



# ONE

*Hand Clapping*

SUMMER 2017

SMALL  
PRINT  
**BIG**  
VOICE

FREE

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**Colm Tóibín** on the North Atlantic Light  
**Tony Visconti** on the Producer's Job  
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A new story by **Nick Coleman**  
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# Editorial

My favourite bit of writerly advice comes from Ernest Hemingway. In *Death in the Afternoon*, he recommends that you think hard about an event in order to arrive at the most significant details. What you're trying to discover, he says, are the specific sights and sounds that make that event so memorable. I like this partly because surprisingly few writers seem to do it. Here is Hemingway describing what he has "really seen" at a bullfight:

"When he [the matador] stood up, his face white and dirty and the silk of his breeches opened from waist to knee, it was the dirtiness of the rented breeches, the dirtiness of his slit underwear and the clean, clean unbearably clean whiteness of the thigh bone that I had seen, and it was that which was important."

Yes, you think, that must have been incredibly dramatic, and while it's true that there is a certain amount of, shall we say, overeager reiteration in this account it's also worth noticing how Hemingway has found precise, specific details in order to communicate things properly. Pick up a book some time and look at the adjectives. If there's a cup of coffee, is it "steaming"? Is there a "monstrous howling"? (I found these more or less at random.) So much prose seems to be simply a means to an end; a medium that transports you, relatively painlessly, from one climax to another. Good prose, on the other hand, approaches the truth of things; it's one in the eye for so many of the magazines and tabloids and video games that are currently attempting to shape our world. Good prose is moral, in other words.

You have in your hands something of an experiment. I want to offer great writing, for free. To proselytise, if you like. But I also want unpublished and under-regarded authors to share a space with established names; to help to create something that feels like both a dialogue and a platform. There are writers here whose work I have been reading (and listening to) with the greatest of pleasure for several years and there are writers (and a photographer) who, up to a couple of months ago, were as new to me as they are to you. Everybody has a voice, or a distinctive way of looking at the world. (This amounts, very often, to the same thing.) I'd like to thank all of our contributors for giving so generously of their work and time; I hope that you enjoy the pieces here. Please think of the first piece, by the incomparable Al Alvarez, as our manifesto.

## ALAN HUMM



The cover image is by **Fabien Delaube**. Both a specialised decorator – trained at the Opéra de Bordeaux – and painter-artist, Fabien studied audio-visual techniques and, in particular, photography before turning towards fine arts. His preferred medium is oils.

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What happens when you sit down with a book? Why do you do it? What's the pleasure in it? Why do books, poems, even fragments go on being read years, sometimes centuries, after they were written, and look like they will continue to be read no matter how many times the death of literature is announced?

I'm not talking about transmitting or acquiring information. On the contrary, at this present moment of change, when the industrial revolution has been superseded by a revolution in information technology, facts and figures have never been easier to come by, although now they are packaged in an appropriately new form. Computers, for example, no longer come with handbooks; all that kind of information is built in; if you want to know how to do something, you click "Help" and, if necessary, print up what you find for future reference. Eventually, I assume, that is how most reference books will be, and the advantages, in terms of economy and convenience, are greater than the drawbacks. Staring at a computer screen in your living room may be no substitute for the silence and calm of a library, and surfing the Web with Google is not as satisfying as rummaging in the stacks, but for those who can't afford to buy, say, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and lack the yard or two of shelf space to accommodate it, it is better to have the work on CD-ROM or the Web, complete with sounds and moving pictures and hyperlinks, than not to have it at all.

Computers may be convenient and efficient, but they are not quite the neutral instruments they seem to be, and the subtle deformations they create in our attitude to language can be dangerous to literature:

*A philologist and his wife for dinner... His ambition is to determine, by the use of electrical computation machines, the basic structure of language. Word values and evocations can be determined, he tells me, by machinery, and thus successful poetry can be written by machines. So we get back to the obsolescence of the sentiments. I think of my own sense of language, its intimacy, its mysteriousness, its power to evoke, in a catarrhal pronunciation, the sea winds that blow across Venice or in a hard 'A' the massif beyond Kitzbühel. But this, he tells me, is all sentimentality. The importance of these machines, the drive to legislate, to calibrate words like 'hope', 'courage', all the terms we use for the spirit.*

John Cheever wrote that some time in the 1950s, long before computers were just another domestic accessory, even before they had a proper name. The philologist's reductive arrogance and the author's outraged response are opposing reactions to a simple truth that still applies: information and imaginative writing are different forms of knowledge, demanding different skills and wholly different attitudes to language.

In order to acquire facts efficiently, scan a synopsis, or gut a newspaper, you have to master the art of reading diagonally. Real literature is about something else entirely and it's immune to speed-reading. That is, it's not about information, although you may gather information along the way. It's not even about storytelling, although sometimes that is one of its greatest pleasures. Imaginative literature is about listening to a voice. When you read a novel the voice is telling you a story; when you read a poem it's usually talking about what its owner is feeling; but neither the medium nor the message is the point. The point is that the voice is unlike any other voice you have ever heard and it is speaking directly to you, communing with you

# The Writer's Voice

## AL ALVAREZ

From 1956 to 1966, AL ALVAREZ was the poetry editor and critic for *The Observer*, where he introduced British readers to John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Zbigniew Herbert and Miroslav Holub. He is best known for his study of suicide, *The Savage God*, but has also written on divorce (*Life After Marriage*), dreams (*Night*) and the oil industry (*Offshore*), as well as his hobbies of poker (*The Biggest Game In Town*) and mountaineering (*Feeding the Rat*, a profile of his frequent climbing partner Mo Anthoine). His last book was *Pondlife: A Swimmer's Journal*.

in private, right in your ear, and in its own distinctive way. It may be talking to you from centuries ago or from a few years back or, as it were, from across the room – bang up-to-date in the here and now. The historical details are secondary; all that really matters is that you hear it – an undeniable presence in your head, and still very much alive, no matter how long ago the words were spoken:

*Western wind, when wilt thou blow  
That the small rain down can rain?  
Christ, if my love were in my arms  
And I in my bed again!*

Nobody knows who wrote that poem or even precisely when he wrote it (probably early in the sixteenth century). But whoever it was is still very much alive – lonely, miserable, hunkered down against the foul weather and a long way from home, yearning for spring and warmth and his girl. Across a gap of five centuries, the man is still our contemporary.

Writing, I mean, is literally a lively art as well as a creative one. Writers don't just "hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature" by creating an imitation of life; they create a moment of life itself. That anonymous poet has left the sound of his voice on the air as distinctly as, say, van Eyck fixed forever the tender marriage of Arnolfini and his wife in paint. The poem breathes from the page as vividly as the long-dead faces and their little dog breathe from the canvas. But it is a two-way pact: the writer makes himself heard and the reader listens in – or, more accurately, the writer works to find or create a voice that will stretch out to the reader, make him prick his ears and attend.

From *The Writer's Voice*. Published by Bloomsbury.



I am in Wexford now, in the southeast of Ireland, in a house close to the sea in Ballyconnigar Upper, or Cush, as it is called by the locals. My parents knew this stretch of coast; my father, in his twenties, with some friends, once rented a small house close to the strand near here. My parents also came on bicycles from the town of Enniscorthy on summer Sundays. There are photographs of them before they were married taken on the hill at Ballyconnigar Lower, which was also known as Keatings'; and then there are many more photographs of us as children when the family came here to spend the summer each year. While we lived our ordinary lives in the town, it is here, this small stretch of coast, this literal small backwater, where I feel closest to something I know, or remember, or wish to see again, write about again.

At first when I came back here, and even later, very little seemed to have changed, the smells were the same, or were familiar, as were some of the lanes and fields and ditches, and the mild good manners of the people were also familiar, and the light over the sea in the morning, and the way a rainy day can clear up in the evening, and the marly sand of the cliffs, and the strand itself, and the hesitant, insistent low waves and the small stones of different shapes and colours (no detail too small) at the edge of the shoreline that make a hollow rattling sound as they hit against one another when a wave comes in or else they are pushed toward the back of the strand by the tide and left there when the tide goes out.

Some things have changed, however, and some things here are not familiar. There has been coastal erosion, so that the hill where my parents were photographed and which used to have a lookout on top has completely gone, and Keatings' house too, which was a landmark, has gone, and my father's first cousin Dick Whelan's house, which was close to the cliff, has fallen onto the strand, or most of it has. When I walk down there I can see the old fireplace and the back wall. And there are some new houses, including two that seem big and imposing in this modest landscape, as well as this house that I am in.

The house we rented each summer is lived in by different people now. A porch has been added, and a bathroom and a new roof. In the years before my father died, there could be seven or eight of us sleeping there, and then aunts and uncles coming to visit. I have a memory of my Auntie Harriet going back to town one summer evening on her scooter, a memory of listening to the sound of the scooter fading and fading more, and then faint in the distance, and then not there. Of the dozen or so people who came to that house, only three of us are alive. And I am the only one who comes to this place still, who walks the lane past the house down to the ruin of Dick Whelan's house and then further down the opening in the cliff to the strand.

The painter Tony O'Malley lived in Enniscorthy in the 1940s and came to Ballyconnigar to draw and paint. He did some drawings of the hill above Keatings', and of the strand. As far as I know, he was the only painter who thought this mild landscape worthy of attention. Many of the Irish painters of his generation went to the west of Ireland, where things were wilder. Or they went to France. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, Tony O'Malley, with his wife, Jane, spent a part of each year in the Bahamas. His tones and textures became more exotic then; he created vivid and exciting shapes and bright colours. He told me once that these new colours would begin to creep into his work in Ireland in

the time before he would set out to spend time in Caribbean light. Just by thinking about the light, or by his knowing he would soon be there, the work he made would start to change.

His work moved north/south; he came from northern light and had his eye nourished by the luscious glare of elsewhere. And then he came home. Home. I am here now. In 1976, three years before she died, Elizabeth Bishop compared herself to the sandpiper of her poem of that title: "Yes, all my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper – just running along the edges of different countries and continents, 'looking for something'. I have always felt I couldn't *possibly* live very far inland, away from the ocean; and I *have* always lived near it, frequently in sight of it." This is something she shares with many people, and even those who do not share this must dream of it, at least sometimes. It is hard to move too far inland.

In the mornings in Ballyconnigar, the sea is always different. It can seem closer sometimes, ready to spill over, when the light is clear, and then distant and forbidding, alien, almost steely sharp, stately, withdrawn, when there are clouds and no wind. In the mornings when there is sun, the light on the sea can be all glare, or buttery on softer days, or austere when there are clouds in the western sky.

Some years ago a friend let me know there was a small painting by Tony O'Malley for sale in an auction in Dublin and I should go look at it. I recognised the scene as soon as I saw the painting. At the bottom of it is written "1952 Ballycunnigar", with O'Malley's customary signature from those years. (He must have written the name of the place as he heard it.) The painting is small, eight inches by ten. It is of a cliff, a strand, the sea, the sky. It is of a scene that is not there any more. It is the soft marl of the cliff that was below Keatings' house gradually going down to be eaten away, washed away, to become nothing. It is painted from the south, facing north. It has the sand below the marl in two shades, one more golden because it is in sunlight, the other darker because it is in shadow. It has to be a summer's day, late in the day, because the slanted light is coming from the west. The clouds over the sea are shaping up for rain but are cut through by light; perhaps they will blow away. And then there is the sea itself, as easy blue as it often is, with a low wave in white and then another low wave behind it. No rocks; no people; no obvious drama, just the world doing its work. What is strange is that it could be nowhere else in the world because of the incline of the cliff, the softness of the sand and the sea, and the precise and peculiar curve of the land going north. It is Ballyconnigar Lower as you move towards Ballyconnigar Upper in the years before they added the huge stones to stop the erosion; in the years before the

erosion itself changed this landscape, lowered the cliff and altered the incline, so that soon it will be remembered by no one, and no one will recognise the scene in this painting.

Tony O'Malley saw it in 1952, and I saw it some years later. Both of us looked at it; he must have studied it closely to get it as exact as he did. It must have mattered to him to make a painting from precise looking and rendering, or finding shapes and colours that would approximate what he saw, but capture it, envision it, re-create it. I never looked at it like that. It was part of what was normal, what was there. But I remember it. I believed perhaps that it would always be there. I must have taken it in on the same summer days, or days like them, days a few years after the painting was done. In any case, we both were there. "Our visions coincided", as Elizabeth Bishop wrote in "Poem", on seeing a painting of a childhood scene, and then she tempered that with "'visions' is / too serious a word – our looks, two looks: / art 'copying from life' and life itself, / life and the memory of it so compressed / they've turned into each other." This feeling that we know somewhere, or we knew it, and it is "live" and "touching in detail" is, as Bishop says, "the little that we get for free / the little of our earthly trust. Not much."

Not much perhaps, but enough to be going on with. Or perhaps not.

From *On Elizabeth Bishop*. Published by Princeton University Press.



# North Atlantic Light

COLM TÓIBÍN

COLM TÓIBÍN is an award-winning Irish novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist, playwright, journalist and critic. He is the author of numerous novels, including *Brooklyn*, which won the Costa Novel Award in 2009, *The Master* and *Nora Webster*. His latest novel is *House of Names*.

Photo of Ballinamona beach, looking north to Ballyconnigar, by Pádraig Grant. His book of photographs, *Pádraig Grant's Wexford*, is available from [www.padraiggrant.com](http://www.padraiggrant.com)



If you study the exhibition catalogue then you might sense a sort of immanence. The photographs, most of them, are angled just as though the buildings are beginning their ascent. They're all in black and white; they have a sombreness, a solemnity, which makes you feel that this is the sort of place where great art should have been created.

But it didn't feel that way at the time. In Frankie's shop, light dribbled down the window pane. The yard itself was sepia. You came around the corner and, if you hadn't been there before, the shop, its awning and striped blind, seemed vivid and desperate, like a flare. Queeny, his wife, kept pansies in a window box. She "manned" the shop; this was a local joke, a sort of homage to the way she glowered at you from behind the till. Frankie and Queeny were the embodiment, it seemed, of what was more a piece of local folklore than a joke: the woman, big as a blown-up ball, who kept her husband in the same way that you'd keep a ferret or a dog. Frankie was only five foot four. He made nervous gestures, little stabs and feints, like he was directing the air around him.

"Try to relax", he said.

Harry was standing to attention. Now that he was in the camera's eye he looked as if he was frozen into the kind of gesture that a statue makes, a sternly benevolent blessing or angry warning. Frankie, impatient, tugged at him. He pulled his cap so that the right side touched his ear. He threw a ticket machine into his hands. Harry said,

"Coo. Where did you get that from?"

Frankie ignored him; stared at him, spat on a handkerchief then worried at his badge. Harry said,

"Leave off."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It's only for the missus."

