

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition
2020 Manchester Fiction Prize
Short List

2020 Fiction Prize Finalists

Neil Campbell: ‘Needle in a Haystack’

Neil Campbell’s third novel, *Lanyards*, is out now. From Manchester, England, he has appeared three times in the annual anthology of *Best British Short Stories* (2012/2015/2016). He has published three novels, two collections of flash fiction, two collections of short stories, two poetry chapbooks and a poetry collection, as well as appearing in numerous magazines and anthologies. He is currently working on new books and looking for an agent.

Hannah Donelon: ‘little’

Hannah Donelon is a writer from Manchester. She studied English Literature at University College London before training as an actor at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Hannah began writing for the stage with the Royal Exchange Young Company and is passionate about exploring the tensions within female working-class identity as well as tensions within cultural heritage. In her short stories, she is particularly interested in tapping into distinct voices and the way in which those voices reveal themselves.

Ian Dudley: ‘Exit Row’

Ian Dudley studied Zoology at university. He worked in market research, travelling extensively in Europe and the US. He’s had short stories broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and Radio 7, and is currently studying full time for a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Birmingham.

Edward Hogan: ‘Bright Side’

Edward Hogan is from Derby, and now lives in Brighton. He works for the Open University. His novels include *The Electric* and *Blackmoor*. His recent short stories have been longlisted for the Sunday Times Audible Short Story Award, and shortlisted for the V.S. Pritchett Prize.

Andrea Mason: ‘Dead Man’s Stuff, Especially, Is No Good’

Andrea Mason is a London-based artist and writer. She is a graduate of the UEA Creative Writing MA and recently completed her Creative Writing PhD at Goldsmiths. She is the winner of the 2020 Aleph Writing Prize. Recent and forthcoming journal and anthology publications include *The Babel Tower Noticeboard*, *Sublunary Editions*, *Seen from Here: Writing in the Lockdown*, *Failed States*, *Tar Press* and *3: AM magazine*. Her debut novel, *The Cremation Project*, shortlisted for the inaugural Fitzcarraldo Editions Novel Prize, 2018, and longlisted for the Dzanc Fiction Prize, 2018, is forthcoming with Inside the Castle, USA, in 2021.

Bernadette McBride: ‘For the man who died in the wood’

Bernadette McBride is a Liverpool-based writer and creative practitioner. She is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Liverpool funded by the John Lennon

Memorial Scholarship. She has published short fiction and a self-help book, has appeared in several anthologies and co-edited the anthology *A Spray of Hope* (University of Liverpool, 2020). She won the Liverpool Guild 2019 award for 'The Biggest Impact on the City of Liverpool' for her public-facing creative writing workshops.

Neil Campbell

Needle in a Haystack

Back in the day there was this weird bookshop on an industrial estate next to a carpet shop and a mechanics, and though there were loads of signs on Harling Road most people had no idea it was there. It started in one industrial unit, but the owner, Osborne, owned the land, so, when the business expanded, he brought in shipping containers and filled them up with books. They were perfect for keeping out the rain and damp and you just padlocked them at night. The shop was near the M56 and the airport, and there was an airport parking place just around the corner, but it was a rip off.

The manager, Lee, was a Wythenshawe lad through and through. He had a wispy beard and a greasy ponytail and wore a leather fishing hat with a little City pin badge on. In winter he wore his walking gear: a green Regatta fleece and Karrimor walking boots, and in autumn used that walking gear on camping trips to the Llyn Peninsula.

Warren had gone to school with one of Osborne's sons from his second marriage and had been working part time in the shop, as a favour, for about five years. He'd been left a load of money and didn't really have to work and spent most of the rest of his time cycling around Cheshire on a three-grand road bike.

Recycling Ray was in his sixties and had never been married. He wore silver-rimmed glasses, had grey hair, lived alone, and drove around in a rusting yellow Mercedes van. He always wanted a chat in the shop and could tell you directions to virtually anywhere in South Manchester, in minute detail. He did a lot of work for little financial return. He went to all sorts of places, charity shops, car boot sales. He was the kind of endearing geek that you still felt had someone out there for him. The trouble with Ray was that he never seemed to listen to what anybody else said. There were a lot of people who came in that were a bit like that. They were on broadcast, not receive, and another one of these was the Rubaiyat Man.

The Rubaiyat Man was rough round the edges and turned up in his white van with the name of the electricians firm on the side. Every time he came in he was looking for different versions of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. He'd recite it to anyone and everyone. He said that one day, in his forties, after a profound psychedelic experience during which he'd talked to God, he'd suddenly been able to remember all the poetry he'd learned by rote in school, Tennyson and all that. But his favourite was the Rubaiyat, though it was the earlier translations by Fitzgerald that he liked most, not the more recent ones. The old ones were more musical, had better rhymes. Lee once asked him what he thought the poem was about and Rubaiyat Man said fuck knows. He was into all sorts of stuff. He'd come in and talk about conspiracy theories, order books by Velikovsky and David Icke.

Virginia lived near the old Empire cinema that was now the Jehovah's Witness Hall, and she bobbed in whenever she felt like it. She didn't do computers and got eighty quid a week to put the books on the shelves, get in supplies for the kitchen, and generally keep the place tidy, which mainly involved going around with a Ewbank and cleaning the carpet tiles. In winter she came in wearing her husband's old fleece and a United bobble hat. She did the most physical work of anyone in the shop. Though she was in her seventies she was strong. For years she'd been a bodybuilder, entering competitions, and still went to the gym on Palatine Road at least once a week.

*

One Wednesday afternoon a man stormed into the shop and looked like he was ready to wreck the place. He was a big bloke, had teeth missing, was dead pale. Bloodshot eyes stared out of his face.

Did you get some encyclopaedias in a bit back?

We get stuff in all the time, mate, said Lee.

Don't be funny. I know, but these encyclopaedias, very distinctive. Some weren't encyclopaedias, they were about the Roman Empire?

We get loads of that stuff in. But not recently, not as I recall. I can show you the ones we've got. Do you want them back or something?

The man didn't respond, but Lee took him over to a load of books blocking the fire escape. Those aren't them, we've had them ages, said Lee.

No, mate, no, but that's kind of what they looked like. Look, what it is, and I'm not accusing anyone here, but what it is, is that my old fella is in hospital, not got long, being honest, and my mum thought she'd have a tidy of the house, make it nicer for him when he got back. So, she got rid of a load of books. Now I don't know why she thought getting rid of his books would make him feel better, I really don't, she's not been herself since he went in, none of us have. But anyway, she took some to the charity shop and some to bookshops, and she said she came in the one near the motorway, which I'm guessing is this one. It would have been about three months ago.

And why—

—Why what? Oh well, like I say, and I'm not accusing anyone, but there was an envelope in one of the books. And my old fella can't remember which one it was, just said it was in one of the big hardbacks at the top of the stairs, on the landing.

Anything we find in the books we put to one side, over here, said Lee, walking over to a shelf behind the counter which had all sorts of odds and sods on it: U.S. airline tickets from the mid-nineties, hand written notes, little black and white photographs.

I can't see any envelopes here, said Lee. Like I say, if anyone had seen it, it would be on here.

Okay, okay, well, like I say, I'm not accusing anyone. So, it would be a load of hardbacks about three months ago.

Yes, well, we get things in all the time, that's the problem, and we don't keep a record of it on the system either. But I'm in here most days, and I don't remember anything like that. What does your mum look like?

Well she's just an old lady.

So, she put all these heavy books in the car by herself?

What do you mean? Oh, yeah, she's hard as nails.

But she doesn't remember?

No, she says she doesn't, anyway. I don't want to accuse her either. I just want to find the books. Okay, look, my old fella said he made a little cut in the top of the spine with a knife, so he knew which one it was. You seen anything like that?

I'm sorry, mate, I don't remember. And I guess I would remember something like that. I can ask everyone else who works here.

Okay.

Do you want to leave us your number?

Okay, yeah, I will do, I was going to suggest that. Mobile is better, yeah, I will get you my mobile, he said, digging it out of his jeans pocket.

Okay, well, we'll call you then, if anything comes up. But I'm being honest, mate, it's a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Okay. I'm going round the charity shops and a few other places, but like I said, she mentioned the place near the motorway, which is why I came here first.

Okay, well, we will definitely call you if anyone remembers anything.

