

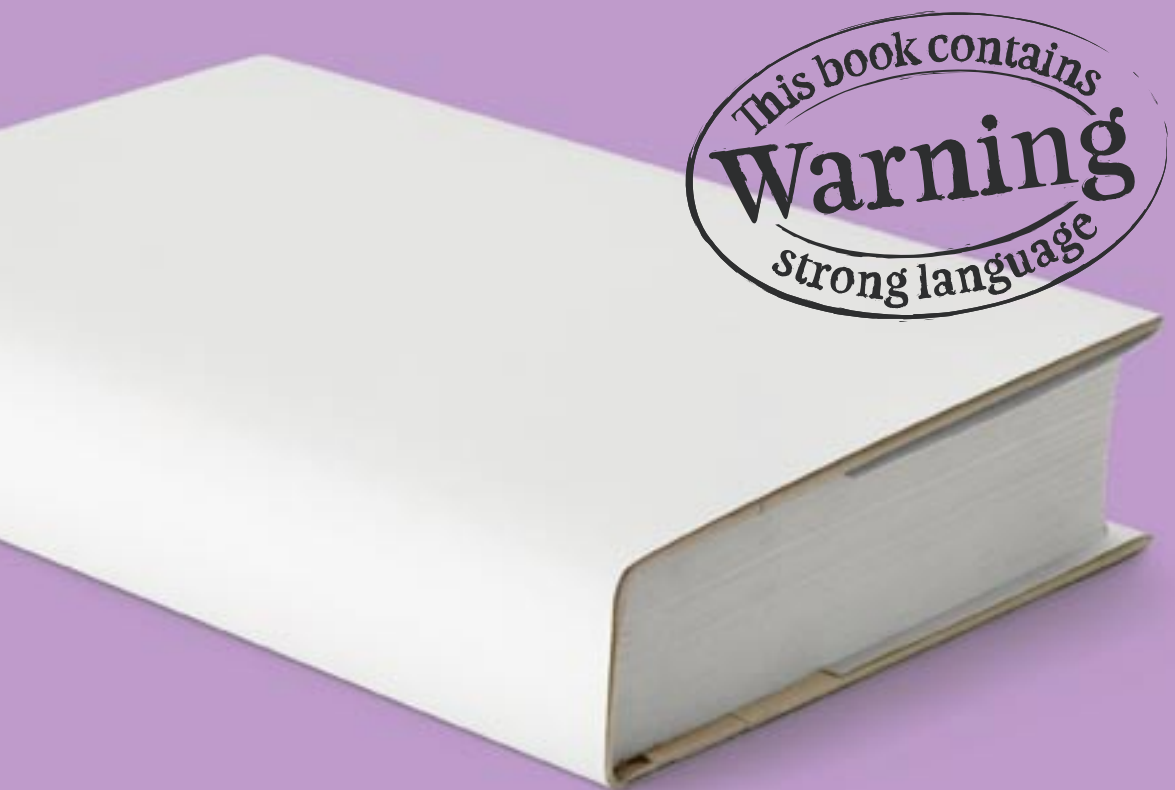
Write Times



Contemporary, Imaginative, Reflective
New writing from the sharpest SQA students.



Scotland may be a small nation but it can lay claim to producing some of the finest writers and poets ever to commit words to page. Robert Burns gifted the world some of its most memorable lines but even today, in the works of wordsmiths such as Edwin Morgan and Liz Lochhead, the Scottish voice resonates beyond our country's shores.





SQA has an important role to play in encouraging new talent — not simply assessing and certificating their achievements but in promoting and celebrating the very best talents in our schools and colleges. I'm really delighted to introduce *Write Times*, our anthology of writing from the sharpest minds. It contains fantastic examples of creativity and imagination in poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction.

It truly is an inspirational book that raises your spirits and celebrates great examples of what our students can produce. Maybe amongst the pages will be the first works from authors of the future who will nurture and expand their writing skills to continue Scotland's rich literary heritage — I do hope so!

Enjoy reading *Write Times*'.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Janet Brown'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Dr Janet Brown
SQA Chief Executive

Straight to the



point.

Presenting a selection of works
by the sharpest SQA students.

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Presenting



Four Closes

Author

Tracy Patrick

Genre

Poetry

Centre

Reid Kerr College

Qualification

HNC

Elderpark Street, Govan.

We climb the steps above the bookies —
a taste of piss so strong, it makes my eyes
water. Black iron straps barricade each
door, hieroglyphs on the dimly lit walls.
My muscles tighten, like prayer beads knotted
on a string. 'I advise you to knock this one back,'
says the guy from Housing. 'You'll never last.
They'll be kicking in your door before midnight.'

Broomlands Street, Paisley.

Last night someone kicked in the front door. Today
there is only a ragged tooth of wood. BASTARDS —
this is what we are; it says so on the walls
in black marker. From my third floor window, I observe
the dogshit yard: a mildewed mattress, polystyrene from the
takeaway, empty bottles of Buckfast. The neighbours
play techno. Their dog howls; we are both prisoners.
Though it's not all bad. At night Cassiopeia zig-zags
across the sky and I light candles, burn lavender oil,
recite poems like charms and, beneath the black wing
of the moon, the screams outside shrink back.
But when the sun opens his huge eye, I insist he take
a broom, sweep the whole lot up, and put it in a box
marked Return to Sender.



Vist Street, Govan.

No flowers, just baldy grass and concrete midden,
 sheets thwacking in the wind. And the old woman
 who every day in scarf and checkered overall,
 scrubbed the stairs, polished banisters and tiles,
 with tissue till they winked. 'There wis a time lassies
 widnae walk doon this street wae oot a hat,' she told me.
 'Ye don't get closes like this any mair.' And she was right.
 What became of her, and those old ladies of tenements,
 keepers of our hearths, who planted roses in boxes,
 kept our doorways scented with pine?
 May the stench of streets never sully their hems.

Arqyle Street, Paisley.

Old closes, damp, steeped in two centuries of smog,
 shadow the narrow, cobblestone street. Faded
 gold lettering points to a tailor on the second floor,
 long-dead. Generations have worn thin the stairs,
 girls to the mills, men to the foundries, children barefoot.
 The crumbling outhouse has lost its roof. Ferns and
 rhubarb replace the toilet. Gone, those dirty faces beneath
 the washing line. Yet this close has preserved time
 better than any museum's glass case. The JCBs wait.

Bonnie

The story of a wandering sheep on Whalsay.

Author

Rachel Burns

Genre

Fiction

Centre

Whalsay School

Qualification

Standard Grade

My name is Bonnie. As in The Bonnie Isle of Whalsay. My owner Arthur chose this title for me when I was just a tiny caddy, little over a year ago. I live in a field close to the Symbister harbour with my flock of around 10 other sheep. Although we are supposed to live in the field, I always manage to escape, much to the dismay of Arthur and the many cars rushing to board the ferry — the cars that I hold up by ambling back and forth across the road.

Today is a particularly warm summer's day, unusually warm for Shetland. I get up and stretch my legs, baaing to my fellow sheep as I make my way to the fence. I noticed a new fence gap last night when I was looking for new escape routes after Arthur sealed up yet another one. I squeeze myself through the fence, catching my wool on one of the sharp bits on the wire. Then I jump over a small ditch, onto the road. I teeter over the road towards the pier where all the big pelagic fishing boats are, causing cars to beep as I hold up the traffic waiting to board the ferry. I wander along to the end of this pier and climb onto the wall to get a good look at my favourite sight.

The sun is beginning to rise; a beautiful sky of golden reds and yellows. The sea reflects and glitters in the sunlight as if every wave and ripple is diamond encrusted. A horn toots a friendly goodbye behind me; it is the Linga making its first journey this morning to Laxo. It chugs along peacefully on the calm water as it leaves the harbour, cutting the sea with the bow as it goes.

I jump from the wall deftly, because I practice every day, and notice some of the pelagic fishermen near their boat. They are getting ready to go off. '*Look there's Arthur's rogue caddy!*' one of the men says to the other. I quickly scurry away, knowing they'll tell Arthur about seeing me when he's next in the boating club.

About midmorning Arthur decides to go out on his wee boat, and I decide it's time for another excursion. I slip through the fence, catching my wool again, cursing as the jaggy bit grazes my skin. Then I follow Arthur towards his boat. I look down into the boat where Arthur is sorting out fishing rods and nets, and when his back is turned, I jump into the boat and scramble into the small wheelhouse. Arthur turns round suspiciously, his face confused about the noise of hoofs on his deck. Luckily he turns back around, happy that no one is on his boat.

He starts up the engine and we're heading out of the harbour. I look out the wheelhouse window, watching as the sea passes me by, the sun having now illuminated the sea properly so it looks like molten gold.

I figure it is time to make my presence known when Arthur starts fishing. I climb out of the wheelhouse and onto the deck.

'Bonnie, how did doo git here?' he says, rubbing his grey beard in bewilderment, 'weel I suppose if doos here doo may as well make desel useful. Here haad this.' He puts a fishing rod in my mouth.

We fish for three hours in total, me catching three small fish, Arthur catching two bigger ones. After fishing Arthur takes me around the small isle next to Whalsay called Linga, where we watch the sunset. It is like a cover being pulled over the sky, because when we went to get back to Whalsay, everything is black. Luckily, Arthur has a light at the front of the boat, a little firefly to help us see where we were going.

We depart the boat and Arthur said to me:

'Bonnie, I tyeen doo doesnoo understand whit I'm saying, but



I think im gonna move dee to Linga since doo likes to walk around so much. Would doo like that?’

I think of all the sunrises and sunsets, the sparkling water and the chance to see all the boats out on the sea. I baa in happy agreement before setting off to my field, and jumping all the way over the fence happily.

Presenting

Tenement

Author

Grace Gourlay

Genre

Fiction

Centre

Carnoustie
High School

Qualification

Advanced Higher

Eh love meh wee hoose. Wiv only lived here twa three months noo, but it’s definitely the best wee hoose me an meh mam have ever bin in. It’s in a block o’ about nine, so mam’s made some new pals tae. In oor last hoose me an mam hud tae share a room, but noo ev goat meh ain room. Meh daddy came ben the hoose an ah asked him if he liked it an he said it wiz a braa room. Eh see meh dad oan a Saturday. It wiznae a Saturday but meh dad wanted iz tae come ower tae his hoose cause he waanted tae take me tae his friends’ barbeque but meh mam said that eh couldnae go cause it wiznae the weekend. Then him an meh mam started yellin at ain another so eh went next door tae play wi Courtney.

Courtney’s meh best pal. Shiz only ten so shiz still at the wee skail. Ehm at the big skail in third year but eh dinnae hae any pals in



meh class. Eh dinnae ken why. Eh broat meh skipping roapy in wi iz an eh asked Chantelle, whaas in meh class, if she wanted tae play with iz. But she just laughed an telt iz tae piss off. Meh mam's awis telling iz that only bad people swear an if yeh say Goad this or Jesis that then Goad pits yer name in a big black book an when yeh die Goad counts up aa the times yeh said a bad word an if yiv goat ower many then Goad sends yeh tae hell with the big burnin fires and aa that. That's whit meh mam sez. Eh awiz wonder if that's whit God diz aa day, if he jist sits there an watches for people swearin. Anyways, eh telt Chantelle aboot it but she jist laughed again an said that meh mam wiz an auld cow. Eh didnae like her saying that about meh mam but then aa Chantelle's pals turned up an started pushin iz an pullin meh hair, so eh ran oaf tae the toilets an didnae come oot until the bell had goan.

Anyways eh went along tae Courtney's tae see if she wanted tae take Bruce oot for a walk. Bruce's Courtney's dug. He's jist a mongrel but he's handsome, black an white, an when yeh tell him tae smile then he lifts up his lip like he's growlin at yeh, but he wouldnae bite yeh, he's dead coothy really. Eh love Bruce. Em awis askin meh mam for a dug like Brucer but she sez that ed widnae tak care o' it.

Courtney's awa oot wi her dad but her mam telt iz that eh could come anyway tae wait for her. So eh goes in an sits doon ben the living room. Courtney's communion dress is hangin up. It's dead bonny, aa white an sparkly. Meh mam telt is that Courtney's a catholic an that's why she gaes tae a different primary skail than eh did. Meh mam sez that catholics are really strict, an that they have tae go tae confession an a that. Eh dinnae like the sound o' that, cause yeh widnae ken if the priest'd gae an tell aabady aa yer business, but Courtney's family dinnae care about that.

Courtney sez that it disnae matter aboot gaein tae a different school right noo cause shiz comin up tae meh big skail soon. Eh think that me and Courtney'll be friends forever.

So em sitting in the living room an eh hear the front door openin an eh jump up cause eh can hear footsteps in the loabby. Eh hope that it's Courtney cause shiz meh best pal an if it's her then we can go an tak Bruce for a walk roond the backies.

But it isnae Courtney. It's Debbie. Eh dinnae like Debbie. Shiz in meh class at skail an gaes aboot wi Chantelle an aa the rest. Shiz awiz being mean tae iz, pullin meh hair an callin iz a mink and a 'retard'. Maybe Goad'll put Debbie in the book for sayin it. Eh asked meh mam what retard meant but she wouldnae tell iz, so eh think it must be a really bad word. Debbie's awiz swearin an goin roond in wee skirts an kissin aa the boys. Wan day wen we were aa aff skail eh went roond tae see if Courtney wiz in, an Ashley came tae the door wi her boyfriend an they were baith in their dressing gowns. Eh thought this was a bit weird cause it wiz only four in the afternoon an when eh telt meh mam about it she said that Debbie wiz nae better than she should be an that Debbie's mam id kill her if she found oot. Then meh mam telt iz what Debbie an her boyfriend must iv bin daein. Meh mam sez that people who do that before they're married go straight tae hell, nae messin roond wi black books an aa that - yeh dinnae get a second chance; Goad points the finger an that's you straight tae the fires, right quick. Eh dinnae think that people shid ever dae that. Sounds disgustin.



¹ Rope swing

Kimberly's mam sez that it disnae look like Kimberly's gonnae be back soon an that eh shid gae oot an play for a wee while. So eh goes out an has a wee shoaty oan the tarzy¹ that me an Courtney made. Eh dinnae ken how we managed it but it's tied dead well tae

the landing bars an wir able tae swing oaf the balcony an kick oaf the harlin an yer stomach's swirlin but it disnae matter, an yeh swing back an forward for ages. It's great fun cause it's so excitin even though yeh feel like yer gonnae be sick an me an Courtney go oan it again an again cause it's just brill. We let other kids fae the block have a go oan it but eh think that we shid keep it tae oorsels cause we built it. But Courtney sez that we shid let other people oan it cause we widnae like it if they didnae share stuff wi us, y'ken, like sweets an that. Eh still dinnae like other kids playin oan it, an seein that Kimberly's still oot wi her dad em no gonae let anybody else play oan it cause its oor swing.

² Spits

So em oan the tarzy ah eh kick oaf the wa' as herd as eh can, an em flyin an em spinnin, an em scared an excited aa at the same time. An ah of a sudden it's over. So eh slide doon ontae the ground. Meh palms are aa red an rubbed fae the rope. Em staunin, feelin aa dizzy fae the ride an haudin ontae the tarzy fur support an eh feel a tug at the rope. Eh look up an it's Debbie an when she sees iz look up at her she yanks the rope dead hard an eh faa over. She thinks this is brill an shiz laughin her head oaf. Then she leans ower the balcony an gobs² oan iz. Eh start greetin an run up the loabby an intae the hoose. Meh mam an dad are still fightin an they dinnae notice that em greetin oar that em aa dirty. Eh sit doon at the kitchen table, looking out the windee, an ah can see Debbie oan oor tarzy, the tarzy that me an Courtney built, an we built it, nae Debbie an she shouldnae be oan it cause it's oors an eh hate Debbie. Eh hate her!

Celebrity

Author

Harry McDonald

Genre

Poetry

Centre

Glasgow College
of Nautical Studies

Qualification

HNC

Green stalks like arms stretched
Raised to the sky giving praise,
Gather about me
Close up and personal.

A celebrity in their meadow field.
A child's chalk figure on the hill,
Tanning in the morning sun
After the cold numbing night.

Ladybirds and dragonflies
Stop briefly,
Bemused but unimpressed
By the twist of nature.

Cloud control
Has left the sky open
And only shades of colour
Draw at my imagination.

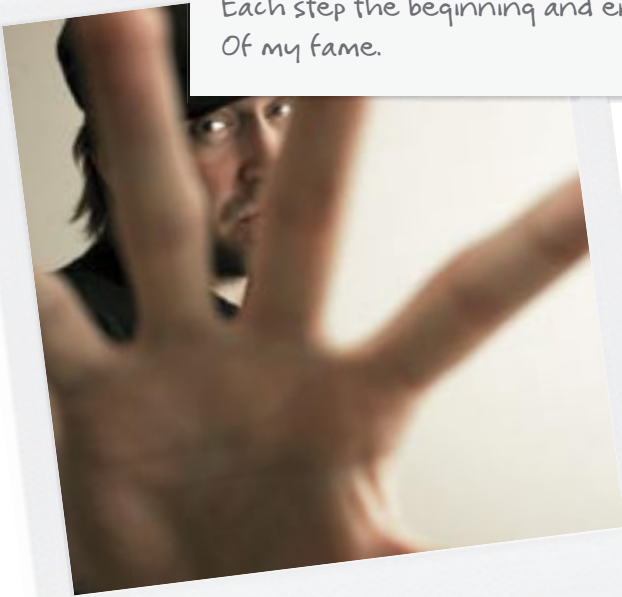
I have watched the stars retreat
Before the pink of dawn,
And the dawn shepherd away the night
As the pale blue of morning staggers into day.

(continued on the next page...)

I see the first black and white
Cross the line
Where the hill overlaps the sky.
A necklace of checkerboard halos.

Then the exotic yellow of a
Sideways serpent approaching,
Before dissolving into
A line of ones thrashing at the grass.

A patchwork of voices
Call at my name,
Each step the beginning and end
Of my fame.



Erosion

(From a series of three poems on the theme of the shore at Loggie, Wester Ross)

Author

Matt Stockl

Genre

Poetry

Centre

Ullapool
High School

Qualification

Advanced Higher

My feet were younger then, fleshy pads
When the dust comes,
the summer months stick between the toes
The straps leave stripes, the stripes are white
The white stripes circle the skin.

The ground of course is cracked
Skin of the cliff
It gapes
Absorbing the seeds, absorbing the rain, the wind
Seeking cause to split further, cut deeper

Down
Below
Where the waves
Where the spiral stones
Where the broad flat granite sits expectant
Looking up.

The sea wall curves out looks down
Sheds monumental tears
Before stepping back into the hills.

In our house, at the back, in the concrete a door
Led down they said
Down.

Wormcasts through the sheer.

(continued on the next page...)

A tunnel for the smugglers
The museum men.
Those mannequin models in greenhouse glass
Looking up like the granite past the history walls
The place by the pub that sells heritage.

The tunnels twist, writhe, meet in the middle
Welcome the seeds
Welcome the rain, the wind
Until the flowers and air own the centre, expand.

The sea wall curves in, breathes out.

Meanwhile my feet grow hard
Solid as the smuggler's effigy
Expand and erode.
New skin forms and falls
New blood inherits the space inside
New stripes circle the old.



My cousin wears a wedding ring ...

Author

Kirsty A Cook

Genre

Non-Fiction

Centre

Dollar Academy

Qualification

Higher

My cousin wears a wedding ring to stop people from trying to pick him up at bars. Even though he's only twenty-three and not really good looking enough for it to be an issue. I only see him once every six months, but during our brief meeting I notice it at once and comment on it as soon as social decorum will allow me to do so.

'Oh, this?' he laughs, twirling it around a long finger so that it slips up slightly, revealing a red chafe mark, the result of other twirling sessions. 'It's not real. You know it's not real. I would have invited you.'

We both know that's not true, but neither of us will admit it to each other or to ourselves, and so we continue our conversation as if I am not here under duress and he actually wants to talk to me. Family dynamics are a beautiful thing.

'It's really just a way of ensuring desperate love rats don't try to pick me up in bars,' he explains nonchalantly, still twisting that little gold band around that long pale finger. I stare at it, fixated, wondering how much he spent on his fake wedding ring. Whether he got it from a proper jewellers. Whether the jeweller suspected it was fake. Whether he takes it off in the shower, or whether his imaginary marital bonds follow him even there.

'Is it really that much of an issue? For you? I mean... it's a little bizarre, don't you think?' I say, after a pause of a few seconds and five ring twists.

'Yeah,' he admits. 'A little. It doesn't exactly help to dispel the family rumours that I've become a lone psycho since graduating.'

'No, I can't imagine it does.' I don't mention that this foray into life alone has been the sole topic of several family dinners in the past



three months. I doubt that Aunt Sarah really knows what borderline psychosis entails anyway, except what she has discerned from that triumph of humanity, google.com

'So, how is work anyway?' I ask politely.

'It's okay. I guess it's okay. I have this recurring nightmare where my manager breaks a clothes hanger, then beats me mercilessly with it and I have to go work in Macdonalds again.'

'Worrying,' I say as he looks down nervously at his hand, the ring hand, and smiles slightly at the thought. We both remain silent for a minute, listening to the traffic below and the dripping of the shoddy plumbing in the pipes. It isn't really a companionable silence, not even in the loosest sense of the term, but it's a bearable one.

'Music sucks though'

'Huh?' I stir out of my heavy-eyed silence to utter that most eloquent of expressions, proving that my expensive private school education was not entirely wasted.

'The music at work. It sucks.' he repeats.

'Oh yeah. Totally.' I reply, doing my English teacher proud with my extensive vocabulary and complicated syntax.

