



THE NEW LUCIAD



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with acknowledgements to
the **Centre for New Writing**
and the **Society for Postgraduates**
in **English Literature and Language**
at the **University of Leicester**

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Introduction

The New Luciad showcases some of the best creative work produced by students here at the University of Leicester. This is the second annual publication of our anthology, named in honour of the University's very first student publication: a formative magazine entitled *The Luciad* which ran intermittently from 1923 to the 1980s.

This year in *The New Luciad* we have a plethora of creativity on display including some stunning pen and ink artwork by Ollie Petts, Rachel Quinney and Lauren Foster, expert photography from Thomas Morris and Benjamin Michael Craddock, well-crafted poetry from up-and-coming poets including Gwynne Harris and Megan Arlett, amusing scenes depicted by Dan Johnson and thought-provoking prose from Rahwa Woldu.

We hope you enjoy these imaginative pieces and feel inspired to explore other work from our talented contributors. We certainly enjoyed editing and compiling this fantastic selection.

This publication was the work of many people and a huge vote of thanks is due to all the students who responded to the call for submissions. We would like to thank the G.S. Fraser and John Coleman Prize winners for letting us publish their pieces. And last but by no means least we would like to offer a big thank you to the University of Leicester's Centre for New Writing and SPELL; without their support *The New Luciad* would not have been possible.

- Suzi Shimwell



ALEX MERRICK

BA English

Innocence

'The ferryman will take her from here.'

I was told.

I mourn but don't know why.

I'm not sure whose house I sit in.

The windows stained with stories told centuries ago.

I'm told to be brave,

I remind them, she's the one leaving.

Going to a better place.

That's what they say to me.

'Will she be coming back?'

I ask the man with the starched white collar.

He turns away, sorrowful,

Calls me a brave soldier.

And moves on.

I know no one here yet they all watch me,

Like I'm a glass figurine, fragile and transparent

I do not know why,

The man has stopped

And everyone is leaving.

I wait for her to appear

Like she always does.

A lone angel out of the crowd

But nothing, no one.

I stand and see what must be a miracle,

There before me she lies,

Peaceful and asleep.

'Goodnight' I say.

RICHARD FALLON
BA English with a Year Abroad

'The New Tale of Sir Galahad' was the winner of the 2014 John Coleman Creative Writing Prize.

The New Tale of Sir Galahad

'All this made Merlin by his subtle craft, and there he told the king, When I am dead these tapers shall burn no longer, and soon after the adventures of the Sangreal shall come among you and be achieved.'

Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur

I

Sir Galahad strode through the platinum gallery of Carbonek, the resting place of the Sangreal and the fortress that is called the 'Castle Adventurous'. A strange fog whipped around his greaves, and the bright darkness of that holy place caused his armour to gleam as if he himself were merely an afterimage, or perhaps a ghost haunting the weird keep.

The corridor he was traversing was long; it was far longer, in fact, than had seemed possible from his observations of the castle's exterior. Sir Galahad was aware now that the testing had begun, and that to turn back would mean the forfeiting of the Sangreal and the ultimate failure of the Round Table. Thus he continued onward into the ever thickening mist and toward the red light in the distance.

Without warning Sir Galahad found himself no more in the long corridor with the red light, and instead in a chamber filled with treasure. Its contents were more fabulous even

than those of the great twilight treasury of Camelot.

A phone began to ring, and Sir Galahad answered it.

‘Hello?’ he said, warily.

‘You’re looking for the Sangreal, aren’t you?’ asked the voice on the other end of the line.

‘That’s right. Do you have any information for me?’

‘I know where it is. I know the location of the Sangreal.’

‘Please, tell me.’

The voice sniffed and laughed.

‘You’ll need to search the higher floors. Try Floor 48. The lift is to your right.’

Sir Galahad looked to his right, and indeed the main elevator was located behind the water feature. He raised his coffee cup to his mouth and took a bemused sip.

‘I’ll go to Floor 48. Thank you.’

He handed the receiver back to the receptionist and entered the lift. He hit ‘48’. The lift ascended and Sir Galahad observed himself and his neatly-ironed black suit in the fingerprint-stained mirror. Was the Sangreal really on Floor 48? It didn’t seem possible.

The doors opened onto a sparse and sickly white hallway that contained a black vending machine and a water cooler sloshing pensively. To the knight the offices lining both sides of the corridor all the way until the end seemed like tombs. He guessed that the door he wanted was at the far end. He had to talk to the person in charge.

This corridor was not infinite and it was no trick. Sir Galahad tapped politely on the frame with his free hand.

‘May I come in?’

‘Certainly,’ said the voice inside.

Sir Galahad entered the office and was blinded by the

light of the sun reflecting on the skyscrapers beyond. The office provided an incredible view over the city, and the molten sunset was turning the entire skyline into a fabulous haze. He raised an arm to his eyes and held it there as his sight adjusted. The owner of the voice was sitting in a leather-bound chair in front of his desk, and even when he was no longer seeing stars the person's face was surrounded by a halo of obfuscation.

'Are you the one who called me?' he asked.

'That's right. You seemed lost.'

'The quest of the Sangreal is a hard one. I don't know where in the castle I am.'

'The Sangreal is well-hidden. It's only natural that you would feel lost.'

'You said that the cup was here.'

'I didn't tell the exact truth.'

'You lied?'

'I didn't tell the exact truth.'

Sir Galahad hesitated, and then thought for some time with his palm upon his chin.

'Are you Joseph of Arimathea?' he asked the owner of the voice.

'That's right. Or close enough to right.'

'You're the keeper of the grail.'

'I'm the CEO here.'

'The CEO?'

'Yes. And you, Sir Galahad – you have a long search ahead of you.'

II

And so Sir Galahad wandered for a great period of time. He searched for the Sangreal at every point in history and in every dimension, and through many books and poems and folklores.

At one moment in time a gigantic and shimmering dragon emerged before him from a cave, but before the dragon could eat Sir Galahad whole the knight pulled out a handgun and fired several blazing shots into the lizard's soft neck. At another, a thunderous bird attacked him from the sky but Sir Galahad was able to wedge a mud-coloured grenade into its beak and the great bird exploded into a cloud of black feathers.

Sir Galahad searched for the Sangreal in the stone depths of the pyramids of Egypt, and on the airless surface of the moon, and in the seaweed-painted halls of Atlantis, and in the ghost towns of the American west, and at the snowy pinnacles of the Alps, and through snaky jungles and baked deserts and rowdy towns and bleak tundras and verdant hills and crumbling museums and deep mines and frothing rivers and lush graveyards. He searched for the Sangreal until the utmost borderline of infinity. But he did not find it.

The purest knight in the world searched for the cup of the Last Supper until he became nothing but static and scan lines and pixels and binary code, and then almost nothing at all. It wasn't important.

The quest was reaching its end.

A draught blew through the inner tower of the Castle Carbonek. Sir Galahad was now ascending the spiral staircase to the top of the tower: the closest point to Heaven on Earth. Through the window slits he could see milky clouds twirling in the sky and white birds circling around. Blue torches lined

the walls. The sound of an angelic choir was resonating down the stones of the tower and it filled Sir Galahad's heart with joy, for he was approaching the chamber wherein the Sangreal was preserved.

The gauntleted hand of Sir Galahad hovered over the handle of his holy sword, ready to unsheathe it and smite any final revenants presented to challenge his quest. His strike was the fastest in the world, the universe. Faster than a waterfall, sharper than a scorpion.

Before him was the door to the grail room. He prayed and then pushed it open.

'I bid you welcome, brave knight Sir Galahad.'

Sir Galahad bowed deeply before the cloaked man who sat in the centre of the room which was red with sacred blood. The man was Joseph of Arimathea, the keeper of the grail.

'I accept any challenges you present to me in my quest for the Sangreal,' said Sir Galahad.

'You are indeed a perfect knight,' said Joseph of Arimathea, 'and worthy of the Sangreal. However...'

Sir Galahad raised his eyes to the old man and the beautiful ghosts who danced in the rafters.

'Something remains?'

The Sangreal flashed in the bloody dark. Joseph of Arimathea said no more and gestured to the glittering cup as the choir fell silent and the ghosts retreated. Sir Galahad approached, and felt in his own steps the steps of Sir Lancelot and Sir Percival and Sir Bors before him; he felt the last gasp of the Round Table and England. And the stars span around him, and at that moment Sir Galahad felt himself to be at the centre of the universe, and in his brain he felt the heat of the

sun.

Without a word Sir Galahad drew his handgun and fired three shots into the Sangreal. The shards of the frail cup scattered across the flood of the chamber and a sanguineous mist rose and diffused in the cold air.

‘No more will knights seek the Sangreal,’ said Sir Galahad as he returned the sword to its sheath.

‘So be it,’ said Joseph of Arimathea, and he disappeared as if he had never existed.

Around Sir Galahad the Castle Carbonek disappeared as well, until he was once again in the open air of the brown and grassy hillside with the sky spinning above his head.

III

The journey back to Camelot was perilous, and Sir Galahad was forced to battle with wolves and trolls, goblins and wildmen, demons and sea serpents, and dinosaurs and aliens and robots. After a great many battles the knight returned to the place that was his true home and stood before King Arthur to tell of the result of his quest. King Arthur’s face jutted out between shafts of light that were filtered through painted glass. The Knights of the Round Table looked on like an audience of china dolls.

‘What is the result of your quest, Sir Galahad the most virtuous of all knights?’

‘My good king, I discovered the Sangreal and destroyed it.’

King Arthur’s face became stern and hard and all the courtiers around Sir Galahad whispered anxiously to each other. Then the king spoke again through old lips.

‘It is done,’ he said. ‘This deed brings you great honour.
No more will knights seek the Sangreal.’

‘Thank you, my king,’ said Sir Galahad.

‘Would you like a cup of coffee?’ asked King Arthur.

‘Please,’ the knight replied.

Sir Galahad sat down at the Round Table and leant back
in his seat. The coffee was brought to him and he took a sip.

‘It’s good,’ he said.

‘It’s the best,’ replied King Arthur.

