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Scottish
Book Trust

The best new writing talent in Scotland

Scottish Book Trust's New Writers Awards highlight some of the most exciting new writing talent in Scotland. This collection features work from the 2023 awardees, including novel extracts, poetry, spoken word, middle grade fiction and young adult fiction.

'Winning a New Writers Award was a life-changing moment for me; it was a huge shock, and I still remember exactly where I was when I got the call. The award supported me, raised my profile, gave me invaluable mentoring, and challenged me to work even harder and be more ambitious. I'll be forever grateful to Scottish Book Trust.'

– Martin MacInnes, New Writers Awardee 2014 and author of *In Ascension*, longlisted for the Booker Prize 2023.

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New Writing from Scottish Book Trust's New Writers Awards

Volume 15

Volume
15

New Writing

from Scottish Book Trust's New Writers Awards

Scottish Book Trust is a national charity that believes books, reading and writing have the power to change lives. A love of reading inspires creativity, improves employment opportunities, mental health and wellbeing and is one of the most effective ways to help children escape the poverty cycle. We work towards a Scotland where everyone has an equal opportunity to thrive through literacy.

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For more information about any of the writers included, please contact Lynsey Rogers at lynsey.rogers@scottishbooktrust.com or call 0131 524 0160.

New Writing

From Scottish Book Trust's
New Writers Awards
Vol. 15



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This sampler has been produced for literary agents and publishers. Please be aware there is a range of content featured in this book, some of which is unsuitable for readers aged 14 or younger as it contains strong language and mature content.

Introduction

We're delighted to share the latest volume of our sampler. In these pages you'll find writing from the talented awardees on our New Writers Awards programme 2023.

Every year, we work with expert panellists to select some of Scotland's most exciting writing talent from many hundreds of entries. Our judges for 2023 included respected authors Janette Ayachi, Benjamin Dean, Matthew Fitt, Laura Kay, Nick Makoha, Hollie McNish, Victoria McNulty, Kiran Millwood Hargrave, Jacob Ross and Tawona Sithole, and the awardees received tailored support from our Writing Communities team, including a cash bursary, a week-long writing retreat at Moniack Mhor, mentoring from a writer or industry professional, as well as dedicated training in press and PR, social media and performance. Awardees also took part in a Showcase event.

They also join our growing body of awardees, all of whom we are pleased to support with advice, guidance and promotional platforms throughout their careers. Many have achieved wonderful things, including the Costa Book Award for First Novel, the Manchester Fiction Prize, shortlisting for the Booker Prize and much more.

Have a peek at the publication list to see some of the writers we are proud to have worked with during their path to publication. We look forward to including many of the names in this sampler on such lists in the future.

Selected books from former New Writers Awardees

- Claire Askew, *All The Hidden Truths* (Hodder & Stoughton) and *Novelista* (John Murray Press)
- Rachelle Atalla, *The Pharmacist* (Hodder & Stoughton)
- Samantha Clark, *The Clearing* (Little, Brown)
- Juliette Forrest, *The Night My Dream Came Alive* (Scholastic)
- PM Freestone, *Shadowscents* (Scholastic)
- Gail Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (HarperCollins)
- Kirstin Innes, *Scabby Queen* (Fourth Estate)
- Nadine Aisha Jassat, *Let Me Tell You This* (404 Ink)
- Mòrag Law, *Cuibhle an Fhortain* (Luath Press)
- William Letford, *Dirt* (Carcenet)
- Kirsty Logan, *Things We Say in the Dark* (Harvill Secker)
- Martin MacInnes, *Infinite Ground* (Atlantic Books)
- Victoria MacKenzie, *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy On My Little Pain* (Bloomsbury)
- Calum L MacLeòid, *Fon Choill* (CLÀR)
- Graeme Macrae Burnet, *Case Study* (Saraband)
- Sandaidh NicDhòmhnaill Jones, *An Seachdamh Tonn* (Acair)
- Mòrag Anna NicNèill, *Artair sa Chaisteal* (Bradán Press)
- Niall O'Gallagher, *Fo Bhlàth* (CLÀR)
- Ryan O'Connor, *The Voids* (Scribe)
- Alistair Paul, *Linne Dhomhain* (Luath)
- Louise Peterkin, *The Night Jar* (Salt)
- Lucy Ribchester, *The Hourglass Factory* (Simon & Schuster)
- Helen Sedgwick, *The Growing Season* (Harvill Secker) and *When the Dead Come Calling* (Point Blank)
- Catherine Simpson, *When I Had A Little Sister* (Fourth Estate)
- Sarah Smith, *Hear No Evil* (Two Roads)
- Em Strang, *Bird-Woman* (Shearsman)
- Malachy Tallack, *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (Canongate) and *Illuminated By Water* (Doubleday)
- Alice Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild* (John Murray Press)

**Fiction and narrative
non-fiction**

Alessandra Thom

‘Alessandra’s writing is both vivid and compelling, combining raconteurial warmth with sharpness, poise and an enviable instinct for rhythm. Whether its subject is family legacy and memory or the precarities of young adulthood, this is writing attuned – apparently effortlessly – to both atmospheric subtleties and the timeless antagonisms of intimacy.’

Daisy Lafarge

Alessandra Thom is a writer born in 1998. She grew up in Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire. She writes literary fiction about modern life in Scotland, womanhood, family, isolation and intimacy. She is represented by Seren Adams from United Agents. She holds an MLitt with Distinction in Creative Writing from the University of St Andrews. Her fiction has appeared in *Gutter Magazine*. She is currently working on a collection of short stories and her second novel.

Thicker Than Water

1

Paula has been counting the ways someone can die on a boat. Drowning - obviously - then there's breaking your spine or hitting your head before you even hit the water.

Dehydration, floating, lost on a lifeboat, eating your own leg for survival.

Starvation, floating, lost on a lifeboat, unable to even muster up the energy to eat your own leg for survival.

Paula is up on deck, clammy palms gripping tightly to the orange railings, watching gulls plunge into the frothing waters. They shift grey, then black, then grey again. The ferry pitches to and fro.

Niamh pretends she is not scared of the blood dripping into the toilet bowl.

Paula pretends she is not scared of heights.

The ferry left Aberdeen around an hour ago and according to the voice on the tannoy the water is a wee bit choppiier than normal but nothing to worry about.

You could get murdered, Paula thinks, but that could happen anywhere. You could crash into one of the thousands of wind turbines which shift in the distance like hungry fish. She wants to run downstairs and show Niamh them but her face was grey when she ran into the loo and also, Niamh told her not to go up on the deck without her because she didn't want to miss anything. But if Niamh doesn't know she's missed anything, has she really missed anything? If Paula's up on deck without Niamh but Niamh isn't around to see, is Paula really up on deck?

Paula thinks that question about the tree falling is stupid. They did it in RMPS along with a bunch of other equally stupid questions that she can't remember now, but she remembers this one because it fucked her off so much. Of course it makes a fucking sound, it's a fucking massive tree. And just because there are no people around to hear it doesn't mean there isn't anything else that can hear. She bets the birds and the ants and the squirrels living in the tree made a fucking sound when it fell. She bets they heard it fall too. If your fucking house fell down, Mr Patterson, I bet you'd hear it fall. And what was it that made the tree fall? Whatever that was would have made a sound too. Even lightning makes a sound, it just takes a while. But Mr Patterson told her she couldn't know for certain, that it was a great philosophical question and that there was no definitive answer, which was what made it so interesting. Paula had said that it wasn't interesting, but that it was exactly the sort of thing a man would find interesting. She had got a warning for this, but not sent out of class, which she was pretty pleased about.

Niamh and Paula are going to Shetland for a holiday. Paula has never been to Shetland before but she has been on the Wikipedia page and liked all the stuff about the Vikings. It was Niamh's idea to go but Paula was quite pleased about it because she is really scared of flying. There are even more ways you can die on a plane than a boat. If the door opens when you're in flight you'd all get sucked into the air and die. Or if the oxygen stops working you'd all drown in mid-air, drown out of water. These are both things that nobody knows how they feel, unless you got resuscitated right at the last minute. Paula wonders if it feels different, drowning out of water and drowning in it.

In the harsh fluorescent glare of the ladies' toilets, Niamh wonders if it is possible to drown above water. If it is, she thinks it must feel like this. Her head and throat have constricted, and she can feel an immense pressure which has pushed her insides to either side of her body, carved apart with an invisible speculum.

There is so much blood. She has gone months without a single drop. She has been having violent, nativity-blue nightmares.

Niamh wonders if the water has pulled the blood out of her, if there's something about the unsolid depths - miles and miles of it pulled apart by the moon - that has tugged at her insides and dissolved them. She rests her hot, sticky forehead against the cool white sink. Someone tries the handle for the bathroom. I'll be just a wee minute, Niamh says. Fat tears roll off her cheeks onto the bathroom tile.

The gulls are crying, wheeling above Paula's head. They sound like home. Paula thinks about whether or not you can be at home in more than one place. Can she be home anywhere she can hear the gulls, or is that fucking stupid? Paula likes the word *fuck*. She likes how much it freaks people out to hear her say it. She is sixteen next weekend but she knows she looks much younger.

Paula looks around at the people up on deck. The yellow seats are dotted with couples and families, bracing themselves against the wind. She should probably go downstairs to find Niamh. But she really doesn't want to go back into the cloying air of the cabin. The gulls wheel overhead and the longer she spends near them the less afraid she is of falling off into the sea, the more she believes that if she did, she would be picked up by the wind, stretch out her arms and dip in and out of the clouds like she was swimming.

The birds have changed. There's new birds now too, cruel-looking gulls with lemon-yellow heads. A man with the ghost of her father in the crook of his smile names them, calls them *gannets, wee girl*.

Paula ignores him (stranger *fucking* danger mate) and leans further out over the railings.

Niamh leans further into the sink. The room is getting bigger, slowly, so that Niamh is so small she might get lost in the grouting on the floor, someone might step on her, put her out of her misery. Then Niamh is huge, she is massive, she is worried her head might knock against the ceiling, that she might get pressed into the walls and burst like a watermelon with a rubber band around it. Niamh feels for her miraculous medal, cold against her chest, and grips it.

The person outside the bathroom door knocks quietly, politely, softly. I'll only be a minute, says Niamh.

Paula thinks she could stay up on deck another minute or so. If Niamh was worried she would have called her. Paula got a phone from their mum for her birthday last year. Mum is going to Spain. Paula prefers Niamh to her anyway. She likes staying with Niamh, it's much better. She can stay up until 2am if she wants and eat chicken nuggets every night. She thinks Niamh would be a good mum. She's more like Paula's mum than her big sister. Last year Rebecca's big sister pierced Rebecca's ears in the school toilets with ice, a sewing needle and a lemon. Paula wishes Niamh was cool enough to pierce her ears in the toilets with ice, a sewing needle and a lemon. Paula wishes she didn't know that piercing your ears in the toilets with ice, a sewing needle and a lemon risks allergic reactions, blood-borne diseases, permanent mutilation and death.