'Yeah.' (Pause)

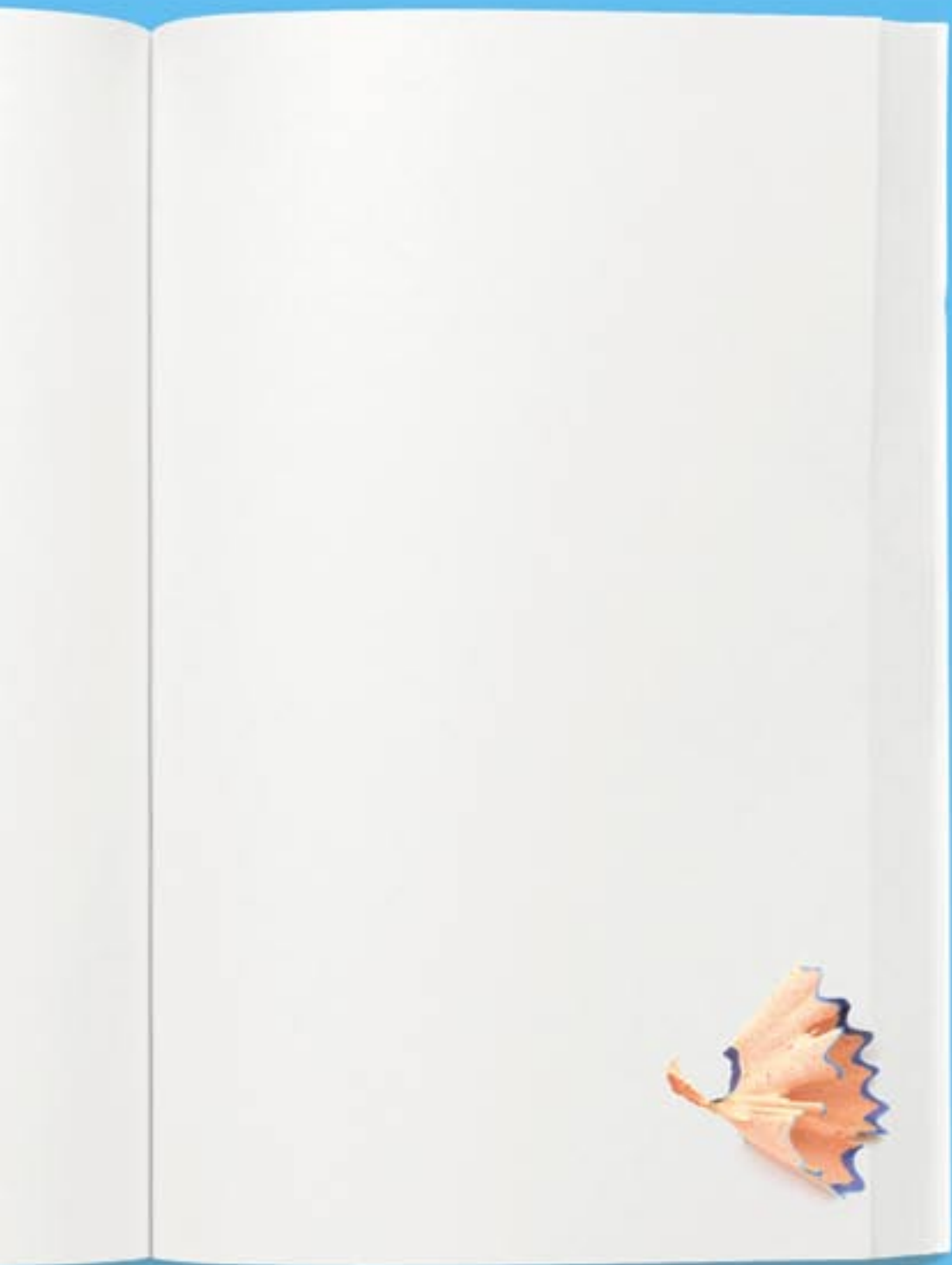
'Clothing stores are where CDs go to die.' I remember this quote from somewhere suddenly. I can't remember who, where or when but as it thumps in my head I say it, my mouth acting as some kind of parrot to my brain.

'Mmm. Yeah. Definitely.' He finally stops staring at his hands, and looks at me for a second, a bold uncomfortable stare that reminds me of a look my teacher used to give me during language orals. *'Definitely.'*

We sit in the same uncompanionably bearable silence for a while. I think of asking all sorts of questions about rings, and desperate love rats and the music at work, but I don't. We say our goodbyes, and he lies and says he'll call me and I lie and say I'll e-mail sometime. Part of me intends to do it.

Later that week I go to a family dinner, and tell my Aunt Sarah that I think he's gone insane, feeding the family gossip canon. I feel guilty, but tell myself he deserves it for being so odd. Somehow, I secretly know he doesn't.





Fiction

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There is great confidence in the writing here, and it's a joy to discover. These stories leap around the globe, roll backwards and forwards through time, plumb human despair and climb the heights of aspiration. Victorian marriage customs play off against those of India. New York vies with South Africa. Island life jostles with the urban. From gazing up in awe inside the big top, we shift onto vertiginous rooftops to work alongside slaters. An expanse of ocean played by a pod of dolphins gives way to the claustrophobia of narrow minds, one-track lives, a coffin, a railway carriage. Suicide, exile and death flare in the dark. There is variety in approach, from traditional to experimental. Attack, form, plotting and characterisation are robust, engrossing.

Here, in Rachel Hynd's disturbingly accurate *Cat's Eyes*, is a woman trying to make life work in the constant wreckage of routine violence. There, in William Letford's revealing *Rambo on the Moon*, is a man, tough as the nails he hammers daily, disparaging assistance with the same ease as he holds out a helping hand. Here is the child of Grace Gourley's chilling *Tenement*, deprived, bullied, caught between estranged, warring parents and inadvertently constructing her own ultimate loss. And there is the unforgiving madness that life can bring us to, irrespective of talent, poverty, intellect or circumstance, succinctly

captured by 'wee burst balloon Betty' in Mandy Maxwell's masterly *Inmates*. These are mature stories that would sit well in any mainstream collection of literature, finely drawn, superbly observed, beautifully told.

That gritty realism is lightened by fantasy, by stories with neat twists and those that speak of warmth, surprise and hope - always harder to capture than tragedy. Perhaps it says something about humanity that creatures other than human provide many of the uplifting themes and characters. Yet it's the linguistic variety of voice that delights most.

English dominates, often cleverly crafted to suit setting, period and style. But we are also treated to smatterings of Hindi, Romany, and a variety of Scots from Shetlandic to Ayrshire, Glaswegian to Dundonian - all of which enlivens and authenticates, adding veracity whenever it appears. With it comes the automatic exclusion of flaccid overwriting, the inclusion of native bi-lingual mastery to the written page, providing much of the confident expression that is self-evident here. The national is global, the parochial is universal. It's in the particular, most intimate telling, that stories capture what it is to be human. The short fiction here is rewarding and highly readable. Read and enjoy.

Ayah

Author

Leela
Somasundaram

Centre

Reid Kerr College

Qualification

HNC

A tropical night, the sky a heavy navy curtain lit up by the silvery stars. But she is too tired to look up. She walks in, locks the flimsy door. She takes in the scene, her one room outhouse with the asbestos roof still too hot to sleep in. She lies on the charpoy under the stars, a much cooler option. Her chores for the day are done, she puts her weary head on the pillow but her mind starts racing. Anjali's wedding was looming ahead, how was she going to meet the expenses? I must ask the mistress in the morning. Sleep closed her tired eyes.

I watch her as she draws the most intricate pattern of rangoli on the freshly cleaned veranda. It's half past five in the morning, the quietest time of the day, the coolest, and the sun lazily peering out. Ayah adjusts her thin sari, tweaks the rice flour of the rangoli pattern into perfect shape and moves on to her next chore. The cook is busy. The smell of freshly roasted coffee beans rises up. The cook turns the coffee grinder with gusto, a sound one cannot miss. The milk boils as he prepares the 'decoction'.

The aroma of fresh coffee fills the air. Dad is busy reading the Hindu newspaper, waiting for his coffee. The driver arrives, the Ayah runs in to get the car key. He hurries away to start cleaning the car. The morning bustle starts like bubbles frothing up. I reach for my dissertation. I need to complete it soon. The deadline for submission is scarily near.

Ayah hands me the coffee and waits, smiling.

*'Amma, I've got some good news this morning.
I want to tell you first.'*

'What is it?'

'Anjali is getting married.'

'What! Anjali? Isn't she too young? She is years younger than me.'

'She is already 16 years old. Nearly 4 years since she matured, my relatives will be unhappy if I let her remain unmarried.'

'Have you stopped her from going to school then?'

'Oh yes, last year. It was not a good thing to let her out. Too many boys were eyeing her up.'

'When did you arrange it then?'

'Just last week, the wedding date has been finalised. She has been home, learning to cook and clean.'

'Ayah, why didn't you mention this before?'

'You were all so busy with your sister's wedding I couldn't bother you with all my business.'

'Mum, Mum' I shout excitedly, 'Did you hear? Anjali is getting married!' I run to the veranda. Mum is chatting quietly to Dad as he tries to read the paper.

'What?' Mum starts up. 'That's great news, Ayah, soon after our Gita's wedding too. Tell me all about it. Who is the boy?'

'Amma, he is from our village, my brothers have arranged it.'

'Your brothers? They were no good when you had all the problems, Ayah.'

'I have to listen to them, Amma, as I am a widow. The males in the family make all the important decisions.'

'So where is this boy working?'

Ayah shuffled a bit. 'He is in the village, he works on the land.'

'Not a landless labourer, Ayah, Anjali has lived all her life in the city, how could you?'

'Amma, he is her 'murai pillai' chosen from birth, I can't go against the family tradition.'

'How will she adjust to a life in the village? Are the family good?'

'I know very little about them, my brothers arranged it all.'

Ayah, why didn't you tell me? We have boys in our company who are smart, working and earning well.'

'Amma, my brothers would not agree to anyone but Muthu. It is a family tradition to marry as arranged since our birth.'

'Well, I had no idea...'

Ayah smiled sweetly. 'Amma, about the wedding expenses... nearly 10,000 rupees...'

'Of course, I'll get it sorted for you, though I can't give you the whole lot. I'll talk to the master. Some will be a loan that you'll have to repay.'

'Thank you, Amma, You've been like God to me.' Ayah seems about to fall at my mum's feet and mum stops her from doing that, with a wave of her hand.





'Yes Amma, I'll bring her tomorrow...' The door is flung wide open, Gita comes barging in, throws herself at mum, *'Oh I hate that house, I wish I was back home!'*

Melodramatic, that's my sister. Perfectly made up, only the best for her. Designer jeans, diamond solitaire glinting in the morning sun, leather Italian sandals.

'Now what's the matter?' Mum's whole attention immediately switches to Gita.

'Mum they expect me to do some housework. I am not used to it. I am not going back, how can they expect me to wash the dishes and cut the vegetables? I didn't marry Ashok to be a maid did I?'

'Gita, servants do need time off, surely you can help out.' Only then does Gita notice Ayah hovering around.

'Ayah, get me some lemon sherbet, I'm parched, and turn the AC on, it's so hot.'

Gita's memsahib voice is crisp.

'Yes Gita'ma' nods Ayah as she hurries away to do what she is told.

'Mum you only take their side,' Gita now a little more composed is checking her elegant watch.

'Gita are you happy with Ashok?'

'Of course, I love him. I just hate living with his family, why can't they get more maids? Mum, why don't I take Anjali, she'll be perfect help for me?'

'Gita you are unbelievable. Anjali is getting married and moving away.'

'What! She's too young, married oh, the poor thing. Just find me a new maid mum, I can't stand it. I won't have any time for socialising if my mother-in-law has her way.' She tosses her glossy black hair and smooths it back.

'Well, I'll ask around, it's not easy to find young maids who are reliable. I also need to talk to your mother-in-law, she may not like it.'

As usual mum does whatever Gita wants. Pleased with having achieved her goal, she turns to me. I am conscious of my old pyjamas and tee shirt, comfort clothes to work in.

'How's my little sister then, still with your head in books? Anita, by the way I've seen a beautiful jewellery set. Jade with silver. It will be great with my new green sari, will you come with me? I want to get it today'

'No, I need to work on my dissertation' I said. I hated her perfection, her superficial life, yet she was my sister and I could not ignore her.

'You're such a bore. I'll call Sushma, she loves jewellery shopping' Gita went off to call up her friend. Spending money was her way out of anything.

I tried to work on my dissertation. Memories came flooding in. Anjali and I were playmates. She would join me when we were little as we chased the sparrows, plucked jasmine flowers from the garden, ate mangoes and grimaced at the sour taste.



The ‘mali’ would let us have a go at the hand pump and we would water the garden. She was a tomboy like me, taking part in the cricket games that my brothers played. The boys would always use us as fielders, giving very little chance to bat or bowl. I remembered how I stood up to the boys and demanded we were allowed to bat. Anjali stood by me; being a maid and younger she had very little say.

But that bond of playing together was special. Gita my sister did not like to get her clothes dirty, she preferred to watch TV or play with dolls. Anjali was part of my childhood, a happy time. Those innocent days flashed past so quickly. I was whisked off in the chauffeur-driven car to the exclusive private convent school. Anjali attended the municipal school. We still played together occasionally on a Sunday, but our lives soon moved in completely different circles. As we grew up our relationship changed subtly. Anjali helped in the house when she finished at school, put the fan or AC on, took care of my clothes, ran short errands for us. Being away from home for my university I had not noticed that Anjali had not been around the house. Like all the other maids she was totally at our beck and call all through Gita’s wedding. Gita’s wedding, lasting three days, took six months to organise. Nothing else mattered. It absorbed all our waking days.



Behind the Mask

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Standard Grade

The trapeze artists performed another breathtaking flip, drawing an awed gasp from the audience. It all seemed perfectly calculated and graceful.

Charlotte sat in the circus stands next to her Grandfather, watching from between her fingers. She yelped with fright as one of the men let go of his bar and plummeted, five, ten, fifteen feet, before being grasped securely at the wrist by his partner.

'Grandpa, what if they fall?'

The old man pointed below the flying men.

'You see the net? It's to catch them, and stop them hurting themselves,' he said, with a smile that drew the corners of his mouth into the folds of bristled wrinkles at either side.

Charlotte seemed satisfied with this explanation, so her Grandfather turned his attention back to the performers, now leaving to a shower of applause from the audience.

The portly little showman appeared, in his red waistcoat and jet black top hat.

'Well how about that, folks!' he boomed. *'Trapeze artists from Transylvania!'* There was another scatter of applause. The tent fell quiet. *'But now, I must introduce to you the most feared creature ever to appear in this town. Some call it the human torch, others just scream and flee... all the way from Bulgaria... Levovski, the fire conjurer!'*

The audience broke into another round of applause, as a huge man walked into the middle of the ring. He wore a crimson mask, the colour of blood, and his few clothes revealed muscles.

The tent was thick with silence now. Charlotte peered down at him, terrified. He looked around imperiously, instantly creating an atmosphere. The lights dimmed, almost to blackness. And then...

An explosion of sound and red light assaulted Charlotte's senses, boring straight through into her skull. She shielded herself with a skinny forearm, groped for her Grandfather's hand, found it, squeezed it. She could hear the music now, a chaotic, rapid sequence of percussion, very dramatic and foreign.

As she lowered her arm, she could see that Levovski had erupted into life. His two poles seemed to ignite spontaneously, like struck matches, only with a deep, red glow. He twirled then now, around his body and head, extremely quickly. She could see the lines that the red flames carved into the air, before they faded, and were replaced by new, ever brighter blood red lines, in beautiful motion.

She watched in awe as he performed more and more dangerous tricks. His legs swung from beneath him as he sprang into a back flip, spat out a jet of fire, and landed, still twirling the sticks, always in time with the music. It was a satanic ballet; every move was one of grace and smoothness, and those red flames...

Levovski's huge presence, and the bloodstained light from his flames filled the entire tent, casting exaggerated shadows onto the walls and ceiling. The music got faster, and more urgent, and so did Levovski, flipping, twirling, dancing, with ease. The flames now exploded into a venomous green colour, throwing the act into a completely different mood. They sliced into the air, acid green circles arched gracefully around him. The flickering quality of the light made everything appear to be on fire, even Charlotte's

captivated, admiring face. Finally, he threw his sticks into the air, and regurgitated a blast of green flame, which instantly extinguished, along with the sticks, and music, throwing the cavernous room into total darkness and silence.

There was a moment of shocked silence, and the crowd exploded into applause, different from the trapeze artists' almost polite reception. The auditorium became clear as the lights came up. Charlotte stood as Levovski ambled back down the performers' tunnel at the far end of the tent. The ringmaster hurried into view, sweating, with an astounded look on his face.

'Well WHAT ABOUT THAT, folks!'

Charlotte and her Grandfather were leaving the tent, along the dim tunnel among the slow, progressive trudging of the crowd. The sharp air from outside exploded into Charlotte's eyes, sharply reducing her pupil size, as she adjusted from the dim interior of the musty circus tent, the harsh, cold light intrusive after Levovski's warm red glow.

She looked around, taking in her surroundings, seeing the circus performers despondently heaving themselves into the cabs and backs of battered pick-up trucks, ready to set off for the next show. She could not stop thinking about Levovski, the majesty of his coloured, spinning lights. She really wanted to meet him, if only to shake his hand. His graceful, yet erratic dancing had moved her.

Just as Charlotte and her Grandfather approached their car, she caught sight of him climbing into an ancient pick-up truck, throwing in a bundle of belongings in before him. Without thinking, and despite her Grandfather's protests, she ran over to



the truck. Levovski heard her, and turned around, surprised. He was still wearing the mask, and as she looked into his blazing eyes, she wondered if his acts were just an outward manifestation of the fire burning within him. She spoke.

'Excuse me, Mr Levovski, I just want to congratulate you on your performance,' she said, the formality of her words far exceeding her ten years. Levovski looked down at her for a moment, as if contemplating something inside his head, then pulled his mask off.

Charlotte gasped. Standing before her was — a woman! A woman with shoulder length, auburn hair. Levovski began to speak, placing her hand on Charlotte's shoulder.

'You are... uh... good child,' she struggled in a heavy Eastern Europe accent. She looked into the middle distance again, as if considering something, then extended the muscular arm holding the mask. *'Keep,'* she said decisively, patting Charlotte's head. Charlotte was stunned. She looked down at the mask in her hand, peered into the eyeholes.

'Thank you,' she said, looking up, but Levovski, was already in the truck, moving away.

'Goodbye!' she called, in that gruff voice.

Charlotte watched the truck disappear past a clump of trees at the edge of the circus plot. She ran back to the car, where her Grandfather was waiting, thankfully, the familiar smile on his face. She held up the mask, also smiling.



Cat's Eyes

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So the kid's greetin' and bawlin' again and I need to get up to see her. She's only wee I know, but this is getting' to be a pure joke. I'm workin' most of my days to pay for the stuff she's sleepin' and greetin' on and all she can do is sit there wae a sore face. She's keepin' me up all night an' it's just no workin'. So I get quickly out of my bed and move quietly along the wee blue corridor and there she is, under thae pink covers of hers hidin' like a limpet when the seagulls come tae shore. It's a weird position she's in; foetal I think it's called, aw curled up in the corner of her bed next tae the far wall. The only thing I can see is a wee blond curl peekin' out o' the side to the right, shiverin' a bit. I pull the covers off her with difficulty, annoyed at the fact she's still scared when her maw's right in front of her offerin' help. Out comes a wee face, aw red from her cryin' and strainin'. She's sweatin' like nobody's business and the wetness on her sheets and now on my shoulders is there to prove it. Her eyes are aw puffy as well from her rubbin' at them.

She says 'Mum' a few times and reaches out tryin' to hug me but bumps one of my bruises instead. I pull her close for a bit, touchin' her sore eyes, tryin' to calm her down and she eases just a bit. Her breathin' stops jumpin' that funny way after a few minutes when she starts to get sleepy again. The only way I know she's still alert is by how tightly she's holdin' onto my shirt and buryin' her face into my hands.

I leave her for just a minute to go into the bathroom right next to her bedroom to get her a damp cloth an' she's shoutin' me back in a panic straight away.

I'm exhausted like her, an this havin' to rush about isnae helpin'. The dog's startin' to walk about downstairs as well, obviously

wakened by the noises we're makin', an I can hear his claws on the floor.

I go back and when she's lyin' down nice again I fix her jammies an' wipe her curls away from her face to give her head a kiss. She's still a wee bit weepy, and keeps lookin' over my shoulder at the door. Hers is just across from thae big black stairs of ours an' it's almost as if she knows he's there.

'It's alright,' I tell her, 'Uncle Jim's downstairs sleepin' on the couch so he won't be getting' in again. Uncle Jim won't let him, ye hear?' I try to sound as reassurin' as possible but it doesn't look like it's workin'. Her eyes still show fear though she's givin' me that smile to convince me otherwise. She's still afraid of what the night brings.

Ever since that bastard Tam came up here one night, out of his face steamin' and shoutin' all the abuse under the sun, she hasn't had a good night's sleep. Neither have I. She's still scared he's comin' back. Runnin' up those stairs again like he does every Friday with that mad smile on his face that says nobody is goin' to bed early that night.

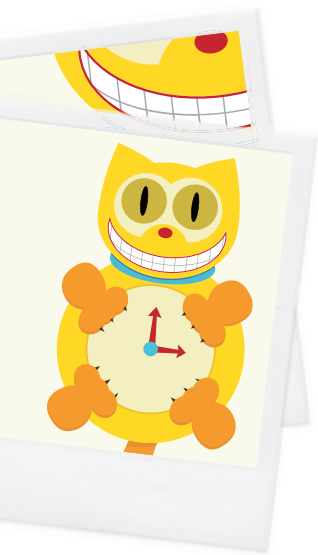
I say I'm goin' back to bed soon cause I'm tired, and I can hear her breathing get sharper like she's scared that when the darkness comes so will he. I can't let her sleep anywhere else but here though, it's no safe an' she never wets her own bed. But when I'm standin' to go across the corridor silently again she starts her whimperin' and cryin' to get me to stay just one more minute. But I'm just too drained to stay. It's been well over an hour an' my patience is wearin' thin. I love her, aye, and I feel sorry for her, aye, but it's startin' to get light outside and all I can think about is sleep.

Even the wee cat clock in the other corner above the cheap wardrobes is mockin' me with the tickin' of its eyes, swayin' from side to side above its big Cheshire grin. It's tick-tockin' reminds me of how close the morning is, an' gentle cheeps from the birds outside tell me the sun's already on its way.

She's tellin' me she's scared and other stuff I already know, an' I can see the sweat's back gain, so I just can't walk away, even at this point. So I go back again over to the bed and I stroke her face downwards across her nose, the way that sends her to sleep, and I'm no waitin' long till she's calm again and her eyes are shut. She's sleepin' once again for the time being, and hopefully this time it'll be until I'm ready for work. I think it's funny how they sleep aw sprawled out in every position all over the place when they're wee, yet when they get older and know more about how the world works they curl up into these wee balls, like they're scared. She's only ever slept that way since Tam started visitin'.