But, of course, this wasn't true. Nobody, Frankie knew, was ever entirely impervious to the power of the lens. Later, in the darkroom, there he was: Harry. Wooden; on his dignity; half-drunk (Frankie left these in a drawer) and then – these two – the

**THE PHOTOGRAPHS, MOST OF THEM, ARE ANGLED JUST AS THOUGH THE BUILDINGS ARE BEGINNING THEIR ASCENT. THEY'RE ALL IN BLACK AND WHITE; THEY HAVE A SOMBRENESS, A SOLEMNITY, WHICH MAKES YOU FEEL THAT THIS IS THE SORT OF PLACE WHERE GREAT ART SHOULD HAVE BEEN CREATED.**

Harry that Harry would have wished the world to see. Frankie's presence, the camera that had seemed to want to nuzzle him, had made him gather the ticket machine into his chest. He had a look of mildly affronted rectitude; he looked the type for whom it was important that he get you safely home. When he came in he held the photo, sheepishly, between his thumb and forefinger. He lifted it to the light and tilted it from right to left and back again. At last, he said,

"as it"

He nodded.

"as me."

He made a grab for Frankie's hand. His huge paw next to Frankie's delicate, tapered fingers was an illustration of their relative sensibilities. Frankie had the bearing – the cockiness and breeding – of a court photographer. He said that you had to be a mind reader but, really, it wasn't hard. Mothers wanted to look maternal; builders swaggered through the door; bookies and publicans all worked at being convivial. Mods – it was the time of mods – wanted a blend of masculinity and something else: a surliness but also a languid and free-floating grace. Frankie gave people what they wanted. He coaxed it out of them; he seemed, sometimes, to be caressing them. He made a good living at it, too.

Until Diane came in. It was a spring day but the yard was grey and wet. Her raincoat was bright pink and she had modish batwing eyelashes; two lines of exclamation marks. She pointed to the blinds that led into the back, saying,

"He in?"

Her hands, after all that, were a bit of a shock. The hair; the raincoat; her bare knees – all told you that she was a typical London girl; a clerk, say, or a secretary. But her fingers were stubby and grimy; greasy, even. Queeny looked her up and down. Diane began to speak but, at that moment, Frankie wandered in. He was studying an advert, a woman who, in her fur coat and chalky lipstick, might just as well have been one of the bottles of perfume ("Joy!") that were advertised out in the yard and in the streets beyond. She looked expensive, which was the last thing that Diane was. She said,

"You free?"

Frankie looked at her for a moment. He seemed to see something; some splash of light. He nodded, almost to himself, and grinned. To Queeny he said,

"Alright?"

"You only 'ave 'alf an hour."

"Okey-doke."



Illustration by Elizabeth Burman-Smith

He went dancing round her, plucking a packet of fags from behind the till in the same way that a magician might produce a bunch of flowers. This jauntiness, too, was part of local (indeed, of national) myth; one recognised and felt a certain comfort in the presence of someone cheeky enough to guy the battle-axe that he had married, seemingly inadvertently. It was Diane's turn to grin. In the studio, she sat on the stool provided for her. She said,

"It's for my mum."

Her hands hung awkwardly between her knees. She was... what? Frankie studied her. 19? 20? She rubbed her nose. Below her miniskirt, her knees were red. She was smiling. She nodded at Frankie's camera.

"She says you're good. She says that you'll make me look bee-yoo-ti-fall."

She did a daffy pout and flounced her shoulders so that her hair fell down behind them. Frankie smiled. He lit a cigarette. She seemed to dance, just for a moment, in a heady sort of gauze. He bent expectantly then fired off a round of shots. He tried, he really did. He came so close that he could feel her breaths, short rapid puffs, against his skin. He made her sit, demurely, with her hands clasped in her lap. He introduced a hair-band, then took it off. He went for thoughtful; innocent; womanly – but nothing worked. She was impervious. Not indifferent or defensive – just impervious. Something resisted him but it felt just like its opposite; as though there was nothing there. His hands felt

oddly awkward, now, like flippers or spades. He pushed his hair out of his eyes and it felt like somebody else was doing it. He had another go. At last, he said,

"I, um."

She looked at him expectantly.

"I need more time."

She didn't say – she didn't seem to be thinking – anything. Her face was perfectly in proportion but this perfection didn't seem to have anything to do with her. It was a sort of fruit – no more expressive than that. Again, he nodded, like an idiot.

"More time. I need..."

He moved his hands together and then apart, like he was trying to negotiate two shapes into alignment. She smiled, but it was astonishing, really, how you could smile and yet communicate so little. He felt a frustration that was unfamiliar. Diane was like some stubborn material that had refused to shape itself under the sculptor's hands. He wanted, just for a moment, to throw something at her. He said,

"Tomorrow?"

She shrugged.

"If you say so."

But nothing happened. Not on the next day or the next. She smiled, she fluttered – she flapped – her lashes, but she could have been anyone. She had a blandness that felt generic, somehow. All over the country, there were girls like this, smiling and giggling in ways that were, essentially, identical. He said,

"What do you want to be, Diane?"

He sounded both as irritated and as nonplussed as he was feeling but, at first, she didn't seem to understand. Her mouth moped downwards, pointlessly sensual. At last, she smiled, and shrugged.

"Dunno."

She giggled.

"Sandie Shaw!"

She kicked her feet and waved her hands but later, in the darkroom, it looked abstract; a mime: she was mimicking somebody else's *joie de vivre*. Her face was an eerie blank. Frank stared at her. That night, Queeny turned to face him. Wherever in the bed she was, she seemed to wallow in it. But she also loomed above him. She said,

"You're old enough to be her dad."

Outside, the noises of the street – the shouts; the snort of traffic – sounded more intimate than anything in here. The clock gave a thump, like the thump of an axe, whenever a minute passed.

**SHE WAS IMPERVIOUS. NOT INDIFFERENT OR DEFENSIVE – JUST IMPERVIOUS. SOMETHING RESISTED HIM BUT IT FELT JUST LIKE ITS OPPOSITE; AS THOUGH THERE WAS NOTHING THERE.**

# The Photographer

**TOM RAYMOND**

TOM RAYMOND is a previously unpublished author. He has written two novels, *Rough Music* and *The Conquest of the Incas*, as well as a collection of short stories

Queeny breathed, laboriously, through her mouth. When Frankie stroked the bedspread he realised, all over again, just how thin it was; how it seemed to express his dissatisfaction.

But Queeny was wrong: he had no sexual interest in the girl. If he could have put it into words he would have told you that she represented something. It was intangible; something unrecognisable that he had lost, or, rather, had never had. Queeny’s grossness (the look she had, now, of a duenna) was of a piece with the way that Frankie’s life felt cumbersome; both circumscribed and dutiful. He’d been a soldier and then a husband and now a photographer; each role was prepared for you: you knew exactly how to act. But Diane didn’t seem to be anything. She was 17, she said; she worked in a factory. But beyond that – beneath it – there was a blank. At first, he’d thought: she’s lost. But she wasn’t. She was free.

In the third week, she came in wearing a jacket that was daubed with the Union Jack. He asked her what it meant. Again, she shrugged.

“Nothing”, she said.

He thought that that was perfect. If he had had the nerve, he would have asked her to take off everything else; to roll around in it. Instead, he asked her to pull a face. He had her smoking, then chewing gum. Her sense of freedom was elusive, like a rare bird. You had to stalk it. He began to see that the more wooden her gestures were, the more she seemed to toss them off or wilfully exaggerate them, the freer she seemed to be. He encouraged her to strike poses but to undermine them, too: to cross her eyes or fake a limp. He joked; he prodded her with the camera. He gimped around the room, his hands lolling below his knees. She said,

“You’re mad.”

Still, she kept coming back. She was flattered, he thought. She thought that he found her beautiful.

But something strange was happening elsewhere. It was Harry’s wife who first drew attention to it. Marching into the shop, she waved a photograph in Queeny’s face. She said,

“What’s this? Go on: who’s that supposed to be?”

Queenypeered down into the photograph. She looked incongruously scholarly, but cautious too, as though whatever it was might bite her. Nora, the Nora in the picture, looked angry and defensive. She gripped her grandchild like she wouldn’t let you have him back. You saw that the love she felt was really just a net or a set of chains; it seemed appropriate that the child should be squirming to be released. Queeny said,

“You, Nora. ‘as you.”

But Nora backed away. She said.

“It’s not. I’m telling you. He’s made me look...”

She couldn’t seem to find the word. Her face contorted, so that, in the end, she seemed to spit it out.

“Dreadful”, she said.

Yes, Queeny saw this at once. Nora was full of dread. She held her grandson like a treasure that would, inevitably, be snatched away. Where she had wanted softness – a shimmering gauze of sentiment – Frankie had found a terrible sort of truth.

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And he kept doing it. He made builders look like slabs of meat; their unresponsive eyes were like the eyes you’d paste onto a teddy bear. Bookies were twitchy. Mods were sly. More: swishy and droll. People began to go elsewhere. One day, Queeny edged into the studio. Diane sat, mermaid-like, in pink shorts, smoking a cigarette. Around her, there was a ripped-up pile of schoolbooks. Queeny ignored her. She said,

“What’s this?”

He didn’t seem to know. He smiled and shrugged. He looked like he was drunk, she thought. She was aware of herself in a way that she hadn’t been for years. She felt enormous but she had a countervailing urge to flaunt herself; to use her body like a fist. She said,

“Who’s she supposed to be? Nell Gwynn?”

Diane was looking vacantly around the studio.

“You’re ruining us.”

She raised an accusing arm. She was Commerce; Morality.

“These pictures. What you’re doing. It’s dirty, Frank.”

Even as she was saying it, she knew that she wasn’t saying what she meant.

“It’s filth.”

She meant that Frankie was digging up what would be better hidden. No-one, she knew, would want what Frankie wanted on their mantelpiece. And she was right. The shop closed two years later.

Which makes her pause, now, at the picture in the middle of the gallery. It is the shop but, somehow, a platonic version; shorn of all the sounds and smells that she remembers, it looks iconic: terribly significant. The card beside it talks about Frankie’s “purple patch” but all Queeny can remember are the unpaid bills; the customers who crossed the street whenever they saw her coming. Here they all are: Harry, an overweening drunk, and tarty Marge and Morris the homosexual; poor swishy Mo. Here, too, is Diane – four or five of her, gurning and doing the splits and showing you that, really, she hadn’t a thought in her head. That was what Frankie had managed to expose, all unbeknownst to him: her silliness. His silliness.

She wants to cry but when has she ever cried? Even the room is a sort of dream; pristine, bright white, soft, somehow, it buoys you up and has you drifting from face to face. The journalists ask: what do you think about when you look at them? How do you feel about the fact that he’s not here to see it?

Queeny shrugs.

“His loss”, she says.

Little  
George

barks at whatever  
is not the world as he prefers to know it:  
trash sacks, hand trucks, black hats, canes  
and hoods, bicycles, snow shovels, someone  
smoking a joint beneath the overhang  
of the Haitian Evangelicals, anyone – how dare they –  
walking a dog. George barks, the tense white comma  
of himself arced in alarm.

At home he floats  
in the creaturely domestic: curled in the triangle  
behind a sleeper’s knees, wiggling on his back  
on the sofa, all jelly and sighs,  
requesting/receiving a belly rub.  
No worries. But outside the apartment’s  
metal door, the unmanageable day assumes  
its blurred and infinite disguises. Best to bark.

No matter that he’s slightly larger  
than a toaster; he proceeds as if he rules  
a rectangle two blocks deep, bounded west  
and east by Seventh Avenue and Union Square.  
Whatever’s there is there by his consent,  
and subject to the rebuke of his refusal  
- though when he asserts his will  
he trembles. If only he were not solely  
responsible for raising outcry  
at any ripple of trouble on W 16th,  
or if, right out on the pavement,  
he might lay down the clanking armor  
of his bluster...

Some evening  
when he’s climbed the stairs  
after our late walk, and rounds  
the landing’s turn and turns his way  
toward his steady sleep, I wish  
he might be visited by a dream  
of the world as kind, how any looming unreadable  
might turn out to hold – the April-green sphere  
of an unsullied tennis ball? Dear one,  
surely the future’s not entirely out to get us,  
or you, and if it is, barking  
won’t help much.

But no such luck,  
at least not yet. He takes umbrage,  
this morning, at a stone image  
serene in a neighbor’s garden,

and stiffens and fixes and sounds  
his wild alarm: *Damn you, Buddha,  
get out of here, go away!*

MARK DOTY

Since the publication of his first volume of verse, *Turtle, Swan*, in 1987, MARK DOTY has been recognised as one of the most accomplished poets in America. His books include *My Alexandria*, *Sweet Machine* and *Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems* (2008). A long-time resident of Provincetown, Massachusetts, Doty teaches at Rutgers University in New Jersey.



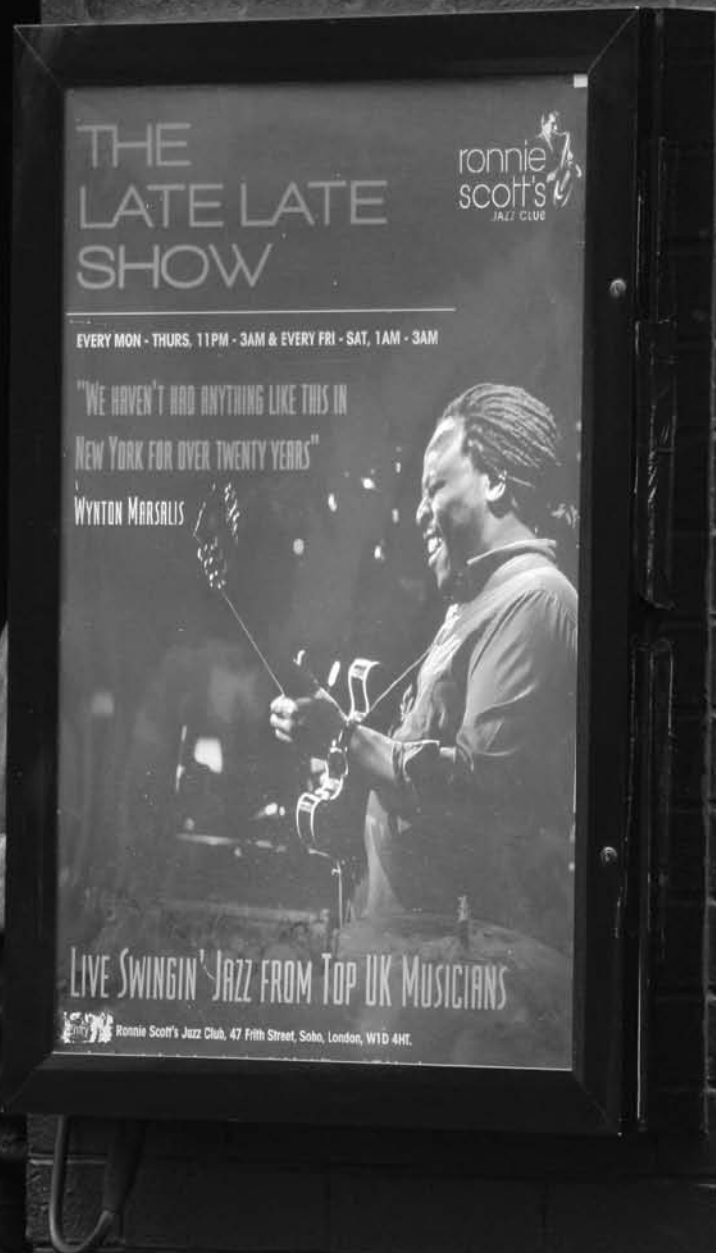


# Soho

Photographs by

**RICHARD HELYAR**

RICHARD HELYAR has worked as a researcher and strategist in advertising for over 20 years. He now runs his own consultancy (Goldstone), which enables him to explore his first love: photography. ([www.richardhelyar.com](http://www.richardhelyar.com))





# There Are No Small Things

(After NÂZIM HIKMET)

It's 02 January 2016.