The woman knocks on the door of the ladies' toilets

again. Niamh tells her she'll be just a minute and then her body starts spinning out above her head and she says, actually, could you please find my wee sister? Before she falls to the floor, Niamh unlocks the door.

2

Paula likes hospitals. She likes the smell, she likes the nurses' clean scrubs, she likes knowing that anything that goes wrong in the world can be fixed right here. All the knowledge anyone could ever need is in a hospital.

Niamh's skin is pale, the colour of the outside of Kirkwall hospital. Paula prods Niamh with the rubber end of her pencil. Niamh shifts slightly. Paula prods her again. Paula wonders if she should call their mum, but she thinks probably she shouldn't because nobody will tell Paula what is wrong with Niamh and she shouldn't call and disturb her if she doesn't have any answers.

Really, the person Paula wants to call is Niamh.

The nurse in the pink scrubs with the swollen ankles and the lilting accent told Paula that they were waiting for some test results but not to worry.

There was a huge fuss on the boat. A voice came over the tannoy telling Paula she was to come down to the main deck immediately. Niamh was slumped against a wall all bloody, crying softly. A man with green hair who told Paula he was a first aider was giving her small sips of water and a cushion for her back. They were going to get off in Orkney now, to go to the hospital. Niamh smiled weakly at Paula. The floor didn't look very clean.

When they docked in Kirkwall there was an ambulance waiting for them. It was late and the sky was dark and the paramedics let Paula sit up front with them

while Niamh went in the back. Paula dozed on and off in a chair in A&E until a nurse came and got her and took her to see Niamh. A different nurse gave her toast with butter for breakfast and smiled when Paula corrected her, that Niamh wasn't her mum, Niamh was her sister.

People make that mistake a lot. Paula doesn't really mind but she knows Niamh does so she always corrects them. There was that time that Niamh didn't have the right change for the bus and she didn't want to give the driver a full fiver and so he got really angry and annoyed even though he'd just let someone off for not having the right change right in front of them. All the people on the bus stared at them. At the bus stop, after the bus had moved on, Niamh had started to cry and Paula had asked her why and Niamh had said because they thought I was your mum and then she had started to cry harder but Paula hadn't really understood why this meant they weren't allowed on the bus and she wanted to ask why again but Niamh had already brushed off the tears and told her to start walking.

Paula jabs Niamh with the pencil again. She uses the rubber end to lift up the wires attached to Niamh. A clear liquid is flowing through them.

Paula looks around. The room has a big window on one side and has three other sad-looking women in it. All of them avoid her gaze. One is doing sudoku from a big book of sudoku. Paula wonders if she would let her do one of the sudoku puzzles. She's so bored. She's run out of data, her phone won't connect to the hospital Wi-Fi and she doesn't know who to text.

She pulls her school calculator out of her bag and pretends to do calculations on it, so that the woman doing the sudoku knows she's clever too.

Niamh grips Paula's arm as her eyes open. She blinks quickly at her and looks around. Paula says hello what happened to you the doctors won't tell me anything they're being so fucking weird are you alright it was so crazy there was blood everywhere.

Then Paula stops talking because she remembers that in films and TV shows she's seen the people in the hospital normally get woken up by a soft hello and then people stroke their arms or something.

Paula strokes Niamh's arm. Niamh croaks out a hello and then a what?

Paula says, nothing, don't worry. Paula goes to get the nurse who is outside typing something on the big wheely computer. The nurse runs in to check on Niamh and Paula is left standing in the corridor watching her sister be fussed over through the glass window like she's watching it all on telly. Niamh takes sips of the water that the nurse gives her, and the nurse holds her hand and speaks to her in a low voice that Paula can't hear. Niamh begins to cry.

There is a wheely shelf full of glass bottles with all kinds of clear liquids in them next to the wheely computer. They like things on wheels in hospitals, Paula is discovering. Even the beds are on wheels.

Paula thinks of all the ways you could die in a hospital. There are so many that she has to stop because her head is hurting. Paula wonders if she's getting a migraine or if it's meningitis. She checks her skin for rashes and finds a patch of eczema. She presses one of the glass bottles up against it and it vanishes under the pressure. Thank fuck. Relieved, she goes in to tell Niamh.

I thought I had meningitis but turns out I don't.

Class, Niamh says.

The nurse smiles at Paula.

Are we still going to go to Shetland? Paula asks Niamh, instead of asking her if she's going to die.

I don't think so. I can't really camp now, can I?

That's true.

But let's go to Glasgow or something next week for your birthday, we can get a refund from the campsite I'm sure.

Paula nods, relieved. If they're going to Glasgow next week then Niamh will be alive next week. Jenna from her biology class went to Glasgow at Easter to visit her brother who's at Strathclyde and he got her a fake ID and they went to the campus pub and Jenna got smashed on Malibu and threw up everywhere.

Would you get me a fake ID if we went to Glasgow?

Yeah, sure. Niamh is fiddling with one of the wires that's plugged into her hand. Paula doesn't think she really listened to what she asked her, but she files her reply away anyway, in case she needs it in the future.

They play eye spy for a bit and then the nurse comes through and unhooks Niamh from all the machines and says that they're good to go. She gives Niamh a leaflet and a bag full of really big period pads which Niamh stuffs into her backpack and they get the Number 4 bus from outside the hospital to the harbour.

Niamh gets them chips from the chipper and they sit on a bench and eat meditatively, staring out at the boats in the bay, rocking gently back and forth on the silver water. Niamh lights a cigarette and tells Paula not to tell Mum.

3

The ferry back seems shorter. The birds don't change this time. It's seagull as far as the eye can see. Paula and Niamh sit on the top deck together and watch Aberdeen grow up in the distance.

Thicker Than Water

Thicker Than Water is a short story which forms part of Alessandra Thom's collection, *Mould & Mildew*. The collection charts miracles at Aberdeenshire bus stops, funerals on forgotten islands, almost-lovers in snowy Glasgow, first dates, final goodbyes and the mouldy tendrils of connection in the 21st century.

Dervla Johanna

‘In *The Nuisance of Fortune Telling*, Dervla deftly coaxes readers through the story with tantalising reveals and the constant upping of tension. It’s a love story – in every possible sense – and Dervla’s talent (and joy) for writing magical tales shimmering with humour and heart shines through in every word.’

Anna Zoe Quirke

Dervla has been writing for as long as she can remember, scribbling stories at the back of her school jotters about spies or spaceships or adventurers. She graduated from English and Creative Writing at the University of Dundee with First Class Honours, from her Masters in Literary Fiction at Queen’s University with Distinction and from lockdown with a beginner-level knowledge of the Irish language and a better understanding of her OCD.

As a student her short stories featured in student magazines and publications and in 2018 her short-story ‘Baby Steps’ was a runner-up in the Mother’s Milk Books short story prize. In 2020 her story ‘Pining for Christmas’ was performed on BBC Radio Suffolk as part of the Ink Festival.

Her heart lies in long-form fiction, particularly the fantasy genre, where she writes about regular (brilliant) people in exciting worlds, found families and people fighting for what they are passionate about.

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Extract from *The Nuisance of Fortune Telling*

Chapter One

She's coming.

A chill prickled at Oisín's skin as the voice inside his head reminded him that their client was due any minute.

He took a deep breath, trying to settle the uneasiness in his stomach. One client and then, if the Internal Nuisance didn't totally exhaust him, he could sit on the deck and spend the rest of the evening playing his fiddle and reading in the rain.

It wasn't hard to get the lounge set up and looking nice, just time-consuming. They couldn't afford to replace anything so every night it was all neatly packed away, the fabrics folded up, and the expensive candles replaced with the ones that stank if you burned them for too long.

'I think that's us,' Cáit said after she had put the crystal ball on the small round table. It was Oisín's least favourite decoration, but Cáit insisted it was put out for *atmosphere*.

'Great,' Oisín said dryly, taking his place at the table. He had already set out his quill and parchment.

Cáit stood in position, certainly looking the part. Her Seer's clothes were a far cry from her usual fighting leathers but she wore both with such confidence that they always looked natural. She was sporting a high-collared black dress with a red veil, and an enormous amount of paint around her eyes. She had even put

rouge on her lips, which stood out against her warm, brown skin. It was unusual for Cáit to wear anything on her lips as she always ended up chewing it off, but today was a slow day and sometimes that led to experimenting with the Seer's outfit.

There were footsteps outside. The distinct echo of boots walking up their creaky stairs and across the decking. Their client was here, but the steps lingered just before the door, as if they were debating whether or not to come in.

Looking at the sign, the voice inside his head revealed. He nodded at Cáit to let her know this client wasn't one of the occasional clients that developed cold feet at the door.

'Hello?' The door produced a long squeak as it opened and a tall woman stepped inside. Her blonde hair was pinned up but random strands had been plucked around the sides, as if she had been tearing at it.

Eithne Cody. Wounded and desperately in love. His Internal Nuisance sometimes gave him an address or a profession, but today it seemed to be going for a poetic approach.

Oisín wrote the information on the paper in front of him. There was a clump of fabric and a few boxes painted to look vaguely mystical that helped hide what he was writing, but it didn't really make that much of a difference. The client was too mesmerised by everything else in the room to notice what he was doing.

'Welcome,' Cáit spread her arms. Despite being small, she really knew how to use all the space in the room.

'I like your sign,' the woman, Eithne, said nervously as Cáit guided her to her seat.

The sign was one of Oisín's favourite parts of their lounge. Beneath the chipped paint that advertised their business as 'The Leitirbeg Seers' was a carved image of a

woman with her fingers pressed to her forehead.

‘Thank you, it was gifted to us by a friend,’ Cáit said, giving Oisín a subtle nudge with her elbow as she took her place next to him.

‘The woman in the carving, is she a Seer here?’

‘Sometimes. We have so many.’ Cáit always told that lie convincingly. Their business relied on people believing ‘The Leitirbeg Seers’ were more than Cáit and her partner, Una, dressing up in increasingly elaborate costumes.

‘She’s really pretty,’ Eithne said, and Oisín suppressed a smile.

It wasn’t the first time someone had complimented the sign. It was there to draw people in and nothing sold a Seer’s lounge more than a mystical-looking woman in a pretty dress.

Only, the carving wasn’t of some random woman. It was Oisín. If you looked closely the resemblance was clear. The short hair, the sharp jawline, the thin eyebrows, the wide eyes. It was him, carved lovingly in wood for the world to see (only with the addition of generous breasts).

The problem was, no one ever paid enough attention, to the sign or to him, to notice.

Cáit straightened herself and glanced down at the paper subtly enough for Eithne not to see. ‘Eithne Cody, you’ve been wounded and are desperately in love.’

The woman let out a gasp and Cáit, who was so good in this role she sometimes had Oisín convinced, responded with a gentle smile.

‘Would you like to tell me more?’

