

Manchester Writing Competition 2013: the Short-listed Poetry Finalists

Carolyn King

NOBODY TOLD SCARLATTI

T. S. Eliot apart, they say that when it comes to higher art (especially poetry) cats – even tabbies – are taboo.

I glance from one to other of my slant-eyed babes – the green-eyed jet black girl, amber-eyed ginger boy –

and can't believe it's true; longing to run the gauntlet, to throw my fur-hat into the ring

with the Siamese blue point:

nobody told Scarlatti.

THE CAT'S FUGUE

("My music is composed of lively wit and harmonic puns: it is an ingenious jesting with art." – Domenico Scarlatti)

Because he delights in my delicate touch on the harpsichord keys, he kindles my natural flair – calls me his muse, his pretty Pulcinella; strokes the music that emanates from my tip-toe odyssey, just as he strokes my silky fur from musical ear to baton-tip of rhythmical waving tail.

I love these quality times: together we make sweet sound. But he works too hard. Some mornings I'm stirred awake at dawn by uncompromising addiction to detail – fanatical phrasing repeated over and over again, his hungry fingers licking the ivories. Nuzzling into the arch of his palm, I beg him relax – but often it's clear he's intent on his own agenda. I offer a purr of approval, go back to sleep, aware that my contribution is untimely.

Licking my ruffled fur into place, I linger in a ray of light that streams like a perfect arpeggio through the broken shutter; sacrifice my role to allow him sole satisfaction in this one-man show, unaware that the fugue he's writing was spawned by my musical pussyfooting along the keys.

Domenico comes to me later – softly urges me awake and settles down beside me. Together we soak up the warmth of Spanish sunshine; I curl with pleasure, feeling the heat of his hand the length of my body's pulsing curve, my purr pianissimo ... piano ... forte. Later we sleep, dreaming of wine and olives, figs and fishes, minnows and minims. The cool of evening ruffles his mood: soon he is restless again and I know before the moon is up he'll be back at the keys, the music of spheres drawing him deep and deeper into the night.

I never sought to upstage him: it was others who invented the soubriquet. I've heard tell he's happy enough to credit me with the opening bar; to cede the title.

Being a cat, I am above such trifles – preferring the magic of fingering; life in the fast lane, tracking his high-speed hands dashing frenetically across the keys. Scarlatti toyed with the notes I trod. I was his prompt; his good-time girl; his sometime god.

POEM ON A HOT DAY

She glides into the long grass with the grace of black swan on still lake.

Hush . . .

The wind isn't breathing this afternoon and the green blades barely tickle her nose.

"Minnaloushe", I say, "are you going to write me a poem?"

But Minnaloushe is not going to write me a poem:
for her, the grass is poem enough – silent perfection.
Words cannot flatter the silky shape commingling
with couch and cocksfoot, haunches splayed,
till only the midnight tips of her ears stand sentry.
For one so small, her beauty is huge.
It magnifies her presence:
like looking at a leaf through the glisten of raindrops.
Soon she will drift into sleep:
mute swan, head under wing.
I shall write a poem.

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH LILIES

The dark-eyed girl with the pale flowers
pours them into my arms.
She smiles:
"I hope you like lilies?"
I say I do: and I *do* –
tall trumpet heads
and beautiful pink-lip petals
opening like so many mouths
breathing *hello!* – *I love you.*
It's the *scent* I abhor:
the evocation of dying memories,
shiny new coffins or maybe
the anniversary spray I housed overnight
in the spare room, holding my breath,
before he gave it to her
just weeks before leaving.
I find my deepest vase, plunge
slender stems in water,
watch as she re-explores the garden –
old stone steps she dared to climb
on summer visits long ago.
Magical to see her again –
if only for a butterfly moment,
then back to the airport and flown.
I move her gift from the lounge –
admire the stately blooms
through a glass-paned door;
perfume-less from that other room –
to me more perfect than before.
Ginger cat on a cushion
in the lilled conservatory
sleeps in the blissful cool of evening,
unaware of the heady scent;
then stirs
blinks
yawns
gives me a quizzical glance.
I hope he likes lilies.

UNSOLICITED FINALE

Black Minnaloushe is waning like the moon.
(Dark contradictory words out of the blue:
for Minnaloushe is round and full, well-fed).
Perhaps it is her predecessor who
evokes a verb so oddly out of place,
for *Simile* was plump; then thin; then dead:
the sweetest cat. I miss her pretty face
even today, long since she lost her head
to plundering fox. And even though they say
he stole her sweet smile *after* she had died,
I have no evidence – perhaps they lied
to spare my feelings. Was it really so?
I hesitate to write this opening line
lest, in her fullness, time should prove it so.

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Debra Marquart

Things Not to Put in Your Mouth

-Medical Display, Iowa State Historical Museum, Des Moines, Iowa

a penny a quarter a button a paperclip
safety pins, closed and open
most ingested while changing diapers

In two shadow boxes, Dr. James Downing displayed the objects
he'd extracted from patients' food and air passages
between 1929 and 1956.

a wishbone a kernel of corn (overlarge) a pen nib
beads from a necklace with the string still attached
a nail a screw a cover from a bottle of Anacin

Thumbtacked in rows, suspended in glassine envelopes
the objects floated in glass cases, a warning
about things not to put in your mouth.

a toothpick a rhinestone earring a metal snap
a long sewing needle a cocklebur seed, spikey as a porcupine
many small chicken bones

The exhibit includes the doctor's leather medical bag
and his instruments of extraction a tracheal dilator
a uvula dilator laryngeal and esophageal forceps

with a humorous note, jotted in a hospital report,
"feed her anything but nickels and pennies"
beside the nickel extracted from the child's throat.

things with sharp edges, things that get caught in your throat
a Daughters of the American Revolution pendant
a gold hinge from a jewelry box

a wadded up ball of paper a sardine can turnkey
a price tag marked .89 cents for Item #1025293
from the Younkens Department Store

Poor You

Back when we were still together, it seemed
my ex-boyfriend could never lose anything.
Car keys, dollar bills, everything that fell from

his charmed pockets floated back. *Lucky us.*
Check books dropped in grocery store parking lots
delivered to our front door by Good Samaritans

before the ice cream melted. Perhaps this is why
he treated me with such benign neglect, forgetting
how the slippery dime of me could work through

the stitches of silk pockets. Once, at the therapist's
he handed the Kleenex box to me with this look
on his face, like *poor you*, like I was some catastrophe

under glass. *Oh, poor us.* It reminded me of a cartoon
I'd seen in the paper of two men in a sinking canoe.
The guy in the front end is submerged, taking in water,

already drowning. The guy in the back of the canoe
is tipped high and dry. In the caption, he's thinking,
Boy, am I glad I wasn't on that end of the boat.

China: 5,000 Years

Guggenheim Exhibition, 1998

not the jade ornament of a pig-dragon or the lamp in the shape of goose holding a fish
not the bronze buckle ornament of a dancer with cymbals
or the nephrite jade carving of a winged horse
all from the second century B.C.E.

not the chime with a crouching dragon carving from 1600 B.C.E.
or the rearing gilt bronze dragon from the 8th century

not the Neolithic goblet with eggshell walls so delicate
or the eleven-headed bust of Avalokitesvara, looking eleven times compassionate
or the Buddhist ritual objects—a carved turtle, a pillbox

not the Ming dynasty silk paintings with mountains that look like dragons
or the earthenware squatting musician with dimples and a drum from 25 B.C.
who looks as modern as the busker you saw on the street today

not the dragon-shaped jade pendants from the 4th century B.C.E.
that make you wonder about the marvelous lapels or blouses
of the ancient people who could have worn such things

which gets you thinking about the cave of your own people
where they must have been squatting at that time
drinking out of streams, gnawing meat off bones
with no clock or mirror or comb or pen
or compass or gilded silver tea utensils
certainly, not even tea or calligraphy

none of this hits you until the Indian restaurant on Columbus Avenue
where you sit by a big window and watch the stream of faces push by

and perhaps you've had too much wine, and garlic naan, and mughlai chicken
and maybe the ragas aren't helping either, the sitars and tablas
circling around a five-note melody

and that's when something starts to well up in you
—you hope you can make it back to the hotel—
so you ask the waiter for your bill, but instead
he brings you dessert, a small custard in an oval bowl
which he offers in cupped hands for your inspection
saying, *for you, on the house*

and you try to say *thank you*, to register your delight
but instead, something starts to come out, a deluge
the napkin clutched to your face
mascara smeared on white linen
and real crying, real shoulder-rocking sobs

all of which alarms the waiter, who has bent down to you now
and the two women dining in the table next to you
have rushed to your side asking, *is it something we said?*
No, no, between sobs, you try to tell them
about the exhibit of 5,000 years of Chinese history
about the smooth five-petaled porcelain bowl from the 10th century
and the funerary objects carved in the shapes of laughing dogs

but all you can get out, really, is the thing about the terra cotta warriors
the soldier, the military officers, the general, and their horse and cart
to represent the other 6,000 figures discovered in Pit 1 in the Shaanxi province,
the way they looked lost in the Guggenheim without their spears, swords,
or crossbows, with their hands still frozen after centuries as if holding weapons

but mostly, it was their faces—
how you realized real people must have posed for each statue,
real people from 200 B.C.E., each with unique noses, hair plaits,
shapes of eyes, curves of cheekbone—
and how they were all so dead now, how they'd all been dead
for such an incredibly long time.