Okay, thanks. I'm not accusing any of you that work here. Don't get me wrong.

No, it's fine. I mean, do you want to say what was in the envelope?

If anyone's seen the envelope, they'll know what's in it, believe me.

*

Lee didn't say anything at the time, but he knew the lad by name. He was a Walsh, from one of the old gangs in Wythenshawe, and his dad was Terry Walsh, who'd spent most of his time in Strangeways over the years. Next time Osborne came in, Lee had to tell him about it, and Osborne wasn't happy.

The bloody Walshes! They were the bastards torched this place, one of his lads it was, did a year or so for it, nothing, but yeah, was them, stuffed rags through the letterbox! And now this cheeky sod is coming in asking about an envelope? Tell you what, if anyone has seen this envelope just keep it!

So, you haven't seen any envelope?

No, I haven't seen any bloody envelope!

I've asked Warren and Virginia, and they don't know anything about it. My gut feeling is that I don't think the books even came here, they probably went to a charity shop or something.

If anyone finds it, tell them to come straight to me, then we'll deal with the bloody Walshes.

*

Tommy Walsh had long lived in the shadow of his father; years spent preparing for him to go to prison or preparing for him to come out, always the anti-climax of the coming out, when their quiet little house, only occasionally interrupted by new uncles, was filled again by his dad's elephant-in-the-room presence. Tommy always had to put up with the giggles of his mum that first night back, and the reduction in his standing within the house after that, until inevitably his dad ended up going back in and Tommy was the breadwinner again.

The Walshes had come from Ireland to work on the fairgrounds, finally settling on Ford Lane in Northenden. There's the M60 barrelling through there now, but at one time, just down from the old Tatton Arms, where people used to come to watch boat races, there was a fairground down by the Mersey. When the fairground closed some of the people working there stayed behind and there's a residential caravan park there now, beside the motorway, under the pylons.

Terry had moved them into a council house in Benchill, near where the Benchill boozier used to be, but they still kept the caravan in the front yard, taking a bit of fence off to fit it in, the caravan blocking all light into the front room.

Tommy's mum told him she thought Terry preferred it inside. Then the illness came, and he was in the prison hospital, and Tommy knew he wasn't ever coming out.

When his mum told him about the books and he passed it on to Terry, Terry's face turned red and he called her all the names under the sun. He had always called her names, routinely hit her, and yet she stayed with him because she said she had nowhere else to go.

Tommy went in the bookshop near the motorway, tried all the charity shops in Northenden, Didsbury, Sale, Chorlton, and of course there was never any sign of the book. One of the last things Terry said to Tommy was for him to keep looking, keep looking out for that hardback book with a little rip at the top of the spine, but Tommy knew he was pissing in the wind. Someone had had that envelope, and they were never letting on.

When Terry died, Tommy could see the relief in his mum's face, like the relief they both felt when Terry went back inside, but deeper than that.

*

When Osborne died, after checking himself out of the hospital only to have a heart attack at home, the shop was closed and that was it. Osborne's kids had no interest in the business and Lee heard that they just recycled all the books, regardless of their worth, and sold the unit to the mechanics firm on the other side of the yard.

Lee had always known there was no redundancy coming. Like everyone else who'd ever worked there he'd never had a contract, and because when Osborne died they didn't get paid, he said he was dropped right in it, immediately having to figure out the Universal Credit system. Signing on had changed beyond all recognition since he'd last done it in the eighties, and he said he'd just about managed to survive until his first payment. For a while he said he'd done a lot of fishing, sometimes eating what he caught.

Warren had never needed the job anyway, was already flush from the money he'd been left, and so he just kept on cycling, getting more and more into it until he completed the Coast to Coast route which he said nearly killed him.

Virginia missed the shop. As with Lee, it had been a big part of her life, but she took the opportunity to make a change. She spent sixty grand on a chalet at Boat of Garten, went walking all year round in her beloved Scotland, going to spots she'd been with Norman, feeling his presence in all those quiet places. It was assumed she'd paid for it with the money Norman had left her.

Rubaiyat Man could often be found at the poetry night in The Farmer's Arms, where the landlady always enjoyed his performance. When one night he recited the whole of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam it brought the house down, and the young kids who organized the night were amazed. The career of more than one young performance poet began that night. Rubaiyat Man was even able to afford to give up his electrician work to go freelance as a performance poet himself, and a highlight was when he supported John Cooper Clarke on a tour of West Yorkshire.

Ray's yellow van could still be seen going up and down Harling Road most days, and he'd always had other places to go to for a natter and a slash. That he could pay off the mortgage on his little terrace on Moor Road a couple of years ahead of schedule was something he wanted to shout from the rooftops about, but he'd finally learned to keep some things to himself.

Of course, there are no bookshops of these kinds around any more, and as such, nowhere quite like them for people like these to go. Life is much more prescriptive, with computers dictating our choices and controlling our brains. But there once was a time when people bought books based on their own instincts and not algorithms, when they could wander around knackered old buildings with books in a kind of order but generally just scattered quixotically, by owners wilfully idiosyncratic in variously old-fashioned human ways, in a time before we all walked headlong into this oblivion.

Hannah Donelon

little

Another one
She's really
It's always a scroller of a message
In that tiny box
It always looks like
the message is in a sort of wooden cabin and it's stretching
Out its growing body and pretty soon it'll have to find
somewhere else
To live
Because the beams will fall down like
40 pairs of
knees
buckling
under the pressure
Of it
all
She's verbose
But it's OK,
like
It's cute,
She's clearly been
Told
She has a
A way with words
By people who are just being
They're just telling her something
They know She
wants to hear.

She doesn't.
Have a way with words.
She just
puts a lot of words together
a lot
of words
No craft to it or
Anything
really.
Integrity is –
She probably doesn't edit because she probably thinks
To
not edit is to

write from the heart
but Joyce –
She places spaces before commas and it makes
my skin crawl but
only in the way it would with anyone
If anyone
Did that.

Eliot was basically made
Of Edit

Style,
as a writer,
She does
I guess
A style of sort of endearing
superlatives, hyperbolic
Sincerity.
Yeah,
Sincerity.
It must be exhausting
To be that
To have that
Sincerity
And about and over
Everything too.

At the start of it all.
I did say
I did say
I'm not Helena.
And I said it nicely.
And with heart emojis.
You see
the thing is
The
Thing
is
it takes a lot of
energy to
respond to those types of
messages, doesn't it? Those types of
long
sincere, hyperbolic
messages
That most people write out of
sheer laziness

Because.
She never
You can tell it's not laziness with
her
She never
uses capital letters or exclamation marks.

.

.

She's not crass
like that.

.

Of course she sends
Those Chain Things
but
I mean
all of the people
her age do,
Michael Morrin
Jacqui
Ginger Jacqui
and they never seem to notice I ignore them.
Or maybe they do
Because maybe they check
on all their like
304 inbox things.

But.
I don't care
are their minds really so
pure
as to think – if they don't
forward them on a ghost will appear
in the window
Well I'm sort of chatting shit now
aren't I because
they haven't been about ghosts for a while, but I can't
at the moment, think
how those threats and/or those
Promises
currently
disguise themselves nowadays

If I'm really
honest
I'm developing a problem with cynicism and
It's –
But
I don't mind it as much anymore.

I think I'm learning to sit
with it
a lot
better
Than I –
I used to be
And feel less...
guilty. That everyone is a
fucking idiot
Thank God actually
That
I don't have to
See
people as much
Anymore

...

I thought that less
When
I was Younger,
Although maybe
Not
To shed it
To shed youth
like
like this
Well it's almost
You know
So
I started replying
As
Helena.
Sure. Why not?
She's not seeming to
Understand that
My name is Hollie
Hollie
Not
Helena
But
I just think
I think
I'm bored.
And it's

fine

.

It's annoying me you're not Listening

Reading

Like when my pupils

Ask me for

My thoughts

My feedback they even

pay me

Like idiots

For it

I'm like:

Why?

You never listen

Anyway,

Not really

No one ever really listens

But

That's OK

That's OK

Because I don't Listen much

too.

But why pay me

A lot

Only to

Think up

your own

Mediocre

Thoughts maybe

it's actually

Arrogant

To write such long messages.