‘Um...’ Eithne cleared her throat and played with the ends of her sleeve. ‘I am in love with a man and recently we shared a moment together...’

They kissed in the bushes until he found a thorn in his backside and then they went back to feeding the ducks.

He didn't want to embarrass the girl so wrote down 'kissed and fed ducks'. He could tell Cáit about the bum thorn later.

'... but I fear he's in love with someone else.'

His childhood best friend. They were apart for so long but now they're reunited.

Cáit pretended to be deep in thought while she watched him scribble this all down. She had worked out the perfect position to read his notes without the client noticing.

'An old friend,' Cáit mused.

The woman's eyes widened at Cáit's words. 'Does he love me?'

The nuisance was silent; it was a question his Gift would only be able to answer if her partner was nearby. But before he had the chance to write anything down or Cáit had the chance to say anything, Eithne choked out a sob.

Moments like this made him appreciate being on the sidelines. He wouldn't know what to do with a crying client, but when Cáit spoke, she managed to turn it to something positive.

'Love is complicated, but you deserve a partner who makes you happy.' Cáit squeezed the client's arm. Oisín didn't think Cáit was telling Eithne anything she didn't already know. The fate of this relationship was probably obvious to Eithne as soon as she arranged a meeting with a Seer.

'Will I ever be happy?'

The woman looked at Cáit expectantly, but the Nuisance remained quiet. The question was too vague, yet too complex, and the Gift only dealt in truth.

‘Vague.’ Oisín scribbled on the page, just in case Cáit hadn’t realised. Fortunately they had been doing this for a while and Cáit barely glanced at the paper before replying.

‘If you want to be.’

Eithne let out another sob.

‘But I want to be happy with him!’ Her hands shook as she wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

Oisín’s stomach rolled over. He had the feeling he wouldn’t be needed for the rest of this meeting. It didn’t matter that he was the only person in the lounge with ‘the Sight’ as his father called it, or ‘the Gift’ as Cáit called it. He hated both, affectionately naming it ‘the Internal Nuisance’ or ‘the reason I am banned from twelve different taverns’.

He was just the doorman, the scribe, there to take appointments, greet the clients and take notes. The Gift was mostly a woman’s thing, no men seemed to advertise themselves as Seers, and Oisín had never met one. No one wanted their fortune read by a male Seer.

Which meant for the next forty minutes, Oisín did very little while he listened to the girl vent to Cáit.

‘Thanks for everything.’ Eithne finally broke away from Cáit’s comforting hand and reached into her cloak. ‘I’m sorry I can’t give you more,’ she said, bringing out two Airgid.

Oisín expected this from clients, they weren’t exactly in the richest part of the province, but he couldn’t help feeling dismayed. An hour of the Nuisance telling him about someone’s life and the reward would barely cover a week’s food. Not to mention they didn’t even keep half the profits; most of it went to Fiona. But they had to keep their prices low, otherwise the few clients they had would flee to bigger lounges.

It wasn't their main business anyway. The lounge was owned by his father, a profitable trader of furs and farm equipment, and Fiona, a profitable trader of thievery and general banditry. The Seer part of the business facilitated the rest of Fiona's trade.

'What you've given is more than enough.' Cáit smiled as she guided Eithne to the door. 'It's getting dark, do you have a safe way home?'

'I have a carriage waiting,' Eithne said, shaking her head a little.

No carriage.

Oisín coughed and gave Cáit a nod.

'Come with me, I know someone who can escort you home,' Cáit held on to Eithne's arm as the two of them walked to find a suitable escort next door. The house was occupied by other members of Fiona's gang who were always willing to help someone in need, even if it meant a long walk in the rain.

'Twenty minutes of overtime is ridiculous!' Oisín sighed as soon as Cáit returned. The Nuisance was tired, he could feel the beginnings of a headache burning at his temple and he knew another client would put him very close to burnout. He had thrown himself onto one of the couches - that was one benefit to the business: an abundance of soft, cushioned furniture.

'She was hurting, I could hardly throw her out.' Cáit frowned.

'I would have.'

'Didn't you cry over Aodhán for a week?'

'You say that as if I wouldn't kick myself out.'

Oisín watched Cáit perch herself on the arm of the sofa instead of taking the chair beside him. She didn't really like sitting for long, even her fake Seer routine

usually involved moving constantly from the table to the pillows on the floor.

‘Why is it that we see more women who are left heartbroken by affairs than men?’ Cáit asked, possibly to change the subject. He was thankful; Aodhán was a subject he always wanted to avoid.

‘We haven’t had a male client in weeks.’

It had been a middle-aged man seeking fortune. He wanted to know if his trip across the sea would be fruitful (yes) and whether or not he would get rich (no).

‘And why is that?’

‘I feel like you’re about to tell me.’

She gave him a nudge. ‘Your Gift is off.’

‘Are you trying to use my sacred Seer ability to ask why men are more likely to cheat than women?’

‘Sacred? It didn’t look that way when you were using it to win at cards on Saturday.’

He pressed a finger to her lips and raised his other hand to his head like the engraving of the woman in the sign. ‘I see that. . . women have more to risk.’

She snorted. ‘Oh shut up,’ she said, moving off the sofa to lean against the wall that separated the lounge from their home.

‘Does *The Great Caitlinina* not know how to sit down for five minutes?’ he said in his Seer voice. It was really a poor impression of his mother’s Southern accent. He could never get her same cadence.

‘The Great Caitlinina does not know. She sees!’ Cáit’s Seer voice, which she had only used once in front of clients on a dare, was her own but higher-pitched. She performed a very convincing impression of an old woman, despite the fact she had just turned twenty and had skin as smooth as a baby.

Oisín laughed. As tiring as the past hour had been,

at least it was over. Their doors were still open until evening, but it wasn't likely that anyone would actually come in. It happened sometimes, someone feeling a little lost took a stroll through town, discovered the lounge and saw it as a sign to get their fortune told. But not this far into the afternoon. Most people were either just finishing work or going home for dinner.

Cáit moved from place to place, chatting until the sun began to set. Oisín was beginning to gather away the fancy Seer candles when there was a knock at the door.

Hurt. The word sent a shiver down Oisín's spine. There was a tingling in his chest.

Most of the time when clients came to the lounge they were wounded in some emotional way: bad breakups, love affairs, broken hearts. But this was different. He felt this hurt low in his gut, like his skin was about to tear open.

He forced himself to sit back down at the table, holding his head. Everything felt light. 'Cáit..'. His throat was hoarse. The words came out barely louder than a whisper.

She turned to him, her expression shifting from her usual fake Seer's gaze to one of concern. 'Oisín, are—' The door burst open and cut her off from whatever she'd been about to say.

Cáit's eyes snapped forward. Standing on their doorstep was a woman with soaking wet hair and a muddy cloak. She barely looked at Cáit as she took the seat opposite Oisín.

'I'm here to see the Seer.' The woman's eyes fixed on him and his neck burned.

'That would be me,' said Cáit as she resumed her place at the table.

Erin Byrne. The Nuisance explained, and Oisín wrote it down on the paper, alongside the fact that she was apparently hurt.

‘Erin Byrne.’ If Cáit was worried she didn’t show it.
‘What are you here for?’

Love. Death. Love. Death. When the Internal and Perpetual Nuisance was vague or torn between answers it liked to repeat itself until Oisín had a migraine and his vision was full of auras.

‘Nuisance.’ Oisín wrote and Cáit exhaled sharply. They would have to wait for Erin to tell them. Which was unfortunate; Oisín wanted her out as soon as possible.

‘I was wondering about a friend of mine, Aine?’

Aine McFadden. Dead.

Oisín gulped. So many people came in looking for long-lost relatives yet the word ‘dead’ still gave him an ache in his chest.

‘What about her?’ Cáit asked.

‘She died recently.’

Oisín was relieved. Poor Aine, but at least the client knew.

‘I’m sorry,’ Cáit said, reaching out to touch the woman’s arm.

The tingling in Oisín’s chest had faded but not enough for him to trust Erin. He repressed a wince as Cáit laid her hand on Erin’s arm. The woman only smiled softly. Whatever the Nuisance was trying to tell him – whatever hurt this woman was in or going to be in – Oisín genuinely believed she had come for their help. Maybe they could stop the hurt or at least ease it.

‘It’s okay, she was sick for a while, I was looking after her.’ She paused. ‘I’ve been to see the other Seers about it.’

The Deargs.

Their rivals in every sense of the word. They had been fighting over territory for so long that the most notable members of the Deargs were household names in this part of the province. Every man, woman and child

regardless of their involvement with either gang knew about Turlough the Bear and Etain the Lion, warrior siblings who were described as being part giant. They had all heard stories of the group of axe throwers who could demolish and ransack a village in minutes. And they all knew about The Hammer, a young warrior who wielded a legendary hammer more forceful than any other weapon known to man. Cáit had fought him once and managed to get away with only a broken arm. Oisín hadn't been there, but he would never forget the dread he'd felt on seeing Cáit return with the others on a stretcher.

'The Deargs won't like us taking their business,' Cáit said. Her hand moved from the client's to be closer to the dagger she kept hidden in her skirts.

It was a bad idea. The pain in his skin intensified. He had to look down to make sure there was no blood on his shirt. He ran a finger along the scar on his palm from the last time the Deargs had caught wind of them stealing customers and set fire to a school in Fiona's territory as revenge.

'I've already paid them quite handsomely,' Erin urged. *She doesn't want to pay you.*

Oisín wrote this down, alongside the words 'get her to leave'. Her presence was sure to be trouble and the longer she stayed, the more reasons the Deargs would have to retaliate.

'You don't want to pay us?'

'Not with money.' She grinned and flicked her eyes to Oisín. He focused on the paper in front of him. No one ever looked at him during these encounters. The Nuisance was silent. He had no idea what he was supposed to make of it.

'With good fortune?' Cáit raised an eyebrow.

'Information. The night Aine died I saw something.'

The McLaughlin murders.

Oisín froze, his hand shook as he struggled to write the words down.

The McLaughlins were an innocent family who had lived in a neutral part of the province. Mrs McLaughlin was a seamstress, Mr McLaughlin was a shoemaker, and they'd lived in the middle of Cúlcluain town with their five children. They were bystanders until the Deargs had decided they wanted to take the city and burned their house to the ground while they slept, to set an example to anyone who opposed the takeover. The Inner Circle didn't investigate as they claimed it was an accident, but everyone in the province knew it was the Deargs.

'Please leave,' Cáit snapped as soon as he had finished writing. She stood, glaring down at Erin, who stayed sitting with her arms folded.

'You want to know who did it, don't you?'

This was bad. Very bad.

Oisín felt the blood rush from his head, like he was suddenly falling from a great height. The information could be useful to Fiona but the risk was too much. If the Deargs could kill the innocent McLaughlins it wouldn't be hard for them to get rid of him and Cáit too.

Cáit hesitated.