I'm writing this for future reference

It is a small thing, but there will be a time when it seems impossible this date was once the present.

I thought it hardly worth remembering snow on the roof of a Småland church beside the road to Stockholm the quiet of it like a mute sea but on the bus to the airport I was reading you Nâzim, so I noticed and now I am afraid of forgetting it

I am not a person who has much faith in anything even memory

I didn't know poplars were Turkish  
Poplars are the English Fens  
where I was born  
in a city whose cathedral they called a ship  
Beyond lines of poplar I sailed from one waterland into another  
I wonder if this is why sometimes I taste salt for no reason.

I am afraid of forgetting so many things  
for instance, leaning out of the window to hear La Cumparsita from the café on the corner of Rosenthaler and Weinmeister Straße

I want to call those Berlin nights voluptuous but this was when I had stopped loving voluptuousness

It was here I lost my wallet once  
The man who found it told me to collect it from an apartment in Kreuzberg

and I did and  
at the doorstep he  
asked me to come inside  
and I did that too  
and while I was waiting  
the front door closed and the thing that happened next is the

thing women are always afraid will happen  
There is nothing wrong with comparing nightfall to a bird, Nâzim  
it is exactly the right way to describe  
the slow, feathered sinking of darkness

Before the Nazis, before the Soviet patrols  
Brecht would walk along this street to  
his house near the Spree

to one lover or another, whistling *Tumbalalaika* with his hand in his pocket and the stage in his head

"...War is like love,  
it always finds a way..."

Two things we will never stop writing about: love and war

At times like this you see it's true  
the one who loves less is always  
loved most

It is such a small thing, but I am always using words whose meanings I have not lived  
I have a problem with nouns that mix Greek and Latin roots, for example  
but not everything has to be named

By the way I want to ask  
the precise word for the candlelight in the Katarina Kyrka  
the way you would describe  
the tiny lanterns of the dead in  
its churchyard

the shudder of flames beside snow  
I wonder how you would put it

Sometimes you have to watch the tail lights of a Volvo to understand all the things you have lost  
There was someone who could quote Selimović  
There was someone who stole pens  
Aziz survived genocide  
I thought I loved tea, but I wasn't drinking it the Turkish way then  
So many beautiful untold stories  
and my heart a storm inside them all.

Sometimes we cannot write because we are too busy being alive  
It's good to remember this  
especially when you see yourself in a dark window on a train, perhaps,  
when you think *this is who I am*  
and yet you cannot touch this person  
or you will break the illusion  
the charm.

There is a man I loved  
in old Istanbul  
full of stories that brew in him like tea  
in a glass pot  
I am thinking of him now on the bus to Arlanda  
I have never been to Kadıköy  
I have never seen the Sea of Marmara, so I have no idea how blue he was talking  
I have no idea how blue.

It was a small thing made bigger in translation  
Okyanus gözlüm  
My ocean-eyed

"I was never so close to anyone in my life," you said, Nâzim, and you were thinking of Vera on the road to the Crimea

Like objects in a rear view mirror  
I didn't know how close  
What I am saying is: when you go to these seas you do not think about the dangers

I thought maybe I would forget the time Ljilja drove me through Vienna in the dark through the famous woods to the Kahlenberg and the view that is exactly as everyone imagines  
Seven ascending miles in a small French car for the view of the Blue Danube  
Ljilja's *Donav*

Blue is the light of distance  
The edge of the spectrum that longs for but doesn't quite reach earth  
The world in cyanotype, the stars

Nâzim, you wondered about them

Emerson said if we only saw the night sky once in our lives we'd never stop talking about it that we tire of the miraculous but I haven't yet.

There were six of us in the car  
in our dinner clothes, my tight red dress  
Aziz by the window  
"I was never so close to anyone in my life"  
I was thinking of the city he had left the war inside it

Ljilja would only take the skinny ones, she said which meant we didn't all get to see the plaster-pale skin of the church and the broken moon and that blue-midnight telescoping river stumbling to Sulina  
more beauty than I could bear

This was before I knew about Yakamoz, so who is to say I had ever experienced beauty

or if I did it was the way a bird would experience it, yes like night falling  
when everything seems less than it really is as if from a distance, or exiled  
even love  
can be this way sometimes  
I remember now how the edges of the world are no longer blue when you arrive there

But the most beautiful word in the world translates *as the reflection of the full moon on the sea on a bright and cold night without any waves*  
which proves the most beautiful things are not so far away

Memory, for example  
which is only ever the space between things  
I was thinking of how even constellations and iambs are things I could have loved  
or certain arrangements of notes on a clarinet, a particular use of adverbs  
It's impossible to believe anyone could ever get tired of this, but once is never enough  
Nâzim, it is not enough to know the things you love to name the stars  
you want others to name them too.  
I am worn out with desire  
It is not a small thing, to give a person a book  
Something large and expanding pushed deep into the dark machinery of the heart.

There was a ballerina in New York City who danced for a dying man on New Year's Eve  
Each pirouette a sigh for the living world  
a waltz into the blue  
And when she was asked why  
*Why would you do this?*  
Such a small thing, on this night of all nights  
She said, because there are no small things

no thing means nothing  
no word is too small  
no space in the world too small

There are children spinning through the gyres of the Aegean

The measure of freedom is in what we can run away from

But the borders are closing soon  
I arrived too late  
and now the snow above Arlanda falls heavy and the planes, the soaring planes like tired birds have suddenly nowhere to go.

## LUCY DURNEEN

LUCY DURNEEN is a writer and lecturer and is an assistant editor of the literary journal *Short Fiction*, based in the South-West of England. Her first collection of short stories, *Wild Gestures*, has just been published by Adelaide-based press MidnightSun, and is shortlisted for Best Short Story Collection in the UK Saboteur Awards. Other stories and poetry have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Letters Page*, *The Stockholm Review of Literature* and *Hotel Amerika*, amongst other places, while her creative non-fiction has been published in *World Literature Today*, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and adapted for broadcast on BBC Radio 4.



## TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES – THOMAS HARDY

I love this novel, and have done since I was about fifteen when I first read it. I love it partly because it's a world, and the world is complete and immersive. I remember the feeling that Hardy was weaving the narrative around Tess, spinning her up like a fly in a web – forces are at work on her, she's undone, she takes stock, she makes good, she's undone again, and the book sets up a steady rhythm of woman against fate, fate against woman.

In the end, who can say she doesn't win? Of course she doesn't win, and yet – she's the one who goes on as a life force in the reader, at least in me. I can't go to, or even see, Stonehenge without thinking of her. The novel has bled into reality for me, somehow, as if it's something true that happened in the past. None of which is even to mention Hardy's virtuoso way with language, perspective and psychology – but that surely goes without saying.

## ALL THE NAMES - JOSÉ SARAMAGO

I'm smitten with everything Saramago has written, but *All the Names* must be my favourite. It's a curious little book about a lowly, lonely clerk working in the births, marriages and deaths registry of a local authority, who finds the record card of a woman – known only as "the unknown woman" – and becomes obsessed with finding out everything he can about her. For no reason. Just to find out.

Saramago writes in a potent, mystical narrative space somewhere between reality and fantasy. *All the Names*, like his other novels, is playful and wry (nobody in the novel has a name, except the main protagonist, José), the voice always warmly teasing and probing and testing, and the book is a spell – you get to the end and find yourself moved and slightly changed, without quite knowing how.

## THE GRASS IS SINGING – DORIS LESSING

I think a good novel is one that seems to be about several things at once, each of them equally rich. *The Grass is Singing* is a murder story set in Southern Rhodesia in the 1940s; it's about the toxic race relations between the blacks and whites. It's about an arid and ill-fated marriage between Dick and Mary Turner. It's about the

relentless trudge of fate (fate again, I must like it), one day after another, and the smallness of human agency, the inability of people to change their lives or their natures, despite their efforts to do both.

It's Doris Lessing's first novel, written in her twenties, but so skilled, compact, gripping and, well, remorseless; it grinds its characters into the dust. It won't make you jolly, but I think it's novel writing at its best.

## WATERLOG – ROGER DEAKIN

If *The Grass is Singing* leaves you bleak, *Waterlog* will lift you up. A gorgeous song sung to our little green and watery island. Deakin swam around the rivers, lakes, pools, estuaries and seas of Britain and wrote out his observations. It's gentle, unsentimental, attentive, loving, fascinating, cautionary and life-affirming.

When I finished *Waterlog* I decided to write to Deakin, having never written to an author before. I looked him up, hoping to send him an email or letter, and I discovered that he'd died, of a brain tumour, just the week before, while I'd been reading the book. There was something distressing, almost crushing about that, which I think is to do with the intimacy of the book, that it goes from his heart to the reader's – a straight, direct shot. Since his death it's become a classic, deservedly.

## BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH HIDEOUS MEN – DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

I've chosen this because it's one of a handful of books that have been genuinely revelatory to me. When I read it (only a few years ago, already some years into my own writing life), I remember thinking: I didn't know you could do this with words. Foster Wallace was a maverick who did elastic and inventive things with form.

*Brief Interviews* isn't a collection of short stories, nor is it a novel, it's something else. It's an onslaught of ironic, funny, excoriating, grim, sad insights into a series of characters who is each in his or her (usually his) own blind spot. It seems to be about our inability to know ourselves, or perhaps our not having a single self to know. Psychologically, it's a hall of mirrors, it scrambles your brain. It takes you deep into uncomfortable places; it doesn't always take you safely back out again. But it has as much humanity, humility and understanding as any book I've ever read.

## MRS DALLOWAY – VIRGINIA WOOLF

The book forced upon so many English Lit and Creative Writing students; I've heard more than one person say they hate this novel and I think why? How! I suppose for the reason I love it – it's singular. When it was published in 1925 it was breaking the boundaries of what language can do and where it can go (like Foster Wallace, though with no similarities in style), and even now it reads fresh and brave, and challenges readers.

We know that people in novels don't think like real people, but *Mrs Dalloway* was an experiment in putting consciousness into words, and I think to this day it remains one of the most exhilarating and persuasive. Through Septimus Smith it gets inside the experience of mental illness in a way few novels since have managed. And, in my view, it has some of the most breathtaking sentences in literature.

# Since feeling is first

SAMANTHA HARVEY

SAMANTHA HARVEY is the author of three novels, *The Wilderness*, *All Is Song* and most recently *Dear Thief*, which was published in September 2014. She teaches creative writing at Bath Spa University.

## LES MURRAY

LES MURRAY is an Australian poet, anthologist and critic. His career spans over 40 years and he has published nearly 30 volumes of poetry as well as two verse novels and collections of his prose writings. He is regarded as "the leading Australian poet of his generation".

# Music To Me Is Like Days

Once played to attentive faces  
music has broken its frame  
its bodice of always-weak laces  
the entirely promiscuous art  
pours out in public spaces  
accompanying everything, the selections  
of sex and war, the rejections.  
To jeans-wearers in zipped sporrans  
it transmits an ideal body  
continuously as theirs age. Warrens  
of plastic tiles and mesh throats  
dispense this aural money  
this sleek accountancy of notes  
deep feeling adrift from its feelers  
thought that means everything at once  
like a shrugging of cream shoulders  
like paintings hung on park mesh  
sonore doom soneer illy chesh  
they lost the off switch in my lifetime  
the world reverberates with Muzak  
and Prozac. As it doesn't with poe-zac  
(I did meet a Miss Universe named Verstak).  
Music to me is like days  
I rarely catch who composed them  
if one's sublime I think God  
my life-signs suspend. I nod  
it's like both Stilton and cure  
from one harpsichord-hum:  
penicillium –  
then I miss the Köchel number.  
I scarcely know whose performance  
of a limpid autumn noon is superior  
I gather timbre outranks rhumba.  
I often can't tell days apart  
they are the consumers, not me  
in my head collectables decay  
I've half-heard every piece of music  
the glorious big one with voice  
the gleaming instrumental one, so choice  
the hypnotic one like weed-smoke at a party  
and the muscular one of farty  
cars that goes Whudda Whudda  
Whudda like the compound oil heart  
of a warrior not of this planet.

From *New Selected Poems* by Les Murray.  
Published by Carcanet. [www.carcanet.co.uk](http://www.carcanet.co.uk)



14 A group of musicians and a lead singer pour their hearts out into a handful of microphones. When the song finishes a cheerful voice from the control room booms over the speaker, "That's it boys, it's a take!" and the band members slap each other on the back and run into the control room to their awaiting girlfriends who are, of course, all models and starlets. It's a notion and an image that has Hollywood's fingerprints all over it – reality is a little different.

On my first recording session, I was the bass player; I too heard that booming voice, only he said, "That wasn't very good. You guys will have to keep going until you get it right. Bass player: your E string is flat!" We were desperately bashing out this song for an hour or so under the audio equivalent of a microscope. The booming voice was right. The playback of our last take was sloppy and my bass was out of tune. Left to our own devices we would've given up and said that was the best we could do. But the booming voice was persistent, and the next few takes steadily got better, all the more so for checking the tuning of my bass before each take. The booming voice saved the day.

When I grew up I became a booming voice, well, actually, a booming voice with the nasal Brooklyn accent. I wanted to be the lead singer or at the very least just one of the boys in the band, but circumstances put me in the director's chair instead. The circumstances uprooted me from Manhattan and planted me firmly on British soil at the height of Swinging London. I took root and stayed there for nearly 23 years. In the end, I think it was a better deal.

The role of a record producer hasn't changed much since Fred Gaisberg cut the performances of opera singers to wax cylinders in the 1890s. He instructed them to move closer or further from a horn; he was the voice of experience, helping the artists to get their performances to a high standard onto the recording medium.

The first time I heard the term "Producer" was in the '60s when a mad looking man on the Jack Paar TV show (one of the very first talk shows) audaciously proclaimed that he dictated the musical taste

of teenagers in America. He was introduced as a record producer and his name was Phil Spector. I already loved his productions without really knowing that someone other than the artists and musicians were involved (I still melt when I hear "Walking In The Rain" by the Ronettes). It was Spector who brought this role to the public's attention, but most records of that time were still produced anonymously. It was many years later that the great Quincy Jones admitted to arranging and producing "It's My Party" for Lesley Gore in 1963.

