smoke. I drop the jacket and there's a splash. I rub my eyes and look back up to the house in the direction the smoke blows. I need my inhaler but I don't want her to see me taking it.

'A sacrifice. Now you won't ever get hit again,' she says and coughs. 'Or if you do it won't hurt. Not where it matters. That's some magic for you.'

'Thanks,' I say.

'You must be freezing. You should go back to the party. Play your song. I have to go home,' she says and turns her back to me.

I watch her walk away, down the beach and into the darkness and when she's too far off to hear I pull the blue inhaler from my pocket and take a breath. I hold the vapour in my lungs and count to ten. I think of the whiteness of her thighs and the way her jumper hung over them.

The lighthouse sweeps once, twice, and my feet go cold as the sea comes in over my trainers. The jacket is a wet lump in the water, moving back and forth on the tide.

With our backs against the National Trust sign out at Ballymacormick Point we sit and watch the waves. We're meant to be at hockey and the afternoon is going dark. Nibsy is blethering on like he's done nothing wrong, not mentioning he never gave her the letter, saying his dad says there will be snow this winter, maybe even on into the spring and their wee lambs won't like it.

He passes the bottle back. It's so big you have to hold it with both hands. I wince as I take a mouthful and force myself to swallow. *White Lightning* the label says. Hacksaw got it for us but Nibsy doesn't know that and I'm not going to tell him.

'This tastes like mutant piss,' I say.

'Piss pish. It's good for you.' he says. He almost threw up after his first go.

I take another swig and it kills my mouth and throat. I'd asked Hacksaw for poteen and gave him a ten pound note. After History this morning he gave me a blue plastic bag with the bottle in it, said there was a problem with supply and demand and didn't give me any change.

'In the books they always drink poteen. Not this,' I say.

'We're not in the books now. Our Lilt days are over,' he says and raises his hands towards the sea, fingers splayed. 'You say the name of the girl and then where she was and why you fancied her. Then you take a drink. So: girl, drink, girl, drink, girl, drink.'

'Is this another one of your games?'

'No drinking is ever a game young man. All the girls you've ever fancied. And don't be leaving any out.'

'It sounds childish.'

He takes the bottle.

'I'll start then. Rachel Gallagher. We rang the Friday bells at church together. I fancied her because she always wore hats.'

He drinks, coughs and passes the bottle over.

'Do I have to play?'

'Do I have to answer?'

'Right. I don't know her name. She was this Portuguese girl I saw on holiday and her wee brother pissed in the moat of my sandcastle and she had a yellow swimsuit and a suntan.'

Dad tried to get me to talk to her but I couldn't speak Portuguese so there was no point. There.'

I take as quick a mouthful as I can and set the bottle down.

'Carleigh Dillon. She was a helper at Cubs. She was older than us and she had arms and arms full of badges. When the other eejits made fun of her I never did. That's what made her faint at my feet. Your turn.'

'I don't know this one's name either. She was on the plane back from that Portugal holiday and she was playing Battleships with her sister. I gave her a postcard with my address on it while we were waiting for our bags to come.'

'I don't believe you did that.'

I think about lying again but he sees it. I shouldn't care about lying to him after what he's done.

'No, I didn't. I thought about it though.'

He laughs.

'You never told me them ones before. I shall continue the litany. Miss Kirkpatrick. I fancied her right up until the other week when she went buck daft at me in class. I only couldn't remember what magnétophone meant. Magnet O'Phone, Miss, isn't he the drummer in U2? She's getting married now so she's missed her chance.'

'Sure, I fancy her too. It won't be the same after she's married. If you were her husband she'd come home from school and you could get her to do whatever you wanted.' I think of how you could have her wear a swimsuit around the house, even in winter.

'She's your next one then?'

'Yes.'

'So drink.'

He watches to make sure I have enough.

'Miss McDiarmid, that Biology student we had last year. She had spots but I overlooked that fact because she had great legs to go with them. I was good at Biology so the attraction was mutual. Mutual attraction. You should try it sometime. Instead of your constant fatal attraction. Foetal attraction. Aaron's Foetal Attraction. That's a good band name.'

He drinks, coughs and his eyes water. I don't want to tell him the next one. He passes the bottle. It doesn't feel any lighter. I take a longer drink and then another. The more you drink the less bad it tastes.

'Come on, it's still your turn. I know there's more and we need them all.'