'You can tell us who murdered that family?' she asked. Oisín couldn't believe she was buying into this. The Inner Circle was corrupt, likely influenced by the Deargs not to investigate the murders. What could their run-down Seers lounge do to help?

'I can tell you what I know.'

Summary of *The Nuisance of Fortune Telling*

The Nuisance of Fortune Telling is a queer adult fantasy novel set in a fantastical version of Ireland. It's about love (platonic and romantic) and being cared for because of who you are and not who you're supposed to be.

Nineteen-year-old Oisín could be using his gift of precognition to do good. Instead, he uses it to win at cards and to help his criminal band of friends earn money by reading fortunes.

For Oisín, his gift is a Nuisance that ruins surprises and plagues him with endless details about other people's love lives and deepest secrets. But then a woman comes to the Seer's lounge and Oisín sees the truth about a dangerous murder.

With a target on his back, Oisín is kidnapped by the rival gang he suspects to be the murderers and held for ransom. To make matters worse, Oisín's gift tells him that one of his kidnappers, Darragh, is destined to fall for him. In order to escape and return home safely, he must embrace his gift, solve the murder and worst of all - befriend his enemies.

Craig Aitchison

‘Right from the start *The Laddie in the Mirk* draws you in with an authentic Scots narrator whose evocative voice perfectly reflects the uncanny, unsettling atmosphere of the narrative – one moment making you shiver, the next making you smile. Superb writing. Craig’s prose adds to the rich seam of contemporary writing with a folk horror edge – it is reminiscent of Max Porter or Andrew Michael Hurley – but does so with an authentic, evocative Scots voice which marks him out as a truly original and exciting talent.’

Liam Bell

Craig has a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Stirling. His fiction has appeared in *Lallans*, *Fictive Dream*, *Northwords Now*, *Southlight*, *Wyldblood* and *Pushing Out the Boat*. He has won the Sangschaw award for short fiction in Scots, the Wigtown Prize for Poetry in Scots in 2023, and the Badenoch Poetry Competition for a poem about emigration and immigration. He has had poetry published in *Poetry Scotland* and *Nutmeg* magazine. He was commissioned by the Scottish Poetry Library to write a poem celebrating 250 years of Sir Walter Scott. He was recently chosen as a Scottish Mountaineering Press Creative. In 2022 his work featured in *New Writing Scotland* and the Fly on the Wall Press anthology, *Demos Rising*.

Extract from *The Laddie in the Mirk*

Waukent

A souch comes ower the village. A pirr ower brae an law. Throu the auld streets an the ex-cooncil hooses an the foondations o hooses still gettin biggit. It lifts litter, shifts curtains, tirls leaves. Juist a brief puff but Jean feels it pass ower, cairryin eneuch chill tae chitter her oot ae her ease, mind her ae her knee-pine, her drouth.

She sips watter, shifts oan the stiff mattress. Bloody thing. It wis meant tae be better for her back. So her laddie says. Like sleepin on a wudden bench. An it wis oan a flatpack bed in a wee side room, so she didnae have tae thole the stairs. Above her were rooms wi nae furnitur, juist stoor.

A quiet, dernt niggie has come in wi the breeze. It skimmers around her.

She sits up. Her feet seek oot her baffies, slide in. She pulls on her goonie, waukent noo, fully waukent, so she micht as well get up, hae a look oot the windae.

Juist a whiss o mist. Streetlight glow.

She gresps the curtain in her fist, looking oot tae the gairden. She should get back tae bed, the hard, sair bed.

If Dod wis here noo he'd think she wis puggelt. He'd ratch his erse and say, 'Christ wummin, get yersel back tae bed.'

He isnae here. Husnae been for mair as a year. That's aw this is, she tells hersel. Lanesomeness. Her mind reakin oot for somethin tae fill the empiness.

She turns frae the windae, but as she does, in the corner ae her ee, at the side ae the hoose, she sees a shade in the mirk.

No a shade. No a buss or tree or ony kind o plant. It seemed tae tak on a mair solit form as she watched. A bouk. Limbs - shanks an airms. A heid.

The heid turns taewart her an tho she cannae mak oot features in the mirk, she kens.

It's the laddie.

There's nithin wrang wi her een. There's eneuch licht frae the street tae kep the shape o him, his daurk claes hingin aff his shilpit frame, heid covert bi the hood o his jersey. She's seen him aften eneuch, at the bottom o the gairden first, bi the edge o the wud, then again creepin aboot near the shed, an when she came tae the back door, joukin ahint the rowan tree afore slippin away.

Noo, in the howe dum deid, he's back. He moves oot intae the middle o the green, oot o the shaddae o the tree. An tho his face is hidden, Jean kens he's facin her. He hauds oot a haund as if he wants her tae reak throo the windae and tak his haund in hers.

She gawps oot.

Mibbe she should call the polis. He micht be wi ither laddies, gettin up tae mischief, runnin through gairdens, plunderin, if bairns still did things like that. If she kens yin thing aboot laddies, it's that they egg each other oan, get intae bother, like thae teenagers that hing aboot the bus stop at nicht, smokin an drinkin frae thae brightly coloured tins they leave lyin aroond. Wee basturts. A tellin frae the polis micht be juist what he needs.

But he isnae chuckin stanes or plunderin aipples. There's nae gang. He's alane.

Jean jalouses whit the feelin is that waukent her. It's a mither's bode, the wittins that somethin bad is aboot tae happen.

She hastae catch the laddie, tae pertect him frae danger. A grue at whit micht happen if she fails him; nae

sayin whit could happen - the rate the cars gaun throu the village, the bad men that micht be oot there, men that would kill a wee laddie, or worse.

She decides.

She'll gaun oot, airt him oot, get him tae come away back tae the hoose whaur she could gie him a gless o milk, mak him a piece or butter him a scone. She'll speak tae him, find out whit he's up tae out there in the nicht.

'Bide there,' Jean mooths. 'Bide a wee.' She gauns oot intae the lobby, past the phone an her coat oan its peg. She fummles open the door, puing her goonie ticht with crossed airms, the towe amissin. She chitters.

The laddie stands quate an still as a stookie. Hingin oan for her.

She steps ontae the gairden path, watchin her feet so she disnae stotter. When she lifts her heid, he turns an scarpers, lowps ower the smaw dkye an legs it doon the pavement taewart the main road.

The wee bugger. It's like he's wantin a chase. She's ower auld for that cairry-oan.

Mind, she's up noo. The cauld's got intae her; so's a need tae find him. She skuifels tae the gate an oot, doon the narrae pave tae the road, scancin intae neebours' gairdens as she gauns. He cannae be faur away.

She dabs at her neb wi a hanky. It seems tae run like a spoot lately. Scunner. Mibbe the chainge o wather, some wairm air, micht shift it.

The main road noo. A muckle lorry roars past. She wunners if she can flag it doon tae ask for help but, afore she can, it rattles by, the gowst near knockin her ower.

Win away. Leave the laddie. Hell mend him.

Let his mither find him. She'll be frantic. Or mibbe no. Mibbe his mither disnae ken. Or disnae care.

Newcomers likely. Ootrels. Furrin even.

No that it maitters. A bairn's a bairn.

She cannae gaun hame. No yet. He's dependin oan her.

She wants tae caw oot but disnae ken the laddie's name.

Caw canny. Cannae faw. Cannae end up back at the doctor's. Mair ills, mair pills. That many she rattles when she walks.

Cannae leave the laddie oot here on his ain. No on his ain. Wi the things o the dark. Beasties, flichtermoooses an hurcheons.

Gaists. Folk like her laddie, Thomas, say there are nae gaists. They dinnae ken. She kens the deid never leave. The past swirls aroon us the hale time. The deid tak a wee bit o us wi them when they leave, hollae oot a wee gap where a bit o them bides.

Where dis the laddie bide? Where dis he hide?

Caw oot.

Caw like a craw.

Voice weak, puggelt, loast in the mirk. No a corbie, a moose.

There's a moose loose about this hoose. Her ain hoose is jist a daurk shape ahint her now. Anither shade.

Oan. Oan an oan. That's aw ye can dae. Aw there is. Keep gaun.

Ower the road there's an auld garage. Jock's for years, o course. Aye oot, washin an polishin his motor til it wis spotless. Never lookt like he even ran a comb ower his hair mind. Jock was gone noo. Like awbody else. Awthin else.

A breeze flaffs at a tarpaulin.

Then a soond that disnae belang. Jean gypes at the garage, een bleariet bi forfochtenness an the glower o streetlights.

There. There bi the waw. A seck shifts.

A seck. Or a laddie?

She fouters in her pocket for a sweetie; juist the auld hanky.

She crosses her airms, stands as still as she can, willin hersel. Look. See.

An there he is, huddlet ower, airms wapplet roond his knees, keepin wairm, pertectin hissels.

She steps intae the road.

The laddie steys still. She's won the wee gem. He raises baith haunds. You've got me. Surrender. Gie up.

The soond again.

A kittle in her wame. A flochter.

A wammle maks her stop, richt oan the white line in the mid o the road.

She swithers like she's stepped intae a river that's ower deep, ower fast.

The side o the garage seems tae licht up. The muin shuirly.

The laddie hauds oot a haund.

She keeps oan; the licht brichtens.

Yin mair step.

A bellum an binner. Licht daizles an blints, engine growls.

A car.

It lours. Brakes skirl. The car jouks.

A pirr hits Jean. She shaks, swees.

The car jees ower the road, dunts the kerb, then slaws an skites an scuds intae the low dyke, bumper crumplin, wheel trim fallin ontae the grund and spinnin doon the gutter.

The car door opens an a man emerges frae ahint an airbag, stotters, strauchtens, dichts his face, turnts taewart Jean an shoogles again. He stotters tae the waw, where he buckles ower an spews a thin dreeble o puke.

Jean bristles, sterts tae cowp, but feels a haund oan her airm.

‘Jean.’

She cannae place the vyce.

‘Are you all right Jean?’

She ettles tae weegle free an look at whae’s claucht her airm. Young, a bit peelie-wallie, unshaven. Friendly, but she needit awa.

‘Let go,’ she says, fidgin away.

The man steps in front o her, blockin her wey. ‘It’s me. Derek. From next door.’

She staps. ‘Oh aye. So ye are son.’

‘What are you doing? Out here at this time?’ he says.

She could ask him the same. He shouldnae be here, gettin in the wey. She disnae hae time tae explain. ‘The laddie.’ She flaffs a haund taewart the garage.

‘He’ll be all right. Alison’s with him. You know Alison.’ Derek pits a haund oan her back.

Alison. The big, tall wummin frae ower the road that drives tae work in a muckle car built tae cairry sodgers, no messages. Stuck up, Jean thinks, but she’s wi the laddie, that’s somethin.

‘Oh.’ Jean tries tae look for the laddie but Derek’s steerin her back ower the road, taewart hame. Jean feels bauchelt but disnae want tae gae.

No yet, no efter she’s nearly fund the laddie.

She should be wi him, comfortin him, scauldin him cannily. Ach well, maybe that Alison will bring him for a wee blether afore she gauns aff in her muckle car.