News Flash

"This is a substantial find, as diamonds of this size
are a very rare occurrence," Nare's CEO Charles Mostert said.
—*Mail & Guardian*, April 22, 2006

One cape yellow diamond, octahedron-shaped, 235 carats,
was found in the Schmidtdrift mine, an alluvial riverbed

outwash near Kimberley, South Africa by a three-week-old
start up company named Nare Diamonds Limited who re-opened

the mine—closed for three years—by the previous company,
(unnamed, in all accounts) who labored there for years,

who went bankrupt mining gems of 1.14 carats or less.
The report says, twenty-one days after resuming work

in the Schmidtdrift, Nare Diamonds found the 235 carat
diamond, cape yellow, octahedron, the size of a hen's egg,

rough cut and shining amidst the mine's erosion deposits.
This small morning news flash, scrolling across my screen,

returns me to my desk, to the bottom left drawer,
to the gray green notebook, and what lies buried there.

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Abigail Parry

The Lemures

Something is digging the stuffing from the old red plush
of the seat behind you in the darkened theatre.
And later, with the rain falling not-quite-right
in the headlights, and the odd half-glimpsed zigzag,
and the cat's eyes coming unstuck, that soft tug-
tugging at your collar is conclusive. They are still here.

Still here, with their quick fingers and luminous eyes,
their spook faces, their fingers hooked like questions.
You meet them half way, know them from halfway places:
the empty A-road, the mezzanine, the bent
reflection in the lift doors before they purr
open again on the things you know: phones ringing, people.

They are a nuisance. They have so many questions
and no respect for the living. They prod and pinch,
they stare. They paw at the glass between what is yours
and what is theirs. Do not feed them – they will always
want more. They will steal from you. Pickpockets,
rifling the snug pouches at the back of the mind,
and that one narrow finger grubbing, rat-a-tat,
for your soft spot. They never stop. They belong to you
and they will wait for you – in the borders of the wet garden,
the silence behind the beech hedge. They horde rubber balls
and the past and all your lost things, and always want to know
when you're coming back, when you're coming back, when.

J♥

*He that must use them, take this rule from mee,
Still trust a knave no further than you see.*
Samuel Rowlands, *The Four Knaves*

Sworn bachelor
and dandy, man-
about-the-town.
Snook-cocker, fancy-
man, catch-him-if-you-can man.
Peacock-suited, booted, pretty-boy,
fop. Too nimble for the altar, too dashing
for the chop. One eye's for the ladies
the other's on the crown Back-
doorer, in-and-outer, turn around,
he's gone. Trickster, twister, wild-card, liar
Now he's in a Landau Now a Black Maria.
Rich man, Poor man, Ragged man, Prince,
Steerpike, climber Give the man an inch!
Springheel, charmer, haven't-caught-him-yet.
Hard-to-get, hopeless case, straight-up
bad bet. Two-face, double-crosser,
table-talker, crook.
Player, faker, heart-
breaker, ladies'
man, I'm hooked.

The Oracle

I

You love the word long before you learn
its stingy meaning.
Dry, and hollowed out
like snailshell, it has the choral click
of mussels jostled in a wicker pot;
so you put it where it fits –
at six years old,
your oracle is a sparrowskull.
Wafer-dry, its thin dome hugging
a small, snug dark.

II

Sunday, 12 p.m. Off go the gloves like lizardskin
and with them goes the slew of graven
images, genuflections and Corinthians.

The words don't let you in. Their fine scaffold
of tracery and transept, scrolled and elegant,
obdures in the ecclesiastical chill

and keeps its distance. *In principio erat verbum* –
that part you understand, though understanding
is a plodding, humdrum thing, not like the quick fix
of a good incantation: its whiplash logic.

III

You keep another altar. In the briar thicket,
the rhododendron dark, the wrought work
of praxic fern. In the tabernacle quiet
of a Sunday afternoon, rooting
for the hidden brickwork and the rusting grille.
The oracle, your oracle, is within.

Just look: the bony pate, the terse-set beak,
the vaulted sockets and their printed frown;
it is a dry professor, coddling

a lunatic wit in that eggshell brainpan.

IV

It speaks a wasp-language, mouthed in sawdust corners,
confessional. Heathen nonsense of taps and clicks,
struts and echoes, and a huge, surging whisper of the dark
music in things: a choral clamour
of organ reverberations. And you're a lost cause –
you take many gods,

rattle necklaces and call yourself *pagan*
because that word is a peg staked
in the thick turf of private hallowed ground
that Flyaway Paul and Comeback Peter,
Matthew, Mark, and all their Latin cannot budge.

Follow the Lady

I watched...as the three-way mirror split her three-card deck.
A.S.Quinte, *The Vanity Mirror*

The first belongs to the world. Known by this argument
of artifice and accident: gypsum, almond, opal, bone,
river pearls and dental gold.

The second

is mine alone. I'd know her anywhere
by the precise syntactic script of cartilage
helixed at each ear; the proposition posed
by the yoke of muscle – just visible now –
that meathooks jaw to collarbone.

The third

I cannot see. The complicit frame
is a blind door, locked on an empty room. I never know
where she goes, or what she does. She frightens me.

(Don't they know it's) The End of the World?

This place is a shot fuse, hot, bitter,
defunct. A dud. No one told you
you could end up here, reels stalled,
needle snagging on a burred *frick*.

They're all in on it. The carousel
and the Big Wheel, the pier lights

cranking a stuck waltz and one blunt thought
doing the circuit: you asked for this,
you asked to go round again.
Here you are, then: spent, dead-ended
with two brown pennies to your name -
one for the bandits, the other for the ferryman.

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Pascale Petit

Arrival of the Electric Eel

Each time I open it it's like I'm a Matsés girl
handed a parcel at the end of my seclusion,
my face pierced by jaguar whiskers
to make me brave.

I know what's inside – that I must
unwrap the envelope of leaves
until all that's left
squirming in my hands
is an electric eel.

The positive head, the negative tail,
the rows of batteries under the skin,
the small, almost blind eyes.

The day turns murky again,
I'm wading through the bottom of my life
when my father's letter arrives. And keeps on arriving.

The charged fibres of paper
against my shaking fingers,
the thin electroplates of ink.

The messenger drags me up to the surface
to gulp air then flicks its anal fin.

Never before has a letter been so heavy,
growing to two metres in my room,
the address, the phone number, then the numbness –
*I know you must be surprised, it says,
but I will die soon and want to make contact.*

Fauverie II (Black Jaguar)

He seems to have sucked
the whole Amazon
into his being, the storm–

clouds of rosettes
through a bronze dusk.
I've been there, sheltered

under the buttress
of a giant, felt
the air around me –

its muscles tense,
stalking me
as I stumbled

through dense fur,
my father's tongue
wet on my neck

as I fell into a gulch,
the blackout of his mouth.
And when I woke

I thought I heard
the jungle cough – this jungle,
the jaguar safe

behind bars. I lean over
and touch his cage – his glance
grazes me like an arrow.

Blackbird

When they locked me
in the cellar

and told me to count
slowly to a hundred,

each number
became a blackbird's feather

and all the darkness
sang

through the keyhole
of my yellow beak.

Fauverie XII (Black Jaguar)

1.
A solar eclipse – his fur
seems to veil light,
the smoulder
of black rosettes
a zoo of sub-atoms
I try to tame –
tritium, lepton, anti-proton.
They collide
as if smashed inside
a particle accelerator.
But it's just Aramis sleeping,
twitching himself back
to the jungle, where he leaps
into the pool of a spiral
galaxy, to catch a fish.

2.
Later, the keeper tells me
Aramis has had surgery
for swallowing
a hose-head
where his hank of beef
was lodged. But
what vet could take
a scalpel to this
dreaming universe?
What hand could shave
that pelt, to probe
the organs
of dark matter, untwist
time's intestines
and stitch
night's belly
together again, only
to return him to a cage?

A Tray of Frozen Songbirds

For our last meal together
my father takes out of the freezer
a tray of frozen songbirds.
He's saved them up, these delicacies
with ice crystals in their beaks,
wings stuck to ribcages.
There are skylarks, blackbirds, doves.
He tells me how some were plucked
while still alive,
about the mist net at dawn,
how one nightingale was thrust
into a sack of discarded heads
and cried, then the poacher licked
the sticky lime from its plumes
tenderly, before slitting its throat.
He pours champagne as if it's
the river of life.
We eat like two drunks
woken from dreams of flying,
me on his lap, singing the song
I've just learnt at school – *Alouette*,
gentille alouette, alouette je te plumerai.

