

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

**The Manchester Writing Competition**  
**2014 Fiction and Poetry Prize**  
**Short Lists**

Since its launch in 2008, Carol Ann Duffy's Manchester Writing Competition has attracted almost 12,000 submissions from over 50 countries and awarded more than £75,000 to its winners. The Competition was designed to encourage new work and seek out the best creative writing from across the world, establishing Manchester as the focal point for a major international prize. The winners of the 2014 £10,000 Manchester Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be revealed at a glittering Manchester Literature Festival ceremony on Friday 17th October.

This year's Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Christopher Burns and Claire Dean, and the Poetry Prize was judged by Adam O'Riordan, Adam Horovitz and Clare Pollard.

For further details, go to: [www.manchesterwritingcompetition.co.uk](http://www.manchesterwritingcompetition.co.uk).

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# **2014 Manchester Fiction Prize Short-listed Stories**

# Something Inside the Head

## David Grubb

I have to tell you something, right at the start. I died one minute ago.

Something inside the head; clicking, ticking, a ripple running down and I am out of it. Except that's not the truth of it, the actual, the state I'm in.

It is a very different state because here I am talking to you.

My wife will know that I am dead when she enters the garden and finds that I have fallen down between the back of the summer house and the potting shed, just by the water tank.

Right now I am alive in her mind, in her head, in her heart. All is well. If the phone rings and the caller asks to speak with me she will say "He won't be a moment. I will call him. Hold on." And he will do just that.

Just before I died I drenched the bamboo. We had thought that it was about to fail and so we moved it out of the troughs and planted it at the top of the garden and after the deep snow last winter it began to reach for the sky as if it were a prize winner.

I watered it and then suddenly I was dressed in silence and everything swam back and away and the grass was white and there was some sort of clicking inside my head.

I think there was a toad that might have witnessed this or a few dragonflies. I think that for a few seconds I was standing still and then I was falling towards the bamboo and then I was half hidden in the canes and when my wife came across the lawn she would not initially have seen where my torso was hidden.

When she did find me she attempted to pull me out from the dense green, unaware that I was in fact in another state. She was thrashing at the canes and trying to tug me free and wanting to tell me that Richard was waiting on the phone.

When I got to the phone I told Richard that I had just died and that there was a lot to do and that my wife would get back to him about the funeral.

All this time my wife was still trying to pull me out and she had to leave me there for a while whilst she ran to the house next door and Mike and Jill came over and managed to drag me onto the lawn. Then Robert came over and Lesley and a dog or two.

Meanwhile I was wanting to take my wife into the house and show her where the Will was kept and remind her of our solicitor's name and phone number and show her the latest valuation of some first editions and remind her of the estimate of the two Cornish oil paintings. The bank manager was called Michael. I also wanted to tell her about where the first drafts of three new short stories were carefully filed.

There is a lot of sky here and it is warm and there is no pain and I suppose that I have been dead for five or six minutes and the garden is a good place to die. When I am carried into the house it is still like being in the garden. I have lost the sense of stairs, room, bed, curtains.

When the phone rings again I pick it up and say that we are all rather busy right now. Somebody wanting to upgrade something at no cost.

I think I have been dead for about two hours now. I feel that I have a body made of feathers. A list of things keeps slipping in and out of my mind. It comes, it goes. It gets shorter and shorter and finally it is more like a poem. A sequence of places: Padstow, Truro, Pentire Head, Malvern, the Hudson, Wave Hill, a back yard in New Castle, Indiana, Bellagio. Mousehole. Henley.

At the funeral now. I am not sure who is really here because the figures and faces keep transforming. I don't mean close loved ones but very much liked ones and not seen for ages ones and also some dead ones. A gathering of people who made up my life and also those who gave me grief.

Some sing up, really participate, truly have something to say as they sing and pray and fight to control their emotions. A few of the men needing to swallow hard, to bite the lower lip. Some of the women holding on to the service sheet as if it might be a bird and suddenly fly.

The minister tangling some of the facts and my brother inventing moments and events as if presenting *This Is Your Life*.

My dearest, my beloved, my special ones clinging on. They have become angels. They stand close in case they slip. They are walking on water. They could go under at any second.

And there are also people who cannot possibly be here: the baby who lived six weeks, my dead parents, my first lover, my Housemaster, the man who published my first poetry collection. The dead ones.

There are also those who I cannot be sure of. They are here for seconds. They are not here. As in life I am not quite sure that I want them to be here. I would not seek them. Why then would they attend?

At the funeral now, the living and the dead and the music and these special words saying what must last for ever.

At the reception, at the final gathering, I wander from group to group, listening to what they say, what the words must do now. Different scene, different act, another essential part of what has to be perfectly performed. Sometimes the silences speaking louder. Sometimes the past leading present. A few teenagers wondering what they might be missing in the ordinary world, the suspended present, the tick tock time.

And when they leave the reception I wonder how much longer I might be here, what keeps me, how this works.

It is, you see, more like a gradual letting go, nothing to do with real time, a slowing of being and not yet becoming. One minute I am observing my wife back at the house. The television is on. The clocks all work. The slow-motion consuming of cups of tea. Closing moments. At the same time I am walking along what I know to be the Malvern Hills and there is a man walking towards me and I want him to be Sir Edward with a new tune blossoming. There are some men hang-gliding. The sound of a train. Two boys with kites.

Then I am in another heart place. The sea almost freezing. The black rocks of north Cornwall and a wind that has a voice of ancient cold and gulls blown in clusters. There is a man whose umbrella almost hauls him off the cliff top.

Meanwhile my wife is seated on the double bed. She is reading the last letter I ever wrote to her. She walks across to the other side of the bed and looks out at the garden and thinks that she sees me watering the bamboo. She pulls the curtains across knowing that nothing in her life will ever be the same again.

My oldest daughter enters the room. They speak in silences.

In this letting go I spend time in different places. I am sometimes a child, a teenager, a young man, a husband, a father. Sometimes I am there in winter and then suddenly it is summer. It is as if for seconds I could enter inspirations, so much more than tranquil memories. And some of the people in these scenes are mental inventions, entirely made up but matching the meaning of the place. In Padstow Malcom Arnold slaps down a wad of notes on the bar counter and orders another round. And there is the body of an old woman being carried up from the beach at Polzeath and I can hear my mother warning me to hold on tight as I reach for the topmost apples in the small orchard in Bedfordshire. And when the horse dies in Somerset and six men come to haul it away we know that there is still sunrise in its head.

So this is the way we go. The living have their memories, their secrets, their wishes, and the dead have this parting, these filtering farewells, these cascades, these visits, these slow observances as though there is no hurry, no time, all will become other when it is right. The sight and sense of heart places will fall away. There is no need for event. There is no need for ghosts. However, not all the living agree.

They will not let go. They call back, seek something that makes more sense, are compelled by loss and guilt and the ragged nature of farewells. They would place roses in the mouths of the dead, still hold their hands, write letters to them, iron their shirts perhaps or talk to them in a summer garden. Whether they live to love new partners, bring up new children, live alone, there are moments from the past that keep growing with meaning, that simply will not cease.

Perhaps this is a sorting of love, a poetry that grows in wonders, a heart song that becomes a blood song. And in this manner we never die.

I have been waiting for something to change again. I keep thinking about rain being the same rain for ever. I am aware that nothing actually ends, it changes, it transforms but it never ends. There is no such thing as ending.

The light here never goes. We are entirely made of light. When a baby has come here and is ready to leave it is the light that departs with the baby and when another person comes here it is the dark we are aware of first of all and then the sudden light.

There is no need for anything else when we are here, the lasting light. Then one of us must make a journey again and the light leaves with us, our individual light. We all know when this happens. Something inside the head. Sometimes it can happen when we walk into a house and know that in some previous life we were within this room. Or crossing a field we see a figure a long way ahead and know that it is a younger self.

Or when we appear in a scene and wish that we were not there: in our parents' bedroom, when the Housemaster stands alone in a moment of weeping, when Father tells a lie and then turns to us and smiles, when the person we have adored and trusted our secrets to places a hand where it should not be, when the teacher praises us for the words we have stolen, when cutting up worms is a delight, when the man called Jesus slaps us hard, when the person we adore fails to turn up for the very first date, when the baby in our hands has stopped.

And when you are entering the room that you have been in before but in another life, when you are walking up a drive that no longer exists, when you are kissing a ghost, when you know every word that the other person is beginning to say, when you look across to the field where slaves in rags are working, when you hear somebody calling your name in an empty orchard, when you pick up the phone and know that it is your dead mother, when you hear the voices in a ruined cottage and the light that passes all understanding dresses you and addresses you and the silence is older than rain.

I have been dead for a year now. I only know this because I see my wife standing in the garden near the bamboo patch that has grown denser and even more attractive as the light traces between the stems as if letting in light were a trick.

The trick is not knowing what will happen next.

The trick is that you do not need to know.

She sets down a small bunch of wild flowers. She stays for a while.

I hear the telephone ringing.

**David Grubb's short stories have appeared in *Ambit*, *Cornish Review*, *Stand*, *Stride*, *Circus*, *Carrilon*, *Aireings*, *Leaf*, *Circus*, *Voices For Kosovo*, *Horizon*, *Geometer*, the Matthew's House Project, and been broadcast on BBC Radio Somerset. His collection *Hullabaloo and Secret Pianos* was published by Root Creations in 2011. He has published novels and novellas, has taught creative writing and creative reading courses, and runs a mentoring scheme for individual writers. His subject matter has been influenced by initially training as a psychiatric male nurse, teaching in comprehensive schools and more recently directing aid programmes in conflict zones and failed states.**



## Eating Words

### Avril Joy

River in our blood. He say. Ain't nothing we can do about it. Ain't nothing even if I was minded which I ain't seeing as river in my blood, in my breath, my being too.

It happens when I'm a crawling child. According to mama I up and crawl right off the boat. Nights I feel it, river sucks at my throat. I am spluttering and choking like a chicken for the pot. Pulls me out like he do the snapping turtle because daddy a man of river ways. I blue mama says. He thump my chest good and hard and some of the river come up and some stay put. They say it a miracle that I'm alive. After, I turn to a sickly child with coughs and fevers and bruises and boils, river water still in me. Still. Times it soak up all my breath.

Silas keep the Book. By that I mean he do the writing in. I also do the keeping of. Dry-keeping which require swaddling in oiled flour sacks to ward off river-damp liable to curl pages and stain them the colour of tobacco spit, safe-keeping which is a secret-under-the-bed-in-the-cottonwood-chest kind of keeping, so that only me and Silas know it whereabouts and house-keeping because it so arrange that he write in the Book every night.

