

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition

2023 Manchester Fiction Prize

Short List

2023 Fiction Prize Finalists

Edward Hogan

Edward Hogan is from Derby. He has worked in libraries and colleges, and he is now a lecturer at the Open University. His novels include *The Electric*, and *Blackmoor*. Ed's recent short stories have been longlisted for the Sunday Times Short Story Award, and shortlisted for the V.S. Pritchett Prize, amongst others. His story 'Single Sit' won the Galley Beggar Press Short Story Prize in 2021. He lives in Brighton.

Dayal Kindy

Born, raised and now once again based in the West Midlands, Dayal Kindy has earned writing scholarships and awards that have supported her writing journey and led to several short stories being published. She is slowly writing a novel alongside working in NHS Mental Health services. In 2022 she was longlisted for the BBC Short Story Award, was runner up for the Mo Siewcharan Prize and a winner of the Space to Write Project.

David McGrath

David McGrath is Irish and lives in London. For short stories, he has won The Bare Fiction Prize, the 2023 Bryan MacMahon Short Story Competition and the 2023 Cill Rialaig Residency which he used to complete a novel set in a pub in rural Ireland. Also this year he has been published in The New Writer's edition of The Stinging Fly and won a mentorship with the Irish Writers Centre. In the past he has won StorySlam at The Royal Festival Hall and has been Most Valuable Player for Liars' League London twice.

Nicholas Petty

Nicholas is a British writer, originally from Macclesfield and currently living in Utrecht, the Netherlands. His short stories have previously featured in the Sunday Times Audible Short Story Award, the Galley Beggar Press Short Story Prize, and the Desperate Literature Short Story Prize, among others. They have also been published in the New England Review, The London Magazine, The Moth Magazine, and elsewhere. He is currently working on a novel and a short story collection.

Chloë Philp

Chloë Philp is a writer and playwright currently completing a BA in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. Her dramatic writing has been directed at the Stroud Theatre Festival and Roses Theatre and her prose writing has been read at the Cheltenham Literature Festival. Chloë is currently writing her debut novel and loves all fiction with diverse, speculative themes at its core.

April Yee

April Yee's poetry, fiction, and essays have won or been listed for Best of the Net, *The Best American Essays*, the Ivan Juritz Prize, and the Manchester Poetry Prize. A Harvard alumna and former journalist, she reported in more than a dozen countries before moving to London, where she has served as *The Georgia Review's* editor-in-residence and Refugee Journalism Project mentor. Her work is in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Offing*, and *Electric Literature*, and she has received support from the Sewanee Writers' Conference, the Southbank Centre, the National Book Critics Circle, and the University of East Anglia.

Edward Hogan

Home Work

Content warning: contains images of physical and mental ill-health, violence and death

Your first break-in.

In the blue dark of the hallway, your amped-up senses captured the animal smell of other people's coats and the sound of your trainers on their laminate flooring. Your whole body throbbed. A clueless rookie, you crept back out the patio door after a few minutes, with two Mariah Carey CDs and a bra whipped off a radiator. When you showed your mates, they laughed so hard they had to lie down on the pavement.

But that night switched on a part of you that won't switch off.

Mid-nineties, Midlands of England. You're sixteen and still at school. Sometimes. You get dragged out of history for shouting, 'Who the fuck is Norman Conquest?' In the corridor, the teacher taps his head and says, 'You're not thinking.' But that's why you love doing houses. You see everything, hear everything. You don't think.

In the canteen, you play-fight with the new girl. Nicole. Braided hair and black/pink Air Max. The cushioned soles give her an inch on you. 'Why don't you just meet me in town?' you say.

'Fine, Jesus,' she replies, as if it's a hassle.

For your mates, breaking is just a party. They enhance the experience with amphetamines, weak coke, glue if there's nothing else. So do you, in the early days. But after a while, you get serious. You go out at dusk, alone, to mark houses. You consider other neighbourhoods, other lives.

West of town, a cul-de-sac of detached houses backs onto chewed-up fields. An old dude wearing a decent suit comes home in a Jag the colour of raw lamb. Saturday nights, his missus bathes for hours and leaves the frosted-glass casement open for the steam. When they go out, he sits in the passenger seat of the taxi, and she rides in the back, tanned in autumn, a lot of jewellery and plenty more where that came from.

In the shopping centre, you buy Nicole a hot chocolate in a dark Italian café. She teases you about your style. Everyone wears big hoodies and baggy jeans, but you can't have rustling fabric. In tight sweats and Levi's, there's nothing to catch on door handles or window frames.

'If you don't like it...' you say.

'You're lean. Fox-like.'

Nicole's mum works in an office, stepdad's a plumber. She likes school, she says. She's good with numbers, and wonders where that might take her.

'You could be my accountant,' you say.

She gives you a killer stare. 'You could wash my car.'

You laugh at her temper, and eventually catch her smiling.

Her life is all right, but you can feel yourself ruining it.

Apparently, your dad is an Irish security guard who left when you were a toddler. So your mum says. You can't remember him, and picture instead the IRA bloke off the telly with the wolfish beard.

Mum's current boyfriend calls himself 'Rocket', and he's not much older than you. He wears British Knight hi-tops, and when you play football he sticks his knife in the ground for a goalpost. One night, Rocket accuses you of thieving cash, and it gets physical. You both land a couple of shots before Mum steps in.

'You can't give *yourself* a nickname, dickhead,' you bark, teeth pink with blood.

Doors slam. After an hour you put mugs of tea and the biscuit tin on a tray and take it to Mum's room, where they're watching telly in bed. 'Just wanted to apologise, yeah?'

'I don't need any trouble,' Rocket grunts, accepting the tray, 'but there's got to be respect.'

At the snooker club – the only place that'll serve you Southern Comfort and Coke – you tell your mates how you lined the biscuit tin with foil and took a dump in it. They slide off their chairs, howling. The old guys in the shadows hold their cues like staffs until you all pipe down.

'You're a dead man,' Raz says, measuring up a long red.

You press an ice cube to your swelling lip. 'Listen, I've been scoping this house. Rich couple. Out every Saturday. Bet they've got a widescreen plasma. Raz, we could use your brother's van.'

Raz misses the pot. 'I don't know, man. TVs? That's a step up.'

The others hide behind drinks.

Approaching home, you're ready for Rocket, the thick end of Raz's snooker cue up your sleeve. But inside, Mum sits alone at the kitchen table. 'Your father called. He wants to see you,' she says. 'In the hospital.'

You peer into the hallway. 'Where's Rocket?'

'I sent him home to calm down. What you did was disgusting.' She gives you a piece of paper – the name of a ward in her loopy handwriting.

'Might go next weekend,' you say.

Mum's bangles clink as she hoists herself up. 'Wouldn't leave it too long.'

For a week in October, Nicole wants constant sex in the joss-stick mist of her bedroom. That's fine, but afterwards she won't stop talking even when you fall asleep. She plays her music so loud the neighbours complain. Then she just runs out of juice, sleeps all day, won't eat, and ends up doing a month in the psych unit near the retail park.

When they let her out for an hour, you hold hands behind the big Sainsbury's. 'How you feeling?' you ask.

'Oh, you know,' she says, and makes the noise of a telephone dial tone.

You laugh. She's in there, somewhere.

Conversation is slow, so you take her across the car park to Rollerworld: coloured lights, Donna Summer, the rumble of skates and the stink of vinegar. You kiss on a bench in a dark corner, but it feels like she's not into it. Then, suddenly, she is, and the bass kicks up through the bench like rushing blood, and you nearly cry.

Your dad's ward is on the second floor, and you wonder if you'll recognise him, but it's obvious. His bed is by the window, and he's working on a wordsearch book with a ballpoint pen. His face looks a bit like yours did when you took a beating off Rocket. Dark swelling around green eyes. He has a crap moustache and soft, side-parted hair. An accent. When he says your name, you get the buzz that usually comes from breaking.

'All right?' you say.

He smiles. 'No. Are you?'

You talk. School and work: the twin traps.

'You been here the whole time?' you ask.

'In the hospital?'

'In town. You know. Last fifteen years or whatever.'

'I've been back and forth,' he says. 'Listen, I'm sorry. And tell your mother sorry as well.'

You shrug.