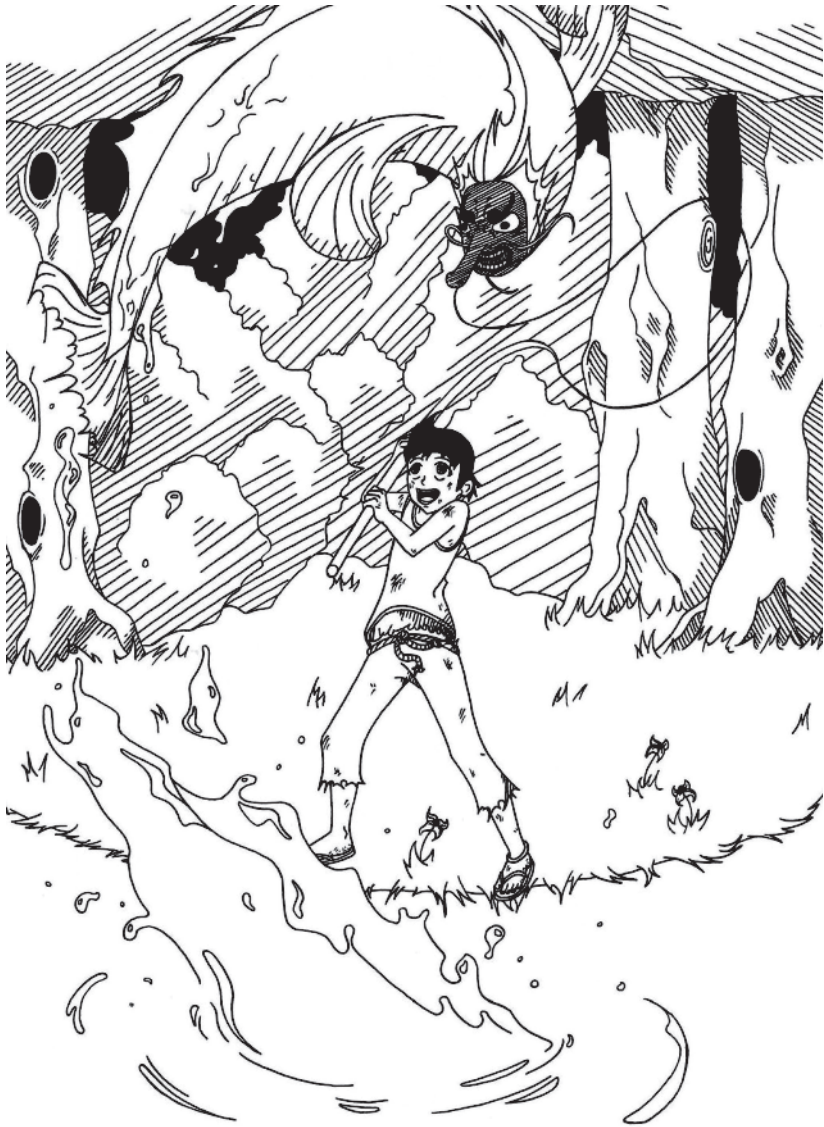
Sir Galahad looked down into the black liquid.

Caxton me fieri fecit.



DAIGORO KATO

OLLIE PETTS, BA ENGLISH



UKON AND THE DEMON FISH

OLLIE PETTS, BA ENGLISH

DAN JOHNSON

BA Psychology

Batman & Robin Sketch

Note: This piece was written with the original intention of performing it live on LUSH Radio, the University of Leicester student radio station, in what was to be a weekly sketch show featuring members of Leicester University Theatre. Unfortunately, the show never materialised.

A city back alley. A man is walking alone when another man steps out of the shadows brandishing a knife.

MUGGER

Okay buddy, give me all your money. Your phone too.

VICTIM

Aah! Help! Help! I'm being mugged!

MUGGER

There's nobody around to help you pal!

From off stage.

BATMAN

Oh no?

Cue Batman theme. Batman and Robin run on, hand in hand.

MUGGER

Oh crap! Batman and Robin!

VICTIM

Yeah! You're in for it now! Wait... Why are you two holding hands?

BATMAN

We figured it was time we stopped pretending. Life's too

short to live a lie.

ROBIN

That's right! Don't worry citizen, we're here to beat this guy off!

BATMAN

Woah Robin, come on. We talked about this. We're trying to steer clear of the gay innuendo, it's just so... cliché.

ROBIN

Sorry.

VICTIM

But what happened to Mary-Jane?

BATMAN

Who?

MUGGER

Do you mean Lois Lane?

VICTIM

No. Oh what's her name?

BATMAN

Errm...

ROBIN

Hmm...

MUGGER

Err...

They struggle to recall the name of Batman's love interest.

BATMAN

Err... There was a Rachel in *The Dark Knight*.

ROBIN

Or Talia al Ghul?

VICTIM

Yeah maybe. Anyway what happened to her?

BATMAN

It's over. It's time to stop pretending to be something I'm not.
Time to stop hiding behind a mask.

Pause. They stare at him.

BATMAN

I mean figuratively. Anyway, enough chit chat! You're going
to jail my fiendish friend!

MUGGER

I'm not going anywhere without a fight!

ROBIN

Then in that case prepare yourself for a damn good pounding!

BATMAN

Dude!

ROBIN

Sorry.

Victim puts up his hand.

VICTIM

Errm... Excuse me?

BATMAN

Yes?

VICTIM

Well it's just... I'd rather you didn't to be honest.

BATMAN

What?

VICTIM

Well I appreciate the effort but... I'd rather wait for the next
guys if that's alright.

BATMAN

What do you mean?

VICTIM

Well I didn't realise you two were... you know...

ROBIN

Hang on. You don't want us to save you because we're gay?

VICTIM

Well no offence guys but...

ROBIN

What do you mean no offence?

VICTIM

Well it's just a bit embarrassing is all.

BATMAN

Embarrassing?

VICTIM

Look I appreciate you coming here and everything but I'd rather not be saved by a couple of gays.

MUGGER

Oh dude that's low.

BATMAN

So you'd rather us just leave you here with this vicious mugger?

VICTIM

Well...

MUGGER

Jeez, what an asshole.

ROBIN

I know! Can you believe this guy?

BATMAN

So instead of letting us help you out you'd rather be left with

a guy who very well might have murdered you?

(To Mugger)

Would you have murdered him?

MUGGER

Yeah maybe.

BATMAN

Yeah he might have murdered you.

MUGGER

If I'd have known he was going to be like this I definitely would have.

BATMAN

You see? You're a dick.

ROBIN

Maybe we should just go.

BATMAN

Good idea.

MUGGER

Actually guys... Would you mind giving me a lift? I'm just not in the mood for mugging any more, this guy's brought me down.

BATMAN

Yeah sure, we're just parked round the corner.

MUGGER

Cheers man.

They start walking off.

MUGGER

(To Victim)

Dude... Not cool.

(To Batman and Robin)

So were you guys really going to beat me up?

ROBIN

Yeah absolutely. You'd never have felt a fist like it.

BATMAN

You're doing that on purpose now aren't you?

ROBIN

Yeah...

End of scene.

Igor

Note: This piece was originally written as part of a compendium of dark and gruesome short stories akin to Roald Dahl's adult works and traditional pulp fiction named The Bastard Fairytales which, for one reason or another, never materialised.

Igor sat on a splintered chair in a dark room, and by the light of a bare, flickering bulb, and with the aid of a cracked mirror and rusty pliers, patiently set about removing the shards of glass from his gums. He winced only twice – once when the fragment was about the size of a fifty-pence piece, and once when it was smaller than a grain of sand. For the former, a speedy application of cotton wool stemmed the potential crimson flow before it could begin. For the latter, Igor had to suck the fragment out of his gum, whereupon it had lodged in the roof of his mouth. This was the most painful part of the procedure.

Once the delicate operation had been completed, Igor sat back in his chair and sighed. He rolled the pliers in his grey, calloused right hand, and felt the familiar, uncomfortable knock of the handle against the stump where his ring finger should have been. The pliers made a hollow thud as Igor tossed them onto the bench, and, after taking a brief pause to scratch his heaving belly, he picked up the claw hammer.

Igor had tried many tools in an attempt to make the operation smoother but he had always returned to the claw hammer. There simply was no better tool for the job. The pliers, a crowbar, even his own teeth had been employed, but the hammer far outperformed these or any alternative. And

still, it was not a comfortable process. Weighing it in his hand, Igor breathed in deeply and then slowly, steadily used the claw to pull the three seven-inch nails that pierced his left hand between the thumb and first finger and secured it to the block of wood. It was the same hammer that a few hours previously, Igor had used to pummel the nails into his hand in front of the entranced crowd.

Igor worked in a circus, where his job description was always a contentious topic. He detested the term 'Strongman' as he felt it ignored several of his key attributes. He had a soft spot for 'Freak' as it really emphasised his uniqueness, but then again it did ignore the skill required. One of Igor's previous employers had mooted the description 'Performance Artist'. Igor had picked him up and shaken him vigorously by the throat, until the coins in his pockets rattled to the tune of 'Waltzing Matilda'. He had then taken a bow, and insisted the poor man applaud him for his 'performance'.

Besides the nails and eating glass, Igor also specialised in lifting a small car above his head, setting fire to his bare arms and allowing members of the public to hit him in the stomach with a baseball bat. He was able to achieve these feats not only by being exceptionally large and strong, but also because an accident in his youth had left him with damaged nerves. This in turn meant that his perception of pain was much, much lower than the average person. This, coupled with his love of travelling and no particular family to speak of, made Igor a perfect fit for life in the circus – except for one thing: Igor was absolutely terrified of clowns.

The next morning, Igor emerged from his caravan at around 8am as always, heaved his backside into a torn canvas chair and ate a tin of cold beans. He enjoyed the early

morning bustle of the circus preparations. It was worth getting out of bed slightly too early in order to watch the bizarre sights on display. Often, Igor felt that he was observing the continuation of his dreams; with jugglers chatting with contortionists, gymnasts cartwheeling past horses, and an elephant being painstakingly draped in jewelled cloths by an underpaid stable-hand. These cloths would inevitably be shrugged off by the disinterested beast to the frustration of the stable-hand, whereupon Igor would chuckle, scratch his belly and return to his bed for an hour or so before he had to begin his own preparations.

At around 10, Igor would lumber to the area of the site set up specifically for him, a circle of seats with his workbench and tools and a battered lime green Volkswagen Beetle in the centre. There would be no crowd until at least 11.30, but Igor always had to leave so early to make sure he avoided the clowns. If he ever did spy one on his way, Igor would rush immediately back to his caravan and sob uncontrollably for an extended period of time. This is why he always ensured his site was set up the night before, as if Igor happened to be carrying a tool when he spotted a clown, he had a tendency to lash out with it. He had once accidentally struck the Bearded Lady across the face with a mallet after a rogue harlequin stumbled out of the food tent. She survived, but the resulting scars from the shattered jaw significantly reduced the quality of her previously impressive beard.

This particular morning journey had passed by without incident, and Igor was able to settle down in one of the plastic chairs and catch some sleep before the crowd began to filter in and he was prodded awake by a bored assistant named Max. He would then head to a backstage room behind a

curtain, don his much detested leotard and boots, sigh, and get warmed up with some basic stretches and strong liquor.

This morning was the first Saturday of the circus, and so each seat was occupied and the chatter of the crowd was audible to Igor as he warmed up. He always found himself in an uncomfortable purgatory of emotion towards his audience – he enjoyed performing and truly appreciated the support and cheers and gasps of wonderment that greeted him. But yet, these people were paying for the privilege of watching him perform what could be extraordinarily difficult and painful acts; taking a perverse pleasure in the knowledge that one false move could see Igor killed live in front of them. It was better, Igor determined, to remain ambivalent to it all, to step outside, perform his act and remain totally detached from his observers. He heard feedback whistle and crackle over the speakers, and knew Max had picked up the microphone to introduce him. He grumbled briefly, cracked his neck and his knuckles and emerged through the curtain to the sound of quiet yet enthusiastic applause, and a tinny, poor quality recording of trumpets over the speakers.