Silas write in the Book on our wedding night while I fall asleep on the cotton pillow, washed in sage water that mama give us. It been so every night since, sage long faded. Silas never miss. He even write in the Book the night the ferryman Oss Starling drown and the lynchmen come because they say it Silas's fault for keeping the Book. And even when they calm with my root wine and ready to leave, they tell him they never want to hear of it again. I tell him it time to put the Book away, it full of wickedness but he turn from me and refuse to listen.

Cold days when the mist hang on the river and you don't see from one boat to another, wet days when the fish are jumping and if a person so wants they can get a whole stringer of catfish and bream, such days, when Silas leave for work in the slaughterhouse, I go to the hiding place and take out the Book. I put it on the table in what passes for our kitchen which Silas say is not fit to be called a kitchen on account of him being raised in a cabin with a kitchen and all.

I open it, turn the pages of his hand; even, no blot or crossing out. I think of what the men say, how Oss Starling's lungs got drown in river water. It dangerous but it still a perfect thing. I try to fathom it but no matter how long I stare it don't show. I am like him hunting in the woods waiting for the rustle of the whitetail in the chinaberries, only nothing come. The marks stay put. I don't know the word.

Mama try to show me but she got seven of us children and always the prospect of a swollen belly of the like I've never had. All mama's time taken with keeping us clean and cooking and washing and she glad of my help because mostly I stay at home. I don't walk out the Creek along the bank to the school house with the others on account of the river water.

I know Alice. I know my name, A. L. I. C. E. and my sister H. E. T. T. Y. I copy them, say them aloud, I eat them but it don't help none when it come to the Book because it not about her. The Book is Silas, it his corruption.

I am thirteen when Silas come. He running west from the drought and the roller plague of dust. He carry the Book with him and a tin plate and cup. Daddy find him gnawing chicory root and bring him

home and feed him cornbread and blue catfish. He tall and his bones show through but he handsome as a blackbird, handsome as any river-rat.

He take up with Rockwell's old boat, half-sunk in the water and past living in since Rockwell died, and when he done mending it and making it fit for habitation he ask for me. Fifteen, and what price he pay daddy I don't know but it enough because he say yes.

Two years, no swollen belly. Hetty say it because we don't do it right. She say Silas perverse and daddy should not have agreed to me marrying him. Silas say I am without God. But God is here in the mountains and the swallows and the meadowlarks. He hear it like we do. The tears of the Cherokee, the Chickasaw, the Crow. They lay heavy on us. Daddy say it got so the land too sorry to live on so we took to the water. Hetty say that far in the past and these are modern times. But I hear it whisper in the reeds.

Silas promise mama he teach me the word. But when I'm his wife he change his mind, say there plenty of time for reading, it only words. After the lynchmen come I say surely words must be powerful things, surely, if Oss Starling drown himself because of what Silas write. Silas say folk know no better, it superstition. They afraid of having them stories stolen. Silas say the Book have nothing to do with anyone but himself. When I ask him about Oss Starling, how everyone on the river saying his wife Jennie took up with another man and that he drown himself because Silas see it and write it down, he just shrug.

'How about when his wife Jennie come and you make me go outside and lock up the chickens?' I say.

'What you tell her?'

'Nothing,' says Silas. 'What would I want telling her anything?'

'You show her the Book? You read her from the Book?'

'No,' he shake his head.

'Read me the Book,' I say. 'If you don't, how can I know the truth? How can I tell Hetty she wrong and that you ain't prying into what don't concern you, putting yourself up judge and jury?' I wait and when he don't reply I fetch the lamp. I put it on the table and brush away the paper moth wings on the glass. I sit waiting while Silas fetch the book. Outside the river slap and suck on the cypress logs. He bring the Book. He open it at the beginning and read. When he finish he close it.

'It ain't nothing,' I tell Hetty. 'It not what you're thinking.' Hetty is expecting her first born. Summer hot and her ankles ripe for priming like a cow's udder. I go every day. I row across, then take the path through the wood. She live on dryland near the town, five minutes' walk to the drug store. Her man Johnson building the cabin but it only part finished. Hetty sit on the porch and swat flies and drink lemonade.

She not listening. Like she don't want to hear. Like she only want to think badly of Silas.

'It not what I hear,' say Hetty. She sigh and rub her ankles. 'God damn I wish this child would make its appearance.' She lean back in the cane chair. 'Men at the slaughterhouse, Johnson say, they had enough of him and his strange ways and all this weather we've been having, the storms and such. I hear the preacher going to pay you a visit, Alice, that's what I hear.'

Sunday evening. Me and Silas back from the Brush Arbour and the prayers and the hymns. We eat our biscuits and gravy and Silas finish writing in the Book. Maybe now he notice me sat here quiet and maybe we sit outside a while and look at the stars, listen to owls and frogs and even though it not the season for shooting stars if we lucky we see one and wish on it. Then the scull of oars in the water. It scatter the pintails. Then he step on the stage-plank and knock.

Preacher Inman sit at the table with Silas, the Book between them. I give him root wine. He don't eat. Silas look at me and I know he want me to leave but I fetch a stool and sit right down with them. Preacher nervous, I tell by the way his hands fidgety and he keep coughing like a fish-bone in his throat.

He swallow hard and say, 'Silas. You probably knows why I'm here. It's about the book.' He put his hand on it. 'I'm afraid it causing some difficulty hereabouts. You see, everyone knows you came with the Book. But some think you came because of it, to write down all their shortcomings, and spy on them. You've got to understand, people are natural born suspicious. Expecting to be done against just for living this life here on the river.'

Silas nod.

'Others think it's something worse, that it's witchcraft or the like, the devil. They say strange things been happening, the dust for one, the storms, the oak trees laid every which way, cars in the pasture, houses gone, the river running backwards and they're saying it's because of you, Silas.'

Now likely you mean no harm but that ain't how folk see it. So my advice to you, my reason for being here is to ask you to give up the Book. If you give it up to me that will be the proof that you've changed your ways and people have nothing to fear. Do you understand?'

Silas nod. 'I understand,' he say.

'Well then that's easy settled. I'll just take this.' Preacher Inman lean over and go to lift up the Book. Silas put his hands on it first. 'No.'

'It's for the best, Silas. Now you just relinquish the Book and that will be an end to it.'

I praying he will give it up. Prayer is filling my chest till it burst open like fruit in the fall.

'No,' say Silas picking up the Book. 'I'd be grateful if you'd leave now, Preacher, and no need for you to return.'

Silas buy a gun from the store and hide it next to the Book. He expecting the lynchmen to come and take him. 'You cannot die for a book,' I say, 'it don't make sense, Silas. Give it up. I don't want a gun in my house. I don't want killing.'

When Silas refuse to answer me I go outside. I climb up onto the bank. Sunlight flicker through the pines onto the path. I follow until I come to where the Creek close up and the water pool deep, where they jump in off the rock. I look down and fill with water. There is no room for breath and I know I got to leave.

Living with Hetty ain't so bad. She pleased to see me in an I-told-you-so kind of way. I go into town and shop at the store. I help look after her first born, Truman. He cry a lot, get restless when the moon come up. Harvest coming now and the moon big as a watermelon. Truman cry all night and I rock him. I miss Silas. Daddy say I should pay no mind to the ignorance of folk. He say Silas a good man and I have no right leaving my husband. I say I have every right. But my heart's gone hid itself away like the bear in winter. Why Silas don't come to fetch me? Why he don't call for me by name? It dark and Hetty asleep, Truman too. The slaughterhouse men are out on the porch with Johnson. Four of them. The same lynchmen who come for Silas the night Oss Starling drown.

'Reckon it's time,' says Verl Brinks. He the only one I know by name. Twice the size of the others. Drink twice as much.

'Reckon it is. Reckoning time is overdue,' say one of the others and he laugh. They all laugh.

'Time he get a wagon-burner's due and that squaw of his, no offence now Johnson, be off your hands, free to take up with someone else, not some red-skinned Crow and his crazy witchcraft,' says Verl. 'Reckon on tomorrow being the time. Under the moon. I ain't for hiding away none, not from river rats.'

Silas ain't Crow. He might look it but he ain't. His daddy from Italy just like mine from Wales. Mama say it the Welsh in his blood that make him a fine singer. I go to the store and buy what I need. When he get home I'm waiting. 'Good evening, Silas,' I say and I take his bloody apron for steeping and even though the nights are cool he bathe in the river while I fry the fish for supper. After supper we take a blanket and sit on the deck board under the moon. Hear the fish jump.

They come by land, on horses, fiery torches lighting trees and boats.

Verl shout from the bank, 'Hey Crow, time's up, gonna burn this place down and you in it if you don't hand over that book. Silas push the blanket from his shoulder and go to stand up.

I put my hand out and catch his arm. 'Wait,' I whisper. I go inside. I fetch the Book and the gun and go back out. I face Verl and the men down from their horses. I hold up the Book. 'This what you come looking for?' I call out. I pull back my arm and throw. It heavy as a mountain rock. Silas cry out. I pray it won't come back up. I hold the gun in the air. I fire a shot.

They gone. Silas sat at the table head in his hands. I put the Book down in front of him. He look up at me. He look down at the Book then he smile.

'Read me,' I say, 'about the darkness.'

He open the Book, *Sunday April 14<sup>th</sup> 1935 - There was no light left in the world that day. The chickens started roosting at noon. It came like a black mountain, a hurricane wind, a wall of dust, filling our eyes and mouths, needling our skin, covering everything. We could not grope our way through and when it passed and was still, I saw she had the child in her arms. They were buried in dust and my heart too. I turned west then with the homeless and the hungry and I found...*

'I know that word,' I say. 'A. L. I. C. E. That word, it Alice.'

Avril Joy was born in Somerset, the setting for her first novel, *The Sweet Track*, published in 2007 by Flambard Press. Her short fiction has appeared in literary magazines and anthologies, including Victoria Hislop's *The Story: Love, Loss & the Lives of Women: 100 Great Short Stories*. She has been shortlisted for a number of prizes including the Bristol Prize, and the Bridport. In 2012 she won the inaugural Costa Short Story Award. Her latest collection of stories, *Millie and Bird, Tales of Paradise* will be published in 2015 by Iron Press. She blogs regularly about writing and life at [www.avriljoy.com](http://www.avriljoy.com) and lives with her partner in County Durham.