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Wayne Price

Witness

I've followed the older boys stealing milk
from doorsteps at dawn, after long pale nights
in summer spent camping on the rugby ground.
When they took the bottles from my own front door
I never complained. And I watched them hang
a screaming friend of mine by his ankles from
the quarry cliff, then watched him hoisted back again.
I've stood and watched as Benny Griffiths took
a kicking that nearly killed him, outside
the Workingmen's Hall. He curled inwards like a snail
until the toes of those big boots had picked
his skinny body loose like string; I watched
by the cenotaph, late, in the rain. Years
I've watched myself watching. These and other things.

Nightfishing

Hand and mind are fishing the river after dark
for the slow, heavy old ones that rise at night.
The white feathers on the hook are spread
like wings on a moth. Mind watches them travel down
the bright lane the moon makes. A white moon and the white bait.
The line in hand grows heavy with the river's black weight.
Or it is an indoor scene: the moon's brittle silver on the stream
is the night light over beds in the emergency room.
In the deepest pools the trout, heavy as sacks of sand,
are staying in their gravel bowls, between the big stones.
Their bodies shape their homes. They have fattened
on smaller shapes that were images of their own.
Hand and mind are fishing for a nest of forms.
Like an egg in a nest of clouds, the moon.
The bait is a moth that has battened on the window pane.
As mind stares out, it stares in. Like chains the hooks and lines
of drugs and salt and blood to hands. Mind is fishing between
the banks of beds. Like moonlight, one light always on.

By Glôg Hill

The sparrow hawk surprised
clatters up through winter sticks. The vole
it leaves behind, opened wide,
is a warm, dropped purse.
Two small streams
have been meeting here since
the last glacial retreat. Faint
tongues of trails follow both.
Like a simple riddle
the answer to water is ice.
The clean fuel
of light and sound that we need
for the humming
engines of our heads
must run out. The January
mist above the talking brook, the mist
from our mouths. And evening
has already arrived
from the brittle fences of the woods,
from all directions at once
across the pasture fields.

Helpless

August afternoon. I'd flung
the back door of my grandparents'
narrow, lean-to kitchen open, expecting sunshine
in their sunken concrete yard.
The stale air seethed
into life and sound, the machine snarl
of bluebottles, swirling and batting
at my face and hands
as if tumbled
in a nightmarish snow globe.
The twelve white ducks
my grandfather had reared
for months on mash and meal
were dead. Each bird,
hanging like terrible
laundry by its legs, smiled raggedly
at the neck, where the blood had been let.
I stared at the jellied puddle
where each of their lives had mixed
and levelled. It was glossy as the top
of an old-fashioned casket, shellacked
to a rosy black.

Now that I was still, the flies
settled again:
furring the flat wet disk of blood,
clasping like brooches
on the opened throats.
I remembered the fat mild ducks
in life, following me up and down the path, gabbling
sociably in the mud.

When I moved at all
the host of flies like rioters
boiled up again. For a while
I made a game of it,
conducting them like God.
Beyond the yard, in the allotment above,
I could hear my grandfather whistling
his pigeons round and round,
circle after circle
in the blue sky overhead. In front of me
the broken outhouse stared, shaggy and dark
in its pelt of ivy, its rotten door
gaping open
on one bad hinge.

And suddenly I felt
the strange helplessness in all of it:
the useless door like a twisted mouth
that hadn't shut for years
and now never would; the flies
that could not stop themselves
obeying my commands; the pigeons wheeling
on invisible tracks, their awful, obedient
repetitions; my kindly, weak-eyed
grandmother, even, somewhere
in a dim, crooked room indoors,
knitting, knitting, knitting
things we'd never want to wear;
and the ducks with their friendly, blunt-beaked
heads, that used to follow where I led, dangling
now above a pond of blood, absurdly
upside-down in air, helplessly dead.

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Victor Tapner

Banquet in the Hall of Happiness

When staying at the Summer Palace in Beijing, China's Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) took her meals in the Hall of Happiness and Longevity attended by teams of eunuchs

They listen to the click
of my silver chopsticks
on the porcelain plate.
No one dares to speak.

Each supper they bring me
the kitchen's riches.
Tonight I've eaten nothing
but hyacinth beans,

these mirrored screens
my only guests. Once
I was the Lady Yehenara,
concubine to a god.

Now, forbidden by rank
to smile: a dowager
with starched face
and waxen hair,

a woman made Buddha,
too precious to touch.
Later, when the maids
change my gown

for my evening walk
in the marigold garden,
I'll feel each fingertip
of their white lace gloves,

a hundred buttons
being undone, sleeves
slipped from my arms,
silk falling.

On the table before me,
dishes for a dynasty:
sauce of bear's paw,
hummingbird wings,
cakes of a thousand flowers.
I peel an iced lychee
for its scent, its flesh full,
its skin red as a berry.

Pictures from the Forbidden City

Before becoming China's emperor, Prince Yinzhen (1678–1735) commissioned a series of propaganda paintings portraying himself tilling the fields

Corn poppies sprout
along the edge
of every irrigation ditch,
waving their flags
as crowds in the streets
on coronation day.

Across the valley, wind, like war,
has stripped the hillside
bare of trees.

An army of rice plants
raises a million spears
above the drowned land.

So often the crop
is flattened by rain.
Villages murmur hunger.

Spade and sword
have shaped these terraces
and pathways, the graded banks,
still pools, where every stem,
each ripening head,
has its place.

I dip the ladle in the wooden pail
and pour the mix
of watery dung.

This is how the people
must know their emperor:
back bent with peasants,
up to his knees
in the flooded fields,
while he alone sees the snakes
that swim among roots,
their dark bodies
twining the stalks.

Temple of Heaven

Saturday afternoon, and the amateur opera singers
gather in groups along the painted cloisters.
Beijing's breezes are out too,

a dry Mongolian wind and sleet of dust
clogging the contact lenses that trouble
the diva as she steps forward to perform.

She brushes her white weekend blouse.
The tenor, straightening the collar
of his scuffed suit, unfolds his songsheet
and glances at the soprano. She nods.
He starts. Accordians, flutes,
harmonicas, hand-drums: all find a way

to enter the stuttered harmony.
A Mozart lilt, Verdi aria, a Cantonese song
from a time before the land was drenched
in revolution, the days before they saw
their teachers sent to pick stones
from furrows, to boil bark.

Sitting on a bench, an old man
peels an apple and wipes his penknife,
ignoring the accordion's quick, free notes.

The Ambassador and His Wife Take Afternoon Tea at the Orient Hotel

He straightens in his rattan chair,
she teases a cigarette
in her lean fingers.

His New York suit is summer beige,
she is Prague chic
in linen grey.

Each Sunday they are seen for tea,
the Siam lounge,
a corner seat.

The glass-topped table reflects a past
preserved on the wall
in photographs.

Hemingway, Coward, Nehru, Mountbatten:
a gallery of lives
their minds inhabit.

Above the stairway, a ceiling-fan stirs
the foyer's
air-conditioned ferns.

A guest in the salon orders cocktails.
They dip their heads
and smile.

Their smiles are light
as the lemon cake
on the plate.

In the Cabin in the Woods

On Fridays when we met in the cave above the weir after school I always brought Trude something – some chocolates or some left-over wine I'd smuggled out of the house or a few flowers from the garden Mutti wouldn't miss – and in exchange she would give me a kiss. But after a few weeks my little gifts began to get on her nerves and one afternoon towards the end of autumn when I arrived with a handful of marigolds, she told me she was bored of my presents and the only thing she could think of that was interesting enough for her to want me to bring it to her, the only thing she could think of I could give her that would ever persuade her to kiss me again, was the heart of Magdalena Hirsch. From this I concluded that she was bored of me, that she didn't really want to see me anymore, and this was her way of telling me to get lost. I went home, throwing the marigolds in the river on the way and told myself I'd better forget about Trude.

But I couldn't. Trude's lips were so soft and warm and kissing her in the cool cave after school was the best thing I'd ever done. I kept thinking about her and I kept thinking about what she'd said about bringing her the heart of Magdalena Hirsch. It was a stupid thing I knew it was, but somehow it caught hold of my imagination and wouldn't let it go and in the end one evening when supper was over and the washing up was done and everything was put away in its proper place, and Vati had settled down in front of the TV with his newspaper and his pipe, I told Mutti I was going over to Dieter's for an hour or so and I'd be back later and then I set off in the direction of the Hauptallee and from there I made my way to the cinder path that led into the woods.

'Don't be too long, Peter,' Mutti called after me.
'I won't.'

I'd never been near Magdalena's cabin in my whole life. I had no idea where to head for. I'd been into the woods many times to pick blackberries and elderflower and to take our old dachshund, Lili, for walks, but in my whole life I'd never gone beyond the point where the cinder path stopped and the dense middle part of the woods began. I don't know how long I walked through the thick wood. It was dark and drizzling and even through the trees the drizzle came down onto my face and hands. When I came to it there was no clearing and no garden, only a low wall that ran round the cabin; no gate in the wall, just an opening you had to walk through to get to the door. I knocked but there was no reply.

