

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition
2017 Poetry and Fiction Prize
Short Lists

Since its launch in 2008, Carol Ann Duffy's Manchester Writing Competition has attracted more than 15,000 submissions from over 50 countries and awarded more than £135,000 to its winners. The Competition encourages new work and seeks out the best creative writing from across the world, with Manchester as the focal point for a major international literary award. The winners of this year's £10,000 Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be revealed at a gala ceremony on Friday 1st December in the atmospheric Baronial Hall at Chetham's Library in the heart of the city. These are the UK's biggest prizes for unpublished writing.

This year's Poetry Prize was judged by Adam O'Riordan and former winners Mona Arshi and Pascale Petit. The Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Bonnie Greer and Angela Readman.

For further details, go to: www.manchesterwritingcompetition.co.uk.

Poetry

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2017 Manchester Poetry Prize Short-listed Poems

Romalyn Ante

Nightingale Pledge

(after Nightingale Pledge)

Before God and those assembled here, I pledge:
I will check the screen tracing your heart rhythm –
the beep steady as a bird's call from the shadows.
I will tie your gown, so faithfully strong
it won't show your bare back, your leaf-like keloid.
Only filtered air will stroke your unwashed hair.
I will carry out to the best of my ability
my nocturnal duties – the warm Horlicks,
the call bell, the ajar door. I will devote
my midnight listening to you hum a song –
something that lessens the weight of my eyelids.
I will attend to the sound of your bare feet
as they touch the sticky floor. In the morning
I will explain what the cylindrical bottles are for;
without a word, you'll unbend your arm to me.
My fingertip will search for the strongest vein.
I will not do anything evil. The defib pads
will fly out of the metal drawer, I will slap them
on your chest: one on the right, below the clavicle,
the other on the left, just under the armpit.
I will be the first one to greet you, *Welcome back*.
Even if I know you'd rather go. I will not reveal
the story of your life, how your daughter left
when she learned of your diagnosis.
I will devote my hours listening to things
you do not say. I will maintain the prestige
of my profession, but release a wild laugh
when I find out you pretend choking
on your egg-white tablets
so I will pat your back.

Transform

The nurse tells stories of her country –
the *kapre* and *espíritos* in dipterocarps,
the tale of Mount Makiling, and now
I no longer count the pills she puts in the pot.

I call her Maria, goddess of Makiling.
She charms all the doctors who visit.
Her ethereal smile as loud
as daylight that engulfs the lounge.

Soon, this home trembles into a jungle
and the wall rails on the hallway
bloom into ivy and balloon vines.
The coat stand at the corner transforms

into a ficus, and when the lights go off,
glow-worms rally on its aerial roots.
Today, Maria dribbles the therapy ball
which bounces into a *sarimanok* –

ruby feathers flutter.
We jump out of our wheelchairs
and race to capture the harbinger of luck.
But there are days when Maria doesn't come,

when the wind sounds like Annie Laurie on flute.
There are days of silence, when a comrade
permanently moves opposite the road –
a spider traces his name on the limestone.

Molave

The doctor and I read
the MRI scan. Your lungs
look like an upside-down tree.

The right and left bronchus
are the hard trunks of molave
you use for building *bancas*.

Your air sacs, the clusters
of purple flowers. I think about
your old habit of two packs a day

and wonder if those carbon deposits
are as black as the pea-sized fruits
you weigh on your palm.

There are nights you are too breathless
to press the inhaler in your mouth
and days you give me that stare

as you pull off your nebuliser mask
and say I am rude for not knocking.
Soon, the tree in your ribcage

will stop releasing oxygen. If you want
I can wheel you to the garden today,
let you suck in a cigarette or two

in the cool shade. But please don't break
our silence by asking me if I know that
those leaves are resistant to beetle bites.

Antiemetic for Homesickness

A day will come when you won't miss
the country *na nagluwal sayo*.
You'll walk on gritted streets, light snow
will shawl you like a protective mother.

A vertigo of distant lights will not deceive you.
You may now bury all the kisses of yesterday
in the fold of your handkerchief, the illuminated
star-shaped lanterns, the *tansan* tambourines.

But keep the afternoon your father sold his buffalo
to rent a *jeepney* to take you to the airport.
The driver who spat out phlegm with the same
trajectory of a grasshopper landing on the ground.

Keep the list you wrote the night before you left,
promise you won't return till you become *someone*.
Keep the cassette tapes – your children's voices
shrill as the edges of winter stars.

Rest on a pillow where you can hear the beat
of your lover's heart. Listen to Tagalog songs
that help you sleep through the cold,
scratches of December.

Keep the booklet of *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*
in your uniform pocket, powder-blue
like her robe. Pray the rosary,
feel each *kamagong* bead.

Here's the tea-stained smile of a *kababayan*,
inviting you to a party. Go no matter how heavy
the day has been, and how many corpses
you have carried within.

Enjoy the home-cooked *pansit*, the roasted pig's head,
the blood-red apple in its mouth. Here's a karaoke mic.
Sing your soul out till there's El Niño in your throat
and you can drink all the rain of Wolverhampton.

A day will come when you won't need an antiemetic
for homesickness. You will accept, wholeheartedly,
the good and the bad, the patient who always buzzes
for a commode, the search for the missing boot

of an A&E habitué – the village's drunkard.
You will learn to heal the wounds of their lives,
and the wounds of yours. Love – even the puff
of a Black Country accent on your face.

Romalyn Ante grew up in the Philippines and moved to the UK in 2005. Her debut poetry pamphlet is *Rice & Rain*. She is a Jerwood/Arvon mentee 2017-2018. She is Commended in Battered Moons Poetry Competition and received Creative Future Literary Awards for Poetry in 2017. As a recipient of Artists' International Development Fund, she travelled back to the Philippines in November 2017 to write about culture, identity, and reconnections, and to talk about her craft at De La Salle University, Manila.

Ella Frears

I Knew Which Direction To Go

from the way the moon was tilted towards the sea.
My heart, pulled gently from my chest, was carried over the waves
as though sleep walking. I held my breath, concentrated
on the new space within. There was pain, but it was not new pain.

Pray now, whispered the sand and I fell to my knees thinking:
moonlight, moonlight, moonlight — — —
until it was no longer a word but a colour and then a feeling
and then the thing itself.

Walking Home One Night

I catch the moon, winking through the trees.
I'm gripping my house-keys, sharp end pointing outwards
between my knuckles. It's like glimpsing an old friend through a crowd.

I soften. She is a sliver, leaning towards the soft end of yellow.
I breathe in the night, lift my fingertip to fill-in the circle, squinting.
Turning onto the stretch of road that I don't like, lampless and narrow,

I tell her: *I will be calling on you as a witness if something happens.*
I will testify that you saw the whole terrible thing through one half-closed eye.

The Moon Bathers

Last night we slept under a full moon. Our bodies wound
like pale snakes through the silver-tipped grass.

We opened our mouths and let the light fall in.

Have you ever tried it? It is the closest light to water, pooling
on your eyelids, cool and wordless on your tongue. We slept deeply,

eyes open. Our breath becoming something pulled from us. We felt
the weight of the water in the air and wild laughter began to well-up inside.

We threw back our spotlight heads and let it pour forth until morning.

Phases of the Moon/Things I Have Done

New Moon: I ransacked the house for something that does not exist.

Waxing Crescent: I ate twelve peaches.

First Quarter: I Tipp-Exed an old letter from him, leaving only the word: *basement*.

Waxing Gibbous: I put on my favourite underwear and cried in the mirror.

Full Moon: I buried a pork-chop in the garden, walked backwards, howled.

Waning Gibbous: I thought a great deal about drilling a hole in my head.

Third Quarter: I told the neighbour my heart beats only for her.

Waning Crescent: I stood outside facing the house, waited for myself to appear.

I Asked Him to Check the Roof, Then Took the Ladder Away

All night I enjoyed the lie: *not feeling well, upstairs in bed but sends his love*.

I could feel his frustration above me, through the ceiling; could feel it so strongly that it was as though my chest were the roof and he was trapped inside me. *How will we go on after?* I thought, *how will I end this?*

He hadn't called for help. Maybe he'd worked out a way down but I didn't think so. The dinner party was wonderful. As the guests left I looked up and realised that there was no moon.

Shine, darling. I whispered. And from behind the chimney rose his little head.