Igor's act generally lasted about 20 minutes. If it was longer, it meant that his usual disdain for humanity had subsided briefly, and he had chosen to interact with the crowd. If it was shorter, it generally indicated that he had hurt himself in some way, and was ending the show early in order to hurry backstage and jam a cloth into an artery or pour cooling balm over burnt flesh. On this particular day, Igor had been feeling in a somewhat genial mood and had engaged in banter with the punters in fake broken English and an indistinguishable accent. A plump, bosomy lady in the front row had spent the duration of the performance shrieking with

delight and guffawing at every single one of Igor's recycled jokes. Her young son sat next to her seemingly matured in front of Igor's very eyes – he switched constantly between open-mouthed wonderment at each gruesome act Igor performed and red-faced embarrassment at the attention his mother was attracting from the rest of the audience.

It was time for the final stunt, where Igor would hoist the Volkswagen over his head. On his more socially interactive days such as today, Igor would invite a member of the audience to stand with him under the car. He decided to invite the young boy from the front row, who he judged to be about 6 years of age and possessing one of the most unfortunate haircuts Igor had ever seen. His mother, unsurprisingly, whooped and clapped loudly as he shyly stumbled his way towards the vehicle. The boy remained silent when Igor asked his name, and his mother, for all her usual loud contributions instead grinned inanely when Igor turned to her, oblivious to the question. The putrid, sweet stench of a cigar emanated from the third row, where a grey skinny gentleman with a drooping moustache chuckled at the awkward moment.

Ushering the boy to stand a couple of feet behind him, Igor tensed his muscles around the underside of the car. This was Max's cue to press play on the cassette player, and the speakers reverberated with a canned drumroll. It was customary for Igor to throw in one or two false starts in order to build up the noise of the crowd. Once he was satisfied that the atmosphere had truly reached its peak, he braced himself, dug his palms into the secretly constructed wells underneath the car and heaved.

The crowd burst into rapturous applause as Igor's veins

bulged and sweat dripped from his neck. He strained his arms straight and began a slow rotation, taking in the appreciative clapping from the audience and keeping the boy just behind him.

That's when it happened.

Over the shoulders of the back row, out of the corner of his eye, Igor spotted something that made his blood run cold. Despite being expressly warned countless times, and despite the constant threats of death and vengeance Igor had made, a single, lone clown had meandered into view.

Igor shrieked and hurled the car straight into the air, diving behind the curtain backstage. He heard the sickening crunch of the Beetle on bone and sinew, and the horrified screams of the crowd. He went pale. He felt sick. The boy, undoubtedly, felt worse.

Igor was a mess. His veins thudded against his skin as if his very blood was trying to escape from him. He paced and whimpered, shaking and swearing to himself, bursting into spontaneous fits of crying and laughter. He scratched deeply at his arms and face, lamenting for the first time his inability to feel exactly as much pain as he deserved. He'd killed an innocent child. Yes, he'd had a stupid haircut, but one would argue that probably isn't reason enough to warrant being crushed to death by a lime green Volkswagen Beetle. Besides, his fat ignorant mother had probably given him that haircut.

Shit, the mother! Igor went even paler than before as he realised that he had an audience full of witnesses to his terrible deed, including an undoubtedly distraught mother. In the split second it took him to process this information,

something somewhere deep in his subconscious had told him to run. Without a second thought, Igor found himself sprinting out the back of the tent, away from the crowds and back to his caravan. He kept his head down and charged, knocking people over left and right if they strayed into his path. Tears streamed down his cheeks and clouded his vision, and as he heaved a forearm across his eyes to clear them his caravan swam into view. It was some distance away, but Igor could see that a small crowd had gathered outside his door, peering in the windows and banging on the glass. There were at least two police officers standing menacingly with truncheons drawn and speaking sternly into walkie-talkies.

One looked in roughly Igor's direction and he ducked hurriedly behind a hook-a-duck stall. The proprietor gave him a perplexed look, shrugged, and continued his merciless conning of small children and their parents. Cowering behind the badly painted wooden slats, Igor surveyed his surroundings. He spotted a portaloo that might offer some temporary cover, if it weren't for the queue of queasy, green-looking people making their way to it from the waltzers. The car park was a possibility, but it was too far away to get to unseen. Then, about 20 yards to his right next to the hot-dog van, he spied a tent door with 'Staff Only' crudely stitched above it. He made a mad dash towards it, looked quickly left and right and slipped inside.

He found himself in what appeared to be a dressing room. It had a large mirror propped precariously on a table immediately to his left, and a rack of brightly coloured clothes on the opposite side of the room. Igor scanned the room for somewhere to hide and his heart sank into his stomach. There, on the floor near the chair was a pair of oversized,

lemon-yellow and red striped shoes. There was a large palette of bright face-paint on the table. Igor realised he had stumbled into a clown's dressing room, and immediately vomited.

Suddenly, he began to hear the sound of approaching footsteps and serious voices outside the tent.

"Roger sir, no sign of him at the moment. Conducting a thorough search of the area. He won't get far. Over".

Shit! Igor stifled a howling sob with his hand and forced himself to take a deep breath. There was only one thing for it.

Less than two minutes later, it was complete. Igor hurriedly threw down the brush and moved as far away from the mirror as he could. He just hoped he could make a believable clown disguise, given the fact that he had refused to look at himself as he smeared the paint across his face. He had no idea if the makeup was in the right place, nor did he care. He had refused to tie his oversized shoelaces, as it meant maintaining visual contact with clown paraphernalia for almost ten seconds. He was sweating and shaking and felt so wracked with guilt, fear, disgust and all sorts of other emotions that his left eye constantly twitched.

He peered out of the tent and saw that his caravan was no longer surrounded. The path was not by any means clear, but he judged that he might be able to slowly make his way across the site without attracting too much attention. Once he reached his caravan he'd be able to find the keys for his trusty motorbike, which lived permanently in the centre of his 'living room' for security reasons, and make a break for it. With trepidation, he slowly edged his way out of the canvas and into the sunlight.

He felt like everyone was staring at him. Everything

was blurred and grey to him except for the beautiful oasis of his caravan, and so his periphery was full of shapeless faces which appeared to be staring accusingly through his makeup. Grotesque images bombarded him, with bearded ladies and snout-nosed children clutching bags of goldfish assaulting his vision. He ignored them all and headed determinedly in a straight line, head down, arms swinging. He had got almost half way there when he was stopped in his path by a curly-haired eight-year-old girl in an orange dress who smelled strongly of popcorn and processed sugar.

“Clown!” She yelled excitedly. Igor’s heart skipped a beat and his knees wobbled, but he managed to restrain himself from looking around.

“Clown!” She repeated, clapping her hands and smiling inanely up into Igor’s face. “Do juggling for me clown!”

This stumped Igor.

“Errm...” he mumbled, trying to edge round the girl, who despite being tiny, seemed to be dwarfing Igor and blocking the path.

“I said do juggling! Why won’t you juggle for me?” Her bottom lip began to tremble. “What kind of clown are you if you can’t even juggle? I bet you’re not even a real clown!” she bawled, stomping her feet and crossing her arms.

Igor was panicked. A small group of people had begun to gather, pointing at the two of them. Igor decided that if he made it out of this he would see to it that children were banned. They were nothing but trouble. If he was this girl’s father, she’d have had a slap by now for being so rude. For that matter, where were her parents?

“STOP IGNORING ME CLOWN!” the girl bellowed, shaking Igor abruptly from his thoughts. Rude.

Now all eyes were on Igor. He had frozen. He looked hurriedly around him from one face to another, hoping someone; anyone would offer him a way out.

“IT’S HIM!” someone shrieked from over the girl’s shoulder. “That’s the man who killed my son!”

Fuck! Igor let out a shriek and turned and ran, charging as fast as he could away from the menacing crowd who had begun to give chase. Ahead, he saw three police officers blocking the exit. With nothing else for it, Igor ducked into the nearest tent. Above the entrance was a large black sign pencilled with thin silver letters, which, if Igor had bothered to read it said ‘House of Mirrors’.

The policeman made his way slowly and carefully across the makeshift wooden floor. He hated the distortions the walls were giving him, surrounding him from all sides with his own reflection. He cursed having to chase a suspect through a maze. A maze made of mirrors no less. He weaved as silently as possible down the narrow silver corridors, trying to fan away the fog that was being pumped in for effect. His heart was beating fast, he felt at any moment that he could be attacked, and hoped that his colleagues had indeed called for backup.

He was faced with a T-junction and opted left, then a right, then another left. He stopped dead in his tracks and went pale. He reached across to his walkie-talkie and called for urgent assistance.

In front of him lay a very large bald man in a clown costume, with poorly applied makeup smeared aimlessly across his rugged brutish face. His right hand, which was missing a ring finger, was clutching a nine-inch long jagged

shard of glass, covered in blood. All the mirrors around him were smashed and spattered with a spray of red blood, which continued to seep from the man's arteries and veins in his wrists and neck. A gurgling noise emanated from his mouth. The policeman hurried forward and listened to the man's chest to see if he was still breathing. The man's eyes rolled slowly open, until they met with the policeman's. A wheezy, broken voice croaked out of his mouth, repeating something so quiet that the policeman had to press his ear against the man's lips:

"I really hate clowns".

LAURA MUSE

BA English

Palliative Care

This poem is about my experience with my Grandfather losing his battle with cancer. It is about my feelings of innate selfishness in being unable to mask my despair. Ultimately, it is about the complete sense of hopelessness that accompanied my wonderful Grandfather dying by my side.

I

1. Death turns us all into poets,
2. Grappling with grief makes us romanticise,
3. the every day.
4. Trauma turns the mundane into octaves, the simple

II

5. into stanzas.

III

6. (why close your eyes,
7. to blacken the world?)
8. My eyes heave
9. selfishly demanding closure.
10. Now that my light continues to dim,
11. darkness clarifies what is left
12. of my memories
13. my rest is never peaceful.

IV

14. Turn me into a hardy rock,
15. Like those found being assaulted by a tumultuous sea,
16. so that I can be smashed into
17. pieces.
18. Then perhaps every fragment of myself
19. could be used to patch up the parts of his body
20. that had cracked.

V

21. Sigh,
22. open my eyes,
23. and scrape my body from the floor
24. onto the deathbed.
25. (patch up your face,
26. do not let the dying see you cry!)

In Memory of William Nicholson



THE WITCH'S SON

RACHEL QUINNEY, MA MODERN LITERATURE

ELLA ABRAHAM
MA Modern Literature

Blank Canvas

From my rotting body, flowers shall grow and I am in them and that is eternity.

E. Munch

A blank canvas is the one thing that both terrifies and excites her in equal measure. From the trepidation of stroking the surface with paint for the first time, to then dipping the tip in linseed oil to make a second mark; a move so permanent, yet so revocable. In her studio she is sheltered by the murmurs of radio chitchat and warmth exhaling from the electric heater. Everything, it seems, has its place. And after ten hours a day, three days a week, for what could often feel like years – her painting will be complete.