'This is what I'm doing now. Apologising to all the people I've screwed over. I'm running five-minute slots, eight hours a day.'

'When do you get out?'

He raises his eyebrows. 'They tell me it won't be long. But there'll be no need to call a taxi.'

'Right.'

'Listen, compadre, would you do me a favour? You see that butcher's apron?'

He points to the window and you look out at the shabby council housing across the way. 'Can't see no butcher's,' you say.

'I am referring to the national flag of the United Kingdom. The Union Jack, so called.'

A faded version hangs from an upstairs window of a house, the red gone the colour of iodine. 'What about it?'

'Could you get rid of it for me?'

'Eh?'

'Ask them to take it down for a while. I'm no freedom fighter, but I don't want it to be the last thing I see.'

He gives you a blank white envelope. 'There's a cheque in there. I'm not saying it's a foot race, but you may want to cash it promptly.'

You go straight to the bank and fill in forms with the ballpoint pen you nicked from his bedside table. It has a dark green shaft, and a silver arrow for a clip. It's nothing special. No point selling it.

The cashier hands over the money. Fifty sheets.

* * *

A Thursday night in December, wind rattling the Christmas tat. You take the long way to Nicole's, and see the fancy couple outside their place. The old dude lifts his wife's pink suitcase into the boot of a cab. Some winter sun to top up the tan.

As soon as you arrive, Nicole drags you into the kitchen. She's been out the psych unit for a while, and you've spent a lot of time together.

'I'm late,' she says.

You glance at your watch.

'I've done a test.'

When the penny drops, you consider climbing out the window, but the stepdad comes in. A broad-shouldered Jamaican with a neat beard. 'Here's what we'll do,' he proclaims.

He says you'll need work, and when you say you've got money, he shakes his head. 'Something legitimate. I can take you on as an apprentice.'

'Plumbing?'

'It's a good occupation, and I'm a fair boss.'

'I've got school.' Never thought you'd use *that* as an excuse.

'When you're finished, the child will be born, and you'll have a job. Nicole tells me A-levels were not necessarily an option,' he says. 'In your case.'

You turn to Nicole, ready to tell her what you think of this shit-show, but she looks small at the table, her collarbone visible through the wide neck hole of her sweatshirt. You click the ballpoint pen in your pocket. Nicole cries, and you know it's genuine, but you think of the phrase, *turning on the tears*. You think of plumbing.

Your cousin did YTS as a sparky. £38 a week. You make five times that in one good night on the rob. You need to think.

You need to be free of thought.

So, by two am, you're in another kitchen – not yours, not hers, but the kitchen of the rich old couple. You wait for your heart rate to drop into the cool zone. The place is not as posh as you'd imagined. Sunflowers on the tiles, eggs in a basket. You swipe diazepam from the meds cupboard.

The living room has a low ceiling and wall-to-wall shagpile. For a moment you think someone's crouching in the corner, but it's just the Christmas tree. They have a good TV, VCR and stereo, but you can't carry that stuff. This job will be about the cash rolls upstairs. Jewellery, watches, handbags.

You imagine the old couple on their plane, halfway to the Canaries by now. You hit the switch on the wall socket to turn on the old-fashioned Christmas tree lights. Blue, white, red, green. You watch them glow. Framed photos of two girls in Seventies school uniforms stand on the mantelpiece. Women by now, working in Debenhams or a building society.

As you're about to leave the living room, you notice a sharp smell coming off the tree. Hot pine and melting plastic. Then there's a loud pop. A new light flickers in the branches. It quickly becomes a small flame. You step forward, step back. A frosted bauble drops to the floor. You mouth silent curses and stare for five, ten seconds, mesmerised, as the tree's skeleton darkens in the fire. It's already too late to fight it – the flames climb the curtain, and you cover your mouth and nose. No alarm sounds. Smoke pours across the ceiling, and you back out into the hallway and shut the door, ready to disappear.

Then you hear someone cough, upstairs.

Shit.

You could leave. Tell yourself you just panicked. But from the bottom of the stairs, you call, 'Oi,' sickened by the wrongness of your voice.

The old bloke appears on the landing and squeals. He doesn't look so dapper now, in his vest and pants. 'Who are you?' he says.

'Your house is on fire.'

'What?'

'Your fucking house is burning down, mate. We need to do one. Now!'

He sees the smoke and gets moving.

'Where's your missus?' you say as he descends.

'Gone to see her sister in Spain.'

Trembling at the front door, he mutters, 'Oh God, Oh God, Oh God', as the smoke pumps out from the living room. You're both coughing and heaving. He pulls the keys from a pot on a little table but fumbles them.

'Sort it!' you shout.

Finally, he opens the door, and you bust out onto the drive and suck in huge gulps of cold night air. He puts his hand on your shoulder, but you flinch. Neighbours come running round the corner.

'Oh, Don, thank goodness you're okay,' says a woman in a kimono. 'I've called the fire brigade. What happened?'

You know the old bloke will try to answer that question. He'll find that things don't add up. He'll look to you for answers, but you'll be gone, down the alley, through the garden, over the fence and away from the house, which is noisy with the cracking of beams and joists, the bursting of window glass, as if there's a person stuck inside, going mad.

Later, you drop a dose of the Valium and walk, hoping the wind will blow the reek out your clothes. The drugs kick in, and you barely feel the cold.

You hadn't intended to honour your father's dying wish. It just didn't occur to you. Maybe if he'd withheld the cheque. But now you find yourself outside the semi-detached council house with the faded Union Jack. 4am. Still too early for the bin trucks.

The flag hangs from the window, too high to grab. You find a damp wooden stepladder in their backyard. After wiping frost off the steps, you climb to the top platform. You pull at the flag, but it won't come loose. They must have secured it from inside. You have a vision that the flag is a bath-plug, and the whole house will turn to silty water if you pull it out. You wrap a corner around your fist, give it a proper yank. The stepladder creaks, and then you hear the wood split. The platform snaps and the whole rig topples, but you keep hold of the flag and swing against the wall of the house.

So, there you are, dangling from the Union Jack like a hooked fish, the sky turning purple, the ladder lying in bits below. You graze your arm on the rough brick. The fall wouldn't kill you, but you cling on, laughing, feeling the strain in your shoulders. The twisted fabric of the flag unwinds, and you rotate until you're facing the hospital. You look up at the high windows. Some light, some dark. A shadow moves behind a wipe-clean curtain. You think of your dad's soft dry hair, and the sheen on his baggy face. You think of the wordsearch book on the bedside table, and his arrow-clip pen in your

pocket. Chances are he's dead by now – you know that – but the birds are singing, and you are very much alive.

Dayal Kindy

Dolby Rests in Peace

Content warning: contains racist slurs

Run Paki Run.

Lad thinks I'm a Paki I says a laugh leaking out.

We walk on: every shape every sound hilarious: especially the human. Everything high. My eye picking out bright yellows in the night.

Can't be sure it's not just God: jealous that we're the light in the halo while everyone else stays pinned to the shadows tonight – but there's this bare solid shove from behind. My boys keep trying to pull us up. I'm no ten-ton man but them boys are stupid with laughter.

A slam to his bonce floors G but he scrambles back up in a quick scuttle. Scuttle scuttle he goes. They've stopped pulling me up my lads. The laughing's long gone. There's this rapid-fire rah-rah-rah getting louder. I focus see a top-set so shiny I swear down they're glowing. It's the peek-a-boo of dog's teeth. His mouth straining to get his chomps on me before its lead's yanked back tight by some bird. Must be that dickhead's bird. That dickhead smiling his hate. My lads back away. Staggering first then running. Running for the strength in numbers back at the party.

They race off through the unbroken quiet streets of night: full of sleeping babies and snoring granddads: all at peace in the black centre of the halo. And I'm left on the foggy rim of it. Alone. Not in the peaceful black and not in the shining halo of love and hope where I once was. There's no strength in numbers for me.

The cold slabs of pavement tell me up. So I do now I found me sen. And I'm up telling them: come on then. Lets fucking do this. But must be talking slow because I'm down again. My face on this lichen that's been making a life for itself in a crack between the wall and pavement. And I see the frills of it: feel its beauty: the brightness of its yellow in the streetlight. All this time its supernatural yellow's been growing underfoot just to cheer me on. I try getting up, leave that lichen in peace but the violence cracks my face open: ugly rough punches. So sloppy but never stopping. And their red streaks of anger spreading: it's too hot it won't stop running.