Ella Frears is a poet and visual artist based in south-east London. She has had poetry published in *Poetry London*, *The Rialto*, *POEM* and *the Moth* among others. Ella is a trustee and editor for *Magma Poetry* and was shortlisted for Young Poet Laureate for London 2014. She has completed various residencies for Tate Modern, the National Trust, Newlyn Art Gallery and most recently she was Poet in Residence at Royal Holloway University writing about the Cassini Space Mission. Ella's debut pamphlet *Passivity, Electricity, Acclivity* is forthcoming with Goldsmiths Press.

Don Judson

Notes from Prison/Florida (1984-1992)

101339

(PCI)

Language cut at the knees,
syntax—

Old men scattering feed / Ceremony of children

Mothers sisters friends if you could be walked down into

this place where language begins I would say *Forgive me* This morning,

anointed with cigarettes and jailhouse wine, some white boy leans in and runs

a shank deep inside a Cuban working the canteen The sirens go off then

Cops in riot gear hustle us back to our cells

It will be days before we are out again

Tommy—

(UCI/Death Row)

I remember one time shackled

to a metal bench in the prison van

I was able to pull up and glimpse through the wire mesh back window
a fishing shack just off a river—and an egret working the shoreline there.

Everything stopped inside that moment. I swear I counted all the seconds of my life.

I thought, "This is what I'll hold forever," but of course I didn't though I can still
picture the sky that afternoon building dark and meaning as it does during summer
here in the south, a thunderstorm—but I don't know what I believed any of it

had to do with me. Years later, working at a gas station in Key West, I stole
a woman's address from her check book. The woman was beautiful. And pregnant.

Most mornings she came into the station she seemed ill at ease around me.

I drove by her apartment a few times over the next week, and then one night, broke in.

I bound the woman with duct tape I found in a kitchen drawer.

All that happened next and up until, they said, an hour before dawn is untrue.

It did not take place. It was just a dream. A bad one. Tonight, as I sleep inside
the voices that hold each of us to our own absolute stillness, I would like to dream
about the fishing shack only and the bird I saw there. I want to know what they meant.

former gang member put to death tuesday evening

(UCI/Death Row)

4 pair of socks

4 t-shirts/boxer shorts

3 photographs

2 books c/o inmate sent direct from publisher

3 articles cut from a magazine

1 letter folded

there was a slight delay in like a lion/peaceful as a lamb

normally placed in the crease of an arm pronounced: 9:24 est

who shot dumped set on fire rolled in a carpet

who invisible but wishing to believe along that river fronting beautiful corporate buildings/condos the delicate wrist of jesus—that just one, amongst all that glass those windows, must have glimpsed if but for a instant and no matter how small or distant as he drove past 80 kilometers from the city

a grass fire someone thought and who repeatedly said the words *I love you*

the most aggressive of the shooters/mentally impaired july 2nd/14 yrs

officials finally fitted the lines into his hands impossible these miles of empty

roads empty fields but as time goes on they fill with thoughts and words spoken

living and dead the nights (how many) and every dream not just now but the fields

a room who has entered the city/its nation taking several deep breaths while praying

who mouthed kisses who

18 yrs old 6 days before the killings who

started to snore

and eventually

Stopped

101339

(APCI)

You tell me pray

but this is prison Hard morning light on the day they release me

All summer is repentance, its voice articulating a scraped blue sky

For weeks, hurrying along a crowded street, pausing at a door, sitting outside the kitchen at work release I am suddenly taken back—caught in a moment between this world and the other—but it is never the Cuban I see, clutching his cut wide stomach, or the white boy waiting alone in a toilet stall for half the cell-block to fuck him; instead, it is the Haitian in lockdown who climbed his bars, incessant—day and night—preaching how *they* were trying to kill him and who *they* finally pulled as they warned they would from his cell and stripped naked and beat and threw naked down an old stone stairwell to the psych-tank with its steel door and single cot tossed without care into a far corner

By fall I am back in the city—watching there not for anyone or anything, but just a *coming*

the approach *of* And for that, again, little prayer Yet this—

I can tell you this: that the white boy, who wanted to, could not manage for years to die while the Cuban, wishing only life, did, his heart stopped in mid-step at the infirmary door

and the Haitian, ever since—insistent (as if leaned close)—both of us/stripped

now like trees/the season's waning

**Attleboro/Massachusetts
(2015)**

Sitting Out at Night on the Stoop

First come the dog walkers
(—*Mother*

Then tatted-out fourteen year olds with cell phones

fucker their soft insistent call)

After two, junkies and skels open yet again

A beautiful opera of themselves across these same scattering lots where I once listened
To Father, alone in his room at night, praying *Do not unto us Do not /* hours on end

This just before Florida where he moved us soon to play out some sort of final string

By dawn the first of the trash pickers: Wagon Man with his Red Radio Flyer
Some few others from my block their carts fastened to peeling bicycle frames
And among them always the same Russian woman I see deep into winter rains

—Two or three bags over each shoulder and bent it seems forever

Forward hair splayed across a pale enduring face—But it's summer I see her most

On mornings I've taken my dog early and we stand together a while yet in the yard
Local train slowing just beyond a line of trees / Light
Opening then over rooftops and across roadways

Opening as well the separate rooms where each in turn waits
Endless but ending in itself It is enough for that

Don Judson is a poet and fiction writer living in Attleboro, MA, USA. His writing honors in fiction include a Howard Foundation Award, a MacColl Johnson Fellowship and an Emerging Fiction Writer Award (for a novel) from New York University. Among others, he has won a 49th Parallel award and the Boudreaux Prize for poetry and been nominated for three Pushcart Awards. Poetry publications include *Rhino, The Bellingham Review, 580 Split, Palooka, Witness, Tupelo Quarterly, and Nimrod.*

Lindsay Means

The Sea Cow

I think Steller must never have seen a land cow before:

that beast tangled in sunken weeds
warm and leathery like
a familiar old couch

thrown overboard,
upside down in the bay.

To think that her tough old gray snout,
columned where long-ago ancestors had trunks,
looked anything like the gentle narrow
black-spotted faces that mooned over
the wooden fence in my grandmother's backyard—
while in her old age they lived next door,
Grandma had never seen a cow at all
until she was seventeen, with two children already
(it was the 1940s
and her father ran a hotel on Skid Row
and nobody will ever tell me what was done there.)

There was still a river in Los Angeles then
though it was already filled with garbage,
and it is hard to think that same city
shared an ocean with
the cool rocky bays of Kamchatka,
eagles whipping down through low clouds,
where Steller looked at the creature before him
and saw a mermaid,
saw the paddle-fins
with their gentle wrists,
the goblet tail,
the long parabola of her dinosaur spine,
the gleam of a horizon in her cannonball eye.
The absence of powerboat scars.

A land cow is to a sea cow
what a car is to an old steam train,
by which I mean
the alfalfa fields I grew up in
are paved over now.
I don't know what happened to the beasts next door.
I don't remember what it felt like
to see the ocean for the first time
and of course all of Steller's sirens
are gone now too,
their big slow grace too easy for this hungry sea.

The Hospital

Sometimes a river meanders too far –
years pass and the land changes.
Your grandchild becomes someone else's grandfather,
the river leaves the river.
Cattails and centuries wedge the banks against themselves.

In Japanese, *moyamoya* means “puff of smoke” –
a tiny bonfire, or a dragon's first breath.
On a child's CT scan, it means that small vessels narrow and tangle.
They say *cerebrovascular accident* because *stroke* sounds like luck.

Six hundred years ago, the oxbow lake near my cousins' house
was part of the Rio Grande. My cousins told me that it happened
because God was playing horseshoes with the river.
That it was haunted by ghosts of old conquistadors.

The cure for Moyamoya disease is a surgery too delicate for its own name:
Encephalo-duro-arterio-synangiosis.
Under the dura, something galactic: luminescent thoughts,
the inner workings of an imagination.

Gloved hands can reroute rivers and streams,
creeks smaller than a strand of hair.
The skull clicks back into place like a lock.

For a long time, the only fish in the oxbow lake were ghosts.
A child wakes up with the memory of conquistadors,
the river returning to the river.