## Our Disorder

### Martin MacInnes

It started when he was three. We thought it was hilarious, then endearing. He brought soft things to our bedroom during the night – newspapers, packaging – then dropped them at the sides and end of the bed and left quietly, so we'd only find them in the morning. When we moved them too high to reach he brought cushions from our living room and one time even his own duvet.

We'd imagined he wasn't awake as he did this, that he was sleepwalking, but he wasn't a great talker anyway so it was hard to tell. We'd tell him everything's OK and he should go back to his room, his bed, and sleep, and then he did.

We locked the door.

He put soft things around us as we sat at the table or watched television or worked in the study. He never said why he did this. The psychologist said it was a passing state, and he was right. Our son started collecting tiny pieces of dirt and hair from the carpets and laying everything on a pile by his bed each evening. When we asked why, he said so there will be another of me in the morning. My wife asked him what he meant – we had laughed uncertainly – and he said pieces are falling off every day and more will be needed to keep me going.

The psychologist told us this all started because he cut his knee one day. We were really grateful to find the source of his behaviour and the means of correcting it. We reassured our son that it was normal to get an injury every now and then, that the body knows how to repair itself. I am just helping it, he said, especially at night because then I'm not there and I'll need to be made again. We found other things. He left checking devices. Sets of numbers written down according to an obscure code. Only he would know how to decode them. So when he woke and understood them it was proof that he was himself, the real person, our son, and not a stand-in, not a counterfeit who had been produced falsely overnight, supplanting him. That's what he said. He was seven-years old. He made a nest out of stories in the garden so that wounded things could shelter there.

Obviously there was something troubling him, but it was easy to forget it. It's not like he did these things all the time. He did well at school and he made some friends and he didn't complain too much. He just did and said these weird things sometimes. It could be awkward when we had strangers over, professionals, tradespeople. A plumber was fixing a block in the sink. Our son watched him, and the plumber was used to it, part of the job, minding these young apprentices. He said please don't destroy our house.

I'm fixing it! the plumber said, a good sport.

The walls are thin and you could break the house with that hammer, it would be easy, please don't. He began walking with his eyes closed. It was to stop him running out from there. He thought he could spill himself through the eyes. He said he fortified against this by keeping them closed.

I was beginning to dislike him. I might have thought hate. Why did he have to go around determined to invent eccentric trouble? He said he sees the colour of the fortifications and he sees the other way too, from the back of the eye inwards through the centre of the head. When his eyes were open he carried parts of the world into him through his bloodstream including insects, air, and trauma.

I don't know what we have done wrong. I don't know what he did to get this.

He learned to walk on his hands, his feet extended in the air, and he went this way in the house and in the garden, said it was because he wanted to go backwards, back to the place he had come from. It's so funny when I eat like this, he said.

He didn't like that he was growing. Naturally, his solution was to reverse the direction of his life. At midday Wednesday he started walking backwards and undoing the things he'd done previously, leading himself to bed, sleeping for eight hours and then having the previous night's dinner, etc. He was talking again at this point, though only in the small statements he had learned to express backwards. He must have been planning this one a while. He weighed and measured himself daily, pleased that he appeared to be getting smaller, though this was likely from the disrupted diet caused by the new regime. At this stage, of course, he was being home-schooled. Now I wasn't prepared to learn words backwards for him, but I couldn't help going along with him just a little – you should have seen how happy it made him – so for a while at least I would reverse history, teaching him war through the establishing of a babbling peace-treaty that split into rubble, self-assembling buildings, bombs exploding, shrinking, curling up into containers, aeroplanes and the arms of men. Finally there were factories and the ground. He liked detail. He would always stop me if I didn't go into the details of things so I began giving them unprompted.

When we get back to the start, Dad, he said, we can begin again.

As he wished we changed the seasons, dressing according to previous weather and sticking plastic leaves onto the trees in the garden. Night was day so we had our meals then and got used to the weird television playing and we would walk the empty street, my son and I, with no-one else around, no lights, and we didn't say anything.

He asked me why I wasn't going backwards too. He tried to correct me, saying I was copying him and getting smaller but that that was wrong, I should be reaching the fullness I used to be. He said it was my hair and the way I walked. I wasn't full and tall like I used to be. I walked slowly and I was a clumsy reverse-expresser. I taught him metal- and woodwork and we looked at putting things together and at how they come apart. What is this house made of, he said? How long did it take to build it? We went on excursions, field-trips to timber-yards and forests, quarries and the sea; it had been decided that we should visit all the places our house was made of. He felt guilty about all this stuff having just been taken, for our own use. Consider it a short-term loan, I said.

He was OK with that. We filled our bags with the outdoors. Gathered rubble and broken branches. He said they would be used as fittings to restore the house to how it was before. We were our only friends. We didn't claim to understand each other, but that was OK. I should have taken him back to the psychologist earlier, I know that. Especially when it happened, I should have done it right then. The loss was bound to have exacerbated his condition. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I just didn't want to lose my son too. And he was not unhappy. He wasn't emotional. So long as you went along with his solutions, moving around objects to comply with how he wanted things to be, everything was OK.

He was very persuasive. I hadn't worked in some time; looking after him was a full-time job. He was enthralled by the beach because sand, shells and limestone made concrete. We swam together. He was happy because this was before buildings. The stuff made our bones and blood. We had reached a much earlier time. He carried me away. We never spoke about the reason for all this, for our attempts at restoration. We just acted. It was enough to see him smile.

It wasn't like we only lived extremely. Much of what we did, by this stage, was mediated by his obsessions but then we also ate together regularly, we sometimes watched TV, we slept for average amounts of time.

He sometimes slipped, said do you think it's working? and I didn't have the heart to answer.

I think every time he woke up he wondered, for a moment, if we had been successful, if our plan had worked, but then he would see the date on the newspaper laid on the kitchen table and we would eat cereal together and he would walk away.

One of our days at the beach I thought I'd lost him. I'd nodded off and my reflex was to scan the water to see how far he'd gone. This time there was nothing, he'd pushed past the horizon, I went running in and just as I kicked through the water I heard him yell, Dad, what are you doing? from behind me. He had this barely suppressed smile, like he was proud of something he'd done and was just dying to tell me, but knew he couldn't.

The latest fad was salt, which was an interesting thing, apparently, because it both preserves and corrodes. It keeps meat and it takes in the land. When things were going well, and we were having a good time, he would coat the scene in salt, to keep it. People who live by the sea, he said, are better storytellers, they remember everything that happens because they're dusted by salt. Things decayed slowly on the beach. I'd been drinking and I almost said out loud, how it was obvious now, we should have kept her here, laid her body out on the sand, just beyond the water's reach.

We were there at the table covered in salt, as if fresh out the sea. When I'm feeling good, he said, or when I'm feeling bad, when I'm feeling just anything, this is what it is, isn't it, Dad?

I wasn't sure I understood him.

Well no, I said. Table salt never felt good or bad, did it?

It was the stuff with a voltage that lit us when we woke. It was an acid inside us sourced from the sea.

The really small things that you can hardly see, barely there against air or water, wisps of a nervous system and a heart and gone in a day or two – if they have any feeling of duration then they live long as we do, they beat more quickly and if they see someone falling on the beach it would be a very gradual thing, a long process, and there would be no obvious point at which one becomes zero. I replaced his clothes when I deemed it necessary and I never let him know, I bought the same style and colour and I always cut the labels. Fortnightly I cut his hair in the dark while he feigned sleep. I clipped his nails every three days. He might've thought he never grew and we both dreaded maturity. I couldn't stand the thought of him orating like a giant through an artificial bass, tearing off his lower face each morning, marching out like a little imperialist. How had I let it get like this?

Did he really think that things would've been different if he'd wrapped and cushioned the house more thoroughly, those years ago? If we arrived there now I bet he'd flood the building so the three of us would be weightless and couldn't fall, the three of us, in the water, could grow and grow and grow with nothing to impede us. His lunacy was full of good intentions. Our bones would get as big as walls, we'd outgrow the house, together, soon we'd be the size of whales, then islands, continents, and then we'd be the world.



Martin MacInnes is from Inverness and lives in Edinburgh. He received degrees in English from the University of Stirling and the University of York, winning the Edward and Thomas Lunt prize for his thesis on Virginia Woolf, before working and travelling in West Africa. He has read at the Edinburgh Literature Festival and been published in *Edinburgh Review*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Gutter*, *Litro*, *Causeway Magazine*, *Dactyl* and *Northwords Now*. Earlier in 2014 he won a New Writers Award from the Scottish Book Trust, and read at the Lake of Stars festival in Malawi. He is interested in natural history and modernism, and is close to completing his first novel and a collection of stories.

## Henderson Robert Mason

The boy turns up again this morning. Obviously he wants me to play, to join in. I sit in the doorway and watch him as he performs clumsy manoeuvres, trying to show off and tripping over his own feet: he's no Tom Finney. When I show no interest he starts kicking the ball against the shed and haring after it when the uneven planks send it spinning in some unexpected direction. It never gets far; there's enough dew on the grass to slow the fat, leather thing. The noise is irksome, to the extent that it registers above the cacophony in my head, but he drifts off after what seems like a short time.

Wondering if she sent him, I watch him back into the house and think of slow-motion skeletons, grinning despite it all, gamely kicking around a bundle of tied-up rags when the more decent guards were on duty. I cry a little and go back to sleep, letting jungle noises enfold me and relishing the dull damp in my bones while Henderson looks on mutely.

The mobile library visits today. I feel nervous because it's the only time I meet anyone apart from her and the boy. The elderly driver, who has thick, horn-rimmed spectacles and a half-halo of pure white hair around the back of his head, knows my requirements: non-fiction only, biographies, memoirs, travel, religion (except Christianity) and philosophy (not too rarefied). He seems to enjoy the challenge of pleasing me, and doesn't converse beyond what's necessary. But he's too plump; I get no sense of bones under his perfect, pink skin. *Everyone* looks too plump. When I first got back such abundance of flesh confused me; it actually made me hungry, and that was such an awful feeling that I could barely force down any proper food. The phase passed, but I still half-expect some of these bulbous people, with their strange lack of angles, to burst like over-stuffed sausages, meat spilling everywhere.

As I listened from the front garden, trying to identify the approaching rumble of the library's engine above the clamour I can't switch off, some gypsy women swaggered along the road. They were brown and fierce, selling clothes pegs or lavender or lucky heather, I don't know which. I had to hide; they were too alien, too different.