Like

Why, Marie, are you assuming

This is how

Helena wants

to spend her time

And obviously

Now

Helena needs to

Respond,

Doesn't she?

.

.

.
. .
Miles away from Marie
Across all the colours
The dynamic in the group
Chat
The Girl Group Chat
The Group Chat for the Girls
Is shifting
Dramatically
And I can spend more time
Manipulating
Because more time now
To manipulate
And get those
Dynamics
Back To
how
They
Were
How they used to be
Before I went away.
But even that
Is boring
And
The guy who posted
A video of him slitting his wrists
Has responded to me
And it dawns
It dawns on me
I'm probably not
Equipped
Equipped enough
To deal with this
Didn't even see the video
Properly
It was posted on the
Group chat
The girl group chat
Bunch of idiots
Watching it between
themselves
I got
Mad
And reached out to him
And now

I'm unsure
If I'm
I feel sort of detached from
His name
I feel unable to
You know
I know his year 8 face from
Before he left
For that school across the vale
The enemy school
The school we were supposed to get violent with
About twice a year, three times if
There was a derby
But now he's
In his own little box at the bottom
Typing
And reading
And I've been
Seen
It says
'Seen'
Was it just
Anger towards
Towards
Them
Those in
The group chat
That made me
I don't know.

Probably safer
To assume
'No'

She messages again
Honestly
You're able to use a lot
Of words, Marie,
So surely
You can read
That my name
Is
Hollie
Not
Helena
Hollie
Your

Messages are so
How are they so
Have we
Me and
The People my age
Have we got this other
Language
Now?
Where we
Don't sound how we
Speak
The way she does
Surely you
Would scroll up
To see all the times I'm
Telling you
That you've
Messaged the wrong

.

Helena
Sounds
From your messages
She sounds
Helena sounds Lovely

.

.

.

.

.

Legend
I'm now telling
Year 8
he was a legend
Oh dear
Not flirting
Just
Trying to
Reach out
But this is
An odd way of

.

.

Will say
have
to
Go
In a strong

kind way
But I've just
Asked him
A question
So that would be
Odd
Wouldn't it?
Like I just faked it
Will say have to go
As soon as he answers
the
Question
My hair strikes me as something odd
This blonde bit
Hair
Strand
Striking the corner of my eye
It's so bright
Too bright
Or something, ldk.
I Don't Know.

Mum emails from work
She says:
Not sure
Not sure she
Likes that photo of me
Not sure I like that little photo of you
What little photo of me
But I know full well
Which little photo of me she means
Which digitised little photo of me She means
Who gives a fucking fuck
Mum
But I reply
How interesting
Because that will hurt more
How interesting
Will hurt more

I hear the sounds of the ping
Reverberate
Reverberating
In the next room
Those messages always go to
Dad's phone
Before they come here

Before they reach mine
A picture
Of a cat in a sombrero
Nice
Should spend more time
Talking to them really
But I'm funnier
Than them
So they're rinsing me
All the time and I
I'm getting nothing back
I'm funnier
On here anyway
When I type
I'm funnier
I hear them laughing
More
Nice little box to be in really
And close when
I
 want
Mum probably
Wants the little photo
To be more
Her
So she can show off
Young skin somehow
But I like my skin
Blue anyway

Marie where is Marie
She'll understand
I will tell her I passed a dog today
And thought of her
Helena probably loves dogs you see
Helena probably struggles to keep up
Too with
Her mum's expectations of her
Fake vapid expectations
Though I'll dumb this down for Marie
And for Helena too
Naturally
Someone is probably
Watching this
Watching and Wondering
Why my names aren't matching up
Those people

What must they think of us
Of our little boxes
And our little ways
Creepy to think of them
Emotionless reading
Seeing this type of thing Over
And Over
Nothing new
Suicide boy
Nothing new

If I leave Marie
Hanging a few days she will
Realise how much she needs me
This little box
She will realise
She loves me
It's beneficial for both of us
All three

I like my skin
Blue drooping
Like a Salvador Dalí

I say this to Marie
But I change it and say
Went to gallery today
Lovely paintings
Lovely paintings by a fella
Cracks me up when people say: fella
Lovely paintings by a fella called
Salvador Delli
Maybe I haven't spelt that right
Salvador Dali that's it Marie
Have you heard of him?
I would recommend his work
Though not a patch on
O'Keefe
I know she likes flowers you see
But flowers can be mine
Flowers can also be intellectual
Intellectual property
Can be mine
Flowers are mine now
For a minute
Flowers are mine
Must dash anyway

Lasagna.
Homemade.

How might I describe
The next days
Much the same
Between me and Marie
Or as Helena would point out:
Marie and I

Marriage falling apart, Marie

Wasn't hard
I used my own break-up
The abandonment
The future of it all
the past rolling itself out
Like a carpet but going diagonally

She tells me she understands
I don't think she does
But she does
Somehow
I find myself

.
Warming to her
As Helena of course
Helena, moved
How strange to find myself telling you Marie
I'm in love
I'm falling in love with you
Tears all over my keyboard
As I write this to you
Smile as I wait
Heart pounding
As I
On the precipice
Or
Or

.
. .
She feels the same
As though
The World's shifting around
And,
she continues in her verbose way ,

But my eyes are now accustomed
Like a cerebral highlighter pen
to disregard 80% of her
Message
And quickly scan:
She feels the same

My fingers become little
Fish fingers
Crumbs all over the keyboard
Telling her
We should meet
I've not felt this connection to anyone before
I've not felt connection
Not for
A long time
Question if I ever have
But this is
This is
Well it is
Something

M:
No, please go ahead

H:
Thank you.

M:
Do you have the time?

H:
Yeah. Hold on. It's... 3pm.

M:
Thank you, Dear.

H:
Waiting for someone?

M:
No
I
I don't think so

H:
Are you OK?

M:

Yes

.
. .
. .

H:

It's OK if you're not

The demise of Helena
Was harder
Than I first imagined
Both of us
Marie and I
Couldn't let go
I'd found this person
Who knew nothing of my
Past
All the people
And it fit like
Gloved fingers typing
Warrior like
Shiny
The flip
The slide
I'm a God
Helena of Troy

But then
Marie started lying.

I sent her a picture of a flower
O'Keeffe
Pretended I'd painted it
For her
She never once asked
Why did you not show up?
I've toyed with this a few times
Does Marie
Does Marie on some level know
Helena is a lie

Year 8 swoons in
Hey Hollie been a while since you checked-
That's all I see
Otherwise it'll say 'seen'

.
. .
.

H:

I was supposed to be meeting someone but they've let me down

M:

Really?

H:

Yeah

People are like that

Can't really ever trust anyone

Can you?

M:

I don't know

I think I can

H:

That's sweet

Why hasn't she told me

About today?

It wasn't a normal meeting

She's

Being

Deceitful

I decide to type

to talk about my childhood

Not sure why

But

Offering her

This

Part of me

I look at the words strung together

Imagine them in the air

And a football coach

Fixing them as best he can

His weak underfunded players

Scrawny and desperate

Arranging them

Still, it wouldn't be enough

Can't control them once their out on the field

So Marie

So

It's imperative you write back
Tell me your thoughts on all of this
I need you
You see why I need you
To always tell me the truth

Marie

?

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

Typing

.

.

.

.

She sends

A picture

A flower

O'Keeffe

And asks

Why I lied

She wants to ring me

She's ringing me

I put my phone on silent

The walls in this house

Are too thin

Do people not understand

And by people I mean

Marie

Marie do you not understand

It's much easier to communicate

If we take out the sound

M:

I brought you something

H:

Really?

M:

It's a painting

H:

Wow

.

.

Thanks

M:

Some flowers

H:

.

.

Did you

M:

No

It's a

She's called

Georgia O'Keeffe

.

.

.

.

Are you OK?

H:

I'm great

Yeah

M:

What's your name?

I feel like

My insides

Marie

They've been clawed out

Something really heavy

Really heavy

Has been dropped onto my heart

And my breath

I can't

It feels like really thick fog

Tarmac fog

In my chest

Do you ever feel like that?

Marie?

Marie?

M:

I think about you a lot

H:

You do?

M:

You're very

Young

And your hair

Is So Bright

.

.

Meeting you

Talking to you

Feels

Feels

Feels what

Marie?