Stab's too blunt a word for the neat sweep that gets me screaming. The fucker's blade jolts its shine into me again: trying to free my heart. But it's already free – don't those knobs know it? There's no need to scoop me out. I'm out already. Not dying but flying in the silence. Spinning in the most secret black heart of the halo.

Look at me floating. Me: who's never been on a plane cept that once when I was too small to remember it proper. You seen me right? In the album, up on ma's hip? It's on the same page that's got Bibi hugging a buffalo like it were family too.

You thinking this the same Dolby? Runt of the litter. Champion at twisting his hands to make fart sounds. King of the dead-eye when you boring him. Course it's me. It's still me. I'm not ashamed of who I am. Or was. My life's a love story. I done it all for love. Well mostly. Sometimes for hate too. And then there's some things I did because for laugh – cause you only live once right?

If this is a love story I got to start with my babygirl. Took everyone by surprise my Jade. I was back at G's party holding out for some fine thing. I waste bare time keeping watch. Backing up in case that ugly triple neck she's heavy-hooked into fucks it up. But he never does so I end up on the stairs. End up dropping a couple I still had in my pocket from Manchester. And it sounds mad but I swear she rolls out of the wallpaper onto the step above me. Just appears. Like Jade was always there or never quite anywhere but I seen her right then because I was meant to.

You lot were wrong. She never was a scag-ho. Everyone said that shit about her but she were never like that, not proper. They never knew my Jade.

She comes out from the wallpaper where she's been hiding all my life and begins smoking my draw. Next we're holding hands walking out the house.

It's mad because they were starting up the tunes and I had to move. You know when your body goes prenatal just wanting to jog around to any old heart-beat. But we walk out together.

Walk the quiet unbroken streets of night. Nights full of snoring granddads and kicking out babies. My lads don't get it – Shit, some bare fit girls came in after you'd left...You could have been sorted man...Man you can get better I got told the next day. I just laughed. I knew they wouldn't see it. Those boys never want to see you lucky. Just want to shit on what you got. What do they know about my baby?

Jade's got the softest ears. It's crazy. They're like pets. You could cuddle up to those ears on the sofa. It's mad that the soft small hairs from the back of her neck had ambition enough to grow to her ears: they just had to keep on reaching out. It sounds gross I know but it's not. Not at all. It's that softness that surprises: makes her special. How it sits against the hardness of her. God my body loved the surprise of hers.

We had words that night. No we weren't banging all night. She didn't blow me behind the Co-op or whatever else you think you heard about us. We speak the best words we ever did that night. The best we ever will do.

It's beautiful. I see it. How the artificial I powders and flies away in front of our eyes. And she gets it. The ridiculousness of pouring I into two different bodies. We lie on the hillside: brave in the face of dog walkers that don't pick up. We breathe in the Lucozade streetlights and find music to move to. I even give her my emergency powders and pills that I keep on me for times of administrative errors and queuing nightmares.

And you're thinking with your tiny tick-tick brain, you're thinking it's just the chemicals. He's manufacturing love. Making it for himself cos he's a runt and the girl he's dancing with is as plain as paper. I say well that's for you rationalists to figure out. You who don't believe in God or love or destiny or any of the things that make a fuck-up of a life into something where each word you say matters: each desire each decision counts. Like you have control over your life maybe even the world.

I've walked home at dawn a bare few times and it always felt an achievement: a double life. While the rest watched telly and fell asleep unfucked I was flying across the city to dance and have a laugh and keep my pockets full just by making people happy. Giving them pilld and clumped versions of grainy cream meaning in their grey worlds of re-sits and bed-sits and trying and signing on and being fucked over and over again. And I ate it all up to feel like a superhero at my front door knowing I'd lived a double-decker life for a night.

But walking home with Jade on this first night feels like I've lived twice for every night I would ever live. We lie close and warm and my fingers comb her hair. We can't sleep because it's so new: our bodies too alert for threats. And jackhammers cave our brains in, our minds dance to our hearts: beat. Beat. Beat. It near gets me up dancing again but the pills have worn thin and my legs are heavy. So we chase it. Run the lines down the foil. Chasing it zigzag, sucking up the brown trickle so it unfolds and sits on us. Our veins filling with cement so we are everyday people made statues curling up into each other like we'll never sleep apart again.

Course I realised I'd seen her before then. I don't think she'd seen me except as someone's baby brother maybe. You were in the same class— remember? You like to think you're the only bright one, but Jade's smart. She's just didn't get the breaks that's all. She floats through walls that girl. You think she's by your side but she's disappeared. But I'll find her again.

They used to say I was going bad. But I was no businessman moving ki's across the city. Bringing it down from Liverpool and Manchester the twin angels of Foil-on-Trent. My people held down jobs, looked after their kids, took care of themselves. Doing favours man. That's all I ever was. A lad who knew somebody. Someone willing to follow Queensway ring-road right round the city — that's all. Most people live tiny — I knew everyone that's all a lad like me is. Was.

Except when it started spinning away, crashing me into our shop.

That night I fucked-up I had a moment I tell you. I was tooting it back at Jade's and I remember it still. I was breathing in that sharpness and for the first time the thought crosses that if I shoot it: just dig it in – I could have a dream so big it could eclipse the mess I was making. I could get to the same place as Jade and drag all of life's disappointment into a full nod and let it rot there.

But I never got the chance. My baby starts crying when she sees the money from the safe. I think it's out of love. That she's realising that that's how much I love her.

Yeah that too Dolby love.

But no. It was never going to be just that. I'm scaring her: a junkie. Me scaring a junkie by bringing her money? And I'm thinking she's finally cracked.

I thought we were heading somewhere better Dolbs, but I've only made you worse.

I try to lift the tears off her cheeks with my palm. You're not dragging me down I say. She grabs my hand and pulls me onto the floor. She's trying to pray: Please save us from ourselves. Please love us. Save us. Make us better.

We hold onto each other: our heads hooked over each other's shoulders like the horses on the field.

I remember wondering if it had worked. If we were finished with the bad. Are we new people tonight? I asked. But she didn't say anything, just fitted us into each other on her single mattress. And all the time I think I'm comforting her, it was me she was cradling. In the morning she tells me I've got to take the money back and not to come to hers no more.

I hold her hand but it snakes away. Then she says it:

Listen I need you to listen. I need you to hear what I'm saying.

So I wait for it. Thinking there's nothing much that my baby can knock me with.

I want you to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour she says.

And I don't want to laugh so it happens in a tumble: part fart noise: part spitspray.

I need you to listen Dolby love.

I look at her and she's so desperate to be good and clean that I say Alright I'm listening.

She says it again.

I try it the best way I can. Alright then go on if you want me to babe I'll do it I say.

But she's not having it.

You know what it means? Don't just say it Dolby love. You've really got to mean it. And I see she's got some new magic that I can't fake or take so I try again. I'm happy for you babe but it doesn't have to finish us. I can stop using. Stop drinking. Go veg, but I don't get it. What do I have to do? Go to church or something?

She looks at me new.

Then the only girl I've ever loved disappears: vanishes through the wall.

And all the while after when I was a good boy-reborn with ma and dad and even you patting me on the back because I was being a good lad again, really I was trying to be good enough for Jade. You picked me up too I know. Stopped dicking around for long enough to pick me up from being so low and pissed off about it.

It just never entered my head that she'd go off with another bloke: not with her life. But a God-man was perfect for my Buddha girl who fasted alone in her flat staring into the walls trying to make the world better with her stillness. I just never saw him coming. Not even when the God Squad were giving out needles and foil squares with their milky teas.

I used to drive around trying to catch a glimpse but I never saw her. I missed her to madness. And yeah okay, okay you got me. And I missed it too.

It's a heavy and fucked scene in the middle. But on the edges it's the best of life. Yeah okay – it's impossible not to tip over: but on that slender halo of shining high it's everything you thought life should be: love and hope and joy.

I can see you sneering. I see you. But I tell you the people who dance in that chemical-light: even the ones that trip into the molten core of it to that place that absorbs your I until you're just a sickness – the difference between us and you is that we're real. We're prepared to feel the joy and the hurt. Me, to be fair I'm for the joy and throwing off this control I see everyone struggling with all the fucking time.

