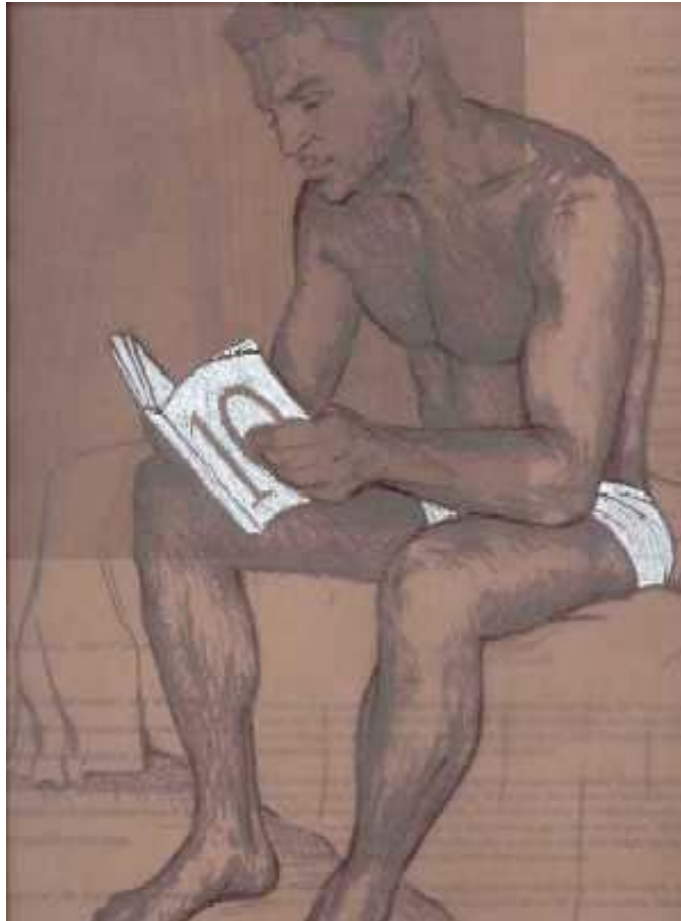


# **Gay London Writers 1993 – 2003**

**10'th Anniversary Reading**



**Gay's the Word Bookshop**

**Monday 3 November 2003**

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**Peter Slater**

**Introduction**

I founded Gay London Writers (although the name only came later) back in 1993, by placing a postcard on the notice board in Gay's the Word bookshop.

Writing is an isolated business and I thought it would be useful and fun to meet regularly with other people doing the same sort of thing, to swap ideas and get feedback on work in progress.

I wanted the group to be solely for gay men because - ten years ago, and still to an extent today - gay men are generally more comfortable with the language of certain intimacies when in each other's company. That's a slightly pompous way of saying that if a member of the group wanted to include words like 'spunk', 'semen' or 'cum' in his work, he needn't fear the shock/outrage or hostility of fellow writers. In GLW there is no bar - visible or otherwise - on either subject matter or words. Read what you like, but try not to be boring. I can only remember one instance of someone falling asleep during a meeting (and snoring heavily.) The sleepy member is no longer with us, the person reading his deathless prose at the time was me. No hard feelings.

Commercial success is a banal indication of any such group's worth; but, nevertheless, it is pleasing that group members have had their share of this. Jeremy Trafford's 'Ophelia' was published recently and received numerous excellent reviews. My own books 'Storm,' 'Maestro,' and 'Paradise Palace,' have sold well. P.P. Hartnett, before he moved North, was a regular member and read the group early drafts of his cult classic 'Call Me.' Several of the group had stories published in The Gay Times Anthology of Short Stories, our poets have appeared regularly in magazines, you will often find a feature article written by one of us in a magazine or paper. The group itself has

been the subject of features in the Pink Paper, G News and, most recently, The Hampstead and Highgate Gazette.

The real joy of the group, though, comes from the sheer amiability of its members. Our comments and observations are always sharp and insightful, but each of us knows that to read aloud from one's work is often to reveal something of an inner and sensitive self; so, although some writing may stand in need of substantial correcting and revision, nothing cruel is ever said. Every newcomer is welcome.

Anyone interested in finding out more about us may tap in [www.gaylondonwriters.com](http://www.gaylondonwriters.com) into their web-browsers and, thanks to the ingenuity and hard work of the poet Ernesto Sarezale, they will find one of the best-maintained and entertaining sites on the web.

Finally, thanks to Jim McSweeney for allowing the use of Gay's the Word for our tenth anniversary Reading and a big Thankyou to Roy Woolley for assembling this *festschrift*.

Now start turning the pages and find some of the reasons why so many gay London writers choose to spend every other Friday evening in Earls Court.

October 2003

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**Warwick Stanley**

**Group Report - Friday 7 Jan 2005**

**From:** Warwick

**To:** GLW

**Date:**

**Subject:** Group Report - Friday 7 Jan 2005

A smaller than usual number attended Friday (7th Jan 05)'s group which was chaired by Neil. There were four principal readings, beginning with three untitled prose-poems by Roy. Each poem was awash with startling allusion, the first dreamlike with enigmatic ending involving the dreamer avoiding turning back from an underpass; what incident might have been missed thereby? The second yet more atmospheric capturing that pregnant confinement of passengers in a car; bleak moods, surroundings and reflections following perhaps a lively previous night out whilst travelling; the entire culminating in the (sinister?) searching in the glovebox by one party. Lastly, a country scene of young lads playing; seemingly innocent yet underlying cruelty with one victimised, withdrawing, seeking sylvan solace as a hare might escape a fox... or not.

Each evoked a lively set of interpretative responses with general approval of the new, more lucid style fittingly described by the poet himself as harbouring 'a new clarity yet with many hidden currents'. Adrian felt the three might combine as part of a much greater opus.

Jonathan then prefaced his reading from his new set of 26 prose-poems by eliciting approval for a new title 'Minor architectures' to replace old 'Night shift'. This option divided the group, as borne out by the high level of debate that followed. Number 'h' opened with the premise that all desire be an integral part of nature; this was then instanced by a graphic description of intense pursuit of pleasurable pain, the self-insertion of a giant dildo a chance to explore the mind/body split (or fusion?), threshold of consciousness under external stimuli (i.e. penetration and poppers), extreme sensory experience (a path to ethical insight?). Andy, in particular, admired the vivid conjuring up of pain

and pleasure, that anyone might be going through or exploring at some stage. Jeremy liked the ambivalence of tone whereby one might eagerly seek some excessive sensation yet simultaneously be equally dismissive.

The second poem - number 'i' - opened with an implication of sensuous love being wounding in some way via the interplay of roles (dominance versus suppliance) or humiliation by rejection; running down the stairs in underpants, giggling; a vivid ray of realism. However, the group continued to discuss the first prose poem as this held huge impact; Jonathan a little battered but pleased with the enormity of the feedback generated (Roy, however, pointing out that writing might more usually be read solitarily though J. countering that with the possibility of a discussion with oneself) later declaring his ambitious intent to bring the lofty tenets of moral philosophy firmly into the realm of oftentimes mundane life via such graphic excerpts.

The writer pointed out that pure moral philosophy rarely exists within the realm of literature - this was widely disputed whereby James finally produced the example of Elliot's 'Middlemarch' wherein at the end a quotation from Saint Teresa (of Avalon?) is included. Nevertheless few writers ever rise from the mire to incorporate anything remotely approximating Plato's 'pure light of reason and hence, truth' - if they are even aware of this illuminating doctrine. Jonathan to be commended for his efforts.

After that Ernesto outlined further options for the group's website. Neil then endorsed, on behalf of all present, that existing (e.g. Roy's booklet) and new contributions be welcomed and pasted thereon; that an evening of readings be booked again at Gay's the Word preferably coinciding with the forthcoming Gay Pride Arts Festival in June/July. All this to be covered in detail by separate e-mail from Neil.

Adrian then delighted by re-reading his poem on holidaying in Bulgaria that employs heroic couplets throughout culminating in 'vulgar' and Bulgar - the reader may draw their own inferences; also, a delightful second poem, equally well received; with Philip magnanimously donating his airspace to Neil so that he could make a grand, if belated, entrance with a new work of inspiration.

This turned out to be a skit on the Sound of Music as interpolated by a certain Pretzel von Trapp, the misbegotten and much-maligned also-ran of the stage and screen. Needless to say an abundance of cat-fights, camperie, and the callous cutting of kudos throughout. Much laughter even if the work in need of greater tautness, overall aptly suitable for a proposed evening of readings to include other of Neil's gems such as the sauna soliloquy and the Proustian parody - the writer recommended again such an entertaining event for the forthcoming GayPride arts festival - even offering to assist in the design of the many extravagant costumes that Neil would be required to wear throughout.

Note, I would write more on Neil's latest masterpiece, however, the sound of sweet wrappers, of coughing and spluttering, of noisily eaten crisps and much worse, all of the general tenor of a baboons' tea party (no disrespect to that noble animal) prevented me from hearing very much of Neil's reading coming as it did, at the end of a typically exhausting, if stimulating, writers' group meeting.

Warwick Stanley

8.1.05

c.c. Neil, Chairperson Extraordinaire

**Jonathan Kemp**

***from Pornocracy***

I thought that only drugs or music could supply me with the transgressive thrill I sought. I never gave sex much thought. I had a lustless and lacklustre grope with Julie one night before Spike and her started what my grandmother would quaintly call 'courting', but on the whole I knew even then that I preferred boys – knew that I preferred Spike. I hid this desire beneath a fog of drugs, claiming a cynical disinterest in anything sexual. They mockingly called me the Poet because books and the lyrics to songs – and the thoughts they inspired - claimed more of my attention than trying to get laid ever did. Then, one night, I stumbled across the one thing that gave me such pleasure that it evaporated boredom like a blast of heat: sex for money. Now, there's a path down which to dance awhile, joy like sparks at my heels.

On this particular night, the night that maybe led me here in some strange way, I had left Spike, Julie, John and Heather on the golf course where we usually congregated to drink and smoke the night away, and had gone to meet my friend Phil at the Bistro. I used to call in to see him in the kitchens occasionally, sometimes have a drink with him at the bar before walking home with him. This night, it was New Year's Eve, the full stop to 1985. I was fifteen. As I arrived at the kitchen door at the back of the Bistro, Phil was just finishing. He was alone in the kitchen and I jumped through the door and screamed, making him drop a pan noisily onto the floor. "Clumsy fuck", I said.

"Cunt!" he barked at me, grinning.

"Happy New Year to you too, fuckface!"

We went through to the bar, where the rest of the kitchen staff and the owners, plus some regulars, were gathered, celebrating the New Year. Phil and I got chatting to one of the regular customers, a handsome man in his late twenties. He announced at one point that he was off to do some coke, and did we want some? I had never tried cocaine before, Johnny's brother didn't deal in it. So of course I was curious. Cocaine represented wealth, glamour, debauchery, decadence: in short, rock'n'roll,

something which, if done well, couldn't be boring if it tried. I knew that much already. I knew that there were other worlds if you bothered to look. Phil declined but I agreed. I eagerly followed this man up the spiral staircase that led to the toilets, and followed him into a cubicle in the gents. I watched him unwrap the little pouch of paper and tip the white powder onto the flat ceramic surface of the cistern. Every move he made was observed and recorded. The credit card chopping the powder and scraping it into two fat white lines; the licking of the card's powdery edge; the crisp £10 note rolled into a straw, the finger closing off one nostril while the other one hovered up the trail of white grains; the graceful rise from his bowed position and the tipping back of the head, note still in place; the furious sniffing; the licking of the finger to gather up the loose granules from the cistern; the rubbing of the dusted fingertip against the gums. I took it all in, like an actor preparing for his role. The man handed me the note like a gauntlet whilst he continued to hold one nostril closed and sniff hard with the other. I bent over, the note up my nose, and chased the length of my line with the sort of enthusiasm I had not applied to anything for a long time. I looked at him. He was beaming, and the rush I felt expressed itself in a return of that smile. "Good, huh?" he said. I nodded. Another vista opened up before me, glistening with possibilities.

There was a local eccentric that used to come and hang around at the kitchen who had been given the nickname The Count because he looked like Dracula. No one who worked there really liked him, or really knew him, and I'm not really sure why he used to come in. There were rumours that he was a paedophile, a pervert, a queer, and he was certainly sinister, dressed smartly in shabby black, his thinning black hair Brylcreemed back across his scalp, a thinning widow's peak pointing down towards the gaunt face. He would usually engage us in mindless chitchat, and no one there took him at all seriously. I had only met him once or twice and considered him a harmless freak.

As Phil and I were leaving that night we ran into The Count on the street outside and he began talking to us. I'd

had several trips to the toilet with the coke-head and was feeling pretty wired. The Count began asking us questions that soon moved from the inane (“Where do you live?”) to the obscene (“What kind of sex do you like?”). He asked us what we would be prepared to do for money. Would we, for example, have sex with a fat and ugly woman, or an old woman, or man, even an animal? I knew that, like me, Phil was a virgin. He confessed to me once that he used binoculars to spy on a teenage girl in a house opposite his, watching her undressing, or parading around with a handbag. He was fat and stank and didn’t have many friends. I only hung around with him because his mother and mine were friends and it was sort of expected that we would be friends. Throughout the Count’s interrogation, Phil laughed like an embarrassed child, clearly terrified, but I was fascinated. Here was someone totally unlike anyone I had ever met before. Someone strange and dangerous. We reached Phil’s house, and he went indoors, his odour like a shadow behind him. There was still some way to go before we reached my home. The Count and I continued to walk, and he continued his questioning – and I was pretty much saying yes to everything, yes I would do that, why not, if I was being paid. My heart was racing. My cock was hard. He asked if I had ever had sex with a man, and I said no. He said, would you let someone – a man, for example - suck your dick for £20? I said, sure, why not? We were by now walking by a golf course, and he suggested we go into some bushes. I held my hand out for the money, and he took out a fat wad of notes from the inside pocket of his grimy suit jacket and peeled off a £20 and placed it in my hand. I screwed it up and thrust it in my pocket as I followed him into the bushes.

Perhaps I can return to that moment and find in it something that makes sense of my life. Perhaps, like Phil, I could have retreated from the situation – what if my house had been first on that journey home that night and I had left Phil with The Count? But the encounter thrilled me, and then sickened me, and that was a pattern with which I was to become only too familiar. Sex for money provided me with the means to retreat from my body at the same time as I was experiencing it most intensely. It pushed me

inside myself, but took the sensations being felt on the surface of my skin in with it, so that it became something that was essentially part of me and at the same time essentially apart from me. I guess you could say that The Count was my first client. I was beginning to formulate a way of life radically at odds with what was expected of me.