A Thing About Machines

Nothing but static. All the way up the stairs
he succumbed to the old fears,
but when he got to the top floor
he found a forest for a bedroom.
Moss wrinkled out of the closet;
birch trees spindled around the bedposts.
He stood ankle-deep in grass.
A stream whispered beneath the radiator.
The window was curtained in morning glories
and humming with insects,
but outside again a car engine rumbled,
and the machines rampaged against the door.

Portrait of Mariana de Silva y Sarmiento (Unfinished)

I wouldn't have painted her that way –
all velvets and moonwhite silk,
hair the color of faraway rain.
Her left hand holds a small gold ring.
In the right, a skeleton key.
I always had trouble with hands
and nobody has skeleton keys lying around anymore.
In those days, everything was turpentine and patrons.
Maybe the patrons ran out of money.
Maybe the gold chairs were just gilded wood after all,
maybe someone else made her more beautiful.
Maybe the artist dropped dead of a plague.
(In those days, everything was *pentimento* and plagues.)
Maybe the artist didn't like the look
of her lapdog, set his paintbrush down,
and walked away into some Italian sunset,
leaving her holding a puzzle piece
of Pekinese-sized blank canvas.
Under the raincloud hair,
where the face should be, nothing looks back—
skin grown over features, shadows instead of eyes.
I've never used the word *masterpiece*, but
you can buy a nightmare at auction.

Lindsay Means was born in California and lives in Brooklyn, New York. Winner of the 2015 Elinor Benedict Poetry Prize, she works as an editorial assistant at Riverhead Books.

Carolyn King

THE CUCKOO IN THE PILLOW-BOOK

(on first looking into the Pillow-Book of Sei Shōnagan)

Because their song was beautiful,
those harbingers of summer,
I lay awake at night - longing
for it to begin.

That day we set out early
for the Temple, reaching the gates
of Urin and Chisoku in record time,
the sky still overcast
to match my mood.

Some of the carriages were dressed
in maple branches, faded hollyhock.
The High Priestess moved silently
among us – proud, intangible.
I could feel my insignificance

stifling me, forcing me into the wings:
until a chorus started up – *hototogisu*
filling the air with music.
And I stood tall, teetering
on the balls of my feet

to catch sight of the birds;
rising, like dawn, a second time,
climbing on to its fragile shoulders,
stepping outside my shadow.

SENRYU

the river willow
planted in our old home then
transferred to gold sand

soon cold-shouldered sea wild garden cliffs
sheer as imagination: died knee-high
to fuchsia grown fat and purple-pink
on lazy afternoons

ahead of Spring and *hotogisu's* English cousin
cuckoo call drowned out by fickle waves
of passion promising much
delivering nothing.

Christmas: we cross the storm-swept Solent
(so different from our muddy Thames) – decide
the day's too foul for festive shopping:
Shall we go home?

The children's faces light up, like candles
on the fir tree in our clifftop cottage.
"Can we?" And I know then, just one month in,
that *home* is somewhere else -

yet we persist dig in our heels:
the willow weeps kicks up
its heels in protest:hara-kiri
drowns our Christmas carols.

Spring reveals itshrivelled snowed in;
salt sea air its lungs refuse to reconcile.
We soldier on: it's what we do. The while
our children thrive, as children do.

River willow time
muddied by memories cloud
cuckoo-land daydream

UNPALATABLE

We query the word when she takes our order;
understand *oiseaux*, but meet with a shake of the head
when we venture “*poulet?*” – accept instead
the diminutive *oiselets*.

When they arrive, on a silver tray,
our ten-year-old lifts the lid on the *cailles*:
eight little quails with lolling heads and curling claws,
sightless eyes and drooping tail-feathers.

Six-year-old Simon’s look of dismay says it all.

We smuggle the small, sad bodies stealthily
out of the old *auberge* – in a vanity case
that held our love-letters (long before the holiday,
planned to revive them, ricocheted into a nightmare).

You promise humane disposal;
but, come dawn, you go back on your word
as we hit the rain-stained tarmac
hard as your cold-hearted lack of concern.

I don’t believe there were tears in your eyes:

more likely the cuckoo in our nest
caused you to misjudge the right-hand turn.
Lucky to crawl from the wreckage alive,
we abandon the luggage. It sinks back into the mud.

By the time they’ve returned it to England
you’ve already gone. I retrieve what I can,
washing our dirty linen in private.
The children say I’m washing you out of my hair.

The vanity case isn’t there.

I still wonder who disposed of it - opened the lid
to lay puzzled eyes on those eight little shrouds
(tiny shapes draped in white table-napkins)
head-to-tail; like chess pieces in a compendium.

Maybe they took to the air - wings and hearts
beating for joy when the catch was released -
surmounting the clouds of a human stalemate
heartlessly ditched with the sad, limp bodies of quails.

FLOWER-BED

The furrow in the mattress is in recession
now the pillows have smoothed their ruffled feathers;
so why does it wound like a bed of nails,
hard as a futon?

I cradle my pillow-book delicate child
from early days when Spring and cuckoo
came as one summer was long and winter
brought coal fires dark nights your warm embrace.

You wouldn't recognize the garden now my scythe
has stripped the terrace; and the hole where we planted
the willow has long since healed and nurtured scabious,
hollyhock montbretia.

The children are irreplaceable: they flew the nest
soon after you deserted the temple. But I stand firm,
rising on the shoulders of each fragile dawn, knowing
I shall no longer hear the cuckoo calling Spring

but listening for *hotogisu* heralding Summer:
long days short nights *might-have-beens*;
and always the song of thrush and goldfinch
drowned by the harsh persistence of a seagull's cry.

* * * *

The cuckoo called uglier
than *hotogisu*.
All you had to say was *NO*.

The whole nest wrecked
for the sake of a syllable.

Carolyn King lives on the Isle of Wight, where two of her poems are cast in bronze at Island landmarks and others are currently displayed at Freshwater's 'Dimbola Lodge' as part of the 19th-century pioneer photographer Julia Margaret Cameron Exhibition. Carolyn was involved educationally for many years with language-impaired children and this is often reflected in her poetry. Since being short-listed for the Manchester Prize in 2013 she has taken first prizes in the Second Light annual competition and the 'formal' category of Poetry on the Lake, second prizes in the Thomas Gray Tercentenary, the Segora and the Sentinel annual poetry competitions and a number of other awards.

Laura Webb

The Greatest Lady Swimmer in the World *for Agnes Beckwith*

Dear greatest lady swimmer, does water taste like buckets,
like swallowing a flower only to find it blossomed in your stomach
hours later, casting its turquoise shoots in your small intestine,
its petals surfacing ceaselessly on your tongue?

You tell yourself to pass the time, the hulls of boats
that hang like heavy hearts beneath the water's surface
are clouds the sky has flipped over to better absorb the rain.
You smell, you know this, like hard boiled eggs.

We watched from heights as on sands greased men
ran limpet-fingers along your flanks and soft edges.
We held our doubt tightly in our fists, like the hands of children.

Overlooking the Irish sea, we sucked water up straws
into growing bellies, briny pregnancies we did not regret,
months later birthing strong girls like grains of salt.

The Coincidence

Based on the painting *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (artist unknown, c. 1600-1610) in Tate Britain

Sister 1: Have you noticed how the sky outside is coming apart in pieces?

Sister 2: I have, sister. Have you heeded how, whilst it hints at holding many moons, it offers none?

Sister 1: Exactly that. And how when water falls it falls in clusters,
so you never catch a drop alone? And how no one ever gives us a reason for these things?

Sister 2: A friend told me that at the ends of the country they collect the rain in massive buckets
they call oceans.

Sister 1: And what happens next, sister?

Sister 2: Cows come and drink from them, it pleases them.

Sister 1: It sounds pleasing, sister.

Both laugh

Sister 1: Isn't it terrible to think, sister, that sometimes heavy things fall on people, and break them?

Sister 2: Beyond terrible, sister.

Sister 1: Like musical instruments. Maybe even lutes.

Sister 2: What makes you say that, sister?

Sister 1: I was just thinking of terrible ways to die, sister.

Sister 2: Like an allergy to feathers in a henhouse?

Sister 1: Exactly, sister.

Sister 2: Or choking on your fingernail as you bite it?

Sister 1: Precisely so.

Sister 2: Why do you think we have hands, sister?

Sister 1: I imagine it is to better love each other, sister.

Sister 2: My fingers bend backwards and forwards, sister. Further than I think they ought.