When I heard a Beatles record produced by George Martin I began to understand that record production was an art form, not just an aural mirror of a live performance. Before those intricate Beatles recordings it was just that, a live performance captured on cylinder, disk or tape. It is said that once Bing Crosby, the legendary crooner, discovered that two performances could be edited together by cutting audio tape with a razor blade, he gave birth to the "art" of record production.

There was one pioneering genius who stood the recording world on its head and changed everything forever – Les Paul. His name is on millions of the solid body electric guitars that he designed. But his greatest contribution was his concept of the multi-track tape recorder. With his wife, Mary Ford, he produced supernatural recordings of complex arrangements (supernatural in the sense that two people sounded like twenty). His guitar was used over and over again on a simple song as he created a guitar orchestra. For very fast passages he slowed the tape down, played a phrase and then returned the machine back to normal speed. The result was impossible tinkling runs of demisemiquavers. Wife Mary was transformed into a very precise female jazz vocal quartet. At first his one-off 8-track tape recorder was considered a novelty, but when multi-track machines were mass-produced the world of making records changed forever. Since the '60s most recordings have been made in assembly line fashion, not all the sounds recorded at once, but in layered overdubbed sessions. Even in the sacrosanct world of classical music Maria Callas broke the rules by overdubbing a missed high "C" in an otherwise perfect performance. There was a critical furore but since then classical record producers have been doing virtually what a pop record producer does.

A record producer is responsible for every aspect of a recording. In the early days the word "producer" was more descriptive because the record producer put up the money for the recording and hired a team of experts to execute the various creative jobs. Eventually the role of a producer became more creative and resembled that of a "music director". George Martin crossed the line and wasn't shy about giving the Beatles positive feedback and suggesting changes in their musical arrangements. A straight up producer would not be qualified and certainly not welcomed to give such dramatic direction, but George Martin was a very accomplished orchestrator, pianist and oboist. I think his most glorious moment in the Beatles' recorded repertoire was his stunning octet arrangement for "Eleanor Rigby". Equally stunning is the sheer wizardry of "Strawberry Fields Forever". Of course the Beatles contributed greatly and John Lennon refused to take "no" for an answer when he wanted two disparate takes, recorded on different days, in two different tempi and keys to be joined together. George Martin and their extraordinary engineer Geoff Emerick stayed up all night and made it work! There might have been four Beatles, but there were two more Beatles working in the shadows. Record production, as we know it today, started with

15 George Martin and the Beatles. I make it no secret that I fashioned my style of production after Martin's.

To be responsible for every aspect of a recording a record producer should have a working knowledge of recording techniques and music. Many modern record producers are experts at one or the other or both. I have read that we also have to be psychologists, but that's a bit far fetched. I see us more as coaches, a job where some psychology might be necessary. My mentor, Denny Cordell, instinctively knew how to get the best out of an artist and the best sound out of a sound engineer. My policy is to interfere as little as possible, but to draw out the best in the artists I work with, especially the singers. Sometimes I offer advice for the substitution of a word or melody (for which I don't take a royalty); I've also sung backing vocals and played various instruments too. The best part is towards the end, when I sit at a mixing console and put it all together.

All in all it's a very nice occupation..

From *Bowie, Bolan and the Brooklyn Boy*. Published by Harper Collins

Photo of Tony Visconti taken on the 2017 UK Holy Holy tour by Nick Hynan. [www.nickhynanphotography.com](http://www.nickhynanphotography.com)

# What is a record producer?

TONY VISCONTI

TONY VISCONTI is a Grammy award-winning music producer and has worked with, amongst others, David Bowie, Marc Bolan, Morrissey, Angelique Kidjo and Kristeen Young. He tours with Holy Holy, is presenter and judge on Sky's Master of Music programme, Honorary Tutor at the Visconti Music Studios at Kingston University and author of the autobiography *Bowie, Bolan and the Brooklyn Boy*, published by Harper Collins.





I went to Madagascar once. I spent my last day in Antananarivo trying to find the ladies selling lemur lamps that I had seen on the first day I'd arrived. The lamps were masterpieces of kitsch, featuring gloriously tacky lemurs clinging to a mango tree, topped by a bulb. The ladies had been working the Haute Ville, hanging outside the French-style cafés where the tourists congregated, but I'd be damned if I could find them again.

It turns out my time would have been better spent digging through the dusty stalls of Analakely Market looking for old 45s by Sylvin Marc. For a short time in the late sixties, Sylvin Marc was Madagascar's Soul Brother #1 and at just 17 years old he laid down "Listen To Something About Soul", the heaviest, funkier track ever to come out of Madagascar.

Born in Masomeloka, a small village at the mouth of the Masora River, overlooking the Indian Ocean, Sylvin Marc was raised by a music-loving teacher who owned the only record player in the village. He polished his skills mimicking the records brought back by other villagers from their travels and at aged eight played his first concert, performing a set of songs heard on the radio and requested by his neighbours.

In 1967, he travelled to Descomarmmond studios in Antananarivo to lay down "Listen To Something About Soul." It was recorded in one take, on a rickety two-track tape machine, with his brother, Justin, on drums and his mate, Ange Japhet, on bass. In true Soul Brother fashion, the groove was so tight it had to be spread out over both sides of the single.

From the moment the needle drops, "Listen To Something About Soul" crackles with energy and ambition. Funded by a small advance from Jackman Records, the single was Sylvin's one shot and you can tell. He doesn't try to hide his influences – he namechecks about a half a dozen James Brown songs in the first 30 seconds – but they are fused with a rawness and with distinct rhythms that create something that is thrilling, breathless and irresistible.

# African Revolutions

PETER MOORE

PETER MOORE has been wandering the world since he was 19 years old. He is the author of six travel books and writes about African music on [www.africanrevolutions.com](http://www.africanrevolutions.com).

A decent 45 was a Malagasy musician's calling card and "Listen To Something About Soul" opened a hell of a lot of doors for Sylvin Marc. He formed The Pumpkins with Jean-Claude Andriamihaingo, a well-known Malagasy filmmaker, before heading to France to play with Nina Simone, Eddy Louiss and Aldo Romano.

Sadly, funk and soul was not a field Sylvin Marc continued to furrow. He fell in with Chris Rea, working as a bass player on his 1993 "God's Great Realist" tour and playing with him ever since. In that time he released eight solo albums, but, unfortunately, they owe more to "On The Beach" than "I Feel Good." "Listen To Something About Soul" remains his purest and most essential work.

I never found the lemur lamp ladies. They'd returned to their village to pick up another consignment so the lighting on my bedside table remains strictly functional. The good news? Barcelona-based label Rocafort have re-issued "Listen To Something About Soul". Now everyone gets to know what James Brown would have sounded like if he'd grown up in a Malagasy village on a river overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Visit [rocafortrecords.bandcamp.com](http://rocafortrecords.bandcamp.com) to get your fix.

Photograph by Sony Sanlé/Rocafort Records



## Rita of the White Bees\*

pray for us, for the girls like green splinters, their pierced reveal unfolding in small towns running on skeleton crews; for the pageant-hearted girls who burst like bright ideas into backseats, bikinis, the blessable dream of being human; for the too skinny stay-awake girls, living on rice wine and red light, whose home is the typical *elsewhere* of exiles; for the lip-glossed gonzo girls, those high femme fatalists, all cried out; for the lost girls, giddy and groped and coked to their stoic ponytails, shiny and slick and swinging like whips; for the headlong girls, barefoot and bracing themselves in a bus lane, smiles like Saint Laurent scarves on fire, manic and vampire; for the girls who went waning in wraparound glasses to clinics and vigils; for the pub-crawling girls in packs, in parks and lanes, alive with the loitering joy of foxes; for the girls who fuck like stray cats come to sad anatomical terms in the spongy summer nights of cities; for the girls in ravenous warp speed, spinning, spun, till tears collect in their cartwheeled eyes like sparks; pray for us, for wasted girls with workshy serotonin, whose trestle cheekbones grind on air; for the peep-toed girls with broken heels and fake eyelashes, trafficking tears at a photo shoot; for the lookbook, look back angry girls, whose *bad day* is a black dress that goes with everything; for the bitch fight girls, their raw collided atmospheres on fire, all cellulite, venom, and celebrity perfume; for the girls whose hairdos are stairways to heaven, whose pigments shiver in vintage frocks, whose song is a storm in a borderline thought, who tend their fetishes like flowers; for the girls, most of all, who are their own witching hour, their jaundiced drama dragging them down in the bump and grind of a tightening gyre; for the girls whose vertigo is *not* the fear of falling, but the fear of jumping; who are so entirely sick of this mingy, yelping ethic men call *love*; for the girls who are no longer young, whose unmade faces are empty airports; whose bodies are the quarrels they are having with themselves; for these girls, their madness lasting them out like a sensible pair of leather boots. Patroness of Impossible Causes, pray for us, that we might flip a decade's deadweight like a mattress; gather our Godspeed, walk away from ourselves.

\*Saint Rita of Cascia, Patron Saint of Impossible Causes, and of abused women.

## True Confessions of a Catholic Schoolgirl

Friday night is viral blight, the monitor glowing with gilded intensity. Here is a mirthless acre of flesh; sex is the shivery pain you roar and cramp with. Now you are sliding right. I tell you, *you can Google me*. I disclose myself in parts: gingham, pleats, and long white socks, my father's massive bicep wearing black. *What is it you think you know about me?* Mine is a mood you might take tweezers to; my mood resisting Spring's green reek, with cats alive in the redolent hedges. Despair's a kind of clockwork lust. I am technician to your winding up. *What is it you think you know about me?* Winter isn't shrugged, my dear, not round here, and you want something, *everything*: the giddy habit of my love, the truth, the meme, the myth. But honesty's the lowest form of impotence, my love. Inside is a thundery hurt, it's been this way for years. I am wakeful and genderless. *You* ask all the wrong questions. *I* never learnt to separate my *grievance* from my *grief*. I spent a life in trying to keep my clotted wrists above the waterline. Hail Mary's in the fraying dusk. *I say the shrapnel in my flat, broad bones is not a metaphor*. *I say it's easy to be brave when someone loves you*. How do you make a study of forgetfulness? A hobby out of loss? The silence thickens. The silence is like fur, it strokes one way. You brush against it. *I say stop giving compliments; stop taking photos*. If you could feel how I feel. If it was your unyielding guilt that scribbled things in notebooks. I've no right to be alive. I swelter in a white shirt. The climate grinds. Everyone avoids me. About my own prospects I'm as cynical as science. I will not be improved upon, or fumbled with, like women are, *real* women. You don't know how to talk to me, trope faith you make a fetish of. No, I did not *keep the uniform*, and in the air behind me the saints are perfecting their deaths, screwing them into my brain, like lightbulbs.

FRAN LOCK

FRAN LOCK is the author of three poetry collections, *Flatrock* (Little Episodes, 2011), *The Mystic and the Pig Thief* (Salt, 2014), and *Dogtooth* (Out-Spoken Press, 2017). She is the winner of the 2014 Ambit Poetry Competition, the 2015 Out-Spoken Poetry Prize, and the 2016 Yeats Poetry Prize.



The prime quality of literary prose – that is, the thing it does better than any other form (movies, songs, sculpture, tweets, television, you name it) – is voice”, wrote George Saunders in a recent piece in The New Yorker. “A great writer mimicking, on the page, the dynamic energy of human thought is about as close as we can get to modelling pure empathy.”

When Saunders’ previous book of short stories *Tenth of December* was published, it was immediately hailed in January 2013 by the New York Times as “...the best book you’ll read all year” and, although lauded so early in the year, it went on to top bestseller lists and win awards. Now his first full-length novel, debuting in the bestseller lists again, delivers all the passion and compassion, satire, tenderness, wry humanity and creative acumen that we might expect from Saunders. Here, though, the evocation of a child’s death is so acute as to make you pause, winded by emotion, as you read.

Emotion isn’t new to an author engaged with the empathetic voice. Put simply, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is about President Abraham Lincoln visiting the body of his recently deceased young son in a crypt among a cemetery of ghosts. The bardo is a Buddhist, transitional, limbo state (Sogyal Rinpoche’s *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* will tell you all you need to know about this), and a state where it is “not good for children to tarry too long”. This oblique urgency carries the plot and becomes something of a preoccupation for the other occupants of the cemetery – those vexed and vexatious voices, realised in phantasmagorical terms, uncanny and funny and stuck with the unresolved dilemmas of life that trailed into the bardo with them when they died.

Saunders’ notion of the bardo is, he says, “That whatever happens after death wouldn’t be disconnected from what’s happening to us now and there were ideas that really interested me and one was the notion that our minds are continuous, so

THROUGH HIS PERSONAL GRIEF, LINCOLN COMES TO UNDERSTAND THAT THIS ECHOES THAT OF OTHER PARENTS OF OTHER DEAD SONS KILLED IN THE WAR OVER WHICH HE PRESIDES; AND SO HIS GRIEF BECOMES UNIVERSAL.

your after-death experience is going to somewhat resemble what you have here; except that the mind that is *now*, is stuck in the body. The bardo notion of mind is that it is like a wild horse, but tied to a post and when you die that tether gets cut and the mind is incredibly wild. Which is”, he adds, “both terrifying and comforting.”

And it’s a notion that has all sorts of literary possibilities. We’ve had ghostly voices before. Messrs Ogmire and Pritchard in Dylan Thomas’ *Under Milk Wood*, the cemetery inhabitants in Act 3 of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (which Saunders says was something of an inspiration) and even the ghostly Furies in T S Eliot’s play *The Family Reunion*; but none as compelling as the imaginatively realised Roger Bevens, Hans Vollman, Reverend Everly Thomas and others, trailing their unfinished business into the bardo, resonating with Jung’s psychoanalytical theories about the continuation of consciousness after death, and providing refuge for Lincoln’s own imagined interiority. It is into this ghostly world that the uncomprehending boy Willie Lincoln steps.

It is a strange book, a compelling one, full of nuance and twenty years in its gestation. The seed was sown, Saunders explains, when the crypt in which Willie had lain in the Oak Hill cemetery, Washington, was pointed out to him; along with the tantalising piece of information that Lincoln had visited his boy’s body there, several times after the child’s death. There the germ of an idea had rested, resisting excavation, for years.