I told you about my childhood remember

And now you have betrayed me

Exit Row

Ian Dudley

After being searched and questioned and sealed for hours in the passage grave of a long-haul plane, you're taken to a holding cell in a business hotel.

Hanging your dripping coat on the back of the door, you set the coffee maker clucking soft brown fumes. Showered warm, you dry yourself and take your coffee to the window.

The city is closed in a pearl of rain. Its canyons are so thick with vapour, light bends. The world ends at the corner of the street. A lone SUV ploughs a bow wave past the front of the building.

Behind you the silent TV replays *The Masters* from the summer you turned 18. While you look the other way, the Kodachrome colours fade into the white noise of rain.

The conference room is piled with the fruits of the earth: a ziggurat of berries; a melting ice floe plugged with sodas.

Your palm on the window feels the hive of sunlight pressing back. It's heat stroke weather but you're chilled as slaughtered meat – a king whose cheesy snacks turn his fingers gold.

After a fuck off *son et lumière* that buttoned down O'Hare, it's past 2 AM when you land in Minneapolis. The only cab on the rank has the decal scars of a one-time patrol car and a driver so pale he could be blown away.

The car smells like a body and the trunk won't pop. You buddy your bag on the back seat watching a hospital band chase the driver's wrist as he fights the tracking.

An illuminated 10-metre fibreglass Indian points the way to your unlit hotel.

You've lost your meeting in a hall of mirrors: identical rooms with boardroom tables, platters of catered food, wide-screen TVs, and conference phones.

You're training the trainer, but can't remember if today you're a player or the prince. If you're stabbed will you get up to take a bow or lie on the floor bleeding out?

The trainer asks if he can 'stop you there'.

You stare into your coffee; the blackness is full of stars. Leaning back in your chair you notice a photo of you surrounded by your team. You're holding a photo of your team surrounding you holding a photo.

You tick the box that says 'here for business', but it makes no difference. There's sand on the floor of the hotel lift. Two women in bathing suits chat across you.

You want to get to bed so you can put in a full eight hours of lying awake. When you give up and head down you're the only zombie in the restaurant, drinking whisky sours, forking french fries and bronzed red snapper.

You say you won't care if you never come here again; it's a nightmare theme park of strip malls, clip joints, and churches, archipelagoes of houses with moorings, box-fresh golf courses and instant villages.

You're still burning bridges when the ghost in your phone trills a hurricane warning. It's time to leave when it starts raining in your room.

We apologise for the delay to this flight...

You're spat into a plaza of antiseptic light to suffer and be unforgiven. Hours dead, parents hang from their necks; their headless children reel like chickens. The gutters of hell run with boredom. There's no time to do anything.

When the Tannoy jerks you to life, you line up in the dusk along the airside window; mirrored in fluorescent light, you and your shade queue for the flight.

You see a glass falling in slow motion, smashing into a thousand pieces. It's so slow it takes days.

You're awake at dawn, cold and hungry. Go outside and your skin burns in the wind that leans on your shoulder like a friend.

The haggard crow on top of a thorn bush is a tattered plastic bag.

You're ill. Recovering. Both.

Larks burble above the fields.

No unauthorised persons beyond this point

At the entrance to the forest you surrender: laptop, keys, phone, coins, tablet, belt, and pocket knife. In the scanner you raise your hands to placate and confess: English, unarmed, and mostly harmless. They let you pass.

You try to remember the names of trees, which way is east, how to calculate the time of day, how to find water, and which berries you can eat. You begin to feel uneasy. The wind in the leaves makes a sound like rain.

Even now, if you were wearing the shoes you had as a child with a compass in the heel, you could walk right out of here, leaving the spoor of fox and badger and otter behind you.

You learn many things: that the flowers of forget-me-nots placed on the eyelids bring dreams; that a sprig of rosemary in the hands of the dead will not let them forget.

Some are untrue. Tincture of valerian doesn't bring you sleep, but the discovery you can fight what next with nothing.

On your desk is a pot of pencils taken from hotels, an Anglepoise lamp, a saucer full of paperclips, a drinks coaster, and a pay slip.

In the cafe you watch raindrops pick holes in the pavement.

The weight of water in your woollen coat pins you to your seat.

The last time you had contact with reality was in the 80s when you voted in Physics that a pound of feathers was heavier than a pound of lead.

Thirty years later, the only time you feel at home is when you're trapped in a revolving door of timezones and anonymous rooms.

A butterfly flags out of the meadow into a soft limestone landscape: parade grounds of silver olives, square white buildings, lanes drenched in the shade of umbrella pines, red, friable earth.

While you sleep, irrigation bleeds into the roots of olives, medlar, pomegranate, lemon, the lozenge of expensive grass trimming the swimming pool.

A swift clips low, stalls, sips an insect out of the air, and flicks away. Buried machinery hums and currents thread the water – priceless, sterile, silver and turquoise.

You dream of emigrating to Mars. You get so high you see the earth as paradise.

After a phone call, you drive through three countries to be at the bedside of a dying friend. The rented apartment is clean and inhospitable.

First thing in the morning the loops of the cable car shine against the dark pines, swooping upwards and vanishing over the crest of the hill.

You feel trapped at the bottom of the valley like water.

The *téléférique* lifts you above a thousand metres and you look the overwhelming Alps in the eye. In the valley your phone is a camera, but at altitude it chirps into life gobbling messages and news.

The people who live in the high meadows are the colour of tea. Their calves flex like hydraulic pistons.

You take photos of the concentrated flowers and follow the path along the ridge-line, sweating salt into the dust dry air.

At a wooden platform in the meadow you board the train to the sanatorium. The track rises through 30 degrees and the carriage struggles upwards on its gears. Gravity presses you back in your seat. The air is so pure you have to remember to breathe.

You disembark into an empty field. There is nothing to see except, in the distance, a gigantic bowl of rock, raw as a ruined hip joint, pale with the absence of an exhibit removed from display. Walking closer you see the score marks where data was deleted.

You climb upwards. The higher you climb the more the gradient tightens and the closer you have to lean to the world. The earth under your feet starts to fall away. You jump for safety onto a flat and floating stone.

When you turn, you're looking into a frozen blue wave as tall as a skyscraper.

You hear the sound of water in a desert: huge cisterns filling and emptying.

Falling scree clip-clops downhill. Time moves so fast you can see it.

Darkness forks the light, the reboot chimes, and scalding rain liquefies the hills. Gagged drains vomit fountains. Roads resurface under choppy rivers.

Numb air spills from the chiller cabinet. You miss the old-fashioned English weather, the pragmatic, half-hearted climate. You buy milk and butter and a bag of bird seed.

In the kitchen you keep a list of prized sightings: a nuthatch in eyeliner and powder blue opera cape, a young male woodpecker with a cherry-red mohawk.

Grey squirrels try to tear the feeder open. You scare them off with a Nerf gun and go out to pick up the bullets.

Living this close to the ring road you're deafened by surf, your lungs thick with invisible particles. You think of Keats dying of consumption in Rome, haunted by memories of herons and hares and small rain.

Through the open window you hear starlings needling the twilight. You press play and the steady notes before the music begins tidy your feelings away. Heavy chords weigh down the night until it's too dark to see.

Perhaps wet feet don't mean the end of the world. Perhaps there is a future abounding in light bulbs, milk cows, brand-new machines.

The night grows unfathomably calm. To posterity your life will seem strange, inconvenient, stupid, not clean enough, even sinful, and there is nothing you can do.

Bright Side

Edward Hogan

A year after her husband died, the council erected a streetlamp on the cul-de-sac, directly outside Cyb's house. Was the world too dark? No, certainly not in the suburbs of an English Midlands town.

The streetlamp was at the exact height of her bedroom window, and it blasted a noisy orange light over the back wall and the dressing table and the bookshelf and the bed. Particularly the bed. It made her feel like she was living inside a throat lozenge. Fifty-two years old, and for the first time in her life she couldn't sleep.

She hung a sheet of blackout paper. As it was August, she needed the window open, but the breeze flapped the blackout, so the light flared intermittently, which was worse.

After two weeks without sleep, she was in bits. Fatigue, forgetfulness, professional mistakes. Cyb worked for the customer services department of a white goods company. David, her late husband, had taught people to drive.