Sister 1: Further evidence, sister, if any was wanted.

Sister 2: Quite, sister.

Brothers

You said they were like racehorses
not in the way they jostled and ran
or in the way folk bet on them
or in the way they lived or died
but in the way you only ever know them
through the way they spring and land;
their dark faces on the sonogram the
black river, the white kicked-up sand.

Catwoman: An Explanation

When she came home from the night shift, with three carrier bags filled with lord knows what, hair half out its plait, blood under her nails, you knew she'd not have resorted to violence unless a serious provocation under federal law. Gone, the days, mixing her own rosé from bottles of white and red, she told you of her childhood in Nebraska; how, at night, she spied the shapes of mountain bears move across the belly of the mountain and from a certain angle the mint on her windowsill looked like a singular tree growing in space. One slow winter, you tracked constellations from the patio deciding which lost creatures they were, how their lives would develop once they moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the career paths they would choose – their dictated fates. Now you catch her words in stealth like fish, pull them out of the water to hear her *hierarchy* rhyming with *karaoke*, over and over.

There were a few things you never worked out: her allergy to fur; how she never wore sunscreen, even in burning summer; why, when you hear glasses clatter in the kitchen, they sound like love.

snoek

I've seen pyramids being built, their structures digging out triangle homes in the sky like bright milkshakes sucked out of glasses. I've read bus prints the way some people read tealeaves and faces in tall windows of buildings from the top deck. I said I wanted to swim with dolphins but when it came to it I dangled my legs off the side of the schooner and watched their dense shadows swimming under the surface the way gravity pulls away from us indefinitely.

I found the two broken ends of myself in a kitchen drawer and sold them for scrap. I've smoked through a Russian banknote. I've looked in your eyes and told you I couldn't tell you I loved you. I watched Lincoln's monument being built, caught sweat rolled off backs, felt the gap between unfamiliar toes gasp for air. I dug a tunnel under ocean to lay telephone cabling's fine wire, and it was both freezing and boiling and my hands stuck together. I told you I was a polyamorist, a tight-ropeist, and sometimes both.

Laura Webb was born in Birkenhead in 1985. In 2006 she won the Blackwell Publishing/*The Reader* magazine 'How to Write a Poem' competition. She completed an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) at the University of Manchester's Centre for New Writing and a PhD on contemporary poetry at Sheffield University. Among other places, she has had poems published in *CAST: The Poetry Business Book of New Contemporary Poets*, *Best Friends Forever*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Manchester Review*, *Magma*, *Poems in Which*, *Poetry Wales*, *Stand*, and *The Rialto*. She lives and works in London.

2017 Manchester Fiction Prize Short-listed Stories

The Bed

K. L. Boejden

My father didn't really want to die at home. It just worked out that way. Once he reached that point where going to a hospital meant dying at a hospital, we thought it would be better to keep him in a place he knew. We didn't tell him, though. We just kept bringing him his glass of water while we watched the fear of death slowly settle in his eyes. Like black grains of sand sinking to the bottom of a forest lake, my sister said. I disagreed. I thought it looked more like small, black seeds swirling in a bucket. But we didn't argue. Metaphors were meaningless at this point.

He was afraid. That much was clear. He was afraid of going to sleep, afraid of closing his eyes and letting go, leaving his soul, his self, his whatever in the unsupervised care of his failing body. He struggled to get up and even though I knew the nurse had told him to stay in bed, I indulged him. I saw how the strange, compelling deathbed logic – you stay in bed, you die in bed – left him only one rational reaction.

I helped him up, lifted him into the wheelchair, rolled him through the house and down the ramp that I had built out of beer crates and plywood. And outside, on the patio, I stood behind him, holding his head – one hand on his brow, the other on his chin – trying to soften the rasping wheeze of his breathing.

I didn't say anything. I knew it was too late for that. The time for the real goodbye, the wry smile and the manly tears, had come and gone. It had been days since we had watched it pass, floating by on wafts of deathbed chatter – somewhere in between an *are you thirsty* and the increasingly insistent *try to get a little sleep*.

So instead of talking I let his head tilt back and let him gaze into the sky, hoping that a glimpse of starlight would somehow soothe his breathing and still the motion of the small, black seeds settling in his eyes.

Gradually, his fists unclenched and his breathing slowed and the wheeze became so soft that I could hear the TV in the neighbors' kitchen and the sound of an approaching car. Then the doorbell rang and I heard my sister greet the nurse.

She smiled as she stepped out on the patio and put her hand on my father's shoulder. Looking first at him and then at me, she suggested that maybe it would be better just to stay in bed. Her voice was gentle, but there was an edge of irritation in it. She muttered something to herself as she pushed him up the ramp and back into the bedroom.

Afterwards, she went over everything again. Sitting with my mother and my sister at the kitchen table, she repeated what the doctors at the hospital had told us weeks ago, explaining to us in detail the effect of water, the porosity of the mattress and the pros and cons of a wooden bedframe.

The sedative was supposed to make him sleep until morning, but he was wide-awake when I looked in on him an hour later. He was struggling to get up. So, I put the glass of water down and moved the chair into position. When I tried to help him up, however, I realized that something had begun to change. I couldn't move him anymore. I had carried him in my arms every day for the past few weeks, and now his shrunken frame of skin and bones had suddenly become too heavy for me to lift.

I saw the reason right away, glimpsed it through the opening of his pajama shirt. On the skin above the navel, among the scaly rashes and the bruised injection sites, a single blade of grass was sprouting.

It looked like something I could have plucked from the lawn out front. Just a plain, green leaf of grass that broke off between my fingers when I touched it.

I tried to hide it in my hand, but my father must have noticed. He pushed against the mattress and began to dig his fingers into his abdomen. All I could do was to clutch his wrists and tell him that there was nothing else to clear, that it was just a single blade of grass and I had handled it already. I swore that I would take care of everything. Every seedling, every sprout and plantlet, I promised to uproot as soon as I saw it breach his skin.

His eyes wavered, refocused, and fixed on me. For the first time in weeks, he seemed to really see me. It lasted for just a beat, a brief flicker of recognition before his fingers dug into his abdomen again.

My mother started crying when she saw the blade of grass. My sister looked away and said that we knew that this was coming and that the nurse had said that it would happen soon. Then she started crying too. I left the thin, green leaf on the kitchen table and went back into the bedroom.

His hands had stopped clawing at his stomach and the sound of his breathing had thickened somehow. It sounded wetter; gurgling as if liquid was accumulating in his lungs. His eyes followed my hands as I checked for more sprouts. I found nothing on his body and lay down on the floor to look at the roots under the bed.

There were more than I expected. Some barely touched the carpet while others had grown into the concrete underneath. They were thick and fibrous and impossible to pull out. So, I went into the garden shed and found a saw and a pair of shears and set to work.

When I was done, my mother came in with a broom and a dustpan and started sweeping up the carpet shreds and cut-off roots. My sister sat down on the bed and tried to make him drink some water. Each gulp seemed to cause him pain, but he kept drinking until the glass was almost empty. Then he threw up. Black bile flowed out of his mouth and down his chest and stomach. We tried to wipe him clean with wet towels and paper napkins, but the acrid, penetrating smell of bile clung to his skin. All night I could smell it. It was the first thing I noticed when I woke every hour to remove the new shoots.

The nurse came at about seven. She found three seedlings that I had missed. A thistle between his toes and two blades of grass on his thigh. When she asked me if there had been any more, I said no and told her about the black bile. It was normal, she explained. It was the liver failing, the body shutting down. If he needed water we should just moisten his lips with ice cubes. She looked under the bed, at the cut-off roots, and told us not to remove any more sprouts. I nodded and left the bedroom. She spoke for a while to my mother and sister. I waited in the kitchen until I heard her leave.

The grass on his thigh broke off without any resistance at all, but the thistle was harder to pull out. The roots went deep and it bled for a while. Maybe it's time to stop, my sister said. I disagreed. I believed that all we could do was to indulge and pretend. But we didn't argue. We both knew I wouldn't be able to keep up for much longer.

Around noon, I started dozing off. I tried to fight it at first, splashing cold water in my face and pacing around the room. But my eyes kept closing. My body needed sleep. Finally, I asked my mother to watch the sprouts and wake me in an hour. My sister was sleeping in my old bedroom, so I lay down on the living room couch.