I tiptoe back along the corridor once again, tryin' not to make a sound, switchin' the bathroom light off as I go so it doesn't run up the bill. I'm back in my bed at last, lunging for my white sheets and fluffy pillows. As soon as my head touches them, though, I can hear her again, mumblin' in her sleep to cuddly toys with no answer to her problems. I'm scared she's bein' too noisy, but I'm more afraid of makin' too much noise by gettin' up to close her door over.

'You better shut her the fuck up before I do,' Tam says beside me, before rollin' over to face the window.



Inmates

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Old Cathy was married to Pat Bonner. She kept him in a frame by her bedside, right next to her rosary beads, her fags and a two litre bottle of Asda's own make Irn Bru. I found out two things about Cathy early on: one, that her fag packet was always empty and two, her juice was always flat. It didn't take me long to realise that her head was just like her fag packet, empty, for display purposes only. And the framed picture that she kept of her man by her bedside. I could have bought it on sale at the Barras market for £2.99. But that didn't stop Cathy from her nightly serenades... *'Paddy, Paddy, oh where are ye Paddy?'* Howling like a deranged Juliet all the way down the ward. It was never her Romeo that came, just a pissed-off member of the night watch, always with a little blue Prince Charming in a plastic cup. Aye, well, chemical romance. I never felt more like singing the blues.

Cathy had her faith though and waited every day religiously for a visit from Pat, standing up for her conjugal rights I thought, and under the eyes of the Lord and all. Poor cow, wearing the tights she'd got from Lourdes, the holy ones. She's come back up to the ward in tears, making excuses for a man she'd last seen saving a penalty against Dundee United in the 1985 Scottish Cup final.

Betty was Cathy's friend on the ward, wee burst balloon Betty, all wrinkled and lifeless. She was a constant fixture on the sofa in the TV room, as if with one final high pitched wheeeeeeee she'd danced in a frenzy round the room until the air in her had finally run out and there she'd landed.

Betty lived on a daily diet of daytime television and nicotine. I didn't know what crime against sanity she'd committed to get committed, but she'd served six months already when I got there, with no sign of an early release. I thought she was a lifer.

As it turned out she was almost on death row. I was sitting one afternoon in the dorm, discussing medication with some of the other inmates, when Betty was wheeled by on her bed, no teeth or tights and wearing nothing nylon. It was the big blue shock for her, a battery recharge.

She came back after her stint at the electric works flickering like a dodgy street light, all nervous and twitching like she was about to short-circuit at any time. I think the white coats thought they'd done a good job on wee Betty, turned her into a right live wire. But they didn't have to sleep in the bed next to her, buzzing away all night.

Then they moved Sharon in, something to do with her and me having the same surname, (thanks Dad). She'd been in a single room under the 72-hour observation guidelines, bestowed upon every new prisoner for their own safety, then let loose on the ward. Our room literally went dark. Sharon was a big girl, with a skinhead and tattooed knuckles that dusted the floor when she walked. This girl made a Neanderthal look like a New Man and she didn't speak, but communicated in a series of grunts, scowls and hand signals.

I tried to dodge Sharon and the furniture missiles she would frequently launch across the room, at the same time trying not to bump in to wee Betty and be electrocuted or run in to Cathy, who would bless you or damn you to hell, depending on how recently she'd been medicated. It wasn't easy.

The final push came one evening, not long into Sharon's stay, when I was jolted from sleep like a monkey falling from a tree. I came to, in bed in a puddle of sweat, confused and unable to

move the left side of my body. I panicked, thinking I'd had a stroke, this hot saliva dripping down the side of my face and mouth. I was about to pull the emergency chord, when the word LOVE struck me on the face. It was Sharon's left hand attached to the bulk of her that was pinning me to the mattress. I screamed like a woman being dragged to hell backwards by her hair, threw my fags in Sharon's direction to stall for time and tore out of the room at nuclear speed. (Sorry, darlin', you're just not my type.)

That was the last I saw of Sharon. I heard she took the rejection quite badly and after redesigning the dorm was carted back to the secure unit, jag in the arse.



On the Drom

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'SELT! Tae the laddie at the back wae the bonnet. Ta much. Nou men, next up we hae this beautifully crafted oak caravan, worth clinging on tae fur it's at least 100 years auld! Aw we're asking fur is a sterting price o' £3,500! Brilliant, oh, £4,000, £4,500, £5,000. Bonny, weel done! £5,250, £5,500, £5,750... come oan lads, this is a bargain! Nae mair takers? It's SELT, tae this smairt young yin at the front! Cheers!'

It's all thanks to my creator, Bill Macaulay, that I'm here today. I was built a Gypsy Vardo by him but wasn't always used as one; Bill used me for travelling and storing his produce. He was always piecing together lovely items of furniture and so he built me for travelling around with his goods when he was seventeen. My friend made me as beautiful as can be with American Oak wood, spending weeks assembling me and then decorating my interior with pieces of his beautiful hand made furniture.

*grai**

— horse

We were always travelling to lovely places with Dune, Bill's *grai*, selling as much furniture as he could make. I thought it crazy that Bill would sometimes spend hours in the night thinking of new detailed designs but it shows how much he enjoyed his job and wanted to please his customers. The years we spent together were great. Bill was born in Largs which was where we started our journey. I didn't want to leave for I loved the view across the pebbled shore and dark waters to Cumbrae, but I'm glad we did travel on or I would have missed out on the experiences I can share with you now. Bill, Dune and I journeyed along the coast through Ardrossan and Saltcoats where we sold forty-three wicker chairs as the people there liked them a lot. One woman with similar talents to Bill was so interested in his work that she asked to travel with us. Thank goodness Bill said no, I didn't want some stranger interrupting on our friendship and she was filthy!

We remained between these two towns for 9 years selling many articles, then left for Troon after Bill found out that Cathy — the lady-friend he had met in Saltcoats — was cheating on him! I was shocked; Cathy had always seemed lovely, once painting a pretty red flower on my side and saying to my friend, ‘*whit a lovely caravan ye hae Bill*’. Obviously this was just a mask over her inner ugliness. My friend was upset for days.

Even when we arrived in Troon he was still distraught.

*puro**
— old

Eventually Bill got over the loss, thanks to the fact that everything was selling quickly and he had to make products faster. He had a tough time as he was then getting quite *puro* at the age of twenty-nine and wasn’t as strong as he had been. Dune was also getting elderly so Bill replaced her with Jessie. She wasn’t as pretty but did the job.

In 1871, Bill and I moved on to Ayr, the most cherished place of all that we visited together. It was lovely because you could watch the sun set above Arran. Bill had stopped making his furniture by the time we arrived in Ayr due to becoming ‘an auld codger’, as they call it nowadays. I was saddened by this because I loved the pieces he produced but I knew Bill was happy, so was I too. We stayed on the front in Ayr — just Bill and I — because a local ironmonger bought Jessie — for almost four months and it was fantastic. Every evening Bill would go skinny-dipping in the sea and he really enjoyed himself, not having to work anymore — he could just relax. One morning however, while washing his face in chilly water, Bill Macaulay slipped into the sea and disappeared. It felt like the end of everything. But, as the years continued, I came to feel almost happy for my friend as he had always wanted to die near the same waters as he was born, back home in Largs.

*daj**
— mother

*dari-av**
— sea

I remained on the front in Ayr for twenty-three years after Bill's death. I spent every evening looking out onto the *dari—av*, how peaceful it was — lonely too. Passers-by used to stare at me in awe and occasionally pass comments such as 'whit a sin, abandoning that pretty caravan' or 'I wuner wh sort o' life it has seen?!' I remember two young girls who played 'houses' inside me, I was their holiday home for one hour or so every weekend until their *Daj* called them to go home for dinner. Of course, not all of the local people were so nice. I was disgusted by one man who was extremely drunk. He urinated on me! How I wished he had been punished!

*grai**
— horse

A kind man called Balo rescued me from terrors like this. In 1895, when he was riding his *grai* on the beach, Balo spotted me and was so delighted by my beauty that he immediately attached me to Shofranka and we rode off. I was stunned with joy. It was great to be back on the road again, but the journey didn't last long.

We soon arrived in a vast area of land — filled with rubbish and junk mouldy food, broken furniture, cracked china. It wasn't too pleasant but I could understand the place because Balo's family seemed to be living there. There was a small fire in the centre of it all with cooking equipment beside it. I noticed a kind of den made from branches and earth, and pondered for a while at what it was meant to be? I was surprised when I realised that Balo and his family were sleeping there! Sitting on a rotten piece of wood (about to fall apart) was Simza, Balo's wife, cradling a young boy. Neither of them were very clean but their beauty shone out from them. I could tell at once that they were lovely people and that I would enjoy my time with them.

*drom**
— road

I was then stripped of all my contents by Balo. He was re-decorating. He chose lots of items from the surrounding land to be included in my renovation, for example, wood from an old chest that he used for a cabinet. It took my new companion about three weeks to fix me up, including painting me scarlet red, yellow and royal blue (he kept the pretty flower which I was glad about!). I was very pleased when Balo, Simza and Arben moved in. This time I was on the *drom* for a lot longer.

*dat**
— father

*daj**
— mother

Shofranka and I took care of the family from then on; we were always on the move to avoid any serious occurrences associated with the war. It was great to live a gypsy family's life with them. Balo and Simza looked after Arben with such great care and they were all such lovely people. My owners both worked with metal and as Balo would make nails, tools and cooking equipment, Simza would plate objects with tin or emboss and engrave jewellery. Every town we came to we would stop at to sell these goods and Balo would also sharpen people's scissors or knives, using his whet-stone wheel — for a small fee. As he grew up, Arben was taught these skills and continued the trade with little help from his *Dat* and *Daj*.

In 1941, the war had not yet ended and we moved on to Clydebank from Abbotsinch. All of the family were trying to ignore the war. Scotland had remained uninjured throughout it, and there was no need for worry. Or so Simza thought. But moving on to Clydebank was a mistake. On the 13th of March, the only sustained German air force attack on Scotland took place. 1200 people were killed in the raids.

This, I assume, included Balo, Simza and Arben (then forty-six years old), who were resting at the bottom of an old oak at the time.



As soon as Shofranka heard those aeroplanes she darted in the opposite direction, leaving all suffering behind us.

We ended up in a field at Glenburn. I felt ashamed of leaving everyone behind but I had not had any control over Shofranka. For two years she and I remained in the same area, moving whenever Shofranka needed a drink from the near-by brook or just when she chose to. Near the end of those two years, Shofranka gnawed her way to freedom and left me... stranded.

An auctioneer then discovered my presence while charting of land I was on. He attached me to this automobile item, I think it must have been a new invention as I had never seen one before. It was really brilliant though, and I had arrived in Barrhead in no time. I spent the night in a box-shaped place that had loads of tools in it, quite different from Balo's. During the night I thought about the gypsies, wondering if they were killed in the raid or if they had survived and what Balo, Simza and Arben were up to now. In the morning I was auctioned.

And the experiences continued. I was bought from the auction by a lovely man, Andrew Wilkins, and I live with him and his son Danny now — I have been here for thirty years. We all stay at a filling station — where automobiles are filled with fuel — which Andrew owns. I have seen more and more cars since being auctioned and they get more impressive (and popular) as time goes by. Andrew and Danny fix these wonders in their garage with the help of plenty of tools. That is their job. It looks quite complicated but they must do it well as the owners of these new inventions always seem satisfied.

 vardo*

— travelling wagon

You might think that I would be envious of these machines that have taken the place of *vardos* like me? Not at all. My time has been; something new has to enjoy the glory. I have had a long lifetime, a lifetime like no other. Wonderful people have cared for me and travelled with me, helping me on my journey through history. And I am sure that I have a lot more adventures to come.

*Glossary of Romani words used.

 Fiction

Rambo on the Moon

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The morning that young Joe MacDonald stepped from the van the sun and the moon were sharing the sky. He stood out amongst the dirt stained workers preparing to begin their day. He was too clean. Each item of his clothing had yet to endure a single day's work. He stood out, and he stood staring at the moon. I watched him as I buckled on my tool belt. I caught a glimpse of Slate Knife McCallum striding across the building site, homing in on the new start. Old Slate Knife wouldn't be long in pulling Joe's head out of the sky and getting it down to the job. He grabbed Joe's hand, turned it palm up and dumped a heap of nails onto the fresh pink skin.

'The moon's never far away, son, and there's always work to be done. If you want to stare at the moon, that's fair enough, do it in your

father's back garden. If you want to work, put your tool belt on and fill it with these. It'll not be long before I'm needing them.'

The youngster had moved from the moon to a handful of nails in the space of a single breath.

When all three of us were set, we left the frost on the ground and ascended the scaffold, lifting and laying our limbs to the sound of hammers. Joe's feet didn't falter as we got higher. It seemed he had a head for heights, which was just as well. The exertion of climbing the scaffold had brought forth my first sweat of the day. When we got to roof level I looked out across the Forth Valley.

'It's a good day to work,' I said, 'crisp and clear.'

'There's a rain coming,' replied Slate Knife, 'mid-afternoon.'

'The weather forecast said it was to be clear.'

'We'll see.' As usual, he was sure of himself.

'Seems like the older you get the further you can see.' I looked down at all the slate that had to be moved from one side of the scaffold to the other.

'It's all in the nose.' He tapped his grizzly old hooter. In fact, right there I noticed how much his nostril resembled one side of a pick axe.

'Well you better breathe through your mouth. Otherwise you'll drag the rain towards us.'



I expected some sort of reply, even a cuff across the ear, which wasn't beyond him, but he just tapped me on the shoulder and pointed behind me. Joe was there, kneeling down in front of a pile of slate. He was looking down intently at something. We crept up beside him. The youngster was staring at a fly that had landed on the top slate. Slate Knife lifted his hand.

'No,' said Joe quietly, *'Don't, can't you see it's rubbing its hands?'*

'Young Rambo,' Slate Knife had the habit of calling anyone under the age of eighteen that. 'Young Rambo,' he said, *'I wouldn't dare hurt something so small and so precious,'* then slapped Joe across the back of the head.

The fly took off, and for an instant was framed by the moon which was now sitting low in the sky. Joe laid his hand on the back of his head and watched the fly zip away.

'Sorry,' he said.

Slate Knife rolled his eyes at me. *'Sorry doesn't move these slates from one place to another. It's your back that'll do that, now start lifting. You can see where they've to go.'* Joe bent to pick up a lift and struggled to get it waist high. He lumbered over the wooden planking of the scaffold like he was struggling to cross the deck of a ship in a high storm.

'Easy there sailor,' I called after him. I took him back to the slate, showed him how to use his knees to get the lift to his shoulder in one smooth movement.

'Less strain on your back if you use your shoulder, and don't carry more than your body wants to. You'll need your back to earn your money.'

If that goes, you're fucked. Make lots of journeys with what you can handle, your strength will build from there. And don't let anyone tell you any different. Break your back for no man. Your hear me?' He nodded once with a stern set to his lips.

'Good,' I said, 'now go.' He struggled but he got the lift to his shoulder. It would come with practice. 'And enjoy yourself,' I shouted at his back, 'at least up here you can see the world. You could be cooped up inside like the joiners.' He looked over his free shoulder at me then, but it was hard to decipher his expression.

I found old Slate Knife cutting down broken bits of slate to tappers.

'Go easy on the lad, for Christ's sake. He's a bit of a dreamer but he's sixteen, it's his first day. You don't want him going to bed tonight dreading tomorrow.'

'A dreamer? If he wanted to be an astrologist or a zoologist he should've stuck in at school, but he didn't, and he's here with us. We can teach him how to make a living but if he doesn't keep his mind on the job he's a danger to himself and a danger to us. The sooner we find out what he's made of, the better.'

'Old Slate Knife McCallum, have you forgotten what it was to be young? Have you forgotten what it was like to run in the woods?'

He looked up at me then. I could see his face, and his eyes, and the lines stretching from his eyes, and the frost covered fields stretching into the distance behind him.

'I remember what it was like to run in the woods,' he said, then set to his task again. I knelt down beside him and picked up a brick



By the time we had stopped for lunch the slate had been shifted. We had struck the chalk lines across the felt and made a good start to slating the roof. Joe had begun to blend in. The half shift had soiled his clean clothes. He walked across the rubble strewn ground with a dip and roll to his shoulders that came partly from exertion, and partly from the sweat that had already begun to freeze on his back. All three of us welcomed the cramped interior of the van with a deep and satisfied sigh. Slate Knife let the engine turn over and switched some power to the heating element. Not too much, though. If the temperature didn't rise gently the skin on our hands and feet would begin to itch and burn.

Joe was jammed between us. He was as thin as a piece of string but as we tried to shift out bodies to collect our flasks I noted how wide his shoulders were. Given proper exercise he would fill out well. It was our policy to always have three clean mugs hidden safely inside the dash. Slate Knife had strong black coffee in his flask and steam drifted upwards from the dark liquid as he poured a moderate measure into each of the mugs. I had let a pot of soup simmer for hours the night before. Plenty of vegetables for goodness and two healthy chunks of smoked rib from the local butcher gave heart to the flavour. We used the plastic cups from the top of our flasks as bowls. Joe watched us from the corner of his eye and imitated our movements as we raised the soup to our lips and paused to let the heat flow over our faces before slurping down the meat and vegetables.

I was speaking into my soup but addressing young Joe when I asked the question.

'Have you got yourself a wee girlfriend son?'

'Yes,' he answered, then blew his breath into his soup to encourage it to cool.

'*What's her name?*' asked Slate Knife.

'*Maria.*'

'*Maria, good, I meant her second name.*'

'*McKenna.*'

Slate Knife set down his coffee and looked out of the window at his right shoulder.

'*I knew her mother. She was a good woman. That's a strong family you're moving into there son, keep a hold of that one.*'

Half Brick McMurphy appeared from the side of the farmhouse and came stomping across the building site towards the van.

'*What's this idiot looking for?*' Slate Knife didn't much care for the Mcmurphys. He just sat there until Half Brick was standing outside his window. Then he still just sat there, facing him through the pane of glass. Half Brick huffed and chapped lightly on the door. Only then did Slate Knife roll down the window and when he did the cold came tumbling into the van.

'*What's happening old man?*'

'*I'm getting cold, that's what's happening.*'

'*We need some extra hands.*'

'We're having our lunch.'

'Young Rambo, go back to the van and get the oilskins, we'll be needing them before long.'

I looked behind me and sure enough there was a dark mass of rain moving over the valley.

We fastened ourselves into the oilskins before we started hammering home the roof irons. The moving mass of falling water came as we were lifting the last and highest baton into place. I could hear every single droplet strike the hood of my waterproof. I was on the ground, passing the batons to Half Brick who was on a set of ladders. Joe was balanced on the baton that was halfway up the roof. Slate Knife was up top. Roof irons are hammered into place and stick out from the roof at right angles. The wooden batons are placed on top of these right angles to form a series of thin platforms for the workers to move up and down the roof. Once the top baton was in place Slate Knife hauled himself onto it. He was shouting something down but the rain was mercilessly pounding the hood of my oilskin. I couldn't hear a word.

I pulled back the hood but he had already passed the message down to Joe so he could relay the words to Half Brick, then to me. Joe's hood was too large for his head. Whenever his head turned inside it the hood would stay static so that every time he turned he found himself looking at the inside of his hood. I had to screw my eyes shut from the force of the falling rain but I could see him struggle with this predicament. It was comical and Half Brick was laughing into the rungs of the ladder. Slate Knife was irate and motioning for him to throw his hood back. When he could handle it no longer Slate Knife leant forward on the baton and reached downwards to pull back Joe's hood himself.



Joe felt the tug at his head. He had no idea where it was coming from and his natural reaction was to jerk away from the pull. He pulled Slate Knife off balance. Half Brick stopped laughing. The old man let go of the hood at once but a wooden baton is a thin area to try and regain your footing. He toppled sideways, landed with his back to the slates and began to slide.

Sliding down a slate roof on your back is no place to be. He twisted onto his stomach so his hands and feet could scabble at the roof. He made a desperate reach for another baton but it only flipped and followed him. When Half Brick saw that man and wood were rushing toward him he started to scamper down the ladder. Joe stretched out, belly to the roof, and grabbed Slate Knife's hand. His fingers, as they clasped the old man's gnarled knuckles, seemed unnaturally thin and pale.

Slate Knife's momentum took Joe with him. Joe kept his grip as he tumbled from his own baton. He landed on the next one down and stuck there. Slate Knife, anchored now, swung across the roof in an arc. The baton that had been following his descent missed him and clattered into Half Brick's ladder. Half Brick landed with a thump on the wet ground but I took no notice of him. I hoisted the ladder in a panic and placed it beneath Slate Knife.

The old man was cursing and swearing and spitting foul words at Joe. I climbed the ladder as fast as I could and helped push him onto the safety of the baton. When he was firmly planted beside the youngster he grabbed him. Seized hold of the head of his oilskin, yanked it away, and screamed:

'Pull back your fucking hood!'

The rain cleared. Half Brick was fine, but sloped home for the day holding a hand to his lower back. Slate Knife insisted we finish our shift even though young Joe's shoulder was giving him pain. Once we were back onto our own scaffold Slate Knife sat the youngster down.

'Young Rambo, if a man is sliding down the roof you never, never, show him your hand. The only thing worse than one man falling, is two men falling. It was virgin's luck that stopped us hitting the ground together.'

'But...'

'But fuck all. If you show a falling man your hand again you won't have the pleasure of living to regret all the mistakes you've yet to make.'

The youngster nodded, with that stern set to his lips again.

We worked in near silence for the remainder of the shift until I looked at my watch and shouted time. The old man wanted to finish his last task while we brushed down the roof and collected the equipment. As we were finishing up, Slate Knife was cutting down some slate on a baton. Joe was crouched beside him and had to stretch sideways for a tool. Maybe a little too much.

I was watching as the old man, without moving his head, reached out and curled two fingers around the inside of the youngster's tool belt. The setting sun was falling behind them.

Simon

Author

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Qualification

Advanced Higher

Simon was furniture.

In the office Simon was a desk. A rolling platform for the keyboard. Sometimes he was a plush easy-chair with wheels and a swivel. At home Simon was a battered and abused floral armchair, blending in beautifully with the wife's three-piece. If the wife had ever let him go down the pub, Simon would have been a barstool.