A Beginning

1976 November time. Lights flashed above her head. The metallic walls raced past. She had found herself lying on a bed with no memory of the past twenty-four hours – the only feeling she had, other than profound confusion, was a searing pain in her lower back.

She was rushed through the last set of double doors. Her eyes, blurred from exhaustion, managed to make out the sign that read Acute Ward. A doctor looked down at her.

‘Hello, Isa’, he said. ‘We’re going to have to put a tube into your stomach, your peritoneum, where a liquid will go in and out.’

What the hell was going on?

He explained in a rushed, and she supposed, a rather sympathetic tone, ‘The tube will be inserted using a local anaesthetic. Then bags of fluid will be filtered out of your body through the tube,’ he paused. ‘It will cleanse your blood.’

Isa Phelps, fifteen years old, was coming out of her first operation. She began to open her eyes, slowly gaining consciousness. Her mouth was dry, her face stiff and her body heavy. A man in a white jacket sat before her.

‘Hello Isa, you’ve just woken from a very serious operation. You are in St Mary’s Hospital in London. Your family is waiting for you outside.’ He smiled reassuringly but his face was clammy and his breath smelt stale,

‘We’ve had to remove both of your kidneys and we are going to have to put you on something called dialysis. It’s a machine that will be connected to your body through your veins – it will work to replace what your kidneys originally did.’ He paused briefly, and began to speak again, though this time switching his glance from his hands to her face. Sweat glistened on the surface of his forehead.

‘There are,’ he said, ‘however, a few things that will have to change.’ He produced a sheet of paper

Rules for Dialysis Patient

- No Potassium (chocolate, bananas, nuts...)

- No Orange Juice
- 750ml of liquid a day (strictly no more)
- No Cheese
- No Potatoes
- No Crisps
- No Condiments
- MUST take required tablets
- ...

Isa scrunched the paper and dropped it on her lap. She looked at him, now directly in the eyes and said,

‘How long will I have to do this for?’

‘Ten hours a day, three days a week.’

‘For *how* long?’ she repeated in a sudden desperation. An oppressive pain began to clog up her throat. Her eyebrows lowered and the creases in her forehead slackened. Her face was wet with tears. She was staring at the doctor through blurred vision; all the doctor could see were thick white eyeballs shining frantically back at him. The blue of her eyes was smudged into the thick impasto white, flecks of red in the corners threatened to bleed into the cracks of the eyeball.

‘Indefinitely, Isa, until we can find you a transplant.’

Starting Point

Isa sat back on the plastic chair: she had to peel her legs off and place them back down several times before the nurse came over. Clad in a cotton grey nightgown, she rested her left arm on the side of the chair facing upwards, exposed. A slim woman sauntered over; her eyes flicked towards Isa, then back to the chart.

‘Yes, hm, okay’ she murmured, ‘now watch carefully because you’ll have to do this on your own after the first few times, alright?’. She moved to Isa’s left side and began to assemble the equipment. First she dipped the gauze in a solution and began to sweep it over Isa’s skin. Although it was a clear solution, the back-and-forth sweeping movements began to redden the surface. The thickest cobalt vein was found and as the piercing syringe drew out, flecks of blood lightly splattered the smooth surface of her skin. Isa’s eyes tightened and she clenched her teeth.

Isa had never painted her self-portrait before - this was her first. She bit hard at the skin around her nails; some blood rose to the surface and then settled.

She looked at herself in the mirror and traced the lines around her eyes with her fingers.

‘Come on, just start.’

Picking up the tube of white oil paint, she squeezed almost a third of the tube straight onto the canvas. After dipping the paintbrush in linseed oil, she pressed the thick brush against the white paint and began to make fast

sweeping movements across the surface.

* * *

A Routine

Isa wasn't frightened. She had been used to her not-so-new routine now for eleven months, and today, she was celebrating her birthday - on the Renal Ward. Brilliant. The nurses gathered and presented Isa with a carrot cake. She couldn't help but look disappointed.

'You know you're not allowed chocolate, Isa, carrot cake's still delicious though.' The nurse beamed encouragingly at Isa. They were constantly trying to get the patients to eat fatty foods because they were all underweight. Isa glanced around the Ward at the anticipating nurse's faces and watched the sticky mouths of her fellow patients attempt to sing 'Happy Birthday'.

Familiarity

Isa glanced around the Ward studying the faces surrounding her. There was Angie, sitting on her right who was onto her second crossword of the day; Luke, who sat opposite her stroking his salt and pepper beard; and Solomon, the patient to her left who had sat next to her on the Ward every second day for the last two and a half years. He smelt of a mixture of stale cigarettes and a peppery aftershave.

'How old are you Solomon?'

'Seventy-two years young, dear.' He laughed a raspy laugh, which quickly turned into a spluttering cough. A couple of the nurses rushed over to calm him.

This was her chance. She was ravenous for something

new. She had half a mind to rip the needles and tubes out of her arm and run, keep running down the cold stone stairs with her bare feet slapping the ground. The slapping, clapping making such a sound that resonated throughout the hospital disturbing the bleak atmosphere. She would, she imagined, be making a point that she was too young for all of this, and this would be her two fingers up gesture to anyone who thought otherwise. So, while the nurses weren't looking, she took the chance to sneak out of the Ward and go down to the canteen and eat.

Eat. Eat. Eat. All of the things she hasn't been allowed to eat for two and a half years.

This was the extent of her rebellion. Eating. Surely this was a given right. She laughed to herself; her friends were going out and drinking themselves into a coma and she was crouched in the corner of the canteen, with her catheter hanging from her one arm whilst the other was used to stuff succulent slices of salty bacon down her throat and wash it down with glass after glass of fresh orange juice. There was a gluttonous flash of hope to be found in these despairing moments – this 'deviance' gave her the chance to act just like her friends.

And just like her friends, Isa would soon feel the effects. Almost immediately after she threw up the salty slices of heaven as her body began to reject this unwelcome commodity.

Once the outline was done, Isa could start to fill in the details. Painting her eyes felt like an out of body experience.

She had to separate her consciousness – as if she, herself, was not Isa. She suddenly felt intoxicated with fear.

‘I can’t, I just can’t do this.’

She put the paintbrush down. And looked at herself in the mirror.

Chance

There had been an accident. A girl aged fourteen had died in a car crash, sirens screamed and telephones rang off the hook. The death of one girl meant another was given a new chance at life.

The phone call came on a Sunday around midday. Sundays were Isa’s ‘day off’ and she would usually spend the day curled up in the warmth of her living room.

This particular Sunday she remembered very well. She and her family were off to the races. Isa loved horse riding and despite her obvious disability, she continued to ride her horse every Saturday. She refused to give up this refuge and strapped up her legs, wore high riding boots and flew through the air. If she could not be in control of her own body, she would be in control of her horse. This was her sanctuary.

The phone rang just as Isa and her family were just about to leave. They were dressed smartly, her mother, father, sister and brother. ‘Typical’.

Isa rolled her eyes. At this point she would usually go off on a rant about the inconvenience of the phone ringing just as they were about to leave. Her brother would slouch back down on the sofa. Her mother would put her bag down

and reluctantly go into the dining room to answer it. Her father would look at Isa and quip, 'it's probably her sister again.'

This time her brother answered the phone. 'Isa!' he shouted impatiently: 'it's St Mary's'.

The family quickly gathered in the dining room, Isa took hold of the phone,

'Okay. When. Now? Are you sure? Thank you. Thank you.'

She rang off,

'They've got a kidney for me, and they're pretty sure it's a match.' There was no time to think; everyone knew what to do. Her father ran upstairs with her and quickly packed a bag. Isa's brother called her grandparents and told them the news.

She didn't really remember the car journey.

After arriving at St Mary's numerous tests were done – bloods, blood pressure, Hemoglobin. Everything had to be just right. They couldn't just give someone a transplant if the patient wasn't in a state of complete health. And the blood, of course, had to be an exact match, otherwise the body would reject the kidney.

She waited.

On the operating table the surgeon carved and sculpted Isa's body as if it was her own creation. She moved quickly but delicately, slicing, shaving, snipping, cleaning, and ensuring that this girl lying before her was handled with precision. There were no room for mistakes.

Finally finished, Isa stood back and gazed at the portrait from some distance - her eyes yellowed and lachrymose. A boy peered through the window of her studio and turned the handle.

‘God, it’s hot in here, mum. I’ve brought you some orange juice.’

‘Thanks, Julian.’

He scrunched his eyes and scratched the back of his head. ‘Who is that? I thought you were doing a self-portrait?’

‘I am.’

SUZI SHIMWELL
PhD Creative Writing

One Man On High

I will stand on a mountain
and gaze into the distance.
And you?

You will photograph me
hidden behind your one-way eye of a camera.
And we?

We will place the photograph on a wall
and for the rest of our time
we will watch as I contemplate the void.

It's not you, it's me

There was snow on the ground as we went into April
and for some reason I wanted to be alone.

In the spring I always go North
to see the daffodils
in the pre-dinner light.

This year I suggest York.
We train it up.
The whole time you sit silent beside me.
I think,
I know you want to be there
because of course that makes a difference.
Doesn't it?

Half way you look at me,
the cloying sweetness of it suffocates the air out of the
carriage,
you get a sickly smile back,
I'm sure you hate me.

Then the train jolts the coffee all over the table.
"So, so, sorry,
"my fault",
we say in sync,
dabbing.
We're so damn polite
that I know when we go back south
I'm going to write that Dear John for you.

Apples

When we discussed his work,
he said,
'it's not science,
baby,
it's politics.
There are eight
apples and ten
people'.

Ha!

Stein loved apples.
When she looked at the space Cezanne's had been,
she felt she should write:
'Apples
Apples
Apples went.'
Because Leo took them.
Took.
Took.
Took them.
Of course Picasso felt her pain,
whipped her up a new one.
After all they weren't apples
they were paint.

It's not apples,
baby,
it's paint.

RAHWA WOLDU
BA English with a year abroad

Mother's Flight

Two weeks have gone by. She has just been released from prison. She leaves behind a cold, dusty floor and stale loaves of bread. She runs home. Weak, haggard yet determined. She finds her bedridden mother. Elated yet stunned she hugs her daughter. She interrogates her. 'When were you released?' 'How?' She tells her mother she lied in order to be set free. She must leave, they will be back. Her mother resists the choking in her throat. She agrees but she tells Freweini she will never see her again.

He tells her he will be leaving in a few days, with a group of twenty five people. 'Would she like to join?' Left with no other choice she agrees. She will have to pay five hundred Nakfa. Part of the cost will be paid now, the rest once she has arrived. She packs essentials. A spare change of clothes, a small sum of money and some family photographs. Mentally she is not ready for this journey. She does not want to leave her home. All she has known.

Goodbye Eritrea. Goodbye sweet childhood. She is seventeen.

Day six across the desert. They walk at night. It is dreadfully dark. Only the two leaders can see. A dim lamp between them. They travel in silence, conscious of their breathing. The route is a danger zone. The heavy scent of death fills the air. They pass skeletons and makeshift graves. Hyenas are in close proximity. Along the route they search for water. They excavate it from the sand and fill their jugs.