'Wait. I need an actual piss now.'

'Aye.'

Standing up and walking through the stile to the beach takes longer than it should. This dizziness is new. I have to concentrate to make my eyes focus. I lean against the sea wall, undo my trousers and look at my trainers. The white leather is scuffed and stained and the basketball-shaped pump in the tongue is punctured. I say the word *pump* aloud. *Reebok Pump*. I ought to get boots. Black boots with buckles. I say the word *boots*, then *buckles*, then *The Shoot to Kill Policy*. I have to stop calling it that.

Steam rises from the wet patch on the wall. I do up my trousers and walk back across the sand and the shingle. He's throwing shells out into the sea. I should make up a name or skip one out but he'd see another lie. I shouldn't care after what he's done. He never said he'd given her the letter but I should have asked to make sure.

'That was a quick piss,' he says. 'Are you feeling the effects yet?'

'No.'

‘Let’s have it then. Take the bottle. Who’s next?’

I kick the sand from my shoes and slump down beside him.

‘Sadie Jackson. She actually came before Miss Kirkpatrick. I got the ordering of the girls a bit wrong. You confused me.’

He frowns.

‘Who’s that?’

I don’t answer.

‘Hold on. That one from *Across the Barricades*? A made up girl? A made up one from a book? You dirty mutant. Why am I not surprised?’

‘It’s real if you feel it. I’ll have a cider please, Bob.’

‘Yes you will, Jimi. Yes you will. You must be drunk. How do you know what she looks like? There was no pictures in that book. Even one off Baywatch would be better.’

‘It’s all in the imagining. She has blue eyes all twisty like marbles. Like the inside bits of marbles.’

‘That’s definitely the demon drink talking now. Let’s get back to reality. Aoife Ebinghaus. I used to sit behind her in Confirmation class looking at how long her hair was. All the time the minister was banging on about the body and blood I was thinking of the best way to ask her out.’

‘But you didn’t, did you?’

‘The opportunity never arose. The Lord saw fit to prevent it.’

‘So drink. Drink, Judas, drink.’

‘I’m no Judas.’

‘My turn.’

I take the half-finished bottle from him. The plastic dents in my fingers and holding it now is easier.

‘People call her Alice but that isn’t her real name. She ran away from home and stayed with me for a while. You might say she’s made up. I say I don’t care.’

‘Another made up one? I could count the number of girls you’ve ever met on one hand with two of the fingers chopped off. I could name them too. Book girls don’t count. You read too much. You need to get over this affliction.’

I shake my head from side to side to feel the dizziness. My eyes have lost focus.

‘The make-believe mutant-boy has gone silent,’ he says.

It’s true that those girls are made up but I know that I’ll remember them more than he’ll remember his. He’ll be sitting in some youth hostel when he’s older, telling some wee lad about how he first fell in love picking blackberries and making tea but now he can’t remember her name or what she looked like.

‘There’s a penalty for using made up girls. You have to go again until we get to a real girl. I don’t want to be hearing about ones from the Famous Five and the Secret Seven. Or Nancy Drew and how you saw her frilly pants.’

I know well enough the name he wants to hear. He wants to hear me say Sorcha so he can go on about the torture and play his clever word games. I pick up a stick from the scruff by my shoes and whip his legs with it. I’m whipping hard enough for it to hurt but he sits still like he feels nothing.

‘Do you think we’re drunk?’ I ask.

‘You are. I feel nothing. Go again. This time a girl who lives and breathes please.’

‘Sure you know the next one. I know you know it.’

‘Do I?’

‘You do. The one I gave you the letter for. The one you never gave the letter to.’

‘The one I warned you about?’

‘You never warned me. You said some nonsense about torture.’

‘That was a warning using recognised code words. It’s not my fault if you didn’t understand it.’

‘Why didn’t you give her the letter?’

‘Oh, circumstances. Considerations. I think it’s now piss o’clock. I can hear the piss bells ringing.’

He stands up, tries to lean against the sign, misses it and falls backwards into the bushes. I let him lie there.

‘We’ve made it!’ he shouts from the ground after a minute. ‘We’re drunk! Goodbye Lilt! Goodbye books!’

Then there’s the sound of him being sick. I try to focus on my shoes, the trainers that will soon be boots. The dizziness has gotten worse. I don’t feel right.