Now I lie beneath the bench eyeing a spider's web billowing and drooping in the breeze. Its creator waits in the angle of the bench's underside, canny enough to know that movement doesn't necessarily signify a new addition to its fragile larder. The morning's exertions – mental and physical – have exhausted me but new books sit next to the pile of *National Geographic* magazines that form my staple reading diet. She brings them, as well as the food; she brought newspapers at the beginning but I couldn't face them. Scudding clouds send a flickering light through the shed; as shadows pass across the yellow spines of the magazines they seem to switch on and off, on and off. The light traverses Henderson, too, watching from the shed's far corner. I never look directly at him but this *now you see me, now you don't* routine makes me uneasy and I turn away.

The camp bed is still too comfortable. I'll have to put more twigs – perhaps some gravel – under the sheet. I don't really want a sheet, but she insists. She means well and I am grateful, though I can't actually *feel* grateful. I close my eyes; real and remembered trees whisper. I hope the gypsies don't come back; the dirt in the creases of their leathery skin frightens me, though there must be as much in mine.

To begin with I tried sleeping in the house, but the walls magnified the racket in my brain and the mattress' softness was unbearable. My usual nightmares were joined by dreams, of being engulfed in shifting, stifling mountains of rice (I think) that filled my mouth, nose and ears. There was a new, terrible rushing noise and I thought my head would explode. I moved to the floor but floorboards were too solid. I didn't trust their reliability; I needed less.

There are tools in here, along with planks, drying chunks of firewood, bean sticks, bamboo canes and so on. Once I had a use for such things but when I moved in here – out here – I shunted their pointlessness to one end, farthest from the door; I needed room for books and the folding chair on which I sit to read and to eat my daily meal. The pile is precarious but since the camp bed is tucked under the workbench I'll be safe if it topples while I sleep. She made me position it there; I didn't care.

Loud clattering shocked me awake, last night; something rolled erratically across the floor —

*GRENADE!*

I crackled with dread and stilled my body: death was here. But there was no further sound and slowly I recalled my current state. As day dawned I turned my head (neck stiff and painful, but intact at least) to see a wood-chisel lying parallel to my chair's metal frame. It must have been dislodged from the pile of tools, by some foraging mouse or rat; both share my lodgings. I recognised it. There was rust on the blade (which looked to be ½ an inch) and while I knew this must happen after years of disuse it annoyed me. The irritation felt positive, and that was so confusing I fell immediately asleep. I was wakened by ball-on-shed thumping, though it took a while to separate it from the howling, whistling and hooting that invades slumber as much as wakefulness. The chisel was only just within reach but I managed to secure it and lay listening to the ball, turning the chisel in my hand and relishing its smooth familiarity.

It still fits.

The boy has gone, to school I suppose. Henderson is nearby. I can't bring myself to check the state of him but he appears to be whole and his presence seems neutral-veering-towards-benevolent: it isn't always. The rust on the chisel is worse than I thought, with soft brown blossoms floating around deeper pits like blackheads. There's little to be done about those blackheads, but the newer oxidisation can be dealt with. I marvel at having remembered *oxidisation*. It's as if the word has been waiting, since before.

Those gypsies must have blackheads; so must I. I don't look at myself. She cuts my hair sometimes – insists on it, though I sit with eyes shut and fists clenched at the proximity of steel – but my beard is unkempt and my teeth feel wrong.

The oilcan won't be found. By the time it reveals itself the shed is in chaos, the tower of wood and tools strewn around the floor, along with my books. The can has kept its waxy sheen, built up over years of use, under a newer carapace of webs, dust and moth parts. I scrape off lines of the muck, enjoying its feel under my thumbnail, and then mull over *carapace* – another acquaintance from the past – while rummaging with surprising spryness through the bench's massive drawers. The flat, grey

oilstone finds me; its angles almost sharp enough to cut and its ashy, unforgiving texture asphyxiating. Everything spins and I have to clear a path to the camp bed before I collapse. Henderson has gone, some time ago I think.

I deposit a small pool of oil on the stone, initially enjoying the spread of my thumb-pad on the lever but then shuddering at its plumpness, localised though it is. I concentrate and place the back of the chisel blade flat on the lubricant, but my heart begins to hammer in my chest and I sweat and have to lie down again. This happens twice more. At the fourth attempt I manage the task, pressing the blade down, hard, and working it back and forth, back and forth: when I wipe the film of oil from the blade-back the rust-blossoms have all but disappeared. I'm exhausted but I must carry on. Turn the chisel over. Angle the cutting edge at 30 degrees to the surface of the stone. *Move the body, not the blade* ... I lose myself in the figure-of-eight motion and the noise that used to make me think of ice-skating though I've never even seen it. I only stop when tears start to skitter across the surface of the oil. The blade is so sharp it scares me; I conjure a slender curve of blood from my thumb and know (without looking) that Henderson is back. I'm hungry, but the sun tells me it's only midday.

I remember she brought rissoles for tea, last night – I enjoyed them – but I don't recall much about the afternoon. So this morning I'm surprised that the workbench bears a new topography of gouged lines and curves. Shavings litter the floor in drifts, my arms ache though not as badly as after a beating, and I have small cuts on several fingers. I hear Henderson snigger as I inspect them, but can't see him. The chisel-cuts on the bench shine nearly white against its sombre patina, like scrimshaw in negative (I'd forgotten *scrimshaw*, too). They intersect darker marks from before and I have to admit they look optimistic. I try to interpret them and another mislaid word – *palimpsest* – pops into my head, but then the football begins to thud against the wall and I lose concentration, though not before registering that the cacophony in my head seems less intrusive.

It's still morning, I think. I find myself studying the chisel marks again; I might have been leaning on the bench for a while because my legs and shoulders are stiff. I can make out patterns, formal-looking arrangements, but it takes time to recognise them as letters: this is surprising given the amount I read. It takes longer still to realise that the jumbled letterforms, some complete and some barely begun, are confined to those that spell the name of that awful place: when the familiar consonants and vowels make sense the tears come again and I retreat beneath the bench and dream of Henderson.

The first sword blow is too low, as it was; the second is too high and slices off his scalp as if it were the top of a boiled egg, as it did. But the third, which in reality sent his poor, spoiled head spinning into the bloody dust, is even lower than the first, and the fourth, ditto. Bright glimpses of backbone and sinew sparkle. The fifth blow cleaves vertically into his skull and the sixth lops off an arm, and then the blows merge into a frantic sequence of swipes and hacks that speed up until Henderson becomes a jitterbugging marionette dancing himself to pieces in a welter of blood-spray and bone-chip and I wake, cracking my head on the overhang of the bench. The boy is looking in the dusty window; I've been screaming but he's used to it, and he waits until I meet his eye. When I haul myself to the shed door he's busily inventing new ways to trip over his football and feet; though I'm trembling and slick with the sweat of my dreams his earnestness prompts a smile. The grass is dry; another day has passed. I look back at the welter of carved calligraphy on the bench-top and – as if I've always known – I know what I have to do.

It's colder; the sun's route is much lower in the sky and the tower of tools and wood that was inside is outside, and depleted. Gusts whisk the grey remnants of my failures from the brazier, six of them not counting the earliest, single-letter rehearsals. The third effort looked promising until the wood split clean in two with a lovely, no-nonsense report, and the last-but-one was almost complete when a hideous serif scupperped me. (Henderson was silently furious; he knew that my jungle clamour was unusually intense that day, and that I knew I shouldn't have touched the chisel.) But the fires have been pleasant and now the finished version waits on the bench, its four consonants and two vowels carved to an equal depth; regularly spaced; neatly painted and flawlessly varnished. It should last for years with maintenance, and the brass mirror-plates will polish up well. I think she'll be pleased – I haven't talked with her about it and have let neither her nor the boy see my works-in-progress – but, most importantly, I think its placement on the front of the house somehow might allow me to re-enter their world, might be an acknowledgement that though the past will never be forgotten it can be assimilated into a less awful future.

She cut my hair last night, with her usual tenderness, and I asked if she would attend at the shed this evening, once the boy is in bed. I'm very nervous.

She looks lovely, in a full-skirted red frock awash with Paisley.

—What is it?

—It's a name. The name.

—Well, yes. It's the name of that dreadful place, the place that did ... all of this to you. To the other men.

—I know.

—Why have you made it?

—I think I had to. It felt like that. But it's helped, I don't feel so ... And, once it's up ...

—It's beautiful. So good that you've done this, it's definite progress.

—Thank you.

—Such detail! It's excellent, really excellent.

—It's the same font – that is, alphabet – as the *National Geographic's* title.

—How nice.

She pauses, pensive, cocking her head.

—But won't it look odd?

—What do you mean?

—On a shed. Nobody names a shed.

A decent pause has preceded each fragment of the previous exchange (which is our longest conversation since I came back) but this hiatus stretches absurdly.

—It's not for the shed.

—But, wherever else?

Her eyebrows perform a charming little dance. I try to smile reassuringly but our glances collide, veer apart, grapple briefly and then diverge again, like chemicals uncertain of the appropriate reaction. My face tells all, she twigs.

—No. Never. Under no circumstances.

Her face has become colourless and she breathes in shallow, speedy gasps.

—But ...

—I will not stay in a house bearing that hideous name. No son of mine – of ours – will, either. What would it do to him? You must be quite mad, madder than even I feared.

She spins on her heel and storms back to the house, scarlet skirts foaming around her legs.

The chorus in my skull – birds, monkeys, cats, and canines, all God's creatures it seems – takes its cue and begins to build towards a great crescendo, louder than anything before.

—She'll come round, Henderson says, above the din, as I crawl under the bench.

**Robert Mason started writing fiction six years ago, having created cover art for many other authors' work during a successful illustration career. In 2010, he took part in Writers' Centre Norwich's Escalator Literature scheme (mentored by Courttia Newland) and has since been short- and long-listed for the Fish Short Story and Short Memoir prizes, and the**

Longworth Editors' Prize. In 2013, Caserom Press published a longer memoir, *Other People's Dogs*, with illustrations by Manchester legend Ian Pollock. In order to focus on writing he recently left his fractional teaching post at Norwich University of the Arts, where he had previously run the BA Illustration course.

## An Ape in a Backwater

### Davey Moore

It is the kind of town at which strangers arrive in a road trip movie. A little pocket of civilisation surrounded by mountains and, in their lower slopes, forests full of wild animals. From between the black trunks of the trees, a female ape watches people come and go. Specifically, she watches a man who drives a dusty pick up truck. He wears jeans and a flannel shirt. He kicks up the dirt in his old boots. He doesn't say too much. What distinguishes this man from all the others in the town? Nothing at all. A gingerbread cut-out could convey more personality. It is as if images of all other men have been laid one on top of the other, and you can see through them, so all you can make out is the most basic outline of a man.