It was dark outside when I woke up. My sister's eyes were swollen and she spoke in a quiet, choking kind of way. At first, I didn't understand what she was saying, but then she pointed to the bedroom.

It stood more than a foot high. In various shades of green and brown. Grass, clover, ground ivy. There were flowers too. Drooping, long-stemmed wildflowers with orange petals streaked with white and small, turquoise blossoms in a knot of purple leaves. Underneath the leaves, at the exact center of his chest, I found a mass of root-like branches. When I grasped the tangle, a few moths fluttered up from between the stems. He was still breathing. With my ear to his mouth and my hand on the branches, I could hear and feel the rise and fall of his chest. The wheeze was still there, but the wetness was gone. The breathing sounded cleaner, more neutral somehow. Like air escaping through a tiny hole.

On the right side of his chest, just below the collarbone, there was a branch as thick as his little finger.

Don't, my sister said as I grasped it with both hands. I pulled and nothing moved. Even with my foot on the mattress for better purchase, nothing broke or came up. So, I used the saw and then the shears and when the branch finally snapped my father writhed in pain and started throwing up again.

I talked to mom about it, my sister said as she wiped the black bile up. We need to call the nurse, they have chemicals that will make it stop. I disagreed, but my sister wouldn't listen. He's not there anymore, she said and tried to take my hand. It's just the body now, it's just the nerves and reflexes.

His eyes were open and even though they fixed unmistakably on me, there was no recognition, no real contact, just the raw, paralyzing fear slowly settling in his eyes. Like black grains of sand sinking in a forest lake.

I promised, I said.

I left the root-like branches, but pulled up everything else. New shoots appeared almost immediately. I could see them grow, see their stems extend and thicken as their leaves shot out and started to unfold. It all grew back, denser and more resilient than before, spreading down his arms and up the sides of his neck. I began to struggle to keep up and finally I just focused on the growths that seemed to cause him pain. The dots of green that splintered his nails and the grass that warped his eyelids shut. I cleared it all, but the damage was done. Only one of his eyes could open and move as before. It fixed on me and then the wheelchair, darting back and forth, again and again.

So, I went back to the branches in his chest, grasped the thinnest I could find and began to pull. A few moths took wing, but nothing else moved. I let go and swatted at the moths that hovered around me. I started to chase them around the room, hitting them in the air or when they perched on the wall behind the lamp. A large one fluttered to the window where it disappeared behind the curtains. I turned off the lamp and pulled the curtains open.

The night was bright with stars.

They shone so clearly that anything outlined against them appeared to shimmer. The top of the neighbor's roof. The towel on the clothesline. The vine of English ivy. Even the moth that sat unmoving in the middle of the window.

Its wings were spread and full of light that seemed to throb in measured beats. With every pulse, its body swelled and shrank while its legs and feelers faded in and out of sight. I watched it for some time, disappearing and emerging from the glow.

Maybe it was the effect of starlight. Maybe it was the sound of a car door closing. Or maybe it was just me being tired and unable to focus. I don't know. But when I tried to swat the moth, I missed.

My hand struck the window just below the hindwings. The moth woke up and fluttered out of reach, bumping up against the glass and leaving me with just the sound of its wings against the window.

I went back to my father.

Sitting on the bed beside him, I took his head – one hand on his brow, the other on his chin – and gently turned it toward the sky outside.

I didn't say anything.

We just sat for a while, looking at the stars.

I felt his breath on my hand and the slow rise and fall of his chest. There was no sound anymore. No rasping wheeze, no air escaping through a tiny hole. Just a drone of distant voices and the rapid clicks of wings on glass.

K. L. Boejden was born in South Korea, grew up in Denmark, studied in Paris, and now lives and works in Norway. He finds the arctic cold and darkness almost as inspiring as the cafés in Paris.

Connective Tissue

Jane Fraser

Story removed at request of the author.

Jane Fraser lives in the small village of Llangennith, on the Gower peninsula, south Wales where she co-directs NB:Design, a design agency ,by day and writes at every other opportunity. She has a Creative Writing MA from Swansea University and a PhD for a collection of short fiction entitled, *The South Westerlies*. She is a winner of the British Haiku Society and Genjuan International Prize for haibun. She has been a runner-up in the Rhys Davies Short Story Competition and Fish Memoir Prize, been longlisted once for the ABR Elizabeth Jolley Prize and seven times for the Manchester Fiction Prize. Her work has been published in prize-winning anthologies including *Accent* and *Momaya Press*, and by *New Welsh Review* and *The Lonely Crowd*. She is grandmother to Megan 8, Florence 7 and Alice 3 who think it cool that, “Grandma’s been going to school to write stories”.

even the kids know better

Sakinah Hofler

In a part of the city long abandoned by those with the funds to do so, five bullets fly through the front window of Clinton's Fried Chicken and Pizza. Four of those bullets miss the chicken shack's customers, while the fifth pierces the upper chest cavity of a NJ Transit bus driver named Jefferson, who'd been next in line, trying to decide between #1 (six wings, fries, and a soda) and #3 (2-piece breast and thigh, fries, and a soda). He thinks he has been struck by a baseball bat then feels the burn of a fireball ping ponging around in his chest. He collapses. Before his pain ramps up, he's able to take in his surroundings. A few crinkly fries so close, he could lick them. A scatter of soiled napkins. Two teenage girls curled in fetal balls, their hands over their ears, their clothing glittering from sprinkles of shattered glass, their screams like a broken chorus – long and high interspersed with dog-like yips. He looks above them at the gaping hole that had been a window. A light rain has started to fall on the city streets. *Rain, rain, be gone*, his toddler Riley often sings, fudging the lyrics to "Rain, Rain, Go Away." But of course, the rain continues, defying human command.

One of the teenagers scrambles toward him. She's dressed in a baggy, midriff top, a thick gold belly ring tugs at the skin beneath her navel. His heartrate quickens. He understands he has been shot, and that the shooter could be anyone, including this girl. His pain gathers, intensifies, explodes. He does not know the bullet has fractured his scapula, fractured several ribs, ripped through the pleural lining of his left lung, perforated his liver, fractured his T-8 and T-9 thoracic vertebrae before transecting his spinal cord. He only knows a roaring blaze rips its way through his chest, that it hurts to breathe, and that the beef chunks of the White Castle burgers he consumed hours ago now want to come out the same way they'd gone in.

The girl leans over him. Her face has been abused by a different type of attack – her lips are bloodied and swollen, the skin around her left eye bruised and discolored. "Mister," she whispers. "Jesus." She pulls a phone from her pocket and swipes the shattered screen several times before turning around and screaming, "One of y'all motherfuckers need to call 9-1-1."

Gold doorknockers dangle from her ears, the kind that spell out a name, but Jefferson can only make out the last three letters, -i-n-a, -ina, which could stand for Christina, Amina, Tina. He stares at her, sensing he knows the answer to this riddle.

"They're calling," says the girl. "I'm gonna get help. On my word, I'll be right back."

When the girl runs out the store, Jefferson swallows, attempting to control his breathing, keep his lunch down, and somehow alleviate the waves of pain. There had been a man in line ahead of him, where had he gone? The other teenage girl remains in a tight ball, her screams dampened down to whimpers. In his periphery, he spots a third teenage girl crouching behind a baby carriage. His mind wholly rejects the idea the Lord created a mother who uses her own baby as a protective shield. In fact, he believes the Lord would not have wakened him at 5 a.m. this morning to have him drive the #25 bus up and down Springfield Avenue, have him break up a fistfight, allow him to let three people who couldn't afford the \$1.60 bus fare to ride on his dime, let Donna at White Castle pleasure him then hook him up with extra sliders only to have him die on the overbleached floor of this chicken shack.

Katrina runs onto the damp city street without first checking to see if the shooter has cleared out or if he's looping back around to come for her again. The block is unusually quiet for an early summer evening, but she finds people – a couple ducking between parked cars, a man lying flat on his stomach on the lawn of a shuttered house, and several people running away from the chicken shack.

Katrina screams, "Help!" though she knows they won't. Normally, she believes in time waiting for her. When she chooses to attend school, she never hurries to class; her detention slips pile up in her locker. Her current foster mother has given up trying to enforce a curfew so the girl returns to the house when she feels like it though she often shows up to a deadbolted door. But she understands that for the bus driver, time is cold cash, a straight-up stack of Benjamins, gold.