Yesterday, they were not so lucky. The water was contaminated. Animal urine. They were forced to drink it. The day before they found nothing. Forced to swallow faint saliva drops. Their lips cracked from dehydration. They must keep up their energy. They are tired. The soles of their feet are skinned. Their shoes are succumbing to the pressure.

The sun begins to glimmer, they scatter to the forests. Sleep takes their bodies until noon. They start a fire and begin to cook. They eat in peace. But then they hear cattle. Rustling behind the trees. They are unable to hide. He finds them. He has jet-black skin. His cheeks are engraved with thick, long scars. His hair is a mass of wild locks. He is a shepherd but they are scared he may report them. So they provide him with food and drink. But he is not satisfied. He wants to keep one of the girls. To look after the cattle he says. He points to Freweini. She is terrified. The group refuse. They begin to offer him more provisions. He eventually leaves. They must vanish.

Day eleven. Final challenge, they must cross a river. They form a chain as they enter. They must withstand the flowing current. Their valuables are firmly tied to their backs like precious babies. Yet, the waves are overbearing. Their treasure begins to unravel. Some let go valuing their lives. Others hold on with desperation. All belongings are flushed away.

Day twelve. Defeated they reach Sudan. There is no celebration. They are feeble, penniless. They have no relatives to comfort them. They feel regret and disappointment. This is not utopia.



THOMAS MORRIS, MPhys PHYSICS



THOMAS MORRIS, MPhys PHYSICS

MEGAN ARLETT
BA English and American Studies

An earlier version of 'The War on Terror' won an honourable mention in the G. S. Fraser Poetry Prize.

The War on Terror

You never were afraid
of monsters under the bed
as a child

But the monsters in the desert
wake you all the time
now

The dunes of your past
lie between us
when we sleep

You say it never leaves you
the sand can't be washed out of your clothes
I saw the grains still in your boots

I dream to know the boy
who lived before those ten months
made you a man

Flood Street

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a dusty trail that quickly mopped up the drops that remained. He could not explain why he felt compelled to work when the sun was highest. All he knew was that rest would not bring him the same calmness and his mind was quiet when his shadow was a pool beneath him. He rummaged through a nearby pile of wood, picking up and discarding the majority. Every so often he stopped for a pallet board or large sheet of plywood which he placed gently into the shopping cart beside him. He carried on down the street, the cart rattling in front of him, and called to a black and tan dog that ran to catch up. He soothed her as they walked, "Good girl Mama. You stay by me."

The streets around him were quiet except for the gritty turn of car wheels and the hum of air conditioning units in every house. New Orleans was hot as hell. Every breath was an inhalation of foggy, cloying heat to add to the sweat that flowed freely from his body. He walked past the store, taking a moment to stop and peer inside at the bare shelves. The city was emptying rapidly and the shoppers walked past him, ignoring his presence. They climbed inside their ice box cars and headed home with the supplies they hoped would help them weather the storm. He stopped and looked behind a dumpster at a pile of wire and metal. After a moment of surveying he prized a coil of pig pen wire free and placed it in the cart before turning down the street and making his way home.

The house at six hundred and fourteen Flood Street was tired but neatly kept. The paint on the clapboard had once

been a bright blue but had faded over the years and was now peeling in places. On the porch was a swing, stilled by the heaviness of the August air. The gate squeaked slightly as it opened and he walked round to the shaded side of the building. The dog curled herself up in the crawl space and her master set about working. Around him were assorted piles of materials. One for wood, one for metal, one for nails, nuts and bolts. In the middle of the piles, on a raised wooden frame was the skeleton of a curved hull. He started to empty the shopping cart and placed each element that he had found into its respective pile. Once he had done this he retrieved a tool box from under the house and set about adding to the platform while Mama watched.

The street was busy with people loading belongings into cars and children playing to avoid helping. The bangs of windows being boarded up rang out around them all. A boy ran past the house, stopped and looked in at the project.

“Whatcha making?” he asked. He was six years old at most and stood slightly hunched, toying with his index finger.

“A boat,” the man replied.

“Can I help?”

He looked across the street to where the boy’s mother was unpacking supplies from the car, “You not needed?”

“Naw suh.”

He smiled, “Well then sure. I need nails. You think you can look for some?” The boy nodded. He continued to craft his masterpiece.

The sun had just fallen below the roofline when the squeak of the front gate made him look up from his work. His daughter stood in the warm half-light.

“Good evening my dove,” he called with a smile.

She scowled, "Inside, please." In the kitchen he cleared the counter of a pile of newspapers and put them with the collection that dominated a corner of the room. The headlines shrieked warnings of the imminent storm. He turned the stove on to high and set a pan with rice to boil. "Do you want me to take these out to the trash?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"No, thank you." Aside from the collections of objects assigned to different cabinets and corners, the house was spotless. She opened a cupboard, inspecting the mass of empty orange bottles within. She picked one up and shook it, rattling the pills inside. "This enough to last?"

"Sure."

She clasped her hands together, "You gotta stop building that damned boat. I ain't gonna leave you in the city."

"I got work to do." He pulled a jar of olives towards himself and dipped his hand into the oil.

"Dad, please. We're leaving for Houston tonight. If you would just--"

"I was born and raised in this city. I'll never... I'll never... we'll be safe."

She shook her head sadly, "Daddy, I can't stay behind with you. I've got to look after the kids..."

"Go with them. I'll be fine." The water from the rice boiled over onto the stove with a hiss; he grabbed the pot quickly and set it aside before clattering through a nearby draw for a tin opener.

"I don't believe you." she mumbled. He opened the can of red beans and tipped them in with the rice.

"I didn't ask you to believe me." He replied.

He woke up early the next day, conscious of the

incoming weather and set to work. He did not hear the gate. Either he was too engrossed in his project, or another sound had masked it. It may have been a car driving past or the clatter of a spanner being dropped on the ground. The first sign of his visitor was the shadow which fell over him. He peered up at the figure. She loomed tall and wide, hands firmly on her hips, a scowl cutting across her face and lips pouting angrily.

"You been making my boy a criminal." She spat at him. He stood up and looked at her with squinting eyes, raising his hand to block the sun that was on his face now that her huge frame was not doing the job.

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

"You been talking to my boy?"

"Your boy, ma'am?"

"Lee. You told him to steal you some nails."

"Steal, ma'am?"

"Playing dumb with me, you son of a-" She stopped herself and took a deep breath. "He tol' me you asked him to get him nails. I found him stealing from his daddy's tool box."

"I apologise for the misunderstandin' ma'am. I would never-"

"You keep your crazy boat business to yourself." The skies grew darker with each passing seconds and the wind made a death rattle through the trees. "Leave my boy alone." The air remained heavy with moisture as it pushed between them.

"You not evacuating?"

"Naw. Mom lived through Betsy. We're staying with her."

"There's space in the boat for us all."

“Stay away from us. Freak.” She marched away, leaving the gate swinging in the wind behind her. He closed it gently and returned to the hull. With a pot of white paint in one hand and a paintbrush in the other he tilted his head to perfect the placement of the word he was about to write. He coated the end of the paintbrush and firmly pressed it onto the hull dragging it downwards in a straight line across the rough wood. Finally, he stood back and admired the slightly crooked name. *Teba*.

The sky was darkening rapidly and a blanket of clouds pressed down on the city. Loose cans rattled down the street and a plastic bag snatched past him into a tree, it tugged and tore itself on the branches before being ripped free and pulled further into the sky. The man wound a thick piece of rope between the boat and the porch and knotted it tightly. “Come along Mama,” he called to the dog who lay watching him from under the house. “Time to rest up.”

The wind woke him in the night and peering out he saw the trees swaying and bending as if in prayer. Street signs quivered and globules of rain were whipped sideways in the air. Metal rolled like butter off the sides of buildings and clattered down the grid of streets. “That water risin’ over the levees.” He cracked the front door open and it swung violently inside with the force of the wind. “We gotta get in the boat now, Mama. Come on!” The water swelled against the front steps and the boat tugged on the railings where it was moored. The wood moaned loudly. “Mama! Let’s get goin’!” He shouted over the wind that pushed him sideways as he walked out onto the porch. The wooden swing careered backwards and forwards into the panelling behind it. Mama cowered in the doorway. The water broke level with the

porch spilling onto it. Mama edged backwards. "Come on!" He walked towards her, scooping her into his arms and holding her close. She curled into his chest with a whimper. "We gon be safe. We gon be saved." A road sign broke free and skittered into the squall. Cradling Mama as best he could he wrenched on the mooring to bring the boat as close as possible. The water flowed inside the front door and soaked the rug with filth. He hauled himself aboard and placed Mama down. She looked up at him, her legs shaking, her feet moving to try and counteract the swollen movements of the boat. Inside, the water inched up the piles of newspapers, swelling and soaking into the pages until they separated and pushed out away from each other across the room. They rippled like a bloom of inky blood on the surface. *Governor Continues Urging Residents to Leave*. He leant over to untie the rope which anchored them. *Gulf Coast Prepares for Category 5*. They bashed against the porch railing. *Katrina has the State on Alert*. Mama fell to the floor and stayed there. *Many Will Weather Hurricane at Home*. He wrenched the knot free, pushed forcefully off the side of the house and the boat came loose. He grabbed hold of the mast and opened up the tarpaulin sail. The wind caught it sharply and filled it with a curl of storm. It pulled them out into what was now one of a hundred Flood streets. The water covered the top of the door frame as they rode away on the swell and he let out a rapturous howl as the storm carried them off in its embrace.

The streets were lined with debris, an Aladdin's cave of material with which to build a boat. Roofs sagged under the gaze of God and the spray painted crosses that adorned them slanted at an angle, embellished with codes.

0-0, NOPD, 9-1.

On the reef made from fragments of destroyed lives sat the wrecked hull of a ramshackle boat. A recovery worker stood by it, peering in at the remnants sadly. He made a note on his clipboard. Nearby a family waded through the thigh high water, the youngest child ran across to the wreckage. "That's my friend's boat!" He cried.

"You know him?" The worker asked. The boy nodded. "What's his name?"

"Oh ermm..."

The boy's mother called to him across the street, "Get back here, Lee!"

"I dunno his name," he said finally. "We just called him Mr Noah." With that he turned away and waded across to his mother. She took his hand and led him back towards the drowned remains of the city.

SHANARA HIBBERT

BA English

'My Skin is Brown' was the winner of the 2014 G. S. Fraser poetry prize.

My Skin is Brown

“So where is it you’re from?” “Bedford.” I am
English, British. But that’s not what you wish
To hear. You frown. I’m failing your exam
Again, as always, I refuse to squish
Into the seat you’ve reserved me. The ‘right’
Answer is Jamaica. But why do you
Care that it’s where my parents’ parents might
Have been born? Times I’ve been there? Only two.
I’ve seen America twice, am I now
American too? I can’t be that one
“My friend’s Jamaican too” friend for you. How
Could I become just a clichéd “Yeah mon”?
Forget tacit P.C. laws of the town,
Just come and ask me why my skin is brown.