The female ape watches the man's wife walk across the town some days. She has a bunch of floral dresses – all cut to the same flattering length, sitting on the collarbone and skimming just below the knee. Her arms and legs are smooth and flawless streams of honey. Other days, she appears in the yard with a handkerchief covering her dark brown hair – which is always beautifully curled and fixed in place – and a housecoat over her dress. On these occasions, she shakes out rugs and hangs out flannel shirts. Her spare floral dresses billow empty and free, shoulders pegged out taut and straight. The female ape admires the way the woman always keeps her council. Never showing her teeth or rolling her eyes. Never sneezing or sighing or getting out of breath. She merely nods to the other townsfolk, respectful but distant. The men's admiring looks simply glance off her. Other women's words fail to reach her ears, elegantly decorated with plain gold studs. She is so content with her life that nothing seems to touch her. The female ape looks at her male ape lover. She sees a bully who complains when he is hungry, makes noises when he eats and farts when he is full. Even in sleep his loose lips and flared nostrils make wet, snorting sounds. And the female ape looks at herself and sees a hairy body that, at a glance, is not dissimilar from her male partner's. And this sickens her to her very heart.

One day, the wife leaves her house, closing the screen door behind her and clicking across the wooden veranda in her modest heels. A glossy handbag with sharp corners swings from the crook of her arm. In one hand she holds her keys. An empty shopping bag swings loosely from the tips of the fingers of her other hand. The woman's eyes are dark brown, ringed with black and cast down. Her lips are unseasonably wild-berry red.

The female ape has spent many hours watching the house and she knows the rhythm and routines of its residents. She steps up to the veranda like a regular viewer strolling onto the set of her favourite soap. Now she can feel as well as see it. The wood is warm and smooth under the soles of her shoeless feet and her passage silent as she steps up to the woman. She approaches from behind so as to minimise the shock as she covers the woman's nose and mouth with her tough, thick fingers. The female ape snaps the neck of the woman as if breaking twigs with which to line her nest. She stuffs the body under the open foundations at the back of the house, the sooner to take the woman's place in the bathtub and the kitchen. She fills the house with steam – plucking and shaving and half cooking both herself and a chicken for the evening meal.

She puts little dots of red varnish on the tips of her sausagey fingers – spreading them across the dresser to dry. She burns and scratches the soft skin of her scalp while wrapping the thin hair on her head around hot metal cones before holding it place with sharp metal clips. She slips into a simple dress, speckled with little red flowers – more clothes than she has ever worn in her life before. She doesn't have to do much with her eyes. They are already dark brown, ringed with black and cast



down. The house soon smells of freshly pressed linen, lavender water, hot hair, boiled chicken and recently ground coffee. Just in time for the man's arrival home.

The screen door slams. The man sits down heavily at the table and doesn't look up. He is so accustomed to being waited upon, that he doesn't notice the female ape, even with her lips an unseasonably wild-berry red. He eats his dinner in silence. He drinks his coffee and slams down the cup. He complains that the coffee was cold, even though it was not. He tells the female ape that she looks like a piece of shit, even though she has polished herself up pretty good. He complains that he is tired and wants to be left alone. That night, the female ape slips between tight, smooth sheets to lie beside the silently sleeping man. And, even though the air is quite warm, her shaved body shivers against her cotton slip.

In the morning, the man leaves without saying a word. The female ape is scratchy with stubble that snags her nightdress and makes her itch like crazy in unmentionable places. The only way to ease the irritation is to scald herself with boiling water and scrape away at her skin all over again. She then soothes herself with the white balms from the jars on the woman's dressing table. These ointments are laced with a fragrance so strong and alien to the female ape that they sting the inside of her nose as much as they salve her skin. Is this what the woman had to do every day? She made it look so effortless.

Her fingertips barely register one of the woman's dainty earrings – she's never touched anything gold before and she can barely get a hold of it now. She struggles to get any purchase on the stud as she tries to push the post through the soft flesh of her ear. But this is the one thing she cannot make herself do. She hopes the man won't notice her unadorned ears. She needn't have worried. That evening, when the man returns, he is too drunk to make words with his mouth so he uses his hands instead. He slaps the female ape. Hard. Everywhere except the face and arms. She's a big strong ape of course, so these blows don't really hurt. Not as much as the shaving and plucking and the metal traps for the downy hair on her head. She vows to try harder.

The following day, the female ape discovers that the man has regained the power of speech – just enough to remind her that she looks like a piece of shit and the house is a dump. That day, the female ape takes extra care to make sure everything is as she has learnt it should be. Covering her head, she remembers the way the woman used to beat the rugs and peg out the washing and fold up the flannels. She even pushes the earrings through her lobes, stuffing the blood-soaked towels under the open foundations along with the other unmentionables.

That evening, the man returns once again to a stringently cleaned and eye-wateringly fragrant house and a steaming hot dinner. He sits down heavily at the table and glares at the female ape. He is so accustomed to looking at his wife without seeing her, that he doesn't notice that her hands are now bigger than his and could easily push his eyeballs right through to the back of his head. He doesn't see that her arms are longer than his and could easily make his ribcage appear in daylight for the first time.

This time, the man complains that his coffee is weak – even though it is not. And he throws it over the female ape. Although her skin is becoming used to the steam and scrape of her everyday battle against her natural appearance, the scalding hot coffee hurts. She's a big strong ape, of course, so it's not a great, debilitating pain. It's a little wasp-sting sort of pain that wakes her up inside. It makes her want to slap her own skin and yowl and then crush something between her fingers.

She stands up to her full height, towering over the man – and she looks up. She lets out a scream that comes from the bottom of her lungs and the top of her skull cavity and everywhere inbetween.

The man seems a little stunned – giving her a good, still target to hit. She picks up the cup as though it is a rock and hurls it with all her strength into the man’s face. It hits him with such force that the heavy coffee mug smashes clean in two.

She doesn’t think the man is dead, but the female ape doesn’t wait to find out. There has been enough killing. She runs back to the forest, ripping out the earrings, tearing off her dress and letting the wild-berry brambles scratch her in unmentionable places.

**Davey Moore writes scripts for children’s television and, after getting breaks from Anne Wood (creator of *Teletubbies*) and the team behind *Balamory*, has written for series including *Octonauts*, *Thomas & Friends*, *Pet Squad*, *Dennis & Gnasher*, *The Furchester Hotel*, *Topsy & Tim* and *Boyster*. In 2011, he was short-listed for a Writers’ Guild of Great Britain Award for his work on *Rastamouse* and has been writing for *Puffin Rock* – a new series narrated by Chris O’Dowd. He works from home, in sunny Sale, and loves cartoons, cupcakes, nerdy films, wordy sitcoms and going to see rackety bands in Manchester’s amazing array of live music venues.**

## Roar

### Adrian Wakeling

The winter before you died the Levels flooded. There was simply nowhere for the water to go. Much of the land is at or below sea level. The upper ground where the rain first falls has become deforested and the land eroded by sheep. Downstream the rivers are clogged with silt. So the tide rushed over the rim of the riverbanks. Fields disappeared, then drives, garages, back-kitchens, hallways.

For months, every time it rained we woke in the night listening to it pounding on the roof and lashing against the windows. We would peer, Clare and I, into the back garden for signs of the rising water. We spent hundreds of pounds on pumps and lay-flat hose and water-resistant electrical extensions. We became regulars at the specialist plumbing stores, trying to stop the water here, hold it at bay there.

Sand bags became rare. Those that had them hoarded them, those that didn't made their own. We stacked them three deep and half a dozen high.

I am telling you about this now because at the time of the great flood you had started to pass into your own darkness.

It is the first Sunday in February, the year after your passing. The month of your birth. I drive down to the coast without a plan in my mind and, once upon the sand, I am none the wiser.

Can I tell you something? I didn't like your taste in cars. I did like your sideburns, your sixties suits and narrow ties. I didn't like your secrecy and the way you ate alone even when you were with us. I did like your voice, which was perfect for telling stories.

You still talk to me. Your voice box is the one part of you that appears not to have been buried underground. You ask me questions. You ask me about sports day as a child, and about climbing Helvellyn. You ask me about DH Lawrence and Patrick White and about Lincoln City FC. You ask me about mother and my siblings, and about the shadows on the beach that dart here and there. But one question lingers longer than the others. It persists, an old scar that will not stop itching: *is there anything you would like to ask me about what happened?*

When we took a picnic in the hospital garden, a psychiatric patient walked directly up to where we sat on the ground and reached his hand into our basket of food. He took a jammy dodger, but worse, his big fingers left several more biscuits broken and contaminated.

You were a runner (not a jogger!) and I take a little trot by the water's edge, arching away from the sea to avoid the white foam as it rushes towards me.

We ran to Torksey, my brothers and I, and to Thorpe-le-Fallows and Sturton. We ran and we ran. Away from school and expectations of what should become of teenage boys. We ran to forget. And later to remember. Small strides, long strides. Breathing fast. But even. Timing ourselves by the little clock on the electric cooker, adding on seconds to make up for the time it took to get to the front door and scan the lane for onlookers.

I liked but didn't like that jumper with horizontal hoops in different shades of purple – the one you wore the morning after the incident.

You and mother were always getting lost. That's what you did with the second half of the twentieth century. You got lost at roundabouts. You got lost in technology. You got lost in each other.

You raised a family of boys and girls. One dog. A rabbit. A hamster. Fish? A cat – adopted and then inadvertently killed by rat poison kept in the dilapidated greenhouse.

Travelling home, my arm forms a triangle with the lowered window, sleeves rolled up as high as they will go. In a few hours I will stand in front of the unlit fire, hands behind my back, a little awkward, the job in London not quite working out, not worth the stamp for a letter or ten pence in the phone box, not worth much beyond the sense of independence. Walking up the high street. Passing through. A little vague on my time of arrival (and departure).

You were good, full of games and make-believe. You were bad, too self-absorbed and prone to depressive episodes. They leaked out of you like rain water from your shoes.

Every year the same roses in my front garden flourish in late May only to wither by mid-June, the rose buds stunted, trapped inside their green casings, never to open and greet the sun. I am careful to smell the first rose, and the second, and the third.

It begins with the memory of a record turning on a turntable, the stylus caught and scratching, shick, shuck, like a fledgling sparrow calling from the hedge. And beyond the record player and the rug and the chairs and all the other paraphernalia, you lie slumped on the floor.

On your feet, old fellow. Come on, up you get. Grab the door handle for balance. Fling it open. Clap your hands together. Stamp your feet.