It was years since I'd thought about Magdalena Hirsch, let alone seen her, and I'd never heard of anyone ever coming out here to visit her.

I walked into a small sitting room with bare timbered walls, a plain wooden table and a single chair next to it. On the floorboards lay striped woven rugs, the kind people like my Oma used to make during the war out of torn-up rags. In the corner there was a fireplace with a neat pile of logs next to it, a scattering of ash and cinders in the grate. There was a bed, cupboards and pans that hung from hooks in the ceiling; an oblong sink on cast iron legs. In the sink there was a plate sprinkled with crumbs, a knife smeared with butter. A little water had been run on top of the plate and some of the crumbs were floating in it. The bed was neatly made and covered from head to foot with a rough wool blanket. Beneath the blanket, when I lifted it, I found her pillow in a white cotton slip, small and flat and square; a flowery eiderdown, silky and cold. On the wall there was a bamboo mirror with a narrow dresser beneath it and on top of the dresser there was a white cloth and on top of the cloth there was a black lacquered box with a lid, oval in shape and roughly the size of my fist.

I have taken out my heart and put it in a box where no more harm can ever come to it.

Magdalena's words had terrified us all when we were children. The thought of her warm wet heart in its chilly little box, fluttering and beating beneath the lid like some small, frightened animal – it was like something out of Grimm.

Every once in a while, she came into town for something – a bag of tea from Gephards' or a ball of wool from Greta Fahr's shop, matches or fuel from Dortmund's – and always at some point she'd alight on someone, Greta Fahr or Herr Gephardt or one of the Dortmund girls or one of our mothers if they happened to be in any of those places when she was there, and she would tell them in a confidential whisper what she'd done and sometimes, crouching down in her old black coat and her long skirt and her funny smock, she'd confide in one of us children as well.

We used to wonder what had made her do it, but she never told us that part. Whatever it was that had happened to her she'd never spoken about it. There was no gossip, no rumours or stories. Whatever it was, it was buried in some dark place, as secret and hidden as the heart she said she'd pulled from her body and locked away, out of sight and out of mind, and when we'd asked our parents, or Herr Gephardt or Fräulein Fahr, or any of the other grown-ups if they knew, they just shrugged and shook their heads and said she was just a poor creature who should have gone years ago to the hospital in Euskirchen where she could be looked after instead of living out in the woods in that little cabin by herself.

I didn't hear her come in.

I didn't hear her set down the logs on the floor next to the hearth, I didn't hear her step onto the

woven rug and walk up behind me. I didn't know she was there until we were standing together in front of the mirror, the two of us, me in front and her behind, me and Magdalena Hirsch.

I had never seen her up close before and it was ages since I'd seen her in town; years since I'd happened to be there when she'd paid one of her rare visits to the shops in the Hauptallee. She looked, to me, neither young nor old. She was slender and tall and her brownish-greyish hair was very straight and soft-looking. Her eyes were grey and the skin of her face was pale from living in the woods. She still had on her black coat from being outside but the buttons at the front were open and I could see her smock underneath. It was dark and rough looking and loosely woven and hung in folds from her shoulders and behind the folds I could see her shape. I thought of Trude. Trude with her starched white blouse and her straw-coloured plaits and the stingy kisses she'd sold to me in the cave above the weir. My face had grown suddenly very hot, I could see it in the mirror, red and burning beneath my short dark hair that was still damp from the rain. Behind us I could see the bed, the white pillow and the flowery eiderdown that had been cold when I'd touched it, and I could feel Magdalena's breath, very quick and warm on the back of my neck. She smelled of milk and wood-smoke.

'You?' she whispered, bewildered, amazed.

A rose-coloured flush had spread into her waxy face and her mouth was open. I didn't know what to say. Her eyes were wide and her face was taut and very still and she was staring into the bamboo mirror at my reflection as if she had seen a ghost. I swallowed and waited and she said it again - *You?* - and then her arms came up around me and quick as snake she reached past me to the dresser and snatched up the little fist-sized box that was on top of the cloth and sprang away from me.

'Get out,' she said softly, clutching the shiny black container against her open coat, hugging it and pressing down with her thumbs on its lacquered lid as if her life depended on it, and then her voice rose and she shouted at me at the top of her lungs, to get away from her, right now, and never come back, to go back through the woods the way I'd come, back to my wife and my baby son, she didn't want to see me ever again, she didn't need me anymore, everything was fine now just the way it was and if I ever tried coming back to her ever again, she would kill me.



Manchester Writing Competition 2013: the Short-listed Fiction Finalists

Joe Dunthorne

Rising-falling

Her name was Lizuan Zhang but, for the ease of English speakers, she called herself Elizabeth. In one profile picture, she played the grand piano in front of floor-to-ceiling windows, overlooking the Huangpu river. When we chatted online, she was always modest about her looks.

- Women do not have body like mine in England?
- No. If only...
- In China we are slim but full-chested.
- You're beautiful.
- Thank you! :-)) So sweet.

It may be clear to you from just this short exchange that I was not communicating with a real woman. If I had this thought, I decided to ignore it. You may say I was duped but I chose to be naive. In science, there are two types of people. Those who see a beautiful, rich woman offering to fly a sixty-eight-year-old square-headed particle physics professor halfway round the world to make love and assume the woman does not exist. And those - I among them - who see that same equation and hope a previously undiscovered nuance of human emotion could make the dream real.

Seeing my office still lit at three am, any passing students of mine may have presumed their tutor was busy exploring the limit of the observable universe. Not far from the truth - Elizabeth and I chatted until dawn. She lived alone, working as a coordinator for a shipping corporation. She was twenty-seven which was not so young. I told her about my work, that it was my job to make a fool of Einstein. I have met Nobel prize winners and can confirm they are often quite boring. She was never dull, even in a language not her own. I have rarely felt such delight as when reading the words: *Elizabeth is typing*.

She paid for my flight and hotel to prove her seriousness, she said, though I needed no reassurance. I turned on my out-of-office. On the plane, I practiced conversational Mandarin, sitting on a row by myself. Learning a language is one of the most effective ways to keep the brain healthy. Passengers frowned at me from the toilet queue. I shaped the words in my mouth. "Tea-ah charn." Family's property. I learned about the four intonations that widen each word's possible meaning - rising, falling, neutral and rising-falling.

I landed in Pudong airport, the roof of which was shaped like a wave. This is an important shape for scientists. In astrophysics, a wave is just that - a signal travelling through time - the reaches of the universe saying hello. My name was at arrivals: PROF DAVID MILLEN written on cardboard. The driver shook my hand limply and took my bag. He had gorgeous pillows of soft skin under his eyes. I practiced my Mandarin thank you. He said nothing, put my bag in the boot.

It was an expensive hotel. The lobby was tall, tiled and golden, with dragons on pedestals, opal carvings in glass cases, framed maps on the walls. In one corner there was a grand piano similar to the one Elizabeth owned. The hotel also had a view onto the Huangpu river and I was glad because that meant she was not far away. At reception, they told me the minibar and wi-fi had all been covered. I was to relax. In my room, I checked my email and found a message: *So sorry! Work emergency! I cannot see you till tomorrow. I will make it up, my angel. XXX* Perhaps that should have worried me but I considered it good fortune that I would have chance to sleep and be my best for our first meeting.

From my bedroom window, I watched the cityscape, the tops of lit skyscrapers steaming like the scalps of rugby players under floodlights. From my office on campus, I had often watched the university team practice. The world was as small or large as the reach of my imagination.

As my eyes adjusted to the view, I noticed coal ships heading downriver, a line of them, prow to tail, empty and unlit, sliding towards the coast. It pleased me to think of Elizabeth's job at the shipping corporation. The world would not stop turning for love between two strangers. Then, at eleven pm precisely, by government decree, all the skyscrapers' lights batted off and Shanghai fell back a thousand years.

I woke late and opened my laptop. No messages. I sent Elizabeth an image of the view from my bedroom window and said: *The boats pass on their way to you? I send my love downriver.*

I went to the hotel buffet for lunch. They had everything: broths, dumplings, eel, snake, duck's tongue. How quaint the row of Western food seemed: roast potato, chicken breasts, sliced cheese. After lunch, I went for a walk and the air was so close I had the urge to loosen my tie though I was not wearing one. Back at the hotel, I had a message. Elizabeth was accompanying her boss on important business, she said, and would not be back till late. She apologised sincerely and attached a picture of her in underwear.

I settled in then, to work. I was happy to stay in the hotel. I wanted to save my exploration of this new city for when I could hold the hand of my tour guide. Half my suitcase was weighed down with the latest draft of a PhD thesis. My student was a small, intense woman with veins visible through the thin skin on her forehead. For the most part, she did excellent work though I felt she was being led astray by the glamour of black holes.

At one, I got a call from reception saying Elizabeth was at the desk and would like to come to my room. I was in bed. I was not ready. After days of buffets, I had grown a little soft. I straightened the duvet, put on a shirt and trousers, turned on a bedside lamp and opened the curtains to the crowd of sleeping skyscrapers.