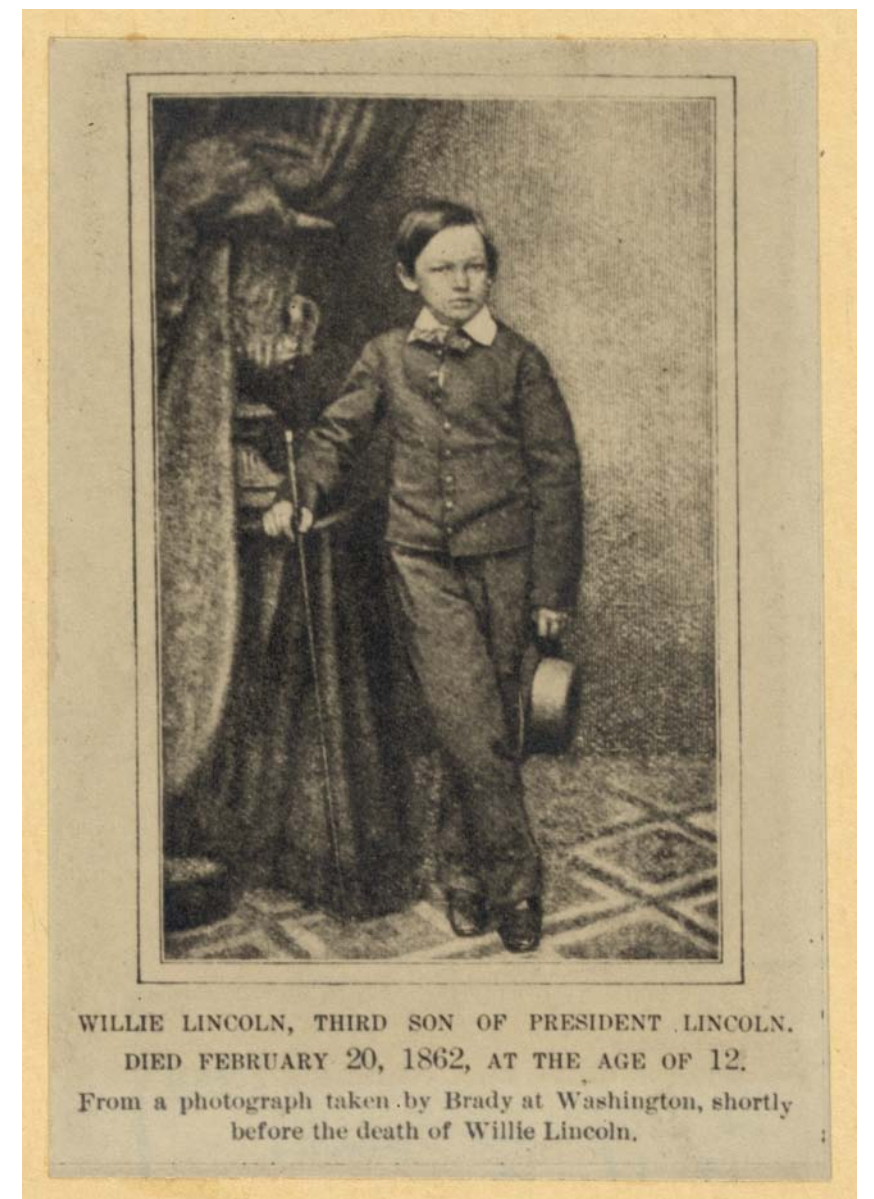
“If you’re a writer, you sometimes work so hard to get a voice of your own, something you feel that you can do and, once you get it, you don’t want to move away from it, and I couldn’t see any way to get into this Lincoln material from that satirical, comic, first person voice I had,” says Saunders. “So I kept putting it off and over the years, every time I felt a sort of... artistic content, once I’d finished a project or something, that book would come out of the wings, going... now? Now? NOW? And I’d go... no. No. NO! And then, in 2012, I’d finished *Tenth of December* and it came out of the wings again, and this time with more force. So I listed the reasons why [not]: it would require me to be less comic, more earnest, engage more fully with love and grief and loss. Now those are idiotic reasons not to do a book so, basically, I gave myself a contract that I would do this for three months; and see. And, as we always dream it might, it suddenly caught fire and suddenly the book was sort of writing itself. It was really a rather wonderful crossroads for me as I was becoming a little unhappy with the fact that I couldn’t get a more positive valence into my work. To be satirical and accusatory and sardonic comes naturally to me, but to say that life can be beautiful and can turn out well is a harder sell.”

How, then, to convey this in a novel about a dead boy and his shattered father? How to write about what is, essentially, every parent’s most obvious fear, the loss of a child, when you have no actual experience of this yourself? “I took the book very seriously, every day. I took Willie very seriously, every day. And I didn’t write the book until after my children were grown,” Saunders observes wryly. “But there’s no sleight of hand, it’s not like method acting, it’s more about assembling things about which you have authentic feelings and juxtaposing them, so what I used for this was my love for my kids and my memory of that time and that was all I needed: that love. In art, you’re using what you have, but often in strange patterns.”

And it’s this love, you feel, that’s evident in a passage in the book describing an exchange between father and son: *First time we fitted him for a suit, he looked down at the trousers and then up at me, amazed, as if to say: Father, I am wearing grown-up pants... Then the shy, boyish smile as I slid the jacket on him. Say, he said, don’t I look fine, Father?* And this takes us to Lincoln’s grief-stricken rumination: “*What put out that spark? What a sin it would be. Who would dare. Ruin such a marvel. Hence is murder anathema. God forbid I should ever commit such a grievance* –

Form becomes content, content form; the expression of loss and sorrow and disintegrating composure, both literally and metaphorically, is made manifest through the ghosts’ voices. The story told via these voices is juxtaposed with actual (and occasionally fabricated) documentation from the time of the American Civil War – newspaper reports, first person accounts and over 35,000 books – the most documented of any war, ever, Saunders says. Through his personal grief, Lincoln comes to understand that his echoes that of other parents of other dead sons killed in the war over which he presides; and so his grief becomes universal. One of the most moving passages in the book is that which describes Lincoln’s realisation of this, his dark night of the soul where, on the verge of giving up, he has to transform his sorrow into a determination to bring the war to an end. And here, another of Saunders’ notions comes into play, where sorrow and the empathy that can arise from it can lead toward kindness.

“Lincoln’s so sorrowful, with no attachment to protective beliefs and then there’s this moment, which I’ve written about, a scene of sorrow and how this translates into kindness.” *Whatever way one took in this world, one must try to remember that all were suffering (none content; all wronged, neglected, overlooked,*



*misunderstood*), and therefore one must do what one could to lighten the load of those with whom one came into contact.

Kindness is a theme Saunders also iterated in his convocation speech at Syracuse University for the class of 2013 (find it and read it) and one that lies at the heart of this book; but let’s not underestimate the humour of its content, because there are genuinely funny moments that work to further the pathos. As in life, it seems, in death.

There is an audio book of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, seven hours long and featuring 166 voices, which deserves a review all of its own. And now film rights have been sold to husband and wife production team Megan Mullally and Nick Offerman, who will work in collaboration with Saunders, further ensuring that this wonderful read reaches an even wider audience.

*Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders is published by Bloomsbury, price £18.99 [www.georgesaunders.com](http://www.georgesaunders.com)

# Lincoln in the Bardo – George Saunders

HARRIET GRIFFEY

HARRIET GRIFFEY is an ex-book publisher and editor, published author, writer and journalist who has written features and reviews for all the major UK papers, including the Guardian, Times, FT, Telegraph and Independent.



# Family Favourites

Heat like the flat of someone's hand.

Each song is like a brick

baked by thick voices into something

else: boredom.

My mum can make a fist

with her whole body;

can sulk with her upper arms.

"Family Favourites".

The soldiers' wives' requests

are like a parody of how she waits,

caught in the slow swell of a summer afternoon.

I've drawn a clown

but now my hand

keeps drawing it.

It wants to take the wait, the strings,

my mother's mood (it settles

everywhere, like dust)

and force them into something smooth and effortless:

a strong line.

It keeps doing it, past eloquence,

scrubbing and scrubbing

at the page until what's left is blackness

and an ache;

the promise of my father.

Later, he will grin and gurn and keen -

each shift is ontological.

My leg will hammer up and down;

will scrub the other leg.

He will upend the wine bottle, like ketchup;

ask me who I love the most.

My leg will tell him.

## SAM MOUNTJOY

SAM MOUNTJOY is a previously unpublished author. He has written two collections of poetry.

# The Colca Canyon

The dark slipped

through the fingers of the moon

like bolts of cloth.

Mauricio, our guide, had a transistor radio;

the music was astringently otherworldly.

I wanted to speak to him

but had to console myself with glances;

tender nods.

The colours of the gorge resolved

from white to blues and greens.

As they began to assert themselves,

so did the drop.

My mule was rolling like a boat at sea.

I gripped its neck.

If I could steer it, I thought,

then I could ride it properly, like a bumper car.

What was its name? George?

Mauricio called it "York".

"Please, York", I said.

"Please."

I was willing it, like a balloon, to stay aloft.

I was begging it; crooning, almost.

Its feet were stuttering like castanets.

At the top,

my cheeks are lifted for the camera,

but I am not smiling.

Mauricio and I are separated by

my urge to cry

and his bewilderment.

Later, on the bus, a sign said:

"Dios es mi co-piloto".

He might as well have been.

## TO MY GRANDSON, WHO FOR HIS OWN SAFETY MUST KEEP THESE THINGS SECRETLY IN HIS HEART:

I wish that I had the eyes of a hawk – and not only the eyes but the perspective too. That way I might be able to give a more pleasing account of myself and of my life and of the violent death that, more than forty years ago, finished the old world. That violent death is, I know, what you want to hear about.

Nevertheless, I suppose I could now, with effort, travel in my mind's eye to the top circle of a hawk's gyre and contemplate the famous slaughter that so interests you, and from that height I might relate dispositions and movements, if that is what you desire. I could describe topography and fixtures – rivers, marshes, barns, churches, mills, pathways; the trails and billows of smoke, the flight of tiny creatures through the grass, the reaping of taller creatures as if they were, themselves, tall grass. I imagine that I could, if I chose, see these things anew; I could, with my mind-hawk's eye, dress the scene with glamour to make the story noble.

But I am not a hawk and I do not see like one, even with the sharpened eye of hindsight. I cannot, for all faith, glamourise the hardest detail of what happened that day, nor alter my part in it, nor fix, with new angles and keener sight, the upshot – although I wish that I could.

You will understand by this, then, that I consider myself less of a man than I should be, and so perhaps it is better if you do your looking through the eyes of the bird of prey, if that is what suits your need. Take the over-view. They are efficient, those hawk's eyes, and without prejudice towards their own nature. Hawks are not preyed on by doubt. They only see; they only act.

So up you go, up into the clarified air. Up, up and up to an altitude to which no man rightly has access, unless he is a cathedral builder. Then, while flittering on your tower of nothing, survey the scene below as the chroniclers are wont to show it, wide and untroubled, a disorderly spread laid out like a riverside picnic in the green of England, her finest and her most rotten fruits gathered on the patchwork of several summer meadows and then consumed in blood.

## Which King?

NICK COLEMAN

NICK COLEMAN is the author of three books: *The Train in the Night: a Story of Music and Loss*, which was shortlisted for the 2012 Wellcome Trust book prize; the novel *Pillow Man*; and *Voices: How A Great Singer Can Change Your Life*, which is due in January 2018. All are published by Jonathan Cape/Vintage.

It is your privilege to enjoy such a perspective because you are entitled to history's song, being a young man. Leave me, instead, to live outside the song and inside the moment; to sit forever on my horse down there on the patchwork meadows with my father in the front rank of Sir William Stanley's battalion, shifting uncomfortably in my ill-fitting harness, shitting myself.

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My father insists on looking at me constantly, turning his head under his helmet like an owl and staring without blinking as if I were a vole on a stick. Sometimes his head turns but his helmet does not, and on those occasions he resembles a one-eyed owl. I hope he means this peering as a reassurance to me. I take it as anything but. I was not born to fight.

He is in so many respects a good man, my father, your great-grandfather. He is a reasonably fit and manly man too, approaching his fortieth year and not yet given over to aching. His hair is still thick and dark, like seasoned thatch, his hands like pincers. He is chivalrously strong. I, by contrast, am sixteen and all one unchivalrous ache, from toe to crown. Even at sixteen my hair is thin, like thatch that has rotted and begun to disperse in the wind. My mail and plating hang off me like a drying wash. I do not make a knightly structure. I should not be here.

I should not have been born at all.



No, it is true. This was never said openly in my presence when I was a child but I know that it is true. I should not have been born. It has been observable in every eye every day of my life up to this day, the 22nd day of August 1485. And it is observable now, in my father's eye. He is telling himself that he is peering around the rim of his sallet out of paternal concern for his son; he is reassuring himself that he does harbour feelings in his breast other than warlike ones and that, even with the hot blood of battle already rushing in his veins, he is still a father with a fatherly heart.

But I also know, as he does not, that he is peering in some sort of disbelief. He is gazing at the spindly creature shifting next to him on his over-sized bay, his armour an assortment of fittable parts, his left arm barely strong enough to support the shield buckled on to it – and he is wondering how it came to this.

"Make me proud," he says thickly over his bevor, trying to be kind.

How did it come to this? How did my father – a warrior-like knight of some means and reputation – give rise to a frog? How was it possible in God's Nature for such a creature to be expelled from my saintly mother's womb? What did they do to deserve me? A frog. For so I am widely known, in hall and kitchen and solar and stable, to my mother, my several sisters, steward and house-servants – even to the stable-hands, although they may not say so to my face. "Frog." Frog not because of my colour – I am not green – but because of the strangeness of my body, which is like a barrel, and my limbs, which are thin and spatulate and strong where they are healthy and almost utterly withered where they are not: to specify, my left arm, which is short and twisted and good for nothing much apart from feeble gripping and still feebler waving when my good hand is otherwise engaged (I can clasp a rein with my frog hand, just about, but I cannot heft a cheese).

Frog. It is the name I deserve. And, much as I should not have been born in the first place, I am also not at all sure that I deserve to be sitting here upon this horse upon a mound in Sir William Stanley's retinue, waiting with my father to manifest the accession of my manhood.

Jesu.

But I shall not let my father down. He has instructed me to stay close no matter what, and that I will make him proud if I land but a single blow upon my enemy, whatever his station, prince, knight or churl. What sort of blow though? A cut or a thrust or a mighty cleaving? I know in my mind what such an action should entail, but my body most certainly does not. My arm and wrist know no more of cleaving real flesh than my cock and balls know of penetrating it. Indeed it is likely that my cleaving shall be as my love-making, in which case I will be offering an apologetic tap in passing to someone's pauldron, and then I will be gone.

Nor am I confident about "staying close". My horsemanship has always been risible and with my visor down I will be effectively blind. Blind as a frog in a barrel in a cellar on the darkest night of the year. My single greatest fear is that I will be detached from my father's side, carried out into the melee by an undirected steed and then hooked down into the mud where I will be undressed by avid fingers and then stuck like a pig. I will not be landing many blows at all if I am lying down half-naked in mud with an opened groin.

I hope that my father cannot read all of this fear in my eyes, but he probably can. I am always transparent. My transparency is probably bringing him yet more shame.

More shame? Yes, there's more. Much more. How shall we number the shames?