Alright you got me. Maybe this is me arranging the world so I'm not just some dick dying a foot from dogshit. A waster who burnt up for a girl who loved brown then Jesus and then me in at Bronze. And no one dares say it straight but it pisses me off all the same: that you reckon I never loved her. And yeah it wasn't in a future way. I wasn't seeing kids and forever, but I'm just not into tunnel vision. For me love's measured in Celsius and my love burned through everything we had. Right through the clouds to Jesus.

David McGrath

I Fell In Love With My Documentary Crew

I once manned the helpline for tourists disenchanted by Paris not being the Paris they expected. My documentary crew says that's so interesting.

Better than working for Facebook.

What did you do for Facebook?

I screened reported photographs. Before the software could do it.

You must've seen a lot of dick pics.

The dick pics I could handle. It was the war photographs that gave everyone in the office nervous breakdowns. Our therapist told us that everything was going to be OK. That's how I got the experience for the helpline.

My documentary crew asks where I live.

Well, I say. That's a weird one.

Weird how?

I live with Yuri.

Who's Yuri?

Yuri put an advertisement up on a tree looking for someone to write his biography. I was the only one who answered. So I live in his derelict mansion until we get his story down on paper.

Is it his mansion?

I think he just moved in one day and nobody has ever told him to leave. He told me it takes three people to escape a gulag. And only two survive because one of the three is a sheep.

What happens to the sheep?

I don't know if anything he says is true. I just write it down. But Yuri says Siberian nights are sub-zero temperatures in complete darkness. And if you escape the gulag you cannot make a fire or you'll be seen. And there are tiger-hunters to shoot you for a reward from the gulag, and if you go into a farm for food, they will shoot you. So you are in the middle of absolutely nothing, with no food, and you are freezing to death but you must keep moving, and there are tigers and tiger-hunters everywhere. The only hope to survive is to eat the sheep or all three of you die.

My documentary crew is fascinated. That's so dark.

Yuri says that you have a secret agreement that the third person is the sheep. But you never know—the other two might have the real agreement that *you* are the sheep.

That's intense, my documentary crew says. You're an interesting guy. We don't want some gritty, harrowing, warts and all, kitchen sink documentary. We want sensational. Like you.

My documentary crew and I move in together.

*

What else?

Why don't we talk about you?

What else about you? I want to know everything.

You want to hear about my father stood on the sidelines of my football games for years, shouting into his phone about deals and mergers and million-pound investments?

Yes.

This was when nobody had mobile phones. Back in the nineties. But my Dad shows up to our football games with this big phone, shouting into it like a big shot making millions of pounds at any given moment. And during one of our games, another Dad falls to the ground having a heart attack. The entire field looks to my Dad and tells him to call an ambulance. He's the man with the big phone, after all. And my Dad stands there, watched by everybody, and has to admit the phone is a fake or pretend to call an ambulance. My Dad pretends. The other Dad dies.

That's so fucked up.

That's my Dad.

What else?

And because my documentary crew is so interested in me at all times I fall in love with my documentary crew. I fall in love with my documentary crew's interest in me like some second-rate narcissist. Like my goddamn Dad.

My documentary crew's sound guy never tires. The camerawoman's lens is never out of focus and the questions are incessant. Have I ever used a prostitute? Have I ever cheated on a girlfriend? Have I ever hit a woman? Have I ever called someone a cunt? Have I ever stole money? Have I ever been with a man? Do I have homosexual thoughts?

*

My brother visits with his girlfriend. My documentary crew does not like them and calls my brother's girlfriend the princess. They leave for a day of sightseeing and my documentary crew comes into the sitting room.

There is silence.

You cannot tell anyone we did this.

What did you do?

The princess is cheating on your brother.

What?

She's cheating on him.

How do you know that?

We've just gone into their room and read her diary.

What? I can't believe you did that.

What?

Before I can tell my documentary crew that this documentary is not working out and that I'm not interested in finishing the documentary, my father dies.

My documentary crew complains about my sisters not being fully open at the funeral. My documentary crew does not think they're very sisterly.

Ease up. They've just buried their father. Your behaviour is atrocious at the moment.

This starts a big argument. My documentary crew does not like being documented. We're screaming at each other and my documentary crew is punching the roof of the car, threatening to jump out if I don't stop on the motorway.

Swear to fucking God, stop this fucking car!

This documentary is fucking done! I'm shouting back. We're going to get this pregnancy test, see that it's negative and then we're fucking done!

In the next town my documentary crew hops out of the car. They return with the pregnancy test held high in the air and crying.

It's positive. It's positive.

My documentary crew is pregnant.

That night I propose.

*

Money adds a whole new dimension to my documentary. My documentary is far more expensive now than originally planned and it really focuses on me not being a good provider, me being a leech, me being a loser, me being a dependent, me not doing anything with my life, me not paying enough for our lives. My documentary crew plays me back to myself. They show me to myself saying to the

camera that I should get a better-paid job then replay it and replay it and replay it. They show me to myself wasting time with writing, never going to make it, me being delusional, me being unrealistic.

Fine, I say. I'll get a security guard job where I sit at a desk and write my book and get paid for it. I'll be a building concierge or something like that.

My documentary crew explodes. How is that interesting? How can that make a good documentary?

*

The nurse asks us questions. We answer them like we're at a job interview. There's an exhale in the room, and those who can see behind the curtain are looking at something. We see our baby in the smiles on their faces. He's shining. We can feel him shining in their smiles. And our baby is lifted over the caesarean curtain into view and he's purple and crying not too much, not as much as I expected a baby to be crying, and there are hot drops of blood dripping from him, and he's so tough, such a little man, brave in the face of this new world he has arrived into, so wise, smarter than his Dad already, and right there, right then, I know he's a natural. I know he's so talented, that his possibilities are endless and his future is vast. I suddenly just know all of this. I know it more certainly that I've ever known anything in my whole life.

His name is Wyatt. It means little warrior, born eleven pounds on the eleventh, born into a world where three grandparents met him on their way out of it saying, Rather you than me, kid—his last remaining granddad drinking himself to death in a bedsit, born into arson, car wrecks, divorces, addiction and barricaded doors, his Mum an entire documentary crew and his Dad struggling quietly with alcoholism, trying to finish a novel because it's the only way he thinks the kid will be proud of him, and all the while in the womb, he sat there listening to the turbulent, co-dependent and toxic production of his Dad's documentary, its documentary crew terrified they wouldn't look like the baby, waking up panicked in the dead of night, crying with the thoughts of the baby not loving them. But I know he can take it all in his stride. He's been forged in the fight and all the things that stand against him are formidable, and yet here he is, inimitable, standing strong and brave, bettering himself by the second, alert and learning, living in spite of the life that's stacked against him from the very beginning, a life that he won't get out of alive, and my heart is burst dead from the pain of my love for the strength inside him.

Good boy, I say. Keep going. Good boy. Keep being alive. Keep doing it. Great things will happen for you, I promise.

*

Bad week? the relationship counsellor asks on seeing us sit down, Wyatt sleeping in his bassinet beside us.

It's all about me, I say. It's always about working on me.

You appear stressed.

I am.

My documentary crew chimes in and replays footage to the relationship counsellor, telling her what I said, and then what I said when I backtracked on what I said.

I'm becoming unwell with being told what I say by my documentary crew.

And you were slamming doors this morning.

No I fucking wasn't.

My documentary crew becomes offended by my swearing and by my tone.

The way you speak to us!

Because I said *fuck*? I wasn't slamming any doors—that's why I said I wasn't slamming any fucking doors.

You slammed it.

Let's move on, the relationship counsellor says, horrified, and we're just warming up. This is nothing. Twice in the past week, we have fought ourselves into an exhausted comatose state over how my documentary should be shot.

I'm not moving on until my documentary crew admits I didn't slam any door and that this documentary should be scrapped. Nothing's real. It's a work of fiction.

The way you speak to us!

The story here is that I closed a door. And I want you to admit that. There was no slam.

Fine. You closed a door loudly.

I'm not accepting that. I closed a door. The resulting sound of that door closing was a perfectly acceptable noise befitting a door closing. There was no slam. The slam was in your head because you take the closing of doors as abandonment.