When I answered the door, she was backlit by the light of the corridor, her black hair glowing at the edges.

"You're here," I said.

"For you."

That was the last English she spoke. I took her into my arms. She was so small or I was so large. We kissed and her breath tasted of cigarettes. We kissed and she took off my glasses. I have never touched skin so soft. In the half-light, I felt her two necklaces, one strung with pearls, one opal, cool against my chest. Afterwards, she lay beside me as the air-conditioner hummed us to sleep. I was so happy. In the morning she was gone.

I'd known, of course, that the woman I'd just spent the night with was not Elizabeth. Even without my glasses, even in low light, they did not share the same body, the same face. They had opposite teeth.

I received an email. Elizabeth said it had been the best night of her life and what sadness to disappear. Work had called her away for urgent administrating. She would be out of town for a fortnight. I should catch the next flight home, she said, and - if I would allow it - she would visit me in England. She attached a picture of herself in the changing room of a department store.

I gave naivete to myself as a gift. I let myself be happy and booked a flight home. For my last day in Shanghai, I drank local beer in hotels and hostels overlooking the river. In the street below, there were shops for Swiss watches, Italian couture, American sportswear. When I was drunk enough, I walked back to the hotel, admiring the androgynous models on the posters that lined the street. That was when I saw her or what I thought was her, advertising denim on a spinning billboard high above a junction. I sat on a bench across the road to watch her turn her back on me, over and over. Westerners are famous for not being able to tell apart the faces of those from other cultures. I was drunk. I was being primitive, unreconstructed, I thought, for not seeing the obvious differences between this face and Elizabeth's.

I became angry. I stood up and started walking at the pace of international business. The pavements were still busy with men and women in suits jousting for taxis until I turned down a side road where the streetlight stopped. I passed a 4x4,

struggling to make a many-pointed turn. I felt my shirt stick to my back. I walked down a badly paved lane lined with squat red-brick homes. In the half-light from an open back door, four gents huddled round a fold-out table, playing xiangqi. Washing lines and vines hung between buildings. I felt I was moving back in time. I was moving into my own fantasy. It was dark enough I could barely see my feet. The lane was, I realised, a cul-de-sac and at the end of it a small doorway glowed like an open fridge.

I stepped through, I know not why. It was a kitchen. A man was chopping unnameable vegetables. He stopped singing as I came in then said something that felt aggressive but some languages just sound angry and that may have been my prejudice. I took a step closer. He raised the knife. He sounded angry but perhaps that was all interpretation. I wanted to be saved from my own assumptions. I took another step.

The public's biggest fear about the Large Hadron Collider at CERN was that we would open a tear in the universe or create a black hole that would swallow the planet. To avoid hysteria, we were careful to make reassurances. *High-energy physics is not as risky as it sounds*. In truth, of course, the public's biggest fears were exactly the same as our most hopeful dreams.

Back at my hotel, I was still alive, watching a slow moth circle my body like a plane waiting for a runway. I had a lump on my head from where the chef had pushed me out through the low door. There were six hours until my flight.

On my laptop, I looked up the advertising campaign and found the name of the model I'd seen. I found her microblog, her photos. This took just a couple of minutes. I saw her piano. There she was in underwear. There she was in the changing room of a department store. She had eighty-thousand fans. She lived in Singapore.

All that I knew was that I knew nothing. The internet had brought me here so I let it guide me home. With one finger I slowly typed the search terms. China. Love. Scam. Before I pressed return, I reminded myself that there was nothing inauthentic about the night I spent with a woman who could not pronounce my name. Then, at the website's suggestion, I checked my luggage for lumps.

Within five minutes, I was sat on my bed with two bricks of someone else's drugs. They had been wrapped in foil then sealed in plastic like lunchbox sandwiches. I weighed up my options and, after some thought, went downstairs and out of the hotel. I felt watched as I entered the minimart. The streets were never not busy. In the shop, I bought a tall beer and a roll of masking tape.

Back in my room, I stuck the packages to the underside of the desk. Then I drank the beer and, standing at the window, watched the moon chalk up a line on the river. I had never been a hedonist myself. Had never felt my mind needed expanding or narrowing, either way.

At the airport, once I was through security, I sat on a stool at the internet cafe. I emailed Elizabeth to tell her I loved her. I explained I had found her gift while packing my bag. So kind of her, I said, but I could not accept it. I told her where she would find it. I hoped she had kept the receipt.

On the plane, I watched no films, learned no Mandarin, read no PhDs. I had ten hours to weigh up whether an international drug cartel's pride is so easily bruised that they would kill a professor to avenge the expense of a week in a top hotel. I imagined Elizabeth's representatives calling their colleagues in the UK from a payphone with an echo on the line and using an underqualified translator and I rigorously worked through all the possible miscommunications.

At Heathrow, baggage reclaim coughed up hard cases wrapped in clingfilm, for security. My wheelie bag emerged through the rubber strips with what felt to me like showmanship.

I walked through automatic doors with nothing to declare and into the smell of international perfume. The names of Chinese businessmen were being held up on wipe-clean cards. Out on the forecourt, I waited to be killed, to be shot in the stomach or stabbed.

Nothing came. No warmth in the gut. No sudden numbness.

A man approached and asked to take my bag. I thanked him and he said it was his pleasure. He had dark smudges beneath his eyes. In his car, there were photos of children taped to the sun visor.

Back at my own desk, at home, I waited for the phone or doorbell to ring, listened for footsteps in the garden. For weeks, I expected their arrival. A part of me wanted some signal that what I'd experienced was real. I installed no high-tech alarm systems, on occasion left the door unlocked. Some nights I walked the streets.

The Manchester Fiction Prize 2013: the Short-listed Fiction Finalists

Richard Knight

The Incalculable Weight Of Water

He hauls his aching body forward to the dam wall, up the grassy bank in the warmed silence of a July afternoon. He's too old for climbing hills. Ann has been pushing this idea for years. She's waiting for him now, in the café next to the car park, and he knows that by the time he makes it back down there he will certainly have taken too long. She'll get up and sigh and tell him, tell him that he's too old, as though that somehow explains everything.

Ann has asked him several times over the years why he likes to climb up high. Once, years ago, she came with him out of interest, in the time when they first tussled with each other's strangeness and were happy in that struggle. It was before they'd even thought of marrying, years before Oliver was born. They'd eaten a sandwich, he remembers now, in the lee of this same dark wall, the mist swirling around their young, loose-limbed bodies. She'd mocked him gently about the view he'd promised and he knew by the end of that day that she would never come with him again, preferring the company of the radio, her books or her friends. But he still remembers that image, still sees it now tilting back like a framed photograph; Ann at its centre shivering with the thick-cut sandwich pinched between forefinger and thumb, not liking his walk but loving him still. That trip was conceived from the possibilities of love.

Perhaps she's right, he thinks, looking up and feeling the beginnings of a slight mountain breeze that cools his sweating face. The sky is a densely-packed blue, almost solid and unmarked over the blackened grit-stone wall. He senses the incalculable weight of water that squats behind that wall, unseen, menacing. He's been here before in winter wind and heard it lapping, lashing the stone and agitating for release. But today, a fine day like this, he imagines it will be lifeless, a darker likeness of the unblemished sky.

He should recognise the birdsong by now. Are they curlews? He can't remember if it's the right season, but he doesn't wonder about it for long. He's walked up here many times, but not really for the bird life. He squints under the sun, mapping the route in his head along the ridge to the west of the reservoir and back down to the car park. Flying ants swarm there in late summer but he hopes it's still too early for them.

It's so quiet up here he imagines he could whisper her name – her straightforward name, no need for a gratuitous 'e' – and that it would slice through the stillness and she'd somehow hear it down there. He thinks it, he even parts his mouth slightly, but doesn't push the necessary air out. In the right pocket of his walking trousers he grasps the phone that Ann makes him carry and switches it on. It's mid-afternoon and now it feels as though the heat is humming as he waits for a sequence of glaring screens to load.

It had been Ann's idea to come out today. There was no use just sitting around waiting, she'd said. They had her mobile number, the one she used all the time now. These days he was more often than not bemused as he watched the world alter, swinging away in a direction he couldn't quite understand, but Ann had always just accepted how things moved. As Oliver said, usually after they'd both failed to hear his call ringing on the kitchen handset, there's little point having a home telephone these days. Oliver often sent Ann text messages, which were sometimes relayed across the patterned wool carpet that separated their chairs. Early that afternoon she'd made the suggestion – which was more of a decision really – and put his boots in the car and driven them to the visitor centre. The boots had been the sign. He knew then she wanted to be away from him.

He cups his hand around the old Nokia and turns his back on the sun. As ever, there's no signal. The small icon of an antenna in the top left corner of his screen droops like a plant wilting in the heat. She'll work it out, he thinks. She won't be worried; she knows how it is. God, she's enough to worry about herself. He puts the phone back in his pocket. High above his head an aeroplane trails an erect stream through the blue and he wonders which resort it's heading for. For a second or two he closes his eyes against the glare of a summer idyll, the awful images of everyday happiness.