I had several more encounters with The Count, and he was a fascinating character, a linguistics professor who had travelled the world studying different language communities, and was full of the most amazing stories. He quickly introduced me to some of his friends, who also paid me for sex. He took me around to meet an enormously fat man whose large front room was always curtained, and whose pet bird would always be flying around in a frenzy of feathers, shitting everywhere. I made him put the bird in its cage whilst I was there, wary of its erratic flight. He wanted me to fuck him. He called it rooting. "I want you to root me", he'd say as he lay on his side like a mound of white flesh. I learnt to function somewhere beyond desire, some place where desire transcends reality. Somehow I learnt to live there. Some other desire was born in me and to this day I refuse to name it. Refuse to recognise what it is I learnt to desire back then. Perhaps that refusal holds me back. I don't know. I remember visiting one old man whose entire flat was completely littered with piles of old newspapers and stacks of empty champagne boxes. His pale, loose flesh, revealed by an unbuttoned shirt, stank of stale sweat, and his dentures clicked and whistled as he spoke. Judging from his accent, he was clearly educated, and yet, though I have no idea about his profession (or if he had one), he seemed far from destitute, whilst at the same time appearing utterly penniless. He offered to take me on a cruise in the Mediterranean as I stood there masturbating in a pair of lycra knickers he had provided. Every time I went there he would say the same thing, make the same promise, but a year went by and the cruise had still not materialised. Not that I had wanted to go. I had other plans, for I had saved up those £20 notes and now had enough to get away. On the day after sitting my last A-level exam I left home and came to London. I told my parents I was going to London for the weekend with Phil.

Instead I went on my own and I never returned home. I had to move away from the life my parent's wanted for me, and to do that I had to move away from them. Something had been born in me, some force or desire to which I submitted completely. I had a taste for adoration and the power it gave. I wanted to find myself by being someone else, by being whatever was expected of me in these encounters with men. Looking back, I think I wanted to have sex with men without having to explain myself or commit myself to a single identity, without having to tell the truth about myself to anyone, because I was never sure what that truth was, was never sure who I was. Having sex for money made more sense, though it wasn't long before I also acted on my own desire for another man, a man who wasn't paying. Pretty soon sex, with or without money, preoccupied most of my time.

To begin with, I was more interested in imposture, anonymity, and lies. And prostitution provided a perfect outlet for imposture, anonymity and lies. Most of my clients wanted to believe I was straight, wanted to believe I had girlfriends (and many of the whores I met did, though even that may have been a reluctance to drop the act). Clients wanted to imagine that I only did what I did for the money. I was only too happy to act the part, imagining myself a million miles away from the person I was pretending to be. Distance is my tendency.

After arriving in London, I wrote to my parents telling them that I would not be coming home, and not to worry about me, but I never gave a contact address. Being a dutiful son wasn't part of my plan and whilst I have phoned my mother occasionally, they have never known any truth about my life. I'm probably still too young to know whether that is a great loss or not. They certainly don't know where I am. It would break their hearts.

It breaks mine.

Neil Zoladkiewicz

Steam : A Monologue For Radio

INTERIOR: A steam room in a sauna somewhere in Central London.

The hiss of water on coals – close to mic - gradually dissolving

into NORMAN coughing heavily into the mic.

Another loud hiss of water, a wooden spoon dropped into a

bucket then NORMAN's feet paddling on wet tiles walking

away from the mic.

A sigh (close up again) as NORMAN sits down.

NORMAN is from Yorkshire and is in his early sixties.

**NORMAN:** I shouldn't have come here. Not this weekend. Not with this wretched cold. **(Coughs again)** I thought all this dry heat would clear me chest. No use whatsoever. And I've come in here without a hankie. 'Coughs and sneezes spread diseases – catch them in your handkerchief'. That's what the advert used to say. Well I can't. I'll have to use the end of my towel.. **(He blows his nose.)** That's better.

**Bare footsteps approaching in the distance.**

**NORMAN:** **(hopeful)** Hello -

The heavy door of the steam room swings open.

A pause.

It closes again and the footsteps walk away.

**NORMAN:** **(annoyed)** Please yourself. It's like a morgue in here this afternoon. It's normally more lively than this. Must be

the Bank Holiday. Weather's picked up too. They must all be down at the coast. I wish I was now. I've always liked the seaside. I'll be off soon at this rate, anyway.

**Footsteps again, coming close.**

**NORMAN: (hopeful again)** Hang on a minute -  
**The door re-opens.**

**NORMAN struggles with a loud sneeze unsuccessfully.**

**The door closes again and once more the footsteps fade away.**

**NORMAN:** I knew that would happen. **(laughs)** I frightened him off with my germs.

**Paddle of NORMAN's feet walking away from the mic.**

**Hiss of water on hot coals again - more aggressive this time – close to mic.**

**NORMAN: (chuckling)** More steam please Vicar.

**He has another fit of coughing as he walks away from the mic.**

**NORMAN (sitting again):** It's just an off day here really. I do like coming here. The Olympus Sauna. Not that there are many Greek gods wandering around here, I can tell you. **(laughs)** I pay a visit every time I come to London. **(smiles)** It's got to be once a month now. A pilgrimage, you might say. More like a bee-line really. It's the first thing I do when I get here and the last thing I do before I leave. **(Chuckles)** It's where I do

my sightseeing. I've seen the pigeons in Trafalgar Square and all that many a time. And Madame Tussauds has nothing on this place sometimes. If you pick the wrong day it can be quite a chamber of horrors, I can tell you. Not always though. **(sighs)** The only thing is, it gets so hot in here. My glasses are always steaming up. It can be such a nuisance. I wonder if contacts do too? Not that I would wear them. They're too fiddly for me - my hands are too clumsy. **(laughs.)** Imagine losing a lens in this place. They're such tiny things. You'd never find it in the steam. It could end up on the coals. Or in someone's lap. Now there's a thought.

**Pause.**

No I won't get rid of my specs. I know I look daft at times and I could sort of manage without them, but it wouldn't be the same. Infact, it would be pointless coming here without my specs.

**Pause - then in a confidential tone.**

You see, I come here to look at the willies. I do. I only look, mind you. I don't touch. Not often anyway. **(Coughs)** Don't get me wrong. I like this place for other reasons too. These lovely fluffy towels for instance. It's a shame to wipe my nose on them.

They're so soft and luxurious. I've often been tempted to sneak one out and take it home with me on the coach. But no - I'm too well brought up for that sort of thing. Besides the towels are a part of the thrill of this place. White towels, steam and pink skin. Wrinkled pink skin.

**Footsteps again. They stop for a moment – the door opens and closes very quickly - then the footsteps recede into the distance.**

**NORMAN:** Another one walking away. **(laughs)** Word must have got round. It'll fill up later when the pubs come out. I'm sure it will. You have to be patient you see. **(sighs)** Yes, I come here for the willies. I've been doing it all my life really. Looking at willies. Since I was a teenager up home. At the local baths.

**Young voices filter in - shouting, laughing and splashing in a cavernous swimming baths.**

**The sounds of the bathers fade into in the background.**

That was puberty for me. Eyes full of chlorine looking at bulging trunks slithering out of the water. Wet

backs glistening, teeth chattering. Damp midriffs moving quickly as the lads catch their breath after a few lengths of the pool.

**Pause.**

Terry smiling at me and giving it a little stroke before he takes a dive.

**Deep splash of TERRY diving into pool (close to mic) followed by a sharp whistle.**

**A shower is turned on and runs followed by laughter again and a murmur of singing.**

**The sounds fade into background.**

**NORMAN:** Taking a peek in the showers. That's where I fell in love with the steam. Like an exotic curtain hiding their bodies – inviting, enticing, parting to reveal the glory of a crutch.

**Pause.**

He knew what he was doing, Terry did. Grinning and dropping his towel. Not that it meant anything. Married a girl from Woolworths in the end. From the class below us. Got her pregnant. Still kept giving me looks, though, even at the reception.

**The shower sounds fade out.**

**NORMAN:** That was the old baths. All cold white tiles and wooden benches. Now it's wave machines and cubicle showers. All too professional and slick for my liking. It's not cosy anymore. No more fun. Lost its innocence.

**Pause. Then in a reverie -**

Cold tiles and warm pool and a bag of hot chips on the way home to stop the shivers. And laying awake in bed, remembering the willies.

**Pause.**

I'm too old for the baths now, any road. And I've never really been one for public toilets - too dangerous. Undignified. And drafty with my arthritis coming on.

**Pause.**

No this is safer – and more satisfying. And I don't have to peek anymore. I can look for as long as I like. Besides, it's something to look forward to every month. A little treat. **(smiles)** And there's still the steam - seducing me. If only there could be steam

without heat - it gets to me sometimes. So I can't breathe. I have to give up gazing and dash outside for a breath of air. That does annoy me, that does.

**Pause.**

Mind you, not everyone shows theirs off. Some of the younger ones are too proud - or maybe not proud enough. They keep their towels firmly round their thighs if they see an old man like me taking a peek. At least they do until a young handsome number comes in. Then off come their towels like grease lightning and they don't care who's looking then. **(coughs)** If a really young hunk comes in here, the guys start a kind of competition - smoothing out the wrinkles and standing to attention, like a parade. Of course, if the young lad's timid, all this attention from their nether regions often frightens him away.

**(He laughs then splutters into a cough.)**

And then there are the 'cabaret acts' - complete with audience participation with a bit of luck. Oh, yes, there are always exhibitionists here. They don't care who ogles them. Public adulation - that's what they're after.

There was one guy who gave me a floorshow all to myself - like a kind of private view. Very flamboyant, he was. Waving his towel like a bullfighter. Standing on the bench opposite, flopping it around. He was getting near his grand finale when he slipped and banged his head against the zinc bucket near the coals. There was blood everywhere – even on my specs.

According to his mate, who was in the jacuzzi at the time, he'd had seven alcopops and an ecstasy tablet before he even got here. No wonder he didn't mind giving a midnight matinee to a lumpy admirer like me.

**Footsteps again coming closer.**

**The door opens - pause - and closes again.**

**Footsteps recede.**

That was another one - another exhibitionist. Tall blond guy. From last month. Played the 'stroke, stroke and slow peel to reveal' routine with his towel. I was getting all excited until it was finally out in the open. It had what looked like a curtain ring stuck through the end. Turned my stomach over, it did. Apparently,

it's called a Prince Albert. I dread to think what a Queen Victoria must look like.

**Silence.**

I have thought about the Internet. They say it has lots of porn channels – with photos of willies, lots of them. A world wide web of willies, I suppose. I know a bit about computers from work. And I've money left over from when Mum died, so I could have my own computer at home. No-one would know what I was doing. Cost a fortune in phone bills, I imagine. Unless I use that BT scheme, that Friends and Family thing they keep advertising. **(laughs)** Friends and Willies, more like.

**Pause.**

I don't think I'll bother. It's not the same. Just like the magazines and videos. There's no steam, you see. It's not the same without the steam.

**Pause.**

Some people might think I'm being a bit ridiculous, a man of my age. But it's too late for a lover now.

Looking after mother put paid to that. It's too big a step anyway.

**Pause – then confidential -**

It did happen once. I was much younger then. I started to see someone in another village for a while. He was a policeman. Lived at home like I did. We'd meet at weekends when he wasn't on duty. **(smiles)** I had a pushbike then. We called it our pushbike romance, Lionel and I.

**A cycle bell and cycle tyres swerving close to mic.**

**Two cycles on the road in the background, fading out**

We'd cycle off into the countryside. Far and wide we went. Where no-one could see us. It was a wonderful summer that year - because of what we were up to I suppose.

**Crows circling and wind in long grass, fading into the background.**

Craggy stone walls and windy moors. Fields with grass as high as your waist as you walked through. All that open space and freedom.

**Pause.**

I didn't feel guilty. Not for a second. I felt proud, proud of being with him. It seemed right, it did. Because we were close to nature, close to the earth. Lying there, holding each other and looking up, up at the sky, counting the clouds, squinting at the sun.

**The crows and grass dissolve into -**

**Seagulls (close to mic) then waves gently lapping the shore  
underpinning -**

Sometimes we'd head off to the coast - it wasn't too far, you see. There are lots of quiet stretches where there's no-one about - even nowadays. We'd sit on the dunes and watch the waves together. I'd listen to the seagulls screeching overhead. As if they were warning us that someone was coming. And if the weather turned, we'd huddle together and we'd still keep looking out to sea. Through the mist - the mist in the air. Sea fret we call it Like the steam.

**The sea fades out.**

**Pause.**

It was the secrecy that killed it off. Choked it, really. Nipped it in the bud. Like a sudden frost. Mind you, once the winter had set in, things would have been more difficult. Finding places to be alone together. A look across a table in a teashop wouldn't have been enough. We'd moved on so much that summer, you see. But it was the secrecy I couldn't handle, the lies. That look in mother's eyes.

**Silence.**

**NORMAN's feet paddle again away from the mic.**

**Hiss of water on the coals (close to mic) - gentle this time.**

**NORMAN:** So I'm left here with my willies – and my memories. **(sighs)** I'd like to think he'd walk through that door. That would be a turn up for the books - Lionel in here. I often wonder where he is now and what he looks like. Of course, I only remember him as he was. Tall strapping lad. Cheeky with it. All smiles and squeezes. That mop of brown hair. And those eyes – hazel like the sea.

**Pause.**

**NORMAN's feet paddle away from the mic again.**

**He coughs into the mic.**

If things had been different, I wouldn't be sitting here now, I suppose. Waiting for willies. I wouldn't have looked at another willy ever. **(smiles)** I had all of him you see. And he had all of me. And it was grand.

**Silence.**

Perhaps I could build my own sauna. There's enough room at the bottom of the garden. No. The neighbours. It would never do. Besides, who would I get to go in there with me? Still, there's all that money sitting in the bank. Might as well make good use of it, enjoy it. That's what mother said to me in the hospice.

**Pause.**

That's it. I'll go on a holiday. Abroad maybe. I know: one of those resorts with nudist beaches. There are quite a few ones

for men, if you know what I mean. I've seen them in the magazines lying around in the coffee bar upstairs. Mind you, there wouldn't be any steam. No sea fret either. But there'd be the waves. I could watch the waves and think of Lionel. And there'd be plenty of willies. Lots of them. **(chuckles)** I remember when I was a boy, we'd go away in the summer on our holidays. And Mam would say 'When you're on your holidays, enjoy God's creation.' Well, I will, Mam, I will.

**A final triumphant hiss of steam.**

**Philip Donegan**

**Where there is Gold**

“**T**oothpaste, I shall need more toothpaste.” Mrs. Dornaby wrote it on the back of a postcard she hadn’t sent to the Mallinsons, hadn’t written even. A fly buzzed around her head. She would be glad to get away from the flies. Home was so civilised; no extremes of heat, no strange insects, and you could get everything you wanted from the shops.

Soap, toilet paper, disinfectant, Jeyes Fluid, scouring powder, bleach. She wrote the items firmly, the pen biting into the paper. It broadened the mind to travel, she reflected, but it would be a relief it would be to use her own bathroom again, with the washbasin, the bath and the lavatory all in matching primrose. The French really did have something to learn about lavatories. The one she’d had to use in Arles – she shuddered – just two blocks and a hole in the ground. Deodorant, perfume - she would get that on the plane – air freshener. She added them all to the list.

She wondered where Simon was. Whatever did he find to do in that jungle of a garden? Most boys of his age would have given their eye teeth to go fishing with their father. But not Simon, oh no. She feared he would become a dreamer.