We moved from hospital to hospital, from house to house, from town to town. The house came with the job. The garden with the house. The apples with the trees.

In the living room, the curtains are shut. On the TV, people with hats on big heads move slowly and then very quickly with small heads and bodies. They talk to each other in cars and on aeroplanes.

Your father was a nice man, everyone said so, so it must be true. Your mother was simple but complex, with hidden layers. If grandmother was an onion that lingers on your clothes for days, grandfather was a lovely Cox's Pippin.

I do not want to wear glasses. You won't have to wear glasses. Mother reassures me. She wipes a pretend tear from her eye.

I am a child of the countryside, of the flat plains, the yellow rape seed, the Roman roads.

I am part of a gang, lost in the hair, eyes, and fingertips that are mine but not quite mine.

I am also part of you, or you are part of me, though we were, I think, not greatly alike. I indulge in a waking dream (the best kind). You are lost at sea, lying in your coffin (with no lid), buffeted by large grey waves, seeking sanctuary in some distant land where the pebbles sparkle on the beach and mothers rock their children to sleep.

In my (limited) experience, you cling to the good in a person once they die. But after a year or so the 'not so good' starts to creep back, like a child that has been out of sight and out of mind for too long.

Returning to the car I fetch a bottle of whisky from the glove compartment. It's been there for months, bedding in to my consciousness, taking root, waiting for the right moment to be harvested. I drink quickly, not caring for the taste, just wanting the effect. Very soon I am forced to allow my head to be at one with the sand and to stretch out my feet. I rest my hands on my chest, as if I have been laid out for my own funeral. As if I am about to face eternity.

I remember how it made me feel, watching you pass into the unknown – your memories eroding, your sense of self reduced to a shell. You knew it was going to be a difficult journey. Not as bad as some have to endure, perhaps, but tough enough for most soldiers. You slipped across the border carrying nothing but a blue plastic bag full of your pills.

Every breath is a word. Yours and mine. In the near distance the tide laps against the bottom of the drive. In the house, a door opens and shuts. And always the constant drone of the TV.

We awake together, you and I, on the same rug, the record turning impatiently.

Mother is taking her confession: the sound of her weeping floods the church. The wooden bench that you made is just visible through the end window. The sun. A bee. White butterflies. A smell of apple crumble in the air. And wood smoke.

Who wants to go there? Isn't that where death waits, hoping you will stumble, hoping you will become enchanted by the sounds?

Cars turn into dust storms, into bears, into waves. Reminders of journeys taken, journeys to come. Here, here, here, here ...

Footsteps outside, making their way round the house. A tramp? I used to lie awake at night and picture a tramp settling down in our shed.

Food kept for too long in a plastic container, muffled and warm. School trips. Stonehenge: cheese and butter inside white fluffy bread rolls.

We awaken to the same sense of despair, curled inside the hollowed out carcass of a whale left to rot on the shore. I write to you on the sand, starting at the pier end, deserted in the early Spring, my open letter stretching to the huge made-made barricade of rocks at the Western end. Stay close to me.

Our father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Sea horse. Masquerade. Clogged. Oily. Fish and chips. Anoraks. Windswept tops of small English mountains. School shoes. Hawaiian shirts – Scarborough had never seen the like. The Partridge family. The New Seekers. What are they seeking and what happened to the old seekers. Too old, too arthritic?

The pulse gets heavier, the arteries increasingly clogged up. Black dogs. Farm machinery. Rusting. Cakes not eaten. Photographs of shadows. Keepy-uppies. Father in the attic writing poetry. Mother in the kitchen braising steak. Sister in the bedroom playing with rubber snakes. Brother in the living room tuning his guitar.

Here I am. Your son. It takes time. It's taken me time. To get here. Along the beach, the tide coming in and out, very unpredictable. And me in a high state of nerves, not knowing, not knowing what will happen with the night and my footing and how foolish I have been. All that's left is... what?

One final hurrah, one last gnashing of the teeth. On your death bed, you kept raising your arm, like a conductor conducting the ghosts of the past, directing them to stay with you right till the end.

Did you ever get that feeling? Gardening? Drinking? Making love?

Is there anything I would like to ask you about what happened? Yes. I want to ask you what causes a life to be lived so quickly? And what happens to the moments once they are diced and sliced and thrown into the soup pot?

What did it feel like to wake into that emptiness? It made you shout. It made you scream.

I get to my feet. I pick up the arm of the record player and drop the stylus back on the disk. It's Lead Belly. It was always Lead Belly. He's singing the blues. He's singing about Hitler:

*Hitler started out in nineteen hundred and thirty-two.  
When he started out he took the homes from the Jews.  
We're going to tear Hitler down.  
We're going to tear Hitler down some day.*

Amen to that.

**Adrian Wakeling lives in Somerset. He works for the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. His only claim to fame (until now!) was being asked to play double bass with the Communards in the early 1980s. Adrian was playing in the big band The Happy End at the time. On the night in question (a gig at the Brixton Art Gallery) he was wearing bright red track suit trousers. For several weeks The Big Apple was just waiting for him to take a bite. But it didn't happen. Adrian does not bear a grudge.**

# **2014 Manchester Poetry Prize Short-listed Poems**

## Mona Arshi

### ***Bulbul***

*Bulbul*, don't look so nervous.  
I know the light can be brutal  
but let me apply

angled lines of *Sindoor* on your  
throat, along your breast and  
dot your lifted brow.

I imagine capturing you under my  
anglepoise, *Bulbul*,  
coaxing your wings to flare and settle

on my palm, deepening the colour  
of my hands. I watch you  
through the gap  
in the window screen,

your compacted heart receives  
the broken bread  
whilst the rain nibbles

at the blossom,  
you gaze at a bud,  
listening hard for a miracle.

*Bulbul* (Urdu and Hindi): Nightingale

*Sindoor* (Hindi): red vermillion powder used as a mark on the forehead.



## The Gold Bangles

In my bedroom dresser, in a little red box  
sit two gold bangles.

They are pure yellow gold  
and the pair are a set, though I believe  
they once belonged to part of a bigger set  
some time ago.

They were given to my grandmother  
and passed down to my mother  
upon her marriage.

They are very simple, wide bands and  
wear and age have pitted the surface  
and begun to effect  
the integrity of their modest design.

I imagine that it was the kind of thing that could  
be melted down and refashioned into more ornate  
jewellery or sold by weight quite easily depending  
on the circumstances.

I believe many girls at the time in those Punjabi  
villages would have been presented with similar  
items by their parents before they departed on their  
long journeys.

My mother wore them on her journey to England.

When I hold them in my hands I like to think  
not of that long period when she owned them  
but the time before that ;  
her waiting for *Papaji* by the gate  
her wrists still unadorned and naked.

## Large and Imprecise Baby

I gave birth to a large and imprecise baby  
which I'll admit, was quite a shock given  
my fine distinct bones and on account  
of the fact that I didn't even go to term.  
One of the mothers in the playgroup gasped  
when she saw me unbuckling the buggy  
and heaving him into the sandpit.  
He never cries or emits any sound  
except when immersed in water.  
Sometimes I take him to the coast  
where he lies passively feeding  
from the bottom of the ocean.  
I asked that he be referred to a consultant.  
The baby watched and pushed raisins  
into his mouth whilst Dr Frankel measured  
my head with a cold metal instrument.  
*"It's not him it's you"* he says eyeing me  
suspiciously, stroking his beard.  
Outside, I smooth myself down,  
kneel to his level and decide to kiss my boy.  
As my face nears his, his feeble mouth  
makes a jittery noise like a broken gull,  
or the scrape of a heavy chair  
just as the thin rain starts to fall.

## **My Father Wants to be a Rooftop Railway Surfer**

A fly's crushed body has marked  
a point between Hyderabad and Delhi.  
He lives there in his dreams.  
Under a different light, before partition  
he was a boy in the *Haveli* courtyard  
tracing the looped script of an ancestor  
or memorizing each chink of his mothers  
braid of hair on a night they stooped to  
collect fireflies.

He shuffles to bed, complains  
about the whistling in his head,  
inspects his chapped hands.  
'This country with all its wind  
and its broken buds.'  
He's not going back.  
He wants to sit amongst the stars  
turn his head and see nothing but an  
unknown city glinting far behind him.

## **Mr Beeharry's Marriage Bureau**

Seated opposite me there is a small woman in a green sari. Her son is about five and she is hand feeding him morsels from a clear Tupperware box. The receptionist brings me tea and a clip board with the forms attached and she lends me her pen which is silver and heavy . I flick through waiting room magazines. My name is called and as I stand up, the small woman stops and stares at me. I remember thinking how very lovely her lashes are. I had already been told that I should be very respectful and call him Doctor. I shake the hand of the white haired man and give a little half bow and he acknowledges my show of politeness by nodding slowly then points to the chair. I sit down. He has kind eyes. The examination is brief; he asks me if I have any questions or concerns and I reply no- that everything had been explained to me just fine (and I don't want to be any trouble) and then he takes a piece of square paper from the pile on his desk, scribbles something down, opens a small cubby hole which was set in the wall and places the note inside it. Then he gestures to a sort of dressing area where there is a blue folding screen and says that I should change now as it would be easier for me later to get to the other side. When I reappear, I notice the room has been rearranged and there are two rows of chairs and sitting on the chairs are my parents, close family and friends. They are smiling at me encouragingly. I turn to them and give them a little wave. The doctor asks if I am ready now, and I say yes and lie down in my white nightie and offer him my arm.

**Mona Arshi was born to Punjabi Sikh parents and grew up in West London. She initially trained as a lawyer and worked for Liberty, the UK human rights organization, undertaking test case litigation under the Human Rights Act. She began writing poetry in 2008 and received a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia. Mona won the inaugural Magma poetry competition and was runner up in the Troubadour last year. Her work has appeared in magazines such as *Poetry Review*, *Rialto* and *Magma*. Her debut collection *Small Hands* will be published in Spring 2015 by Pavilion Poetry, part of the Liverpool University Press.**

## Guy Carter

*from* PREDATORY PARASONNETS

**Creed**  
**(After Rupertus)**

*This is my sonnet. There are many like it, but this one is mine*

a fourteen bore Petrarchan chiseled down to a weapon of choice

& armed by England. Feel the slick pump action. Note the double click.

*I must master it as I master my life: this kulturkampf must-*

*have. I will learn its parts: trochee quatrain & volta. We will be-*

*come part of each other, we will.*  
The times are target rich. *Until*

*there is no enemy, but peace*  
there is no enemy but peace.