‘Come on,’ Derek says. His vyce is suithin, his haund oan her back strang but gentle. ‘It’ll be all right.’

When they’re back oan the pave Derek turns an cries ower the road, ‘I’ll get Jean home.’ Jean sees Alison

noddin then turnin back tae someone sat oan the waw. Jean staps, wantin tae get a sicht o the laddie, see he's awright. But it isnae him; it's the man frae the car, hurklet ower, speakin intae a phone.

'He's away.'

'Let's get you in.' Derek impatient noo.

'We huv tae find him,' she says.

Derek isnae listenin. He nudges her oan.

She keeks back tae the garage. He's away. It's ower late.

Stervation. Knackert.

She cannae find the wairds tae explain that they should be huntin for the laddie, the danger. She lets Derek steer her back up the road taewart her hoose, his airm linked in hers.

'I'll make you a cup of tea. Then I'll give your son a phone. Thomas, isn't it?'

She nods. She's fait.

The laddie's legged it, intae the nicht. She cannae chase him, cannae keep lookin for him in her baffies and goonie. He's been fleggit awa by the car clatterin agin the waw an aw the neebours fussin.

But the laddie disnae want them. It's her he wants.

Conditional

If

Then

If I leave now, I'll beat the traffic. I'll be out of the city and driving south on roads that will be quiet or will only have traffic coming north, early commuters making their way to Edinburgh.

If I beat the Sat-Nav, she'll be okay. It says it'll take an hour and seventeen minutes. I can do it in less.

If your auntie had baws

If I had it all again

If I'd been there, I could've helped, I could've been the one to comfort her, or prevent her from going outside, coax her back to bed with reassuring words. *I'm here Mum. Everything's all right.*

If Derek hadn't been there

If I can just get there

If this light turns green, she'll be fine.

If she dies, the house will be mine. All its memories and damp walls, the room where I slept, wee holes in the wall where I pinned posters, in the ceiling where I hung model planes, the shed, the garden where I played

If it wisnae for yer wellies where wud ye be?

If this keeps happening, she'll need to go into a home, somewhere they know how to treat someone like her, someone suffering from

If it's

If it is dementia.

If she's losing her mind

If I can keep my head

If I'd been a better son.

Vieve

*There's whispers an hishies,
rash o burn, babble an blether,
reeshle o leafs, wheesk
an whinner fae the wud,
nicht-craiturs head hame,
tae dern bouries, ithers stir,
chirl o bird an chirk
o door, knot, hoch,
beuch craik, daw-pirr
saft souch, bleat an bark,
peuch an pluff, comins
an gauns, spring seeds,
syne tae sprout, shuit,
nicht ends, keek o day;
endins, stertins.*

Steer

There's been a bizz an bimmer in her hoose. Her kitchen. She's been lecturt and tellt aff.

You can't go out in the night on your own. You could have got hurt. Or...

Talkt tae like a bairn.

We just want you to be safe. You've been very lucky.

A bloody cairry-oan about nithin.

Paramedics in green biler suits pokin an proddin at her.

They've yaised her kettle, opened cupboards tae find tea bags. Him frae next door yaised the phone tae speak tae her laddie he says, tho he never let her speak, never even asked.

Bloody polis an aw. Twa o them. A big tall laddie an a muckle-boukit yin. Baith as puggelt as each ither. She never tellt them about the laddie, they never asked. Naebody's asked. Naebody kens. Fine. Better that wey.

Derek talkt. Tellt the polis that he'd waukent when his wee lassie had a bad dream an he happent tae look oot the windae an see Jean daunderin doon the road. Juist as well an aw...

She let him talk. He enjoyed the attention. Let him hae it. Let them gie him a bloody medal for aw she caret.

An noo the polis an the paramedics are away an she's left wi the heroic, the blessed Derek, smilin at her, aw seempathetic an couthie. Shairly Thomas will be here soon. No soon eneuch.

She gets up. 'A'm away tae yaise the lavvy.' Like she's back at the schuill, askin permission.

Insteid o the toilet, she goes tae the press in the haw. Checks that nithin's been taken. They nicht hae uniforms, but she isnae shair whae tae trust. She lifts her purse an goes tae the bedroom.

She dresses hersel, chuisin claes that come tae haund, leavin her nightclaes in a heap oan the flair. The bottom o her press is heapt wi cardigans, skirts an jerseys. She cannae seem tae hing things up these days - threidin a coat hinger through the neck o a sweater conflummixes her; she lets claes fan hinger faw.

She picks a scrumplt lilac bloose frae the pile, fummles an footers wi the thrawn buttons. It'll dae.

She gauns across tae open the windae, let the spring air in.

Fresh air wafts in. Jean breathes deep. Somethin else tae. The comfortin foost o baccy an pigeon shit, a waft o a man that's been deid for mair as a year noo but that comes tae her whiles. She smells it noo, either cause she needs easement or juist cause the spring breeze has caught up a fain scent. It disnae maiter.

'Whit'll A dae?' she says.

Juist the breeze, a fistle o leaves in the gairden, the sangs o birds, the lilt an wheep o notes, the pirl and spring and whirl, the beauty and brawnness.

Then anither soond. A chap at the door, the hinges swingin open.

Her laddie. Thomas is hame.

Good Advices

There's a rational explanation. REM Sleep Behaviour Disorder. *Living the dream*. Focus. Remember how to react. How you respond has a huge impact on her wellbeing.

'Are you okay Mum?'

Keep your voice calm, level.

'A'm grand son.'

Ask for a description of the hallucination.

'Why were you out Mum? What did you see?'

She just looks at me like I'm daft. You're doing fine, by the book.

Calmly explain.

'Mum. Remember. This is your... condition. It's a hallucination.' I take her hand. It twitches. Panic in her eyes.

'He wis there. The laddie. A thoct...'

Don't argue, this can lead to more distress. 'Okay.' I stroke her hand.

Those lost eyes. Those thin fingers. My old mum.

Reassure. 'I'm here. I'll look after you. I'll help.'

And a wee bit of hope comes into her eyes at that last word and I feel that there's some strength in those fingers yet. She nods gently.

'Ye'll help, son?'

'Of course Mum. Anything.'

Tighter grip, two hands, more nodding.

'Ye'll help me look for him? The laddie?'

Check she's not hungry, thirsty or uncomfortable. 'I'll make tea.'

A nod, a weak smile.

Distract. 'We'll take it out to the garden.'

Tea

Water, kettle, tea bags oot
the piggie, milk oot the fridge,
spuins oot the drawer,
pot an cosy. Awthin whaur
it's aye been. The wey A like.

I know the cup she likes,
the one with a matching
saucer, both chipped,
know she likes a pot,
the ritual, and that in all
likelihood it will go cold
in the cup, stew in the pot,
another layer of blear.

Summary of *The Laddie in the Mirk*

The Laddie in the Mirk is a hybrid novella set in a small village in the Scottish Borders, which uses elements of folk horror to explore the terror of ageing and grief.

When Jean, an elderly woman, wakes in the night, she is convinced there is a young boy in her garden, so she puts herself in danger to help him. Her neighbour, the police, medical professionals and her son all believe that the laddie she sees is a hallucination, evidence of dementia. Jean, however, remains determined to find the laddie. Is he real? And what is more frightening - a ghost haunting the village, a child who is lost and alone, or the onset of dementia?

Spanning one day, *The Laddie in the Mirk* uses a blend of Scots and Standard English, prose and poetry to convey how Jean and her son seek ways to connect and communicate. It is about the mirk of everyday lives - the uncertainties in family relationships, the way we can be oblivious to other people's struggles and unmindful of the wonder and harshness of the world around us. It seeks beauty and hope in nature, memory and pigeon-keeping.

Hannah McDonald

‘Hannah’s writing is characterised by wit, warmth and astute observations, narrated with immediacy and intimacy. The lively, boisterous choreography of awkwardness and domesticity in *Institutions* catches you off guard. With genuine humour and intense emotional grazes, Hannah unveils our psychic investments in, and derailments of, our foundational societal organisations.’

Colin Herd

Hannah McDonald is a writer and English teacher from the Southside of Glasgow. She graduated with Distinction in 2021 from the MLitt in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. Her writing focuses on relationships, identity and concepts of place and belonging. Hannah is also interested in fictionalising oral histories of working-class communities in the West of Scotland; this was the focus of her MLitt dissertation.

One of these stories was included in *Scotland’s Stories*, published for Book Week Scotland 2022. Her work has been featured in a number of other publications, such as *Gutter Magazine*, *The Common Breath’s Middle of a Sentence*, *Epoch Press* and *New Writing Scotland*, and she has also performed her work at various events such as Queer Theory and SPAM’s Summer Bummer.

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Extract from *Institutions*

Chapter One

Top of the Pops is the most perfect show on television. If you don't watch it, you should. It's the highlight of my week, the best thing ever; it keeps me going through all the other nonsense that makes up life. And it's what I'm watching, in the living room with my mammy and daddy, on Thursday, 16th March 1972.

We live in a wee village outside Glasgow, have been here my whole life, and my mammy's whole life as well. She doesn't know anything else except this village. Neither do I, but I don't want to stay that way. I'd like to leave someday, escape all the faces I know and the grass and the hills and the same houses passing me as I trundle along on the bus to work.

It's not that I don't like my family; I love them very much. It's just that nothing ever happens here. There's no movement. No progression. I'm afraid that if I don't leave then I'll just marry a miner and have three weans, just like my mammy, and the cycle will continue until the end of time. For now, though, I'm content to sit and watch *Top of the Pops* with them, taking enjoyment where I can.

I don't know it yet, but this night is the beginning of the unravelling of my life.

'Where's John away to the night?' my daddy asks as Uriah Heep plays the opening chords of 'The Wizard'.

'I'm no sure actually,' my mammy replies, dropping her ball of wool and letting it unspool across the carpet. Our cat Mog, who has been warming herself by the fire,

is intrigued by the tumbling ball, and reaches her paw towards it. But it's too far away, so she turns back to the fire with a small sigh. 'Ruth, did you speak to John before he went out?'

'He's away to the pictures,' I say, not taking my eyes off the screen.

'Who's he away with?' my daddy asks.

'Dunno,' I reply.

'Come on Andrew, you know we won't get any significant information out of her when her programme is on,' my mammy says. They smile at each other, and we begin to relax into the sounds of the television. But then the moment is ruined by the doorbell ringing.

'Who's that at this time of night?' my mammy asks, dropping her needles into her lap and looking over at my daddy. He shrugs, gets up from his hardbacked chair - he can't sit in soft chairs because he falls asleep almost immediately - and goes to get the door. We hear him padding along the hallway and then down the stairs to the front door. We're too far away to hear what's being said, and I'm not even paying attention anyway, but after a few moments of vague mumbling I hear him calling my name.