Today Simon is an elegant but inexpensive pine trunk. His lid is raised in a lacquered salute and dark velvet swathes his innards. Brassy bar handles follow the longer lines of his rectangle and lilies are scattered carefully about his perimeter.

He is a trunk.

He is a coffin.

In death he lies within his own walls,
as in life he lay inside himself.

An elegant black-clad woman weeps gently over the casket. Her thick foundation and waterproof mascara speak of youth dissolved and adulthood postponed. A child of perhaps three years runs volatile around the small room in a suit of expensive black. He fights robots with a swooning lily, swiped from his father's coffin. No one attempts to control him. Another child, six or so, sits bored and confused. No one attempts to console him. The room is otherwise empty but for two or three well-cut suits talking nonchalantly but respectfully down thought-free hands-free headsets.

In the back-right hand corner of the room, a tall stereotype, swaddled in shadows. This man is not so much swathed or suited, as interred in black. His longcoat surrounds his body and brushes ground, fading slightly at the root from frequent contact with the

soil. Against the nighttime of his coat, his face transcends pale, past white to an almost luminous green tinge. An undersized top hat slides threateningly around his skull. Even for an undertaker this seems over the top — and of course this man is an undertaker. If you squint hard enough you can almost see the label from a child's dictionary hanging in the air at his feet — UNDERTAKER.

The undertaker steps forward towards the coffin. The coat ripples around his feet, short flash of white leather, red light from the heel.

As the woman withdraws, this man gently lowers the casket lid, covering the veiled face below, hidden in cloth, too broken to show. One of the faceless men interrupts his hushed conversation to make a farewell speech, opening and closing his mouth to allow words to slip out over his teeth and dribble down his chin, clichés and ready-mades from Eulogies For Idiots.

'Super chap...much missed...around the office he...with us today...rum old world eh...' man in black suit says.

Farewells complete, Top Hat pulls a lever beneath his fibrous fingers. The conveyor belt below the coffin kicks itself awake with an abused grinding and twin steel doors swing halting open at the belt's far end. Flames lap beyond, excreting sudden light into the room. Simon trundles into the furnace and the room becomes once again clinical as the doors swing home.



The Jug and the Shadows

Author

Pamela Nicolson

Centre

Reid Kerr College

QualificationHNC

Many years ago, a hundred and fifteen to be exact, a woman stepped slowly off a dark steam train and onto a red velvet carpet, helped down by a servant. She strolled under a canopy of parasols, held by barefooted black men in linen shirts and kilts, and into the little palace, recently completed for the princess's first visit to South Africa. A quick glance around; she tightened her slight smile and followed a servant to her rooms, where she sat regally in an ornate mahogany chair, lifting a finger very slightly. The lady in waiting rushed over to Anna's side and listened to her demands. She was to have some servants to fan her constantly during the day. She expected things to run exactly the same as at her home in England, especially the cleaning. And then she cleared her throat and spoke louder for all the servants lined around the room to hear.

'I expect that all members of my staff, whether hired or ... housed, shall be extremely careful about hygiene. I expect them to wash their hands and feet as often as possible and to take regular baths, especially before touching my clothes or food.' She turned her cheek to the lady in waiting, who scuttled off to the side, fanned her flushed cheeks and sighed, *'That will be all.'*

The staff did not move. She stopped fanning and looked incredulously at them.

'You may go.'

The servants pushed to get out of the room as fast as possible. The princess sat back and thought of the following night's grand welcoming party.

A woman with ebony skin, so dark the moonlight made it appear silver, straightened her flowered pinafore and pushed her hair behind her ear before entering the chambers of the princess.

She tiptoed to the princess's bed and gingerly laid out an immaculately clean silk linen gown.

Anna sat in her sleeping gown at her dressing table, applying kohl round her eyes with scented fingers. She remained facing the mirror when the slave entered, eyeing her reflected movements until she left, noticing with a sneer a stray hair hanging over Maria's face. As the door shut softly, Anna rose and reached for the dress. She felt the crushed silk and pressed muslin beneath her fingertips and was fascinated by the intricate lace design of the covering lace shroud, so unlike the uniform flowers of home. The geometric figures made her think of the games she had seen children play on the train to the Transvaal. The local women had given her many gifts from their villages, but had been trained in lace by British seamstresses to make this stunning masterpiece for the princess. Anna had been impressed and was as excited about wearing it the following night as the villagers were excited about pleasing her and seeing her too. Now, as she examined it at arm's length, she saw black smudges where she had rubbed the silk.

Her lip curled in a snarl. She ran to the door and it sprang open like retractable fangs as she hissed at Maria, sitting quietly in front of the door. Maria, startled, jumped to attention. Anna swivelled on her heel and stalked back into the room.

'Come!'

Maria tried to walk in after her as quietly as she could, but she was half-bent over, her stomach muscles contracted with nerves to the point where she was going to vomit.

'Did you clean this?' Anna held the dress with her thumbs and forefingers, pinkies in the air.

'Yes ma'am.'

'Then what is this?' She indicated the black marks.

'I ... I,' Maria stuttered.

'You... you. You what? Do you speak English? How did you clean it?'

'I ... I put it in the cold water and leave. Then I put in warm water and I carefully clean. Then I spend half the hour to dry and press. Teto check and I bring ... bring here.'

Maria was shaking a little now.

'Let me see your hands.'

Anna scratched Maria as she grabbed her smooth black hands, and when she saw them to be perfectly clean, she sneered.

'They're filthy.'

Maria's eyes widened.

'No ma'am.'

'No? No?!'

'I'm sorry m'am. I just washed them, ma'am!'

Maria's voice had risen.

'Your filthy hands have ruined my dress!' Anna threw the garment on the floor and stamped on it as Maria lifted her chin to make her tears afraid to fall.

'Get out of here and a take a bath. Stop your snivelling. Don't let this happen again.'

Anna turned her back on Maria and went to her dressing table, picking up her jewel encrusted comb. After a few minutes she noticed the silence and opened her window to hear the crickets who promptly adjourned their evening orchestra. The moon shone grey in Africa, she noted, shutting her window and facing her empty room. She let the candle burn out that night.



The Legend

Author

Gurpal Stickland

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Qualification

HNC

'It's raining out. George, button your coat.'

'I'm so happy. I don't feel the cold.'

'It's damp and it goes for your bones.'

'You sound like my mother. I'm forty-five years of age. I've been looking after myself for a long time, y'know.'

'Och aye, so you have, and I'd like you around for a lot longer. Will I see you tomorrow?'

'Wild horses couldn't keep me away. Good night.'

A kiss and then, closing the door behind me, I walked, no ... the truth is ... skipped.

Down the steps into drizzling Edinburgh. Smiling at the clouds, stepping jauntily onto the wet pavement. A pleasant afternoon with a friend. The weather couldn't deflate my mood, although, now that I was outside and the cold hit me, I could see that it was becoming dark and I should hurry. George Street was deserted except for the two men standing on the corner of South Charlotte Street. They looked as if they were deep in conversation over a pressing matter.

'Got a match, sir?' the taller of them spoke to me as I passed.

'No, I'm sorry I don't.'

'Miserable night', the other added.

'Mild for February, I think. Good evening,' I touched my cap and continued across the road to Charlotte Square, making my way towards Hope Street.

The trees hung dripping over the pavement concealing the light of the day. I heard footsteps behind me, they quickened and something made me turn. The tall one was swinging a lead pipe at me. I tried to duck but he hit me square on the side of my head. I heard a yell, felt myself fall. My knees cracked as they hit the pavement. I felt boots thudding into me. Why me? I haven't hurt anyone. I don't have money. Take what I have. For God's sake,



stop! My head spun, I felt blood in my mouth, and I seemed to fall into any abyss, into complete darkness. I thought a long time had passed and then, from the depths, I heard voices.

'Who is it?'

'I think it's George Chalmers, the artist.'

'What a mess. Who would do this?'

'We need to get him to the Infirmary.'

And now all I wanted was to get away from the pain, to be safe, warm and loved. In my mind, I found myself running, a boy again, not knowing where I was at first, but then I recognised the path to Granny Torrie's cottage. I was late and my head ached, but I disregarded that because I had to hurry. Granny would wonder where I was. She wouldn't want to start without me. The others would be there already. The path was wet, with here and there a puddle. My feet dragged and I couldn't run fast like I used to. And then I'm at the gate. I have to lean on it, although I'm not ill. So why am I stumbling? I reach the door and put my hand to the latch. But I was never poorly as a child. Something is not right. I open the door quietly and peep around it.

Everyone is there: Euan and Fiona with Marie, their sister. Fiona and Marie are wearing their pinafores because they're always working for their stepmother. Euan's wearing his hat because he loves it, not because he's cold. Maggie is sitting on her favourite stool. She has new clothes because her Dad's the coalman, and she gets whatever she wants. Jamie's on a mat on the floor. He can't walk and he isn't growing properly. His legs and arms are too thin and his head's like a baby's. He loves coming to Granny's. David will have carried him. That's David, sitting on his box, in front of the window with his arm around Maisie. She's a scaredy cat, frightened of everything, especially 'The Legend'. It's my favourite of all the tales that Granny tells. We all love it and never tire of

hearing it. The way Granny tells it, it seems new every time, and we're always deliciously afraid long before the end.

She's on her chair near the fire, wearing her hat and shawl, leaning forward, her hands helping to tell the story. She turns her head to smile at me and I know it's alright, she'll make sure I haven't missed anything. I tiptoe round to the back. Everyone's eyes are transfixed on her face so they hardly notice me. This is my favourite of all places. I could spend eternity here. The fire is low and it's warm but not enough to be uncomfortable.

I feel sore all over my chest. My face must show the pain but I keep my eyes on Granny and she continues telling 'The Legend'. I'm trying to concentrate. It's the exciting part where the monster from the loch takes Heather away. I hear voices in my head saying, *'It's no use. He's too badly hurt.'*
'Such a pity. He's not old and a great friend and generous too.'

The pain is taking over and it makes me grind my teeth and I slip off the box and onto my knees. Now I'm staring at Granny without hearing her but I know the story's finished.

She's coming towards me with her arms open. In my head I hear, *'He's gone. There's no heartbeat.'*
'Goodbye, George.'

Granny kneels down and touches my head and the pain is gone. She smiles and takes my arm. I'm able to stand up. She hugs me. I'm so relieved and happy.

Granny says, *'Georgy-boy. Your journey is over and you've come home.'*
'Granny, I painted you. I painted us, listing to 'The Legend''
'I know and I'm so proud of you, my little Georgy. Welcome home. To the safest place you know. Welcome to 'The Legend''

The Man on the Train

Author

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CentreGrantown
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QualificationIntermediate 2

Yesterday I met a man on a train who told me that, two months ago, his only daughter had taken the elevator up to the top of a tall building in Japan. And jumped off ... I listened to his regrets, to his hurts, and my only regret at the time was that I hadn't managed it myself.

I had tried. My very hardest. I'd even written a note. Not that anyone would find it. The only person that ever knocked on the door of my dingy, dull little flat was the rent collector. And even he never set more than a few steps inside ... only to decide whether the odd, unsanitary stench — as he called it — was me, or it. Not that it would have mattered much whether it was found or not — it's not like I've anyone to miss me. In fact, I don't think anyone would even realise I was gone. If I had succeeded ... if my breeches hadn't caught on the blasted metal handrails and I'd actually plunged from the high rooftops of the London flats, maybe then someone would've noticed me, my mangled corpse delicately sprawled upon the pavement — or would they simply walk over me?

But I couldn't even do that right, and once again became a laughing stock. For the people who found me, for the people who they called for help and then for the people who were called by them, 'just for a bloody laugh'. Perfect. My life on a whole — bloody perfect. It had always been that way. Ever since I could write my name. For me, it started with name-calling and never ended. I now have an unforgiving hatred towards my parents. The ones who brought me into this world; the ones who raised me for the first ten years of my life; the ones who named me and the ones who left, as soon as it got hard. As soon as the money trees stopped growing and the bank stopped loaning, they ran. And I was left on the front doorstep of an orphanage, with only a note and the



clothes I wore. Scared, confused and completely and utterly alone.

I was fed up. Fed up with failing. Fed up with the deep nauseating feeling of regret. I would do it. I wasn't going to fail this time; I wasn't going to return home swimming in shame and self pity; I would end it — finally. A long dull road it may have been but finally the end had come. Suppressing a quiver of the lips, which many called a 'smile' — the word tasted peculiar on my tongue — I gathered my things with a little more haste than I anticipated and a lot more than I had memory of ever using before.

What I needed didn't take long to gather: I'd dedicated an entire drawer to them. My knife. Lying on the very top, only small, broken off from some overly used penknife many years ago, but very precious to me. Not that I could honestly say it had been used on anything other than old cheese packets — but it still looked impressive and is somewhat reassuring to have. The rope. Again, never been used...yet. And, finally: the pills. A small clear glass bottle, long rid of its label with an equally small lid, containing a surprisingly large number of minute yellow pills, was lodged at the very back of my drawer — in shame. They, unlike the knife, had been used before, to my humiliation. I'd trusted them to help me, help me cross over the bridge into death; but they'd deceived me. It was only later when my stomach had finally decided it had punished me enough, and allowed me to stop running to the bathroom every two minutes, I really scrutinised the small print on the bottom, only to find out to my horror that they were in fact a vitamin supplement! Some other objects nestled in there, too, but I'd already made my decision.

Walking through the back streets, I felt an odd motion in my stomach, leaving my legs and arms tingling and me feeling

sufficiently ill. However, it did nothing to slow my pace or my mind. Now the decision had been made it seemed a large weight had been lifted. Even though I'd made such a decision on many occasions before, for the first time, it felt real. Perhaps I'd purposely sabotaged my earlier attempts: a subconscious way of telling me I wasn't ready? Perhaps. Then, again, perhaps not.

The streets seemed to be whizzing by almost as if I were in a train or some other vehicle, watching myself through a window of time. Floating above my body, I seemed to shadow my physical self. Every movement seemed so distant, my body numb to the thudding of my feet as they collided with the cold paving. It didn't take long to arrive where I wanted to be. The woods were quiet, so quiet, but not in an eerie way.

A strange tranquillity followed me as I walked in, deeper and deeper. I craned my head upwards, searching for a suitable branch. The rope had already somehow found its way from my knapsack into my hands, now sweating with the tight grip they'd taken. That momentary lapse in search of a good branch allowed me to catch a glimpse of something black and shiny in the undergrowth. Bending closer, it became obvious it was a man's shoe. My stomach tightened. I had a good idea what I'd find next. Looking up, eyes slowly following the line of the nearest tree trunk, sure enough, I was not mistaken.

I dropped the rope. Hanging there, limply — the man on the train.



The Night Train

Author

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Largs Academy

Qualification

Standard Grade

'Nopesy grandma. I'm sures I'll be okay. Nope, not too cold and yesh I knows my way home. Don't worry, don't worry. Mandy's a big girl now. Okay, okay, I'll be really, really careful. Don't worry grandma. Takey cares.'

With a large stride, Mandy stepped boldly out of the warm, welcoming house, pulling the door closed behind her. A strong, sweet smell of cinnamon drifted around her, bidding her farewell. Outside, the air was cool, and the sky smooth and black, like silk hung across the stage of the world. Mandy shivered slightly and pulled her scarf tighter round her neck. She was small even for her age, and against the tall crooked trees, writhing and outstretching as though trying to grasp the moon, she seemed even smaller, like a little cloaked pixie. Her hair, invisible under her little red hood was hanging in soft golden curls at her shoulder. Suddenly aware that she was alone, her intelligent sapphire eyes flitted around the forest as she stepped cautiously onto the narrow dirt path. The magnificent full moon was her guide as she trekked and trudged until finally she arrived at the train station, a crooked little hut offside the uneven path.

Mandy seated herself down on a small rock beside the platform edge, embraced her knees in her skinny arms and made herself comfortable. She waited patiently for the sign of a passing train but nothing disturbed her until her heavy eyes finally closed and she dosed off, dreaming of the warm fireplace and the sweet scent of cinnamon cookies fresh from her grandma's most treasured possession, the ancient stone-oven.

She was startled suddenly by a sound of a whistle. She sat bolt upright and scanned the area. Catching a glimpse of light in the horizon, she squinted her eyes and peered at the rail. Something was silently rushing along the tracks, swishing past bends and

out-running the trees and bushes. Something wasn't right about it though. For one thing it was yellow, striped with brown, and huge with large round bulbous headlights, and it didn't have wheels. But most of all, most importantly of all, it was furry. The thing stopped in front of Mandy, whose eyes were so large it almost looked as though they had fallen out of their sockets.

Without warning a gap appeared on the train and a trill voice echoed in the scarce countryside.

'This is Isotille Station. Thank you for using the Night Train. The next stop is Mirandatown Station. Please step back. The door will be closing in nine seconds.'

Mandy stared in awe as a large furry paw reached out and lifted her onto the train, dropping her with a thud onto a soft bouncy chair. The paw vanished as suddenly as it appeared. Colour returned slowly to the girl's face as she broke into a mischievous grin. Overexcited and bewildered, she laughed and jumped up and down on the seats, making them squeal and squeak until she was so exhausted she collapsed on the bench.

The passenger beside her turned with a face of disgust and shifted away from her, his large fluffy tail swaying from side to side as he hobbled on the moving floor. Mandy laughed hysterically and skipped after the creature until it stopped abruptly and turned. The impact caught her off guard and caused her to bounce off its flabby belly and land on the floor. Towering above her, the enormous creature turned to face her and glared at her through huge green eyes.

'Whaddaya want? I ain't got nothin' for ya, so just move along, eh kiddo?' growled the huge blue cat. Mandy giggled, jumped to her



feet, prodded at his jiggly beer-belly and wrapped her twig-like arms around him. *'You're funny,'* said Mandy, yanking at the long swishy tail, *'What are you?'*

The creature stopped glaring and turned away as though genuinely hurt by the question. He made his way to the seat on the other side of the carriage and sat, his head hung in shame. His eyes watered and a tear, sparkling like an emerald in the dim fur-lined space, slogged down his fat face.

'I'm a no man now. A ain't got no place to go. 'Em things, horrid things conquered our kingdom. We've lost to 'em now. Now we're all homeless. Nowhere to go.' Mandy seated herself beside the creature and rested her head on his large plump arms.

'Where d'you comes from?' she asked, her eyes closed.

'It don't matter now. I ain't going back. A can't go back ne'more,' replied the giant cat. But Mandy was not prepared to take this as an answer, and excitedly urged him to tell her his story. He did so obediently, glad to be heard and fussed over for a change.

And thus she began to learn of mysterious kingdoms she had never realised existed, where magic did exist once and animals and wondrous, magnificent creatures all lived in harmony, and war between inhabitants had long since ceased to exist. But, now these kingdoms are destroyed and all the inhabitants homeless. Perhaps some will find a new home, a new place to survive but others may not be as lucky. We the humans, so destructive and harmful to nature, are the ones who turned the forest animals out of their rightful homes in order to satisfy our own selfish greed.

The train stopped. The cat looked at the sleeping girl, nodded with a smile and stepped out of the train, into the dull rainy streets of the city.

The Vanishing Hitchhiker

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QualificationStandard Grade

The graveyard gate creaked open, moaning. He stepped forward and peered through the fog which had completely engulfed the horizon.

'*Why am I here?*' he wondered to himself. He began walking towards the great aisles of gravestones. There must have been hundreds of the stone tablets, but somehow he knew which one he was looking for. He felt like he was being drawn to it...

He was called John Smith, and he was driving home to Barrhead after visiting his sister in Ayr. He had been driving for half an hour, and it was an hour's drive, so he was looking forward to getting home to his father fairly soon. It was Boxing Day, and the radio had been playing the new Band Aid single for the last five minutes. Suddenly, heavy rain and hail started hitting off of the windscreen. John turned on the wipers, and then realised that he should turn on the lights as well. It was very dark for this time in the evening, even at this time of year. At that moment, static started interfering with the radio. John tried changing the station, but it was the same on every channel.

'Ah well, that song went on for too long anyway,' he muttered to himself. Then, into the distance he saw a lone figure standing at the side of the road. It was a young woman as white as a sheet. She looked so frail and helpless standing there alone, with the relentless elements rebounding against her. Although she didn't seem to be trying to hitch a lift (in fact, she didn't seem to be doing anything at all), he felt that he had to stop and offer her one. He would feel awful later on if he didn't. He stopped the car and lowered the window, feeling the biting chill that flew in from the outside. He leaned out of the car and asked her where she was going and whether she would like a lift. She thanked him, and said that she would. As she walked towards the car and clambered

into the back seat, John realised that she was limping badly. He asked her again where she was going, and she said that her home was only a few miles away. Just before starting the car again, John realised something.

'You might want to buckle up your seatbelt', he told the girl.

'No. I'm alright,' she replied.

As he drove the car towards her destination, John could feel the warmth draining away from the car. It was freezing. He watched the temperature gauge. Four degrees, three, two, one, zero, minus one... This was unreal. What on earth was happening? John looked at the back seat. The girl was shivering furiously; she must be frozen through. He took off his jacket and handed it to her.

'Thank you...' she moaned quietly.

John continued to drive, trying his best to ignore the flickering headlights, the icy windows, and the ever decreasing temperature. He soon arrived at a small house in a cut-away at the side of the road. There wasn't anywhere else for miles.

'This must be the place', thought John. Just then, the radio crackled back into life halfway through another tedious Christmas song. The temperature started steadily rising and the headlights stopped flickering. John turned around to face the back seat.

'Here we are —' He stopped mid-sentence. The back seat was empty. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

John panicked. Had she fallen out of the car? No — he was being ridiculous. The doors were securely locked and the car had been moving the whole time. Surely he would have noticed if she had somehow left the car. But where was she? He unlocked the doors and stepped out of the car. He looked at the house that the



girl had led him to, and decided to go inside. He couldn't leave the situation hanging in the air like this. He needed answers. John knocked on the door, and waited. There was no reply. Drenched with the rain, he was about to leave when it slowly opened. 'Hello?' It was an old woman. She looked like she hadn't had much sleep.

'I'm sorry to bother you at this time of night, but something rather strange has just happened to me,' he explained.

She invited him in and he told her the story. Although he expected her to laugh, she did no such thing. She just looked very sad. 'Wait one second,' she said, and retreated to another room. She returned with a photograph frame in her hand, and handed it to him. 'Is this the girl you saw?' It was, and he told her so. She sighed.