His heart thuds and he suddenly feels light-headed. He reaches the wall, holds out a hand to its rough contours. The breath of the breeze cools his brow and he steadies himself there, peering out across a vast sheen of thick, peaty water. This strip of the world, this strange flat landscape, is as empty as ever.

This is what he comes for.

The stillness consumes him for a moment and he lets it, lets it sink in until it rings through his skull.

Ann thought they'd have rung in the morning.

'You'd think they would,' she'd wondered aloud at lunchtime through the tinny babble of the kitchen radio, as he cut woody cores from slices of tomato. 'Why keep people hanging on? It isn't fair. Thoughtless, really.'

He didn't think she needed to hear a reason and muttered his agreement. She was talking to make noise, to fill spaces. Now he feels the sweat between his eyebrows and his eyelids, takes off his glasses and wipes it away with the back of his wrist. He hadn't realised it was quite so hot when he set out an hour ago. He hasn't

brought water with him. Another hour and he'll be back in the café with a cool drink, but he's dreading it already. He fears the evenness with which Ann will accept the news, whatever that is, and turn her mind to the future; to plans, ideas, images that he can't even bear to picture. Up here the world is unmoved, unmoving. Up here his mind is at rest briefly, out of range, lacking a signal. He blinks and puts his glasses back on.

At first he sees it as a small island. It's summer after all, a rare fine one, and the water level in the reservoir is already quite low. Over by the west shore there's a slim, black mound, maybe twenty yards out in the water. Curious, he walks further along the embankment. He has to go in that direction anyway, to get to the path that runs along the ridge. At the end of the wall he stops and shields his eyes from the glare of the sun.

The black coat is filled with air. Who would throw their coat into the reservoir, he wonders? Nearer though, dropping onto the small rocky beach, he recognises an arm, a white hand. He stumbles on a stone, his arm shooting out instinctively as he rebalances and stands, struck suddenly immobile by the lifelessness of the corpse. His heart pounds, as a kind of reassurance, a chaotic celebration of his own life. He hesitates at the edge of the gently lapping water.

Before he knows what he's doing, he's ankle-deep in the reservoir. The black water ripples into wide chevrons in front of his shins. Each short stride takes him inevitably towards the startling prospect of a dead body. He stops for a moment and looks back, as though there might be clues suspended in the humid air; about when this happened, how it happened, why it happened. But there's nothing. He turns back to the corpse. The white hand he'd thought was floating is in fact resting on a black bin bag. The body could have been here a long time, he suddenly realises. The moment of death might have passed months ago, when a coat would still have been needed. Would *he* worry about keeping warm in a winter coat just before his own planned death? He stays there, the water below his knees, the question stalling him for a second. He feels a compulsion begin to rise, an urge to wade just a little further and tug at the coat, at the hood that hides the face. But he's fearful of the nothingness, the dreadful emptiness he might see there.

There's no rush up here. There's no life to save. The phone in his trouser pocket buzzes urgently and he almost falls, his boots slipping a little on the unseen bed of the reservoir. The noise is disproportionate, comical even, on a hot and windless hilltop and him up to his knees in water as sludgy and black as leftover coffee. He takes the phone from his pocket again, his eyes still fixed on the corpse ten yards away. He begins to make out the arch of the buttocks beneath the coat where the legs begin to slump under the surface of the water. It's definitely a man. He's convinced of that fact, for no clear reason.

With two careful prods of his thumbs, he unlocks the screen of the phone and despite the sun's glare he can just see there's a new message. He opens it.

From: Ann
just rang its ok hurry up want to go morisons

Instantly he senses fizzing molecules of air above the reservoir being sucked over the near horizon of the black wall. He gasps and stumbles on the uneven bed of the reservoir. Staring once more at the corpse, he is momentarily excited by something; his own jagged, unbalanced, uncalibrated heartbeat, perhaps.

There's little he can do here now. His impulse to reach out and touch the dead man is fading. He no longer has a desire to witness the hidden legs, the other arm, the true shape of a barren body, the gruesome and bloated white face that he pictures with a gaping mouth, a mouth that once spoke and relentlessly breathed air. He's no longer curious about the contents of the bin bag.

He grins at Ann's dreaded practicality, the unstudied normality of her text, the careless spelling, the missing punctuation. No x. Only two short words reserved for such significant news. He replaces the phone in his pocket. As they rotate in the water he watches his legs and sees the peat-saturated water swirl gently around his shins.

Back on the rocky beach, he turns and looks again. It's still there, that small, black island. It's not a mirage, despite the shimmering air of summer. It's as real as the phone in his pocket, as the acrid water now slopping in his boots, as the car that will soon carry them – him and Ann – to Morrisons.

Descending the stony ridge path to the car park, he thinks about the dead man in the water. He knows he should call the police. He should tell Ann, too, which would deflect the conversation they ought to have. It would delay her shopping trip, that was for certain. He isn't clear how, but he knows that if he makes the call now, if he tells his wife, it might take them away from each other. As he nears the car park, he still hasn't decided what to do.

In the café, Ann's there, nursing a cup of tea with one hand and texting with the other. She stands up quickly as soon as she sees him enter. Her eyes glisten as she takes in his boots, moments before she smells the peaty water.

There's the sigh.

'Isn't it about time you packed it in, all this climbing up away from the world?' she snaps, even though it had been her idea in the first place.

She steps forward, not meeting his eye yet, and just for a moment he sees her doubtful eye cast over him, the young man he once was at the edge of his world. But he doesn't understand what happens next. She splutters, drops her shoulder like she's been shot, and he reaches out and catches her, holds her still. She sobs, only for a second or two, brief instants of the afternoon. He says nothing now. The café is empty, just the two of them left in there. He holds her for some time, listening to the clatter of dishes coming from somewhere beyond a door at the back of the room, trying to feel the heartbeat of his wife.

She breaks away finally and sniffs. She laughs at herself, a short cough of a laugh behind a folded tissue, before she dares to catch his eye.

'What did you see up there?' she asks, beginning to move past him towards the door.

Someone will call the police soon. It might be him, but if he does call it won't be today. They'll go to Morrisons instead. Perhaps tomorrow he might tell Ann what he saw up there, if she cares to ask again. 'Nothing much,' he whispers, watching her back as she strides away through the door into the blinding light of the afternoon.

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Manchester Writing Competition 2013: the Short-listed Fiction Finalists

Alison White

The Island Visitor

As you enter the kitchen you detect the same pervading smell that lingers through all of this building. Bird shit. Here the smell is mixed with fried eggs and toasted bread. A large wooden table fills the room and in its centre sits an old milk bottle filled with red campion. The sun is hanging low above the building's roof and burning into the cove. Its shadows char the cliff face; its light turns the water to foil.

Like everyone who visits, your urge is to cross the room to the glaring window. There, you cast your eyes down towards your rocking boat, then lift them northwards, scan as far as the horizon line. Looking out from this dim room into the blazing evening light scorches your eyes like a blowtorch and you scowl, quickly turning your head back into the room momentarily blinded.

I'm standing in the shadow of my bedroom door watching. You can't see me, I've checked. The angle of the door, the narrow corridor obscures where I stand. As you look back towards this darkened space you are blinking. I imagine black spots floating in your vision as you turn back to the window, gaze out again over the sea.

You haven't changed much these last three years; you still have your slick blond hair, pale skin and that lean hungry look, those gull black eyes. But your face is frowning; are you looking for clues? No Rebecca lives here. I'm Sam. Nice and ambiguous that one.

* * * * *

It was at the abortion clinic that I picked up a birders' magazine and saw the Trust's advert, stood abruptly and left. I didn't intend to disappear this way. Who would expect to find cover on a bird stinking island.

* * * * *

You are standing just where I had stood a few hours earlier when your boat appeared from behind Rye Rocks. My eyes are constantly drawn towards them, checking for that sudden appearance of a distant black shape; the whine of a motor, like a fly coming to land.

I'd watched the boat approaching, made out a man standing, dropping the anchor. He'd hooked the buoy with a pole, pulled it towards him, tied the boat up and then reached for the pulley line from down in the water. The seaweed was shaking off the rope as he pulled the boat across the water to the cliff face.

I saw him recoil. It's the stench of the leatherbacked turtle stuck on a ledge at the base of the cliff. Its flesh is all but dissolved. The Gulf Stream has brought it and the cold water has killed it. Now we're waiting for the high tide due with the full moon to take it away.

The man had stretched his leg towards the ladder strapped to the cliff and pulled himself up and off, his rucksack slung over his back. He'd noticed the helmet, put it on. He knew. Not everyone realises what that's there for. He'd climbed nimbly up the rungs with the gull bombing him as he passed its nest, slapping the helmet with its feet. Even Matt's been caught unawares by that one; he came in yesterday with blood dripping from his head, was hit from behind.

I'd grabbed the binoculars to get a closer look. Lucy was banging her bowl on the table. I heard it wobble on the wood, crash to the floor. Lucy was screaming, but her cries dispersed, instead my ears filled with a noise like rushing water.