How dare you try and fathom what's going on in our head.

Say I didn't slam a door.

No.

We're done, I say. This documentary is over.

As I walk out I stop at the door and shout, By the way, *this* is how you slam a fucking door!

I slam the door so hard that I nearly take it off its hinges. I'm a self-righteous, falsely accused door-slammer, a self-fulfilled prophecy high off my own indignation, victorious, bounding through the hallway like a fire alarm, off to work like a caveman, fuck this and fuck that, the baby screaming, camera rolling and police on their way.

*

The staircases in the Family Courts are diagonally shaped and caged to deter suicides. They suicide-proofed the stairs because so many documentary subjects were going headfirst down seven floors after losing contact with their children. Splattering dead on the marble and the credits roll.

I'm reading my documentary. It has finally been made and it's forty-six pages long. It details coercive control, emotional and sexual abuse, financial abuse, intimidating behaviour, harassment and stalking, punishing silences, alcohol abuse and association with villains and assassins. It details a use of a prostitute in 2007 when my documentary was not even in production. It details use of cocaine around the same time. It details an incident in which I attacked my documentary crew, and our relationship counsellor, with verbal abuse and then used violent, aggressive and extremely concerning door-slammings to further intimidate.

It thanks children's social services for its help with postproduction.

It says I'm traumatised by long-term exposure to gore and graphic images and have a morbid obsession with death and murder. It says I come from a broken home and have never sought help for the torment suffered. My documentary strongly recommends that I not be part of my son's life. It recommends a lifetime injunction. My documentary concludes by reminding the court of the non-molestation order and asks for a partition at the hearing so that my documentary crew is no longer exposed to my toxicity and vicious terrorisation.

An announcement goes out over the public address system. Hammersmith and Fulham versus Smith, Court Fourteen, please.

Forced adoption, says my solicitor, Vincent.

How do you know that?

If a borough is involved they're taking the child. The parent normally doesn't even show.

Is there hope of seeing the child afterwards?

No, says Vincent. That's the end of the line.

Jesus Christ.

Haunted houses got nothing on the ghosts in this fuckin' place.

Court Seven explodes. Gangs of tracksuits and trainers spill out in uproar. Everybody is shouting at the court—that it's a baby-snatching cunt. The Dad goes hard against his own sisters for trying to calm him down. He goes hard against his whole family for not going hard enough. The family rally and go hard against the court. Everybody is a cunt, including me in my little shirt and tie, Vincent, the security guards and the social workers, the barristers against them and the free legal aid trying to represent them. It all moves down the lobby and out of sight.

There was a woman once, Vincent says. She had thirteen children taken from her. She just kept having children and the state was waiting at the end of the birthing bed to take them. Couldn't stop drinking and drugging.

That's harrowing.

Common enough. Maybe not to the extent of thirteen. But thirteen happens.

The Court Officer comes and tells us the magistrates are ready for us.

Before we go in, Vincent says. There's one thing here. Vincent reads, Father sells bogus holiday packages for Paris and other European destinations to vulnerable Asian tourists.

It's when I manned the helpline for tourists disenchanted by Paris not being the Paris they expected.

Vincent laughs. You have to hand it to these documentary crews sometimes. So what did you tell the disenchanted tourists?

I told them everything was going to be OK. That the worst experiences in our lives turn out to be the best things to ever happen us. That no matter what happens to us, or where we find ourselves, we can see how our experience can be useful to help others.

Vincent smiles because he's had a documentary made about him, too.

Good man, he says. Now, let's go in here and get your son back so you can bring him to the park and see the squirrels.

Nicholas Petty

Close Your Eyes

Content warning: contains images of threat and violence

I bet you can't describe the Belgian coast. Not like you can the white sands of Thailand or the sunny bays of Spain. Without your phone to hand, and with a little drink in you, I could convince you that Belgium has no coast. It is landlocked, like Switzerland and Luxembourg and Liechtenstein and all those other neutral countries, I would say, and you would buy it, at least for a while. Perhaps, if you were clever and immune to me, you might see through my ploy and imagine the coast is similar to Normandy's. You would be close, but wrong. If you are thinking now that the Belgian coast is a hidden gem, then stop thinking that. It is not a gem, it is only hidden.

I live in a one-bedroom flat in Moederskerke. It has a big window overlooking the sea. You are imagining me – a grey, weakening man – reclined in a leather chair watching spectacular sunsets, the room around me filled with golden light. This image is true but it is not my life. In the grey light that is more common to these parts, my flat is dull, damp and peeling. The building is a monstrosity. Concrete, flat-headed, decrepit. Wedged in between all the other silent blocks that line the Belgian coast, filled with people like me waiting for redemption, or the opposite of redemption.

You will not find tranquility on the Belgian coast. Where there is brief respite from the ports and holiday resorts, where nature is allowed to – I would not say thrive – exist, then you can still hear the road and the tramway that are never too far from the sea. Someone once told me the endless bank of buildings looks like a windbreak. This is a good observation. The wind crashes against the Belgian coast, sometimes in a great, howling fury, but the air behind the buildings is always perfectly still. It is always perfectly dead. I have another comparison. The Belgian Coast looks like one long container ship beached upon the shore. I told this to a barmaid once but she didn't understand.

You are wondering, now, why I live here on the Belgian coast, why I have lived here since I retired in a place where I do not know a soul, and where, because I do not speak the language or languages, I will never truly know a soul. You are wondering why I live here in Moederskerke specifically, which is the worst of it, the buildings replicated like a lazy backdrop in a computer game. Well, let me tell you this also: I do not like to be by the sea. It evokes a great depression in me. But don't be mistaken, I am not depressed by the water's stretching vastness, seeing myself as some tiny, meaningless speck in the grand scheme of things. I have been too large in this life. I wish I had been smaller, that I had done smaller things. Now, you are trying to imagine what I have done. I cannot promise I will tell you. Do not expect a confession.

When the water is still, a girl – a young woman, I should say – swims in the sea outside my apartment. She is famous in these parts, an elite athlete. Not a professional swimmer, but a gymnast. The first Belgian gymnast in some years to threaten world renown, so I understand. I do not like the way she swims. That is to say, I enjoy watching her swim and can derive pleasure from imagining the obliterating cold of the water on her skin, but I see weakness in her swimming technique. She does not float so well. Her muscles are fashioned for elite movements that are not good for paddling, her body trained to a density that is un-buoyant. I do not think of her body often. I do not mean her any harm.

When she was younger, she would swim only when the water was safe and with her father walking the beach beside her. Her father does not walk with her anymore. Perhaps she asked him not to, or he is infirm, or dead. It is not safe to swim alone here. Especially here, outside my apartment, where there is something off with the water. On still days, when it is quiet enough to hear the whisper of one's own thoughts, I watch it emerge: a slick, roiling whorl in the water that would drag even good swimmers under. I do not know why it is there. Perhaps it is due to a steep drop in the shelf combined with some swirling, manmade effluent from a nearby pipe. I am making this up. But it is there, trust me. I assume the girl does not see the whorl from the level of the water, because if she did – if she knew what lurked here – she would not swim alone in front of my flat.

All of this triggers visions. I often think of her sinking, struggling, gasping for air. I imagine rushing down to save her. Pulling her cold, supple body from the water and breathing some life into it. This is ridiculous: I cannot rush; I would be dragged under myself from nothing more than the wet weight of my clothes; my breath does not contain life. So I dream again. That I do not try to save her from that whorl and instead float above her, clear-sighted through the salty water, doing nothing.

Let me tell you this, at least. For my whole working life, I sailed on cargo ships. Ships that when you see them up close, seem to belong to some future or long-gone civilisation. Certainly, sailing upon them instills in you a sense of unreality. Your life is not a real life, as you surface in identical-looking ports with a thick wad of local currency, to spend exactly how you like. In forty years, I never rose above third mate. I was clever, hard-working, and possessed all the requisite skills to climb higher, but I did not. Perhaps the captains I worked for sensed unreliability in me, or something worse than unreliability, or unreliability that manifested in the worse sort of ways. I did not want to rise above the rank of third mate. It is an anonymous role.