She began to hallucinate at home. As she drank her morning coffee, the articulated lamp in her peripheral vision briefly became a shoebill stork – a massive, ugly African water-bird she'd seen on Attenborough. It had an oversized beak like a giant clog and an extra pair of eyelids – slick, milky membranes.

At night, Cyb longed for additional eyelids. Preferably made of lead. But all she had were these two useless flaps of skin, increasingly swollen, and yet increasingly permeable to orange light.

It was unfair to call shoebills ugly. To other shoebills, they may have been beautiful. Not all of them, of course. But out there somewhere was the Clooney of shoebills, the Beyoncé of shoebills. Every shoebill had a mate.

Cyb asked the neighbours about the new streetlamp. Three of the women on the cul-de-sac were called Jill. 'I hadn't really noticed,' one Jill said.

The second Jill found the light reassuring. 'When my Roy stumbles home from the pub, he needs all the help he can get.'

The third Jill admitted she'd petitioned the council for the streetlamp. 'We're all getting older, and some of us – as you know – live alone. It's a security measure.'

'You didn't ask them to put it slap bang in front of *your* house, though, did you?' Cyb said.

Jill tutted. 'They said it was the optimal position.'

'For who?'

'Maybe you should buy a blindfold.'

'You mean a sleep-mask?'

Jill shrugged.

Before she'd ever seen David, Cyb's friends had talked about him with admiration. 'He's just a great, great guy,' they'd say. But they wore a sad, strained expression as they spoke. Cyb couldn't decipher that look. She'd wondered if David was a woman-beater or an

alcoholic or voluntarily celibate. But it all made sense the night they first met, at a Christmas party. A dark red birthmark covered the entire left side of his face.

At first, Cyb didn't know where to look, but as they began to talk, she got used to it. David asked so many questions. He wanted to know about her colleagues, where she grew up, her family. They sat together on the sofa, and she found herself telling stories. Before she knew it, two hours had passed. Her nerves danced like the sequenced lights on the host's Christmas tree. 'What about you?' she asked. 'What do you do?'

'I'm a driving instructor,' he said. 'Do you drive?'

'No.'

He swapped places with her, sat down on her left side. 'Look ahead, up the road,' he said, gesturing beyond an imaginary windscreen. He gave her an empty plate for a steering wheel, and talked her through the acceptable hand positions. Ten and two. Eight and four. He glanced at her from the passenger seat, his birthmark now hidden from view. 'It's the perfect job for me,' he said. 'They only see my good side, at work.'

She dreamed of amniotic sacs, of drowning in Lucozade, of high-diving from David's stiffened tongue into a pool of egg yolk. She couldn't wake from these dreams, because she wasn't really asleep.

In her bedside drawer, she found two scrunched-up sleep-masks – the type you get free with a travel set of cosmetics. One was office-chair blue, the other an oddly sexual pink. She put them both on, one over the other. They were useless. The orange light picked them apart in seconds.

She ordered a serious mask off the internet. It arrived from Japan in a rubber case, and was black, with owlsh recesses on the inside to prevent pressure on the eyeball. When she tightened the security straps around her head, there was a sucking sensation. It was good and dark in there.

Lying in bed, she sank into the void, but soon woke with a disturbing realisation: beyond the mask, the room remained bright. Even though she couldn't see them, the big orange triangles still slashed across her bed, her body. The light still throbbed on the wall. You could cover your eyes with NASA-grade Kevlar, but it wouldn't make the room any darker.

She pulled off the mask, flung open the window and glared at the streetlamp, with its corrugated cone of plastic, its stupid tin hat, and its coterie of crazed moths. 'Fuck you!' she shouted.

'Bit harsh, I'm only having a quick vape,' said a big-nosed man below, wafting away his caramel-smelling mist, and scratching his left calf with his right foot.

Cyb ducked back into her house, and re-dressed the window, aware that her breast had spilled from the side of her nightie.

Human Resources signed her off work because of the crying, and some foul language that had found its way into customer-facing emails. She was contractually obliged to visit her GP, a young blonde woman to whom Cyb explained the sleeplessness and the streetlamp. The doctor went through all the sensible suggestions and the 'sleep hygiene' strategies, then blushed, and quietly asked if Cyb had tried masturbating.

Cyb leaned forward and whispered, 'Yes. It's *brilliant*, isn't it?'

The doctor prescribed anti-depressants.

Autumn came. How quickly the nights drew in. What a phrase: *the nights drew in*. She thought of terror suspects hooded with drawstring bags, the cords pulled tight.

Earlier and earlier, the streetlamp came on with a weighty click. Whatever she was doing at that moment, she'd freeze, her foot raised on the stairs, or her knife lodged deep in the green flesh of an onion. At first, before the sodium vaporised, the light would shine pink and that was fairly pleasant, but soon the jaundiced glow prevailed, and her house began its descent into the orange world. It was as though the colour had risen to the surface of her furniture, like blood to slapped skin.

I'm not someone you meet for the first time twice, David used to say.

No point drawing the curtains. Each evening, the shoebill would land in the garden, or she'd see it strutting along the cul-de-sac, investigating Jill's rockery. It lifted one leg, the huge toes of its feet collapsing like some fold-away kitchen mop.

Cyb wandered the house, avoiding windows. In the bathroom, she found the little leather wash bag David used to take on holiday. It contained the free sachets of moisturiser she'd collected for him, the Bic razors, the miniature bottle of bright pink Gaviscon. In the mirror, her face was half in shadow.

For holidays, they'd always travelled by coach or train, David not wanting to drive because of his job. She remembered many restful moments spent on public transport. It gave her an idea. Anything was better than moping around the house in this eternal twilight.

So, the next afternoon, she ambled down to the bus shelter and caught the number six towards town. She sat near the back and put her head against the window, felt the engine resonance in her skull and neck and shoulders. Along the A6, branches scraped the windows, but even that soothed her. By the time they got to the Palm Court roundabout, she'd fallen asleep.

When she woke, it was dusk, and the almost empty bus was parked at the depot on the outskirts of town. Cyb pulled in those slow, colossal, post-sleep breaths. The young bus driver swung down the aisle, checking under the seats for rubbish. He was about thirty – a bodybuilder with a shiny face, and hair stiff with product. The short sleeves of the bus company shirt clung to his arms, which made him look strangely babyish. 'Rise and shine, duck,' he said.

'I must have missed my stop.'

'A fair while ago, I reckon,' he said. 'I tried to wake you.'

'Sorry.'

'You'll have to shift, now, though, because they're doing a decon.'

'What's that?'

'Decontamination.' He nodded outside, to a group of men in white overalls and backpacks, filing out of the depot shed.

'This bus is *contaminated*?' she said.

'They all are,' the driver said.

Cyb tried to stand, but dizziness overcame her and she stumbled sideways and crashed into the seat across the aisle.

'Christ,' the driver said. 'Are you sick?' His hands were raised as if to catch her, but Cyb could sense his reluctance to get involved.

'I'm fine. Just a bit woozy.'

She tried to walk again, but her left leg buckled beneath her. She grabbed a pole, and accidentally rang the bell. 'Next stop, please,' she muttered, trying for a joke.

'Bloody Nora,' the driver said, wincing. He glanced around, as though looking for help or witnesses. He took his mobile phone from his pocket. Compared to his hulking upper body, his legs were thin, and his trousers didn't reach the top of his shoes. 'Do you want me to call someone?' he said.

'There's nobody to call.'

He checked the time and sighed. 'We can't stay on the bus. Tell you what, come to the café, sit down for a bit, till you're steady. I'll buy you a coffee.'

'I can buy *you* one,' she said.

As she followed him off the bus, she heard the wet padding of large three-toed feet behind her.

In the depot café, they took a window seat. Her mouth felt warm and sour with sleep, her eyes sticky. This was a joy.

The driver's name was Marco, and he seemed more relaxed, now, amongst people. He produced a sweetener dispenser from his top pocket. Cyb declined.

'So, you've been riding the bus all afternoon,' Marco said.

'I suppose.'

'Do you do that often?'

'First time, I think.'

'Listen,' he said, and then paused. 'Not being funny, but do you have a place to stay?'

'What do you mean?'

'Are you homeless?'

She laughed. 'No.'

'Okay. Good. It's just that my sister was homeless, at one point, so, you know.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.'

'No, it's fine. I'm glad you've got somewhere.'

'I've just been having trouble sleeping, and the bus helps me nod off,' she said.