'She is my daughter. She died in a car crash on the way home from a Christmas party. That was a year ago today. I think that her spirit is still trying to come home.'

John was stunned. He couldn't believe what this woman was saying, but he'd seen the evidence for himself. The girl in the photo was the same girl. He apologised again for bothering her and walked back to his car. On the way home, he felt a chill and realised that he was not wearing his jacket. He had given it to the girl.

The next day, John had still not been able to get the girl out of his head. He went to the local library and searched the archives for a copy of the paper of a year ago to the day. He soon found it, the story of a girl who had been killed in a car crash on her way home, not far from where he had picked her up. He left the library and went back to his car. There was one more thing that he had to check.



The graveyard gate creaked open, moaning. He stepped forward and peered through the fog which had completely engulfed the horizon.

‘Why am I here?’ he wondered to himself. He began walking towards the great aisles of gravestones. There must have been hundreds of the stone tablets, but somehow he knew which one he was looking for. He felt like he was being drawn to it.

And then he saw it. A grave that stood apart from the others. And different from the others, because his jacket was draped over it.

Fiction

Horse Power

Author

Allan R Lennie

Centre

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Grammar School

Qualification

Intermediate 2

There wis an almighty clatter, I sprang up in me bed and lucked roond. Everything seemed to be in place. Then I teen anither sweep o’ the whole room, puss must hiv knocked sumtheen ouwer in the lobby. I jist about leapt off me bed when the grandfather clock chimed, Ding, Ding sivin times. I wid hiv tae git up and dae the byres, fur am needin tae day a thresheen oh oats this mornen and hid ah taks time. So I scrambled oot oh me bed and climmered ower tae the wardrobe and gecked inside luckin fur me claes I teen aff me sark, long-johns and bed cep. I halled on me vest and shirt, got me wolley gansey and tweed troosers on. I unearthed me socks that aunty Lil had knitted tae me last Christmas oot oh the chest-o’-draars and pulled them on. I could smell the porridge fae the

feet oh the stair and the aroma fae the kitchen wis delicious and fair meed me mooth water. I wandered in tae the kitchen still half a sleep me mither hid the whole o' the kitchen table set oot fur wur breakfast, the cups and saucers and bowls fur wur porridge. Mighty Mithers porridge fur yur breakfast fair keeps yi warm on a cowl'd morneen. Before I ate, I geed and gave me face a dyke way the face cloot tae wackin me sell up, I sat doon at the table. Mither dished up the porridge so hid wis coolin before the rest o' the family came through fur their breakfast. They came slowly wan by wan. Firstly Fither, then uncle Bob and aunty Lil and then me sister Margaret, , they all sat at the table and fither said grace afore we started tae ate wur breakfast. I glaepid mine so I could go oot and git things ready fur fither and Bob comin oot tae help. Hid wis gitin a fair heat in the kitchen asweel, I jist cudna stick the hate any longer so aff I geed and pat me rubber boots on and geed awa oot tae the byres.

Up the closs I geed, what a bonny, peaceful, winters morneen hid wis. The blackbirds wur singin in the trees. Deer Soond wis crisp clear blue and Auskerry wis prominent in the distance. The sky wis still dull but the sun wis jist beginin tae peepin ower the Mull Heed. Sum change fae that wind and rain we hid on Thursday night hid wis sumeen else. I geed roond tae the stable tae git Bessie wir Clydesdale horse oot and harness her tae the cart. I teen her roond tae the stack yard in front oh the hoose as we needed tae git the sheaves fur dayin the thresheen. Fither and Bob met me doon bye the barn way wur dog Mirk. This wis tae help me build the sheaves on the cart. They took Mirk wae them becis aboot a stack there wis alwis the odd rat and Mirk wis most fairful good at catchin them. Fither and Bob forked the sheaves up tae me as I built them on, wae got as many built on the cart as possible tae safe hivin tae tak twa trips. As Fither and Bob forked the sheaves



Mirk sat sternly watchin and waitin fur the meerist twitch or sign o' a rat. All o' a sudden Mirk fled in tae the stack and there wis a crunch like the thraain o' a ducks neck. Mirk sat and scoffed the rat. Hid wis right fine tae git rid oh that dirty vermin fae a roond about ur steeden and no hiv them chowin jute sacks and oats tae pieces. That wis us noo we hid the cart loaded, so I teen Bessie roond tae the barn way the cart. Fither and Bob walked back roond tae giv me a hand tae unload the cart. Bessie geed intae the barn and stopped next tae the back oh the mill whar we forked all the sheaves of the cart tae ahint the chaffy box ready tae fork up on tae the shave board and intae the back oh the mill. Wance we got that by way, I took Bessie roond tae the stable unharnessed her fae the cart and lead her back in the stable. I combed and groomed her coat, scraped the dung fae ahint her feet, loaded hid ah on the borrow and gave her some hiy and oats. I nipped doon to the middeen climmered up the plank and dumped the dung oot oh the borrow and geed back up tae the stable way the borrow.

As usual I went ower tae the sloosh oh the milldam and watched the ducks sweemin awiy happily oot in the middle oh the millpond, when I looked doon in the water I cud see twathrie eels and brandies sweemin aboot. I liked watchin the gabliks in the milldam. The wap tae release the sloosh needed tae be screwed up tae allow the mill wheel tae turn and mak the watter wheel o' the mill turn, so I screwed hid up. 'Squeek squeek' hid geed and finally the watter rushed fae underneath the sloosh. The mill leed began tae flood and fill up, so I fled back roond tae the barn in a clatter tae help Fither and Bob git the mill runnin. I jumped up on the chaffy box and climmered up on the sheave board, Bob pulled the leaver which tensioned the mill belt tae allow the mill tae run. Fither forked the sheaves up tae me, when I cut the strings o' them and fed thum intae the back oh the mill. Everytime a sheave geed

through the mill it let off a loud brrroom noise and the stray and oats appeared oot o' the mill. Bob caught the oats in jute bags fae the grain shoot and made sure the mill wis runnin properly. It wis a tierin job endlessly forkin and feedin sheave efter sheave in tae the mill but efter an oor and a half we wur nearly done. The milldam wis jist aboot dry and we widna hiv hin very much power tae drive the mill if we hidna stopped. Wae'd hin a good morneens thresheen which should lest fur another week. Fither and me geed tae feed and clean oot the kye when Bob tied all the strae up in tae winleenss. He took a bunch o' strae, twisted each end and tied the ends tae gither tae giv a neat buch o' strae. I still didna hiv the nack that he did oh gittin a neat tidy winleen.



In the hoose Mither, Lil and Margaret wur cleanin up efter breakfast. Lil and Mither geed oot and collected thur eggs oot oh the owld widen henny hooses fur the van wis cumin fur them this efternoon way the cheese and butter they had made yesterday too. Wan by wan they collected the eggs oot oh the four owld widen henny hooses intae strae baskets and teen them back in tae the hoose fur washeen. Hid wis the job that me and Margaret despised the most washin the eggs but luckily fur me as I wis cleanin oot the byres the day. All the watter hid been used in the hoose. So Margaret hid tae nip oot tae the well in the gerdeen fur sum watter. She got the steel bucket and tied a rop tae hid, she lifted the o' the well up lowered the bucket in tae hid allowed hid tae fill up. She then hauled the bucket back oot oh the well wance hid wis full, shut the lid and heeded back in tae the hoose and wash the eggs. As she washed the eggs, Lil dried them and put them in sections ready to tae be boxed. Mither on the other-hand geed oot tae the milky hoose and got the salted pork oot of the barrel o' salted watter ready to roast fur wir dinner. She then placed the lid back on the barrel and teen the pork roast in tae the hoose. She placed

hid in a tin she laggered hid in mustard tae season hid and stuck hid in the oven o' the stove tae cook fur dinner.

The fire wisna heat enough so she shuffled twathrie more peats on tae give sufficient heat fur the pork tae cook. Margaret and Lil hid feenneeshed washin the eggs and hid them all boxed. Lil started tae pare Golden Winder tatties when Margaret geed oot tae the gerdeen fur Kale, she washed the hid, chopped hid ah up and placed hid in a pan ready fur gan on the stove at half eleven. Mither though wis noo creamin butter and sugar ready to mix in floer and eggs fur steamed pudding me favourite.

Outside we jst hid the middle byre tae clean, feed neeps tae the stots and heefers and git neeps fae the field before dinner. Fither pat the last o' the neeps in tae the cutter and whapped roond the wheel which turned the big roond blade tae slice the neeps fur the baests as he turned the cutter hid wis slurp slurp as the juicy neeps wur cut up. He filled two wire baskets sharin wan basket atween the stots and another atween the heefers. I brushed all the sharn doon fae the stalls and the back o' the kyes feet and off the wak in tae the uddler. Yi hid tae watch ursel about the younger baests as sometimes they could gae a fair keek and giv yi a singer o' a sore leg. I shuveled all the sharn in tae the borrow and dumped hid in the mideen I wheeled the borrow back up tae the stable and parked hid aside Bessie.

By the time I hid the byres cleaned oot, Bob hid the last oh the strae gathered intae winleens and fither hid fed the last o' the kye fed. So I lousened Bessie and got her oot oh the stable and harnessed her back up tae the cart. Bessie lucked a bit dull and stiff like but she soon perked up wance we hid her harnessed tae the cart. We geed oot the road tae the Brecky Field whar the neeps wis,

bit Bessie jist wisna her usual sell. I said to Fither, *'Whits is wrong wae wir Bessie'* and he said *'am no sure but will need tae stop so I can hiv a luck at her'*. Then all o' a sudden Bessie fell wae wan almighty clatter on tae the road. Bob and me seen her startin tae keel ower and we scarpered ower the side o the cart before hid tipped way is. By the time we got roond tae her she wis gaeing her last keeks and there wis not desh thing iny o' is could dae tae help her she wis a goner. Fither said, *'beuy I think hid must hiv been her ticker whits packed up as it wis fairly sudden and queek'*. *'Bessie she cant be deed'* I kept sayin hid tae mesel. *'We've hin her fur the last tane years she cant be!'* Fither said I doot min she's gone and theres nothin any o' is can do about hid. Bob said the only thing that we can do is git her of the raod ready tae be burried the morn. So we geed doon the road tae wur neebour John Taylor fae Sandesquoy tae ask him if he wid cum way his gelding tae help is pull her off the road. John very kindly came up with his gelding pulled Bessie aff the road and intae the Manse park whar she wis gan tae be burried the morn.

The next day, wae were all still shocked at Bessie's passing, but we had tae pull wursels tae gither and day a days wark. So Bob agreed tae stiy at home and do the byres while fither and me dug the grave fur wur Bessie. It took us two oors tae dig the grave because the grund wis that stoney, but finally we got hid finished. As we dug the grave I reflected back on all the good times I hid way Bessie. I still mind the day she wis born, hid wis a cowld winters morneen in December, I geed oot tae the stable in morneen and there she wis lyin on the floor still weet after Jimima her mither hid foaled her durin the nite. I also mind the wiy she used tae snort at yi if yi didna pet and groom her after gayin her hiy, she really wis a freck o'dirt. She wis a tremendous horse, there wis hardly a job that she cudna dae fae plooin tae cartin in sheaves.

Yas she wisna only a horse bit she wis also me freend, I doot she'll be sadly missed by is all. John came up fae Sandesquoy way his gelding wance we feeneshed digin and pulled wur Bessie intae her grave. The whole family came oot and said their last good byes. I fund it hard when way shuvled earth ower her body, I felt a tear fall doon me cheek, I wid nevere see her again 'me poor Bessie'. Fither turned tae me when we hid the grave filled in. He said 'weel beuy, I think will hiv tae move way the times and purchase wursel a tractor'. 'Will no need tae muck the tractor oot, feed it or groom it!'



A' Bhothag

Author

Kristina MacDonald

Centre

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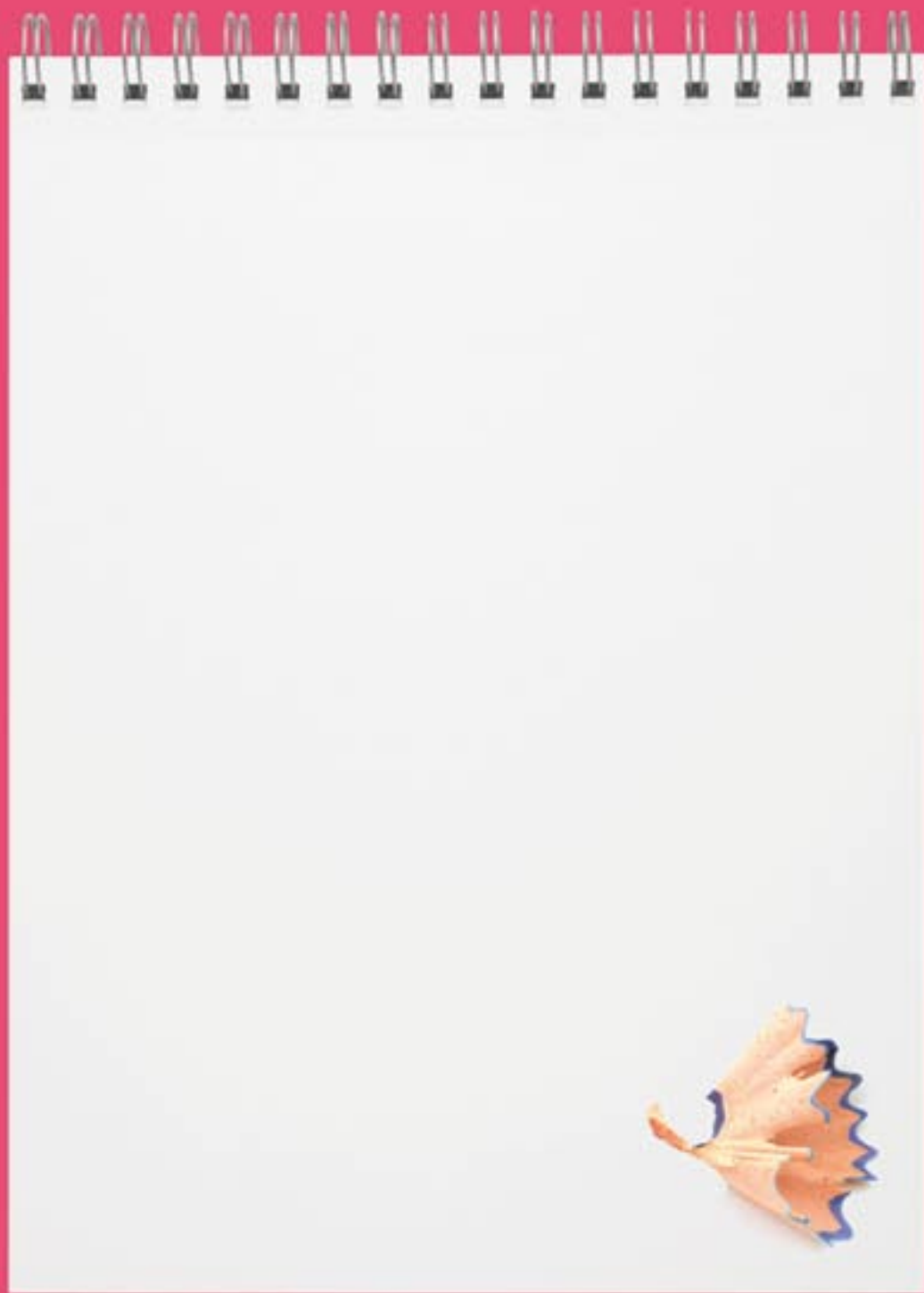
Bha mi an sin, 'sa bhothaig, leam fhìn, nuair a thoisich e. Bha mi a' suidhe a' coimhead a mach an uinneag agus bha mi ag radh cho snog 'sa bha an oidhche. Ach beagan an deidh sin dh'fhàs e gu math dorcha.

Chuala mi fuaim, cho eagalach agus thionndaidh mi mun cuairt. Bha an t-uisge a' dòrtadh sìos. Dhùin mi mo shùilean agus dhùin mi na cuairtearan. Shìn mi sìos air mo leabaidh.

Bha am fuaim a' fàs nas àirde agus nas àirde! Choimhead mi a mach agus bha dealanaich san adhar agus tairneanach. Bha na sgothan cho dorcha ri poll. Bha fàileadh a' tighinn a steach. 'S e adhar blatha a bh'ann agus bha e gu math doirbh d' anail a tharraing.

Annas a' bhothag bha e gu math dorcha air sgath 's nach robhsolais ann.

Shuidh mi an sin, mar luchag a' caoineadh.



Non-Fiction

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When I was Writer in Residence in Easterhouse I had difficulty at first in getting school pupils writing. Until I discovered that, if I asked them to write about football, or concerts, or fashion — then the writing came tumbling in. There is a belief that somehow ‘real’ writing means fiction, lyrical poems, heartfelt short stories. But young people’s real lives are full of drama, dilemma, wonder — as these examples show so clearly. Everyday experience is the starting point for all writing, and thought. To be able to represent yourself, and the lives of those around you, is a crucial skill. Non-fiction — you couldnae make it up.

A lesson in frustration

Author

Natasha Hosie

Centre

Hillhead
High School

Qualification

Advanced Higher

Many people have strange beliefs in life, but I don't hold with most of them. I don't believe that aliens come and experiment on people; guardian angels don't protect and watch over us; witches and wizards are things that seem preposterous; out of body experiences can be explained by science. Grand conspiracy theories never hold my interest for too long and I take ideas about spirits and ghosts with a pinch of salt. There is one area, however, where I am out there with the lunatic fringe. I believe in curses.

The reason behind this, you see, is that I am in fact cursed. As ridiculous as it sounds it is indeed very true. I know of nothing I did to deserve it and there is no way to be rid of it. Mine is a curse of biology, a curse of the mind. It doesn't manifest itself in blotches or pox on my skin; there is no outward sign. Nor does it bring me bad luck that strikes at the worst possible moment. It is my constant companion and what it does do is far worse. My curse is dyslexia and everything it brings with it.

One of the most recognisable symptoms of my curse is the effect it has on my reading and writing. My ability to recognise words and repeat them in some form whether it be orally or written. For years English teachers have been relentlessly drumming spelling rules into my head just for me to forget them a week later. It's as if my brain doesn't want to conform to the way that things are done. It wants to go off on its own tangent; to do things the way it thinks they should be done, spell things the way it thinks they should be spelt. This normally constitutes in an extra 'e' being added to the end of a word or doubling a letter in the middle of a word when adding an ending. But there are times when it goes way out to left field and everything starts to turn into phonetics. 'Why not?' says my brain 'This is how you say it so why not spell it this way?' it reasons. 'This is simpler. There's only one thing to remember,



and life is too complicated already. At this my sense of reason kicks in its two cents: *'That's true'* reason says 'there's already too much to remember' and the brain nods eagerly at this. So the voices of my better angels are once again shouted down, overpowered by the hold that the curse has on me. Possibilities become 'Possibilités', people become 'peepil'; very soon 'gestion' and 'wurk' come to join the party and by this point all bets are off on what's coming next.

The task of always having to concentrate on spelling correctly is one that is not unlike doing algebra. You have half of the sum and you know what it's meant to add up to but you are not quite sure what the other pieces are supposed to be. There is no way to describe the difficulty I have trying to read or write simple pieces of work, and the only way to describe the relief I feel when I am allowed to write the way I want is that it's not unlike coming up for air after being trapped under water. The only way I can get across how difficult the curse makes these tasks is to turn the tables 180 degrees. To make you understand I'm going to have to make things a bit more difficult for you from now on.

There is more to the curs than a crimp in academics. Most people don't relise that dyslexia extends into all aspects of life. It affects everything from sleep patterns to taking parts in sports. It creeps into the most simple things and makes its precence nowen with a bang. This surprises most peepil; most see dyslexia as nothing more than a reading and writing difficulty or an overall learning difficulty at most. It's not, it changes everything, turns everything into a batel.

In the six years since I was given my lable dyslexia has been an increasing influecnce in my life. To prove myself to others has

become my main motivation where before the only person I felt I had to do that to was myself. My mother always says I was a confident child and that she doesn't know why I changed. I do. It was the dark corroding tendrils of my curse seeping in and stealing my self-confidence, replacing it with doubts and criticism. But who could blame me? As soon as people find out, the bar is immediately set so low that there are times when I can barely see it. And so the cogs and wheels of my brain process this and always come to the same conclusion. They must have done it for a reason. Why else would less be expected of me if I didn't have less to give, less to offer? Or did they always expect me to fail and this is just an easier way to let me know it? Am I better than this? Could I be better than what I have become? This, however, is not the worst thing about my curse. Yes the self-doubt and the constant need to prove myself is a pain but they are not my biggest burden.

My biggest burden is frustration. It is a thing that I have become very familiar with over the past few years: frustration with others, frustration with myself and frustration with the system. It simply boils down to a few main causes, the first of which is that no one really understands the effects that dyslexia has on a person. Even the people that are there for support, as great as they are, have no idea what it is actually like to be dyslexic, and no amount of explaining will make them understand. The more I learn about my curse the more I realize that the people around me have no clue about what's going on. Friends? Most of them tend to talk around it, the big pink elephant in the room. They don't understand the little eccentricities that go along with the curse: my stutter and inability to articulate myself seems like too much trouble for them to decipher, in much the same way as words are for me. It is this inability that fuels most of my frustration with myself; to know that I want to say and not be able to tell anyone; to know the answer and



not be able to do the question; to know I can do the question and not find the answer.

All these things combined however do not, and cannot, compare to the frustration that I feel with the education system. The lack of knowledge that teachers have and the difficulty in making them understand that dyslexic doesn't mean stupid, the idea that I have to have every idea explained to me like a six year old or that I need to be watched over constantly while doing simple tasks. Teachers mistake lack of preparation as my way to avoid doing work, they think that lack of structure in work is simply laziness and an inability to take notes as a lack of interest in the subject. They do not see these things for what they are. They can't understand that being unprepared is because I really can't remember things I am to bring, not that I didn't do the homework. That the absence of structure is because the ideas will not stay long enough in my mind to be put on paper, so everything has to be instantly put down or lost. Not taking notes is not because I am not interested it's because I can't write and listen at the same time and understand both. But they would not understand if I explained. Repetitive failure has taught me this.