You are thinking, now, that the Belgian coast evokes some sort of nostalgia for my time on the cargo ships; that the blocks of flats resemble the stacks of rusty containers I transported; that, sitting here, looking out to sea through my large window, reminds me of the times I would secretly climb the

containers and look out across the ocean, reflecting on all that I had done at port and all I would do at the next. This is a good observation, though I would not call it nostalgia.

In the summer, the apartment blocks heave under the weight of holiday-makers as they take their places in their seaside pigeonholes. The promenade is filled with children eating ice cream and driving go karts. Largely, I keep to my flat in these weeks, watch the people from a safe distance. But sometimes, when the sun is high and bright enough to render all else distant and grey in comparison, I venture outside. The restaurants serve lunch on terraces surrounded by plexiglass windbreaks. If you were sitting there, eating a grilled fillet of fish, you would watch the people on the promenade, the children in their go-karts, and you would feel like you were in a cage viewing one of nature's great spectacles. I finish my meal at a languorous pace then paddle in the sea where the children splash about. I am old and frail-looking enough that the mothers smile kindly at me. They assume I have grandchildren, which I don't. They assume I have suffered tragic loss, which I haven't. They pity me, which they shouldn't. It is a relief when I return to my flat, everything unscathed.

In the winter, when the tourists drain away from the coast, I venture out more often. I walk with my feet in the freezing sea, sometimes all the way to Ostend, where I sit beneath the old arches on the seafront imagining a life of genteel promenading. After my walks, I visit the pub beneath my flat for a small beer. The manager is dour and takes no interest in others. The locals are the same; they pay me no attention. But Lina is kind to me. She works the bar on Wednesdays and Thursdays. She is saving money to help fund her Olympic bid. Did I not mention I know the swimming girl personally? We speak regularly, Lina and I. When the pub is empty, I move to the bar, and we talk. She is happy to practice her English, under the promise that I correct her mistakes, which I don't. Her polishing a glass, me nursing a small beer, us talking. About the weather, the holidaymakers, thin slivers of my life on the cargo ships. I ask her to tell me of her future; how she will feel when she wins a championship medal; whether she will find true love and happiness; about the day she will leave Moederskerke to start a family. Your future, I tell her, is precious. Don't let anything or anyone steal it from you. Afterwards, I walk her home. I know she does not mind. She lives on the road one back from the coast, behind the windbreak, where the air is already dead.

What if I told you this. There was a time in my life when I found something like peace. I worked in a whaling museum on the island of South Georgia alongside a host of friendly people. One ship a week passed through the island, and a burst appendix would cause you to die. It is a happy existence. I restored a rusty whaling shed, fixed small engines, helped cook, and whittled scrimshaw into a menagerie of albatrosses, penguins, and elephant seals, which I observed in situ. The figures sold well in the museum shop, and I was commissioned to whittle each of the islanders, though I never got round to it. I had a companionship with a woman called Grace, who was devoutly religious and offered

blanket forgiveness. We thought about marriage. I was supremely content. Is any of this true? Do not believe specifics just because they are specific.

What if I tell you this instead: I stole from a homeless man in Shanghai; I committed fraud in Hamburg; I trafficked people from Hai Phong and sold them into slavery across Europe; I pushed a man overboard between Algeciras and Rotterdam; I deserted a woman pregnant with my child in Antwerp; I strangled three men to death in Port Klang, Mundra and Tanjung Pelepas; I gravely injured young people in more places than I can count. I did all of these things; I did none of these things; I did only one of these things, and it is not what you hope it to be.

A few weeks ago, on a Wednesday evening in the bar, during some light conversation with Lina about the beer, the beach, the time in Thailand I fed a drugged tiger from my hand and felt the roughness of its tongue, a roughness that can lap flesh from a bone, I asked her a question: Can a man ever truly change, ever truly repent? Polishing a glass, she graciously considered my pitiable question, her large hazel eyes set in a face that is too perfect. She said, Coach always says it's not about what you did, it's about what you do next. She set the glass back on the shelf. I left before she turned around. I was back the next night.

The coast feels empty this winter. Yesterday, hardly a soul passed my apartment on the promenade, only a mangy dog that stopped to look up at me before chasing after a rat. The whorl outside my flat has got worse. It spreads greedily across the water, tentacled undercurrents that only I can see. I would venture that I am lonely. Some days I tell myself I should sink myself in that whorl. But I do not have the courage. Lina swims often.

I slept badly last night. A storm struck the Belgian coast and I had a nightmare in which a doctor told me I would live forever. The weather blew itself out and today the cloud is thin and high, the sea sluggish and thick, the whorl thicker still. I have sat in my chair all morning, feeling terrible. Because I know what is coming. I know I will hear it. Call it a premonition, if you like. Splash-splash, splash-splash: the irregular chop of Lina's arms through the water. Her body moves inexpertly along the Belgian coast. The whorl gulps silently at the sand. Lina ploughs on regardless, and the whorl – oh that terrible maelstrom! – grows across the water as if in greeting. I fancy there is a moment where she might escape, where the whorl will relent, but the moment passes without fanfare. Simply, she is outside the whorl, and then she is within it, and she cannot break free. She swallows too much water and begins to panic, like I knew one day she would. She should not swim unaccompanied. That technique of hers is no good. Her body is sinking; it is her body that is doing the sinking. Because I am doing nothing, I promise.

Maybe now you can picture the Belgian coast. You might see it so clearly it is like you are there, your feet in the wet, scratchy sand. You gaze at the ships on the horizon, the grey sea, the windswept

promenade, the featureless apartment blocks, and you feel some great depression in you. You search for the whorl, but you are not sure you can make it out. You notice a lump that looks like a huge pale fish washed up on the sand, but you do not approach it. Then you walk down to the water and dip your toes in the sea while you still can, because you do not want to return to the Belgian coast.

Chloë Philp

We Have Made Your Bed Now Lie In It

Belushya Guba was no place for humans.

It was too far north, too inaccessible, no room for any kind of movement. Once you found yourself in Belushya Guba you were there for life, or at least until the cold came for you. The town sat on the very northern tip of Siberia, almost arctic, completely forgettable. There was nothing exciting; it was old Military land. If Belushya Guba were human it would be an old moustachioed general who still thought in Tungusic and reckoned they were safe here, encased in what had once been snow and thick ice but was now just the hardened earth. Anybody who had a little sense knew they were no longer safe, had not been safe for years. With the arctic ice nearly all gone to the north, war to the south, and barely any whales left to poach from the ocean, the residents of Belushya Guba were an impossible island in the middle.

And now, they weren't alone.

The first bear— a young female, blood spotted and limping— came in the low light of evening. She was a sepia photograph against the golden dusk sky and the whispers followed her around town like the beginning notes of a kettle set to boil. Mishka's mother pulled him inside despite his protests, let him watch— zoo-like— from the window as the bear trudged along the cold-cracked mud road; crept around their houses. They saw how she stuck her muzzle into their bins; limped away with a plastic bag someone had thrown away.

'Not good,' Mishka's mother had said to him when she had tucked him into bed that night. 'Not good. You must never go near the bears, Mishka. This is their land, not ours. We are the guests.'

The neighbourly visits continued, always at night, like a love affair. Mishka could hear them outside, romping around in the treacle-thick darkness, soft growls and low snorts breaking the silence. He fell asleep to their sounds, woke with the rest of the village in the morning to inspect what had changed. Usually it was simple things; bins tipped over and rummaged through, cars scratched and rubbed upon, fences torn down and covered in fine white hair. Occasionally, they got into a barn and killed a cow, but they never took it, always preferring a visit to the whaling yard for their dinner.

The bears had not yet braved the daytime, human-time. Not yet.

Mishka's bike screeched like a shot pheasant as he pedalled through the village. He passed the whaling yard— the balsamic copper-tinged smell getting stronger— and continued along the ice slick rubble

stones down to the edge of town. Somewhere, a motor rumbled, the choked sound of their last remaining quad bike on patrol at the forest border. Belushya Guya had awoken changed, a dead bear carcass steaming in the middle of the town, bags of rubbish surrounding the fallen body. The village had cowered, Mishka had ached to get closer. There was something about the bears that obsessed him; perhaps the warning from his mother and a young boy's natural instinct to disobey but he was desperate to see one up close. The body had already been moved by the time he was allowed outside, allowed to go and fetch the bins and prepare their waste for burning. Still, he looked out for it as he cycled, his head swinging back and forth as if he was crossing an endless road.