'It can be quite lulling.'

'Not what I want to hear from my driver, Marco.'

'Ha-ha, yeah, no.'

'My husband had a driving job, too,' Cyb said, looking out the café window at the lumbering, prehistoric buses in the yard. 'His legs got very stiff after a day in the car.'

'Yeah, that happens.'

'He used to do yoga in the evenings, to open the hips. He might have taught you to drive, actually, if you learned around here. He was an instructor. David?'

'Nah. The fella who taught me, he was disfigured. He had one of those big red wine stains on his face, you know? I think his name was Robert, or Rob. Nice guy, though,' Marco said, checking his phone.

Cyb stared at him, but he didn't look up from the screen. He'd received a message which made him smile.

They finished their drinks. 'Well, I'm done for the day,' he said. 'Will you be all right getting back?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Hey,' he said, passing her a leaflet. 'There's an autumn offer on coach travel. You can get out into the Peaks, dirt cheap. A right good kip!'

'I might do that.'

The driver of the return bus was a woman, and Cyb fell asleep again, woke two stops from home. When she walked into the cul-de-sac, the streetlamp blazed, but she felt rested. She gave the pole a friendly shove and went into her house.

Upstairs, she sat by the window, elbows on the sill.

Port wine stain. There were other terms for other birthmarks: salmon patch, stork bite, strawberry navel. Who came up with these names? Much of David's everyday life had involved looking after people who were upset or flustered by his appearance. The bank-tellers and car mechanics, the shop assistants and taxi-drivers. He made them feel all right, like they'd been tested, in encountering him, and they'd passed.

Despite his best efforts, some people still freaked out. Cyb recalled a daytrip to London, and a woman who'd screamed and fled when David asked her for directions. Cyb had called after her, 'Don't be so pathetic!'

'Let's just buy a map,' David had said.

Tomorrow, Cyb would go to Ladybower Reservoir, on one of the cheap tickets Marco had mentioned. She'd go early, just after daybreak. She'd stand on the gravel shore, in the blue-grey light, refreshed after a good long sleep on the furred seats of the coach. And she would watch the shoebill wade out into the shallows, alert for prey. She'd watch him cock his head back, before thrusting that bill violently into the water, down into the darkness, after something she couldn't see.

Dead Man's Stuff, Especially, Is No Good

Andrea Mason

A bag of rags.

~~A bit, he replied.~~

A black Harley Davidson boot, women's, with a metal-tipped spike-heel.

A blue cotton item.

A copy of *The Economist*.

~~A film flickered, highlighting his limbs and his hand wrapped around his cock.~~

~~A full cup, surely, she would have said.~~

A plastic box of poster paints, containing 21 10p-sized circles of colour which glisten as if wet from recent use.

A right-foot burgundy shoe.

A roller-coaster ride of them against the world, the result of which finds her in a room, digging through the dusty items of a dead man.

~~A shit smell.~~

~~A tiny naked Carter clambered up a ladder in front of his chain-link version of Fragonard's *The Swing*, hung on the wall behind the tent, and perched on its top rung.~~

A V-neck sweater is dusty, its left shoulder ravaged by moths.

~~A violent Japanese porn film.~~

After years of moving she finally feels at home.

Ah!

~~Alix, come out,' he said.~~

~~Alix held off briefly and proceeded to eat the chocolate cheesecake.~~

Alix inspects it.

Alix presses a finger onto the white.

Alix turns it over and inspects its sole.

Alix turns the item around in her hand and pushes the tail section down through the tied ends.

An Armani bag with fabric handles.

An instruction manual for a table tennis table.

An orange ping pong ball.

An urge to pee.

~~At first she was tolerant of the tubes of Dakacort that littered the bathroom cabinet and kitchen drawer.~~

At its centre she sees a nail.

~~Can we have some ashes, she said, to put under a tree?~~

~~Carter angled the viewfinder further towards her.~~

~~Carter built a six foot high cardboard fortress, and got Jean to paste on wine labels and stickers.~~

~~Carter presented her with the cork, in which he'd wedged a 50p coin.~~

~~Carter referred to himself often in the third person: Carter needs a cigarette, or Carter is tired.~~

~~Carter's studio in Paris was littered with bags from luxury stores and empty champagne bottles.~~

~~Carter swung her around.~~

~~Come and look, he said.~~

~~Dead man's stuff, especially, is no good.~~

~~Did that hurt, she said.~~

~~Did Thérèse buy it for him?~~

~~Did you go to The Royal London, the voice asked.~~

~~Does it matter, she said.~~

~~Does she need to keep anything?~~

~~Finally, the balancing and bending, her left hand working his cock, the right hand with a finger up his arse, became too uncomfortable.~~

~~For luck, he said.~~

~~Half of the circular compartments are empty.~~

~~Have you made anything else, the woman asked?~~

~~He flipped the viewfinder towards her and pressed play.~~

~~He's going to leak out whilst I'm asleep, like the Genie in the bottle.~~

~~He's fucked, she thought.~~

~~He hadn't liked to read.~~

~~He leered, or sneered, which was it, and rolled away to smoke a cigarette.~~

~~He read out from the mags, broadcasting as visitors wandered around the show.~~

~~He shoved a camera in her face when she was in labour with Jean.~~

~~He stayed at the gallery most nights, crawling about underneath the stage, where he had a sound system and a stash of porn mags.~~

~~He wanked, slowly, then more vigorously.~~

~~He was projecting a porn film onto her, and filming it.~~

~~He was prone to eczema breakouts: itching and scratching.~~

~~He will ask where they came from.~~

Her chest and throat feel thick.
Her finger print shows up, grey on the white.
~~Her usual drink then was Thunderbird.~~

His black-footed skinny legs dangle down.
His lean torso, in the black T-shirt with the white seams, squares its shoulders.
~~His parents took his ashes away after the cremation and conducted a burial.~~

How can there still be a smell?

I haven't seen the dead body.
~~I saw your advert in *Modern Art* magazine, the voice said.~~

If an item is wearable, is it wrong to give it away?
~~If this was Carter's life now, she thought, he was welcome to it.~~

In her bedroom she puts the items into a second laundry bag, and zips it up.
~~In Maxim's, Alix stared around at the women, the young only distinguishable from the old
by their fresh skin and hair that moved.
In their flat, the phone rang.~~

~~Indeed, a strange concept; how much would you like, half a cup, a full cup?~~

Is it coming from the bag?

It comes down, hits the edge of the desk and pings off under the bed.
It feels tainted, like hazardous waste.
It has a deep band, which ties at the front as she holds it, with curved panels to give a hat
shape, and a flap or tail section at the back which tapers to a point.
It has scope, room for improvement.
~~It's a pill box, from the second world war, which we glazed as a philosophical gesture, she
said.~~
It is cold enough to snow.
It's dirty and covered in patches of yellow mould.
It's like handling items from a desecrated crypt.
It's some sort of bonnet.
It's too large for a child.
It lands tights uppermost, feet caught beneath the pile of T-shirts and jeans, which gives the
crotch even more of a thrust.
It looks like a child's paint set.
It smells musty.
~~It was always Carter's work.
It was cold, around 5am.
It was in this way that they began their collaboration.~~

~~Jean always called him Carter.~~

~~Just say whatever you think they want to hear, he said.~~

~~Later, at a private view, they discussed the merit of being phoned by a New York gallerist.
Later, the drinking and coke made the rashes angry, and she no longer cared.~~

~~Let me know when you do something else, she said, and they forgot to.~~

Like her emotions, rustling and settling.

~~Look at this, he said.~~

Lopsided from historical subsidence, the house is a survivor like her.

~~No, they said, we don't want to separate him.~~

~~Now it was his thing, part of the work.~~

~~One time, she wet her finger, and inserted it, gently at first, then harder, into his anus.~~

Perhaps the items are settling?

~~She and Carter did that once, with stuff from their loft.~~

She bounces the ball against the floor.

~~She called them the night before.~~

~~She can recall many times when he ruddered his cock between her breasts.~~

She can't sneak the socks into Jean's drawer.

~~She climbed off the stage and got into the tent.~~

She collects the bundle of items from the chair, and presses the crotch of the black tights to her chest.

She comes upstairs to go to the loo.

~~She could be subsumed by him, or go all in.~~

She doesn't want to ask Jean if he wants the clothes.