In this particular case, the shame has already been heaped upon his back by the news, imparted overnight to the captains of our company, that we are not, as we thought, assembled in these meadows to repel an invader from France but to see which way the wind blows, and then to act to our best advantage – "our advantage" to be interpreted jointly by Lord Stanley and his brother Sir William and then communicated by signal to all constituents of the muster upon our respective crests. We will be assaulting as and when (and whom) My Lords determine according to their interest, in all likelihood rather late in the day.

Our new general directive?

"Succour the King!"

Our question in reply: which King? Richard or Richmond? The "attainted" Yorkist tyrant or the "liberating" Lancastrian Welshman from France? Stanley's liege lord or Stanley's stepson?

We will find out in due course, no doubt, when one king has established his ascendancy over the other by clear means – we are to be, I infer, the finishing blow. Although it remains my most fervent hope, naturally, that we will not get to find out at all and that neither king will require our succouring, so that the Stanleys may then suck up to the eventual victor without having to sacrifice a single drop of my blood. It will rake my father's guts to have to wait for his cause, and for his cause to be a contingent one.

And so we sit upon our hillock, our harness chinking in the morning air as our mounts shift and steam beneath us. There is much unease abroad. No one is sitting comfortably. I am regretting the turnip that yesterday brought comfort on our ride to this contemptible spot.

There are swifts in the air, like premature arrows.

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What would you like to hear?

That trumpets bray and mounted men clash in eddying swirls, their armaments sparking, while arrows sing and guns erupt like the coals in Vulcan's forge, pouring death upon the anvil plain?

Perhaps you would prefer me to triangulate the science of the conflict, in the style of Vegetius: the strategic manoeuvre followed by the thrust and parry of disciplined forces feinting for an opening, hitting, then rolling with the counterstrike, giving ground and absorbing impact, holding, turning and then driving hard again into the exposed, half-turned flank like a fist...

Or the heraldry! What about the heraldry? Heraldry is displayed upon the field for the reading eye – it is how we know what is where and who is who and why it is we die...

But no. I cannot offer such accounts. Being an accountant, I do not possess the wit, nor sufficient grasp of the military art to construct a narrative that can possibly meet with your desires. And besides, from where we sit upon our hillock, there is virtually nothing to be seen. Not to begin with. In fact nothing occurs at all throughout the long morning, or so it seems. Instead we gaze in a sort of awe at Richard's host rippling upon the crest of distant Annbeam Hill, and then we watch its gradual descent onto the plain below, a slow torrent driven down by nature, as answerable as running water upon a woodland slab. For a spell I feel the nobility of it.

And then I feel the cogitations of my arse. I tell my father that he must excuse my presence for a time and I take my relief behind a bush, which is not easy given the nature of iron cuisses, poleyns and greaves. (My crunchy sabatons get off lightly in the circumstances.) And it is indeed a turn of good fortune that, across the fields, the guns begin their popping while I am depositing my turnip. They must be close to a mile distant, and so, in the vicinity of my bush at least, my arse makes the louder report – but, nevertheless, I am grateful for the guns. The rest of Sir William's battalion will be distracted.

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The morning passes with much craning and wrangling of horses by their uneasy riders. Most of the horses seem to have a better idea as to what to do with their morning: they snort and stamp and shift around as if annoyed. Movement is of course also perceptible on the vale before us, but it is hard to distinguish the detail of it. The general disposition is one of slow-curdled mass activity – pushing and shoving, mainly – giving rise to not very much at all. Nothing decisive at any rate. There is shouting and clattering to be heard, naturally, even at such a distance, but the volume of noise is not overwhelming (you might think of rain upon a neighbour's slates), especially once the guns cease their bellowing – presumably because they no longer have a clear target at which to belch their stones. It is the case that, despite our slightly

elevated angle, it is difficult to tell one thing from another, even with commentary from my father, who is determined to read the scene out loud like a psalter.

"That," he says, pointing at some ripple I can barely distinguish from the general current, "is the virtue of pikes."

"Ah-hah," I say, as if all the shocks of my life had not prepared me for the force of this revelation.

And so we sit and watch and listen, and admire the assiduousness of the "heralds" who traverse the grasses between our position and that of King Richmond, enveloped in his retinue away to the left across what looks like a luminous cake of marshland, serenely detached from the general to-do. I do notice however that, by the midpoint of the morning, the swifts have departed – perhaps driven to their nests by the flight of real arrows, and perhaps by the tang of blood in the air. And for an hour at most the two hosts push and shove and Lord Stanley receives and returns dispatches from beyond the marsh.

And then King Richmond moves.

It seems to me in the moment that he moves because his dispatches are not eliciting the answers he desires. And so he resolves to make himself the dispatch. He sets out hesitantly at first – he is obliged with all his company to circumnavigate the luminous bog – but there is no doubt about his intended destination. He is moving his guard towards us, away to his right upon our hillock: Sir William's crest. It is not mistakable.

It has not been mistaken elsewhere either. For it is before Richmond has covered even a tenth of the distance separating his position from ours that the battle music changes and my father makes a sound in his throat that might be a gurgle of satisfaction or rage or lust or despair.

"Here it is, Frog," he rasps. "Here it is." And then he expectorates loudly within his bevor, forgetting that it is a bevor. My attention is detained only briefly with speculations about the consequences of this before it is dragged north across the vale to a new and even more terrifying spectacle. A substantial wave of mounted chivalry is breaking around the eastern flank of the general melee and surging like a tide across the meadowgrass towards the manoeuvring Richmond. The battle is bringing itself closer to our position. I want to throw up.

"That," says my father, his voice rising steeply above the growing racket, "is the king. It is Richard. He wants to catch my lord of Richmond on the move. He wants to finish it now..."

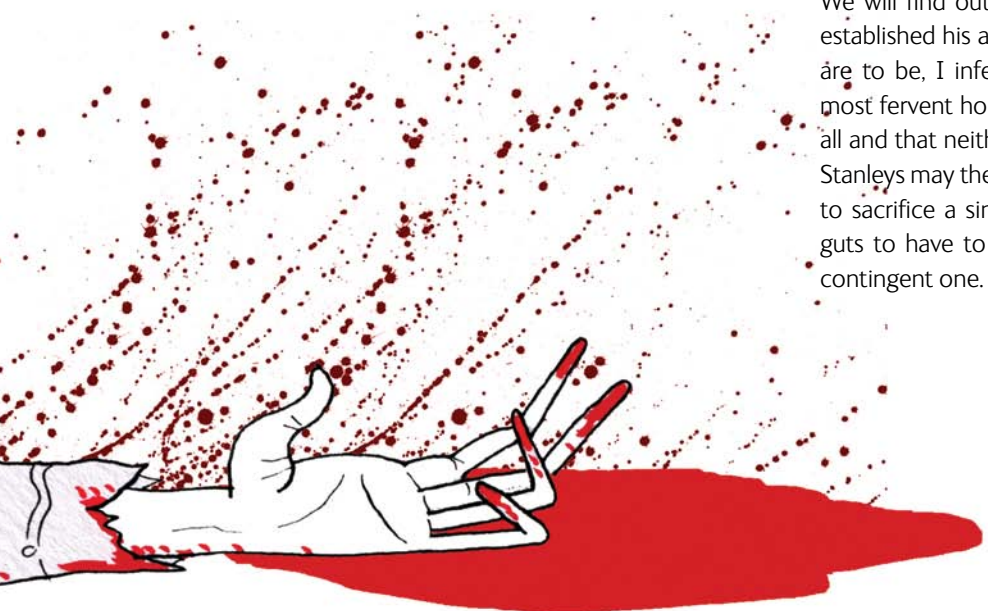
My father stands in his stirrups and turns to face me with a metallic snap, a flourish that causes his mace to bounce upon his hip. The fire is leaping in his eyes.

"Now, Frog, now's our time!"

"But which king?" I pipe, my voice an ant's voice.

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The wave crashes into Richmond's flank as his troop skirts the marshy ground behind a moving bristle of pikes. Well, I say "crashes" but I don't mean it. I say it because that is what waves of chivalry are supposed to do. They crash into things. They then carry those things away and leave wreckage behind, like broken ships on rocks. That is the chronicler's way of seeing it; it is the chivalrous way of telling it. And I can repeat it over and





again for you now, if that's what you'd like. But it would not be true. It would be far truer to say that Richard's charge arrives on Richmond's flank and then bridles at the bristle of pikes. It just stops. The charge even snatches back in places, like a hand in the dark that has touched something unexpected. This surprises me. But then it seems to me a matter of simple logic that horses cannot be made to crash into anything against their will, least of all into long, sharp, iron spines grouped together and held rigidly to present a wall of angled points. Horses value their eyes. They are sensible beasts, as well as sensitive. The charge stalls.

I cannot see Richard, but my father can. He keeps telling me to look for the crown. For the gold. For his colours. But my attention is general – I am looking at the patterns of war, not the details. I can just see King Richmond beneath his standard behind his pikemen, and I can see the horde, the wave of his Yorkist assailants – there must be a hundred at least – thwarted and recoiling to muster again, outraged at having met with such resistance – and probably fearful, now that they have reached it, of the mire's edge. It has the look of a sucking bog.

And then I do see Richard – although I should say that I see a figure that I presume to be Richard. He has dismounted and is oratorical upon a tump. It is clear to me even at such a distance that he is calling his corps to order and to dismount themselves and to form some new sort of configuration. His helm is off. His two arms are widely held, as if to encompass victory and perhaps even to describe how it might be accomplished.

Nearer at hand, my father's agitation is ever more apparent to me even though his commentary has ceased. Unusually for him, he is now lost for words. He is up on his stirrups again and is leaning hard into the morning, like a pointing dog, as if straining to hear Richard's words and see everything that may be seen. He snaps his gaze back and forth between the distant king and Sir William, and then to My Lord Stanley himself just visible on his crest to our right. He looks mad with something and I think it is not the bloodlust.

Which king?

King Richard's mounted corps has dismounted, tethered its horses and formed a new shape, perhaps the one indicated by the king's arms. They advance deliberately and tightly, as if roped together within a great noose. Indeed the new shape is barely moving at all when it reaches the hedge of pikes – but it does not recoil this time. Instead it parts the pikes, one by one, smashing and wrangling its way in like a boar parting boughs in a thornbush. Pikes are clattered upwards by the assault, or forced aside or down. Some are ripped from the hands that brandish them and are carried up on to the backs of the assaulting bodies to find their own passage to earth. And I am able to catch a glimpse now and again of a figure that might be Richard bobbing madly in the thick of it. He is driving hard for Richmond himself and the two kings must face each other soon. The struggle is slipping into the mud, yard by yard.

And then the mud begins to claim them. What had been a press becomes a tumble and then a chaos of falling; men slipping and tripping other men, legs going up and weapons dropping, skewed at angles, encumbering some, gouging others, and all fall down into the morass, which is only curdled the more by churning until the luminous green is frothed away by knight and

pikeman thrashing like sturgeon in a vat of horse glue. There is no momentum now; it is all a great tumble.

I have lost Richard.

I have lost my father too. He has departed on his horse to offer counsel to Sir William. And the truth of the matter is that I am so panicked by his removal from my side at this moment of decision that I take my eyes off the muddy carnage and so miss Richard's assault upon the person of Richmond himself and his banner and his banner-men.

Or at least I turn my eyes back to it only when my father returns. And by then the picture has changed.

\*\*\*\*\*

We are loosed abruptly from our chewed-up little hill, because we now know which king. The decision has been made. So we pour down into the meadows and I feel my teeth swim in my head. I do not like riding, even at a trot. It brings on nausea and a sort of wild unclarity of mind. I gibber, I squint, I pray, I lay close to my father's charger, even as we break into a smoother canter with fifty yards to go. I am borne witless and inadequate into the fight.

Sir William Stanley's battalion – which is to say the one that I am in – takes King Richard's dismounted corps from the side, where the flanking marsh permits, which is easier said than done: the mire extends beyond its own visible limits into the meadow we are obliged to cross to reach our objective. It is thick like pudding in a wet sauce. My horse splashes the last few yards and then...

I do not have words to describe what it is to ride a horse unsteadily into a millrace of flailing iron and flesh. I do not have the words because I have not retained the sensation. It has quite left me. It has left me as surely as the hairs that once strewed my head have left me. I can try of course. I can call upon my dwindling demons of imagination to summon the terror but I may not, try as I might, recall the experience as a tally of events and perceptions and emotions.

I know this much: that I carried my sword in my right hand and that I waved it, while clinging on for my life with my frog hand. I know that the horse carried me through the first press and that, by the exercise of great concentration, I remained balanced upon its back, like an egg on a spoon – which might explain my lack of memory of events, heroic or otherwise. But this much is true: I did not lose my seat and I received no blows, not even light ones. My passage was quick and almost slippery. And I may add that all my sword-waving did not result in the arrival of my manhood, because the sword's edge did not at any stage bite, cleave, nor carve flesh, jar bone, nor even tap lightly upon the pauldrons of mine enemy. It hewed only air. And in that at least I count myself fortunate.

However, my escape from the press did not result in the end of violence. On the contrary, the momentum gathered by my father and I carried us through the melee and down into a sort of hollow behind it, a scooped-out, thorn-girt depression across which the bog's feeding brook traversed a small road at a right angle. And it was at this ford, my horse blowing, my mind weeping uncontrollably and my heart's breath coming in vomitous starts, that I finally knew which king needed my succour.

I waited for my tears to stop before pushing up my visor. My father had reined in his horse a few moments after I had reined in mine, which left him ten paces further into the hollow; and he paused there on the slope, transfixed, for as long as it took for me to stop crying and to come to my senses. He then turned to look at me but did not speak nor rest his eyes upon me for long. For he could not. His mind was not with me. His attention was upon the hollow.

I once watched with my father a sea anemone devour a tiny fish in a rock pool. The anemone – a purple, pulpy-looking thing the size of my fist – surrounded the fish and then seemed to paralyse it with its soft arms, as if caressing it into submission. It did not beat the fish, nor cleave it. There was no struggle, nor even rapid movement – just a sort of gracious silken waving in the still waters of the pool. The fish seemed powerless to resist this stroking. Indeed, my presumption is that the anemone's arms were subtly envenomed to induce paralysis without exertion, so that all that was left for the fish was to sink into oblivion, without struggle. Perhaps with a watery sigh.

I watched events unfold in the rock pool as one does a dance, charmed by its apparent courtliness. But as the fish sank into passivity I began to sense the uncourtliness of the dance too – I became aware of the way the genteel movements served to disguise the predatory intent that lay behind them. The fish's eye remains with me still in my own mind's eye: a black dot in a silver filament, unexpressive, immobile, unblinking. It seemed to me, as the moments trickled by, that Time was the essence of this present cruelty, and that this tiny black dot was an expression of infinite Time: Time not as a line along which we travel to our deaths but as a hole through which everything escapes.