I'd lowered the binoculars and was stood motionless, my fingers digging into the sill.

I had been expecting it, not you but the boat. Matt mentioned a visitor earlier when he'd grabbed a sandwich and his bag of leg rings.

'There's some artist coming over tonight, he got me on the phone and I went and said yes.'

'You did? How come?'

'Well the research rooms are empty, that Oxford lot are delayed and he sounded okay. He's got his own boat and can come over later this afternoon when the conditions are right for crossing the Sound.'

'What's he wanting to do?'

'Something about capturing the shrieking at night. It sounded a load of shit to me but no more than some of the other requests we've heard.'

'But the weather...'

'Yeah I know, he got me before the last forecast. I tried calling back but no answer. I'll tell him tonight he'll have to leave early.'

'It said a massive low pressure.'

'I know, that's why I've got to get this tagging finished.'

He'd grabbed his notebook and was gone.

This kind of thing happens all the time to Matt, people trying to use the Island for something; it's chance who he'll say yes to.

Now Matt will be greeting you onto the island. I can still remember the thrill of that first arrival. Climbing the barnacled ladder, taking the steep path up towards the island's top, looking out across the bay as sunlight seeped through the clouds, sent beams of light down to the sea as low flying puffins zipped past, sand eels in their mouths.

The island is uncannily quiet in the daytime; the shearwaters are gone. They are rafting out at sea collecting sardines; filling their bellies to fly in tonight, regurgitate a meal for their chicks in their nests underground.

The black backed gulls spend their day waiting like sentries at a post. They let out the odd cackle and take the odd scrap from a puffin to keep their chick happy, but what they really want is a full meal. They are waiting for the shearwaters' return. These black feathered birds with soft white bellies, hooked beaks and legs too far back in their bodies, wait for the cover of night time, the clouds to cover the moon, before they arrive en-mass, shrieking, thumping to the ground besides their burrows. When they miss, the deft footed gulls are waiting, peck the thing to pieces, its cries blending with the screams all around. By morning all that remains are its wings outstretched.

I've never understood why the twitchers' don't sense the menace of this place. They refer to the cries as 'uplifting,' 'magical.' There are usually a few of them here helping to manage day visitors that arrive if the weather allows. Tonight there are none. The weather forced the last lot to leave early and the next lot have yet to arrive.

That's how I came here three years ago. I saw the advert and crossed the country to Renny's Slip and waited for the boat to take us volunteers over Deadman's Sound. I'd thought I had come to take stock of what was happening, escape for a few weeks; I didn't know that this was going to become my hiding place.

The Island's pockmarked like honeycomb; its tufted ground's a fragile rooftop to the burrows underneath. From above it looks pinched in the middle, with a slender neck precariously holding the two sides together, its cliffs crumbling with every storm. It makes me think of the necks of the shearwaters arriving at night. Stretched taught, convulsing, their strangulated screams escaping from their gaping throats. At dusk the puffins circle above in their thousands, whirl round and around above this slither of land as the light fades and the gulls stand erect on the cliff top waiting patiently for night to fall.

And to think you used to call me P. Say I had a face like a puffin. Ironic really, seeing as there are thousands of them now outside my window.

* * * * *

From the shadows of our bedroom I see Matt enter the kitchen. He's late, has been finishing those burrows. I'm guessing he asked you to help – then sent you ahead because he doesn't usually invite someone in here.

It's a strange procedure tagging puffin chicks. He'll have had you lying with your stomach pressed to the ground, told you to slide your arm into the burrow carefully, not to put weight on the roof, and then twist so your arm reaches its pit and you feel the fluff of the chick, the peck of its beak.

I can hear your voices in the kitchen; your words are low and your glasses have been filled.

'So it's art you do?'
'Yes, conceptual, if you know what I mean?'
'Right.'
'How did you come to be Warden?'
'I'm drawn to Islands,'
'This Island?'
'Not necessarily. We're a community, us Birders'. I was in the Faroe Isles but I came south when this post came up.'
'Been here long?'
'Eight years. Time to move on soon before insanity takes me.'
'And your wife, she came with you?'
'Sam? My partner. No I met her here; she came over as a volunteer.'

Matt's taking you out of the kitchen, through the snug, into the hall of boots. You're climbing the wooden stairs; I can hear the thud of your socked feet as they cushion the wooden risers.

Tonight upstairs in the library there will be *birdlog*, it's a tradition dating back years even if no-one is here. Usually there is. Then a handful of volunteers will congregate at nine in their jumpers and socks, holding cans of beer and notebooks to discuss the sightings of the day. Tonight there is only the two of you; the impending storm has made sure of that.

I hear Matt's footsteps running back down.

'Hey Sam are you okay?'
'I've got a migraine.'
'Shit. There's that artist guy here, I thought you might want to meet him.'
'It's blinding. I need to lie still.'
'Shit. Did Lucy go down okay?'
'Yes she's whacked from the walk waving off Tom and Daz. She should be down for the night.'
'Okay, okay. Shit. The guys got whisky; I think I could have a good night.'
'Go ahead; I'll try to sleep this off.'

Hard drinking is part of the island culture and Matt craves it. There's a need to release some of the Island's intensity, to let things out.

* * * * *

I step over an orange frog and pass a stunned shearwater on the concrete path that wraps around the building. It's sitting there on its belly, its legs useless. It flaps and bumps, its glossy wings outstretched, its sharp curving beak closed, an eye watching me.

I can see the light still on in the library. Matt will have opened you a can, will be calling out the list to you as if it is music: chough, cormorant, curlew, eagle, fulmar...

I furtively open the door and enter the hall; I pull my feet from my mud caked boots and add them to the pungent row. Back in my room I hear a thump against the building; it's time. The shrieking and whooping has started; the floor's beginning to vibrate. It's the most macabre sound I have ever heard, like a pig being strangled. Tonight the night is right. By that I mean there is no moonlight; a sea mist has enveloped us. It is midnight and they're dropping from the sky in their thousands.

You've come down from the library and settled in the snug. I'm trying to overhear your conversation but I can only catch snatches.

'Those birds...can't walk?'
'...Legs' set back... perfect... hunting underwater.'
'Leave by six... the sound...this bastard hits us...'

I can hear Lucy crying! Please, please let Matt hear her.

She will be standing in her doorway, eyes scrunched, holding her toy stuffed bird tight. Her strangulated cry is mimicking the deathly cries outside.

'Shit, that's Lucy.'

His words are beginning to slur.

I lie waiting. My room is sparse, a double bed, four wooden walls and a tiny crack up high that gives me a glimpse of your bunk.

At last you stagger out of the snug into the hall. As you open the door the noise deafens. It must be two. The whole island is resounding with screams, 300,000 of them. Your footsteps pass outside my room; I hear you stop. The blind's down tight. Matt's staggering around in the snug, pulling the spare duvet out of the chest, collapsing onto the sofa. I'm out of the bed standing in darkness with an eye fixed to the wall. I hear the creak of a door and I know you've entered the researchers' quarters. I hear your boots fall and a distant hiss, your piss, and then a light flicks on. It makes my eye hurt. You step into the room and sit down on the edge of the bunk, put your head in your hands and rub your forehead over and over.

I'm barely breathing.

You suddenly stand, take four steps and flick the switch and I hear the creak of the bunk.

And in time, your breathing slows.

* * * * *

I put my eye to the crack again. Blue light enters from the window; your bunk is empty. You have gone. I heard thumping on wood at six, heard the door open, the outer door slam.

Outside the birds are silent but the shriek of the wind has replaced them. I imagine strong gusts lifting you as you take the earth sodden path to the cove. You will step over the wing of a bird, its fingers of feathers outstretched. You may have looked back, seen the house perched on The Neck as you descended the ladder, pulled the dripping rope out of the swollen bay. You will have tugged hard to pull the boat over and steadied yourself before making that wide step. The boat will have drifted as you lowered the propeller, pulled the throttle over and over again, at last heard the splutters of the engine. You'll have turned out of the cove, headed out past Rye Rocks, out of my view and into the bubbling Sound.

It won't take long for the engine to cut, I made sure of that. You're nearly empty.

I stand abruptly; I want one last look from afar. I slip through the kitchen, the snug, past Matt and out. I step over a wing and turn the corner, look down into the cove.

I can't see a thing.

I try to listen for the whine of an engine but I just hear the screaming wind. The mist is swirling, the wind buffeting my face when it suddenly hollows, opens out like a hole to show chopping water, your boat heading out towards the Rocks

I see you glance over your shoulder, up towards the house. Am I silhouetted? I wave; you won't be able to see my smile. You look away but then your boat makes a sudden arch, curls in the water. You're making a full circle in the sea with the boat. Your arm is raised high and one finger is thrust in the air.

My hand drops as if severed.

What was that in the boat?

The mist encloses again, it swallows her whole, as I whirl around and face the house; I see her opened window.