Washing powder, carpet shampoo, stain remover, fabric softener. She would have a good spring clean when she got back, she decided, even if it was September. She looked up to see Simon standing in the doorway, holding something in his hand.

“What’s that, dear?” she said.

“A moth.”

“Well don’t bring it in here,” she said.

The boy put it on the low wall outside the door and walked through the bead curtain into the house.

“Wipe your feet,” she said. “I don’t want you bringing goodness-knows-what indoors.”

“Mum,” he said, “you know where the path that runs past the olive trees comes to the brook?”

“No,” she said. “I’ve not been down there, it’s overgrown. Is that where you get your feet wet?”

He ignored her question. “There’s a skull in the water,” he said.

“Don’t be silly, Simon,” she said. “This is France, not the Wild West.” She added paper towels to the list.

“Shall I tell you a secret,” he said. “Shall I tell you something special?”

“Yes dear,” she said. “Just a minute while I finish what I’m writing.” Washing-up liquid, dustbin liners, metal polish. “What is it then? What’s so special?”

He came up close to her, blond hair tousled. She smoothed it into place. He looked up at her.

“I know where there is gold,” he said.

“Do you really, dear,” she said. “We shall have to take some back with us. Then Mummy can pay her big shopping bills with it, can’t she?”

The boy’s shy smile had gone, his eyes were round and fixed on his mother.

“Honestly,” he said. “I found it down by the river. I saw it glinting in the water. Big pieces of it, like nuts.”

“What an exciting holiday,” she said. “Now don’t go away, Simon. I’m just about to prepare lunch.”

“Will Dad be home for lunch?” he said.

“You know he’s gone fishing,” she said. “I don’t know why you couldn’t have gone with him.”

“I don’t like fishing,” he said. “I don’t like it when the fish gets the hook caught in its mouth.”

“You don’t mind eating fish fingers,” she said. “It’s your favourite.”

“But they don’t get the hooks caught in their fingers,” he said.

“Well we’re having fish for our lunch today, you and I. A nice tuna fish salad.”

The boy turned down the corners of his mouth.

“You needn’t worry about the tuna,” she said. “It’s out of a tin.”

He thought of the fish as he lay in bed that night, the fish his father had caught in the lake on Sunday. He watched him ripping out the hook which the fish had swallowed, and the blood around the fish's mouth. "Too small to bother with," his father said, and threw it back. From downstairs he could hear his parents' voices, just their voices, not the words. Mostly his mother's, loud and brisk, like a big dog's bark, then his father's, plodding on, he always thought, plodding like an old horse. From his bed he could see the sky through the uncurtained window, and in the sky, stars, millions of stars. So unlike home.. "Fancy not providing curtains," his mother had said when they arrived. "The house is supposed to be fully furnished, isn't it? We must complain." Downstairs the voices plodded and barked, plodded and barked, plodded.

Suddenly Simon was awake again. He didn't remember falling asleep, but must have done so, for now the house was quiet, the voices silent. He got out of bed and tiptoed to the window, avoiding the floorboards that creaked, and looked out onto the moonlit garden. The trees, the tussocky grass, the stones, everything was silvery white. Out there, he was sure, was adventure, were mysterious things, out there was gold. In the rafters something scuttled, making his heart beat quickly; he could hear it thumping. The scuttling continued, wild running, quicksilver legs over dry rattling bits of things. He looked out of the window again. Could he find the place where the gold is? Yes, he was sure he could. The thought excited him. Down the path that goes past the olive trees, through the overgrown part, past the stone that looks like a lion, to the brook that chattered over the stones and was so silent when it got deep. Should he go now? Tomorrow, he decided. As he climbed back into bed, the mouse in the rafters was running, leaping, tumbling overhead.

"Stanley, there's a rat in the roof," Mrs. Dornaby said to her husband over breakfast.

Mr Dornaby was reading last Sunday's Observer. It had cost him five euros, so he was even reading the book reviews.

"Probably two of them," she said. "It was deafening in the night."

“Two what?” he said, dipping the Arts Review in the marmalade they had brought with them.

“Rats,” she said. “In the roof. You must kill them. They’ll only breed.”

Simon watched his father drinking coffee leaving brown beads on his moustache. Mr. Dornaby folded the paper and clapped the boy on the back.

“What d’you say to a rat-hunting expedition, old man?”

Simon hated being called old man.

“A real man’s job, that, hunting rats, what d’you say?”

Simon looked into his empty cup.

“It’s only a mouse, Dad,” he said. “A mouse in the rafters.”

“If you don’t kill them, Stanley,” Mrs. Dornaby said, “I’ll put down some bait. What’s French for rat-poison? Why didn’t I think to bring some? I’ve got some ant exterminator, do you think that would work?”

Simon was tugging at his father’s elbow.

“Dad, I know where there is gold.”

“Well done, old man,” his father said.

“Dad, will you let me show you? Go on, Dad, it isn’t far.”

“You wouldn’t come fishing with me, would you, old man,” his father said. “You’ve got to learn to be a sport, you know.”

Mrs. Dornaby interrupted. “I’ve got to do some shopping in the village,” she said, checking her list. Bread, milk, potatoes, butter, something for supper, maybe chicken. Lucky I brought bouquets garnis, they don’t have them here. That’s France for you, though, not a bouquet garni to be had.

In the afternoon Mr. Dornaby tried to get into the loft but couldn’t, and hit his head against a beam. It made him red-faced and angry and he went outside and stamped on a lizard. Mrs. Dornaby cleaned the house and sat down with her address book, making a start on her Christmas list. Simon found the dead lizard, put it in an empty soap carton and buried it where the wild thyme grew. The lizard’s funeral over, he walked back to the house through the long grass, and found his father outside on the patio.

“Dad,” he said, “let me show you where the gold is.” Mr. Dornaby was asleep in the deck chair. Simon went over to his mother.

“Mum, let me show you where the gold is.”

Mrs. Dornaby was making a start on her Christmas list. Patterson, Pemberton, Quigley, Rogers, Roland, Smith, Unwin.

The boy went off on his own, wiping his feet on the mat as he went out into the sunlight. The air was fragrant with the scent of balsam and rosemary. In the distance was the village, crowned with a little church. A butterfly danced before him, down the path that ran past the olive trees. Now he could hear the music again, the music that only came when he was alone, drifting through the air, coming from far away, wrapping round him, lifting him. It blended with the buzzing insects, the drone of bees around the ivy. The water in the stream tinkled, the breeze plucked at the tops of the olive trees, and somewhere, it seemed, a mouse was running in the rafters. Still the butterfly danced, undecided between the blue flowers that grew by the path, bluer than the sky, and the daisies, yellow as the sun, yellow as gold. When he reached the stream, he took off his shoes, sat on a stone and dangled his feet in the cool water. He looked at the stones, the colour in them. All were grey, all were different. Grey like elephants, grey like wool on barbed wire, grey like slates, grey like pavements. This was where the water chattered, nattering with the stones, rattling over the pebbles. Further down, near the bend, the water gurgled and swished round a fallen tree. And then, where it got deeper, the water was quiet. From his stone, he looked to where the stream bent round the tree, to where the sun fell in patches, to where the water beckoned. "There," he breathed, as he stood up, "there it is."

The bees had left the ivy, and there was more warmth now by the stones of the house than from the lengthening rays of the sun.

Mr. Dornaby came in from the patio.

"Put the kettle on," he said. "I could do with a cuppa."

"Look at the time," said Mrs. Dornaby. "I hadn't realised. Supper's going to be late."

"I'll help you," he said. "Simon can lay the table."

"Where is Simon?" she said. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," he said. "Where's he been all afternoon? Wasn't he with you?"

"No," she said, "I was here, indoors. I was writing, then had a lie down. I thought he was with you."

“No,” he said, “not with me.”

“I thought he was going to show you his gold,” she said.

“What gold?” he said. “Where is this gold?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “ I don’t know where the gold is.”

**Samuel Brookes**

**from I am Raymond Wallace**

Chapter Seven

Raymond stands in a strange bar in a strange city; no one knows where he is except himself. Or, at least, no one who knows *where* he is knows *who* he is, which amounts to the same thing. He is taking steps he's never taken before; steps that have never been available before this night - and yet this night is precisely what he's been moving towards for some time now. The pressures of the secrecy, the movements in the offices, the double bluffs, the dissembling: all these point the way towards a certain epiphany, a certain moment, a certain honesty.

The bar is small, cramped, smoky. It is like all the bars in the world, and like no other bar in the world. He is foreign, strange, and allowing himself to be someone different, if only for tonight. He steps further inside, to the bar itself. He leans on it like he's leant on so many bars, here and back home. This bar is awash with beer, but not English beer, of course. This is the residue of cold beer that tastes like pop and the promise of sex. This was a new taste for Raymond, a new flavour when he first arrived. He orders a beer. He's hot, and wishes he'd worn something else. *Only he didn't know he was coming here.* He begins to strip himself of his outer layers: his thick coat, wool; his scarf, hand knitted by his grandmother; his jumper, thick and warm:

tonight, everything needs to come off. He stops short of removing his shirt. He has a vest on, too: he's sweltering. His beer arrives and he matches the sweating bottle, drop for drop. Folding everything in front of him, he sits on a bar stool and takes a sip of the beer. *Pop and the promise of sex.*

A man steps up to the bar to his right and nudges his knee. Raymond stiffens, but the man holds his hands up in submission and says,

Hey, man: no problem.

The man sips his beer and the bubbles froth his moustache. Another beer and Raymond might lick those bubbles away: he allows himself thoughts he's never allowed himself before.

Music plays, something Raymond doesn't recognise. Over in the corner there is a man slow-dancing, his vest – his *singlet* – riding up his torso, a seductive dance. He is like Salome: shameless and exquisitely determined. This is astonishing. My father envies his rhythm, his ease. The dancer's eyes are closed tight, ecstatically so, and he dances all alone like a silent film star. This is a world of alternatives, of possibilities, and the beer begins to make possible thoughts previously not so. My father bleeds himself into the extraordinary and appalling concept of taking part. He fades himself

out of one world and immerses himself in this new one. After all, it is only for a moment. It is a world of strangers and unknown systems of thought, and yet crucially and fundamentally it feels like coming home.

Suddenly, Raymond longs to dance with a man. He closes his eyes and imagines dance halls, partnered nights, some men leading, some following – some taking the woman's role - and the roles changing. Tuxedoed boys immaculately groomed lead each other around the floor, changing positions every eight bars. He opens his eyes onto the brave new world into which he has entered, and feels the knot in his stomach begin to unravel, thread by thread. There are other men dancing now, one has his hand on another's hips. It is almost inconceivable to my father as to how that might feel: he is at once reassured and repelled. He cannot take his eyes off the point at which these two men converge. The man being held has his arms drawn back like wings, like an angel's wings. He leans away from his *partner*, and Raymond wonders what that word means now. He needs to learn a new vocabulary, or to learn new meanings for his existing one. He is frightened of many things, but especially of opening his mouth, since words no longer seem to make sense to him. This is a new order. There are codes he cannot possibly decipher, for he can barely process the information that his eyes are receiving.

The holding man has his hands on the angel's hips, as if delaying his flight. His thumbs grip the moment where the hips meet the abdomen. Raymond has a new ambition: one day he will hold his hands thus, and will feel an angel at his fingertips. The man's thumbs hook through the belt loops; his fingers wrap around the waist to the crest of the buttocks. Raymond can hardly look; his mouth is dry with lust and dehydration. As if in slow motion he turns his head to the bar, eyes so wide as to be openly weeping, and gestures for another beer. He shudders with the relief of some ancient grief, and places his head on his hands. He hears a pinking in his ears, like a wheel coming loose, and - under the blanket of the heat and the strange music - it is minutes before he realises that the pinking is his own cry, a child's whimper: it's him who's coming loose, though he cannot be quite sure as to whether he is falling apart, or opening up.

Right then - *and the timing is crucial* - on the little finger of his right hand my father feels the cold wetness of glass: refreshment, another beer. He lifts his head, face snotty as a schoolboy's, and takes the bottle directly to his lips: a significant swig. He needs to keep the veil of impossibility lifted for a while longer, please. He looks to the barman who shakes his head and directs Raymond's attention to a man on his left.

It's on me. Drown your sorrows.

My father grins before he turns to thank, and having turned, finds that he can no longer speak. His face goes slack as he takes on board the face of this stranger. His eyes are so dark as to be black in this light, and his face pale as the moon. When he blinks his lashes close slowly, as if not to take his eyes by surprise. His lips are a deep dark pink, his chin stubbled with black roots. Raymond is staring at him.

I'm so sorry. Terribly rude. Thank you. I don't know what's wrong with me.

There's nothing to thank me for. You look hot.

Raymond isn't entirely sure what the man means.

Where are you from, anyway – Irish?

England.

So, uh, God save the Queen!

Indeed. And all who sail in her.

The man laughs incredulously. Perhaps he is surprised at Raymond's ability to make a joke. Raymond has surprised himself.

Barely half an hour in this new world, and already tears and laughter:  
*he's doing fine.*

So, uh, Mr Englishman, what's your name?

Raymond. Ray.

It's a pleasure to meet you, Ray. Giuseppe Azario. But here I'm Joey.

It's a pleasure to meet you too, Joey.

*At last.*

So - Ray, right? - uh, what brings you here? I mean, how did you find us? I'm sorry, you must just tell me to shut up if I ask too many questions.

It's not a problem at all. I um, well I was out for a walk and I just sort of...I just stumbled across it, really. I was just wandering and saw this tiny light at the top of the door. Then someone walked in, and I followed.

That's how most people find it, I guess. Serendipity, I think it's called.

That or Sod's Law. Serendipity's not a word I use very often.

Me either, Ray. But it seems the right word for tonight.

Raymond blushes at this point, and Joey says,

Listen, Ray, I didn't mean to, um -

I've never -

Well, actually I did mean to say that - and that's just fine, Ray. Sorry, I interrupted you. You've never-

I've never done anything like this before.

You don't look like you have, but that's just fine. In fact, to some people that's the point. No history, no baggage. You come as you are. In your case, a tearful queer with a British accent. Some man's idea of heaven.

Some man's?

Joey smiles, now – smiles and Raymond is almost positive he even blushes. For the first time in the conversation Joey looks to his beer, conveniently empty. Raymond doesn't hesitate to make this his cue:

Can I buy you a drink?

Sure, Ray. You can buy me whatever you like.

And now Raymond's almost unbearably confused - not because he doesn't know what's going on, but because he knows *precisely* what's going on; it's just that he cannot possibly take all this on board. He feels exhausted, like jetlag, like he's been up for days, and yet wide-awake, more awake than ever before. He takes another mouthful of beer, gestures to the barman, hears Joey draw breath and say:

You wanna come back to my place?

Raymond has to concentrate his entire mind and body on the process of swallowing. Tears and laughter are fine; choking is not an option. He can't look at Joey. Not because he doesn't want to, but because the decision to allow himself to want this - *him* - has so many implications that his brain feels ready to explode. This is a new language, a new algebra. Raymond can open the door onto a world

of unbelievable beauty, and yet he cannot take responsibility for the opening of the doors. He swallows his beer, hears *Only if you want to*, and realises that the doors are already wide open. He turns with a whole new set of tears in his eyes and looks at this remarkable man.