## Mark V

You must acquire a landship's appetite for attrition, recap-

turing by increments abandoned blotted-out lines again &

again. You must cultivate the uncomely choreography

of inching it against incoming. Skirt entanglements. Become

blasé squandering drafts as if mounting an early offensive

of Haig's. Press on. The orders issuing from the Chateau are mis-

remembered, lost or countermanded. Your objective's no-man's-land.

## Pike

Think pike. Her faux paralysis  
must hide your hunt. Glide at a glac-

ier's growth rate. Tack a tooth-width.  
Displace a millilitre's worth

of lake at most. & Eye over  
aeons the succulent under-

bellies of the inattentive  
hoarding for now their flavours. Starve

like Tantalus. Sharpen your stare  
on the watery whetstone where

Fright & Ferocity's traject-  
ories savagely intersect.

Prolong this indolent pause  
like peace. Then (softly) part your jaws.

## Raptor

Colliers in tutus sang for  
her extinction. The handbagged fur-

nish her footnotes, those imperfect  
predators Grantham's raptor picked

off. Scargill is gone. The war of  
Semtex & excrement is ov-

er: those who inflicted the most  
failed. The *junta* gave up the ghost

coveting kelp. Alderman &  
Assisi gifted Mitterand

's hybrid her evolutionar-  
y edge. The East's invective ar-

moured her. She rose, God's radic-  
al chick, the one McGee couldn't kill.

## Therapod

Take it as read that you'll engage  
with Greene's 'Upstart Crow' at some stage

strutting his stuff & plot line pinch-  
ing, quite the Galapagos Finch

with his adaptations: part phrase-  
smith on the make - coining it as

Essex & Elizabeth slug  
it out in the streets or the plague

scuppers a run - part Peppered Moth  
darkened like the Dane to blend with

grime's backcloth. He's dialogue's din-  
osaur, scrapping with Kit & Ben

for the top spot. One down from God,  
he's theatreland's true therapod.

**Guy Carter was born in 1956. He earns his living as a caricaturist and silhouette artist. He recently won the Jeremy Mogford food and drink short story competition. Years ago he was a prize-winner and runner-up at several Telegraph Mini-Saga competitions. He is filming Shakespeare's sonnets for the internet.**



## Michael Derrick Hudson

### Down at the Circus of Self-Disgust

*Just what we need is another faceful of Climax the Clown,*  
complains the Half-Ton Skeleton Girl

throwing up half her sandwich. *That's not funny,* protests  
Climax, tucking in and buttonholing his way

out the flap. *Worms!* exclaims Lenny the Lion, gumming  
again the Ringmaster's watery stool...

*Oh, yeah? You're just one more tiny prick in a Universe*  
*of tiny pricks,* says the Human Pincushion

to Todd the Sword-Swallower, preparing to gag his way  
through another set. He's hopelessly in love

with the Armless Wonder who rolls her own with callused  
toes, inching her way into everyone's

heart. Mike the Magician tries to make her  
laugh: *Uh oh! What could this be?* he always says, elbow-

deep in his own stovepipe, as if she'd never seen *that* before.

## The Archaeologist

From the end of a methodical shovel came life-size Apollo  
fingerless, earless, noseless, and lacking even

a penis as if mauled by the jaws of a marble chimpanzee

enraged by beauty, mythology, poetry and the inexorable  
passage of time. *First or second century*

*BCE*, murmured the Archeologist, red-kneed  
in her baggy shorts. *Perhaps a decoration from the palace*

*of King Ariobarzanes...* She'd divvied up the site into grids  
of twine with tiny yellow marker flags snapping

furiously in the winds of Cappadocia. *The sun's probably  
not worshipped around these parts*

*by anyone anymore*, I thought to myself,  
not very helpfully. The sun didn't care, bleaching my bones

right through the flesh. *What can this mean?* I asked Apollo  
first or second century BCE, just as a horsefly

settled on his pitted brow, making him for a moment look

cross-eyed and just a little idiotic. *We'll sift six tons of soil  
before we're done here*, said the Archeologist,

tapping her trowel with a calloused index finger: *tic tic tic*.

## Feeling Sorry for Myself at the Museum's Blue Whale Heart Exhibit

So who needs a curated metaphor? Here lies 600 kilos  
of muscle gaffed from a beached ribcage

that must've looked like rafters in a bombed cathedral,  
so vast that even the beautiful girl-whale who got away  
couldn't sledgehammer this meat locker

apart, her songs quavering against his tympanic bones  
as big as my fist and *love, love, love* pumping through  
valves slamming like manhole covers,  
hormones by the gallon sloshing toward a penis bigger  
than all pornography. Surely this transcends zoology?  
Did a soul dwell here? I talk myself into  
a ghost of circus-tent proportions flapping and hooting  
over the pumpkin-sized pineal gland  
and a six-foot-thick slab of throbbing cerebral cortex...

O slovenly benthic church! O muscle-bound ziggurat!  
But what if the autopsy reveals only pitiful Jonah knee-  
deep in krill-fouled brine, accused  
of transgressions incomprehensible? Is he free will's  
final jot, hunkered far down a sticky  
vena cava? Maybe now he's gone amphibian, webbed  
and froggy green, deaf to God's  
constant hectoring. Or perhaps Jonah's dead, flensed  
to the bone by tremendous *thud-thuds*. Who can say?

We can't even stitch things back together: it's a fake,  
a full-scale fiberglass replica infested  
with parasitical children worming their way like flukes  
through the glossy chambers, mugging  
for the photographers and banging their busy little heads  
if only against the fact of its terrifying dimensions.

## Back in College, Two of My Girlfriends

had ex-boyfriends named Dave. Michelle's I knew only from the ghost stories, a wraith of post-punk

pre-med heartbreak with a cocaine problem. But Meg's Dave lacked tragedy, a prognathic

Cleveland with an up-and-comer's senior portrait toothiness. He'd vamoosed about a year

before I came around, matriculated and swashbuckling his way through the world, a finance major

with a plan, a new Pontiac and a job three states away (the fiancé was only a rumor). *He cheated*

*on me, but he wasn't such a bad guy*, said Meg bravely, leaning back against the headboard,

twenty-four and so fucking sad. Whenever she was out

I'd go through her photo album where Dave's chest hair glistened with droplets of water like diamonds

bestowed on him by the Goddess of the Gulf of Mexico, athwart the outriggers of some kind of sailboat

like unquestionably the best thing going down at Longboat Key. I flinched at those morning-after shots,

Meg (in a turquoise bikini) with Dave in the charred circle of their extinct campfire, hungover and postcoital

among the beer cans, oyster shells and lobster carapaces the seagulls had scooted around and picked

clean, like the ruined armor of a massacred ancient army...

Well, Meg and I never did go anywhere during our boozy nine months together. Just Ohio, not once

leaning into the wind with me clutching the tiller. *Let's go*

*to Florida*, she'd say, gazing at photos from two-years-ago Spring Break with Dave and Brenda and Tom

and the not-quite-sister-in-law who sometimes kept in touch. She let me keep one, a shot of her in nothing

but a fluffy white towel, a little sunburnt, clutching a bottle

of baby oil in a doorway of their wood-paneled motel room,  
getting ready to go out or just coming back in

I don't know. She never told me and I'm sure I never asked.

## Last Meal

My spork breaks against the State's lobster claw  
while the French fries drown in half

a bottle of ketchup. *Cold! Cold!* I cry. *A final*

*bad decision*, my biographer will note. Maybe  
in an hour I'll manage something

more profound than these hourglass melodramas  
and the tick-tock mojo of the minute hand

making its majestic circumnavigations, maybe

after they diaper me and check me for  
a pulse. *Thump thump*, goes my pulse, scared

half to death without me. I get the hiccups, snag  
a hangnail, heart-stoppingly

sneeze three times: hopelessness  
gets to be such a bore. *Give anyone enough time*

*and they will break even God's heart*, I propose

to the hillbilly chaplain with  
his stupid dog-brown eyes and dandruffy lapels;

he yearns to take me all the way home, clinging

to the mint-green bars just like  
he's seen in the movies. *Thanks, Padre*, I think

I'm supposed to say.

Michael Derrick Hudson lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana where he works at the Allen County Public Library in the Genealogy Centre. His poems have appeared in *Boulevard*, *Columbia*, *Georgia Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Iowa Review*, *North American Review*, *New Letters*, *Washington Square*, *West Branch*, and other journals. He won the 2009 *River Styx* International Poetry Contest, the *Madison Review's* 2009 Phyllis Smart Young Prize, and the 2010 and 2013 *New Ohio Review* Prize for Poetry. His poems have twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

## Wayne Price

### **Prayer**

The past is always watching; curtains  
twitching in the windows of its model houses  
that are small enough to lodge  
inside a toddler's nostril. On their miniature  
rooftops a remembered sun  
is always glinting after remembered rain.

I have become  
like one of those sad, grown men  
who must keep his children away  
from the delicate train-set in the attic;  
the mouse-sized, pristine engines in Edwardian  
reds and greens; toothpick trees as brittle as icing.

What kind of game, exactly,  
is this, that only makes us understand  
just how clumsy we've become – all thumbs – breaking  
everything we touch, in time? I see  
Clive Terrace, its bending road as thin  
as a coat-hanger's wire neck. And with a sound

as faint as the tick of a watch  
one of the tiny doors is opening. Why  
did we never look up and see  
our own-shaped shadows across the mountain?  
Could we ever hear, anyway, from this terrible  
height, what our own small voices are shouting?

## The Lovers

Late afternoon; the light in weak solution  
washes up against the windowpane.  
It has travelled a long way from the sun.

Outside, across the promenade, three floors down,  
you can hear the shackled Atlantic Ocean  
raking the shingle and rattling back again.

The lovers are sleeping. You can almost  
see them – bodies and minds like clothes undone –  
as passengers here, carried by dream.

How they resemble us, or anyone, those faces  
blank with exhaustion. Hard to tell them apart:  
they have been two, and one, like a mind

that can't be made up. And now everything  
is still. No sound. The clock's black arms,  
that have no strength of their own,

are not waving them back, or waving them on.  
None of it seems to happen in time.  
And beyond the window, where the sun falls in,

the whole weight of the sea flips a shell as thin  
as a fingernail, or the lovers' breathing skins.  
Late afternoon. Almost evening.

The nuclear boiling of storms on the sun  
candles the bedroom's dust in suspension.  
The lovers are sleeping. Never wake them.