I plunged my hand into the waters of the pool and waved it about, in the hope that I might wake the fish from its stupor and intimidate the anemone into withdrawing its arms. But neither anemone nor its prey seemed inclined to do anything much at all: the fish remained inert, the anemone maintained its soft grip on the fish and I did not find the courage to bring my fingertips to bear directly. I greatly desired the fish's torment to cease but saw no way to ensure either its escape or its peaceful expiry, not without risking stings to myself.

And so it was in the thorny hollow that morning.

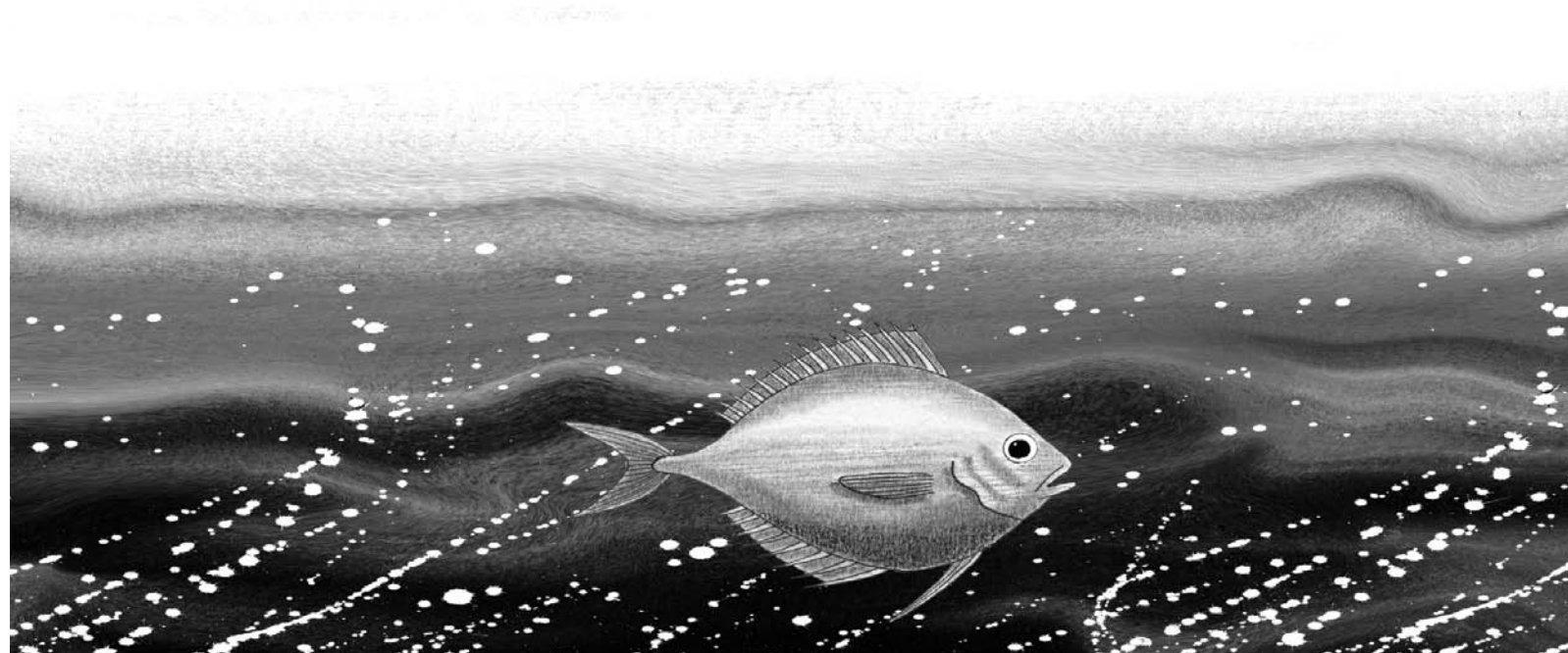
The king was encircled. There were perhaps ten of them, sufficient to surround him in such a way as to render him blind at all times to at least three of their number. They caressed him with their blades, slicing him softly, or so it seemed. He twisted, he turned, he lunged; he was wholly brave. But he was hopeless in his spinning. In his right hand he hefted a small, bloody axe; in the other a sword, not bloody at all – in fact, the sword seemed to serve primarily as a stick to support his weight on that side, and to pivot his rotations as he swung the axe in circles to keep his predators at bay. His helm was off. There was no crown upon his head and his eyes were veiled with blood. He uttered not a word but hissed as he lunged and swung his weapon in ever-diminishing, wildering circles.

How did I know him as Richard, given the absence of a crown from his head, of heraldry from his body and given the dismembered state of his soiled yet beautiful armour? I knew him as any man would know him, from his kingliness, of course, and from the perfect visibility of his crooked back, which was no longer disguised by his backplate – it had come partially adrift to expose his dorsal curvature to common eyes. I certainly wanted to avert mine as he bent low under the burden of his own slow killing, like a boar at bay. He showed his tusks. He hissed.

You sense my feeling, I know. I cannot disguise it. I wish to conceal it, but I cannot do so. There it is. I freely confess that I shuddered at his pain, even as I wrestled with the disgust that I always feel in the face of merciless acts; and I felt vividly its conflict with my desire to express loyalty to the coming new king, Richmond. Yes, you may laugh. This feeling is not legitimate – I know that, and you must forgive me. But it is not treason; it is only softness of heart.

For there he crouched, friendless, alone in his hollow, drawn back into the slime as if already half-swallowed by the earth and the water, the swish of halberd, partisan and poleaxe enribboning his flesh from a distance while he impotently axed the air around him like a child. Not courtly but savage. Natural. Foul. And then, finally, from behind, the single long-handled blow that took the back of his head off like a slice of turnip and brought him to his knees not with a hiss but with a sigh...

The arms of the anemone then withdrew. It was as if the creature – one creature but ten polearmed men – had accomplished its task





by bringing the king to his knees, and that to take the business to a conclusion were somehow improper. The men stood away. They grounded the hafts of their weapons. They looked upon their work and then upon each other, as if searching for direction. As if lost for a moment. Their mouths opened but they did not speak. They watched the gasping king impassively, then became aware of my father and I, and lifted their weapons again.

“We are of your party,” declared my father, his voice commanding. “We are Stanley’s men loyal to King Henry.”

“My Lord of Richmond is not yet king in real,” said one, a Welshman, his eyes watchful. “This one lives, as you can see. He is not yet finished. Perhaps he is to be taken for impeachment, perhaps he is to die here. But he is my prisoner...”

“He is certain to die,” said my father. “Look at him. Look at him.”

The Welshman and his fellows bent their eyes reluctantly upon King Richard as if he were already a ghost and not a living king. I would say that fear played in their features; fear and the consciousness of sin. They clung to their worldliness but their grip was slipping and they took another step back in their circle, as if retreating to the safety of the thorns. Richard, on one knee, his supporting sword and axe each continuing the reach of his arms into the earth as flying buttresses continue the reach of cathedrals, said not a word, although he panted. Blood coursed down the meander in his spine in a quick river.

My father spoke again.

“This must be finished here, for the sake of all – and for the sake of decency and kindness. It must be done now. For all.”

He looked around him.

“Who is man enough? Who is decent?”

The Welshman and his platoon did not move; they did not shift even where they stood. Richard knelt on, his head swinging a little on the yoke of his shoulders. I could see that it was taking all of his strength to remain upright on his knee. A string of blood now connected his chin to the prow of his breastplate. Other fluids from his mouth were making the same journey.

“This must not stand,” bellowed my father as the Welshmen edged away to the boundary of the thorn brake.

“Sir, he is my prisoner,” retorted their leader. “My lord of Richmond shall have his...”

The king let go of his weapons, twisted and slumped down onto two knees, and then his haunches, his hands resting upon the metal of his splayed thighs before deserting them for the kingly earth upon which he sat. With the new angle, the blood from his brains now began to course forwards around the column of his neck and under the rim of his breastplate. The Welshman did not conclude his speech.

My father turned to me.

“Oh, Frog,” he said, and drew his poignard, his eyes dark and ineffable.

\*\*\*\*\*

I cannot explain what then took place in the thorny hollow. I would like to be able to explain, dear grandson, for your edification and for my own understanding. But I cannot. The full course of an accounting life has not given me the wisdom nor sufficient articulacy to make plain what seemed so plain to my

soul, but is, in the currency of a numbersome but God-loving life, very far from plain.

I dismounted my horse. I walked to my father’s side. I took his poignard from him and continued my march to the place where the king slumped in his mud, now black with his blood.

I did not touch him, although I did stand and wait, perhaps for some sign. But no sign was forthcoming, either from the king or from the heavens. So I attended upon the exhalation of three slow breaths and then I squatted down, my cuisses and poleyns squeaking vilely, and looked the crumpled king in the eye.

Only one eye was visible in the mask of blood and it was without light. It was as a black hole.

I strained to see what might live in that hole. Perhaps the treasures of kingship might glint there, heaped and waiting for disposal. I thought perhaps that I might see kingship itself, in all its dire glory. But I saw nothing. I saw only the empty wastes of eternal Time; a hole drilled into life, into which life drains and then disappears without a gurgle. I felt my own pity rise like fluid in my throat.

And then the king began to start. He started as a dog or a pig starts after being struck hard upon the crown of its head. He started repeatedly in spasms, reaching for me in his seizure – and I let him grasp my frog arm with both his hands and hold on as, with my own free hand, I found a suitable gap between his breastplate and bevor and slid my father’s poignard in till what remained of his king’s blood lashed against my armguard and he fell out of my grasp. The blade met with no resistance – I had chosen my angle well. It went in as a heated knife goes into fat and came out, as he fell, as smoothly.

\*\*\*\*\*

*I have not killed a man since, and certainly no more kings. It is not to my taste.*

*Nor was I rewarded by the victor for my knightly service. (I remain undecorated and uncelebrated in all things, except for my skill with a pen and ledger.) Instead, that hard morning, my father saw sense in my pleading and allowed the Welshman his prize and King Henry his accomplishment upon another small hill a short distance hence from the thorny hollow, where he was crowned by Stanley and accepted his divine right as graciously as any man might while clearing his passages of the fume of others’ blood.*

*And I remain closed. Indeed, neither I, nor my father, ever spoke again about the death of Richard – even as my father lay abed in his last illness. Nor have I ever uttered a word to any other living being, other than to my cat – not even to your grandmother, who is hale still and as full of life’s milk as ever she was. God knows at least that I love her still.*

*So it is to you, my dear grandson, that I pass on my knowledge of dying kings and what may be countenanced in their eyes. Think carefully if ever you meet a king, dying or otherwise: their eyes contain secrets that may not be carried easily. And I only ask in consequence that you set a flame to this letter so that your own life might be long and fruitful and as unclouded as the best mornings in spring.*

*For ever your loving grandfather,*

*Frog*

# Black Cockatoos

*after David Brooks*

Red-tailed Bedouins  
of Poetry, black  
cockatoos embroider  
the sun into us,  
seam-rip it asunder.

\*

On the Fitzroy’s  
bank at midday,  
cracking seeds of eucalypts  
that outrank Council, a hundred  
Banksian black cockatoos,  
a paroxysm of commas.

\*

With their subtler  
complex-ions, the females infinitely  
more beautiful  
than the ludic-  
rously coloured gatherers.

\*

The gospel according to the locals:  
‘Four black cockatoos  
kreeing seawards  
means four days of rain’  
(burkesbackyard.com.au confirms it).  
I am not a God-fearing man.

\*

Should black cockatoos  
know  
that theirs are the colours of life?  
Indefatigable black  
and needlepointed into this  
starry orange and yellow.

\*

Imprisoned  
black cockatoos  
long-lived as man  
neglectful beneath the same  
white sun, its ROYGBIV illusion  
destroyed by the tiniest prism.

## STUART BARNES

STUART BARNES’ first collection, *Glasshouses* (UQP, 2016), won the 2015 Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize for an unpublished manuscript, and was commended for the Fellowship of Australian Writers Anne Elder Poetry Award for a first book. He is the poetry editor of Tincture Journal.

# The Pardoner

*with thanks to Dustin Brookshire*

On the wall a small plate  
of sunshine altered position  
bit by bit. He’d’ve had me pick from Gothic headstones.  
While he washed I turned the deco doorknob with  
military precision. Briefs, wallet, keys.

Though on ice, To the One Who Raped  
Me is prostrate with hope. My own mind  
is my own church. In the sack  
I’m no longer an African cat.  
Night terrors give way to dreams.

The fever’s gone  
(Zelitrex a Zeppelin,  
ring-shouts at subtropical altitude),  
the long weekends (smashed  
on Yellow Birds,

Horse’s Necks, Elephant Gimlets,  
the vapours of  
fags/cowboy killers/cigarettes,  
Tina’s champagne paws –  
enough

to crystallise hair).  
I’ve eaten  
my fill of sleazy smiles,  
colour  
handkerchiefs rippling

denim pockets, matchsticks  
thrilling skin. Entirely  
guilty of subversion  
I’ve murmured ‘He loves me, he  
loves me lots’ while quilting Grindr’s fakery.

I’ve dreamed of amnesia.  
I’ve dreamed of Major Nelson. Here,  
I’ve dreamed of seven hours’ revenge, criminal  
of zero variety –  
a kelson of the creation hooked

into him, into him, into him.  
Such sweet thunder –  
Amazonian queen, I ration  
Brookshire’s chapbook. Away  
with the houselights. Douse impossibility.

Candles laugh in the face of the dark.  
Post-burial, what’ll I eat,  
will I starve. The wattle spills globose light  
over Ariel – Ariel, Ariel, Ari, he  
who drugged and raped and pardoned me.

Note: a terminal from Sylvia Plath’s *The Jailer*’, with phrases from Paine’s *Age of Reason*, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.





Illustration for Blackthorn by Mungo McCosh [www.mungomccosh.com](http://www.mungomccosh.com)

Before barbed wire was introduced from America in the 1880s, a thorn hedge was the best form of stock-proof barrier. To prevent gaps in the bottom of the hedge it had to be laid or “plashed” every fifteen to twenty years. There are still distinct regional styles to plashing but the basic procedure is to cut two-thirds through the base of the stems, then push the hawthorns over and peg them down, like a line of fallen dominoes.

This exploits a characteristic of trees known as “reiteration”, whereby they will endeavour to regenerate, repeating their original shapes and reassigning their lateral branches as new upright stems. The result is a thickly multiplied, impenetrable hedge with many substantial cross pieces and barbed uprights.

Hawthorn is most commonly confused with blackthorn, with which it is frequently planted. Hawthorn wood varies from rough brown and silver through to red on the new twigs, but blackthorn has plum-coloured wood, often covered with a film of green moss. Its thorns are vicious two-inch spines and its fruits are sloes, the colour of blue-black autumn skies.

Blackthorn rarely imitates the twisted form of the hawthorn and left to its own devices will make a small spreading tree. Much of the time it seems barely engaged with the outside world. It has a nonchalance bordering on gloom and its leaves are sorry little spoon-shaped things that turn nicotine yellow in the autumn.