Stranger, don't go all soft on me, now will ya?

Too late.

Joey nods in agreement: *Too late*, and takes my father's hands in his for the very first time. With his right hand he cups Ray's left cheek, thumbing away his tears. He wonders what my father cries for; he wants to understand this grief. He's ready to take Ray on board, to hold his unhappiness and to hear his tales. Joey relaxes as he sees Ray's eyes widen in a strict combination of fear and lust - he already knows how to read my father - and Joey's heart begins to cede to the possibility of a beautiful affair. His voice thick with emotion, Joey says:

Time to go?

And now? Now, all Raymond Wallace can do is to hang his head and follow. They open the inner door, nod to the doorman who looks into my father's eyes with a mixture of admiration and sympathy, and

draws open the outer door. It opens onto the winter and the night, and the happy couple shiver with all the anticipation in the world, Raymond's layers of winter clothes more necessary now than ever in the contemporary climate of uncertain meteorology.

And on the way back to Joey's place, there'll be few words - just a brisk walk, Raymond every so slightly behind Joey - and they'll both wait for the first kiss with the anticipation of Spring.

**Peter Slater**

**Thirteen ways of Looking at a Sugar Puff**

**1**

He was a hunter, came from a hunting family  
So that, when he pushed his trolley around Safeways  
he noticed every small movement amongst the packets  
of Rice Krispies, Shreddies, Alpen and Sugar Puffs.

**2**

He woke up beside me and he smiled.  
I had been awake for some time.  
What's that you're reading?  
It came out of a Sugar Puff packet,  
it's a comic book version of Crime and Punishment,  
simplified and abridged for children.  
Altered slightly, too. Look: here's Raskolnikov  
tucking into a bowl of cereal.

**3**

I do not crave Sugar Puffs  
I merely sometimes feel that, perhaps,  
I would like a bowl now and again.  
I want to pour milk forever:  
the lovely act is always over  
so quickly.

**4**

I do not know what it is  
but as I passed that packet, just now  
I felt something  
a movement within my soul.  
Contents may settle during transit

## 5

It is a fact that each Sugar Puff  
contains The Answer.  
All babies discover this  
but by the time they develop speech  
and might be able to explain to  
Those Who Could Do Something About It,  
they have forgotten.

## 6

That moment,  
that very first moment  
when it was discovered that  
wheat could puff  
and be transformed by  
sugar and honey!  
how they must have  
smiled and shaken each other  
by the hand!  
Dollars! they must have thought.  
Dollars, Pounds, Marks, Roubles,  
Yen, Francs, Spondoolies!  
Oh, that moment  
of hunger!

## 7

Guess the number of puffs in this packet and win a prize!  
Shall we have a go, Deidre?  
No.  
He did not argue but blinked  
behind his spectacles.

## 8

We come from the Great Plains the silent heart of America  
Wheatfields still under the blazing heat of a July sun  
so much light a child could grow dizzy with laughter.  
Now, in our packet, the silence is of a different quality  
it is all darkness and the flat smell of cardboard.  
But we look forward to morning smiles in bright kitchens:  
one must always hope.

**9**

In the dense plantations of cane a child  
could get lost quite easily a child  
head tilted wondering where how  
When I was a child I was satisfied with a length of cane  
cut by my grandfather's machete: here yar son!  
Now they want Mutant Hero Turtle bubble gum  
even here in Guyana we don't have our own stories  
anymore  
Sugar Puffs have destroyed all the old ways.

**10**

The quiet breath  
inside a puff of wheat -  
the sleepy touch  
of your lips.

**11**

Three Sugar Puffs  
in the branches of a bare tree.  
From a distance they looked like rare birds.  
Ornithologists were delighted  
until they came closer.

**12**

Mysterious patterns appeared in cornfields.  
A sign from outer space?  
No.  
The earth had merely been bombarded  
by a chance shower of Sugar Puffs.  
Happens all the time in remote areas  
People don't notice, is all.

**13**

Don't go out there. I tell you! Don't go!  
They're waiting for you and they'll get you!  
I have to go! Don't you realize it's our only chance?  
Can't you see that?

**Paul Davidson**

**Cropped Ginger**

The boy asleep in the grass...

whose hair is the colour of rust and thumbstain,  
who exists in a light like olive oil,  
where time's colour is always green,  
where days are slurred like sealskin,

is dreaming of fields and of lapwings,  
of wires that run like sweat,  
and the sound of tractors moving  
in the green distance,

is speaking to himself the language  
of still, clipped grass, of dandelion heads,  
of warm work and the blunt imprint  
of days turning.

(Orkney)

***Galder***

After the conversation has ended,  
the colour of it remains, warm as time,  
like the meeting of eyes, or mouths  
speaking silently through rain.

Even now, I am sailing  
through your eyes' map of rivers,  
dark semicircles of dusk, the sudden  
alteration of mood, lost in these woods  
which turn through endless evenings  
into Sweden. The woods  
are where you come from.

I am being spun in the colour  
of your eyes' reflection: ash  
and fir cone and the wings of strange moths,  
uncertain, deep as lakes

or the fringe of your house, hidden  
miles away in a wood some place,  
and where you spin tales  
out of nothing, colours  
that fade in the open.

(Ostfold, Norway)

***Great War Sonnet I***

We call him, from deep waters mired in mud  
and phosgene, bandages of light,  
the memory of falling, billowed under cloud,  
to this album of stored ghosts, stilled timeless  
fields of crosses and new grass,  
our lady's thistle, bowed angelic guns,  
trailing his past in letters home, and cards  
turned with friends in dusty repetition.  
Surfacing in snatches like old songs  
stiff-voiced with the sea's distance,  
he rises, summoned to this medium  
of clearer waters closer to home,  
with other faces, the soft transparency  
of eyes already having faded.

***Great War Sonnet II***

They seem attracted to the lens,  
like moths or lost boys, their eyes  
bright and meaningless, a valediction  
of shared arms. They are silent  
ghosts from the last great silent war,  
mouthing the words of those who will come  
after them; bottled in sepia,  
evoking senses they are unaware of.  
We imagine for them a neverland  
the colour of stained glass, in which  
dark angleshades of khaki and vermilion  
draw down on fields in evening  
stand-to, a winged gentleness  
of leaves falling in forgotten counties.

***Great War Sonnet III***

He has slipped loose from this weight  
of marl and tarpaulin, his last buoyed  
waterproofing, from morning's feathered stillness  
onto darker surfaces, mirrors of silt  
and channel; garlanded with mare's-tail  
and water-soldier, attended by gulls,  
leaving no image of his ending, only the image  
on the eye's edge, of quiet wings alighting.  
He is untouched and untouchable,  
a burning coal on the lips of angels,  
a delicate white ash settling  
on fields of bright grass, spindrift  
far from the smoke of incoming shells,  
called home in unending circles.

**Russell Christie**

**A Measured Touch**

**T**hey bought in pale equipment in ocean grey to haul him up and stretch him out, to sling him back and forth. He was pressed against a wall by jelly-moulds of plastic, transparent so they could watch how his muscles spread under pressure, resisted then relaxed toward the opposing surface. They opened and closed his mouth, moved in close-up on his eyes and watched him blink. The lighting changed from daylight to moonlight to a red and sultry cave in which they monitored the changing colours of his flesh. Not only positions but styles were demanded. He had to take on a hundred roles, turning the muscles of his thighs from languid and yielding to rampant and possessive in an instant. They rollercoastered his emotions in a hurried compendium of telling postures. They drank the sap of love from out his twisting figure. Until finally he had to collapse in a buzz of strobing violet which made his seed a luminous stream of light as it sliced an arc like a shooting star, dazzling the ambient air and the viewing lenses.

\*\*\*

"You were there the whole day?" asked Christian as the vinyl roach swung on its wires in the breeze from the door.

"Eight hours, thereabouts."

"Weren't you exhausted?"

"It was intense, and interesting. That kept me awake, and sharp. I was exhausted by the end, but it flew by." Alan was pleased with his capacity.

"And what's it gunna be used for?"

"An interactive game in a pleasure arcade. Debbie thinks the basic code can be sold as source, then other people might invent other things to do with it."

"With you."

“With me, yeah. They might invent other things to do with me.”

“Do you mind that, people playing with you like that?” Christian asked.

“I’d rather have them play with me than not,” Alan said, “And three hundred an hour is reasonable rates for an actor. Though I used to know this guy who looked like Michael Jackson and he’d get that just for standing there. Until Jackson changed his face that is.”

“That was bad luck,” said Christian, “I think I prefer the virtual manipulation to the real stuff,” he sucked the final ounce of beer from out his bottle. “It might be useful to look like someone famous, but I wouldn’t want actual surgery, not for any money, especially if those stars can then outmanoeuvre you.”

“Me neither, I’d rather be appreciated just for who I am,” he hesitated, “With a little tweaking.”

“Like another beer?” Christian offered.

“Sure.”

On his way to the bar Christian passed beneath a mannequin of Uncle Sam. Sam was sitting on an oversized donkey, a leftover from a Mexican festival Christian vaguely remembered seeing a documentary about, there had been a swinging mule full of sweets that you hit with a stick. A stolen roadsign had been hung around the donkey's neck, “One Way” it said. He bought two dark beers, home made at Dr. Margarita’s micro brewery.

“You’ll get movie work soon enough,” Alan told him as he returned, “I started off just massaging. But more people see you when you’re on stage and then the offers come in.”

“I’m more into performance and making movies than actually doing anything on a one to one basis.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“A wise decision. You’re actual interaction can get a bit complicated.”

“There wouldn’t seem much point, just having sex with one person, one person in a room, just them, with no-one watching.”

“You wait until you’re offered ten thousand dollars,” Alan grinned.

“It seems to me a totally different thing when there are others involved,” Christian went on making his point, he wanted to explain this, to himself as much as to Alan, “If you’re actually being filmed and paid and you’re part of an industry, a business. With just one other person, in a room, it makes no sense, it’s... it’s...,” he couldn’t find a word for what it was, “...it doesn’t exist, really.”

Alan looked at him with an exaggerated expression of disappointment. “So,” he said, dubiously, “So, er, you’re not into sex on a one-to-one basis then? Just two people, with no-one else watching?” he asked.

Christian actually blushed.

“And how about mirrors?”

Christian looked away.

Alan decided to help him out by reverting to their earlier subject, “Debbie says the company's programmes are big in Japan.” He liked this shy side of Christian and didn’t want to tease him about it, “If this release sells, they’ll take me on a Far East tour. They like Western guys over there in Japan. They have these terminals at Kansai airport,” he went on, “You just sit and slide in five dollars and you can have what you want. I keep imagining all these passengers in the transit lounge entering my virtual hiney while they’re waiting for a plane. They were into me a whole lot for the computer modelling at Altatech – that’s the name of the company - folds and all, every last crease. And I told you about the painting.”

Christian nodded.

Alan felt himself getting worse. “Then they join that up with some endoscopy from someone else,” he tailed off. He was getting the feeling that perhaps this description was no kinder than his previous interrogation, he was becoming self conscious. He paused for breath and to reflect, sucked on his beer. “Okay,” he said, “How about you?”

**Ernesto Sarezale**

**Tears of Eros**



**TEARS OF EROS**

collecting thorns  
worms forking  
ants beading  
bleeding tears  
rosary  
of drop shadows  
Eros weeps  
sips blood drip  
trip from sore  
to shore of torn  
sea pieced  
mirror gash  
gauze bandaged  
god mummy  
tummy rash  
pregnancy  
velvet ducts  
pact with pain  
vain stretch  
of the veins  
genitals  
mourning gag  
blank morning  
eyes bandaged  
wings sucked  
god sight  
flight locked  
by a wrist cut  
cute Cupid cup  
cupola cuff gush  
battered Cherub  
self-inflicted grail  
battered cut  
locked sucked  
bandaged pieced  
torn drip  
collecting forking  
beading bleeding  
mourning

**Adrian Brown**

**Dishonourable Discharge**

Lord, let me reach the end of that dark night,  
Where limitless desire to be a stud  
And screw the ass off everything in sight  
Runs like a hectic through the fevered blood,

Until time tempts us to compound for porn;  
To watch some cyber-hunk hump angel-face,  
Then take the thing in hand, as a forlorn  
Conclusion to an evening's fruitless chase.

I long to say farewell to longing soon,  
Feel no more need to curb an appetite  
Yearning in unslaked rapture at the moon-  
ing grace of some complaisant catamite.

I've served my time in love's deep trenches so,  
Dread Lord of Lechers, let thy bondsman go.

**High On The Hoof  
Or  
Here's To The Ladies Who Munch.**

*Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon.  
The little dog laughed to see such sport  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*

Consider the condition of a cow!  
The first impression's poor, we must allow.  
Their lives observed in field or sheltered stall  
Suggest not much is going on at all:  
Their train of thought – and options here are sparse –  
Would seem: “Today I'll munch a little grass,  
Then stand around and moo a bit, before  
It's lunchtime, when I'll munch a little more;  
But this time, to maintain a varied feed,  
I'll pep it up with just a touch of weed.”

Such programme fills the day till they retire  
Meekly at sundown to the milking byre.  
As life-styles go theirs seems a little flat,  
You must admit, unless we're conscious that  
Certain expressions bear in bovine mind  
The same connections as for humankind;  
That harmless “grass” and unpretentious “weed”  
Are codes to mask a fierce agrestic greed  
For one especial herb, and interleave a  
Dull bill of fare with... ‘Cannabis sativa’!!!

To find the stuff, and slurp its nutrients in,  
Is every meadow-lady's secret sin;  
She knows this shoot, that prudes say roots in hell,  
Will ring ecstatic tunes upon her bell.  
Thus, when the shadows fall, it must be owned,  
Back to her stall trips Bess, completely stoned.  
And not alone; beneath that cow-shed's roof  
The whole damn herd is high upon the hoof,  
With this clandestine fodder deep inside!  
No wonder a cow's skin is called a ‘hide’!

You may pooh-pooh this notion as unproved;  
And “Don’t exaggerate!” is here.....behooved.  
Let’s not infer, when all the world’s abed,  
Cows go to ‘toke a spliff’ behind the shed;  
Or that at midnight they will all convoke  
For each in turn to snort a line of coke.  
The fantasy’s absurd; but all the same  
Assess the field-work of that dewlapped dame.  
With ‘grass’ and ‘weed’ in vast amounts supplied –  
Perhaps a dish of mushrooms on the side –  
She stands all day knee-deep in liquid mud  
Chewing the hallucinogenic cud;  
And when the salt-box she demurely licks,  
The saline’s giving her a hefty fix,  
Illuminating in electrolytes  
A hip-hop runway to galactic heights.

It’s like that old familiar nursery tune  
Of some horned female jumping o’er the moon;

As we were told, when really there’s no doubt  
The frisky moo was – literally – ‘spaced out’;  
The cat and fiddle of this levitation  
Being simply drug-induced imagination,  
Their ‘diddle-diddle’, to her popping ears,  
A full symphonic music of the spheres;  
And laughing dog, with empty spoon and dish,  
Unlucky omens for her star-crossed wish.