## Passing

Owl, and the memory of owl, just after dusk  
in a wooded spot along the salmon fishers' path  
on the banks of the Tweed. Mist  
was spilling into the world  
from the clinking shallows of the river.

I think it was nothing more, that creature,  
than inches from the skull  
that cups my brain in place and offers it up  
to every passing thing: a glimpsed face  
as flat as the dial of a clock,

the moon, the constellations.

## The Guests

You can't make them leave, though they wear you out  
like children, demanding to be taken  
to bright, wide-open fields, or shores of darkly wetted stones  
where they never feel the cold, and love  
the thrilling stink of ozone.

So you find the time and go, and sit behind them,  
feeling the chill climb into your bones,  
watching the slow, heavy machinery of ocean. They are never bored,  
but after dark you ferry them back again  
like a cargo of whispers.

And every time (half asleep at the wheel) you miss the unmarked  
turn for home – the streets and rooms  
you're already forgetting. You stop, always, in empty country,  
the engine purring, and know they are content at last,  
sleeping. And you wonder

where have I come to, so far from anything?  
Why is this enough for them?

## In European Woods

Slowly the morning light  
gives back the bedroom walls,  
releases the world  
object by object, giving up  
the colours last of all.

Mornings like these  
there are European woods  
where the folk tales still  
begin, begin again  
their country meanings, in monochrome.

One by one, amongst  
wolf-pack and bear, deserters  
from three thousand years  
of armies have bivouacked there,  
where ceilings are branches

of pine and juniper. Under  
their shelter, in what is left  
of uniforms – Macedonian  
bronze, furs from the steppes  
of Scythia, the field-grey

of *Panzergruppen* – voices  
in a snow-hushed, perpetual dawn  
murmur in Latin,  
or the Greek of Byzantium,  
and other languages long gone.

**Wayne Price was born in south Wales but has lived and worked in Scotland since 1987. He has published poetry and fiction in a number of journals and anthologies in the UK, Ireland and the US and has been a major prize-winner in many international poetry and short story competitions. His debut short story collection, *Furnace*, was published by Freight Books in 2012 and was nominated for the Saltire Scottish First Book of the Year. He teaches at the University of Aberdeen and is working on a novel and a first collection of poems. He was short-listed for the 2013 Manchester Poetry Prize.**

## Lesley Saunders

### **Fugitive**

Partly it's a state of mind, the way light falls  
or fails to pass through the small opening  
of the eye, to reappear as a figure kneeling

*alfresco* in a field of hunter's green: the meaning  
is elusive. Murex, cochineal, saffron, madder,  
precious matter shipped from Isfahan and Sindh,

the piss of cattle fed on mango, no effort spared –  
absconders all, they've whitened, or dulled to night,  
the brightness in them grown absolute or utterly

engulfed. They've changed the light. And so  
we go on sitting here in The Swan's dark: watch  
the river blackening to cross-hatch, Indian ink.

### **Ware**

*'MARGARITA FUI' – 'I was Margaret'*

Today the river shines like a pearl. Do not be fooled.  
This is the cup from which ashes are drunk.  
The way to the dead house is under these arches.

You may not take photographs. Wrap your self  
in a grey grief you do not yet feel. Darken  
until you can hear the bell under your skin.

The black vase and the red are gate-guardians,  
cherishers of empty. Can you feel yet the unstable  
china of your wrists? Is this slip of earth a child?

See, the doves are all asleep, quartz and porcelain.  
Walk this way, anthropomorph, open the lid  
of your nothingness, the slab and coil of it, the pinch.

### **Alcuin's Nightingale**

*'e li auce / chanton, chascus, en lor lati' – Guillem de Poitiers*

Clad in its bird-ropes a small soul  
perches in the night-tree, waiting to enter –

the windows of the senses can be slow to open.  
Evening has stolen another day

and soon the concert-halls fill with shadows;  
under her basque and fishnet the singer

is a muscle of melody, her solar plexus  
a membrane between worlds: wold and sky,

thunder and lilacs. The bird in her throat  
rhymes sweetness with sorrow and at his desk

a poet weeps because he has no Latin,  
the words for love-song, life-long, loss.

*(and the birds / sing, each one, in their latin')*

## Horse

It is the year of the horse:  
wood horse. War or no  
it is a comforting thought  
to be pregnant, quick  
with sharp-elbowed men

the whole gang of them agog  
and jostling to be birthed  
in this back street no midwife  
one dog barking grave of night.  
Earth horse. The woman

is comfort of a different kind  
her perfumed hands  
on the smooth hide of the taut belly  
her soft voice in the pricked ears  
of the trembling foal:

*Dare alla luce.* Fire horse –  
smoke billowing over balconies  
like blown silk.  
On the shore the white waves  
water horse

rocking to and fro  
between fish-dazzle, tin-flash.  
Then drumbeat blank verse  
man-beast coupling: metal  
horse. My iron-hooved sons.

## Saint

*'Men surrender them their souls, women their bodies...'* – Tertullian

It is her age of iron. A tin of water,  
a fist of bread are pushed at her  
through the gap in the wall. Her skirt

is tidemarked with piss, o where is your mercy?  
The sky trembles as dusk comes,  
the woman's hour, with its veils and birdcalls,

and on the stones a faint mantling of rose.  
But this is not the real house of horrors,  
the one made of mouths and glistening hair

where the men live, burning, frozen,  
remembering her inventive embroideries,  
the wine in the blood, the scent of her,

the breakable bread of her body, all  
her soft technologies. Nightly they pray for her.  
She sings at them like an animal, an angel.

Lesley Saunders has published several books of poetry, and performed her work at festivals and on the radio. She has worked with artists, photographers, sculptors, dancers, and a composer and choir, and held several residencies, including at the Oxford Museum of the History of Science. Her new collection, *The Walls Have Angels*, is based on a residency at Acton Court, a beautiful house built for the brief visit of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn in the summer of 1535. Recent readings include the Swindon Poetry Festival and an open mic session at Paddy Power's betting shop in Clifden, Connemara. She was joint winner of the 2008 Manchester Poetry Prize, and short-listed in 2010. *Photo credit: Dwain Comissiong.*

## Tracey Slaughter

from it was the seventies when me & Karen Carpenter hung out

\*

(cream)

me & Karen Carpenter  
blu-tacked heartthrobs to the hangout  
wall & laid down under our own gatefold  
smiles. The ridges of our mouths  
tasted like corduroy & the hangout  
door was a polygon of un-hinged  
ultra-violet. We stole lines from stones  
& rolled them like acid checkers on each  
other's tongues, testing the discs of our tucked spines  
as we swallowed. We rippled all through  
the magazines: there were morsels of cosmetic  
Top Tip to live on. We loaded our skin  
& rubbed in the limits like cream, microscoped  
for layouts of handbag & muscle. We could  
not switch off the mirrors: it turned out  
since me & Karen C were kids we'd sucked on dolls cross  
legged & shaved their limbs to size with the  
zip of our teeth. Somewhere our mothers had bleach  
dreams. We lay & grinned on the oblong of leftover  
shagpile. The seventies tasted like orangeade, like groovy  
wars & honeybrown explosions in the wallpaper. Karen  
Carpenter held my hand & walked me through the detonating  
spirals. She showed me where we could feast  
on tangerine horizons

\*

(pepsi)

we sat still in the plastic-backed  
chairs, turning the pages of our lip  
synched childhood. Hole punched families  
waved from their holidays, cling  
film paper all sun tan & glycerine. Under  
our thumbs we smelt the funk of days  
cramped into soda coloured  
campervans, gametime swimsuits  
itching at the saltwater crotch. Mosquitos  
came along just like a pop  
song. Sand got in the scrabble  
consonants, bubbles in the pepsi went  
dyslexic. Me & KC colour coded our wipe  
clean memories, watching  
our mothers micromanage their

smiles. The kitchen  
was a clicktrack  
of our goody-two  
shoes.

\*

(fries)

me & KC cruised the aisles  
of all we could stand at the plastic  
markets. Angels got nailed  
up by their fluorescence: it was the season to  
be sick. The trolleys squealed conspiracies  
of hire purchase at our mothers.  
We watched the mall pigs supersize their  
Micky D's: their gums fa-la-la'ed with redmeat.  
But we were a duo: our guts were drumskin.  
We queue-jumped kids to jinx out Santa's fat  
knee: under our uptown skirts a list we'd picked  
clean as a good girl's wishbone. We  
swung each other's red velvet gloves  
& puked up tinsel lyrics  
in unison: joy to the  
bowl.

\*

(cheese)

after the funeral we had Kool-Aid:  
Tupperware is a holy kind of plastic. Even Christ  
on the wall looked kitset, one-legged, his  
drastic fan of big toes crossed. We got  
herded to the corpse at half-time, the  
hymns in our headbands  
droning fluorescent. Don't blame  
me & KC for going woozy in the soundtrack  
of stained glass. Our mothers' tears  
were outsize & turquoise, splashing  
on their PU handbags. There was a jigsaw  
of good shoes squeaking between pews & the flowers  
wore commercial halos, cheesy as the organ chords.  
We did as we were told, bobbed over  
the creep & offered his cheek a queasy kiss.  
Our teeth felt tipsy in their nimbus  
of orangeade. Lucky they gave out  
guidelines for muttering  
at God.

\*

(chalk)



we took streetlit drives  
on vinyl, bending our kisses back, all lipstick  
& zits. Neon made the town look schizo until there  
were parking lots where we broke  
the speed limit on zips. Me & KC  
coached the boys, watching our toeholds  
on the dash – easy does it, buster  
when their hands took a downturn  
into the curved berth of our  
bluejeans. Later we'd giggle at the corny  
choreography of boys, tacky & botched  
on the backseat, thumbs  
in a notch of door or denim,  
an r-rated tug of war. Our hearts were  
imposters, legs loose as shoelaces.  
Somewhere at home in the orange lounge  
our mothers laid back on  
their megadose of soap  
opera. Chalk it  
up to them.

**Tracey Slaughter lives on the Coromandel Peninsula in New Zealand. Her first collection of poems and short stories, *her body rises*, was published by Random House in 2005, and her poetry and short fiction have been widely published and anthologised in New Zealand and received numerous awards including the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Award in 2004. She was the featured poet in *Poetry NZ 25*, and her work was selected for the 2008 volume of *New New Zealand Poets in Performance*. Tracey received the Louis Johnson New Writer's Bursary in 2010, and now works full time teaching Creative Writing at Waikato University.**

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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](mailto:writingschool@mmu.ac.uk); +44 (0) 161 247 1787/1797.

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