Cars speed pass, their drivers oblivious to the *pop-pops* that had rung out only moments before. She runs up to a rusted car stopped at a light and bangs on the window. The driver, a sunken-faced woman with a headscarf wrapped tightly around her head, presses down on her door lock.

"We need some help," says Katrina. "Please."

The driver shakes her head and takes off, running the red light. Katrina contemplates how the woman must see her: twilight, strange girl, troubled city. She, too, would not roll down the window for herself; in fact, if she were that woman she'd have a gun on her, in hand, aware, ready, because you never know how life might end up. She wants to tell the woman and everyone else she's sorry, that she didn't know she would be the cause of their bad days. She'd just gotten her #3 meal-to-go from the cashier with the thick Egyptian accent (popcorn chicken, fries, a can of Coke) when she happened to glance outside and see William hanging out the passenger side of a black car, gun in hand. The two locked eyes. She barely had time to duck and yell "Drive-by" before he started shooting.

Back in the chicken shack, Latonya bounces her howling baby girl on her hip, and Sharmet lies on a ball on her side, silent tears dripping off her face. Katrina doesn't tell them they know the shooter, instead, she leans over the counter to where the two men who had been in line sit huddled on the floor next to the cashier. None dare meet her eye. She asks if any of them have called.

The cashier nods without looking up. "Cops say they're on their way."

The bus driver lies on the floor, his head crooked to the right, his chest shudders as it rises and falls, his blood a thick, dark carpet beneath him. She doesn't want it to touch her, but she also knows what it's like to be alone when something terrible happens. Fragments from long ago of an aunt sitting her down on a bench at Penn Station, saying *I'll be right back*, her aunt's red coat as the automatic doors closed behind her, a handful of stolen buttery popcorn, running, sneaking on bus after bus to glimpse that red coat, hunching, a stranger's hand wrapped around hers, a soft voice telling her she's going to be all right.

Katrina strokes his hand. It doesn't feel like a hand that has nearly yanked an arm out of its socket; this is not a hand that has slapped the shit out of anyone. She closes her hand around his, wishing she could travel somewhere in the Middle East and cover her face with a veil so no one would ever see her for who she is. She has seen the Sandals commercial many times and wants to have the time of her life splashing around in an infinite pool on some random island. Nearly every Sunday, her foster mother returns from Atlantic City grumbling about the money she lost and how she'll make it up next weekend, and Katrina so badly wants to go with her, to see what it's like to gamble a life away and maybe, for once, win a new one.

Both Katrina and Jefferson perk up at the sound of sirens. Both are filled with insane disappointment as the squad car rushes by the store to some other emergency. After all, this is Newark. This happens.

Jefferson feels his hand being squeezed, feels himself being tugged away from that beckoning black hole of unconsciousness he'd been drifting into. The fire in his chest has subsided and he tastes sour meat bits in his mouth: both he recognizes as bad signs.

Through a gray fog, he sees the girl sitting beside him smile, and he thinks, with absolute certainty, he knows her. He digs for a name, can't find it, but unearths a memory of that pseudo-

smile. This could be the girl from five or six years ago that, after a double shift, he'd found hiding behind the double seater during his final walkthrough. When he asked the girl her name, her address, her home number, her parents' names, she'd fake-smiled and answered every question with *I'm hungry*. This could be the girl whose hand he remembers holding, who smelled of urine and unclean. He had contemplated calling child services or the police. But he'd seen how the state liked to sever families, and he had firsthand experience with how the police treated people who looked like him, even when people like him needed help. He figured she'd talk after she ate and brought her to the apartment he shared with his wife two blocks away. Without complaint, Beverly fixed the girl a plate of mac and cheese and meatloaf, and then the two of them retreated to the bedroom to discuss their options. "Child Services" was Beverly's verdict, but it didn't matter because when they emerged, both the girl and the plate were gone, and the front door to their apartment stood open. They went to the police. An officer with green eyes glared suspiciously at Jefferson while he recounted the encounter and Jefferson glared at the officer when the officer asked why Jefferson opted to bring her to his house instead of to the station. The officer eventually left them alone with four notebooks of the missing ("Everyone's trying to get out of here," the officer grunted. "Even the kids know better"), but none of the photos were of that little girl.

On the floor of the chicken shack, Jefferson moves his lips yet only a gurgling sound emerges.

Katrina squeezes his hand, ignoring the damp stickiness spreading through the seat of her jeans. She notices a glint in his eyes, one of maybe joy, maybe recognition. She does her best to smile and tries to remember the fleeting males of her life, some good, some bad; but her memory is a slippery slope with too many nooks that will cause her to tumble into an abyss of ceaseless grief so she turns away, focusing on the sounds of the receding rain and the occasional whimpers and whispers of those around them.

Jefferson's eyes lock on something beyond her – perhaps Sharmet, perhaps the drizzle – and they do not close again.

Katrina raises his limp hand to her mouth and kisses the back of it like she has seen in the movies. She will tell the responding officer who questions her she knows the shooter, but later, at the station, after her foster mother takes her into the bathroom and reminds her not to bring trouble into the house and that "snitches get stitches," she will change her story. Her friends will offer various theories naming everyone and no one because they, too, understand retaliation. She will not tell the detectives in the interrogation room about the fight she'd gotten into earlier that day with William. She'd been walking with Sharmet and Latonya up Hawthorne Avenue when they spotted William smoking on his porch. The two had slept together on more than one occasion (*fucked the shit out of her*, he bragged to his friends; *made sweet love*, she told hers), and she'd been pregnant once (*not mines*, he said), but the only remaining evidence there'd been something between the two was a pit of anger that ran long and deep. He told her to take her ragamuffin broke ass off his block. She called him all the names she'd been saving up for him: Momma's boy, a pussy, a little bitch that likes it in the ass, a small dick nigga.

It might not have escalated had his mother not stormed out the house and demanded that they get off her property and leave her son alone. The girl will not understand until much later in life why she became so angry with this woman. She will not tell the detectives that she and her friends hung around and hid, waiting until William left, then pounded on the front door, telling William's mother to bring her ass outside. She will not tell them she threw the first punch, nor that Sharmet and Latonya joined in on the stomping of his mother, or that when his sister ran out the house, they beat the shit out of her, too. Katrina has had to fight her entire life; she is an expert. For her, it is just another day.

A responding officer with the name L. Sanchez embroidered in her uniform pries Katrina's hand away from Jefferson's. Sanchez pulls Katrina outside of the chicken shack and sternly tells her to let the EMTs do their important work. Other people on the block start to reveal themselves:

pointing, reenacting, arguing. Sanchez guides Katrina to the patrol car where she hurriedly spreads a blanket across the back seat.

Katrina plops down on the curb, waving a hand in front of her stinging eyes.

“Oh hon,” says Sanchez. The officer digs around the front seat then reemerges with a pack of Kleenex. She sits on the wet curb next to Katrina and gives her an awkward side hug. “We’re going to need a statement from you. We’ll ask you a few tough questions, but then we’ll call your parents so that they can take you home.”

Katrina thinks of returning to her foster mother’s house, of sharing a room with seven other kids, of the cold meals, of the fighting, of it all. But as these things go, there will never be the right time nor place for her story. She leans on the officer, balling up tissue after tissue, and tells the William story for the first and last time.

Sakinah Hofler is a PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati, where she is a Yates Fellow. In 2016, she was shortlisted for the Manchester Poetry Prize. She received her MFA from Florida State University, where she was a recipient of the Kingsbury Fellowship. Her work has appeared in *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Eunoia Review* and *Counterexample Poetics*. A former chemical and quality engineer, she now spends her time teaching and writing fiction, screenplays, and poetry.

The Boy and the Bewick

P. F. Latham

Story removed at the request of the author

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Story removed at the request of the author

Now in his 86th year, P. F. Latham grew up in the war and won his first prize for writing aged ten years and ten months (one is precise at that age). A reader all his life, he has been a soldier (briefly) a management consultant, director of a Housing corporation, and then Town Clerk at Stratford upon Avon. Currently he has a children's story on offer to half a dozen literary agents and a love story to another set of agents. So far none has offered to take on either book.