Cathy Thomas was born in Bristol and now lives in London. After studying at Oxford, she went on to gain an MA in Writing for Stage and Broadcast Media from the Central School of Speech and Drama. She has since been invited on to playwriting groups at the Royal Court and Lyric Hammersmith. Her work has been produced at Southwark Playhouse, Rich Mix, Embassy Theatre, Burton Taylor Studio and Climate Camp, as well as rehearsed readings at the Lyric Studio and Theatre Royal Haymarket.

Cathy Thomas | from *Kate McCrae*

About *Kate McCrae*

Kate McCrae charts the story of a young woman as she grows up and out of suburban Manchester, through Oxford University and a London law firm, and into modern Britain. This is a play about navigating the compromises, sexual politics and social privileges that dictate the culture we live in.

Act One, Scene Seven:

After graduating from Oxford and losing her Manchester accent along the way, Kate is now pursuing a career in family law. Determined to do her bit, she's currently undertaking a charity secondment.

*

Act One, Scene Seven

A small room in a legal advice centre. KATE is seated behind a desk. BILLIE, a similar age, is sitting opposite. KATE wears a fitted navy dress. BILLIE wears leggings, a plaid shirt and has a packed bag by her feet.

BILLIE You're very pretty.

KATE laughs.

BILLIE Why are you laughing.

KATE Oh. I wasn't.

BILLIE Aren't you a bit young.

KATE No.

BILLIE How old are you?

KATE I don't think that's appropriate.

BILLIE You look about twenty.

KATE laughs.

BILLIE You're laughing again.

KATE I'm not twenty.

BILLIE So how old are you. I'll tell you how old I am, I'm twenty-three.

KATE Do you want to talk me through the situation again?

BILLIE Not particularly.

KATE There's not much information to go on in the file, you understand.

BILLIE Nick didn't need to write things down.

KATE Nick?

BILLIE The solicitor I had before.

KATE Mr Wheeler was a trainee too, actually.

BILLIE You're a trainee?

KATE Not for much longer. After this seat, I'll be joining the family department.

BILLIE So what, this is like work experience?

KATE No, no, of course not. Shall we get back to your file?

BILLIE This is the pits.

KATE laughs.

BILLIE Do you laugh at everyone? Do you think it makes me feel like at ease?

KATE Miss – [*checks the file*]

BILLIE Can you not even remember my name?

KATE Would you like me to call one of my colleagues in?

BILLIE You could just say sorry.

KATE says nothing and checks the file.

BILLIE I like your dress.

KATE I'm sorry?

BILLIE It looks new.

KATE This? It's old.

BILLIE Where's it from.

KATE I'm afraid I can't remember.

BILLIE I was just saying it looked nice. If I had a nice dress like that, I'd be showing it off, I'd want people to say it looked nice.

KATE Thank you.

BILLIE It looks expensive.

KATE It's not particularly. What I wanted to discuss was your housing situation –

BILLIE It's not or it's not for you?

KATE Do you need my help?

BILLIE What's that on your face?

KATE What?

BILLIE That scar on your face, what's that.

KATE Oh, it's nothing. I got hit in the face with a fish.

KATE laughs.

BILLIE I got one of them.

KATE One of what?

BILLIE lifts her chin.

BILLIE My ex. Got me with a bottle of Becks. I don't even drink beer. He said I was flirting with one of his mates. Cut my chin right open.

KATE looks away from BILLIE's scar.

BILLIE Where's yours from.

KATE It doesn't matter.

BILLIE You shouldn't feel bad about it. I was embarrassed about mine for ages but then I think, what's there to be embarrassed about? Where's yours really from.

KATE It's nothing.

BILLIE Looks bad. Who would hit someone like you?

KATE It honestly wasn't like that.

Slight pause.

KATE It's a funny story actually. We were all totally lashed, we'd finished finals. End of exams, you know, university. Spirits were running a bit high. They were all spraying champagne and then suddenly this boy called Max Cooke hit me round the face with a lemon sole. Just a stupid Oxford thing. We all laughed about it.

BILLIE It's funny.

Pause.

KATE Can you talk me through your needs again, please.

BILLIE says nothing.

KATE We've only got fifteen minutes and you wouldn't want to waste your appointment.

BILLIE No.

KATE Crack on then.

Slight pause.

BILLIE They said I could work a bit in the last bit of my sentence so that's what I did. I saved up enough for a deposit on a flat to rent. It's just a small place and it's out of town, but I found one.