'Ruth! It's for you!' I groan, infuriated to be wrenched away from my programme. I pull my dressing gown around myself, kick my feet into my slippers and walk quickly along the hall, peering out from the top of the stairs to see my daddy standing at the front door. Facing him is Davie Clark, who's smiling up at me. I frown. My daddy starts up the stairs as I come down.

'Don't you two be long now,' he says as he passes me.

'Hi Davie. You awrite?' Davie was in the same year as me at school, and we had been pally on and off during our years of education. One of his pals told me he

fancied me when we were fifteen at a Halloween party, but I didn't know what to do with the information so I just let it sit there between us, unable to give any indication as to how I felt about him. His pal waited for me to respond, and when all I could give him was some repetitive head-nodding, he frowned and walked away. I've kissed boys in the chaste, experimental way you do when you're a wean, but I've never done it for real; I've never really thought about boys beyond the abstract presence of them in the public circles of my life. But now here's Davie Clark, at my front door on a Thursday night, interfering in my private sphere.

'How are yi? I haven't seen you about for a while.' Davie cracks a smile and I see that his small, even teeth are already starting to go yellow from nicotine.

'I'm alright. Been working up at the Castle and I'm not long qualified so I've been quite focused on my training and that.' He nods, looking impressed.

'Aye? What's it like up there?' he asks. I briefly consider whether to tell him the truth, which is that it's an intense job, an unpredictable job, and yet also mundane, slow-paced, quiet. Entire days go past without very much beyond the usual routines happening, and then suddenly you get enough action and drama in one morning to put you to bed for the rest of the week. I decide I can't be bothered getting into that with Davie.

'It's fine. Good. Nice to be helping people.'

'I can imagine you in your wee nurse's outfit,' Davie says, eyeing my dressing gown as if he's hoping I'll remove it to reveal my uniform underneath. 'Anyway... sorry for coming round unexpectedly like this, it's just that there's a disco on in the Miners' Club on Saturday night and I was wondering if you wanted to go? With me?' I look him up and down slowly. He's wearing those

Adidas trainers with the red and blue stripes that all the boys are wearing at the moment; his jeans are rolled up at the ankles and he's got a grey jumper on with a black bomber over it. His hair's black, feathered in a middle parting and curling slightly at the ends. As I look back up at his round face his blue eyes meet mine; there's a sweetness in them I've never noticed before. Our interactions as children mostly constituted him letting me tig him when we were playing in the playground and I was clearly out of breath and losing patience with being het. Tonight, his cheeks are pink and covered in light freckles; his eyelashes are long, dark and curly. At that moment I realise that neither of us have spoken for almost a minute.

'Awrite,' I say. 'I'll come with you to the disco. But I can't stay late and I won't be drinking; I need to be up for church on Sunday.' He smiles and his cheeks redden even further.

'Smashin. I'll get you outside the club at 8 then.' He rubs his hands together and blows warm air into them. 'I'd better head home then. But I'll see you on Saturday!' With a final smile, he turns and jumps down the steps from my front door to the path. He waves again as he lets himself out through the front gate and disappears down the street. I stand for a moment, breathing in the cold night air and feeling a sting of anxiety in my stomach as I realise what I've agreed to.

When I go back into the living room, the television's muted but the credits are rolling silently. I'm annoyed that I've missed the end of my programme, but it's secondary to my anticipatory nerves. My mammy and daddy are acting as if they hadn't been straining to hear mine and Davie's entire conversation.

‘Well?’ my mammy says. There’s an expectancy in her face that tells me my daddy has already told her who it was.

‘Davie Clark asked me to the disco on Saturday.’ My mammy raises her eyebrows and looks over at my daddy. He pushes his glasses up his nose and shrugs.

‘I heard he stopped big Robbie from getting hit by a steel pole the other week down at Cardowan. He’s a good miner, that boy.’ This is as close to approval as my daddy is willing to give when it comes to boys. I haven’t given him any trouble yet in that arena but my big sister Susan is boy daft and we all know it.

‘Did you say aye?’ my mammy asks, her eyes sparkling. She never asks me about boys, but I know she’s been waiting for this day. I nod.

‘Aw Ruthie, that’s exciting! What are you gonnae wear? Maybe Susan will loan you something, or we could go into town on Saturday afternoon and go shopping!’ Both of these prospects sound exhausting.

‘I dunno. I’ll figure it out on Saturday.’ My mammy nods and smiles; she looks absolutely blissful. ‘Anyway, since *Top of the Pops* is finished, I’m going to go to my bed and read for a bit.’

‘Alright,’ my mammy says as I lean down to kiss her cheek.

‘Goodnight hen,’ my daddy says, reaching for the remote to unmute the telly.

Chapter Two

The following morning, I wake up with Susan’s arm draped over my throat. I had fallen asleep reading my book, and she had kindly put it on the bedside table and turned the lamp off before climbing into bed beside

me. She's facing me, snoring gently - her breath smells like Fry's Chocolate Cream. I lift her arm off me, place it back on her pillow where it belongs and check the time. 7.15am. I've got half an hour to get ready for my bus.

I pick up my uniform from where my mammy has left it pressed and folded for me, and walk down the hall and into the bathroom. Having washed my face and brushed my teeth, I pull off my nightdress and give myself a quick wipe with a wet cloth. Some folk call this a hoor's wash; my mammy prefers to refer to it as 'pits and bits'. I dry myself off and put on my pants and bra; roll my ugly brown stockings up my legs; button myself into my navy-blue dress with the itchy, starchy white collar and fasten my navy belt around my waist. I pin my hair up quickly and then leave the bathroom, taking my hat and apron back to the bedroom and putting them into my shoulder bag. Dropping my bag at the top of the stairs next to my black brogues, I walk back down the hall and into the kitchen.

My mammy's already in there, as she is every morning, stirring a pot of porridge. Mog is sitting on the draining board watching her. As I come in, my mammy grabs a bowl from the draining board and ladles a few spoonfuls into it for me; I take it off her with a smile and sit down at the wooden table in the middle of the kitchen.

'Have we got any sugar?' I ask her, and she tuts but opens a cupboard.

'You're too auld for sugar in your porridge - you should be taking it with salt.' She hands me the sugar bowl and I sprinkle it liberally onto my breakfast.

'Mammy, porridge with salt tastes like a bowl full of bogeys and you know it. The sugar gives me more energy.' She smiles at me and unravels the rope knotted

at the wall which controls the pulley. Letting it down slowly, she picks the pants and socks off it and folds them before putting them in the laundry basket on the floor beside the sink. I watch her while I eat my porridge, wondering if she enjoys all these menial tasks she has to do each day, or whether she tolerates it because it's what's expected of her. I know I'll be in the latter camp when the time comes for me to take on the running of a house, but I feel lighter knowing that those days are still far away, that at nineteen I'll be able to stay young and unattached for a little while longer before people start asking me when I'll be settling down.

'Do you want me to pin your hat on for you before you go?' Mammy asks as I stand up and drop my empty bowl in the sink.

'Naw it's awrite, I'll just do it when I get into work. It's so itchy, it drives me mental when I'm sitting on the bus.' I straighten my collar and smooth down the creases which are already forming in the front of my uniform. 'Do you need me to get anything from the shops on my way home?'

'No thanks hen, I'm only working till 1 today so I'll go to the Co-op myself. Here's your lunch,' she says, handing me a brown paper bag. I look inside and see a jam sandwich on plain bread and a Marathon bar. I smile, thank her and say goodbye, head down the hall and stick my feet into my brogues, pulling on my jacket and putting my bag over my shoulder. 'See you later!' I hear her call as I run down the stairs and out the front door.

The bus takes thirty-five minutes to get from my village to two towns over, and I get off at the bottom of the hill at the edge of the second town, at the top of which sits the Castle. I always take my time on the walk up because my nylon tights chafe my thighs when I walk

too fast, and I hate being sweaty and uncomfortable before I've even started work.

The Castle has another, formal name, but we call it the Castle because that's what it looks like. It's huge, expansive, built with beautiful big grey bricks. It conjures up childhood images of princesses locked in towers, kings planning great battles, royal families holding court and living luxuriously. It's quite ironic, really, when you think about its actual use.

Walk in through the huge oak double doors and you're immediately in a small waiting area, with a front desk for admissions and visitors. There's another set of oak double doors straight ahead, and once you walk through these you're in the Castle proper. A corridor stretches out in front of you with two admission rooms on either side, one for men and one for women. At the end of the corridor you can turn left to go into the female wing, or right to the male wing. I work in the female wing, and I rarely set foot in the male wing. However, I know from other staff that it's essentially a mirror image of the female wing. There's also a final set of double doors straight ahead which take you to the kitchen, dining room, launderette and workshops. One floor up from here there's a huge recreation hall, used for parties, film screenings and other forms of collective entertainment.

Each wing has sixteen wards: eight geriatric wards on the ground floor and six psychiatric, one adolescent, and one acute ward on the first. I work on Ward 9, on the first floor, a psychiatric ward with a mix of acute and long-stay patients. There are up to twenty women living here at a time, in various states of distress or dissociation. Within each ward there's an open dormitory, a day room, two bathrooms with a toilet and two baths in each, a nurses' station, a small treatment

room, and a big cupboard with linens, clothing and underwear. The patients eat in the dining room and are shuttled back and forth three times a day for meals.

When I get to Ward 9, it's just after 8.30am. I go straight to the nurses' station where Orla, the Staff Nurse, is standing counting out medication and dropping it into paper cups, putting ticks beside the names on the medication Kardex as she does so. Linda, our Charge Nurse, is sitting at the desk making notes with the night nurses, who have just come off shift.

'Morning Ruth,' Orla says. She's from Derry and her accent makes it impossible to tell what kind of mood she's in from her voice alone. I note that she's wearing make-up, which is usually a sign that she's had a relatively calm morning getting her weans up and out the door for school.

'Good morning everyone,' I reply, taking my apron and hat out of my bag and pulling the apron around my waist. I go over to the small mirror above the white porcelain sink and take a kirby grip out of the pocket of my apron, using it to fasten my hat in place on top of my head.

'So, what's the plan for today?'

Summary of *Institutions*

Institutions is set in 1972 in a working-class mining village in the West of Scotland, and follows a young woman called Ruth who works as a psychiatric nurse at the Castle. She lives with her family who, through the novel, grapple with issues relating to religion, love and emigration.

Meanwhile, a new patient called Grace is admitted to Ruth's ward. Grace claims that her husband has had her committed to punish her, and that she's not really mentally ill. Ruth initially dismisses this story, but as they get to know each other Ruth begins to uncover the truth, not only about Grace but about herself as well.

The book explores themes of power, love and discrimination, through the characters' interactions with each other and the institutions they find themselves caught inside.