She-Clown

Hannah Vincent

She-Clown parked her car outside the house. She was early. The arrangement of the upper windows and the front door gave the house a quizzical expression. What are you doing here, it seemed to ask.

'I'm She-Clown,' she told the house, practising the voice she would use when the front door opened and she greeted today's customer. She smoothed down the velvet of her costume, stroking it one way and then the other, from smooth to rough then rough to smooth, like a cat's fur.

She crumpled the map she had printed off the internet and tossed it into the well of the empty passenger seat, which was ankle deep in other crumpled maps and takeaway cartons. After checking her make-up in the driver's mirror, she got out of the car and put on her bowler hat. They were a long time answering the door. She pressed her face against the cool wall of the house. Eventually a woman dressed from head to toe in cream appeared.

'You must be the lady magician.'

'I'm She-Clown.'

Twin girls, wearing identical outfits of leggings and sequinned T-shirts slid silently either side of their mother. They didn't normally dress the same, their mother said, but because it was a special occasion well, they had allowed it just this once. She invited She-Clown inside the house and the girls ran ahead of them into the garden where several other girls bounced on a trampoline, hair flying.

'This is the She-Clown,' the woman told her husband.

He was a bear of a man with dark hair and a tan that finished before the neck of his T-shirt.

'She Clam?' he said.

'She-Clown,' his wife corrected him.

Her hair was fastened with a tortoiseshell clip. Another woman with similar hair and clothes dressed in similar clothes stood nearby holding a bouquet of wine glasses upside down by their stems.

'I've got more stuff in my car,' She-Clown said, and she asked if it would be alright to leave the front door open while she fetched the rest.

'Oh no, don't do that,' the mother said, opening the door of the fridge and taking out a bottle of wine. 'Just knock and Tony will let you back in.'

'Just knock and I'll let you in,' her husband repeated.

He would be another notch on She-Clown's figurative bedpost – figurative because she never got near a bed with these men. She usually administered her swift magic in her car, or in a small downstairs toilet, or in a shed, and once in a spare bedroom cluttered with mountain bikes and drying washing. The men often seemed surprised that someone like her, in bowler hat and shapeless pantaloons, was a sexual creature. Sometimes they would offer payment in addition to her clown fee, which gave new meaning to the phrase 'turning tricks', or at least to the kinds of tricks ostensibly referred to on her children's entertainer website. She never accepted the trembling tenners - sucking off these men while their women stage-managed the action taking place in other parts of the house was payment enough.

She returned to her car, opened the boot and lifted out her trestle table then lugged it awkwardly down the street back to the house. On the doorstep once more, waiting for someone to answer, she smoothed the velvet of her coat this way and that.

'Need a hand?' the husband asked when he opened the door.

He took the folded table in one big hand and carried it through the house to the garden. The mother and her friends watched from the kitchen as he helped her erect it. She-Clown spread her

embroidered tablecloth over it and laid out her giant wand, her fishing rod, her Chinese fans and ping-pong balls, her spinny plates and sticks.

'I'm ready,' she told the father, and he called to his girls that the magic was about to start. The twins leaped off the trampoline and ran around the garden while their father called to them to come and sit down. Their friends chased them, spilling and leaping over one another, snatching leaves off trees. A slightly older girl, the twins' older sister, asked the father if she had to watch the show. The father told her in a low voice that it would be nice if she would, please. The twins and their friends continued to run around the garden, legs and arms at angles to their bodies, until at last, answering their father's call, they fell onto the grass, reaching up for the cups of fruit juice he handed them. Two girls told him they had a trick they wanted to show him.

'Go on, then,' the father said.

'It's called the "tank",' one of them said, and their friends groaned and said they all knew how to do the tank because they had learned it at gymnastics. Undeterred, one of the girls lay on the ground beneath her friend, holding onto her friend's ankles. Then the standing girl catapulted herself forwards headfirst, performing a forward roll between her friend's legs. Over and over they went, keeping hold of each other and moving around the garden as one. The father laughed and told the girls they looked nothing like a tank and that was a good thing.

'Do we get a prize?' one of the girls asked, but there were no prizes, he told them, only magic.

'Magic and juice,' he said, handing them a drink each, one in a green plastic cup and one in a red plastic cup. The cups glowed in the sun like emeralds and rubies.

It was time to start the show. She-Clown banged her gong and blew her kazoo. She began with the ping pong ball trick and when the girls demanded to know how the balls appeared under their cups she told them a magician never reveals her technique. They shouted back that she wasn't a real magician. By way of an answer she juggled the ping pong balls then threw them into the girls' upheld cups, aiming them carefully and not missing a single one.

'That's not magic!' the girls cried.

'No?' she said, cocking her head. 'What is it then?'

'It's sport,' the twins' big sister said.

'It's sport,' chorused the younger girls.

'It's harder than you think,' the father told them. 'To get each of those balls in every cup.'

She gave each of the guests a stick to hold and set plates spinning on them. Then she put a tutu on over her pantaloons and twirled around chasing a paper bird that she dangled from a fishing rod.

'That's not magic!' the girls cried, clutching each other in delight. 'That's ballet!'

She opened her oversized suitcase and fell inside it. The girls shrieked with laughter to see her feet waving about upside down. She could see their mother drinking wine in the kitchen with her friend.

She finished the show with bubbles, which bobbed sedately over the hedge into a neighbour's garden and sent her audience into a kind of trance. They clapped when she bowed and so did the father but his eldest daughter did not. Then the twins and their friends bounded back to the trampoline and She-Clown began to pack away her things.

'Thanks so much,' the father said. 'You were brilliant.'

He watched her put the lid on the bucket of bubble mixture and fold away her trestle table.

'Where are you parked?' he asked.

'Just outside,' she said.

He tucked her table under one arm and took her oversized suitcase in his other hand while she carried the bucket of bubble mixture through the kitchen.

'Oh, goodbye!' the mother said, getting up and following them to the front door.

'We paid you when we booked, right?' she said.

'That's right,' She-Clown said.

'Well thank you very much, Mrs She-Clown.'

'I thought your name was She Clam, earlier,' the husband said as he led the way down the tiled path.

'She-Clown,' she said.

She indicated which car was hers. Sometimes the man would suggest sitting in her car with her for a moment, with the excuse of escaping party mayhem.

'There's no difference between male and female clams, did you know that?' the twins' father said.

She-Clown opened the boot and he lifted the trestle table, sliding it inside the car.

'No difference in colour or markings or mating behaviour,' he said. 'So only the clam knows who's who and what's what.'

She-Clown wedged the bucket of bubble mixture so that it wouldn't tip over and slammed the boot shut.

'We're separated, my wife and I,' he told her. 'We're not together, if you see what I mean.'

Here we go, she thought, and she walked away from him to unlock the driver's door.

'I very much enjoyed your show,' he said.

'Thanks.'

She rubbed the fabric of her costume between her fingers, feeling the resistance of the velvet, feeling its fibres move backwards and forwards under her fingertips.

'Well, I'd better get back to the party,' he said.

But he waited on the pavement until she had started the engine and before she pulled away from the kerb he bent his body to smile at her through her driver's window. It was a moment of real magic.

Hannah Vincent began her writing life as a playwright after studying drama at the University of East Anglia. She worked as a child-minder to help fund her MA in Creative Writing at Kingston and is currently carrying out doctoral research in creative and critical writing at the University of Sussex. Her first novel *Alarm Girl* was published by Myriad Editions in 2014 and her second *The Weaning* – about a psychotic child-minder – is forthcoming from Salt in February 2018.

A Day Out

David Wakely

Jonathan and Barry are George's Daddies. George is six years old. They all live together in a house in West London. Jonathan is a Public Relations Executive. Do you know what a Public Relations Executive does all day? Barry doesn't. Barry stays at home to look after George. Can you see how untidy the kitchen is? Jonathan can.

George calls Jonathan 'Proper Daddy' and Barry 'Daddy Barry'. Barry doesn't complain because he loves George. Today, Jonathan and Barry are taking George for a day out at the arboretum. Do you know what an arboretum is? George doesn't. Jonathan says it will be educational. See Barry shudder.

George would rather play with Joshua who lives next door. 'Can Joshy come too?' asks George. See Barry look uncomfortable. He says, 'I did ask Joshy's Mummy, but she said, "No, Barry, not after last time".' Can you imagine what Joshy's Mummy meant?