KATE Lovely.

BILLIE Yeah. But the probation officer won't let me, she says I have to go back into supported housing. It's like they want to watch you. You do your sentence but you come out and you have to keep doing it. I can't stay, my ex is around.

KATE That sounds like a challenging situation. No one likes having an ex-boyfriend around.

BILLIE It is a challenge. Yeah. That's what it is.

KATE You might have to put up with it for a few months as your notes say the re-housing process went well. That your accommodation is satisfactory. From their point of view, there's nothing needs reviewing.

BILLIE It's full of junkies. My neighbour has sex for money in the stairwell. My ex keeps offering me drugs. I can't stay there.

Pause.

KATE That does sound. Challenging.

BILLIE So are you going to help?

KATE How could I help?

BILLIE If you could just put in a good word for me, speak to my probation officer. Tell her I need to move. Like a reference.

KATE I'm afraid that would be difficult.

BILLIE All I need is someone to say they know I'm doing alright, then they'd be happy with me going. That I'm coping, I could cope with the move.

KATE Technically speaking though, I don't know you.

BILLIE But you can see I'm not mental.

Pause.

KATE It's not up to me.

BILLIE But I'm asking you.

KATE I'll get into trouble.

BILLIE laughs.

KATE I'm not here to review your legal case. This appointment is just for help with filling in forms. For housing. Work, things like that.

BILLIE My housing is shit.

KATE Legally it's a little more complicated than that.

BILLIE But you are a lawyer.

KATE Solicitor, yes, but I'm not familiar with the ins and outs of your case.

BILLIE You've got it right there in front of you.

KATE I do apologise but I'm not in the right position to help. It's not my place. I don't do charity cases as a rule, I'm not equipped.

BILLIE Charity cases.

KATE Pro bono work, I should say.

BILLIE Do you think in those words?

KATE I'm very sorry.

BILLIE Yeah you look really sorry in your nice dress there.

KATE I can't change the system.

BILLIE Can't or won't?

KATE Pardon?

BILLIE Do you want to get out?

KATE If you're trying to intimidate me –

BILLIE You don't want to leave?

KATE No.

BILLIE Why are you even here?

KATE I'm doing my job.

BILLIE You don't want to be here, do you? Look at your little face.

KATE looks away.

BILLIE Am I making you uncomfortable? Go on, leave. I won't be offended.

KATE I'm not leaving.

BILLIE Will you ring my probation officer then?

KATE No.

BILLIE You're as bad as the rest of them. You lot don't listen, it's like you're on sleeping pills.

KATE I'm only doing my job.

BILLIE I can tell.

KATE I'm sure if you asked nicely on the front desk they could fix you up with someone who could help. But first I'd suggest you have a sit down with your probation officer and have a good chat.

BILLIE She won't listen, she thinks I'm scum. She said the only thing I'd done right was not get pregnant.

KATE She wouldn't have said that, surely.

BILLIE Whose side are you on?

KATE We're all trying to help you.

BILLIE When they said I was going to see another woman I thought, great, she'll listen to me. She'll understand. I didn't think she'd look down on me like you.

KATE It's not always easy to stand up to things.

BILLIE It is for you though surely.

BILLIE gets her things.

BILLIE I bet you only make decisions and not mistakes.

KATE I didn't say that.

BILLIE Lucky you.

KATE Wait.

BILLIE "Please, sir, I want some more."

KATE Where are you going?

BILLIE Fuck you.

KATE Miss Smith.

BILLIE So you found my name then. If you actually wanted to know anything, I've got a file that thick. You went to university so you know how to read, don't you?

I'll tell you if you're too stuck-up to ask. I've been in twice. First time for smack. Second time I come out and my boyfriend has been shagging our flatmate. She's an addict as well, she was skinny thin. I'd wanted to look like her. I got her face with the kettle. I got four years.

They said, did I want to write her a letter to say sorry? They said it'd make me feel better. When you get out of the van, they line you up and give you your pack and number like you're a Tesco delivery. You tell me what a letter's going to do for that.

My probation officer said I should find a role model. I have no friends. I can't see my ex. Haven't seen my mum since she chucked me out. I got a letter saying my probation officer was going on holiday when I got my second sentence. Malta. Two weeks. Nice.