Adam Wilmington

Manchester Writing Competition 2013: the Short-listed Fiction Finalists

It.

They didn't know what to do about it. Nothing seemed to fit. She had suggested they bury it; he said it should be burned.

I hear they let off this nasty smell when they burn up, he said. She lamented that there was no earth anywhere *to dig up* even if they were to bury it. There's concrete over everywhere nowadays. There's no trees.

I remember when there used to be trees.

They went to dinner with it and shared awkward glances across the table; they swapped little iris messages. Little ocular murmurs. She wore that nice red skirt he loved, and the black blouse she had worn on their second date (remember that?). He had taken especial care of his beard that night – spending close to half an hour absent-mindedly plucking and preening in front of the bathroom mirror. All the while trying his utmost hardest not to look at the corner of the looking-glass where he knew it could be seen in the corner of the panel, like a dark stain across the surface.

Initially, many of the other diners were disconcerted by the presence of it; they shuffled largely in their wooden seats and smiled apologetically at each other. Someone made a joke to his party about it and watched with delight as they exploded in calculated mirth. Someone else discreetly asked the head waiter if he could possibly do something about it.

The waiter floated over and gravely addressed the embarrassed couple.

I know, I know, the man said, but what are we meant to do? Just tell us that.

We've tried everything, she implored.

The waiter spent a while shrugging and pulling faces then just slunk off, defeated, leaving them alone – a course of action which the particular gentleman who had made the initial complaint clearly disapproved of. His wife assured him that he was powerless to do anything; that some people don't understand; some people are selfish; the waiter was incompetent at his job. They wouldn't come here again. After some time, the room settled down and the undulating waves of interest ebbed towards more familiar attractions. Wine was poured, food was relished. Lips were smacked.

They settled the bill and left.

This was one of many incidents. Of course there were good days; sometimes it didn't matter that it was there – after all, they reasoned, who hasn't known it? Friends would come round and no-one would notice anything – their laughter would pour under doors and sweep against the skirting boards and everything would be okay.

She would say to him, I love you.

I love you, he would say back to her.

Everyone would smile and be happy. But then it would enter the room and sit down and look; it would envelop the room with its gaze. Not with its eyes (it didn't have eyes – how could it?); but with the *idea* of eyes. It wore a carved remembrance of a smile and beamed cavernously at them. It didn't smile with a mouth (it didn't have any mouth – how did it eat? I don't know, she had once replied); but with the *idea* of a smile, of a mouth. Regardless, they would gather themselves together and embrace each other as if it wasn't there. They were all friends here after all.

After a time it insinuated itself into their favourite music, over-seasoned their favourite meals. It cropped up in old photographs, standing ominously in the dog-eared corners, eating air. He took to taking long bracing walks all by himself, whistling familiar tunes and keeping the beat with the slap-dash shuffle of his feet. This gave him time to think and a space to himself. When he came back he would lift the heavy key up to the big, red door and enter the house, putting on a face of studied nonchalance and peace, pushing past the disused pram and the rain jackets in the hallway and striding confidently into the front room.

Nice walk?

It was okay. I went by the old park, it's still lovely in there.

I'm sure it is, she smiled, looking up from her work smeared out across the furniture.

Listen, when are we going to get rid of that buggy in the hall? I damn near break my neck every time I come in.

She hardened. Not yet, she said.

It began to stir in the corner. She went back to her work and he went through into the kitchen to make some tea.

It was becoming too hard to ignore now – they soon learned that the restaurant fiasco had been but the tip of the iceberg. What had once drawn curious gazes from strangers had now evolved into a tempestuous adolescent which drew the attentions of both frightened spectators and concerned family members alike. They tried to cover it, to hide it. She would daub it with gaudy make-up in an attempt to make it presentable. To normalize it.

No-one will notice, she assured herself.

He dressed it in extravagant swathes of cloth; desperately tightening cords, tying knots, fastening buckles. Staring into the ever more inconceivable depths of its new-found bulk, he pulled and tugged more and more desperately each time. Unwittingly, he had discovered an accelerated unknown urgency and his frayed fingers struggled to keep up with the frantic desires of his diseased mind.

More, more, more, he mumbled.

More.

Soon the local news caught wind of what was happening. A frothing editor waved his arms madly and commanded his photographers and journalists to camp outside the couple's front door. He gave them strict orders to report anything that they saw and photograph anything which seemed of interest to the general public. Out of the kitchen window, she could see the camera lenses scattered amongst the privets like so many shining marbles – whenever it walked past there would be a frenzy of clicking followed by the confused murmur of the reporters.

What is it?

What happened to it?

What's it doing?

Why won't they leave us alone? she asked him.

They're not interested in us, he sighed, they're only interested in it.

They tried to trick it into staying outside, into getting lost. They would drive it to seaports, parks, supermarkets and leave it there, where someone else might find it – but it always found its way back. Driving back from the docks where they had left it one time, they would be nearly weightless with relief – they could even afford to share smiles – until they arrived back at the house to find it standing serenely amongst the pale leaves crowding the garden, with the reporters huddled around it, impotently asking unanswered questions. The couple just sat there in the car and watched it.

We should have burnt it when we had the chance.

Maybe you're right.

I *am* right.

Maybe you are.

Every night now it would come into their room and wait listlessly at the foot of their bed. It was too big now, too big. It occupied space like an obsession and swallowed up moods whole. With a growing stench of regret, it wallowed in its own actuality – a void too despairing to be looked into, a maniac sun which would scar the eyes. We should do something, before it's too late.

She rested in her silence for a time.

Okay. Tomorrow night, she whispered.

The next evening, they tied it up and covered it in sheets. It didn't resist, but its chilly touch sent the clean knowledge of emptiness straight through to their cores. The crowds of spectators and hustling reporters had made it difficult to enter their house when they returned from work that afternoon – as usual – but tomorrow, they told themselves, there would be no more problems of this ilk. This was the final step. To be safe they strapped belts around the inert bundle; then to be extra safe they taped it up securely as well.

Let's put it in the trunk. Come on, help me lift.

They stumbled clumsily to the garage having had to take several stops along the way and then gingerly placed it in the back of the car with the sort of reverence one might reserve for a child.

There, he said with finality.

She puffed out her cheeks and nodded.

They drove out past the scattered remains of the crowd – those photographers still ravenous enough to set up camp on the lawn – and sped out of town with a festering urgency, leaving the winking bright eyes of the cameras in their wake. They used to take trips out to the country all the time; they would pack their suitcases full of new clothes and optimism and just head out, making bookings by phone on the way. She would laugh with her pretty little laugh and point out all the beautiful things she saw and he would marvel at her trained eye, at her innate elegance. Like those nights of old, the stars were all the way out again tonight and the planets blistered in the sky with a familiar and intimate power. They stopped some way out West near the coast and parked the car in a forgotten field, painted a thin hue of silver in the light of the dead and indifferent moon.

After the gasoline had been poured over the grim, still bundle, she lit a match and let it drop. From a reasonable distance, the flames flared and teased their way across their motionless faces.

Maybe we'll miss it, she mused.

How can you miss something that isn't there?

A pause, then: You can.

* * *

The house rose triumphantly from the glistening, dew-sodden lawn on their approach. All the news crews, the photographers, the journalists had scattered by now, off to pursue fresh news. No doubt they had found newer, unspoiled gardens to walk about on. He reached out and grasped her hand, passing on a look of trepidation in the process. Nodding grimly towards one another they anxiously stepped towards the big, red front door like tongue-tied young newly-weds who blush beautifully on their wedding night.

Something moved, in the front room. The half-drawn curtain recoiled and shuddered. His hand, holding the key half raised to the lock, froze. Their eyes met and they shared a sense of dreadful lightness. Trembling slightly, he continued in his mission to open the door but now all the weight in the universe seemed to rest in that key, all the unknowable, terrible secrets of the world resided right there in that hushed and sudden moment, each groove and its intricate spacing along the

calculating metal seemed to hold the terrible knowledge of the ancients – the key sang of barriers in its own language; it told of the slow lift and then the release, of doors opened throughout time through all the world to lead two lovers to this very instant, this very place.

Click, said the key as it opened the door.

Thud, said the door, as it hurled itself emptily against the wall.

She said she would go in first.

Sure, okay, he replied.

Stepping across the threshold, she pushed past the detritus in the darkened hall and edged her way gingerly to the doorway of the front room. The door was open and on its sure, wooden bulk the dappled shadows of the night outside were in riot. He hung back as she positioned herself resolutely in the frame, body receptive to the room, alert and determined.

Well? Is something there? What's happening?

Nothing. Silence. He waited for her to speak but the tendrils of moonlight which reached for her features through the shrubbery in the garden carried a strange mood with them. Her eyes gleamed emptily under flickering anaemic spurts of illumination and her expression became ossified and unknowable.

Again: What's up? Can you see anything?

Light and not-light took turns to caress her pale and delicate face, death-tones reflected from a dead rock which spoke sullenly of absence and its immutable stillness.

Well? he rasped urgently. What *is* it?

I don't know, she said. I don't know.

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