See Barry telling George how much fun it will be anyway, just the three of them. Do you know what 'harassed' means? Barry does.

Hear George ask where his toys are and if Barry will carry them for him. Barry has found George's boomerang and his model aeroplane, but he can't find his frisbee. Jonathan isn't looking. Can you see George's frisbee anywhere?

See Jonathan using his shiny new smartphone to check the bus timetable and book the tickets. Jonathan says, 'Well, I've taken a day off for this. We need to be organised.' Hear Barry sigh.

See Barry help George tie his shoelaces and hunt for his gloves in the pockets of all the coats in the hallway. See how many coats there are. Jonathan buys George lots of things. Barry says George is spoilt. So does Joshy's Mummy. Jonathan says, 'Can't you remember where he put his gloves?' Barry says, 'I know I should, but I'm exhausted. I'm sorry.' Do you think Barry looks tired?

See them walking to the bus-stop. See George's bright red coat. See Jonathan tell George not to put his hood up so that he can hear what his Daddies are saying. See George put his fingers in his ears. Barry says, 'Take my hand while we cross the road.' Jonathan says, 'I hope you're talking to George.' Do you know how to look daggers at someone? Barry does.

George asks Barry, 'Why aren't your hands as soft as Proper Daddy's, Daddy Barry?' Hear Barry humming the tune from an old television advertisement. Jonathan knows how to look daggers too.

When the bus comes, Jonathan gets on first and then George. 'Hurry up, Barry,' says Jonathan. See Barry try to get all their bags through the doorway. Can you see how narrow it is? Mr Emmanuel is the bus driver. Mr Emmanuel has black hair and a brown face. See him looking at Jonathan and George. They both have blond hair and blue eyes. Barry has black hair too, but his forehead is much taller than Jonathan's. Do you know what male-pattern baldness is? Barry does.

See Mr Emmanuel looking at Barry. Can you guess what he is thinking? Hear Mr Emmanuel suck his teeth.

When they get to the arboretum, Jonathan collects the tickets. Jonathan tells George that an arboretum is like a park, only more up-market. Do you know what up-market means? George doesn't. See Barry get stuck in the turnstile with all the bags.

George is pointing and saying, 'They have greenhouses. Joshy's Mummy had a greenhouse, but she never has any tomatoes on her plants. She says they are for a different type of consumption. What does consumption mean?' See Jonathan change the subject.

The woman at the ticket office asks if they know that there's an orchid festival in the Tropical House. See Jonathan looking innocent. See Barry's reaction. Can you raise your eyebrows that far?

Barry asks if that's near the children's play area. See Jonathan roll his eyes. Barry says, 'Well, someone has to think of George's asthma. Going in and out of a tropical greenhouse on a cold day won't do him any good.'

George says, 'Can I play with my aeroplane in the orchid festival?' Jonathan says, 'Not in the greenhouse, darling, but Daddy Barry can play with you outside. I can meet you at the café later.' See Barry take George's hand as they walk away. Hear Barry talking under his breath. How many naughty words do you know?

See Barry help George climb on to the roundabout. See George waving his model aeroplane over his head. Hear him shout, 'Faster, faster.' See the woman sitting on the park bench reading a book. See her look up for a moment to watch them play. See how she smiles as she goes back to reading her book.

See the beads of sweat on Barry's forehead as he pushes the roundabout. Hear George say, 'This is more fun than with Proper Daddy. You push much harder.' See Barry panting as he leaps onto the roundabout too. See how he lands on top of George. Hear George squeal. 'You're hurting me. Get off! Get off!'

See the woman on the bench look up suddenly from her book. Can you think why her face looks so angry? See her take her mobile phone out of her handbag. Can you tell whether she is taking a photograph or calling the police?

See Barry stop pushing the roundabout and march towards the bench. See Barry pull pieces of paper out of his coat pocket and wave them at the woman. See the sweet wrappers and tissues fall to the ground around him. Hear Barry shouting. 'Adoption papers, okay?' See the woman's face go pink. Have you ever made an embarrassing mistake?

Barry is still shouting at the woman. 'I carry them for people like you. Satisfied now?' See her face go scarlet.

'God, the state of some people's minds,' says Barry as he walks back to the roundabout. What do you think is the state of the woman's mind? And what about Barry's? See the waitress in the café looking out of the window. See how sad she looks.

Hear Barry say, 'George, would you like a nice hot drink?' George says he would like chips. See Barry count the coins in his pockets. Do you know why Barry is wincing? 'Okay then,' says Barry, 'but don't tell Daddy Jonathan.'

In the café, the waitress is standing by the counter. She is ever so tall, with very big hands and feet and a very large Adam's apple. See how she smiles at Barry and George. 'Hello,' she says cheerfully, 'come in and make yourselves at home.' Her voice is very deep for a lady.

'Hello Mary,' says George.

'You know this lady?' says Barry. He sounds surprised.

'Mary used to work at our kindergarten,' says George. 'She's very nice and she makes brilliant chips.'

Mary looks at Barry. 'Used to,' she says in her big deep voice. 'Until they let me go.' See how Mary looks out of the window at the woman on the park bench. Do you know how to furrow your brow? Mary does.

Mary looks down at George. 'So how's my little soldier today?' she says. 'Hungry as usual?' Mary tells Barry to take a table by the window and brings two mugs of tea and two big plates of chips. As she puts them on the table, Barry notices the hairs on the backs of her hands. Mary bends down to whisper in Barry's ear. 'Just pay me for the teas,' she says, very quietly. Do you think Mary is kind?

George is looking out of the window and pointing. 'Look, Daddy Barry,' he says, 'it's Proper Daddy.' Jonathan is walking towards the café. Can you see what he's carrying? It's a very large cactus in a big black pot. Do you think it's an amusing shape? Barry doesn't.

Jonathan sits down at the table with Barry and George and puts the cactus on the table. 'Isn't it magnificent?' he asks Barry. 'Where shall we put it?'

Barry has a suggestion. How many words for parts of the body do you know?

Mary asks George if he'd like to come and help her put the knives and forks in the right places in the cutlery drawers. 'A woman's work is never done,' she says to Barry. Do you know how to wink? Mary does. See Barry smile. Hear Mary say to George, 'If you do a good job, you can have a cake.' See George smile.

See Mary look at Barry and Jonathan. 'I think these two need some quality time together.' Do you know what quality time is? George doesn't.

Hear Barry tell Jonathan about the woman on the park bench. 'It isn't fair, him not having a friend to play with,' he says.

'You're right,' says Jonathan. See how he is playing with his mobile phone and not looking at Barry. 'We should get him a little brother.' See Barry snap his plastic fork.

'Perhaps we could look through the catalogues together,' says Barry. 'Because, you know what, I still don't have ovaries.' Do you know any pregnant men? Barry doesn't. 'It's all right,' says Jonathan, 'I'll pay for everything.' Barry says, 'I already have.' Do you think Barry is talking about the chips?

'And whatever happened to challenging the suffocating gender-assigned paradigms of heteronormativity?' asks Barry. Hear Mary laugh. See Jonathan's face. Do you know what Barry means? Jonathan does.

Hear the noise as Jonathan scrapes his chair across the café floor. Have you ever been told that scraping your chair is rude? 'Where are you going now?' says Barry. See how angry he looks. 'Back to work!' says Jonathan. Hear him slam the café door behind him.

See Mary carrying a tray. On the tray is a teapot, a milk jug and two clean mugs. And a cake for George. 'He's been such a good little boy,' says Mary. 'You must be very proud.' See her put the mugs on the table and lift the teapot.

'Shall I be Mother?' asks Mary.

See Barry smile. Do you know what irony is?

Raised in South London, Dave Wakely has worked as a musician, university administrator, poetry librarian, and editor in locations as disparate as Bucharest, Notting Hill and Milton Keynes. Currently a freelance copywriter/editor after completing a Creative Writing MA, he lives in Buckinghamshire with his civil partner and too many guitars. His short stories have appeared in *Ambit*, *Best Gay Stories 2017*, *Chelsea Station*, *Fictive Dream*, *Glitterwolf*, *Holdfast*, *The Mechanics*, *Institute Review*, *Prole*, *Shooter* and *Token*. A poetry salon MC and one of the organisers of Milton Keynes Literature Festival.

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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; +44 (0) 161 247 1787.

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

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