BENJAMIN MICHAEL CRADDOCK, BSc PSYCHOLOGY



BENJAMIN MICHAEL CRADDOCK, BSc PSYCHOLOGY

ANITA SIVAKUMARAN

PhD Creative Writing

Krishnalila: On Karna and Arjuna

Picture this: a vast battlefield, the Kurukshetra, ringed with two silent armies. Above, in the sky, a single swallow emerges to meet the dawn. The squawk of the bird mocks the heavy hush of the two kuru clans.

I take my conch, the Pancha-janya. I wipe the mouth of the conch with the tail-end of my vest. I prepare to blow for the battle to begin. Sunlight cracks open the horizon. Archers lift bows, pull strings taut. Horses tense. Elephants tremble. Generals catch their breaths, ready to bellow out commands. I put the conch to my lips.

Out of the blue, Arjuna lowers his bow and says to me, 'Take me to the other side, O Krishna, so that I may see who it is that fights alongside that evil son of Dridharashtra.'

I lower the conch. I smile kindly at heartbroken Arjuna. I lift the reins of the four white horses and drive Arjuna's chariot to the middle of the battlefield. I have already raised my arm. The battle will wait.

Arjuna stands for a long moment, sees on both sides of the Kurukshetra, fathers, brothers, cousins, uncles, sons of wives, daughters' husbands, mothers' fathers.

He says, 'I will not take up arms against my own kinsmen.' He throws his bow upon the ground.

Dawn chases dusk along the horizon in an endless, suspended moment as I give Arjuna a philosophical treatise on the duty of a Kshatriya. He must neglect family and friends, bonds filial and conjugal, in the service of Karma and

Dharma.

Staring at the frozen tableau of his enemies, Arjuna laments: 'There is the evil Duryodhana, leading the pack. But he is my first cousin. On his left is my Grandfather Bhishma, dearer to me than mine own eyes. And beside him is Drona, my teacher, my one true hero.'

I too, pretend to squint at the men. 'But who is on Duryodhana's right, dear Arjuna? What a contrast he makes with your cousin.'

Indeed. Prince Duryodhana, the enfant terrible, is all silver and white, cold and cynical. Karna blazes on his golden chariot, dressed in hammered and spun gold, in a tribute to his chosen patron, Surya.

'Ah,' says Arjuna, 'That low-born dog is the only one of them whom I can kill with impunity. He is neither family nor friend.'

Prince Karna is Arjuna's nemesis. His equal in stature and skill. In many eyes, his superior. Superior how?

Karna is not a prince, born. Karna is from the toiling classes. Not an untouchable, but not far up from one. He is the son of a charioteer who fights to rise up through the impossible ladder of caste.

Karna, I feel, may provide the key to persuading Arjuna to pick up his bow again.

'Look at him, dear Arjuna, anticipation of battle with you flashes in his eyes. For many here, and in the balconies of the sky, this whole war is merely a platform for you and Karna to set skills against each other.'

Flattery straightens Arjuna's slumped chest. 'And who do you think will come out the better out of us, O Krishna?' he asks.

I smile. 'That is not for me to say, but to bear witness to.'

Arjuna has conveniently forgotten that he has already been tested, and bested by Karna.

Inside the hollow of Karna's soul, there has always resided an endless howl. He has done his best to be rid of it. He turns from his mother's breast to gaze longingly at Kunti, the Pandava mother. An only son, he covets the Pandavas for brothers. A crawling babe, he shuns the servitude of his class. He leaves his charioteer father as soon as he can walk and tries to enter the hermitage where the princes train under the sage Drona. Drona calls him a dog and kicks him out. Karna decides to go to a teacher better than even Drona. The reclusive, Kshatriya-hating Parasurama. Karna disguises himself as a Brahmin mendicant and seeks out Parasurama in the Himalayan forests. Parasurama only sees him to begin to love him. Karna learns what he can from that arrogant seer. Etiquette, weaponry skills, battle strategy and diplomacy. With Parasurama's encouragement, he picks for a patron-god Surya himself, the patron of kings. Karna's family worship the Lady of the Poxes. In all but word, Karna becomes Parasurama's son.

When he is nearly at the end of his childhood, mere days before Parasurama would have sent him into the world with boons and blessings, the sage falls asleep one hot afternoon on the forest floor. Kindly Karna takes his great head and rests it on his own thigh and sits there for hours as the teacher sleeps. A buzzing hornet alights on Karna's leg and starts to sting him. Karna tenses his muscles and sits there as still as he can, to not disturb the sleeping master. The

bee stings again and again. Is it a bee or a mischievous god, wonders Karna, come to taunt me to shake awake the master into a rage. He holds his breath to hold in the pain and does not move. But a single tear escapes his eye and falls on the cheek of the sleeping Parasurama.

Parasurama wakes, sees the bee stinging Karna, and says, 'You are not a Brahmin. A Brahmin would never bear such pain. You are a lower caste. Run, dog, and never come back.'

The entire royalty of Hastinapur notice Karna for the first time when he forges entry into the Kauravas' competition to find the best Kshatriya prince. It is a competition designed to showcase Arjuna's awesomeness. All come and fail to ruffle a single feather on a single arrow in Arjuna's quiver. Karna blazes in. He bears the colours and symbols of Surya. He looks at Arjuna with the arrogance of a God. All of us fall in love with him.

They match weapons. Arjuna loses.

But the truth outs. They find out he is low-born. Karna is disqualified. Arjuna is declared the winner. Arjuna is smug once more. He does not have anything to do with a low-born. One only fears competition from one's own peers.

Karna is humiliated. He is a gold-plated joke. Duryodhana leaps to Karna's defence. Seeing an opportunity to cultivate someone finally capable to defeating the Pandavas, he gives Karna a small principedom and claims him as a brother.

Karna's dreams have come true. Here he is, accepted into the coterie of princes despite them knowing who he really is. A prince at last. A pause in his mind. Now what is he

to do? He sports with his new friends, the Kauravas. He finds lovers. He picks his teeth. Now there is no motivation, to survive skin on teeth, to fight against the odds, to become the best at everything. A shimmer of wellbeing coats his skin. His senses are superloaded. His intellect dims. The howl in his soul is now a whisper.

The cry of battle arrests his gentle descent into decadence. It is what princes prepare for all their lives. The Kauravas go to war with the Pandavas. Over a Kingdom. Over a woman. A cocktail of excuses. Karna's eyes, recently dulled with wine and hashish, sparkle once more.

Duryodhana tells him, 'Karna, you are the key to the Kauravas' victory.'

Karna feels the pleasure from tip to toe. But to slaughter thousands in someone else's battle? Unlike the Kauravas and Pandavas, Karna is not fighting for survival, for the preservation of his very life, and the style in which he lives it. Deep within his mind, Karna knows that he would lose nothing even if he loses everything. He will pretend to himself that for him too, it is a matter of life and death, of honour and dharma. He could refuse to give a strand of his hair for his principedom on some godforsaken stretch at the edge of the empire. He could walk away from his mocking, adolescent friends, the sanctimonious elders of court, the slender indoor blooms that are his lovers. He could go wandering again or take himself off to the forest a final time. He could even try out his father's profession, old though he is to begin something like that.

But he has given his word. He sets to sharpening his battle skills. He is to finish off his old nemesis – Arjuna. He is the one man who can win the battle for the Kauravas. And I

am the only one who can prevent it.

So my plan is nearly derailed when Arjuna falls into a deep sulk at the brink of battle. 'I cannot,' he says, 'take up weapons against my own cousins, my grandfather, my teachers, my friends.' Fair enough.

I am in his service as a charioteer, but my real job is to herd the Pandavas like cattle.

I realise Arjuna is in shock. He needs reassurance. He needs to know that what he is about to do isn't simply the mindless slaughter of thousands, including loved ones, but that it is something more, something higher that would absolve him. I put it to him.

'Arjuna,' I say, 'it is a simple battle of good versus evil.'

A versus B. An abstract concept. He is good. His enemies are evil. Good has to triumph against evil.

'You are merely an instrument,' I tell him. 'A puppet belonging to the puppeteer, chosen to carry out this task.'

I unload the burden of guilt from his shoulders, placing it onto my own.

'You, Arjuna, might physically murder thousands, including your own cousins, grandfather, teachers, but your hand and aim are directed by me. You are not responsible for your actions. I am. You are merely fulfilling your dharma, your karma. All preordained. Set in stone. Inevitable. Inexorable.'

As is his victory. It is a done deal. He would be triumphant. For millennia hence, he would be celebrated as a hero. The immortal is ever blameless.

It takes a long time to convince him. The will to preserve and not destroy one's own blood relations is strong.

‘They too are mere puppets,’ I tell him, my masterstroke. ‘You are not destroying people, but merely agents of evil. If you notch it on a palm leaf, you will see it clearly.’

$$1 + 1 = 2.$$

$$2 - 1 = 1.$$

There can only be one King. For the preservation of, for the continuity of. Well, I needn’t go into interminable details here.

Of course, I choose a different tack with Karna, whom I want to die in battle. Otherwise there is no hope of victory for the Pandavas. Surprisingly, it is easier to make him see his inevitable defeat. He has nothing to preserve. He has doubted the intentions of the gods from the start. He set out to make his own destiny, after all. He knows that the Kaurava army is weak. A blind King, a geriatric regent, an armchair vizier, spoilt, soft princes, an indifferent army, a commander who hated him from the very depths of his pure Brahmin heart. The whole teetering colossus of empire has been set awobble. It would fall.

Perhaps a small part of him wants to die. He has always been lonely. And now, surrounded by friends and lovers, he is more alone than ever. He has never belonged in a charioteer family. He does not belong in the palace. He isn’t a natural fit anywhere. Worse, the caste shame is encased in the kernel of his brain. Nothing can change the facts of his birth.

So then. I go to meet him and to make promises. I would change the unchangeable, make up the impossible.

‘Karna,’ I tell him, ‘If you do not seek to triumph against Arjuna, I will rewrite your story for millennia.’

‘How so?’ he asks. He is uncertain of what it is that he wants, that I have come to offer him.

‘I will eliminate your caste.’

He laughs. He stops. ‘You will?’

‘I will.’

‘Who will my father be?’

‘Surya, himself.’

‘And my mother?’

‘Arjuna’s own mother, the princess Kunti.’

‘Her firstborn.’

‘Hence the best.’

Karna, let’s face it, has always been jealous of Arjuna.

‘You are a wily one,’ he says to me, and laughs in a delighted fashion. He stands half facing me, half-turned towards a window. The years fall away from him while he laughs.

He caresses my curls. Rapture fills his eyes at my beauty. They sparkle, lit by the rays of Surya, his chosen father. After a long moment savouring the vision I make, he says, ‘I accept.’

I have come, bags packed, for days of negotiation. It takes but an hour. The rest, of course, is history.

At the battle, philosophical treatise over, Arjuna and I ride back to the battleline. Dawn resumes. We face Karna who is glowing with the knowledge of his own glorious demise. Arjuna has been pepped and prepped. Without further ado, he kills friends, foes, cousins, grandfathers.