So with our Bessie and her munching mates!  
They aim at similarly airborne states,  
With lift-off for their pie-bald-spotted mass  
Empowered by self-engendered methane gas;  
To reach cow-heaven, on leathern wings to sail,  
To kick the traces, soar beyond the pale  
Of meadow life, until.....until.....until ....until a jolt recalls  
Them back to earth, down to the milking stalls,  
And shows their crumpled horns and chagrined faces  
The pail's what they've kicked over, milk the traces.  
Bleak morning's come, they're linked to the machine  
Like every day, the liquid flowing clean  
From their milk-sacs, as they fill the vats  
With sustenance for other people's brats.

Such is the fate of all of us, it seems,  
Who've bumped awake from psychedelic dreams.  
Our due content, we're forced to understand,  
We'll find among the objects close at hand  
(Or hoof), in our own plot, for good or ill.  
And that's our lot! Yet is there not some thrill  
For cows to hope in mundane life? Sure! It's  
To stand in line with clamps upon their tits,  
Racked in extracting lacteal juices. This,  
If not cow heaven, at least is udder bliss!

Freeze and fade out.

The moral here has been  
That we're the cows, and life the grim machine  
That's got us tethered by the dangly bits,  
Instilling dull routine into our wits  
Yet sucking vital fluids from our dugs....  
While happiness is left to dreams, or drugs

Arden Adiva

### Phat Arse

**E**very morning I wake up with back pain, a severe lower backache. It's not that I've slept in an awkward position, because I haven't. Nor is it that I've had an accident and fallen, thought that is a bit subjective. Its because I've got a gigantic phat arse that would have the Destiny Child girls go weak at the knees.

A gigantic blob of fat, with a giant smile down the middle, but u mustn't forget the dimples. They add character.

The sheer size of my arse forces my lower back 5 inches off the mattress. Now that's the true power of bootylicious. Add to that ample sized breasts that put that poor misguided Jordan to Shame and u would better understand my situation. But u don't see me parading my stuff down the red carpet, and making out with every football player that comes my way. Though now that I think about it, I am very popular on Sport Kit Sunday's at Central Station. Must be my succulent thighs in a pair of shorts. Gets them every time.

This is the usual sample of the morning chatter going on in my head. After which, I usually sit up and press my back against the wall, lightening the load so to speak. Mumbling and groaning lightly so as not to wake anyone.

A few minutes pass and the pain subsides. Next comes the hard part. I step out of bed slowly and finally stand erect. My knees usually feel like they're gonna give way, the soles of my feet hurt like hell. Almost as bad as the back pain. Slowly I walk to the toilet, bang the toilet seat up and take my willy out. Usually I bend over a bit so I can get a full view of it. 'Hello there, you fat little fucker!'

Sometimes I wonder if anyone would sleep with me if I didn't have such a phat cock. Guys usually look me up and down, like a pig on a skewer. And the first thing out of their

mouths is always, 'You have such a nice cock', followed very closely by, 'What's your name again?'

Except for chubby chasers, God bless Chubby Chasers. They usually start off with, 'I like a real man'. But they're all so limited; dump you in a second for a bigger guy with nicknames like 'the sofa', 'Honda man' and my favourite 'Bubba'. Selfish little whore bags, wanting nothing more than a cock up their arse and an even bigger tit in their mouth. Don't even get me started on tit fucking.

After relieving myself in the mornings, I like to wash my hands. It all gets so cramped up and sweaty down there at night, or especially during long walks. Thighs rubbing against balls, the skin get all flaky and rash like from the constant friction. I've learnt Talcum powder is not an option, it's a necessity.

Stepping downstairs, first steps are horrid. Even worse than the initial standing up. Legs are wobbling uncontrollably outwards, the balls of my feet hurt from the unbearable pressure. But it must be done. The kitchen after all is downstairs.

Each morning I set out to eat a healthy nutritional breakfast, toast, jam, cereal, fruit and some grape juice. But between grappling down the stairs and trudging along to the kitchen, the jam turns into Nutella and the grape juice becomes coca cola.

'Okay, there went another day' I tell myself. 'I can't start to eat healthy today; I've already ruined it. I'll start tomorrow properly and eat whatever I want today.'

The day continues and ends with an outrageous amount of consumption. After all, this is the last day, and tomorrow I won't be able to eat the chocolate, the burgers or the fries. So I have to eat as much as I can now before it's taken away.

I go to sleep feeling sick and wake up with an arse somewhat phatter and with back pain somewhat worse. And so on, and so on. Day after day. I wonder what day it is?

## Goodbye Letter

It's hard to say goodbye. I sit up at night, the clock on the wall says 3am and I can't keep ignoring this feeling coming from the bottom of my stomach. Like I'm going to throw up and cry all at the same time.

I don't know love for sure but I think I love you. Just sitting there putting your Ikea table together, as sad as it sounds, was the moment I knew it. My own do-it-yourself love. You turned around back to look at me and at that moment I said 'I love you' in my head. No reason, no bad after taste, just what I felt.

I'd be lying if I were to say I had no aspirations of us getting back together when I came back. One of my elaborate fantasies, you, me, the romance, moving in together, a home and a good job. Happily ever after stuff.

When I think about how I'm going to look back at this and think of what we could've been. It hurts. And though I hope we stay in contact as friends, I don't think there will ever be another opportunity for us.

I understand you don't feel the same. I'm not expecting you. On the contrary I know you don't. You've got to know, it's an emotional attraction – if you were to look into my fantasies of you. You would see us cuddling, laughing together the way we do and waking up in each other's arms. Even growing old together.

I am a lot younger, and I guess you wouldn't consider me your intellectual equal. And who likes an emotional and mental cripple like me anyway. It takes a lot of patience to deal with me. I know I'm not that easy to get a long with.

I told a friend if we kiss before I leave, I think we will resume again at some point in the future but that's not going to happen. You're lying blissfully asleep in bed and I'm sitting here, writing and crying with tears dribbling down my free hand.

I wish I could stop hurting like this. I sometimes wish I could just numb myself from everything. I'm afraid to live, I'm afraid of getting used to people and then having to say goodbye like this.

I remember when I first saw you in the middle of that room. Standing in the middle of the light, your own little spotlight, wearing that sporty singlet of yours. Which I had thought to be yellow in the light. I didn't even notice the leather trousers. You were the first guy I saw that night and the only one I wanted to be with. Imagine my surprise when you liked me too. That was a good night. I'll always remember sitting in the bathtub with you in my arms, feeling every breath leave and enter your body. And the way you fussed when you were worried you'd squashed my balls with your body.

More so, I'll remember that huge smile you had after sex on the night after we met. You couldn't stop smiling. You're so sweet.

I wish you were here with me now. But this is where I say goodbye. Now matter what the future holds, I'll always remember you fondly, as my 'little robin'.

Yours truly forgotten.

**David Menzies**

**Notes from a Quarter**

I began.

Disengagement from the waking consciousness

I broke the small capsule of silver liquid and sniffed it quickly before it rapidly dissipated in the warm atmosphere.

They call me reptile brain.

The imagination and the real have no differentiation for me. All is sensation. There is no morality.

When I devour the subject of my devouring has already become part of myself on sight.

I became.

Gold, electric and red dragonfly. Geiger counter ticked over the street of new rain, the smell of moisture, marijuana and walnut trees.

In the Incense-Cloud room, people applauded, irrationally: the nasty Icelandic rent boy, the crazy defrocked priest, the old hag who prostitutes her children .....

..... one movement then blank.....then movement.....ethersubstance consciousness. I am asked questions about the nature of things that I can work out intuitively but cannot replicate rationally and in accordance with the rules of language.

Below me, the ground was covered entirely with small silver ampoules. Amongst the ampoules spiny geckos played and streamlined lime-coloured lizards moved in

stop/go action. The reptiles tested the ground of ampoules on which they moved under an intense, vapourless sun.

Below me, the earth was covered in whispers.

The Eleusinian broadcast rang out day and night propagandising for the sublime as opposed to the consciousness of political thought.

A black earth tremor shot like toothache through the earth and through thought. Rhythm is the science of electromagnetic impulses.

Reflecting on lack of money ( only having bread to eat and able to buy only 2 cigarettes ): the rich become rich through irrationalist thought. Ideas of hard work and preplanning as means to wealth are decoys away from the truth.

The middle brain voice asked him: do you want to kill yourself? Rushing fugue of morning winds, a cup of lukewarm coffee resides on the table. Electro-acoustic auditorium: Stockhausen.

Later he returned bleeding, changed, fucked, more drugged than ever, sleeping well into the afternoon.

I've done all that. What next now, the final trance? Sex is used up and used over and over again.

Music is about transition of time. People really want wealth. Whether or not they admit it publicly, they only want wealth. Defect of life by the marking it out with cheap cigarette smoke. Sex, insatiable, comes out of ruins and torture in a city full of death, revolution and the moment.

Still no satisfaction.

I move a few paces forward and open the door I have conjured up. No response from within. Only the faintest suggestion of a landscape by Poussin.

Chatting, widejawed. Stupid spastic cigarette.

Later, at night, in the darkest hour, birdman came and scuttled about my shadows.

A diamond-back rattlesnake penetrates the township coming out from a long desert trail.

Outside the nightclub which is not called the flying phoenix,  
two fake lovers sit in a done up 1930's Austin. He says to  
his friend, looking at me, you could charge him I suppose.

They call me reptile brain. My imagination is seeping into  
the world like a deadly caustic chemical.

Writing is not power.

Power is not writing.

Power is without writing and writing is without power.

No writing.

No Power.

No writing without power, no power without writing.

In the Tate Gallery I followed the pretty blond boy, aged about 16 or 17 between La Revolution, La Nuit by Miro, 1923 and the Metamorphosis of Narcissus, by Dali, 1937.

he watched the boy's face reflected in the glass covering the painting by Dali. He seemed to gaze at a point between glass and painting. The boy noticed that he was being watched and followed, then disappeared into another part of the gallery. He was left to look at Painting, by Miro, 1927. Later that day he doused himself with petrol in Trafalgar Square and set himself on fire.

'Summer has all but brought the fruit  
to its perilous end  
and the summer sun and that boy's look  
did their work on me'

(Cavafy)

David Watkins

from Stomachic

Places are back. Lines are being drawn. It's cheese cutter time against the skin, with *Noah* and *Paris Smith* producing tight, leather strap lines, and *Ramirez* putting out an innovative new attachment system which seemingly lacquers fabric to the skin with the wearers own blood. Fashion victims or victims of fashion? *Rudiments* produced an exciting half leather jacket, shredded into strips at the back and then stretched over the shoulders with a neck brace retainer. Forget swimming sweaters or loose slacks. Today's designers are pulling chords and wringing every last drop of sweat from the body. The materials are dry and taught, like the skinned hides of hunted beasts. For those with nothing less to lose and with bones stronger than diamond try *Art's* range of steel bodices and chrome corsets. If you know thin is in, but make sure in is out. If you like a fouler taste on your tongue, squeezing ones innards through the nose and mouth may be just what you've been salivating for. This is the ultimate in hourglass chic. These cages are tight. Not even a grain of sand could pass through these guys. And as there's no more time, go on - get waist'ed.

We meet three blocks from my apartment. I have not seen nor heard from her since the night of Melanie's overdose. She stands wrapped in the fur of some poor dead beast, cleaned and stripped off it's flesh with sanitary professionalism and looks almost cute nuzzled up against her perfect face. I blink the sweat from my eyes, and mop it off my forearms. How can it be so hot? Her hands are gloved in transparent polymer. I wonder where she got them from. Even from the distance I can see she's painted and filed her nails, had them buffed and polished and reshaped and

it's the first thing I'm drawn to. Her fingers will be the focus of the evening and it's now where she wears her wealth. The gloves seem vacuum formed over the bumps of her jewelry -diamond rings and diamond finger bracelets. I check myself in my pocket compact, pluck a nostril hair with my pocket tweezers and spitting on my hand smooth the hair over my head. I wave at her as I approach, crunching along the concrete with bare feet in my army boots. Just as I open my mouth to say hi a transport roars past me overhead and she looks up, raising a hand to the level of her eyes and shading her vision from the illuminated underbelly of the machine. Sugar I cry out, but she neither sees nor hears me until I am almost upon her when again I say hi.

She looks down then, her hand gracing her brow and she says to me

-Hello Heath. I'm glad you could make it.

I look around at the street. The ground is flecked with crystal dots. Everything is wipe-clean. There is the sweet smell of peppermint in the air. And is no one about.

-Where is the party?

-Up there.

She casts her nails directly above her head.

-Fourteenth level. It's at a good friend of mines. I have his address. Here.

She rolls up the sleeve of her fur jacket. 5, upper basin tower 5 lvl 14 is penned neatly in three lines justified at her wrist. The words are written in magic marker and have already begun to fade where they cross the pale lines of cut marks. Was there really a need to write it there? Was there it necessary to show me that?

-Let's go. They're waiting for us.

I have a vague idea what kind of party this will be. Binging. Insufferably dull. I promise to myself that this will be the last time I attend. And indeed I wonder again why I am even here. But she has started off, with the click of high-heeled shoes, sashaying meters down the street to the metal lifts doors fixed into the base of the Lower Basin Fifth Tower. I kiss my teeth and shake my head and I bound away after her. The doors of the lift open with hiss of depressed air and we step over the threshold. We both stare with into the thin strip of mirror on the furthest wall. Silent lasers read our skin tone and identify us as

celebrities. STARS blink around the inside of the lift in small lines. Skin Tone Assessment Registration Strips identify us as sufficiently attractive. The machine clears our access. We're deemed worthy of ascending. She punches in the number fourteen. Without any sense of movement the elevator leaves the street and we are suddenly rising. A breath of filtered air is pumped into the compartment, whirling around our shoulders. The smell of peppermint becomes cloying. Soon the lift stops and there's a hissing as the climate inside is adjusted to the quality air outside on level fourteen. The doors open and she motions me to step out onto a walkway lit by the interior sodium glare of apartment complexes.

From going so low to being so high. The ground below is lost in the foreground affair of hanging spotlights, beating down from levels even higher than this one. It's nighttime and the cityscape is expansive. Transport tubes streak through the night ahead of me like unwinding threads of luminous yarn. Tiny black dots moves swiftly along their length as desperate people are carried to their weekend parties. Elevators going up scale the sides of towers like budding tracks of climbing ivy.

-Heath over here.

She has walked further down the balcony. The smooth operating sounds of humming hover cars in the darkness overlay her call. She's saying something else I'm sure but the static buzz of all around render her honeyed voice eerie and supernatural. She's calling to me and her hands wave out in front of her, beckoning me to approach. She stands smothered in pelt in the yellow throw of a front door light. Her rings sparkle in the light. Her hands float in the air and her voice carries toward me – disembodied. Maybe it's the altitude but the scene scares me then and I hear Melanie's voice saying *they're not like the parties I used to take you to*. My head is giddy. My hands are clammy. Sugar looks like a beautiful apparition in the half- light. The party in my mind has begun. I want to leave. The door she stands in front of is an entrance to house of horrors.