Dòmhnall Eòghainn MacKinnon

‘Bha Dòl Eoin na sgoilear BBC ALBA air a’ chùrsa MA ann an sgrìobhadh airson telebhisein ann an 2018. Bhon fhìor-thoiseach, bha e follaiseach gun robh tàlant sònraichte aige. Tha beachdan-smuain mòra agus àrd-amasach aige, le caractaran a tha fìor agus beòthail aig a’ chridhe. Bha e na urram dhòmh a bhith a’ leasachadh dràma bho thùs còmhla ris agus chòrd a spionnadh, a cho-fhaireachdainn agus a dhànachd rium, is bha e daonnan a’ co-obrachadh agus a toirt taic do a cho-sgrìobhaichean. Bha e na thlachd a bhith còmhla ris san t-seòmar-sgeulachdan. Seo sgrìobhaiche a th’ ann a chuireas iongnadh agus buaidh ort. Tha am modh-obrach aige do-chreidsinneach. Bidh e a’ sgrìobhadh sgrìobtaichean, òrain, bàrdachd agus rosg - agus tha e daonnan a’ gabhail cothrom a bhith a’ toirt piseach air an t-saoghal, chan ann le a sgrìobhadh a-mhàin ach cuideachd le a ghnìomhan.’

'Dòl Eoin was the BBC Alba scholar on MA in TV Fiction Writing in 2018. From the outset, it was clear that he was a special talent indeed. He has big, bold and ambitious high concepts that always have grounded, living, breathing characters at their heart. I had the privilege of developing an original drama with him and loved his wit, empathy and outré approach, whilst always being collaborative and nurturing of fellow writers. He was a delight to have in a story room. This is a writer who won't fail to surprise, charm and astound you. His work ethic is incredible. He writes scripts, songs, poetry and prose – and always makes time to make the world a better place, not only through his writing, but with his actions.'

Ali Taylor

'S e sgeulaiche à Scalpaigh na Hearadh a th' ann an Dòmhnall Eòghainn MacFhionghain. Tha an àrainneachd agus an dualchas a bhrosnaich e ann an cur is dlùth gach sgeòil. Bidh e a' feuchainn ri doimhneachd a thoirt do charactaran agus seallaidhean, gus saoghal fìor tharraingeach a chruthachadh.

Bha MacFhionghain riamh measail air nàdar agus sgeulachdan, on a bha e beag, gus an do cheumnaich e na thidsear bith-eòlais. Tha an ùidh làidir sin ri lorg sna sgeulachdan fhathast.

Air a shlighe sgrìobhaidh, fhuair e ceum maighstireachd a thug buaidh mhòr air. Shoirbhich leis sa ghnìomhachas, choisinn e duaisean, agus tharraing e luchd-amhairc eadar-nàiseanta. Tha e a' cur fàilte air an dubhlan ùr a bhith a' sgrìobhadh a chiad nobhail, *Dubh is Geal*.

Dòl Eoin MacKinnon is a storyteller from the untamed landscapes of the Outer Hebrides. He weaves stories as

intricate and vivid as the environment that nurtured them. The rugged authenticity of his homeland inspires his work, and he embraces tangible realities and emotional facts to dive deeper into our shared experience.

He has always been drawn to nature and storytelling. As a child and as a biologist, he was always fascinated by how the world works.

His journey as a storyteller led him to earn a Masters degree in screenwriting. He found success in the film industry, earning several accolades for his work. It's been a dream come true for him to see his films reach international audiences. His stories come from his heart and soul, and he's amazed by the warm reception they have received. He's excited by the fresh challenge of completing his first novel, *Dubh is Geal (Black and White)*.

Extract from *Dubh is Geal*

Stad e a' bhan aige mu choinneamh an taighe, piuthar-athar a' fosgladh an dòras gu socair, 's a dol air ais a-steach gu mì-nàdarra. Nuair a dh'fhosgail e doras a' bhan, chual' e caoineadh nam faoileag ag èirigh os a chionn. An liuthad teaghlach, mar theaghlach Mhurchaidh, a chunnaic iad a' sgapadh às a chèile.

Air an rathad a-steach, chuir fàileadh seann chuimhneachain fàilte air. Bha ballaichean an taighe gu dìleas a' sealltainn dealbhan teaghlaich à làithean sona. Thug Murchadh sùil ghoirid - fada gu leòr airson a bhogadh le deur - air dealbh dhe fhèin nuair a bha e òg le a chousin; làithean mus ro sgeul air dìmeas no dubhachas.

Bha piuthar-athar a' coimhead lag 's i a' cur fàilte air le cromadh-cinn. Bhruidhinn iad beagan mu na h-aimsir, an t-eilean, agus na clèibh - ach cha tug iad facal air sgath dhe na rudan as cudromaiche dhaibh, a bha fleòdradh nan smuaintean gun sgur. Thug Murchadh gàire oirre nuair a chuimhnich e an rud as fheàrr a chuala e bho chionn treise, 'Ò, tha 'd a ràdh nach fhuilig am ministear smodal sam bith a chluinntinn, ach, mar a thuirt am fear eile, *bean a' mhinisteir*, nuair a thig i a chèilidh, bidh i a tràthadh!

A' smaoineachadh air ais air an rathad far am bu chòir an càr aice a bhith, dh'fhaighnich Murchadh an robh e fhathast aig a' gharaid. Ach cha robh, bha Fiona air a dhol cuairt dhan bhaile leis airson an latha - 'Thàinig iad airson a' weekend gun fhiosta dhomh.' Làn dòchais gum faiceadh e a chousin a-rithist, dh'fhàs a chridhe làidir. Ach nuair a thuirt piuthar-athar gun robh i dìreach air

falbh, sgaoil bròn tro aodann mar chloich a' bualadh uisge. Sheachain Fiona e. Air a dheagh threànadh air droch-amharas, sin a' chiad rud a smaoinich e. Ach thuirt e ris fhèin gun robh e ceàrr - cha bhiodh fhios aice gun robh e tighinn.

Stad gnogadh an dorais a chnuasachadh. B' e na strainnsearan a bh' ann airson na clèibh a cheannach. Sheall e dhaibh iad, sean is làn meirg, sgeulachdan na mara fhathast glacte nam broinn. Agus fàileadh grod. 'Just look at these. Aren't they fantastic, Peter?' ars' am boireannach. 'Aren't they just,' ars' an duine. Às dèidh còmhradh goirid, dh'iarr Murchadh dà fhichead not air an son; gann de thìde feitheamh airson sùim na bu fhreagarraiche - neo daoine na bu dhealasaiche. Bha làn fhios aige gun robh na clèibh, mar bhalaich an iasgaich, air an dreuchd a leigeil dhiubh. Bhiodh iad mar an ceudna a-nis nan ìomhaighean ann an oisean, seach innealan iasgaich tuilleadh. Ge-tà, ghabh e iongnadh a' chianalas a bh' air a bhith gan coimhead a' siubhal air falbh, an cùl car beag dearg, gun fhios aca dè dìreach a rinn iad ceàrr.

Nuair a thill e a-staigh, thòisich e a' coimhead timcheall airson coire no boladh cofaidh. An robh piuthar-athar air faighneachd mar-thà 's nach cuala e i, no an robh i air a dhìochuimhneachadh? Nuair a chuala e mu nighinn òg, a h-ogha, san leabaidh, gu cinnteach na dùisg mun àm sin, thuig e na bh' ann. Shaoil e mu dheidhinn a coltas. Am biodh gàire a màthar oirre no sùilean dùrachdach a h-athar?

Chuir piuthar-athar seata uidheam-ithe sìos air a' bhòrd, gun a chleachdadh riamh, gibht fèill phòsaidh, a-nis ro throm airson làmhan aosta agus cridhean briste. 'Ma nì iad feum dhut, bheir leat iad,' arsa ise. Mhothaich e an t-iarraidh na sùilean airson làithean nas

simplidh nuair a bha iad uile nan suidhe timcheall a' bhùird seo còmhla, ag ithe le sunnd, 's a màthair a trod, uallach oirre gun tachdadh iad leis a' ghaireachdaich a dhèanadh iad, gus an dèanadh i fhèin mu dheireadh gaire mhòr, agus casad beag laghach às a dhèidh. Bha cuideam na phòcaidean a-nis agus rudegin ag innse dha gu robh an t-àm aige falbh.

Chuir Murchadh an dà fhichead not a fhuair e airson nan cliabh air mullach an rèididheatair, am peanta a' rùsgadh agus airgead a' sìneadh air airson a' chiad uair riamh. 'Tha seo airson a nighinn,' thuirt e gu sàmhach, le blàths is tàmailt a' strì na ghuth.

Thug piuthar-athar sùil air, a pròis follaiseach. 'Cha leig thu leas, a Mhurchaidh.'

Chroch sàmhchair air oir na mòmaid fhad 's a thilg Murchadh a shùilean air ais air an airgead. Le corragan mì-chinnteach, thog e fichead not air ais gu seòlta, 's chuir e am fichead eile air a' bhòrd. Bha cùisean doirbh dha, chunntadh a h-uile sgillinn ruadh, ach cha b' urrainn dha a h-uile rud a ghabhail air ais. Mhothaich antaidh a ghlusad ach choimhead i air falbh gu h-obann, mar gum b' urrainn dhi an sealladh a chrathadh às, lèirsinn ag innse dhi gur snog an cothrom a thoirt dha rudeigin coibhneil a dhèanamh, ge bith dè chosg e. Dh'èirich oir an airgid le fosgladh an dorais, mar ìobairt shàmhach dhan anam òg nach do choinnich e riamh. Ann an sin, bha aideachadh - de chuimheachain chaillte, snaidhmean briste, agus an gabhail ris nach freagradh sùim sam bith an eachdraidh luachmhor a chaill iad còmhla.

Anns a' bhan, chuir dealbh an laogh orca gaoir troimhe, mar gu robh i a' coimhead air ais tron lìon. Chuir an coimhearsnachd a' choire air aon bhàta, air aon sgiobair, airson aon tubaist, agus a' phlàigh a thàinig

às a dhèidh. A' leughadh nan rudan a chaidh chur an clò, chunnaic Murchadh na beàrnan. Bha na h-orcas a' sabaid air ais, ach cha b' ann airson dìoghaltas, mar a thuig a' choimheasnachd e, ach an èiginn. Rinn an sgeul snìomhach cron mar-thà, ach bha fios aig Murchadh gun robh barrachd doimhneachd ann, airidh air tuilleadh sgrùdaidh, a' dol thar dubh is geal.

Extract from *Black and White*

The fresh salty breeze of Sheeay filled the air as Murdo parked his van in front of his aunt's weathered house. The island's tranquillity gave little away of the tensions that had long simmered beneath the surface of the community and within his family. Opening the van door, he heard the faint cries of gulls as they circled overhead. The same gulls that had witnessed generations of families, like Murdo's, drift apart.

As he stepped inside the house, the musty scent of memories greeted him. The walls bore witness to years gone by, with family photos displaying happier times. Murdo quickly glanced at a photo of his younger self with his cousins; that was a time before arguments over forgotten slights drove them all apart.