She dumps the laundry bag in the half-finished kitchen.

She feels like the girl in *Tomorrow's People*, which she watched as a kid and was more frightened by than *Doctor Who*.

~~She found it sweet.~~

She grabs an empty laundry bag and transfers the items from the Habitat bag into it.

~~She handled the balls, traced the line of his scrotum with her middle finger, and nudged the tip of his penis into her mouth with the heel of her hand.~~

She has another basket of laundry to hang out.

~~She heard him muttering, moving about.~~

She heaves the bag upstairs into her bedroom and sticks her hand in.

She is no closer to making any decisions.

She knows what happens to stuff: it sits in bags and boxes in an attic, or a basement, or clutters up living space, until finally you crack, and take it to the dump, or pile the boxes ten feet high in a yard and burn them.

~~She lay next to him, her head in his armpit, his scent not unlike the pungent stink when cats spray to mark territory.~~

~~She liked that she made him shout.~~

She loads the laundry items onto the radiator before she goes to sleep.

She looks at the laundry bag from a distance, and weighs up her opponent, preparing for the fight.

She needs fresh air.

She pegs out the new stuff, blowing on her fingers in between each item.

~~She placed her empty spoon centrally on the plate when she finished.~~

She places the solitary shoe next to the solitary boot.

~~She pressed the finger in harder as she sucked.~~

She presses it back onto the radiator, and tucks the shoulders over the top.

~~She pulled it out, and swapped hands.~~

She recalls his smell.

~~She remembers how, when they first met, probably after the first time they had sex, they drank champagne, and filled the bed with pistachio shells.~~

~~She sat alongside him in the van, and felt like a wife.~~

She shoves her hand back into the laundry bag.

~~She slid down his torso, her body suppressing his cock, which pinged up as she slid past, and her face was in line with it.~~

~~She smelt him close by.~~

~~She stared sullenly and chewed her nails, whilst he made laddish banter with the boys at the depot.~~

~~She stuck her legs up on the dashboard as they drove, feeling like her body was full of ants, so desperate was she to get back to her book.~~

She takes a sip.

~~She thought she heard him exclaim.~~

She thrusts her arm back in the bag and picks out a scrap of paper torn from a French comic.

She unpegs the items from the line, including clothes belonging to her and Jean, and balances them on her arm.

She unscrews the coffee pot.

She walks across to the radiator, and picks up the T-shirt.

She walks over to a garden chair and flips the bundle onto it.

She wakes in the night.

She wants to get a handle on it all as a body, an entity.

~~She wanted to film the arguments.~~

~~She was bathed in a glow.~~

~~She watched as he ejaculated across the girl's pink frothy skirts, shook his now flaccid penis, and turned to look at the camera, eyes shining, his face a topography of cracks and crevices.~~

~~She woke up to the noise of the TV next to her on the stage.~~

She wonders if she became just another body for him.

She zips up the second bag, containing items she has yet to sort through.

She hears rustling.

She hears the coffee bubble up.

She imagines his armpit hair poking through the holes.
She imagines the builder coming out into the garden, looking at them, and at her.

~~She looked at the ladder, in front of the chain piece, a few feet away from where they sat.
She looked at Carter, standing behind the tripod.~~

She puts the bandana on, goes into the bathroom and looks in the mirror.
She puts the coffee pot onto the hob, and goes back down into the cellar to bring up the laundry bag.

She turns it over.
She turns her head away, as she repeatedly thrusts her right arm into the lucky dip, to avoid the dust.

So much bloody stuff in the world.
~~So they had no grave, she and Jean.~~

Stuff is no good.

~~Sweat and coke and alcohol and cigarettes.~~

~~Table tennis was her thing, she played as a kid.~~

~~Ten years' worth of accumulated junk, childhood stuff and hand-me-downs that was threatening to bring down their living room ceiling.~~

~~That's the money shot, he said.
That must have been close to the end.~~

The area for the head is too shallow.
The shoe is covered in dust, and has spots of mould on the leather upper and the sole.
The builders, who have been in the house for weeks, have been using the cellar as their changing room, and mess room, making instant coffee with an electric kettle.
~~The first Alix + Carter artwork was a half page advert in an art magazine: a panoramic photograph of a pillbox in a field, and their telephone number in white out of a black border at the bottom of the photograph.~~
The full feet make her think of the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*, snuggled into their sleep suits, waiting to be taken care of.
The Gant socks are OK, she notices as she unpegs them.
The Habitat bag sits covered, now, in an unmanageable coating of plaster dust.
The label says L'Homme Invisible, Paris.
The left-foot burgundy shoe.
The left stiletto-heeled boot.
The most affecting thing is the smell, a sickly, heavy perfume, with under-notes of sweat and dirt.
~~The only thing that matters is the work, he said.~~
The patent has scraped off at the toe, around the lace-holes, and the heel.
~~The Royal London was the hot art school of the day.~~

~~The rule seemed to be to extract a spoonful of dessert, and leave the spoon sitting on the plate.~~

The smell sticks in her nose as she navigates the joists of the kitchen floor.

The stuff is closing in on her.

The tights dangle on the line, a pair of disembodied legs.

The tights mock her from their perch.

The T-shirt, despite having been left overnight in the machine before being hung out, still smells of perfume.

The T-shirt has a hole in the heart, a tear in the shoulder, and several small holes in the torso.

The T-shirt will go into the bin, she decides.

~~Then there was a smell.~~

There he is, sitting on the radiator.

There's a split in the leather on the instep area of the sole in the shape of a tiny crucifix.

There's still so much to go through.

There isn't.

Thérèse's?

~~They were making their final show together.~~

This dead body is not dead, she thinks.

~~This way we can spend more time together, he said, and pulled doggy eyes.~~

~~Through the hole at the shoulder blotchy red rashes would be visible.~~

Through the window she sees the builder in the kitchen, replacing the floor.

~~To accompany him on boring jobs that he didn't want to endure alone such as driving vans for an art moving company.~~

~~Was it a missed opportunity?~~

Was it Carter's or did he buy it for Jean?

What if Jean thinks stuff *is* good?

~~What is it, the woman said?~~

What should she have said?

What, those, she'll say, they belong to my dead ex-boyfriend, I thought I'd freshen them up for him, just in case he wants them back.

~~We're the artist, she said.~~

~~When she was reading he pawed at her like a cat.~~

~~When the girl looked out of the window, all was still, and when she looked again, the standing stones had crept closer to the house.~~

Who cleared out Andy Warhol's stuff after he died?
~~Who's the artist, an American voice asked.~~

Whose was it?

~~'Yes,' she said.~~

For the man who died in the wood

Bernadette McBride

Learning to make marks using hammers, the sentence runs through a thin paper photo collage displayed on a fridge. Not the one where the body was taken. It's a tall silver economy fridge belonging to the mother of the little boy who had learnt to make many marks with his friends in the wood. The woman can't unsee the memory as a fluorescent yellow border around the words makes the letters go *pop*.

Tree falls. Man falls. And after the storm they never went back. The mother wonders about the dog who waited by the man's side. The gates on all four corners of the wood stay locked and the entrance pathways become overgrown. Nature flourished and perished. Habitats for birds undisturbed, a call to a wood dead but for their own kind and the squirrels and the things that crawl beneath.

The singing became louder as the days blurred, Winter turned to Spring, passersby trailed the streets around the perimeters of the wood pressing their ears to the cold black railings which lined its borders. Some half inclined to jump over to hear more, but they daren't. Food scarce. Nothing dropped, littered or left, even out of kindness. Muddied warning signs on all entry points forbidding any human, good, bad or in-between to come in.

Someone from the government holds the key and comes by once or twice to check for danger. Again. Leaves.

The mother opens the fridge to get some milk and free, happy faces jump at her from the collage. That was the last time the birds saw the children. Jumping off logs, in high-vis vests, paid for engagement with nature. Escaping the city's fumes on the nursery bus. Dimpled hands clasped together, holding s'mores over a fire, barely warm hot cocoa dripping from their mouths, running a rivulet over their chins and down their soft necks.

The note on the wood gates simply says, *There is no time or date given for this site to reopen*. What does that mean? Perhaps it will be left untouched like some shrine. But unlike a bedroom with dust gathering and all the stillness that offers sameness, life will carry on. The fungus will grow on trees, creatures will find a way to feed, or leave, new birds will come. Some things though will be unmoved: a lost red wellington boot, tree branches gathered and bent over in a child's prayer for protection, fashioned into a triangle roof.