At the door, Sugar slips her arm around mine and looks at me and smiles and then faces front as more light spills unto her face and the door opens.

It's amazing that he greets me again. Some pure fucking coincidence (right?) that Gambon is standing in front of me now.

-Come in,

he says and we do.

A hallway stretches into darkness.

-And how's Melanie?

he asks.

-She's great,

interjects Sugar, (too quickly).

Gambon hangs up my coat and winks at Sugar.

We are led into a main dining room full of good looking young professionals. People are standing chatting with drinks and cigarettes. There's a woman who looks like Famke and a woman who looks exactly like Melanie and a man who looks like Cabel. He is leaning against a tall marble plinth. Atop the smooth pedestal sits a glass cube with a strange bust - a frozen human head cast in purple blood.

The blood head smiles, opening its mouth. *I heard you were coming. We haven't seen your face for weeks.*

-I'm sorry?

I say

-Why?

says Gambon.

-The time?

I ask

-Soon now.

he says smiling.

The blood head in the hallway bears resemblance to Gambon's handsome features. I'm guessing it's his likeness molded out of in (hopefully) his blood. In front of me now in the warmer flesh he treats me with the respect of a revered guest and I find it hard to reconcile this man as the once who treated me so coldly a few nights before.

-Let me get you a drink.

As he walks to the side of the room, past the blood head I smirk at the fact his effigy on ice, that despite the grotesque lividity of the frozen blood head, even with the congealed black lumps of plasma and red and white blood cells in some ways it looks healthier than he does. Its lips are fuller. Gambon's are cracked. Its cheeks have a warmer glow. Gambon's are pallid and shrunken.

Sugar just stands there next to me, looking around and smiling at various faces, some of which smile back. Gambon returns with two drinks and hands one to me, the other to Sugar.

-How's Kian?

Sugar asks him.

-Oh. No one told you. She had it removed. She stopped bleeding yesterday.

-Are they treating her for the drugs?

-What drugs? She's on the drugs right now. They are giving her drugs to keep her controlled.

Their conversation disturbs me. I wonder who Kian is. I can only guess at what she had removed. There is an ugly pause.

-So what did she have removed?

I venture

-Oh,

he says. His eyes flick back and forth from his drink to my drink to Sugar's grasp on my forearm. The ice in his glass chinks. He is shaking.

-There are so many things.

Sugar's grip tightens as she explains,

-She's had the dependency on other drugs removed. Gone. Here have my drink.

She hands me her glass and stares at Gambon.

Sinister, I think but do not say.

*What I can't articulate right now is what I've been trying to tell you. I am clean but I am diseased. I am not at home. I am standing under a silver bellied behemoth. I shield my eyes from the humming transport. I am holding my face up to the STARS. I am at a party on fourteenth level. I am staring at the (g)host of the party. I am staring at his frozen head. There is a leak in a cooling system. Milky waves of steam flow about a bloodied head. I am a head case. I am a blood head encased in a glass cube. I am not participating in being me. How uncomfortable it feels to be going through the days as if in a trance. The hands that touch Sugar's face belong to me but are not mine. I am neat looking but I am untidy. I am smooth, flawless. I have holes in my being with ragged edges. Something has been ripped out or pushed through, or is caught and snagging. In the elevator before the party, Sugar fucked me with her new and expensive polymer gloves. She spreads drying saliva up the insides of my shaved crack and she fists me with her fashion. I press my face against the glass and blow my cheeks out like a goldfish in a bowl. The lift is transparent and open to everyone – but nobody is looking, I think. The acuteness of the pain is centering me in the moment, focusing my energy. I'm alert and aware of the level of discomfort; the foaming of my spit on the stainless steel lit floor, the lights and slight groan of the lift as it travels up its shaft attached to the side of fourteenth tower. I try to enjoy myself but the whir of the CCTV cameras scare me more than the sex. I hate this. I want to die. This is where it could all end – in the ascending motion of a transparent lift, in the friction of a bubble butt arse and a polymer coated fist. In the burning of my brow. In the freezing of this city.*

Gambon moves his arm through the air and directs my attention back to the art. It had never left.

-Had it done last month. My star sign was in ascendance. Wanted to preserve the moment. They took about six litres of blood. I still feel a little giddy. And anyway mi casa su casa... He drones on in monotone sometimes pausing to breathe. His eyes. There's something wrong with his eyes.  
*Mi Casa Su Casa.* My house is your house. My blood is your blood.

-.....just do not touch the art.  
I will not touch the art.

At the party there crystal bowels of rice no one is eating. The woman who looks exactly like Famke is squeezing the butt of the guy who looks like Cabel who I've been too psyched to talk to not just because he looks like Cabel but because I'm sure that the woman who looks like Famke is flirting with him. He squeezes her butt back. I take a step away. Sugar is at my side, holding my arm and telling me she has just secured a lunch with the PA at the *House of Flutter*.

-We're going to discuss how they can use me.  
-Did you tell them about your scars?  
-I said I was going to be a star again.  
-Did you tell them about the scars on your wrists?  
-Not just on my wrists Heath. Up the insides of my legs also. And they don't do money shots at the *House of Flutter* anyway. It's about hats, gloves and shoes. They call all their clients 'accessories to their success'.

Neo-Famke and Neo-Cabel are walking around the room arm in arm chatting to various other couples similarly interlocked. They look exhausted. Neo-Famke can hardly keep her eyes open and keeps stumbling on her jeweled bedazzled toe tips. I refuse drinks on a tray with a wave of my hand. The server straightens his bow tie and moves on. Neo-Cabel's right bicep muscle bulges every now and again where he has to support Neo-Famke's weight. He likes it like this. His hair is misplaced, sticking up, wavy; waving goodbye to his head more like. Suddenly I notice that it isn't just him, but most of the men in the room look like Cabel. If they are clones, they look too perfect. And why isn't there anyone around here a clone of me? Am I really too

degraded to copy? Is my look that out? Is it the size and shape of my nose, the thinning of my calves, the gradually fading of any color to my tan? The last failings of a disjointed body. I am walking along an edge. No, I have slipped, I am falling.

But Neo-Cabel is not a clone, just a wannabe or a twin brother. And Neo-Famke is only a look-a-like or a twin sister. I don't know which and I don't much care. I check myself in the glass of the blood head cube and see that my hair is almost right. The curve of the light on the glass produces a slight distortion. My hair cut looks bad. Something has chewed the grass tufts of my hair into cud and has trampled my face into mud. I pray it is the light distortion. I put my hand out to the glass. But do not touch the art.

A server enters the room from a side door. He carries a stack of brown buckets with silver capped rims and chrome handles. He starts laying them down on the floor, creating a giant circle as he goes. As he does this, conversations start to silence and the pregnant silence of the drooling guests fills the air, heavy with menace. Another server begins to lay a white bibs by each bucket, bottles of water and something I haven't seen before; small black boxes, about the size of a matchbox. The servers look gaunt. Their cheeks sallow.

Gambon nods and the server's leave and the sound of classical music floats through the air. From the floor, unnoticeable at first, small yellow lights prick their into existence between the buckets as the main lights are dimmed, marking the perimeter of the circle, and the silver handles glint in the half-light. I take a step back behind the glass plinth (the head watches my movements) and I almost hide as the action enfolds. Gambon holds out his arms and bids everyone sit down. The guests seem to know how they're to be arranged because there is no argument about who sits where. I can see Sugar next to Gambon, she is peeling off her polymer gloves and putting her jewelry in the small bag she has pinned to her waist.

From where the signal comes I do not know. It has been a while since I last heard the once familiar wine of dumb waiter drones as they wind their way through the door of a room and the people wave their hands like fluttering moths around their bucketfuls of moon. The drones carry desserts. Coloured sweets and cakes. It looks so good I step forward to see the movements around me die

with my resolve and I can do nothing but slip into the circle amongst them like the addict I never wanted to know I was.

How do you want us to proceed? Is it easy for your mind to take a leap and believe that we have actually got to this point of no return? Aren't you fascinated? Is it enough for your imagination to crest on the sick fantasy of our communal purging?

Well it's enough for mine.

Yes, here I was again, amongst the young and indifferent, with a finger down my throat and the world feeling like it was falling in and Sugar's back jerking forward – her shoulders jumping wildly to every wretched retch. The sounds of someone being sick is almost violent. There's a guttural animal cry to it. An urgent rasping that forms a grizzly language of its own. A room full of people throwing-up. Wild animals on the plain. There is real communication to their calls. They were calling me to stay. To eat more, to indulge more, to feast more, to purge more, to remain thin, to remain in, to be sweaty and high with adrenaline pie. And all I could think about was Cabel and all I could do to remain calm was imagine Cabel, sitting on the throne I had made for him, on a dais constructed wholly of empty jars of chocolate spread (unwashed) in a darkened room, in a cupboard far from the influence or spectatorship of The City and it's freezing eyes. And so we eat. But almost

Someone picks up a small black box and fingers it round and round and then holds it up to their eye and FLASH. Two women on the periphery of a vision I wish I did not have, crane their necks upward and spew forth beige towers of cream that reach into the air, catapulted then captured into stillness by the white of the flash. There are whoops of joy and much clapping. I look down onto the tray to my right. A half-finished citrus sorbet is starting to melt. The woman who looks like my agent dabs a drop of orange from her chin then closes her eyes, sinks down into her self, her lips quivering with effort and lets forth a geyser of mangled mango. Lashings of peach colored matter laces the floor, the scattered trays and she even manages to reach the red cheeks of a man sitting across the circle opposite from her. That must be a record. People continue to take pictures.

Shit I am totally lost in a state of anxiety.

There was no salvation in sight. I was not to become a better, fitter, happier, even immediately satiated person through the loading and immediate evacuation of my guts. I was only going to get fixed.

More food is brought in. It's delicious and heavy and glistening with lubricant.

Gambon is laughing a deep throaty *huhhuh* and every now and again he sticks his fingers down the throats of the guests around, fishes around for seconds and pulls out long strings of pasta or egg noodles dripping with sauce. Every food stuff is present and everybody is stuffing themselves with food. There is no cutlery. There are no tools. It's rip apart with your hands time. It's get into the heart of that chicken Kiev and suck out the fucking garlic drizzle. With the peanut coated breaded oily dips that the guests don't even chew. They just swallow and like hungry snakes, they dislocate their jaws to fit around whole chocolate cakes, I see them go down, see their way under the skin as they fit fall gradually into the never ending pit fall of these ever irrigated wishing wells of stomachs. What the fuck was I thinking about? Did I only come here to follow Sugar? Was the chance of a fuck worth this communal upchuck? Yes. No. At any rate the ice cream was worth sampling. I puckered my lips as it went in and hoiked a facial muscle somewhere in my cheek as it went down. Gambon gets up. He has ripped off his shirt – actually ripped it off and is now strutting round the room banging his chest like a chimp and as each pound of his fist connects with his torso, tiny explosions of sick splutter from his mouth, raining down onto his guests below. I'd want to vomit anyway. He's so pathetic. And I cannot stop eating. Neo-Famke is clapping and cooing. Neo-Cabel has sat back eyeing me cautiously from across the room. Gambon's six pack is tight and firm and the pitted scars of some liposuction operation have actually been drawn out into the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth quadrants of a ten pack that has built its way up Gambon's body almost to his nipples. He looks like a magazine rack. I look at Sugar and note she too is watching him stride around the room, smiling, jeering, taking photos, flexing his muscles. She's thinking he's hot. Or maybe it's me. Or maybe we both find him fit and we'll all be fucking later in the twilight of a balcony love nest. I imagine drawing the shadows around myself and disrobing to his same sex eye with the cautious fear of comparison. I lurch forward and wretch. And I

spoon more ice cream in. Neo-Cabel suddenly reaches over to a bowl near him and does the same.

FLASH. Here in this room with a frozen blood head and a circle of conscious ejectors and a girl who wants me for the fame a city no longer could be bothered for. I was not fit for duty. I am sick but not unwell. I am fit but cannot run. I was alien to their habits. I was being photographed. I was dribbling the last of the ice cream into the silver bucket and mopping my cold lips with the no longer white bib. I had to get away. I had to leave.

-Excuse me please,

I say, throwing up the last of the ice cream. It comes out easily in smooth jet streams – surely the easiest food group to let go. Sure, ice cream is a food group, right, just as much as I am a burning star. I stand up, splaying my hands palm down on the floor, almost slippery in the filmy spattering of sprayed bile. If people notice my passing, they don't comment. No one interrupts my exit. They are consumed with their own personal passings. If anyone notices, it's Neo-Cabel and perhaps Gambon, because he is the host and your guests shouldn't leave before they have thrown up the third course. Cabel nods at me as I get up then actually winks and I see him nudge Famke. The other guests are too busy getting high and their eyes are crossed in ecstasy; they don't see the way I kick my bucket to the side, almost spilling it over and how I turn around, walking backward, bowing out to Gambon, slipping on the floor as I exit, almost moon-walking my way out of there, turning round at the dry ice foaming plinth, catching the bubbling eyes of the dripping blood head which seems to mouth something to me as it melts and I pass. I think it says *run*

**Jason Weidemann**

**Endymion**

Endymion, my Endymion,  
sleeping and translating his dreams  
into prayers for sun.  
For that June was a purgatory  
of clouds outside our room.  
His face is cold and bloodless,  
a figurine of porcelain and apple-blush  
tucked between blue-soil sheets.  
Sleep-silent, held down by hands of humid air.

Our cave had white walls  
and dark door jambs  
between which our love was framed.  
We often invited the fog in through  
small, screenless windows.  
The room is different now.  
The walls close in like an exhaling chest.  
And the lilacs on the ledge-why are they still there?

We had picked them early in the month  
from the slope of an interstate on-ramp  
and threw them out on cue, when they were about to  
brown.  
Somehow they still perch on the edge,  
dulled with dust, sun-sapped, crumbling.

The night my Endymion fell asleep beyond me  
we had performed many bouts of careless love upon each  
other.  
Such was the exhaustion of those days  
that now his eyes are always hidden from me  
behind cream-colored lids.  
I tried to wake him when our lease was up,  
when the flowers were tossed out with the mopwater.  
He stays because I'd like to think I never left that room  
to seek my fortunes elsewhere.

## **Field of Poppies**

At mid-day we stopped at a field of poppies  
that caught our eye like a brush fire  
from the side of the road.

Of all the flatness of the Grecian plain  
stretching into the white haze of the horizon,  
these shameless poppies took up but  
an unused corner of a field of wheat.

We passed through a copse and stood  
to watch them burn from a shack of bricks.

There were so many.

So many, that at the far edge of their world  
we couldn't see single poppies,  
but one fluttering sigh of poppies,  
a sea of fresh red juice.

You put your hand on me.

"Poppies. They are so beautiful. They make me want to do  
things to you."

But we continued on to Kalambaka.

Later, when we made love in our room  
on the cool rough wool of the blue blanket  
I closed my eyes and saw the poppies  
like burst blood vessels behind my lids.