But I'm not completely defenseless in my battle with the curse (for a battle is what it truly is.) There are people who try to end the frustration and techniques that can be learned to work around the curse. There is the odd teacher that sees past the label and sees the potential. There are some friends that don't mind the random way in which my mind works and there is even one who embraces it saying 'It's Natasha logic, it doesn't need to make sense to the rest of the world.' There are times when I can pretend to be normal, times that it melts into the background to be just like a cloud over the sun on a clear summer's day. There are times when the battle doesn't seem so impossible.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was...

Author

Rachel Hill

Centre

Dollar Academy

Qualification

Higher

Journalistic license is a wonderful little tool of writing, and has allowed me to adapt this powerful ditty (originally from the Bible) to suit my own purposes. When faced with the Knower of All Things (here is where I part ways with any religious connotations), there can only be one question. What expectations should we set for ourselves? What is the key to living happily ever after? How do we stop ourselves getting bored with our own lives?

And already that one question has tripled, and if further thought were allowed it would surely spawn a list of similarly confused queries. These were the questions I pondered this August when I received my first, ever official Scottish Qualifications Certificate for my Standard Grade results (which I wished to accept delivery of about as much as I did a Tetanus vaccination).

I wish I could say that these grades were the reward for many laboured hours of strenuous revision, naturally begun months in advance, but to be honest it was more the result of frantic cramming sessions lasting until the early hours of the morning (Form IVs: this is not clever. Don't do it).

Nevertheless, my intellectual capability was judged and graded and presented to me in an acropolis of figures before my eyes, and I couldn't help but stare at them and think...is this it? It was such a let-down, an anti-climax, a dull sense of boredom where there should have been a rush of self pride... was this mediocrity and lack of genuine satisfaction in my accomplishments all that life had to offer?

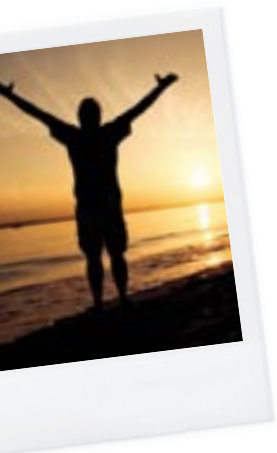
And that's when realisation struck: I was having a mid-life crisis. The mid-life crisis, for those who have not experienced it or have yet to witness the sheer embarrassment of your parents suffering one, is a point of emotional doubt and fragility for someone who

has suddenly realised that their existence on earth is halfway expired. When reflecting on their life, they are disappointed and decide to radically change before it's too late. This can result in several peculiar and horrifying actions as they try to reject middle-age and recapture youth (hence the alarming number of fifty-year-old men driving around in slick sports cars).

Now, you may say, isn't this a touch premature for a girl who has not yet even reached twenty? Doesn't one have to be balding, in a dead-end job, or married, to have such sentiments? Where is all the blind optimism that we 'crazy teens' are meant to have? Somewhere, in the vacuum of our teen years, the fun has been sucked out and replaced by something far worse: premature middle-agedness.

The modern-day teenager has to contend with so many atrocities it is impossible to appropriate the blame for this new form of mid-teen crisis: the endless stream of exams, the expectations, the hormones that we have absolutely no control over, the reality that the rest of the world looks at us with disdain. In fact, with such a multitude of pressures, it's a wonder that anyone survives long enough to justify an actual mid-life crisis taking place somewhere between the ages of 35 and 45, or whenever it happens to be that a man starts to bald and his wife wonders why she dedicated her life to her children.

So, clearly we must do something to postpone the feeling that life isn't worth the hassle for teenagers. Does the answer lie in reducing the number of academic exams forced on pupils and encouraging them to bask in the lighter aspects of life, so that we live an easy, breezy existence and love every moment of it? Conversely, should there be more emphasis placed on personal achievements and academic brilliance, so that the product of these



teenage years is an altogether more educated, more confident young person who proves more capable? Will that then, in turn, prevent or postpone the feelings of self-reproach that arise mid-life?

The problem here is that we have no one to direct these questions at. Adults, the universal solution to just about everything when you're under the age of seven, progressively lose their role as The Omniscient One the older that a child gets, and you find them searching for the same answers that you are. Come fourteen or so, a child will in fact believe that they are smarter than the average adult and any advice given by one is about as well-absorbed as the river Nile is by a very small handkerchief.

When we are faced with the problems in life, ranging from the tragically less important but radically more interesting social issues such as relationships, status, boys, to the annoyingly significant but numbingly boring complications of education, the future, and mortgages, the only person we can rely on is ourselves, hoping that the decisions we take will have the desired effect.

Perhaps the aspirations that society tells us we ought to achieve actually have no significance: what really matters are the goals we set ourselves. Perhaps all these mid-life, mid-teen crises stem from an insecurity that runs through us all: the shuddering thought that nothing you do will be good enough for the rest of the world. Perhaps we should release these tensions from our minds and embrace our individuality while ignoring the standard ideals of what an 'accomplishment' is. Managing to survive past infancy is a triumph in itself, is it not?

So, in the beginning, when the word was with God, perhaps the word was 'whatever' — whatever makes you happy.



Looking Back

Author

Graeme Pyper

Centre

Alva Academy

Qualification

Intermediate 1

I started school when I was five years old but the only problem was that I wasn't ready yet so I was held back in nursery. This was because I was born with difficulties with learning and concentration. These difficulties affect me throughout my days and even to this very day I have trouble understanding instructions which means I'm progressing slower than everyone else. Nobody knows this because I'm too proud to admit I find life difficult. This pride leads to me being misunderstood as most of my teachers, both primary and secondary, believed that I wasn't trying and that I'm still not trying when I actually don't understand. My classmates didn't know and still don't to this day, so I didn't know how to interact with them, which leads to loneliness. Because I was held back I was a whole year older so I was singled out further.

Despite my problems with making friends I did have a few friends known as the dinner ladies. It might sound really sad and pathetic but they were very good to me and helped me get through primary, along with some of my former teachers. They all moulded me into a decent pupil.

My best moment in school was in primary seven when I wasn't picked for our houses tug-of-war team for the tournament at sports day. This was good because every other year I was included and we won but when I wasn't included, we lost, which made me feel like I mattered to the team.

My worst moment was in first year in secondary school as I had to get an operation to take out an ingrown toenail so I was out for two months and had to catch up on all that work. A few weeks later after I came back from the operation, my other toe needed the same operation so that was another two months off. This made my

first year hectic for work. Despite being able to relax all day long I was still heavily frustrated about returning to school and having to catch up four months of work, but I had all the support from my family and the few friends I had, so I managed to get through it all.

Going into secondary wasn't that bad, apart from the operations, but when I was in school I was so alone and quiet that nobody noticed me so nobody picked on me. It was funny because some of my friends used to call me 'The Invisible Man'. What made it even funnier was that a band called 'Theory of a Deadman' made a new song called 'Invisible Man' so it was named my theme for a while. This made me kind of spooked because I was given the nickname just a few days before this song was released so it was a little bit freaky. Even though I got the nickname I was still as unnoticed as I was before.

Third and fourth year were really difficult because those few friends that I had all moved away to different schools, one by one. This annoyed me greatly, but despite losing my friends they were the best years of my life because I passed all of my exams, or at least the ones that mattered to me. This meant that I had done the unthinkable by doing what other children with my difficulties couldn't do. I was completely happy because I achieved something I didn't think I could achieve. I got all the support I needed and a little bit more and with that kind of support I can do anything.

Going into fifth year is really weird because whenever I see someone from primary in a blazer I feel strange, because after four years they have all grown up. All I want out of this year is the same as always and that's to improve and overcome my lifetime difficulties. Although my difficulties will be with me my whole life and I can't lose them, I can fight them and control them. I know

that at the end of my life I can look back and that I've done it, I have lived my life. That's what I'm fighting for, my dream end of life. When I say 'dream life' I don't mean flash cars and loads of money, just a normal life. I think I will achieve this because I've got this far, so why not go further?

I think my school life from day number one has been an obstacle which has helped me by challenging me to go that extra distance and fight back against fate. School for me has been a moulding process, changing me from a child with difficulties to a respectable and capable human being. Overall, school might have been a rough ride for me at the time but now I believe that it's really helped me out and I feel that it's ironic that someone with learning difficulties learned just as much in school as everyone else did.

Non-Fiction

Organic Architecture

Author

Anna H McLuckie

Centre

Grove Academy

Qualification

Standard Grade

Beside all the housing schemes and blocks of flats, there are many unique and beautiful buildings. These buildings take their inspiration, not from what is the quickest way to build a house, but from their natural environment.

Fallingwater is such a building. It was designed and built by Frank Lloyd Wright, a renowned American architect, in the 1930s

and is considered by many to be a work well ahead of its time. Fallingwater is situated on a rocky site above a waterfall, and is surrounded by trees and streams. Its basic construction is from a native stone, with concrete for the horizontal elements. These two completely different materials, the smooth pale yellow concrete against the darker, rougher stone, provide a contrast which helps the house to blend in with its environment, as well as being pleasing to look at.

Frank Lloyd Wright once said of Fallingwater, *'Fallingwater is a great blessing — one of the greatest blessings to be experienced here on earth.'* Some would think that this may have been rather pretentious of him, but we only have to look at the house to see what a uniquely astounding building it actually is.

Fallingwater is a prime example of Organic Architecture, which is the term Frank Lloyd Wright used to describe his approach to architectural design. The basic aim of Organic Architecture is to set each individual building into its own environment, in other words, to make it seem as though the building was naturally occurring in its environment. To do this, Frank Lloyd Wright had to take all the inspiration for his buildings from the environment in which they were going to be set.

And he could not have found a more interesting or varied environment than he did for Fallingwater. All the elements of nature are present in that single landscape — water, stone and wood are all plentiful, and gave Wright the opportunity to design an amazing building. Fallingwater was born. And we can see that it meets Wright's organic ideals perfectly — the stone used in the building is at one with that found by the stream, the concrete blends in perfectly with the light greens of the trees surrounding



it. Fallingwater sits in perfect harmony with its environment, and almost compliments the forest, rock and stream surrounding it.

Another building, which is based on the same principles as those which Frank Lloyd Wright used when designing Fallingwater, is the Maggie's Centre, by the famous architect Frank Gehry. The Maggie's Centre was designed in 2003 as a care home for those suffering from cancer. The philosophy behind the Maggie's Centres is that your immediate environment affects your well-being, and that these intimate buildings will be the first step in helping many cancer sufferers manage their fears.

Architecture is critical to the concept of the Maggie's Centre, which is 'a reaction against the institutional environment of hospitals and a determination to create a friendlier place in which sufferers can personally deal with the disease.'

Gehry said of the Maggie's Centre, *'I hope the architecture won't override the purpose of the building, but compliment it and take it to a higher plane of comfort and beauty.'* Which, in my opinion at least, it does.

The first thing that you notice about the Maggie's Centre is its remarkable roof. Surprisingly, Gehry based his design for this amazing structure upon a shawl he once saw on a woman in a portrait. He went to see the portrait with Maggie Jencks, who was a close friend of his, and was also the Maggie the centre is named after, as she died from cancer.

The roof is constructed from a latticework of Finnish Pine, with stainless steel plates on top. These reflect the clouds drifting past, and also bring out the colour of the Tay Estuary behind. The complex roof is jagged like grey mountain peaks, and each pitch

and angle of it is different. Another unusual feature of the roof is that it has no gutter. Instead the rainwater cascades off the roof into specially designed 'soakaways' in the ground.

Another distinguishing feature of the building is the white tower, for which Gehry based his design on a lighthouse. The smooth white tower in contrast with the dark sharp roof makes a building which is totally unique.

These two buildings are both similar in that they both blend in perfectly with their environment, and are both incredible examples of Organic Architecture.

Fallingwater is the perfect addition to the streams, rocks and forests of its setting, while the mountainous roof of the Maggie's Centre blends so well into the hills behind it that it seems to be part of them.

These, in my opinion, are two of the most beautiful buildings on the planet. They show us that by listening to the environment, we can become part of it, and that we can do good for the world around us, if only we try.

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Raisin Weekend — or Raising Cain?

What Price Tradition in St Andrews?

Author

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Dundee College

Qualification

HNC

Is Raisin Weekend a piece of harmless fun, a worthwhile tradition or the chance for a lot of drunken yobs to take over the town of St Andrews? This is a matter which has been perplexing ‘Town and Gown’ for many years.

Raisin Monday dates back to the early days of the University which was founded in 1410. With the idea of creating an academic family, new students or bejants and bejantines were befriended by older students who became their ‘parents’ and would help them settle into university life. As a ‘thank-you’ for their care, the bejants were expected to give their ‘parents’ a cup of raisins and in return would be given a receipt written in Latin. Failure to produce this receipt when asked would result in the unlucky bejant being doused in the fountain.

Of course this has all been updated to suit modern needs. The cup of raisins has been replaced by a bottle of alcohol, and the fountain dousing by the now traditional foam fight that takes place in St Salvator’s Quadrangle on Raisin Monday before 11am.

This all sounds like a lot of harmless fun but local residents and the emergency services are often left picking up the pieces when things get out of control. It also seems as if the intention of a ‘weekend of hi-jinks’ to get everything out of the students’ collective system has backfired and rather than getting over the desire to ‘party hard’, it seems to inspire an increased desire to binge drink and create havoc on the streets. Just prior to this year’s Raisin Week the following notice was spotted in Greyfriars Garden, ‘The Gig — parental advisory: The Gig claims no responsibility for debauchery, damages, indecent exposure, loud behaviour and excessive consumption of free shots.’ Some local residents were outraged but a University spokesman said: ‘We

have not received any complaints or reports about the alleged incident. The University takes a very dim view of such behaviour and invests a great deal in ensuring all our students are aware of their responsibility within the local community.'

Raisin Weekend is seen by many as one long drinking session. A spokesman for the Scottish Ambulance Service said: *'There is no doubt that we are seeing an increase in the number of calls we get on the 999 service that are directly related to alcohol abuse.'* However, Inspector Andy Edmonston of Fife Police said: *'There is no evidence to suggest that St Andrews has more or less of an issue with binge drinking than any other similar centres of population.'* He added: *'During evenings and night-times throughout the year, St Andrews town centre is a vibrant place with a number of licensed premises well attended by local residents, including students and visitors.'*

St Andrews University Students' Association president, Alex Yabroff, admitted that there could be a problem with binge drinking and some successful campaigns had been organised to help prevent it. He was, he said, continually working to promote good relations between the 'Town and Gown.' He also stated that there was always drunken behaviour in the town, even when the students were away and felt they should not be blamed for everything, adding: *'During the Open Championship in July, laws preventing drinking in public were hardly enforced at all,'* suggesting that the Police are harder on students than visitors to the town. Mr Yabroff went on to say that the Students' Union was working hard with the University to keep students safe and had produced an advice booklet.

However, a local resident saw things very differently: ‘These are drunken jobs. I came down Market Street and City Road last Friday night and there must have been 300–400 people there. We don’t get this when the students are away. A lot of older people live in this area and find this very upsetting.’

Another town centre resident said she was fed up with the ‘filthy language and moronic behaviour.’ She felt this only happened at the start of the university year and added: ‘These are drunken hooligans and jobs who must be students. It is too much of a coincidence that the trouble only starts as term begins. Their behaviour is disgusting. When the pubs discharge you see them in the streets and the language, especially from the women, is absolutely filthy. It is giving completely the wrong impression of St Andrews. This isn’t just a bit of fun — this is anti-social behaviour.’

So who’s to blame? John Barclay, Secretary to the Fife Licensed Trade Association, is quick to lay the blame at the feet of corporate ownership or, as he puts it, ‘faceless people at the top of big companies,’ who are pushing for bigger and bigger alcohol sales. Mr Barclay, himself a retired hotelier, praised the attitude of private landlords who sell alcohol with a degree of discretion. He went on, ‘Unlike private landlords, multiples are not interested in people, only in figures. If a manager doesn’t meet his targets for sales, he is fired. To me that is irresponsible.’ And he offers a solution: ‘By controlling the price you cut consumption by half. Discounting deals encourage alcoholism. It is not these youngsters’ fault.’ Certainly there have been many reports of hotels and bars offering deals such as five shots for £1.

It would certainly be a great shame if the charming tradition of Raisin Monday was to die out because a few — and for the most part it is only a few – drunken and unruly members of the student body choose to abuse both themselves and the town. St Andrews and the University share a long, fascinating history. It is in the interests of both that they should work at finding a solution to this problem.

Non-Fiction

Simply Red

Author

Tess Forbes-
McMurchie

Centre

Harris Academy

Qualification

Standard Grade

Why everyone really wants to be red-headed.

I have been blessed with a rare gift. It is so rare that only 4% of the world's population can boast this trait. What is this fabulous feature I own? To put it simply, a head covered in ruby-red locks.

I am the first to admit that collectively, red-heads receive more insults than any other hair type, whether it be blonde, brunette, curly or straight. However, after years of comments such as; 'Carrot Top', 'Ginger Nut' and 'Ha! Your hair is on fire!', such insults have no effect. Perhaps this is because women with red hair have the highest IQs. It could also be due to the fact that everyone who makes such, as I like to put it, 'hairist' jibes are jealous of my scarlet crowning glory.

I don't blame those who make these snide remarks about my hair. If I had brown, black or blonde hair, I am almost positive that I would become so depressed with my mundane look that I would express my envy of red-heads in a similar way. I accept that their real reason behind hating my fellow gingers and me is because they are only too aware of the benefits of being red-headed.

Everyone wants to be auburn. Sixty per cent of women who dye their hair do so at home. Of those, 32% chose to dye it red. Beauty wise, red heads have always reigned supreme. Both Suzy Parker, the World's first supermodel, and Jackie Loughery, the first woman to be crowned Miss USA are naturally ginger. Even the current top model of the moment, Lily Cole, is not shy about displaying her full head of ruby locks. On average, it is said that a man driving a car will toot a brunette, slow down for a blonde but will stop and reverse fifty yards for a red-head.

Another advantage of being ginger that is likely to appeal to both men and women is that we lose our hair colour later in life, thus keeping us looking younger for longer. When their hair eventually starts to fade, there is no need to worry about turning grey because many turn a sandy colour, similar to that of a blonde.

As a female, I can proudly say that women have a lot to thank red-heads for. Forget the suffragettes — one ginger in particular was the first true feminist and campaigner for sexual equality. No, Emily Pankhurst was not a closet Titian-haired beauty, but I am referring to Lilith, the first wife of Adam. A feminist icon, she proclaimed to her husband, 'I am your equal since both of us were created from dust.' Biblically, other red-heads include Mary Magdalene, Judas and in some traditional accounts, Jesus of Nazareth.

Without red-heads, the world would be a very different place. Renowned for our fiery ambition, just imagine if George Washington, Boudica, Winston Churchill or Oliver Cromwell were brunettes. Think how different the Arts World would be if my fellow gingers such as Van Gogh, Matisse, Mozart, Shakespeare or Vivaldi were blondes. Galileo Galilei, who perhaps made the most important scientific discoveries, was flame-haired, as was the saintly Florence Nightingale. Their achievements alone out-perform any other hair colour.

Everyone should want to surround themselves with red-heads. However, not necessarily any of the aforementioned! Merely looking at the colour red enhances the viewer's metabolism whilst also increasing heart rate and respiration. Therefore, theoretically, if you are in the company of gingers on a regular basis, you're likely to burn more calories and lose weight than if you socialise with blondes or brunettes!

This could also be why Romans traded red-haired slaves at a higher price. In Denmark, it is deemed an honour to have a child with ruby-red hair. I personally believe this should be the case in all countries, as I'm sure my fellow auburn-haired citizens would agree.

Perhaps the best thing about my hair colour is that I stand out from the crowd. No matter where I go in the world, I shall always proudly display my Celtic roots. Everyone remembers me because of my hair and I am proud of that. It is part of my identity, and without it, I would be a very different person. There is also a distinct camaraderie that I am positive no other hair group can share or lay claim to. Therefore I believe that everyone wants to be, to put it simply, red.

The Oxford Experience

Author

Robyn L Munro

Centre

Dornoch Academy

QualificationAdvanced Higher

We arrive at Oxford train station and are spat out onto the rain-drizzled pavement. The scummy yellow fluorescence of the station lights soon melts into the puddles of water that spatter the cobbles. ‘*What do you think of Oxford?*’ the tutors will ask. ‘*It’s wet.*’ I wittily reply. This rejoinder goes down uncommonly well. ‘*A sterling wit!*’, they cry, ‘*a biting intelligence!*’ ‘*Have her we must!*’ they rejoice as we settle down to discuss the merits of Elton over the relativism of Carr and the sweaty imprint Queen Anne’s buttocks left on modern historiography. I simmer softly to myself, leaning back into the steady grindings of the taxi-cab as we gently roll through the streets. Quietly confident, yet refreshingly deprecating. A sturdy alternative to the phalanx of shiny Harrow ponytails that trudge daily into seminars and tutorials, with an inferiority complex the size of Bangkok on my shoulder and the tempting aroma of state schools and Scottishness about my person. The PR guru’s dream — a shoo-in.

The spires of Christ Church college glower disapprovingly as we blitz past; the sulking granite bishops of St John’s huddle under mildewed sandstone auspices, rain gathering at their stony feet. Their eyes are blanketed in darkness, melancholy black holes overlooking the square where, centuries ago, erring clergymen far from home were cleansed in the purifying fires. The taxi draws up outside the college buildings. I breeze past the porters in their pompous embellished blazers, like bloated umpires refereeing a highly pretentious and select cricket match. I carry on with the steely resolve of the hardened imposter, but my traitorous heart makes great empty lunges like a fist reaching out for a hand to clasp but instead closing in on itself, gasping and grasping. Collect the keys and through the grounds and up the stairs and in the door and bang, I have arrived. And it’s only later, when the doors close and the rain stops and the streetlights dim to a dull throb

and everything is silent; then, when I am alone with my thoughts and they drift back to those unwelcoming spires; then, when the screams of those other wayward travellers from a bygone age are carried heavenwards in plumes of smoke; then, that I falter and want to go home.