The houses at the end of the street had piled their rubbish in perfect three-bag pyramids outside their front doors. Little altars for the gods they knew would come in the night. None of the bags had been touched by anything other than human hands. The bears always seemed to stick to the same route when they came, guaranteed food, Mishka thought. He pulled the bags onto the little cart attached to the back of his bike, turned and set off back up the street to their rubbish store. His job was perfect monotony, pick the rubbish, stack the rubbish, in the cart, out the cart. He didn't mind, it gave him more time to look for bears.

The village was empty aside from him, most of the adults already out on the boats. If it were any other time, it would've scared him but it was the depths of daytime. He could see silhouettes of his remaining neighbours move in the windows of the houses he collected from, could still hear the gentle rumble of the quad bike. It reminded him of how the bears spoke to each other in the night, grumbling grunts and growls that felt like tectonic whispers through the village.

He got to the rubbish store— a cracked base of concrete with a spray of ashes over it. In the centre of the concrete, they had placed the carcass of the bear. Someone had skinned it, but Mishka could still see it was the bear, those two darkened eyes still staring straight ahead.

'Put the bags on it,' someone said. Mishka turned to see Nikolai at the house next door, his long greyish beard blowing in the frigid air. 'We've already stacked the wood under it. No use for a dead bear out here. Or any bears.'

'Are you sure?' Mishka said. 'Doesn't the butcher want—?'

'Burn it,' Nikolai said. He went back inside, leaving Mishka and the dead bear alone. The northerly wind stirred up some of the ashes from old fires, they wafted down around the bear's body like fresh snowfall, not that there had been any snow this year. Mishka's mother told him it was too warm for snow now, that there would be no more drifts to dive into along the line of the forest. No more angel silhouettes against the sage-tipped shoots of grass in their garden, no more attempts at igloos. Mishka studied the dead bear, watched the fake snow fall onto its skin. He placed one bag on the bear's back, another by each front paw. He got back on his bike, back and forth until he had every

last bag from town. His cairn of rubbish grew until it stood well into the sky, a fearsome monolith of corporation gold. Later on, they would burn it all to the ground. Tomorrow, Mishka would sweep up the snowflake-like ashes, pick out the globs of melted plastic that never seemed to go anywhere, brush the soot neat into a little circle of salt and pepper and stack the firewood on top ready for the next days incineration.

He stood back and stared up at his pyramid, glistening and bristling in the breeze.

The bear slunk into view along the street, Mishka saw it immediately, as if some part of him had wished it into existence. It moved as if it were a god, each step revered, untouchable. Mishka dared not breathe, dared not do anything. He had thought to shout out, the thin whistling rattle of 'Bear!' beating like a dead pheasant's wings through the village. One glance at the alive black eyes of the bear told him not to, told him not to make a sound. He was a guest in their land— his mother's words rushed back to him in a sluice of ice down his spine— a blight on *their* existence not the other way around.

The bear was close now, impossibly large, its thick middle rocking from side to side. It stopped on the other side of the pyramid of bags. The palms of Mishka's hands were imprinted with the plastic rubber on his bike handlebars. He squeezed them tighter as the bear lifted a paw, struck one of the lower bags, burst it open. It smelt like it should; of rot, of rubbish. Both their noses twitched. The bear lowered its muzzle, sniffled, struck another bag. The pyramid wobbled.

Mishka stood, an immovable pawn as the queen-bear checked its treasure. The bear pawed at the bags until it found one that did not burst, and then it took it in its maw, turned and ran back down the road, back out toward the forest.

Mishka followed. He was not aware of making the choice until his breath was coming in wet pants. He pedalled after the bear, the shriek of his bicycle tearing through the fir trees. Birds took a-flight as he sped through the dirt. He had lost the bear, there was only the tangle of trees and the thin line of smoke-grey sky above him. The forest was even quieter than his home, the rustle of chipmunks in the trees didn't sound like when he heard his neighbours open their doors and head to work, didn't sound like when the bears came in the night. It sounded foreign. He was the furthest he had ever been, an immigrant to the evergreen trees.

He kept going. The wheels of his bike felt thin, only a small layer of thinning rubber between him and nature. The further he went the warmer it was, the thick breadth of the tree trunks halting the wind. Sweat prickled, two hedgehogs tucked under his arms. He came to a clearing, saw the thick beat of the bear prints ahead of him in the black dirt, a few crisp packets tucked along the banks of the trail. They were cold as he picked them up, placed them in his pocket, continued along. Further,

more rubbish integrated itself with the woodland, jewelled flowers hidden underneath the untouched greenery. Mishka kept going, kept picking, followed the bear-prints.

They led him to a mountain.

It was not a mountain of rock and stone— there were no mountains this far North, only the towering cliffs a little further West— but a mountain of bags. It was not unfamiliar, Mishka realised, the piles of plastic. They were the same ones he himself stacked in the centre of town, just in lower mounds, more like a big tumbling of slick black rock than a mountain.

Mishka stopped; his bike finally silent. Before him was the bear he had seen in town, the black plastic bag swinging from its maw. He watched as the bear took the bag over to the others it had already stacked, placed the bag on top, butted it up further with its nose. It was creating something, that much was clear, but Mishka could not decide what.

The bear grunted. It sounded almost human, like the kind of sound Mishka heard his father say to his mother after he came back from work. Nothing replied to the bear, but the pile of rubbish began to move. In slow contractions the black plastic-rock pile birthed a baby bear.

It went to its mother, made another human sound, nuzzled its head between her legs and began to take milk. Mishka watched the mother stand still and let the baby take, watched her decide it was enough and butt her baby away, lead them back over to the pile of bags. Mishka watched the baby burrow itself back into its home, watched the mother turn and make her way over to a smaller pile of bags. She struck one with her paw, it burst open. She placed herself in front of the bag, her back facing the little gap the baby had disappeared into, like an old crone on the porch in the evening and began to eat.

Mishka turned his bike around, led it back through the clearing. When he was far enough away, he rode back to town, back home. It was dinner time, by the time he got back, his father's boots outside the door. Mishka parked his bike, went inside.

'I saw a bear! In town and then in the forest. It's built a house from our rubbish bags it had a baby with it. Do you think there's mor—'

'Don't be silly,' Mishka's father said. He didn't turn from his dinner plate to look at Mishka. 'You're late, come and eat your dinner.'

'But dad—!'

'Miskha. Now.'

Mishka obeyed. He sat and ate but he wasn't done.

'Why *is* there no snow?'

'Miskha—' His mother said. She set her knife and fork down. 'It's too hot for snow now, you know this.'

'It doesn't feel hot,' Miskha said. His father shot him a look and he lowered his gaze to his plate.

After, when he was allowed upstairs, he watched from his bedroom window as they set the tower of bags he had stacked alight. Plastic gold flames licked the sky as it turned from grey, to deep blue, to black.

Mishka watched the bags burn from the safety of his bedroom, thought of the bear in the forest with her baby, tucked away safe in its makeshift home, thought of the dead bear that was now nothing but ash swirling from the top of the flames. The fire dappled his room with light from the reflection through his window. If he closed his eyes in just a way, turned his face from the window just enough, it seemed like the fire was with him in his home, not just outside.

April Yee

Still Blue Thing

The marbles mass in her right armpit, little eggs about to hatch, warm and hard below her fingers: two spheres, then three, then four that she can roll beneath the thin damp skin. The doctor immediately sends her to the basement of the hospital for an ultrasound. His colleague down there is the best. Once, he adds, his colleague detected a node of fewer than four millimeters. She cannot visualize this but understands it is very small, even smaller than the other thing growing inside her, the fetus that has persisted despite blue raspberry slurpees and broken air conditioning and sensitivity training shifts for white managers about systemic oppression without the word *oppression*, because the corporate client does not approve of the concept.

Downstairs, a nurse leads her into a dark calm room lit by a barred window. The paper-covered bed is angled, like at an old folks' home. The nurse instructs her to remove her top and to put on a smock with the opening at the front for convenience. The nurse closes a curtain around the bed and leaves.