## Warden

At first I think it's play;  
his children doing can-cans, kicks,

impatient in a line about to start  
a game of tug-of-war or crack-the-whip.

One taunts another casually;  
tries to flip, incited by a breeze.

I'm behind an upper storey half-moon  
of frosted glass watching,

waiting for bees to sting the heavy, dark  
blue legs, a silent gasp from a headless hem.

I decide its infanticide.  
Emaciated bodies in a line.

A dash over the blind populace of roses  
so the rope can gag them lightly at the throat.

I envy the escape of his body  
but not the punishment

It's an early test of love:  
blanched babies eyed me from a chair

long after he had gone;  
I sent them to their death.

Heavy and cold like hospital gowns  
and charity shop shirts in my hands.

So unlike him, I unchained them  
from the tide and gave them to the vultures.

While they play the iron sucks its steam  
like an executioner doing calisthenics.

## Amsterdam

Ink galleons ply these nested  
rooms on plumes of lucid paper,  
their cargoes waited for by proud  
men in white cravats  
unruffled by the yawns decreed  
by dazed children on a bench.

A camera clicks  
between the breasts of someone bored.

Tired of the Golden Age  
I search for Sweerts and his collections.  
Before he made his solemn vows  
He painted boys about to cry,  
lined up now like parolees immutably in search  
of first loves or playmates, parents  
erased by the embargo of the frame.  
Ten marble eyes seem too old to tear,  
to tear their canvas script—each eye  
a stuffed bunting, each eye a globe of glass.  
I wish for tears, when water runs  
and smudges their heavy makeup.  
I'm tired of staring at portraits of people I can't know  
—they pose even when I close  
my eyes because all faces become stone  
when you are a traveller.  
If these boys ran through glass, whom would they rush to?  
Who would give them a massage?  
No one ever visits these rooms  
(a pilgrimage to the Nightwatch is enough).  
Though someone runs to catch the phone  
leaving varnished lunches hanging on the walls.  
I'm lost among the gilt, the aisles  
winding past doll furniture, life-sized:  
bureaus, lamps, and empty beds.  
Inferred from furniture: we make them waltz  
around a room to fence love in.  
Curtains gag against the posts  
of beds I can't help but picture

sex with you upon-  
us fucking on these garish beds,  
the mess I'd love to make with you  
on whipcream waves of silk  
far below these sagged balloons,  
these soft cathedrals for our sounds.  
It's been months since I left,  
I feel a fool today: all that I have forsaken.  
My head's unhinged at canopies  
that stream in blood red streaks,  
like plumes that float carved  
cornucopias of wilted, wooden fruit.

Or flares-  
fired from four corners of our empty, becalmed bed.  
Set to shore but cursed with months of doldrums.  
I see your jigsawed body-  
flesh with fingers in the foreground,  
your face unmoved as though itself removed by portraiture.  
I dream to touch and set the bed to rock with us,  
our fucking makes your pigments  
run, expand, and blush.

A hardon drives me from these beds.  
With a left hand playing pocket pool  
I seek refuge in the gift shop and  
hide behind the prints and neckties  
with bored British jobs-stoned-energetic.  
Culture's done-they seem to sigh-let's drink.  
Sweerts's boys are here as well in several take-home  
sizes.  
They pass more faded stares,  
sullen now for being twice removed and grouped  
with Nightwatch placemats, puzzles.

**Stevan Alcock**

*from Blood Relatives*

**T**he week had crawled towards Sunday on its knees. Beneath the dinner table Rick was letting the dog lick his fingers. He watched impassively as his mother carried in a steaming tureen of roast spuds which she parked on a table edge apologetically. She scuttled back and forth with each item extended before her like she was in an egg-and-spoon race relay, looking weighed down by her eyelids.

At least she hadn't found the old cigar box he kept behind the heating pipes. It wasn't in the armoury of her ludicrous druggie tirade, but nevertheless he'd dashed up to his room straight after just to be sure. The box was still there, the neat little blues nestling in tiny balls of dust.

He lowered his fingers a little further. Max's slurping tongue would have felt erotic if his brain wasn't flashing a warning about the sagacity of getting a hard on at the dinner table with the unwitting aid of a dog. He adjusted his crotch, longing to be gone, to be anywhere but here.

If only he'd got off with someone last night. If only Craner would cease his mind-fuck games, if only Mum wasn't convinced he was pin-cushioning his body with heroin. If only last night hadn't been a pile of cow dung. He'd only slipped out to The New Penny, just to clock the scene, to be in with a fighting chance. He'd been making nice eye conversation with some so-so bloke propping up the cigarette machine when who should barrel in, but soddin' Gordon. The decrepit old soak. Rick slipped behind someone's back, fists clenched, praying – please Gordon, piss off, please, look the other way...but Gordon was torpedoing through the crowd towards him, leaving haze-trails of exhaled Marlboro Country in his wake. 'I thought it was you!', he chirruped irritatingly, 'hiding your light under a bushel! I think I should start by saying that although this isn't a favoured haunt of mine, and that I do really prefer The Greyhound in Huddersfield - or the Whippet Inn as we all moniker it – nevertheless The New Penny is a pub that I do like to visit on the odd occasion, and tonight is just one

of those odd occasions. Clearly, the gods are smiling on me!

'Hi Gordon', Rick greeted sullenly. 'I suppose you want a drink?'

'Oh, that's very decent of you, yes I would. A pint of Theakstons would slip down a treat'.

Rick eyes crept over Gordon's right shoulder towards the ciggie machine, which was now standing unaided. He pushed his way through to the bar. The bloke was in the corner by the toilets, snogging some fattie with a pinkie ring. 'Your loss', Rick murmured.

For the rest of the night Rick was trapped with garrulous Gordon. Together they endured a drag act in a wedding veil, all miming ruby rubber lips and histrionics to Yvonne Fair's 'It Should Have Been Me', followed by a Marilyn's 'Diamonds are...' etc. and so forth, and when it was all over the small knot of fans / relatives / shags gathered at the foot of the titchy podium all cheered. Barely had this weak cheer died before the DJ was blow-jobbing the mic with 'give it up for...', and s-he reappeared with indecent haste and costume for an 'encore', over-mouthing profuse 'thank you's' to a mangled Judy Garland backing track.

Gordon offered him a lift home in the Humber and seeing it was bucketing it down, Rick accepted. They sat in monastic silence as the wipers swished hypnotically across the windscreen, Gordon shifting smoothly through the gears with quiet authority. You could tell he loved this car like nothing else. Rick instructed Gordon to pull up two streets away. He exited the car just as Gordon was leaning across and slobber him goodnight.

Rick filched some chicken skin from the plate and lowered it to the subservient hound. Across the table Mitch was eyeballing him. Mitch was half cut and had come home in a filthy mood. On his Leeds Utd shirt was a tinned spaghetti sauce stain that was shaped vaguely like India. After the Saturday match - which Leeds had naturally won, magnificent goal by Clarke off a superb one two with Bremner - Mitch's had had a run in with a copper outside a pub. He'd spent the night in a cell, got off with a caution. So

Sunday he toddled off down to some pub with lunchtime strippers, reappearing mid afternoon smelling of beer and ashtrays, making lewd suggestions to Pam while she cooked dinner.

Pam started to collect up dirty dishes. 'Has anyone noticed how Gran keeps repeating herself?', she said. 'She asks me the same thing about ten times and then got reet uppity with me when I said so.'

'No change there then', said Mitch, mopping up the last of the gravy with a crust of bread before saying to Rick: 'I've told you before about feeding that bloody dog when we're eating.'

'It's only chicken skin. Anyways, you do.'

'Do as I say, not as I do. All them starving kids in Biafra and Vietnam and whatnot would give a right arm for a piece of chicken skin.'

The dog barked hopefully. Rick scraped back his chair, his hands gripping the table edge.

Pam said: 'I don't know what it is with her these days, but she's not right somewhere'

Rick stood up. 'Them wars are over Dad, and some of 'em probably gave both arms and still starved'.

'Don't get clever wi' me. Where are you off to?'

'I'm not hungry'.

'There's ice cream and tinned peaches for afters', Pam chirruped.

'I said, where are you off to?'

'Nowhere. Out'.

'Or condensed milk if you prefer?'

Mandy said: 'I know where he's going',

'Mandy, why don't you fetch the peaches from out of the kitchen cupboard?'

'No, you don't.', Rick snapped, glaring at her.

'Why is it I have to say where I'm going and when I'll be back and that and you don't? I mean', Mandy pleaded to Pam, 'why don't he have to say, eh?'

'Probably', Rick replied, 'because Jack the Ripper isn't topping fellas'.

'It's not fair! Why don't you tell them, Rick? Tell them we're you're really going?! I know where yer going, I know where yer going...'

‘That’s good’, Pam flashed. ‘because I don’t, because I don’t want to know, and because I think that your Gran is going doolally! What I’m trying to tell you, little miss know-it-all, is that last night she was found out in all that rain by two constables in a Panda car. Only she refused to get in, didn’t she, saying she was bringing Frank his dinner. Frank, God rest his soul! And it was 4 a.m! Don’t blame me if she catches pneumonia! Never mind the plod on’t doorstep telling me that my own mother has gone walkies in nowt but her nightie, then the police station wor on t’blower saying that my hubbie might be charged with assault, and then to cap it all some cork-arsed cow from the social services shows up’.

They all blinked at her uncomprehendingly. Mitch said, ‘Your mother hasn’t had all her crockery in’t cupboard since t’day she wor born’.

**Hugh Mulhall**

**a prayer**

my guardian, my saviour  
hold me now  
as if I were in your arms  
and comfort me  
with the knowledge  
another day will break  
another day will rise  
and in your arms I will stay  
through this night  
through this life

amen

**Eddie Linden**

**A Sunday in Cambridge**  
(for William)

That Sunday was like an unfinished dream.  
I've never been able to get it out of my mind.  
You looked like Mary Magdalene  
And I wanted to wash to your feet.  
The more I looked into your eyes  
The stronger the pain.  
Your thin body and small waist  
Were all I wanted to possess  
But a shadow hovering in our midst  
Prevented a possible communion.

**Where lovers never meet**  
(For Tony Whooley)

Silent they walk hidden by masks of fear.

There are no angels here.  
Even the moon that white-eyed nurse  
Would scare the loveless birds away.

Heartless men in need of love  
Will kill the love by three  
And on they search  
As if no end in sight.

Only the light can  
Kill the joy of night  
In a place  
Where lovers never meet.

**Peter McGraith**

*from The Long Losing*

**C**aught on the fertile Autumn wind gusting between the trailer homes, the weighty jangle of Stella's keys signaled her approach; young Sandra Trainor hid her right hand behind her back and tendered an imploring "Hi" as traces of her complicity swirled in the elements; and Stella's dog raised itself, whining its welcome, one begrudging note bending upwards into another, and sniffed its way towards the door and the oncoming sweet blast of cooling night. The aluminum rang soft and short under paws and gritty leather soles, Stella fingering through the dog's white scruff, as they brushed past on the stairs.

She stepped in, home, onto the mat, holding firm to the door handle against the forceful draw of the wind, bringing the door to a controlled – click – closure. Normalcy. She walked out of her sneakers across the hush of thick carpet, drew the drapes, turned on the lights and flung her jacket down. No messages on the telephone. It was 2a.m. She took a carton of reduced-fat milk from the refrigerator and sat down, lifting her laptop computer from the glass table, tucking her feet up under her.

An email had arrived.

There was no relief to it. It was flat, emotionless. As though they hadn't ever spent the Holidays together, as though he'd never fooled around on her bed with her only son while she'd been out working nights at the Lakeshore Late Store, as though they weren't almost inlaws. Not even the courtesy of a telephone call, nor the urgency. As though passing on the terrible news to her were a formality.

It read:

Stella

Eddie is ill. I'm sure he'd appreciate it if you were able to visit. Please call me.

Bill

As though it had been measured to hurt, then delivered like a blow.

There were no two ways about it, Stella would have to leave for England, as soon as it could be arranged. There had been a couple of worrying stretches over the previous two years when all news from her son in London had ceased. And then when Eddie had finally called he had sounded vague and fragile, admitting to having been off-color. He'd told her he never liked to call her unless everything was "hunky-dory". She knew it had to be more serious this time or Bill wouldn't have emailed, not in that manner. Stella's gut fluttered and churned. Her worst fear,

long held, now coming to pass, was suddenly secondary to her dread of facing a man she had little in common with, except for her son. She didn't want to see or talk to Bill. She had nothing to say to him.

In near silence she set about packing, only turning on NPR when the sun started warming the back side of the horizon. She made two lists. Items she could borrow: blouses from Lurelle, Maxine's midnight blue trouser suit, a decent suitcase from somebody, and shoes. The to do list: raising the cash for the trip, purchasing tickets, contacting her employers; the dog, who to leave him with, the Halstuc's, or Lurelle – would she have him? Or the- Trainors? No. Left alone with Junior, Sandra Trainor would soon get around to blowing marijuana smoke up his snout. Or God knows what!

At 7.30 she got on the telephone to her daughter. Lurelle was already awake and preparing waffles for Tony and little Bonnie. "Wow, Mom, this is early!" she blasted, over the blare of the television, the sizzle of the pan, and the hiss of the pines from outside her open kitchen window.

Stella cleared her throat, "Yeah, well, it's kinda urgent, Lurelle – it's Eddie."

Lurelle shot a look at Tony to get him to deal with the breakfast, and pressed her left hand over her free ear to block out the din as Stella relayed Bill's email to her word for word. And to the point as his message was, they agreed

that it was evading the issue. Still, they themselves avoided putting a name to what was ailing Ed. Things were bad enough as they were. Instead they shared their antipathy for Bill. “Well, Mom, if this does turn out to be anything to do with that jerk, I’d haul his ass into court in a New York minute.”

“I don’t think that would stand up, Lurette.”

By Bill’s well-to-do standards Stella was dirt-pickin’ poor. He couldn’t have helped but notice. When he had come visiting with her boy Eddie, he had seen that she was working all hours at the store, plus the cleaning work in the mornings, and two evenings per week in Shenanigans. She was making ends meet but every unexpected expense was a hassle and every luxury had to be saved for, and Bill knew it. And him with his pockets so full of greenbacks he could have blown his turned-up nose on the stuff. He could have wiped his big ole gay ass with it. Two round trip tickets for her and Lurette wouldn’t have broken the bank, but if he wasn’t offering then she wasn’t going to lower herself by asking for his charity. His stinginess stuck in her gullet like the acid tang of vomit. At a time like this. And more than likely the cheap English son-of-a had enough Frequent Flier Miles saved up to get him to the Moon and back, first class. The disappointing thing was he was quite capable of being gentlemanly when it pleased him. Even Stella’s momma, not noted for kindness towards queer sorts, had said he was “nice as new shoes” and wouldn’t

hear of Lurelle badmouthing him with the monicker “Three Dollar Bill”. You could never rely on anyone taking your side in things, Stella had learnt, not even your own mother.