Your lot go on about helping and making changes and making statements. I got an NVQ in floristry inside, can you imagine? You wouldn't trust me to clean your toilet let alone do your flowers. You're all hypocrites. You're just here to make yourself feel better.

Managed to get a part-time job in a florists' coming out. Serving ladies like you. They wouldn't look at me when I gave them their change. Put the coins on the counter so they didn't have to touch my hands. Like they thought I'd steal the rings off their fingers.

I couldn't picture what fifteen grand's worth of flowers looked like before we did this one wedding. Bride said she didn't mind I'd just come out, she seemed kind. She worked in fundraising, had a big white house near the Union canal. Big silver kitchen looking on the garden. Was where they put up the marquis. Bunting. Wooden tables. Made to look like it wasn't costing what it was. When I got there to

do the arrangements she got me take my shoes off to walk through the house out back. I had to use the portaloo when I wanted to go. She was fine with me doing the tables outside but when it came to me doing her bouquet in her bedroom, you should've seen her face. I could've trodden dog shit into her lounge and she'd have been happier. People don't like being reminded of things.

She wanted simple flowers so I'd done her bouquet with gerberas. I like gerberas because they look like how kids draw flowers. Big petals and bright colours. I wondered if I drew flowers like that when I was tiny. Probably not. I probably won't have kids.

I don't think I will have anything that you will.

Silence.

- KATE What's in your bag?
- BILLIE I've not nicked anything.
- KATE That wasn't what I meant. What's the bag for?
- BILLIE I told you, I can't stay there any longer.
- KATE But where will you stay?
- BILLIE That's nice, are you inviting me round?
- KATE No, of course not but –
- BILLIE So much for the sisterhood.
- KATE Where will you go?

KATE reaches out for BILLIE's arm.

BILLIE Get off. You can't make me.

KATE Sit down. Please.

BILLIE doesn't.

KATE Do you know the number for your probation officer?

BILLIE No.

KATE Have you got her name?

Pause.

BILLIE opens her bag and pulls out a wedge of paper, which she puts on the desk.

KATE looks at the crumpled paperwork. There is a lot of it.

KATE Did the previous trainee help you reply to these?

BILLIE No.

KATE What did you do then?

BILLIE I'm not thick.

KATE I never said you were.

BILLIE I've got the gift of a mind-reader.

KATE Let me have a look.

KATE reads through some of the papers.

KATE I don't know what I'm looking for.

BILLIE Okay.

KATE I'm sorry, Billie. I'll speak to my supervisor when he's in tomorrow but I don't think there's much I can do.

Pause.

BILLIE You remembered my name.

KATE Well. I looked it up.

BILLIE That's okay. Thank you for being honest.

KATE Kate.

BILLIE Thank you, Kate.

KATE offers her hand to BILLIE to shake. BILLIE doesn't shake it and walks away.

Holly Corfield Carr is a poet based in Bristol, where she has worked in residence at the Bristol Poetry Institute at the University of Bristol and Spike Island, with support from Arts Council England. She received an Eric Gregory Award from the Society of Authors in 2012 and in 2014 was Highly Commended by Faber New Poets. With Clare Pollard and the Jerwood / Arvon Mentoring Scheme, Holly has worked on her first collection and on the site-specific project *MINE*, a sequence of poems which she performed underground in the eighteenth-century Goldney Grotto as part of the Bristol Biennial. *MINE* was published as a pamphlet by Spike Island with City Edition Studio in 2014.

Holly Corfield Carr | MINE and other poems

from MINE

And here. Oxheart clam. *Glossus humanus*.
The shell looks just like a valentine. All loose ligament and
little hinged teeth and two parts put together loosely
so that the calcite lump at the ends of our tethers,
our nethers, our heavy-headed songs and lungs, our own dear
heart jumps up in recognition, says

*Look! Look! Here we are;
we are in the ground
but here we are.*

When the botanist Carl Linnaeus saw the Oxheart clam
he called it *Cardium humanum*. A human heart, drowned,
swollen with sea. On learning to break the heart, science
caught its pale tongue swallowing itself.
Cardium became *Glossus*, mollusc and muscle, the tongue's
brute octave snagged on bone. And here, we hear
(your heart in your mouth!)
two lips articulating themselves
along a fragile line—*be mine—I'm yours—*
—*be mine—I'm yours—*and we fall for it every time.