After his end, the legacy of Karna grows. I have only to give the broad brushstrokes. Other embellishers come along to invent his immaculate conception, his gold armour and

earrings, his many unearned boons, and the best gobsmacking whopper: his promise to Kunti who had abandoned him as a newborn, to not raise arms against her more cherished sons, out of a sense of filial duty.

I laugh, sitting here at the end of days. What a success I've made of him, the poor dogsbody who fought tooth and nail. It's been almost effortless.

Poor Karna did not realise I was doing him and his kind a disservice. By distorting his story, I have helped to maintain the status quo. He isn't unique after all, one who defies his antecedents. He is born of high parentage, hence he is special. He is born with gifts of invincibility – the kundalas, the kavasa, the boons. A princess for a mother, the Sun god for a father. No wonder he is so handsome, so talented. A half-breed of the best kind. A cross between royalty and divinity. Everyone breathes relief again. Society prevails, schisms intact. Caste prevails. Karna is not celebrated as a hero among the lowest and the downtrodden. His story isn't sung by the labouring, the persecuted, to spill light on their gloomy evenings, to warm their hearts. His death does not spark a revolution.

The lion chases the mouse to the end of its ragged days. When the mouse comes up against the wall, it does not turn around and behave like a lion. The mouse does not have the songs of Karna to warm its heart, to give it hope and strength. Instead, it has the knowledge of its caste. It knows that its destiny is preordained. Then, in a desperate hope of release from the misery of birth and life, it gives itself up to the lion. Everything is preserved once more. I have time for a nap.

KELSI DELANEY

BA English

'Between Cigarettes' won an honourable mention in the G. S. Fraser Poetry Prize.

The Willow Man

This poem was written about Serena de la Hey's sculpture 'Willow Man', which was built for the new millennium to celebrate the relationship between people and nature. It sits beside the M5 and is now surrounded by housing estates and a large Morrisons warehouse.

Beside an aging stretch of motorway
I tried to make a man for them, to build a
figure, standing deep in English clay, the
proof of their millennium fulfilled.
So two of these two thousand hands
have willed the willow woven round your
steely span, from foot to mouth across
the form you spilled; the angel of the
south, the willow man.
You shivered at your roots when it began
and turning to the wind you came
unbound, as teeming round you diggers
overran, they raised a Morrisons. And
while you drowned in concrete by a
freeway, full of rage, their road ran
greyer in the spirit of the age.

Between Cigarettes

A milky cloud ran liquid from your lip,
your nails were dry. And in your yellowed grip
you held a cigarette. Preoccupied
you glanced around, while with an even stride
you marked a minute more outdoors, before
returning to her quiet ward once more.
It reeked of sweat and mildew, scrubbed and bleached,
and from the starched synthetic sheets she reached
towards you, purple bruising on her hand,
a silent ache extended. A demand
for recognition after years unchanged,
of awkward phone calls, visits rearranged
for later. Now, with no more time to wait
she reaches, tries to bridge the gap. Too late.
Your hand is in your pocket and your face
It's turned away, you're staring into space.
She went unnoticed, gazing past her bed
your eyes are filled with amber light instead,
reflecting fields of 'Golden Virginia';
the heady scent a bitter severer,
a shelterer, from thoughts too stark to think.
A Rizla pressed against your palm, you shrink
away. Your heart too full to feel regrets
your mother lies between two cigarettes.

After The Funeral

An undertaker
leads us in slow procession
out to the car park.
Our shoes drum on the pavement
out of time, our shoulders hunch.

The plain wooden box
sat in the back of the hearse
seems far too small and
looks faded, it is the same
colour as the upholstery.

We breathe more deeply,
feeling guilty as we do.
Trying not to stare
too much, we fumble blindly
for the doors of our taxis.

My father lingers
as a man closes the boot.
Eyes up to the sky,
shining, stung by the cold wind.
He must be searching for you.



WHALE

LAUREN FOSTER, CERT HE CREATIVE WRITING



ADDER

LAUREN FOSTER, CERT HE CREATIVE WRITING

ALEXANDER FRENCH

MA Modern Literature

The Liar

(AN EXTRACT)

I have always tried to be a good person. Admittedly, I haven't always succeeded. Yet being 'good' has been a concern of mine for as long as I can remember. My parents, who were devout Catholics, filled me with a strong sense of moral responsibility. It's easier as a child: there are rules for you to follow, and providing you stick to them, you are 'moral'. I spent many childhood evenings on my mother's knee, going over her simplified version of the Ten Commandments.

"Repeat after me, Bertie," Mum would say. "It is wrong to steal."

"It's wrong to steal."

"It is wrong to tell lies..."

Those rules seemed straightforward. Others were less so. I had difficulty envisioning in what situation I would covet my neighbour's donkey, given that none of our neighbours even owned donkeys. I didn't understand the rule about adultery, either, which my mother refused to explain 'until I was older.' This worried me greatly, as it seemed entirely possible that I might accidentally commit adultery without knowing it.

On the whole, though, being good seemed easy enough. All I had to do was follow the principles set out by my parents and I would eventually receive a big pat on the back from Saint Peter. It helped that my best friend, Alan Bicks,

was as conscientious as me. Alan was also raised Catholic. Our parents had met at church, and so when we started at Hilford Infants' School we gravitated towards each other, each being the only face the other recognised. Alan and I got on immediately. We shared toys, we made each other laugh and we always stuck together. It was rare for either of us to get into trouble, though it was Alan who gained the reputation as a 'goody-two-shoes'. He certainly had the appearance of a teacher's pet; his huge square glasses barely fit on his round freckled face, and he always tucked his shirt in. More importantly, though, Alan really was righteous. He would never do anything to hurt anybody. Knowing him was enough to convince you that principles were all you needed to be moral. Growing up, however, I started to realise it isn't always that easy.

~

The most important rule in our household was 'no lying'. That was the one my parents took really seriously. They believed that if you were honest, all other forms of morality would naturally follow. As such, dishonesty simply didn't occur under our roof. If ever I doubted the severity of lying, I was reminded that liars were on a par with murderers in God's eyes. Furthermore, lying in our household warranted the unthinkable punishment: no dessert. I would sooner have put the hamster in the washing machine than tell a lie. In fact, I probably would have been forgiven for putting the hamster in the washing machine as long as I had been honest about it.

As I grew up I became confused by the notion that lying is the greatest sin. Some people, it appeared, told lies and got

away with it. I questioned my mother about this matter as we watched television one morning.

“Mummy, the man on the screen says he has a tin of magic beans. Do we have any magic beans?”

“Bertie, the man doesn’t really have magic beans. There’s no such thing.”

“Then why did he say he does?”

“The man is playing a character, Bertie. The story is made up for a television programme.”

“Then he is a LIAR!”

Mum laughed and told me there are some people who are allowed to tell lies because it’s part of their job, such as actors, writers and the Prime Minister. Confused, I simply assumed that any exception to the rule didn’t apply to me. Lest God should appear in the clouds and smite me, I avoided falsehoods at all costs.

It therefore came as a shock when, in the middle of a morning History lesson at Hilford Infants’, I was accused of lying. Alan and I were sitting at a desk by the window whilst Miss Graham taught us about the Tudors. Our teacher was explaining that although Henry VIII is said to have had six wives, he really only had three if you discount the marriages which were annulled or declared void. Whilst she laboured over this point, Alan nudged me and pointed outside. Something small and white was darting across the playing field. I squinted. It was a rabbit! I smiled as I watched the little critter burrow into a bush - still listening to Miss Graham, of course, who was now harping on about Anne Boleyn. When she noticed I was looking outside, Miss Graham paused.

“Bertie, you are not listening. Pay attention, please.” I

jumped.

“Sorry, Miss. I was listening.”

“You were not listening, Robert.” Her face turned stern.

“I was, Miss! I swear!”

“Do not lie, Robert. See me after class.”

I looked at Alan, who bit his lip apologetically. Forty minutes never passed so slowly as those that remained of the lesson. Would Miss Graham scream at me? Give me a detention? Or something worse? I sat in dread for the remainder of the hour, my eyes fixed upon my books. Eventually the bell rang.

“Good luck,” Alan whispered, gathering his books. I frowned. Once the room had emptied, Miss Graham sat down in the chair where Alan had been sitting. My eyes remained on the desk as she spoke.

“Robert, I don’t usually have to speak to you like this. I want you to understand that I am not cross with you for not listening. Everyone forgets to listen now and then. What I am cross about is that you lied to me. It is wrong to lie, especially to your teacher. Do you understand?”

Still avoiding her eye, I summoned the courage to respond.

“But Miss, I was listening to you.”

“Robert.”

“Honestly, Miss.”

“Robert, if you carry on telling lies you are going to get into a lot of trouble. If you just admit that you were not listening and say sorry, we can both forget all about this.”

It was her word against mine. I could see it from her perspective; I was looking outside and it probably looked like I wasn’t listening. In retrospect, I ought to have recited my

knowledge of Henry VIII's wives and not-really-wives in order to prove that I had been paying attention. But I was too terrified to even consider this possibility, let alone get my facts straight regarding Catherine of Aragon and the rest. It was no use blaming Alan; grassing might have got me into more trouble, and Alan would have had a heart attack if he got told off. In that moment I had only two options. I could carry on protesting my innocence and face a punishment I knew not how severe, or I could falsely claim that I hadn't been listening. I cleared my throat.

"I was listening, Miss. I promise."

Miss Graham looked away and sighed. After staring into space for a few moments she stood up, tugging me by the sleeve.

"Come with me."

Miss Graham led me out of the classroom and through the school. Silence fell as we walked through the dining room. Boys and girls queuing up for lunch turned around to watch. Some suppressed laughter; others gasped. Alan turned red as I caught his eye. Several dinner ladies looked down at me disapprovingly, one of them tutting. My heart sank as we reached the staff corridor.

"Wait here," Miss Graham ordered as she knocked on Mrs Jones' door.

The door creaked open and my headmistress appeared. Mrs Jones was the sort of person who looked miserable even on her birthday, but right now it was obvious she was particularly unhappy. Miss Graham left without speaking.

"Sit down," Mrs Jones ordered in her deep growl, pointing to the chair by her desk. After slamming the door she approached me.

“Your teacher tells me you’ve not been listening in class. Messing around and staring out of the window. Is this true, Robert?”

I hesitated.

“N-no, Ma’am-”

“IS THIS TRUE, ROBERT?”

Mrs Jones’ spit hit my cheeks as she shouted. Her large wrinkled face, towering over mine, had turned beetroot-coloured.

“I-I-”

“See that little blue book on my desk?” She pointed. “It has your parents’ phone numbers in it. Am I going to have to call your mother and tell her why her little boy won’t be going home at three o’clock today?”

I didn’t know the ‘correct’ answer so I didn’t respond. A few moments of unbearable silence passed before she spoke again, this time more quietly.

“This is how it’s going to be, Robert. Either you can tell me the truth, or you can come and see me again after school. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“So, Robert, I will ask you one more time. Were you, or were you not, listening to Miss Graham in History earlier?”