But in March, when woodland and hedgerows are still wet and dark, the blackthorn suddenly puts out blossom of startling rich cream. The flowers cluster thickly along the leafless twigs right up the spines, like swarming blossom-winged insects. A “blackthorn spring” describes the odd combination of flowers without leaves and cold March weather: a precarious, peculiarly British beauty. This is a performance that plays to an empty theatre. The flowers appear before walkers will be out to see them, while the sloes only ripen after the first frosts.

Blackthorns can be spitefully misanthropic. Although they contain no poison, their spines are horribly infectious, possibly because they snap off after entering flesh, lodging inside the body foreign matter

# Black-thorn

WILL COHU

WILL COHU has written for many newspapers and magazines, and was a regular columnist for the Daily Telegraph. His books include *Urban Dog* (2001), *Out Of The Woods* (2007), *The Wolf Pit: A Moorland Romance* (2012) and *Nothing But Grass* (June 2015). He has been twice shortlisted for the Sunday Times/EFG Private Bank Award and was shortlisted in 2013 for the PEN/Ackerley Prize for *The Wolf Pit*. He lives in Lincolnshire.

A “BLACKTHORN SPRING” DESCRIBES THE ODD COMBINATION OF FLOWERS WITHOUT LEAVES AND COLD MARCH WEATHER: A PRECARIOUS, PECULIARLY BRITISH BEAUTY. THIS IS A PERFORMANCE THAT PLAYS TO AN EMPTY THEATRE.

coated with bacteria and bird-shit. (Blackthorn is also favoured as a larder by migrating red-backed shrikes, or butcher birds, who pass through Britain in spring and autumn and impale their prey on the thorns.)

Dog-owners will know the agony blackthorn causes when stuck in the paws of spaniels and labradors. In humans, blackthorns can cause mechanical dermatitis, cellulitis, abscesses, foreign body granuloma, peritendinitis, tendinitis, pericapsulitis, synovitis and septic arthritis. You should not ignore any injury from a blackthorn. Its glancing blow may be a coup-de-grace.

In its more approachable moments, the blackthorn is also a contributor to the hedgerow shop and pharmacy. Sloes are rich in vitamin C. In the autumn, many tons of sloes are picked for sloe gin. But, more often than not, sloes are collected on walks and then forgotten, a bagful of decaying good intentions. At the last minute it seems so old-fashioned to be making sloe gin and it has to be left for a whole year before you can drink it. In the past blackthorn leaves were boiled as a cure for laryngitis. Blackthorn was also a stock ingredient for commercial swindlers who used the fruit to make “port”; while it was a jibe against grocers that their China tea had come from the leaves on the local blackthorn hedge.

Blackthorn is not the first hedgerow blossom of the year. Small wild plums, frequent along roadside verges, in ditches and the edges of woodlands, and more often little trees than bushes, come out into flower in early February and are often mistakenly described as blackthorns, though their white flowers are sparser and open alongside little green leaves. Surprising to think there are insects around to pollinate at that time of year.

From *Out of the Woods*. Published by Short Books Ltd.



0

The end, like my own death, belongs to others.

1

I could see from outside that upstairs were having a party, so I walked in. Not straight in through the front door, but up to the roof. Everyone worked at a newspaper. Someone said the Financial Times and I said, THE PINK ONE?

Yes, the pink one, he said. He was rolling his eyes.

One of them had black glasses and a Scottish accent. Guardian Breaking News desk. Random working hours, bad pay, raging egos and ambition (I learned). I stood and drank someone else's beer in the kitchen. I said I wrote fiction. He said, that's what everyone here thinks that they're doing.

A guy who looked exactly like James Spader and who worked for BuzzFeed UK was taking a drug I'd never heard of.

I said, you look just like James Spader.

He took out his phone and showed me a photo of James Spader.

He did things like drink in the park and post photos on Facebook of his beers with a background of grass. He told me he was drinking in the park in a text made up of emojis. I didn't join him.

2

I'd had half a bottle of wine and some cocktails and it seemed a good idea to compliment his stripy vintage polo shirt. He liked my skinny jeans, the ones I don't fit into any more. I don't remember much about the conversation but I do remember leaning over the bar trying to get at him, and the way the other bar staff ignored me like it happened all the time. His hair is grey in places. I saw him last week and he looked older.

This one was the emotional sucker punch. It felt like a basketball rebounding into my fucking stomach. It made me cry at a bus stop and my friends had to send me the dancing lady emoji to make me feel better. (I was lying on a mattress on the floor under a too-thin duvet in a sublet with strangers looking at three rows of a flamencoing woman on my phone and I felt younger and less together than I had in, oh, six years.)

He made me pretzel-crusted chicken on an American-themed night in at his flat. It tasted weird. We watched Heathers and he gave it a horribly low mark out of ten. His flat was from 2003 with a VCR and a Playstation 1 and films like Lost in Translation and Reservoir Dogs on DVD. He really liked Paul Weller. He didn't reply to the last text I sent him.

3

In the morning we walked round and round the Outer Circle in Regents Park and kept coming back to the same restaurant until it was time for lunch. His dad called him and he couldn't stop giggling down the phone. The night before, he'd followed me round at a house party until I relented. Being hungover with another person is better than being hungover alone.

He said in a text: can I give one compliment. You're WOW. He spelled gonna 'gunna'. He'd never heard of Clarissa Explains it All. We went for ramen and he expressed disbelief that I enjoyed both spicy food and beer. He was an engineer, working on something to do with the labels on apples. The labels on apples are edible, he told me. I told him I liked talking on the phone and then we had a four-hour-long phone conversation, which perhaps gave the wrong impression. I don't remember any of it. Letting him down was like kicking a seal pup that had ginger fur.

4

I asked him to tell me the story behind every guitar in his bedroom and he did and now I can't remember any of them.

We went to see Carrie the Musical and he took a photo of the bloody footprints spread across the stage after Carrie had gone on her murderous rampage. He left his keys at home that night. It was raining and there was a hole in the bottom of one of his shoes but he didn't tell me about it until I was at my bus stop, about to go home. He had a northern accent but he wasn't from the North. He couldn't explain why. Neither of his parents were northern either.

5

We met at my neighbour's party. A couple had asked me to have a threesome with them and I said no. I've never been so nervous when texting. I was convinced he was smarter than me and maybe he was: he was posh, he seemed to have an answer to everything, he worked for a magazine and wrote about bands. His flat was in Whitechapel and quite obviously bought for him. He bought me a falafel wrap in the morning and tried to hold my hand, then apologised when I wouldn't let him. When I walked into his bathroom his lights came on without me touching anything. His fridge was stocked with Diet Cokes. Earring, silver chain, oversized shirt, skinny skinny jeans: he was in a shoegaze

band that didn't want to be called a shoegaze band. I swear I saw the label of his jeans once and it said 24.

6

The Kentish Drovers: rosé wine on tap on a Tuesday night. He sat down next to me and drank mini bottles of prosecco all night.

At his flat he read out his favourite bits of *Pride and Prejudice* and lent me a Tolstoy novella. I read the whole book and looked for hidden meanings. (You read *Family Happiness*? You read *Family Happiness*? he would ask later.) The novella was about sexual abstinence and jealous rage. It made me laugh. It was the last week of the summer term and he showed his Year 10s Trading Places the next day.

The cider they serve at the Lambeth Country Show must have something in it but the trees, the trees looked so lovely. I'd seen half of a sheep-herding show and the vegetable competition and I kept on texting him to say I was next to the Eco Toilets. I paid £2 for a wee! I told him this. The bottle of cider was huge and it made the inside of my mouth pucker up. My bratwurst with sauerkraut burst and burnt my tongue but I ate it anyway. I said please look after me, I'm so drunk. I was so happy, though.



Photograph by Richard Hejlar

# 12 Boys

LOTTE HILLER

LOTTE HILLER has previously been published in *The Wrong Quarterly* and completed an MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths in 2014.



He told me, sitting opposite me on a park bench, that he was worried I wanted to make him my boyfriend. The time I saw him before that he'd asked me to marry him and I thought it was hilarious. He threw drunken compliments at me and told me he loved me. His moustache smelled of kebab.

Ginger wine and soda water on an L-shaped sofa trying to work out how to get the DVD player to work. All we wanted to do was watch Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves. He ghosted me after that.

7

Chain-smoking in the morning. He lent me a Nabokov novel that I haven't read because it's so heavily annotated with dumb remarks. It lives on my shelf next to the Tolstoy from no. 6. He was a nice guy. He put sugar on his bacon.

8

The only one that I saw once. He took my yellow bed t-shirt; maybe for the best, since it was O's. He seemed to hate London despite living there, despite being gainfully employed there. He was from the North somewhere. At the party I'd bumped into 2 and he told me to go for it: 8 was hot.

The next day, he told me a woman had approached him at the party and told him he was the most attractive man she'd ever seen, and would he be in a film? He was laughing as he told me this.

He was mixed race and six foot three and had actual muscles. I still regret him the most.

9

My friends christened him Chinless Wonder and Christian Boyfriend, but I called him Tom 2, at one point to his face. He didn't seem to mind.

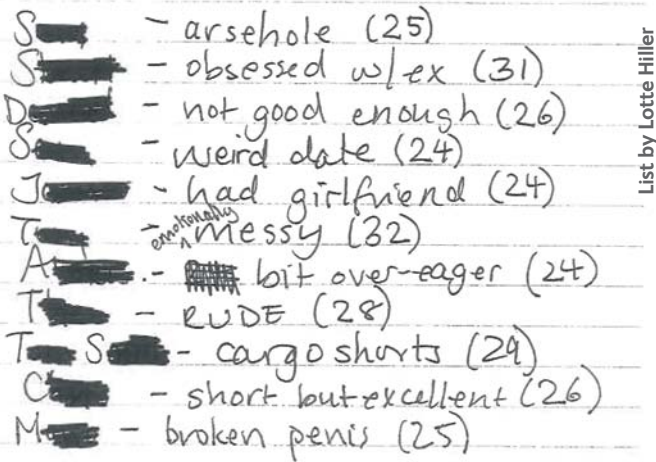
The cargo shorts should have been the last straw but I forgave them. I took him to the Ben Rivers Artangel installation at the TV Centre and then he took me to Nando's and called me "arty and cool". There was a giant stuffed Scooby Doo in his living room and once, when I was round there drunk, I became convinced it was watching me. He lived in Putney. He wore all Superdry to my birthday party. One night he texted me while I was texting 10 and the text said: I'm in Brixton going to see the Offspring play and I was like bye.

10

For lunch he ordered a kebab wrap with no salad and no chilli sauce, only garlic. I'd asked for a falafel but they brought me a kebab too and it was disgusting but I was in a rush and felt too embarrassed to say anything, just chewed the fake meat and tried not to think about it. I could only eat half. Aren't you hungry, he said.

He got angry and said I'd lied to him in two phone conversations set three weeks apart that seemed to mirror each other, but what was in between them? Dead space; endless WhatsApp conversations. True Romance at the BFI and a promise to buy me dinner that never played out, just like almost every other time. It was cold and I lent him my cashmere-blend scarf but I got it back.

We were going to go and see When Harry Met Sally. It's a Christmas film, sort of. Like when she drags the Christmas tree all



alone to her flat but I won't be doing that, I'll just decorate the big pot plant next to my TV.

When someone smokes cigarettes in your flat, whatever you do the smell will be there, on some olfactory level, for at least a week afterwards. I'd say, smoke out the window in the kitchen. He'd stand with his back to the open window and blow smoke inside, throwing the butts into the back yard, down three flights. He smoked Mayfairs and I swear I hadn't heard of them before.

I have a thing for boys from south-east London. I like it when they pronounce Greenwich properly. They never believe I'm really from Plumstead because I don't sound like I am, but I was, I want to say. We knew all the same places.

He was born in the same hospital as me. I hate going back to Plumstead but I love spending time with people from round there, because when I was at secondary school everyone thought it was a made-up place. I lived off Plum Lane, went to Plumstead Primary School where the crest was two plums, grew up in Plumstead, and sometimes I'd take one to school as part of my lunch, wrapped up in a single sheet of kitchen roll, half the time too sour, especially in the middle near the stone. It's impossible to eat a ripe plum without making your fingers sticky. I suppose when he told me stories about playing on Plumstead Common it made me feel as though we shared the same roots but we didn't, we were too different, he didn't know who Agnes Martin was, he bought his band t-shirts off the internet. I'm a fucking snob.

He joked about looking like Tom Hardy. Really he looked like Daniel Radcliffe.

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His penis broke. Don't trust a man who utters the sentence "I used to do a lot of stand-up". I hear he's in a comedy band, anyway. The last text message said: sorry to be a pain. Tried to steal my t-shirt; didn't succeed.

I spent a whole Monday going through his Instagram and Facebook and got so overexcited I felt high: I was emailing photos and running upstairs to talk to colleagues about it, but the next day I was totally over it because he'd sent me a text message about Virginia Woolf. (I sent it back, too.) One good thing that came out of it was that I read *Between the Acts* over the course of an afternoon. Near the end the weirdo playwright who no-one really likes, who everyone refers to as "bossy", sits alone in a pub and starts her next play, despite thinking the last one was a failure. And then I closed my list.

# Ted's Nightingale

Numbness, ache, and, after dullness, pain. And poison

Dull as the dead eye of the nightingale

Sodden and beaten on the sodden thorns.

Where is your singing, where's your melody?

Bragging from brambles, boasting for territory,

Squatting complacent, churning the pot-boiled

Challenge of harmony out over wasted pasture?

You're not singing anymore.

Me, I could murder a pint – an honest

Thick-headed yard of the hard local bitter.

I'd like to get out of my head, get it all out,

Out like a hair-ball, the dull brain

Tenderised like beef, the victim's face, the screaming night

Of honeymoon. All night, outside,

The thwart rain thrums on tractors, where it freezes.

Go sing that!

This is me: darkling. Death is not easeful: coming with a knife,

A bullocking horn, an oven, maybe pills. Don't talk to me

About the south – there's no grapes on my eaves,

The trusting reaper drug-dead in the corn

Is frosted corpse by morning, bloat by night,

Then white bones splintered in the tangling weeds.

Nothing to see here, nothing to crow about –

Fuck off, you southern poof.

## CHARLES HALL

After 10 years in the art world as a curator, editor and critic, working with, among others, the Independent, Art Review and the Imperial War Museum and writing catalogue essays for individual artists from Mark Francis to Damien Hirst, CHARLES HALL has been an English teacher for the last 20 years. He has published a number of poems with PN Review.

# Falling Together

I awake on impact

the two of us

plummeting from miles up,

surrounded by noise

not dream falling

nor an impression or a sense of falling

but an experience of falling

exhilarating

but then a lack of context

no memory of learning how to do this

I love you

but there's nothing I can do, I say,

we're falling

oh I know, you say,

but at least we're falling together

## STEVE SHEPHERD

STEVE SHEPHERD is an unpublished author.



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