As I walk into the tutor's room, I wonder idly at the dimensions of the place. Two of the walls are wholly obscured by books. Probably, there are no walls at all, and the room is constructed out of nothing more tangible than the spidery writings of historians long dead, a crumbling and mysterious mortar. Great leather bound Gothic spires, generic paperback high-rises, elaborate and illuminated minarets cast shadows across the plasterboard skyline. A stale electricity trembles in the dust. This impression gives the room a fleeting temperance, like some illusion unfolding from a magician's box of tricks. The don himself has something of the street magician's assistant about him. His simian hands, blurs of movement that solidify into a glimpse of hairy forearm, rest uneasily in his lap. A fez of grey hair sits jauntily atop his jet-black eyebrows. His face splinters into a smile as I enter — I catch a glimpse of glinting incisor and, though those writhing tentacles remain folded in his lap, I feel them on my neck. He talks as though to himself, quizzing me with *'I wonder what you would say if I told you...'*, or *'I wonder what your reaction would be...'* and then, *'How might you answer...'*. His questions are semi-fluid musings, typical of a man who has spent longer conversing with the ghosts of Bismarck and Oliver Cromwell than with disappointingly corporeal dollops of sinew and cartilage like myself. I leave my interview wondering if it is I, rather than my interrogator, who is the illusion here.

Applying to Oxford is like having an ulcer on the roof of your mouth — it brings weeks of agony, but there is nothing quite so satisfying as reaching out and running your tongue over its fleshy skin, biting your lip and savouring its acrid taste. There is something deliciously masochistic about plunging headfirst into an unfamiliar and unfriendly environment. It is an opportunity to live entirely outside of yourself for just a few days — to throw yourself into a part of your personality that you wouldn't dare show at home, for fear of invoking derision or contempt. It is a blank canvas, a clean slate, a chance to open yourself up to a barrage of criticisms and cultural knock-backs that will hopefully obscure, reshape or hammer out all the other dents and flaws your personality has acquired over the years.

Oxford, like any prestigious university town, is rich in the architecture of deception — people build walls, erect battlements obscuring their flaws and protecting their weaknesses. Others do not put up defences, but retreat behind them. When trying the hardest to let the most closely guarded, the most prized parts of your own personality shine through, it is amazing how quickly you become someone else. Here, among the ancient city walls and crumbling Norman towers, you can rewrite your own history, and wander round those cobbled streets safe in the knowledge that no one, least of all your own parochial and yobbish self, can ruin it for you.

But history is taking over in Oxford. On the streets, the past is literally rising up to devour the present. Tudor houses and archaic city walls have nosed their way up through the cobbles, ancient empty mouths swallowing modern shops whole and lodging them midway into their gizzards. The Gap sits partially digested by wattle and daub — Starbucks is locked in the cast-iron jaws of



Edwardian redbrick. The past is the occupying force, breathing down the necks of the inhabitants. Even those like myself, outsiders just passing through, are shadowed by their forgotten selves. Perhaps it's even worse for us — we aren't used to this uninvited presence that haunts our every move. It is constantly there, dogging our steps, and this perhaps is the reason why we are so poorly adapted to 'the Oxford experience'. We are so far removed from it, that we have more history to hide, more demons with mangled accents to silence. The more we try to run away from our past, the clearer the malformed shapes that hover just outside our line of vision become. The irony is that as we gradually put more energy into obscuring these unpleasant parts of ourselves, our own personalities are left behind, and in their place is a mere shell, a negative of a person. We become the very things we tried to rail against.



So, while I sit and shiver in the corner of some College Common Room, trying to keep up with the twists and turns of the conversation and welcoming even the most stale and unfunny jibe about the 'Scotch' as being at least better than this tumour-inducing mental stupor, my doppelganger, my evil twin whom I left behind when I came to interview, is engaged in an assertive and impressive one-woman rant about the evils of devolution, back in my history classroom. As I wait for my 'true self' to shine through, she is living my life, while I blunder through interviews, seeing things through a stranger's eyes, trapped in an unfamiliar body. I realise that these glitches and eccentricities I had been storing up for such an occasion as this were never actually part of me at all, just enviable snippets pilfered from other people. I never have been and never will be one to talk metaphysics over a glass of Pimms. Years of suppressing what I thought was a yearning for what others saw as pretentious intellectual conversation have

only left me with an aversion to what I can only see as pretentious intellectual conversation. This desire is now so inverted, so deep-seated that I wonder whether it ever really existed at all. Perhaps my needs for cultural stimulation were in fact met some time ago _ with the publishing of Harry Potter, most probably _ and my mind has since plateau-ed. Perhaps I just know myself too well to be fooled by the too-smart blazers, the too-rehearsed opinions. Either way, there will always be something that traps me between the stale electricity of a tutor's room, the quiet thrill of spires against the sky at night, and just another rainy day in Oxford.

Non-Fiction

Bright Lights

Author

Julia A McLaren

Centre

The Mary Erskine School

Qualification

Higher

My youth was a pretty little time. Filled with light, laughter and Leon. I grew up in the countryside of Michigan, daughter of a farmer, and was educated in St Babel's school for 'only good girls'. This was, of course, according to my father, who began to remind me of this fact on a daily basis after my tenth punishment for unexplained absenteeism. More like my tenth punishment for an inability to draw myself away from a fifteen-year-old boy. He was beautiful, was Leon. Above all, the endless appeal lay in his eyes, which promised me every hope for the future. They were eyes that drew me up to his alert little nose and pert mouth, and

that whispered of all the other girls who dreamt of loving him but never could.

The years when Leon and I were swift, yet so intense and vivid that each scent and taste catches at the back of my throat as if it were yesterday. The apples of my father's orchard that fell at the end of a hot, lazy summer; cool as we bit into them knowing they prefigured the crisp winter ahead. The hay we could collect and jump in together, which would tickle Leon's nose and force an immense sneeze, throwing up a puff of sawdust that settled down on his ruffled hair. The endless fields, which seemed to stretch in every direction — to me, they represented a vast expanse of timeless freedom, but to Leon, each direction represented another world, and each a world without me.

'The chickens in for the night?' Father's token question — not a night without it even though I've never forgotten to put the squawking little puff balls away in their huts. It's possibly his effort to convince himself he is still very much in touch with his nineteen year old daughter. He sits down beside me and tells me how nice it is to see me properly — how nice it is for me to choose an evening in for a change. I remind him how I always come home for tea, and how I always come back in time to put the chickens away, but he simply nods in his absent manner, with a faraway smile on his lips.

He's been like this ever since Mother died, over eleven years ago. To me her sun-kissed face is now faded, but to him it lives on, ever flickering in the back of his weary mind. There is a knock at the door which wakes me from my thoughts and Leon enters, his dark hair gleaming and dishevelled. Yet in his bright eyes there is something that makes me stall, and search his familiar face for



hints or clues. He detaches himself from my gaze and turns to my father; *'Evening, Mister Turner'*.

Father nods his old head gracefully and stands up from the table to leave the room. Usually I would have insisted on his staying, but something in Leon's demeanour is making me feel uneasy, and eager to talk to him alone. As soon as father closes the door I move to Leon and he steps away from me muttering something. When he opens his mouth again it is to tell me things that I already know; his age, where in the countryside he lives, what his relatives work as... I stop his increasingly incoherent speech by grabbing his shaking hands and putting my finger on his quivering lips.

He takes a breath and tells me he is going to Chicago. He tells me he is moving to Chicago to work there and that he loves me and that he knows I can't come because of my father but that he needs to go. He tells me not to try and stop him because I won't be able to and that he will write to me and that when he makes enough money Father and I can go and join him and we'll be together again.

All I can feel is my head nodding.

When at last the numbness subsides, late into the night, I am left with an acute bitterness which bites into my very being, and a feeling of betrayal which painfully crushes my senses. I want that city to take him in, to take him in and envelop him with the security of its streets and the pulse of its people. I want it to dazzle him with the lights of its buzzing bars and clubs and theatres. I want it to make him feel loved by the preened parks and neat gardens. Then, I want that city to spit him out, to punish him, to break his choking ambitions and lead him crawling back to me.

Lead him back to the place where my arms will always be open and ready to envelope him, love him. Lead him back to the place where he knows he cannot be spat out or punished — and where there are no ambitions to be broken. Only then will I truly have Leon for myself.

Leon left at the end of that scorching summer as soon as the winds started to blow — they blew so hard that two of the apple trees were uprooted and thirty of the hay bales disappeared, as though they had melted back into the endless fields. The inability to be without Leon, for which I had been punished as a neat little school girl, seemed to stay with me, and I was to be continually punished for that weakness. Although at first he wrote all the time, the flow of his letters gradually thinned and soon I found myself completely alone — and overwhelmingly betrayed. Do not be fooled into thinking time heals the pain of being second choice. It does not. And as time goes on I wonder how many pretty girls that city offered my boy, and whether they ever saw that same light in his eyes that I still see.

Or perhaps they only use the bright lights of the city to see.



Dolphin Safari

Author

Susannah Pencovich

Centre

Holyrood
Secondary School

Qualification

Standard Grade

Dolphins, dolphins, dolphins. Why the fascination?

My heart echoed the skip of my step as I neared the nursery pool. I was eager. I knew exactly what would happen when I caught a glance of my first dolphin. The friendly, chattering mammal would meet my gaze with its deep keen black eyes. Our mutual gaze would be followed by a flash of knowledge, a career idea perfect for my strengths, encouragement, insights into a new improved me. I knew dolphins inspired people.

The nursery pool was crowded, the crush smelled strongly of tourist sweat and fish. Squeezing between stalls selling plush sea anemones alongside ice drinks, around bulging rucksacks stuffed full of squashed sandwiches and juice cartons and through gaps left where a slimy milkshake spewed across the wet ground, I resurfaced at the poolside. The screaming children, coupled inharmoniously with coaxing parents and pre-recorded wave music blaring over the park speakers, did not aid me in my search for inspiration.

Framed by hideous plastic scenery, Dolphin Cove disappointed. Desperately I scanned the deeper waters for a dolphin, a dorsal fin, a ripple — anything to allay the shock of Dolphin Cove's tacky tourist taste.

The fat, tame dolphins floated lazily in the shallows around the edge of their pond. Their small, dull eyes searched greedily for the sweaty palms handing out fishy pellets. Once those were finished the dolphins simply manoeuvred their undignified bulk to the next offering hand.

I didn't cry but disappointment held my heart in a vicelike grip. I felt numb, angry and cheated.

Two years later and far from Florida's Dolphin Cove a small signpost caught my attention. Dolphins. I smiled a little sadly. Even here in Gibraltar, I thought it's dolphins, dolphins, dolphins. Why the fascination?

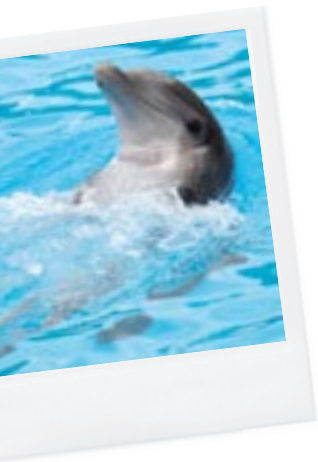
In spite of these bitter feelings, within twenty minutes I slipped off my flip flops and swung my feet under the railings. Perched precariously with my heels drumming on the side of the damp hull, the water was just inches from my toes. The speaker beside me crackled to life.

'Welcome! Today our dolphin safari will take us deep into the straits of Gibraltar...'

Looking around, I believe I was the only passenger relaxed enough to enjoy the sea breeze, a welcome relief from the stifling heat on land. Every single passenger peered out to sea, shielding their eyes from the harsh sunlight, alert.

Arrogantly, I pitied the eager tourists as they desperately searched the horizon only for a solitary glance of the elusive and over rated dolphin. I wondered angrily why there appeared to be a worldwide fascination with the dull creatures.

Looking back I wonder now if my bitterness was really directed at the dolphins. I believe now it was in fact directed at myself for missing the magic associated with dolphins.



Picking up speed now, our vessel ploughed through the choppy waters. Unnoticed, I was drenched in salty spray, but my eyes remained locked on a shimmering white shape just under the surface of the water. Hanging dangerously now through the railings my excitement grew. The white patch, I could now see, was striped with fine grey and black lines and much closer to the surface. My eyes stung from the salty dew. A small wave peaked and toppled sending a cascading froth across the water which consumed the area I watched. The froth swirled and disappeared, replaced by clear blue sea.

A sudden shout from starboard sent the boat swaying as every eager person clambered to the rail. Expectant silence took hold. The horizon was empty.

A strange sucking sound followed by a whistle was heard by all. Five striped bullets punctured the water surface from below. Glistening shards of crystal flew from their shining skin sprinkling us as we looked on in stunned admiration. Reaching the peak of their flight the acrobats twisted with amazing dexterity. In one magnificent moment they were silhouetted against the sun and harsh African peaks. Rotted to the spot in awe I watched where, as one, they dived dramatically back into their subterranean kingdom.

The ripples shaped themselves once again into small chopping waves.

As though the breach was a sign, the sea became alive with chattering and whistling. Each wave became a fin, a tail, a bottlenose. Upon closer observation, each shimmering patch of froth revealed itself as the underbelly of a pirouetting dolphin,





The pod was hundreds strong, in and out, up of down, back to front, from side to side! No manoeuvre was too difficult.

A strange feeling gripped me as I watched each perfectly executed, effortless roll and each amazingly complex formation. I was stunned, bewildered, amused, smiling, laughing until I realised I was in fact scrambling from port to starboard yelling in delight.

I felt an odd sort of inferiority in the dolphin's presence. My clumsy movements felt exaggerated as I became more aware of just how graceful the dolphins were. The pod co-ordinated so fluently, I felt it was easy to acknowledge their superiority over our clumsy race. Humans may dip a toe in the waters at the beach but it is the dolphins who are masters of the oceans.

Suddenly and all too soon the dolphins were gone. They weren't swimming away and our powerful craft wasn't fast enough to leave them behind. They simply left.

I dared not sigh. I dared not disturb the peaceful thoughts and expressions around me. I didn't want to. All I really wanted to do was lay my sleepy head on the cold damp railing, hang my tired feet over the hull and so I did, watching the deep sunset's reflection in the flickering water.

Disembarking I caught the gaze of a fellow passenger. Simultaneously we smiled to one another. We had something in common. We both shared a bond, a dramatic secret.

We shared a fascination. Dolphins.

The Big Apple?

Author

Jill Mcfarlane

Centre

The Mary
Erskine School

Qualification

Higher

Giovanni da Verrazario, a Florentine merchant, first sailed into New York Harbour in 1524. He described the land he found as having ‘commodiousness beauty’, a paradox that was soon to reflect the city’s definitive ambiguity. He saw first the long protrusion into the deep green ocean; at the meeting of salt and freshwater as the Hudson and East Rivers meet. He saw the trees that lined the Manhattan banks and the way their delicate, green leaves fluttered gently in the cool Atlantic breeze. He sailed unwittingly past Liberty Island and past the unusually tall sycamore tree standing at its centre. Giovanni da Verrazario noted the long golden sands on Coney Island and the astounding green wetlands of Jamaica Bay to the east. He first set foot in New York when his ship had anchored a few hundred metres off shore and his crew had patiently rowed him to dry land. He was greeted by the Algonquin tribe, Native Americans who made their living from fishing and hunting. Da Verrazario quickly realised they did not share the European concept of land ownership but did share the very European enthusiasm for trading. The first New Yorkers docked and forced the Natives from their settled areas and infected them with European diseases to which they had no immunity.

He had had a long journey from Europe and was tired and sick. He woke to loud shouts to catch ropes and to tie them tightly to the metal rings as the ship docked in New Amsterdam. His father had been among the first to immigrate to New Amsterdam with the prospect of commerce with the naive Natives. His father left a wife and five sons, of which he was the youngest, and it was his turn now to explore this new world. As he awoke, he stooped underneath the ship’s low ceiling and found a portal. He saw hundreds of black men, carrying box loads of goods from the hull. The shoreline had been littered with small houses and churches

and the sea front was dotted casually with large ships. Further into the distance, beyond the squalid streets, he noticed the vast expanses of land on which no person was housed and no being existed. He spotted a line of trees behind the town, their rusty leaves restlessly quivering in the wind. Hugo inhaled a long deep breath and smelt the rancid concoction of excrement and pigs. He rose and clambered out of the hull and made it onto the dock. He started down the long winding streets packed full of houses and people. Hugo made his way past the prison and the great, northern wall to stem the British advances and found himself in a small, open square with a single water pump in the middle. Hugo knew that New Amsterdam was a far cry from the tranquil replica of a European town he had been promised. As darkness fell, rife began to flow through the veins of the town. Screams echoed around the deserted streets and an incoherent clammer escaped the packed taverns full of people drinking to excess.

I flew into JFK the day George Bush was elected President. I was there on business; to write a report about cultural diversity. I could think of no finer example than this, one of the largest cities in the world. Prior to touchdown on runway fourteen, I glimpsed out of the window and captured a fleeting glance of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife reserve and Sheepshead Bay. I trawled through customs, passing check after check, and ducking feverishly through metal detectors. I hired a cab with a rather dubious looking driver who asked, *'Where, Sir, want you to be?'* so I told him. Half an hour later, we were coasting past Lady Liberty, religiously guarding the entrance to Hudson Bay on her giant concrete stage. She gazed across the water with one weary arm holding her torch high. We continued up 4th until we finally reached Times Square. Further down the avenue, I caught sight of the southern tip of Central Park. The trees stood uniformly, bare and brittle in the howling

New York winter air. I considered the idea, a garden within a city and wondered whether God ever intended humanity to contain nature. Central Park is 340 hectares of man made glades, copses and rock outcrops. It runs for fifty blocks and provides a welcome escape from the dense urban clutter that fully encloses it. I boarded the elevator and headed to the penthouse suite.

I settled down in my usual chair and stared over the cityscape. A sad irony, I thought. The only high point in Manhattan lies not at the top of the Empire State Building nor on the top floor of the Chrysler, but in the green rectangle engulfed by the metropolis. I chewed my pen lid pensively and stared blankly at the computer screen radiating my face. The Big Apple, I thought. What a name for such a gigantic monstrosity, hanging delicately and perishable in the world's economic climate. A product of nature. I think not.





Drama

Any time is the right time to write, any place the right place to imagine. Authors of all ages and stages are making their voices heard. Creativity is a process, not an event. Nations, like notions, exist only in the mind till they're put down on paper to caper. Nations have borders but imaginations know no bounds. A pen or a PC is the passport to pastures new. Scotland is a small country with a big culture and a cutting edge that knows no age or wage barrier. The only backgrounds that matter for makars are literary. New writers are a novelty that never wears off as long as they're nurtured and noted and made to feel needed as they take small steps towards the big picture. From 'nae hair to grey hair', new writing needs a page, a stage, a platform to strut its stuff, needs new readers and fresh outlets. Talent has to be showcased, shown off, shown round. The 'Write Times' anthology is a case in point. A small nation, Scotland has given birth to big literature because of the space given over to imagination, the right to roam from the Highlands to Lowlands, from primary to tertiary, from infancy to infinity. With a National Theatre now a reality new Scottish drama will punch above its weight and play its part in the forging of an ever-expanding notion of nation. The playwriting on display in 'Write Times' shows that the future is in safe hands. This small country has been put on the map chiefly because of the bravery and brilliance of its writers and artists for their sterling work. It's the right time to recognise writers as a national treasure, from the tiniest gemstone to the biggest diamond. New writing, like new citizens, has to be welcomed with open arms. These are the right times to be thinking big.

The Revolution Will Not Have an Itinerary

Author

Aidan P Simpson

Centre

Musselburgh
Grammar School

Qualification

Advanced Higher

(On stage there are three chairs arranged around a table with a half-full cigarette tray positioned on it. A man in his mid-50s, Jack, takes to the stage, carrying a bundle of Marxist literature, and arranges it carefully on the table before sitting down on the rightmost chair. Another man, in his mid-30s, Kurt, shuffles in quietly and takes a seat on the middle chair, followed by a man in his early 20s, Dave, who sits down on the leftmost chair. Jack hands out the other two itineraries, before standing to speak.)

Jack: On behalf of the regional organisation, I would like to welcome all to this the September meeting of the International Communist Union and to thank ...

Dave: Brackets Trotskyist

Jack: Yes, of course, brackets Trotskyist

Dave : We don't want people thinking we're Tankies, now do we?

Jack No, you're absolutely right, we don't want visitors going away thinking we're Internationalist Communists but missing the fact that we're Trotskyists. Anyway, for the record, Scott Tomlinson sends his regards, but sadly cannot be present as he is currently doing voluntary work in Cuba. Moving on, as listed on your itineraries, today's topic is Marx's Theory of Surplus Value. Now, I know that most of you are probably familiar with this particular theory, but it never hurts to re-examine the basics. *(In a droning, monotonous, pompous voice)* Marx argues that Capitalist society consists of two groups, the bourgeoisie who own the means of production, and the proletariat who make up the majority and have to sell their labour to survive. Since the bourgeoisie do not produce any commodities ...

Dave: If I may interject, I think I speak for everyone in the room (*looks around*) when I say we're quite familiar with the Theory of Surplus Value.

Jack: Well, there may be newer comrades here not quite as familiar with the concept as you may be.

(Jack points towards Kurt. Dave flicks his head around to Kurt, then back to Jack.)

Dave: Nah, he's been here since May. If my memory is correct that means he's sat through (*counts on his hands*) seven lectures on the Theory of Surplus Value, six 'discussions' on the Nature of the State and a liberal dollop of 'insight into imperialism'

Jack: Well, he's never said anything to suggest he understands it, has he?

(Dave looks at Kurt then back at Jack.)

Dave: He never says anything. He won't even tell me how many sugars to put in his tea.

Jack: Well, that's true. (*to Kurt, patronisingly*) Isn't it, young fella? (*Kurt says nothing, feeling somewhat rebuked.*) Still, as I have already said it does no harm to revise the basics occasionally. To continue, the bourgeoisie are unable ...

Dave: I think it may be far more productive to talk about the upcoming elections.

(Pause)

Jack: What about the upcoming elections?

Dave: Well I, for one, think it is about time we, as an organisation, considered fielding a candidate.

(pause)

Jack: I'm afraid it is our agreed policy that we do not participate in bourgeois politics. Anyway ...

Dave: Well, what is it, the agreed policy, to do? Throw our support behind some other campaign, so that they get all the glory whilst we sit around discussing the same old theories week after week! Hey, I don't remember attending any meeting where we agreed that, anyway!

Jack: I think you're being a trifle adventuresome. Marxism isn't about blowing your own trumpet; it's about ...