I glanced at the address book on her desk, and then looked back into her furious eyes. I shivered. My uniform was moist with sweat. I closed my eyes, gulped, and then forced myself to answer.

“No, Ma’am. I wasn’t listening. I’m sorry.”

It was the first lie I ever told.

Snow Day

Waking up one February morning, Peter's heart raced as he heard the wind howling outside. The young boy jumped out of bed, praying that today could be the day. Climbing onto a box by the window, Peter pulled back a curtain slowly and cautiously. For weeks he had looked outside and merely seen his back yard, dull and colourless with its leafless trees and bare flowerbeds. But today Peter's wishes were answered. The sight still made him gasp. The garden, so lifeless a day before, was now blanketed with sheets of thick white snow, perfectly smooth and unspoiled by human feet. Every branch on every tree was sprinkled with fresh snowflakes. The scene resembled a Christmas card - but in reality, Christmas was inevitably grey and drizzly. February was when the true magic of winter took place; February was when Peter got to play in the snow with Tommy.

Peter ran downstairs. As the boy burst into the kitchen his father rolled his eyes, having no doubt what was coming.

"Dad! Dad! Have you seen outside?!"

"Mmhm."

Mr Cooper carried on eating his breakfast, reading a pink greeting card which had appeared on the kitchen table.

"You've got to ring the school! Please!"

Eager to return to his corn flakes, Mr Cooper obliged. Peter followed him to the telephone and listened anxiously to one side of the conversation.

"Hello there. This is Mr Cooper speaking. Will Dordale Grammar be open this morning?" He paused. "Really? Oh, right. Well, that is a shame." Peter's heart sank as his father looked down at him. "Okay, thank you. I'll let him know."

Mr Cooper put the phone down calmly before returning to his cereal. Peter stared at him impatiently.

“Well Dad, what did they say?!”

“About what, Peter?” Mr Cooper smiled.

“Is school on today or not?!”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, Son - but no, you won’t be going in today.”

Peter squealed with joy. Throwing on a woolly jumper, he ran to the front door. His wellington boots irritated him for not coming on quickly enough, and his mother’s call of “Don’t forget your scarf!” seemed a deliberate attempt to delay him further.

“Yes Mum, I’ve got it. Bye!”

“Oh, and have you had your breakfast?”

“Yes! See you later!”

A blast of cold air hit Peter’s face as he opened the front door and waded onto the white paradise which had simply been Orchard Close yesterday. No cars had dared attempt the road, but Peter’s feet had not been the first to imprint upon the virgin snow. Approaching Tommy’s house at the foot of the cul-de-sac, Peter observed a trail of footprints which he recognised as those of his best friend. But where *was* Tommy?

Tommy Shaw was a year older than Peter, and the pair had been inseparable since the Coopers moved to Orchard Close six years ago. The boys bonded over a mutual love of dinosaurs when their parents met for dinner, and they soon started playing out in the street together. Peter, short and plump, would struggle to compete against the tall, athletic Tommy when they played tag or football - but this didn’t discourage the younger boy, who was happy to have somebody to play with at last. Peter had seen less of Tommy

recently, since the older boy had started at Dordale Grammar. Peter had joined Tommy there the following autumn, but the boys no longer shared classes, being in different year groups. Yet Tommy remained, as always, Peter's closest friend.

It was an unspoken tradition that whenever school was cancelled due to snow, the boys would meet at the bottom of Orchard Close to play. It was therefore unusual that Tommy wasn't there this morning, but Peter knew his friend too well to let this fool him. Pacing up the road, he began peering over walls and into bushes to find Tommy's secret base, knowing he would be preparing a pre-emptive snowball attack. It was a cunning strategy - but not if Peter got there first.

The first time it snowed, the day had started in a similar fashion. Walking into the street to meet his friend, Peter initially saw no sign of Tommy. Then, out of nowhere, there was a shout from above.

"Open fire!"

Looking up, Peter was pelted in the face by a snowball, the cold ice melting on impact and trickling down his neck. After a moment of confusion, Peter located his attacker. Tommy was sitting grinning on the topmost branch of an oak tree, cradling an arsenal of snowy ammunition. This meant war. Running to a nearby car, Peter scraped the snow from its windshield and moulded it to form a giant snowball in his hands. With both arms, he lifted the huge weapon into the air and threw it with full force towards Tommy. The older boy screamed as he met his retaliation, flailing nervously before regaining his balance and mounting a new attack. Peter, now wise to his assailant, dodged a succession of snowballs as they smashed onto the ground.

"You'll never get me from up there!" Peter teased.

“Oh yeah? Well, I’d better come and get you then!”

Tommy climbed down and chased his friend down the street, both boys giggling uncontrollably. Catching up with Peter, Tommy attempted to slow down, but his feet were beyond his control. He skidded forwards and collapsed onto the floor, hitting the icy ground with a thud. Peter walked over to him anxiously. There was a moment of silence.

“Tommy - are you okay?” Tommy remained perfectly still. “Tommy! Tom!” Peter’s heart began to race. “Can you hear me?!”

Tommy kept a straight face for a good thirty seconds. Then he burst into laughter. Embarrassed, Peter took the opportunity to pelt his friend with another snowball.

Peter looked down at the spot where Tommy had fallen over years ago. He had searched every hiding place he could think of on Orchard Close, but he still couldn’t find his friend. This wasn’t like Tommy. Confused, Peter walked up to the Shaw household and rang the doorbell. Peter was surprised to see the door opened by Tommy’s mother. Mrs Shaw looked different now; her hair, which had always been a vibrant brown, was now showing the first signs of grey.

“Hi there, Peter. What can I do for you?” Mrs Shaw asked, looking surprised.

“Is Tommy ready to come out and play?”

“Tommy? He’s in town right now. He’ll be back later, I think.”

Of course. Peter remembered now. The previous year, the boys had discussed buying a sledge to ride in the snow. Tommy had probably gotten up especially early to go out and get it. Peter was annoyed he hadn’t done the same - he could have helped Tommy to choose a good one! He hoped he

picked a red sledge; red was clearly the best colour. Still, he was sure Tommy could be trusted make an informed choice.

“Oh right - thanks!” Peter chirped.

Mrs Shaw closed the door, her raised eyebrow unobserved by Peter. Walking back onto the street, Peter wondered how they were going to fit all of their activities in. As fun as the snowball fight and sledding would be, it was of course vital that they found time to build snowmen.

Snowman building was another tradition which had begun the very first time it snowed. After the snowball fight had reached a ceasefire, Tommy began scraping the snow together with his wellington, forming a big pile at the foot of his driveway. Peter watched as he developed it into a short, stocky snowman. After carving a smile into its face and adding pebbles for eyes, Tommy stood back and laughed at his creation’s uncanny resemblance.

“Look, Pete! It’s you!”

“Aha. Thanks.”

Peter forced a smile as he glanced at the portly figure. Was that really was how he appeared to Tommy? Well, if that was how it was going to be... Gathering the remaining snow with his hands, Peter moulded a tall, narrow snowman to stand alongside his own likeness.

“I call him Mr Lanky,” Peter smirked.

“That is nothing like me.”

“It is too!”

Every year after that, the boys had ended their day off by building snowmen to resemble each other. With time to kill, Peter took it upon himself to make a start on his portrayal of Tommy. Having developed his craft over the years, Peter made his creation as similar to Tommy as

possible - 5ft in height, and with a smile which was half-friendly, half-smirking. Peter stood back and looked proudly on the finished product. Glancing behind him, he almost expected to see Tommy admiring his work of art - but the street was still empty, the snow still lightly falling from the white sky. After pacing around for a while longer, Peter decided to do his friend a favour. Gathering more snow, he began work on Tommy's usual task: making Snowman-Peter. Though Peter thought himself not quite as portly Tommy's depictions suggested, he nonetheless moulded the snowman so as to resemble one of Tommy's - short, wide and with a slightly gormless expression. Tommy would love it.

Yet the afternoon passed by, and still Tommy was nowhere to be seen. Feeling tired, Peter sat on the curb. He made some snowballs and began throwing them halfheartedly against the opposite wall, one by one. He was beginning to feel the cold, and was tempted to head home and call on Tommy again later. But he couldn't risk missing him, so he waited.

Surely there was an explanation? Tommy had never let Peter down before. Perhaps he was halfway home with the sledge and he realised it was broken, so he had to take it back. That would explain it. But would that really take up the entire afternoon? Peter shivered as he felt the snow soaking into his jeans.

In time the skies began to darken and the cold became unbearable. With a sigh, Peter prized himself up and trudged back towards his house. As he turned towards his driveway, he took one final glance up the road. Two figures were walking slowly down the street. Peter's heart skipped. He squinted. Yes, it was Tommy! He was disguised in an

unusually smart jacket and trousers, but it was definitely Tommy. At last they could let the fun begin. But where was the sledge?

Peter leapt through the snow towards his friend, forgetting that he was almost frostbitten. Getting closer, he looked at the other person. It was a girl, wearing a fancy white scarf and a lot of makeup. Her short brown hair and small features were familiar; Peter vaguely recognised her as somebody from the year above at school. Confused, but indifferent to her presence, Peter called out to his friend.

“Tommy! Where have you been?!”

Avoiding Peter’s eye, Tommy muttered a quiet “Hey.”

“I’ve been waiting all day! It’s nearly evening and we haven’t had our snowball fight!”

The girl smirked, and Peter took an instant disliking to her. Tommy remained silent.

“Well, once you’ve said goodbye to - your friend, we can get started. Can’t we, Tommy?”

Tommy looked at his companion apologetically before turning to Peter.

“Pete - don’t you know what day it is?”

“Of course I do. It’s snow day!” Peter grinned expectantly. Tommy sighed.

“I’m busy today, Peter. Sorry, pal.”

Peter watched in astonishment as his friend took the girl’s hand. The two walked, mitten in mitten, towards the Shaw household. As they shut the front door behind them, Peter thought about what Tommy said. What was so significant about today, other than that it was snowing? He recalled that tomorrow was the fifteenth, which he remembered was Tommy’s mother’s birthday. But this had

never stopped Tommy coming out to play before. And besides, Mrs Shaw was at home.

Peter went back home and lay on his bed till the room went dark. When he fell asleep, he dreamed about snowball-fighting with Tommy - just himself and Tommy, playing together like they always did. By the following morning, the snow had started to melt and the clouds had given way to blue skies. The adults went back to work, and the snow on the street gradually disappeared. By the end of the day, all that remained of yesterday's snow were two snowmen, stood together in the afternoon sun.

GWYNNE HARRIES

PhD Creative Writing

Away From Home

Sometimes after a long day
listening to sirens and police helicopters
in this patch of inner city
I inhabit, I long for the sea.

I hanker after horizons,
salt on the intake of breath and
the mocking call of gulls who linger
around the old cottage
to pilfer my dreams.

A Question of Time

The palisaded rows of brick and slate
Were built with pride in pleasing parallels.
Access to the rear is by a gate,
Through palisaded rows of brick and slate.
But that was then! So now what is their fate,
as they stand empty? Sad, forgotten shells
these palisaded rows of brick and slate,
Once built with pride in pleasing parallels.