Christmas '99 he had shown up with Eddie wielding all sorts of expensive gifts. Obviously Ed had chosen them, but Bill had to have paid for them: a genuine cashmere tracksuit, and diamonds for chrisake – a beautiful little pair of stud earrings, a wicker food hamper from a big store in London, and a whole bunch of stuff. The presents were gorgeous. It had made her feel uncomfortable. Showed her up as being unsophisticated and cheap. Stella squirmed like a worm on a hook every time the scene came back to her. How she almost didn't want to tell them she'd bought them a small something. And Ed saying, “How lovely, Mom. You really shouldn't have.” Lovely – who ever said lovely? And her replying, “It's nothing, you might not like it anyway.” And clear as day she could hear Ed, “If you haven't kept the receipt we could always re-gift it”. And then they had snickered in her face. It was one of Stella's most excruciating memories. It was a mean-spirited way of being generous.

She could have bought a new car with the kind of cash that they had thrown around that Christmas, and right now she was contemplating taking on debt to pay for her flight to London. People with money were clueless, they ought to

learn how to use it properly, have more concern for less well-off folks, or have it all taken away from them.

Having seriously weighed the pros and cons of instant-credit against theft, and finding that neither was a practicable option, Stella came upon the idea of making an internet search concerning valuations, and soon she was heading downtown for the pawnbroker's with the gold Rolex Oyster Perpetual Date gent's wrist watch, and just in case she also packed her treasured heirloom, her long-dead daddy's squeezebox. This was the first time she'd set foot in Workman's Pawn since she'd sold them her old golfball typewriter in 1989. There had been no emergency back then, no particular pressing need for fast cash, so she had been in a strong bargaining position, and still she had only got half as much as she'd been hoping for. Perfect as it was, she was selling it a year too late, they'd said. Most folks were looking for computers by that time. She needed to be successful this time. She wasn't going to have anyone tell her afterwards that she hadn't been there for her boy.

The shrill door buzzer, as acute as a dentist's drill, sent a flash through her nerves as she entered. Stella rehearsed a sales pitch as she waited in line behind two under-dressed Chinese girls in pastel Bermudas, and a greasy round man in his fifties – pawnshops and casinos must attract similar sorts, she decided. She tried to reassure

herself that the watch was in mint condition, still in its original box with its certificate of authenticity. It had always been a totem of their rotten relationship. Back in '83, when the marriage was heading downhill like a behemoth on roller-skates, she had removed it from Marty's wrist after he had been brought home from the club one night comatose. And then spent a month in terror. The watch went into hiding; it was to be Eddie's inheritance.

Her turn eventually came. "Hi, what can we do for you today?" the guy said, smarmy, and before she could get out much of a reply he had disappeared into the back shop with the box, leaving Stella behind the security screen in the tight grimy cubicle for ten whole minutes, fretting about where the hell he had gone with her most valuable possession. He had better not try and swap it for a fake.

"Terms are here in brief on back of your ticket and in full on this document if you'd like to read and sign, please." No discussion. The price was already printed on the form.

Times were very good and getting better when Marty, big Mr. Deal-Maker, had bought himself the Rolex, but even then Stella had seethed at his macho posturing. And here she was hocking the watch for one-thousand two-hundred fifty bucks. At any other time accepting such a piddly price might have ripped the ass out of her dignity, but the news from England had thrown a wet blanket on her fire. And

anyhow, the lower the value on the pawn ticket the sooner she'd be able to buy it back and sell it on to a dealer or a collector at a more appropriate price. She had learned from the internet that the watch was highly sought after now and worth around \$13,000, apparently. She'd take the receipt to London and maybe Bill and Ed would offer to buy it back for her. Maybe he'd never see any inheritance.

Stella wasn't ever going to look like a fashion plate but her momma's training meant she would at least arrive in London appropriately dressed; prepared and dignified, minus her trademark red nylon puffa jacket with the suede yolk and the multi banded knit cuffing. She figured she needed a smartly tailored coat, a black one. She found herself deeply excited, guiltily so, at the idea of dressing sharply, of wardrobe planning for a visit that might turn out to be...

At Jensen's, with the confidence of cash in hand, she jewed the manager down by a whole forty bucks on a knee length, slim cut, high collared coat in a medium weight wool, then spent some of what she had saved on a neat, black turtle neck sweater, partly as a reciprocation of goodwill for the store-keeper, but mostly because she could imagine herself looking a million dollars in the new coat and the sweater, along with her Ray-Ban's, her beautiful black cowboy boots and Lurelle's tight denims. It had been so long since Stella had worked a look. Ordinarily

she wasn't much bothered about what she wore, but more than that she'd become so unaccustomed to dressing as she desired that she now felt inhibited about turning it on; she knew she still could, but to do so would let people see under the surface, to the fantasy, to her core. She couldn't live with fantasies or scorn.

She would do Ed proud, turn some heads and make a glamorous entrance at his hospital bedside, if that's where he was. That would tickle him. Perhaps Maxine's trouser suit and a pair of heels for first impressions. She thought about Maxine, about how provocatively she dressed never giving a damn as to who was enjoying the view. What would Maxine wear on such an occasion? Christ, it didn't bear thinking about; but good for her, Maxine was free. Everything low-cut and figure-hugging. Nail extensions like talons. The teeny gold heart charm that dangled on a ring from the nail of her little finger – a present to herself for ditching Phil. The rock chick raven-black hair, and bird-like shoulder blades moving under velvet sun-shy flesh. On even a semi-close examination Maxine was no ravishing beauty, she was no Anne Margaret, but she had 'it'. Stella, on the other hand, had always been a back of the bus kind of gal – with none of that pizzazz about her. What she did have though were eyes like pale sparkling gemstones and bone structure that a hundred people said was a masterpiece of symmetry. Make-up and fine clothes might have turned her into a movie star, Marty always said:

Katherine Hepburn or Rita Hayworth. But Stella never felt comfortable in the clothes he wanted to dress her up in. They sure had different ideas about what was dignified, or even sexy.

Stella called into the store and asked her boss Sam Steinberg if she might have a minute with him in the office. Sam sat her down and listened as she asked for time off to attend to some personal business with Ed in England. She didn't have the right words for the one hundred dollars of a gift that Sam gave her along with the advance of wages she asked for. She was choked. No words were needed. Sam could have guessed at the whole story. He respected her need for privacy and gave her the time off without inquiry, saying the store would survive just fine without her, however long she'd be gone. Stella might have raised an eyebrow in a well-humored but defiant reply - she was the backbone of that business and they both knew it - but under the circumstances she let it go. The worry over Ed was enervating.

Sam had seen Stella's boy grow since the kid was in elementary school, fifteen years or more, and on recent homecomings it had become plain to him and anyone with eyes that the boy had grown up preferring men, the way everyone had expected, no matter what Stella might have wanted. And since Lurelle's wedding on Presidents' Day 2001, when Eddie, looking somewhat drawn, had come

home with his man friend in tow, there had been loose talk about his state of health, but it wasn't a subject that Sam would ever broach with Stella.

The business of planning the trip was concluded.

Lights on high-beam they headed down the rainy interstate in Lurelle's beat up run-around from Mullan's Collision Centre, and still neither of them had spoken to Bill. Stella had left a message on his answering service at home, saying that she was on her way to London in a day or so and that Lurelle would call to pass on the flight number and expected arrival time, and could he arrange to have her picked up at the other end.

At the airport drop-off point Lurelle got the luggage out of the car as Stella checked and double-checked that everything was in order. Lurelle hugged her mother tightly, with more love and desperation than she had hugged anyone since the day she had married Tony. And when Stella was out of sight she sat herself down on a fire plug and howled into her hands like a helpless child. She didn't ever want to lose a child. Her little Bonnie was everything to her.

Forty-six years Stella had spent on Pacific Standard Time. Apart from a short trip to Portland with Marty before Lurelle and Eddie were in school, and a girls' vacation to Tijuana

and California with Maxine back in '74, Stella hadn't been out of state. And now, forty hours after receiving Bill's email, she was in an aisle seat on a BA night flight out of Sea-Tac for London, Heathrow, heading up towards Greenland and over the ocean for the first time in her life, sinking and folding into herself.

Tijuana and California 1974. What an adventure. It wasn't really an affair, Stella reasoned, because neither she nor Maxine was actually a lesbian, nor were they in love, but whatever it was it had the purifying power of a wild fire, blazing through Stella's inhibitions, briefly. The kind of thing that starts with a spontaneous explosion of abandon and joy, and, as she knew, could easily end on Springer. In this instance perhaps it had resulted in Stella marrying the first man who asked.

Maxine had told her once that gay men could be as misogynistic as wife-beaters. "I love gay men, don't get me wrong, Stella," she said, "but they are so up themselves and each other that they don't even consider they might have any affinity with dykes. There's precious little solidarity going on there. And as for other women, they're just beards." Maxine was always referring to 'friends' who were gay and lesbian. Stella sometimes wondered who these mysterious friends were – people from work? – and why no one ever got to meet them, though she loved the way you couldn't tell what the truth was with Maxine. They

were unlikely friends but true friends, and their little fling remained their secret, as far as Stella knew.

A domino effect of headphone activity was coming her way and instinctively Stella joined in, tearing open the plastic bag, plugging-in like the people around her. She searched the dial for some easy listening, something for the heart-sick. Something to remember later. At times like this every star and cloud, every news story, every song and every word, everything, was portentous. And Stella was looking for signs.

After drinks had been served a stewardess came round offering salmon pasta or a sweet and sour pork wrap. Stella gave a slow emphatic shake of her gray blonde head and stared up from behind a desperate tangle of fingers that clutched a pendant to her mouth. If the others on the flight were able to surmise that she was going through a tragedy, then abstinence from the meal might make them appreciate the enormity of it; and anyway she had an eight inch hoagie from Henderson's in her purse for later if she needed it, as well as some of Anita's valium. "Just another glass of dry white wine, please."

The opaline lozenge clicked and clicked against her uncosmetized teeth. She checked herself for counting down the hours and concentrated instead on the necklace. She had seldom worn it in fifteen years. It had come from

Eddie; from his entrepreneurship in yard work for old folks; from her Sear's catalog that he could read for hours at a time; from his fascination with pretty shiny things; and from his desire to see his momma look more womanly like his Aunt Kathleen, his daddy's sister – the Duchess, as Stella called her – a realtor and didn't she look every bit the part, up to her neck in social churchianity.

She closed her eyes. A still speck in the midst of a delirium of engine noise. Readying herself to reenter her hurt and her love for her boy, a penitent girl again, back in the pews of her childhood, beseeching her maker for a state of blamelessness. She conjured pictures of Eddie.

At forty months. His face, pained with a terrible ear problem, yet beatific, after a nasty fall, in a high, gray-painted bed in St. Francis of Federal Way. Poor lamb; the concussion had him weird for six weeks – till Thanksgiving.

Back at the bungalow that she and Marty had rented through the early Eighties: Eddie passing contented hours on the forced-air vent in the family room, under a tent made from a felt blanket and two ladder-backed chairs, feeding jelly beans to his toy dolls. Pinks, yellows, whites, and peachy-colored ones for Kew-pie, and the strong colors for Action Man.

In her first trailer home down at Laradew, when he was six and Lurelle was eight – having to dress him up for the zillionth time in his short little moleskin Injun suit with the red beaded fringing, to get him to eat beans again, because that was all she could afford. And him repeating after her, "Yep, we's well fed and we's safe from the cowboys now, Mom." And Stella picturing Marty as the outlaw every time. Him and his lies and his promises and his wandering. And that god-awful key club of his, a jumped up bucket shop full of insignificants and contemptibles.

The image of fragile little Ed in hospital clung to her, or she to it. His pallid face.

Her skin tightened into a shiver on recalling Eddie, topless, aged four and a half years, stepping out of the old Studebaker at Grandma Muslek's after a long overnight drive, and him taking the stoop steps like a petite wedding belle in a big Miss Scarlet gown, genteelly pinching and lifting the long legs of his striped pajama trousers. And this the first sight of him Marty's mother had had since the kid was out of diapers! How utterly unaware he was, and pretty as a wild flower too.

**Roy Woolley**

**Trance**

I found you in the long grass.  
You spoke to me

of distances, of the blood-  
beat that bound us together.

Ancient weathers had patterned  
the skin

that flowed into and then through me.  
I could name each cloud

thickening like blood  
above the orchard,

and taste each swirling seed  
from the ruined sycamores.

Snarled in oak-leaves, rain  
like anaesthetic on our skins,

we coiled like briars in ditches  
as you scratched words

on my hands, my face  
with found twigs, sharp stones.

Words I read by storm-  
light, reciting myself to myself.

In the outer dark  
beyond the farmhouse,

years later,  
you're still clawing my skin

as if you'd lost something there.

## **Blackpool Negotiations**

He was lost, curiously lost,  
all the time I knew him.  
First one thing  
and then another – mother-trouble,  
girlfriend-trouble, the wrong course  
at Uni., the wrong job  
chucked in for a new life –  
first Liverpool and then Manchester,  
later Amsterdam and Rome  
finally a house in Blackpool  
shared with a band  
that played at ice-rink concerts.

He phoned me once a month  
and once a month I drove down  
to negotiate the beach with him  
and talk – trying to find  
whatever it was  
that would give him that final push  
into the life he wanted and deserved.  
What could I say?  
Was I the key he'd needed for so long?  
With him I'd be lost forever  
but, at least, we'd be lost together.

## Signals

I am with my son and we are walking  
on the beach where my father walked.  
In the houses behind me I learned  
my first steps and in their folding rooms  
I studied how to lose myself  
again and again one Sixties' winter.  
The smell of freshly-washed clothes  
still hauls me back to those years  
as does the slap of water widening against stone  
or the smell of apples baked with cinnamon.  
On Friday nights, after the pub, I used to stand  
with my father, shoring him up  
if he'd had too much, skrying  
the dark and truly waiting for signs.  
He is curious my son, despite his youth,  
despite his indifference to the caul  
of my life knitting around him.  
He asks me questions and I attempt to answer.  
We are silent though, most of the time,  
watching the harbour-lights fade and re-signal  
or disappearing abruptly like snow hitting water.

## The Bends

There are roughly-hewn, thinly-painted grey walls  
offset with elegant coin-sized halogen lights  
and a few mock-realistic cityscape prints.  
Air is piped in from another, smaller room  
three storeys down. There is no carpet  
and the sealant poured between the sanded boards  
glistens like anthracite or wounded skin.  
The windows are both shuttered and curtained  
and three roses, precisely placed at a surgical angle  
regard him closely, caught in his chair,  
from their vase in the corner.  
Molecules loosened from the petals' surface  
sometimes react with him  
and these chance collisions take him back  
to student walks in strangers' gardens  
or the visionary gaze of the dead -  
but something else is working through him just now,  
some obscure excitement he can feel building up  
saturating him from head to foot.  
He is trying, and failing, to calibrate  
this depth-charge music spilling inside him.  
From time to time he lets go  
a little whimper, a little grunt  
as he imagines footsteps approaching  
or a face touching his. He is happy,  
deliriously so, as each new sensation opens up  
with the speed and the clarity of a paper-cut.  
And perhaps there are footsteps now  
and a voice unwinding in his ear  
and a nail on his chest  
tracing the shape of his heart.