Dave: Not actually making any attempts to convince others of its merits? You may think the best way to bring about the revolution is to sit around, reading the yellowing pages of old pamphlets and smoking cigarette after cigarette until the hardships of Capitalist society contrive to convince the proletariat for you. Personally, I for one would far prefer to actually go out there and make a difference myself. It's got to be better than sitting around talking to our navels all day!

(tense pause)

Jack: Look, I think it would be better if you took a moment to calm down.

(Dave stomps off. Jack also leaves. Kurt pulls a notebook out of his pocket and scribbles down a few notes, secretively, before putting it away again as Dave enters, checking as he does so to see that Jack isn't in the room, before sitting down.)

Dave: Can you believe that guy! *(mocking)* Oh, it's dreadfully important we revise the words of Marx for the umpteenth time to cut that engraving on your skull a little thicker. Yeah, or we could go out there and *do* something! I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm sure not even Marx himself knew his theories as well as that man through there does. But what's the point when he's never going to use them for anything productive! 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world... the point is to change it.' I bet you he could name the book, page and line of that quote. But for all the difference he makes, it may as well say don't rock the boat too hard or the boss might get wet.

(Pause. Kurt looks at him.)

Dave: Look, I'm thinking of starting a new group, the Union of Trotskyist Internationalists brackets Communist, away from him and his paralysis. And I'll do it too, if you'll join me. I like you, you've got a kinda never-saying- anything aura around you. And that guy does nothing but patronise you, isn't that right? *(Nudges Kurt. Kurt shrugs his shoulders.)* Thing is, if I do this I never want to have to come crawling back to him. Never. So if you say you'll join me, you have to be serious about it.

(Pause. Kurt looks down at his fingers. Dave spots Jack loitering in the doorway and hurriedly gets up.)

Dave: Well, think about it anyway.

(Jack sits down and places the tray on the table.)

Dave: Yeah, I might have been a bit hard on our young comrade there. (*chuckles*) We've all been young and idealistic at one time. It's just (*sighs*), you know these students, all mean and angry one minute, thinking the revolution's just around the corner. And when they realise it's not, poof!, they're out of here! On to their nice, middle-class lives, leaving us here to carry the torch for them. (*indignant*) 'The Working Class can kiss my ass, I've got the gaffer's job at last'. Yeah, I know his bloody type.

(Kurt has been nodding off over the course of this speech. Jack nudges him, looking for agreement and Kurt bolts upright, suddenly awake. Jack stares at him for a minute as if expecting him to reply, then continues.)

Jack: (*unperturbed*) Well, I suppose I can't really blame him for being ambitious. I just wish he'd calm down a bit and stop jumping down my neck all the time. Makes me nervous and I can't act rationally. You know what I'm on about, don't you? (*Kurt says nothing. Pause.*) I'd best go check how he is. (*Jack gets up. Muttering indignantly under his breath.*) What am I saying? You just come here for the bloody central heating. Stupid cretin.

(Jack walks offstage. As he is leaving, a posh voice comes out of a walkie-talkie hidden in Kurt's pocket.)

Comma: Comma to Brackets. Comma to Brackets. Come in, Brackets.

(Kurt pulls the walkie-talkie out of his pocket.)

Kurt: Yeah, come in, Comma. Brackets here.

Comma: What are your Commie friends up to now?

Kurt: Well, the young one's talking about splitting. (*chuckles*) Start his own group with two members, or something.

Comma: Yeah, more naïve reds who can't stand each other.

Kurt: Listen, why can't I get a transfer? I feel like I'm wasting my time. The nearest this lot are going to get to threatening is if they forget to pay the gas bill, and ...

Comma: Look, I'd like to, but I've no other vacancies at the mo. And the sergeant's cracking down on people who cut and run from their assignments.

Kurt: But you don't know how mind-wrenchingly dull this is! Listening to those two bicker like an old couple discussing who's going to wash the dishes. Christ, if I hear that old 'un moan about 'the increased cost of distributing the monthly newsletter since the mail increased stamp prices' I'll shove that bloody cigarette in his eye, so help me!

Comma: Yes, I know. Trot-sitting can be an awful hassle when they just squabble all the time. Tell you what, I'll see what I can do back to the station.

Kurt: Yeah, sure, cheers.

(Jack and Dave re-enter. Kurt looks up at both of them, absent-mindedly forgetting he still has the walkie-talkie in his hand. Dave pours himself some tea into a cup, then sits down in his chair facing away from Jack and crosses his arms.)

Dave: *(sulking)* This tea's cold.

Jack: Well, maybe if you'd been here earlier, rather than sulking in the toilet, it wouldn't be. Anyway, it's your turn to do the washing up.

-
- Jack:** Well, it's high time it was, isn't it? You could do something for a change.
- Dave:** Listen, we agreed at the meeting after Socialism 2002 that you were in charge of providing beverages, both in production and in maintenance.
- Jack:** Oh yeah? Wasn't that the same Socialism 2002 at which you utterly humiliated me in front of those Revolutionary Communist Party delegates?
- Dave:** Come on, you were like putty in their hands, swallowing every word. I just told them exactly where they could stick their intellectual revolutionary vanguard!
- Jack:** *(mouths as if wanting to reply, then chooses not to)* This is all irrelevant. The real question is whether or not you've got over all this election nonsense so we can move on with this itinerary.
- Dave:** *(snidely)* Well that all depends on whether or not you've got the real world into that thick skull of yours yet!
- Jack:** Come on. We have neither the funds nor the members to mount an election campaign. It's far more reasonable for us to...
- Dave:** To what? Back Respect? Arse to that! Bunch of whiners from the SWP, with George Galloway and some Muslim clerics tacked on. For Christ sake, a man who drives around London in a BMW, bragging about how rich he is and then has the audacity to call himself a Bolshevik! But then again, you probably see nothing wrong with that.

- Jack:** To be fair, Galloway has done a lot of good work for the Stop the War Coalition ...
- Dave:** Hell, you'd probably have us backing the Tankies in the Socialist Labour Party! I always thought you were a bit of a Stalinist, never too keen on the Trotsky stuff. Well, if you want to crow the virtues of the 1930s' purges ...
- Jack:** I'll tell you what happens to parties who embrace bourgeois politics! They get sucked into that House of Commons crap. Suddenly, they're preaching reform instead of revolution. And then what are they? Nothing. It's happening in Brazil, it sure as hell happened to Ramsay McDonald and if you don't get a grip you'll be one of them. A suit with no principles.
- Dave:** Well, if that's how you feel, maybe I should leave.
- Jack:** A fabulous idea! Go join the rest of your faker pals in the SWP.
- Kurt:** *(In an uncontrolled outburst. Stands.)* Oh for Christ sake, can't you see how stupid you both look? Sitting there, moaning about how *(mocking)* you're the only ones who really represent the working class whilst the real world goes by around you! Look, *(turns to Dave)* face facts. Who in their right minds would vote for either of you two, if they had the choice? What, are the Proletarian masses supposed to be sitting in their homes, wishing they could show their support and come along to these meetings, but unfortunately they've all got ballroom dancing classes on a Tuesday? Do you really want to be left standing there with a stupid fake grin plastered on your face as the returning officer announces 'Internationalist Communist whatever, two votes.' *(Turning to Jack)*

And as for you, go out once in a while and get a sense of the real world! Have you ever left this room long enough to see it's not the nineteenth bloody century anymore?

(Jack and Dave stare at him, surprised but impressed. Kurt moves to sit back down, but just as he does, a voice crackles out of the walkie-talkie, still in his hand.)

Comma: Brackets, are you feeling okay? You seem to be taking this Trot power nonsense a little seriously.

(Kurt jumps in shock and drops the walkie-talkie. Jack and Dave stare at him. (pause) Jack slowly picks up the walkie-talkie.)

Jack: He'll call you back.

Jack: Well, looks like our friend here's been in cahoots with P C Plod the whole time. *(Jack tosses the walkie-talkie into Kurt's lap.)* And to think, you wanted to trust him.

Dave: Me? Who was it that was constantly feeding pamphlet after pamphlet to him? Hell, MI5 must be experts on Marx, the amount of stuff you handed over ...

Their rowing fades as the end of the Internationale fades in. Kurt gathers the pile of pamphlets on the table in front of him and walks offstage, unnoticed. Lights fall.



Poetry

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The poetry in Write Times makes for a very interesting read.

As can be expected with an anthology of work culled from a variety of sources the result is a very mixed bag indeed, and to a degree, that only adds to the attraction. There are voices in development, exploring possibilities I feel, but still with an interesting take on life, casting their net over subjects as diverse as celebrity, gifts, both material and spiritual, alphabet soup as a metaphor for other things, an endeavour in making an image out of imagery and haiku sequence that says subtle things even though the haikus veer away from the form the sequences title adopts, as seems to be the modern way of things at times.

In contrast to this there are writers who are developing assured strong voices that give the reader much food for thought. These poems take us from Wester Ross where Matt Stockl evokes atmosphere with sharp observations, to Pakistan to Britain to Pakistan to Britain where Noreen Masud looks at identity with an assured eye, to Paisley and Govan where Tracy Patrick has an understated but clear take on some of the realities of urban life, and culminating in the fantasy land (maybe?) of P.J.McCafferty where the narrator entreats Sarah to sail away with him to an Alice in Wonderland style dream place (or is it real? Who knows).

All in, a stimulating mix that bodes well as a mirror for the SQA courses and teachers that nurture such creativity with the contrast of rough edges and polished stones that reflect the cross-section of students thoughts and voices in a manner that should appeal to the most discerning of readers.

Brian Whittingham

June 2007

4 Poems

Author

Jessica M Conway

Centre

James Gillespie's
High School

Qualification

Standard Grade

His Gifts

He brought me back
A wooden Philippine flute,
Deep green in colour,
A huge teddy the orchestra gave him
While visiting Germany;
He brought me an Egyptian silver ring
And a tiny recorder
From a busy market in Cairo;
He brought me back
A beautiful Japanese purse;
He brought me shell necklaces,
Orange trousers, expensive chocolates,
Local specialities, photos of sights he'd seen.

But I liked it most
When he brought me back stories
And memories of his visit.
He'd tell them round the kitchen table
Over a specially prepared meal
And would always finish them by saying,
'It's just so nice to be home'.



The Kitchen

The toaster groans with the heat,
 The windows are silent, their mouths painted shut.
 The chairs lie in quiet pain on the stone floor,
 The dust is lazily settling itself on the surfaces.
 The tap occasionally tries to make small talk but no-one
 The cooker lies open, a cold black cave. replies.
 The mugs stand, crowded on the draining board
 And the blender looks out on the room with disgust.
 The room is frozen in time, only the clock persists.

The Sight of an Electric Light

Is the taste of stale bread,
 The smell of a musty jacket,
 The sound of a hungry mosquito,
 The feel of a static car door.

The Taste of Lemon Juice

Is the sharp sound of a triangle being hit,
 The tip of a stiletto's heel,
 The smell of a fresh roll of Sellotape,
 The sting of an open cut in salt water.

Image of Imagery

Author

Mark Ferry

Centre

Reid Kerr College

Qualification

Intermediate 2

The Obese Skeleton inserts her instant relief,
Models her body, hall of mirrors deceive (so swiftly).
A wardrobe designed by Death. Nothing fits right.
Not like the magazines preach.

Convulsions over the sink, the weekly occurrence.
Last feeding time trickles down the plughole.
Tears blur visions of bone and marrow.
Expectations shorten as her life falls into sorrow.
Bones with eyes, the vision of others,
Morbid body stares through.

Dinnertime a crime of being unaesthetic.
Those potatoes look a lot like her,
Full of imperfections.
Sitting staring at the dead carcass,
Over 500 calories.

Fumbles upstairs, not tempted by that plate.
Gets so light headed,
Sits. Eyes slowly flicker,
Energy drained,

Soul spent,

Eyes finally fall under the spell,

And slowly,

Shut.

Garden of Eden

Author

Mark Ferry

Centre

Reid Kerr College

Qualification

Intermediate 2

Lies turn truth,
So transparent she disappears,
Soul drains through cracks in the floorboards.
Serpent's tongue flickers. 'I told you so.'
Cheap aftershave's stench.

The radiators hum a mocking tone,
Never receiving creator's promise of happiness,
Self trials leaving a void in her chest,
Promises of forever slip.
Drained soul descends through fire,
Finally ending in ash.
Burning eyes make for sleepless nights.
She loves forbidden fruit.

Big Issue

Author

Mark Ferry

Centre

Reid Kerr College

Qualification

Intermediate 2

She sits in cold rags,
The sweet smell of compassion,
Luck of the stranger.

Escape To, From What?

Author

Noreen Masud

Centre

Madras College

Qualification

Higher

Blessed Allah

when I was in Pakistan
they said, you're British — our little British girl
and lo and behold oh my golly gee
wasn't I just
with my little British accent
rejecting bangles and shalwar and urdu
for good old SHAKESPEARE, and folksy
land-of-hope-and-glory type union jack
music, god save the queen, these
hypocritical Muslim plebeians will Kill me.

now I'm in Britain
and they say, yes — she's a Pakistani;
might as well tattoo me with paisleys,
for instantly my skin goes darker
and I wrap myself in dupattas,
click prayer beads, reaching
for the tattered remnants of Urdu, inshallah,
mashallah, my god, dear lord,
god save my country,
whichever it may be,
god save me.

In the Sunshine

Bright morning,
full of sun, and I am laughing, because
I never burn. The sun likes me: on its brief
visits from Lahore to this land
of grey rain, peeping slyly from
behind radiant leaves, it recognises my face
from home and treats me with care. So my skin
is turning brown again. Hurrah
for ethnicity. I pull up my sleeve and encircle
a pale forearm with a tanned hand. Digestives
and custard creams — I am struck
at the difference the sun makes, at the differences
coexisting in one person, rising to the surface
like milk in tea. From fingertip
to elbow, brown to white,
a rainbow of graduated cultures.
I pull my sleeve down again.

*

I worry about my skin. A British winter,
though not as bad as I'd feared
(so cold there, the rain all turns to snow,
but don't play with it or your fingers will drop off),
has certainly leached it of what I had
assumed was its natural colour. Ghost arms now,
the brown sucked out like a straw. No longer

(continued on the next page...)

Pakistani, then? Is this how it will be:
 my skin turning with the seasons, with
 meticulous fairness — Pakistani in the summer,
 Caucasian in winter? O God. And what about spring,
 and autumn? This is how the trees must feel,
 shrivelling and changing, flowers,
 leaves, fruits, nothing. And again,
 until they die. No. Pick one skin,
 or the other. And then maybe I can decide.

Names

I live inside my name,
 snugly, like a house. Looking out
 through the a and u, I light a fire
 in the M's grate, wait for smoke
 to billow from the top
 before opening the s and inviting you in.
 Lovely to see you. This
 is where I live. Do come inside.

None of us, after all, really live
 where we think we do. Bricks
 don't wall us in so safely — hollow
 shouting structures, we rattle round inside.
 Countries merge like clouds and separate,

(continued on the next page...)

light as air. No, we live inside our minds,
bedded safely behind eyes. And in our names.
Go anywhere you like, yours comes behind you.
Write it down: on Pakistani
paper, with a stick in British soil. Always
your face blinking from its lines.

But now, with the May sun
shining on new British leaves,
my mother has taken off Masud like a
dupatta — I am amazed at how, beneath,
her maiden name has stayed intact and gleaming,
waiting for this moment. And my sisters,
too, grafting Grace over Masud
like Caucasian skin. But I cannot see
my eyes behind the lines of Noreen Grace:
Masud is where I live. Alone now.



Inchcailleach

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If you half-shot your eyes
you can almost see the small
dug-out boat, the colour
of peat beneath a pewter moon.
Not even the wind speaks
as the feathers of their oars
glide them, mute black swan,
to the silver edge of shore.

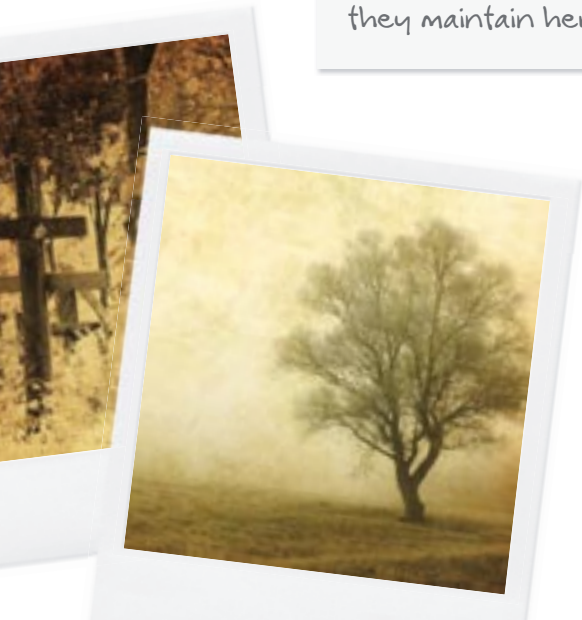
Kentigerna mutters a prayer,
touches one creased foot
to tawny earth. The women
dip the cowled beads of their
heads and follow. No easy path
up — steep past the ancient
furrows of barley and oats,
till their bodies drift to mist
and bright new cloaks of wooded oak.

Only a burial ground remains,
centuries of dead packed between
rock and turf. And ruined walls,
the church in whose cool vaults
nuns washed the corpses' waxy skin,
closed their gaping eyes,
administered the rites and wooden
cross. Now only beetles attend,
and accidents of pilgrim tourists.

(continued on the next page...)

Yet something of what drew
these saints still lives. To
straddle the chasm of the earth,
archway between the Highlands
and Lowlands, passage from
this place to the next. So
Kentiqerna stood — one palm to the
weary world, one to heaven,
welcoming the battle-bloodied chieftains,
toil-worn peasants, faithful victims,
singing to sanctify their souls.

Listen, the secluded trees
hang out their bowers, cloister
the pathways. Their roots are
her oak bones, their leaves her
whorled tongue and in the
green sap of their hearts,
they maintain her peace.



Musical Notation

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There was nothing of note left to say,
except maybe
the slow vibrato of a cello
drawn out painfully on the bow,
a single string of melancholy.

I would end it here,
many notes from where we began,
not delicately
but in a saw-saw of violins,
a rush of timpani,
those small flats and sharps
that when clashed together
have a way of grating the skin.

Some composers
place the odd, the unthinkable,
the discordant side-by-side.
They scrape kisses on our ears,
jolt our senses, run backwards
along the spines of our hair,
and we delight in that sweet sourness,
grinning on a bed of disharmony.

But after the first crescendo,
I found my position,
third back from the middle row,
playing the off-beats,

(continued on the next page...)

oom—pa, oom—pa, oom—pa,
Keeping things going steady
because an orchestra is not made of leads
but the sum of its parts,
greater or lesser.

With you, the score was always
more ambitious than practice.
You didn't notice the baton fall from your hand,
or the notes slip quietly off the staff.
Now the sheets are blank.
In no particular arrangement
I gather the small black notes to my chest.

I would begin here,
Waiting for the tap, tap of percussion,
like morning dew on a symphony of green.
Yet it's the silence that makes me afraid,
the change of tempo,
the pause in—between.

Sail away wi me Sarah!

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We could hoist the sheet up oan this bed.
Take aw thi books.
Thi anes wuv never read 'n' sail for lands
beyond the flung horizon.
Thur ur islandz in thi Palm-treed south uv which ave heard.
Wi ivory sands,
Coco-palms, mangoes,
a billion purple butterflies an copious honey
Fae bees thit never sting.
Id cairry ye across thi shore tae lay by
Mountain streamz thit flow wi wines.
One chilled french ros ,
One Chilean red. Come on then gem, ma dearest love,
let's sail there,
Let's go back tae bed?



Five haiku

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her scent
loneliness
I turn my pillow

morning drizzle
dampens the sound
of hammers

smiling
I adjust my step
yet we still collide

by the beat of its wings
a bumble bee
displacing dust

my friend's grave
I can't find
heavy snow

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Alphabet Soup

As the language clanged and banged,
Verbs vibrated on the inner line,
Grammar grated along the black gates
And the slang slong on the trodden banks.

Drainpipes blocked with capitals and stops,
Abject dialect on the bar crawl
Littering the walls,
The Thames awash with dirty rhyme.

On all the park benches and in all the phone boxes,
Clattering messages with more stories
Paper scatters in the autumn fall,
Trails of ambiguous meaning.

While pythons hiss on the underground,
Passengers chatter
But make no sound
And it's soup to the untrained ear.

The lost tongue
Rolling around, lolling,
Licking the best phrases.
Leaving London.



The Big Splash

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You know you don't believe me
but fuck it was wet the whole fuckin day
comin down so that people were
walkin wi their heads doon
an am walkin alang that quiet bit of Ballater Street
quiet in the early mornin
jist finished ma shift an dodgin
the puddles oan the ground
an there's this guy walkin about twenty yards
in front o me
an he's comin up tae this great big fuckin puddle
spread fae the side o the road
flooded almost oan tae the pavement
and there's this van, white van, no surprise
comes hurtling alang doin about ninety
and whoosh
wheels right through the puddle
an he's away like nothing tae dae wae him
an throws up this big wave
an the guy, the guy in front o me oan the pavement
he jist keeps oan walkin at the same pace
jist a wee wrist movement o his left hand
an it sits there

(continued on the next page...)

stoaps
a trail o ragged glass
like it's frozen
the big splash fae the white van
a big curtain o water no goin anywhere for a minute
or mebbe no a minute but seemed like it
an then when he was clear
it just dropped an made the splash a had been expectin
aw the time like a minute afore
an it soaked the pavement
an am robbin the rain fae ma eyes
no knowin whit am thinkin, feelin
doin the video rewind in ma heid
an he does it quick
just like that
the fucker turns roon
no right roon
bit jist a bit
an he winks
he fuckin winks at me.



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HNC

Ma feet,
like borrowed shoes,
don't seem to get the news.

The fit,
the movement,
the social improvement.

Bit shit!
Life happens.
Gets yer toes tappin.

Count it
Sort ma left fae ma right
Get ma timin right

An due credit,
In time an with time,
She makes me think,
Ya Dancer!

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Spine (Important)

Please adjust the bleed accordingly (left and right) to meet the actual spine's thickness. I have **ESTIMATED** a spine of 10mm.

It's also very important to make sure that the blue of the spine **DOES NOT** bleed around onto the white of the cover. It must stop exactly on the fold, therefore the imposition and actual folding and cropping of this job must be done with the utmost care.

Thanks!