She tugs off her shirt and bra and sniffs her armpits, fearing that in her rush to the appointment she may have sweated. Anything that might bias the professionals is to be avoided. In real life she is quiet, but in medical environments she becomes jokey, fawning, commiserating about the fate of sports teams that she has never watched play. She layers the smock across her chest and lies down. For three months she has been unable to relax on her back without the threat of suffocating the fetus. She doesn't want to birth a still blue thing. But this bed holds her half upright. She closes her eyes and stretches her legs. The bed paper crinkles reassuringly. It says, *I will protect you*.

*

A man with glasses and a sheen of facial oil appears at her side. He sits at a large computer. The screen blinks toward her, anticipating her need to know. She has not yet had her prenatal scan but she imagines it will be similar, except that right now she wants the man to say nothing is growing.

He congratulates her on the pregnancy. She is not sure if he is a doctor and doesn't know how to address him. She smiles. Fawn. He puts on gloves and asks her to lift one side of her smock. She chooses the side with the marbles. Better to get the bad news first. He spreads cold gel across her right chest and armpit. Eyes on the screen, he skates a wand across the gel. She feels she should make small talk but fears distracting him from the four-millimeter prize. He replaces the right side of the smock and asks her to open the other side. Sometimes he pauses the wand and rotates it, nosing for

a better view through the skin. The screen fuzzes gray and black and white like the backs of her eyelids. She holds her breath so she doesn't disrupt his image. It is best, in the hospital, to exist as nothing more than a body part. This is the only way the body part can be fixed.

*

The first time the scalpel cut into her she was nine. She remembers the surgeon kneeling so his face was at her height. He asked if she would like to watch. She thought he would think she was brave if she said yes. She said yes. He wiped the mole on her right shoulder with wet gauze and injected cold liquid in her skin, and she did not even wriggle. He asked her what she would be doing at school if she were there, and she said she was missing an art class where they took clear colored sheets and melted them together like stained glass. She wanted to make an enormous window panel that would turn everyone inside a room blue, like underwater alien creatures.

When she was done speaking, he took a small sharp spoon and scooped out the mole like ice cream. Even as she watched the flesh leaving her body, she felt nothing more than the pressure of a moth's wings, and this made her feel powerful over her environment. He cut a wide margin in case any cells had migrated. Then he sewed it shut with black thread.

For weeks, at her mother's instruction, she rubbed a nub of raw turmeric over the wound, staining her fingers yellow. The site bloomed into a hard pink pencil eraser. The scar itched. It wanted to escape. Sometimes she missed the mole. It had been neat and completely hers, and it had managed to grow without anyone's help, until the surgeon took it.

*

Nothing to worry about, the doctor says about the marbles in her armpits. He never says *cancer*, as if by avoiding the word, he can avoid the possibility. He suggests, as a precaution, that she stop eating dairy. Pregnancy's elevated hormones enlarge breast tissue, and hers extends all the way to her armpits. Not common, but not rare. Removing the dairy will eliminate the additional hormonal load of lactating cows. She nods and nods. Although his speciality is breast cancer, he also advises her, since she is pregnant, to follow good nutrition for the fetus: organic vegetables, quality fish, farmers' market eggs.

She takes this one step further and decides she must become vegan. At home she looks up all the vegan restaurants in her neighborhood: two. She read reviews of vegan grocers and pins recipes for egg-free muffins made with ground chia. She purchases seitan. She tries all the brands of vegan

cheese in search of one that does not taste of decayed coconuts. Before the doctor's advice, she was the girl who snacked on half a baked brie at a time. She once spent a summer eating steak every night for dinner because that was the only dish she could cook. But now she is a woman. A pregnant, vegan woman. It is easier to be definitive, to draw a thick dark boundary between the old self and the new. If she does this correctly, only the things that are supposed to grow will grow. She keeps the receipts for the vegan purchases on her nightstand, and when she cannot sleep, she crinkles one into a ball to hear it speak: *I will.*

*

Her first prenatal ultrasound takes place in the women's ward of the community hospital. The waiting room's chairs are bound together by metal frames, the type at airports that force travelers into awkward sleeping positions. Patients can buy poker chips from a vending machine to exchange for ultrasound images. The receptionists' desk is sealed behind plexiglass. Even with this barrier, the staff hide from the bellied women and their husbands, who pretend not to see the graphic how-to-breastfeed leaflets pinned to the walls. The husbands would cower at the thought of her breast tissue climbing, like a vine, all the way to her armpits, sprouting berries, fruits that have now reassuringly stopped growing. *Nothing to worry about.*

She waits for a receptionist to emerge and states her name. She does not sit. She picks up a leaflet titled *Being Dead* with two men, elbows on knees, leaning toward each other in performative friendliness. She rereads the title: *Being Dad*. The support group meets Tuesdays at 5:45 pm at the local church. She picks up another leaflet on vaccinations and another on home birth. The lists on the last two leaflets are overwhelmingly long, so she replaces them in their plastic sleeves. She keeps the *Dad* one. She feeds the machine a bill and receives 20 coins and a blue poker chip.

*

Chip on the shoulder, the white managers in the sensitivity training say about people who talk about things the white managers think they should not talk about.

Divisive discussion, the white managers say.

I don't see color, the white managers say. *You can be white, black, brown, yellow, blue.*

*

...percentile, says the man holding the ultrasound wand. She waits for him to repeat himself, but he pushes on.

IUGR, he says.

Restriction, he says.

Decision, he says.

She is told to go home and wait for a phone call. Her mind is cluttered with acronyms. She forgets to give the man the poker chip for the photo.

Later, on the phone, a doctor explains that she has a very small baby, that this sometimes happens with low levels of vitamin B, that if she is vegetarian (*vegan*, she silently corrects) there are appropriate supplements to address the nutritional deficiency.

That it would be prudent to have a surgery to help the baby out early, just to be safe, if she would permit.

That, really, everything will be fine.

A formal letter comes in the mail with charts and numbers and a date, and she adds this to the receipts on the nightstand. She traces the X-Y curve with her fingertip up and down, normal to abnormal, abnormal to normal. Her fingertip is a scalpel across the curve of her belly. She wishes she had gotten the poker chip photo to see just how small the baby is. Instead, she nudges her nail in the chip's radiating plastic ridges. A bursting sun. A collapsing star.

*

Technically, she wants to say to the white managers, they would have to have a rare form of colorblindness to not see blue. Even then, they would be able to tell the difference between many colors. They might simply confuse blue and green. Less brilliance. Dying stars.

*

The letter instructs her to fast from eight p.m. the night of the operation. She covers the lentils in brewer's yeast in case this final boost of vitamin B grows the baby overnight. She feels she is in that movie about death row. A prisoner requests four Klondike bars for his last meal. The silver squares of ice cream arrive on a tray for him to eat alone.

In the morning they ask her to lie on a steel table in a white room. She is disappointed by the paper curtain between her belly and her head, like she is a woman about to be fake-sawed by a magician. The anesthesiologist sits by her ear and tells her to say something if she can feel anything.

But how will she feel anything without seeing something? She looks at the board where they have written the details of her operation in blue erasable ink. Her name bears the shadows of past women.

Tight as a duck's ass, a surgeon says behind the curtain. Or maybe it is a nurse. She doesn't know if they are talking about her womb or something entirely outside the room. A window at the top of a lighthouse. A pastry tube dispensing buttercream. She asks the anesthesiologist what they are doing now.

They're nearly done, he says. She can barely find his eyes between his surgical cap and his mask. He looks away. Something small and shiny is hoisted above the curtain, a thing hardly bigger than the gloved hand that holds it. No applause, no congratulations. The hands make it disappear, but she has already copied the image in her mind. The creature is beautiful, a perfect shade of blue, the blue she had wanted to make when she was nine years old making a stained glass window big enough to dye all the bodies in a room. It is exactly what she wanted, and she made it by herself, and it does not matter that she cannot hear a sound.

The Manchester Writing Competition was established in 2008 and for 15 years has celebrated Manchester as an international city of writers, finding diverse new voices and creating opportunities for writer development. The Competition offers the UK's biggest literary awards for unpublished work, has attracted more than 25,000 submissions from over 80 countries and has awarded more than £220,000 to writers. Designed to encourage and celebrate new writing across the globe, the competition is open internationally to new and established writers.

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

Press enquiries: Laura Deveney: l.deveney@mmu.ac.uk. The judges and finalists are all available for interview.