And what of the storm whose passage across Europe was at the beginning of all this? Ciara. The Irish feminine version of Ciarán, meaning black, or little black one. Funny how the gale was so drawn to a wood going by the name of Black Wood, as though two magnets of darkness, unable to resist the pull of the other and then snap.

Still, the fridge magnet holds up hope on a piece of paper.

High winds and rain that fell and rose around car wheels and the people stayed home. When the tree fell and the man fell a storm had just passed. But tree roots were weakened, which, according to the locals who spoke up after, were long rotten and unstable. And they were a gift so they were left to the people of the city by wealthy landowners a long time ago.

At least four to five pairs of great spotted woodpeckers recorded in the wood once, dining out and drumming ruffles on a feast of deadwood. *Fwump-fwump, fwump-fwump*, they foraged, roosted and nested, not interested in living trees like their sap-sucking neighbours. Post-storm air with all its crispy-cleanness, stillness, the kind asthmatics open their lungs up to. And so the human had believed he was safe.

What sound does a tree make when falling?

They say a dog can hear nearly twice as many frequencies as a human, from four times the distance. That they can sniff things out given training: an oncoming seizure in an epileptic, or a virus. If he had lived to tell the tale the man might have said, *The sound is a bit like fireworks going off, at the start.*

The dog was by the man's side until help came too late.

They go by the Black Wood most days and the boy looks out the car window. If he remembers, he doesn't say. The mother is tempted to climb over the gates in the moments she has alone. She's not afraid of being killed by trees. Perhaps she is worried about being caught, being a rule breaker, or seeing something she can't unsee. But she wonders about the wood all the time.

A battle ensues with the freezer door below the fridge, long days lead to many visits, and small hungry children do not wish to hear the word later. The mother removes her knee. Looking at the photo collage above, the top grid shows a trio of photos of her son alone. In a series of three photos, he holds what appears to be a white flag fastened onto a long stick, at full-mast, at half-mast, then lowered. Once laid on the ground, with a wooden mallet, tongue out in concentration, he makes a series of markings with material from the earth.

The mother always dreams at night, strange, startling dreams hard to wake from. But this time they take flight. In the dark she moves, pillows and books falling. She goes back to earlier in the year and is a highflying windstorm. She does not want to cause devastation, just to see this locked-in world. At her fastest — one hundred and thirty-six miles per hour — her form passes by Cap Corse on the most northern point of Corsica. So fast the little boats in the harbour shake and cry and early Christian settlements are almost excavated.

Warnings spread across Europe.

She is a tailwind which sees a world record broken for the fastest ever flight time from New York to London Heathrow in just four hours and fifty-six minutes. In any form, she never imagined she could become a world record-breaker.

Next, she takes in Northern Scotland and Norway flying right through the auroras as though a ghost. Blowing worse through her beloved Ireland, which she misses so. In visiting she takes away the life of others along the path to somewhere else. In Hampshire, an Irishman dies when another falling tree hits his car. Described as well-loved. A woman and her two daughters are buried as she takes the roof off a ski rental shop in Poland, she wants to see the works of Rafał Olbiński at the Polish Museum in Rapperswil but realizes it's in Sweden after all.

Like a demonic drone, her form passes through the Swedish Alps and inland rivers searching for art. A man's boat capsizes and he drowns hands waving until the tips sink. As she dreams, above the fireplace in her room sits a large print by Olbiński she got in another lifetime at an art market in East Berlin. She gave it away once because she came to dislike the man who bought it for her as a gift. But she realised the art meant more than the man and so she got it back.

In the white frame, another woman sits on a chair in a red dress and watches over her, long legs stretching right up to the moon which she uses as a footstool. A cool lake is surrounded by evergreens and props up a midnight-blue sky. It's the surrealist poster Olbiński was commissioned to make for a Polish theatre production of *Cinderella*. But the woman is depicted as barefoot and uninterested in glass slippers.

Stars.

Flying now through a wood she recognises and night gives way to day. Her powers lessen and there is silence. Footsteps can be heard gently treading through a mossy morning carpet, and the pitter-patter of nonhuman feet. Then the falling and what comes after she doesn't know as her form evaporates. More light footsteps and her eyes open. She checks the death rates and prepares to face the dishes.

Hatchlings hear something they don't recognise: a form unfamiliar in all their newborn hours. They nestle closer to their mother burrowing deeper into the twigged bed and listen to hear if the thing passes. Their eyes have not yet opened. It moves below. It's climbing. Their mother's breast trembles against them and her heartbeat is all a flutter-flutter. It's not so easy for her to fly away and leave them, but she would as they would their young. Loud noises and something else follows which almost dislodges them, but they are stuck safe with their mother's glue.

The thing has a hammer, makes markings, synthetic colours left on the oak that stands them tall. Feathers would have pierced through their skin as they learnt to perch and walk, to open their eyes. Catching mealworms in tiny open beaks. It's a long way to fall with your

eyes closed so new, naked and blind. Nothing will save them, no one passes there now aside from the man from the government and his marksman.

The boy sees their eyes watching him, all sitting apart, some smile, others frown, no bother he can't see beyond the things. Jesus is on a stained-glass window high up looking down at him. *I'm scared*, he says to his mother. *Look at the window*, she says. *What colours do you see? Red, blue, green and... some gold*. He knew Jesus only as a toy doll lying in the hay, that time he was a sheep with black stockings. He says he wants to leave, to go home, his mother doesn't seem to hear, so he says it louder. A song plays and no one sings, aside from one man who follows along beneath his breath, moist material moving.

Can I pick this stick up? Can I bring it home? No, no. His hands are peeling. The more the boy touches, the more they peel. He's hungry all the time though he's left to eat as much as he likes. His cars are the same colours as Jesus in the high window in the place where music played without voices. He looks through the sunblind in the car window and sees the gates with tall grass and bushes climbing up high over the tops like Spiderman. And he knows they will drive past because they always do and never stop. He is learning that some things can't go back.

The boy remembers the hammers and the marks and the colours from the earth and the radio in the nursery bus on the way and how he had heard his daddy's voice. *That's your daddy*. They told him he was talking about something important and the boy felt surprised and happy to hear him as they were leaving the city.

A black thick road runs across the length now. Below, some say there's a grave for the wood and all that it was, to the boy, to the man and his dog, to the birds and their fallen splayed hatchlings. And the woman who wondered. A tarmac roundabout is a compass pointing to the old gates North, East, South, West, each entry now replaced with an exit. The great paired woodpeckers are long gone, their *fwump-fwump* dying out with the sounds of workmen's tools drilling into the soil as if they were one of the same kind, exposing cavities for goods.

There was singing again though and new sounds and the sirens stopped. But it took a long time. As long as it takes for a wood to rot right down to its roots and for all life to up and leave and return just to check, and then leave for good. Then to be pushed right down in the ground with the lid closed over like a forest in a coffin or a greenhouse without windows.

On the former North gate, now the first roundabout exit, a bunch of flowers have been left.

Dedicated to the memory of Yusuf Paul McCormack who strived to "be the difference" for all children.

The Manchester Writing Competition was established in 2008 and celebrates Manchester as an international city of writers, finding diverse new voices and creating opportunities for writer development. The Competition offers the UK's biggest literary awards for unpublished work, has attracted more than 20,000 submissions from over 80 countries and has awarded more than £195,000 to writers. Designed to encourage and celebrate new writing across the globe, the competition is open internationally to new and established writers.

The Manchester Writing Competition was devised by Carol Ann Duffy (UK Poet Laureate 2009-2019) and is run the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University: www.mmu.ac.uk/writingschool.

This year's Manchester Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Tim Etchells and Irenosen Okojie. The Manchester Poetry Prize was judged by Malika Booker, Mona Arshi and Mimi Khalvati. The winners of this year's £10,000 Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be announced in February.

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If you have any queries, or would like any further information, about the Manchester Writing Competition, please contact: writingschool@mmu.ac.uk.

Press enquiries: Dominic Smith: dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk; +44 (0) 161 247 5277. The judges and finalists are all available for interview.

The Manchester Writing Competition will return in 2021.