If the heart has a tongue, it could talk, you might think?
Lies thick as bull's blood. Saucy as shit. A slack question mark
appears in the snap of a heart string: if you had all the time
in the world, but the first time ran like a band
round a kingfisher's throat? And the rest was all grit and
disturbance in waters? And to hold it all in one place was to
crush the whole soiled motion
to quartz, quick,
a slow world spinning through itself

as if we could hold all the time in the world, as if we could
crawl back into the sea and not kill so much coral this time,
as if each of us might have another face, another cut
in the crystal, *that nature herself hath framed*
with six cornered smooth sides, within the bowels
of hollow and reddish flints,
for heere
is the earth
of a red colour?†

† William Camden, *Britannia* (1586)

Does he mean blood or clay or Bristol Diamonds?

None of them real diamonds, of course, but quartz
forced from the Gorge, shells from slavers' ports,
a wealthy merchant's Weltschmerz, a whole city's dealt dirt.

You see we're up to our necks in it, down here. Below ground
and breathing, taking it in, the hallowed water hollowing
the stone, luminous as an empty fist, as forgetting a face,
as show me where, as kiss it better, as tip of the tongue,

as one,

as wrong,

as turning.

A cave, they say, is halfway to hell, halfway to the garden.

A hiccup of soil.

A fold

in stone.

The semitone slide between

saying buried and alive.

Crush

—years later, the afternoon arrives, furred
and pink like lung frost, long sung, a pair
of bright cherries slung over your sternum;
one box to tick and another to ripen at home—

Flag

The stranger I don't know to see but in some dark old way
know now better than a doctor or a dog might know by nose,

notes the shadow at their gut and (please, no knowing laughter)
has sat, unseen, has shat their pants clean from themselves

at a crowded point on this loud road, in the trashed threshold
of the night so that when I wake I find their brief scarred green

drawn up in the trees and none of the neighbours know
what to do or say until a year of rain and fraught June sun

has bleached the crotch to the bare flag slung over my house.
So on sunnier days, no one notices.

But when the storms hit, I am reading a bad weather balloon
caught rising in the full blown buttocks. And each night

a landing of a strong-armed moon resists, reveals, as always,
there is a face in the folds, as if every strung shoe

marks a secret violence, as if homeward, as if bound-to-be,
as if this is what is meant by lunacy, as if this is intimacy,

as if within a strange territory, as if surrender.

Male Vapourer

Meanwhile, the male
folds
 his brief day into flight,
his body
 a tissue paper fortune teller
opening itself
 in pockets of orange light, orange
shadow, furred
 at the crease, fragile with overuse and
at each wing tip's tornus,
 a comma, still wet as if just drafted in white
correction fluid either side
 of the body's document, clause drawn like a held breath
after nothing is left to be said.

Here stands a fine old apple tree.
Stand fast root!
Every little twig, bear an apple big.
Hats full, caps full, three score sacks full.
Hooray!

Folk, English

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This anthology gathers together the work of nine talented poets, playwrights and fiction writers and marks the end of their year's mentoring on the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Scheme 2014/15. Since 2009 the Jerwood Charitable Foundation and Arvon have worked in partnership to run this annual mentoring scheme for playwrights, poets and fiction writers. Running over the course of one year, the scheme comprises two residential weeks away at Arvon centres, a year of mentoring from a leading writer, as well as additional support from industry professionals.

This year's writers were mentored by novelist Jenn Ashworth, poet Clare Pollard and playwright David Eldridge. These mentors have supported and guided the writers in their work, from a week of intensive workshops, to preparing pieces for this anthology. To mark the end of their year, the writers retreated to Totleigh Barton without their mentors, where a ceremonial trip to the centre's fruit orchard inspired the name of this anthology: Wassailing.

"At the end of our mentoring year, we spent a fruitful week at Totleigh Barton. We led workshops for each other, shared readings of our work and exchanged tips from our mentors. Amongst all this, we were persuaded to go wassailing in the Totleigh Barton orchard. Outside, wassailing cups in hand, we banged sticks and dustbin lids and chanted the wassailers' song as if it really did have the power to strengthen the trees. Back in the house and listening to each other read, we realised we were all performing a kind of wassailing in our writing. We were deep in the woods of our work, banging and crashing about as we composed a kind of charm, a spell of strong verbs to make something live – and bear fruit. So, we raise a cup to the next year. Wassail!"

– The writers

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