His aunt looked frail as she greeted him with a cautious nod, her voice not as strong as he remembered. They exchanged a few words about the weather, the island, the creels - everything except the tensions that floated beneath them. Murdo made his aunty laugh when he told her that the new minister couldn't stand gossip even though, as the other man said, 'when his wife visits, she beaches'.

Reflecting back on the empty driveway, Murdo asked if the car was still at the garage. It wasn't. Fiona had taken it for a spin, 'they're visiting for the weekend'. The fleeting thought of seeing his cousin again had his heart racing. But when his aunt mentioned she had left for town, he felt a pang of disappointment. She avoided him. His mind, trained in the art of self-doubt, instantly jumped to that conclusion. But he quickly chided himself - she wouldn't have known about his visit.

A knock interrupted his musings. They were strangers responding to the ad. He showed them the creels, now old and rusted, tales of their time at sea still trapped inside. And a foul smell. 'Aren't they fantastic, Peter?', said the woman. 'Aren't they just,' said the man. After a brief conversation, he settled for just £40 for a fast sale, knowing he wouldn't find anyone else in time. He knew they'd now, like retired old fishermen, adorn a living room instead. Still, he was surprised by the sadness that clung to him as he watched them ride away, in the back of that little red car, not knowing exactly what they'd done so wrong.

Heading back inside, Murdo's gaze shifted around the room, looking for the familiar kettle or the inviting aroma of coffee. He wondered if perhaps his aunt had already asked and he hadn't heard, or if she'd forgotten. When he learned about her eight-year-old granddaughter, things became clearer. Maybe, he thought, she didn't want him to meet the young girl. He tried to imagine what she looked like. Would she have her mother's smile or her father's sincere gaze?

His aunt handed him some anniversary cutlery, never used, and now too heavy for old hands and broken hearts. He felt the longing in her eye, the ache for simpler times when they'd all gathered around this

table, eating and laughing together, being scolded by their granny's concern that they'd choke with all the laughter; until she, too, couldn't help but laugh, a cute little cough punctuating her point. The weight stretched his pockets and something told him it was time to go.

As he prepared to leave, Murdo placed the two twenties he'd received for the creels on the old radiator, but the peeling paint and hot metal could do little to heat the cold, hard cash. 'It's for the wee girl,' he murmured, minor and major notes wrestling in his warm voice.

His aunt, pride evident in her posture, glanced away, her voice soft but firm. 'You needn't do that, Murdo.'

A silence lingered for a moment as Murdo's eyes darted back to the money. Fingers trembling slightly, he discreetly pocketed £20. Times were hard for him, every pound mattered, but he couldn't bring himself to reclaim all he'd offered. His aunt caught the movement in the corner of her eye but looked away quickly, as if the sight could be shaken from her eyes. And pride held her tongue.

He repositioned the remaining £20 on the wooden coffee table, leaving it as a silent offering for a young soul he'd never met. In that gesture was an acknowledgement - of memories lost, connections severed and the realisation that no sum could reclaim the precious time they'd lost together.

In his van, the photo of the young orca calf trapped in the net stared back at him. The community had pinned their anger on one boat, one skipper, making him the scapegoat for an incident in a chain of events that had started long before. The orcas were retaliating, not out of vengeance, but out of desperation. A twisted narrative was crafted by the islanders to fit their view of the world.

But Murdo felt it. Deep down, he knew there was more to the story, something that blurred the lines between black and white.

Summary of *Dubh is Geal*

Air eilean sìtheil Shìthaidh, tha Murchadh a' dèiligeadh le mac-talla seann chòmhstri agus bannan teaghlaich a chaidh a chur air dìochuimhne. Air a thàladh air ais le call croit an teaghlaich, tha e a' faicinn suidheachadh bhon àm a dh'fhalbh a tha a' strì airson àite a lorg san latha an-diugh.

Am measg nan trioblaidean pearsanta, tha an t-eilean a' snìomhadh sgeulachdan, tha na h-orcas ri ar-a-mach, agus tha upraid eaconamach ag èirigh às.

Tha e a' tighinn a-steach air Murchadh gu bheil an fhìrinn a' sìor chrìonadh agus gu bheileas a' ruith a-mach à tìde. A-nis, feumaidh e coimhearsnachd sgapte a thoirt còmhla mus till cùisean brònach dorcha às an doimhneachd.

On the serene island of Sheeay, Murdo faces the echoes of old feuds and forgotten family ties. Drawn back by the looming loss of the family croft, he confronts a fragile past struggling to find its place in today's world.

Amid the personal turbulence, an island weaves twisted tales, orcas rise in defiance and economic turmoil ensues.

Murdo realises that with the truth rapidly eroding, he faces a race against time. Now, he must unite a splintered community before a fearful sacrifice is offered to the depths.

Poetry

Eloise Birtwhistle

‘Eloise is an essential new voice for our challenging times. As an admirer of her work, I’m gratified to see her at last receive the recognition she so richly deserves. Her poetry is visceral, moving, spectacular and designed to remind us what it is to be humane.’

John Glenday

Eloise Birtwhistle’s poetry has been published in *New Writing Scotland*, *Mslexia*, *Gutter Magazine*, *SPAM Zine*, *The Edwin Morgan Centenary Collection*, *Wet Grain*, *Algia*, *From Glasgow to Saturn* and *Reclaim: An Anthology of Women’s Poetry*.

She received a Distinction in her Creative Writing MLitt from the University of Glasgow, graduating in 2018. In 2019, she was selected as a St Mungo’s Mirrorball Clydebuilt apprentice, where she benefited from mentorship by John Glenday. Her writing has been exhibited by the John Byrne Award and she was a finalist of the 2019 *Mslexia* and Poetry Book Society Women’s Poetry Prize.

Eloise also delivers community arts projects and has hosted public readings and conversations with writers including Claire Askew and Nadine Aisha Jassat. Her creative writing workshops have been run with organisations including Glasgow Women’s Library, the Survivor Arts Community, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, and the Inverclyde Homeless Centre. Through this work she has edited zines and two book-length anthologies.

Changeover Pink

This April's Pink Moon rises swollen
from the city. An unblinking Egg

Moon, Fish Moon, Sprouting
Grass Moon. Think of smooth shells

opening themselves to her, think of
a trout's delicate skin.

Down a little on the verge a man's voice
bloats through the evening *She lives on in*

you, you are her and I am you in circles
to the woman beside him.

He takes a piss in front of
us both, cigarette lurching in one hand

the other full. Drags on
the snout, calls backward *I want to care*

about what you care about. All these palettes
and I can't put my finger on the grains

of colour in the air. Last I checked
Pantone had over three hundred shades of it

but the count's all perception. And here
is a fish's left eye, plucked

from the water, its sleek form turned
in your palm and there

a right eye, the burning sun.
The woman's silence bends like her body

against the rise of the hill, the descending
light sizzling her pale hair.

I recoil at that gauche smack
of *p* and *k* sharp set

at opposite ends. Consider the deepness of *ink*
the neatness of *pin*. Think of the warm

roundness of *pumpkin*, now there's
a glimpse of dusk.

Smearing edges, the air
tonight is not so stark, these shades

are dirtier, more entire. The voice continues
through the cusping park. I move along

the charts: *Apricot Crush*, *Mauvelous*
Blush. A bowl of pure white grass seed, the rice slowly

stained with falling light. A violence
that splits the sky

in half. *Cotton Candy*, *Tickle Me*
Pink. Cutting colours

into sample cards. If you creep close enough
to a widened eye, the glossy egg white

bursts with vessels. Light diffusing
into rooftops, the woman's outline

the cooling earth. This sphere at once blood
and chalk, sky daubed

with moon and sun, the unnameable
setting and rising together before—

Above us a set of wings turns from red to white
from white to red. These days the pink darkens quick.

12 December 2019

When the exit poll arrives I rinse
my skin and let her
snip inches from my hair.
Stand straight, face
forward, strike up new
things to say; words dusting
our kitchen as she
crescents around me. The quiet touch
of the blade is a balm
against my nape, a line
to the knuckles that hold.
I feel crumbs of myself
shiver down, here inside
here outside, catching
beneath a collar or falling
to her toes. I need to learn the things
that don't go without saying—
to snug my voice
into handles. I begin to warn
her of splinters as if
my body were a weapon.

Four Blue Splinters of Vivianite

Ötztal Alps, 3300 BC

Winter draws sheep into the hollow where his body lies. They shelter, leave droppings, depart with the season. Eventually the glacier swaddles him. Held in his stomach: grains of wheat, strips of ibex meat. Minerals leach from the ice, blossom into vivid pustules in his lungs, on his tattooed skin.

Jing'an County, 500 BC

Forty-seven nanmu trunks, split and hollowed into women's coffins. From single blocks ladles are carved, lacquered and placed into the tomb. Hairpins, jade sets, a bamboo fan woven into the shape of a cleaver. One brain shrinks like the closing of a fist. The women's bones exhale crystals into the clay.

Stockholm, 1628

A southwest wind drifts white-blue into lions' gilded mouths and the muzzles of open gun ports dip to drink. When the lower deck fills a crowd of hundreds watches. In the wreck, fish rid thirty skeletons of soft tissue. Jawbones wash against cannonballs, grow blue as if coins had been placed onto their tongues.

South Vietnam, 1963

A Phantom F4 unravels from sky
into the soft bed of a stream, lays
shards of flesh and cockpit. Jet fuel
winds bright along the water. Jungle resettles
the years. The pilots are returned with the wrinkles
of their footprints intact. Hawaii's Central Identification
Lab interrogates if the remains were warehoused, suspects
some religious act rendered them imperial blue.

Marriage Poem

Picture it: Each summer night
a cactus blooms one flower.

From a thicket of spines
this pale star opens just how

it chooses to open.
Of this, you can be assured.

And in those settling moments
after sunset a moth alights

on the petals, rubs into
the flower, drinks

the flower and leaves itself behind.
A single egg, right there

at the edge of the petal; the gentle weight
of a head on your chest.

Soon enough our flower turns
into round, red fruit

ripe with flavour
and the moth's new body.

So, we have the two
of them; the cactus and the moth

and for longer than we can remember
they have been learning

one another, learning themselves
and choosing the cool, certain night.

Shooting the Model as Corpse

Reflecting on Giuseppe Zanotti, Spring/Summer 2004; Jimmy Choo, Spring/Summer 2006; America's Next Top Model, S08E04 2007; Vice Magazine, June 2013; Mark Jacobs, Fall/Winter 2014.

Within minutes her skin
mauves as underneath it
self-digestion spills open cells
capillaries collapse
all of her
functions fade
bacteria work through her, ferment
her sugars, her skin
tightens with gas, becomes
marbled, blistered
eventually rips in release

The darkroom drips black
into an alkaline bath—
a solution that reduces
molecules to atomic silver
and the latent image
materialises
the image is contained
submerged, agitated
the solution is dumped
replaced, agitated
the image rinses and dries

Laceration

I suppose we'll never settle who
caused the crash that cleaved
your leg that upturned May: a bike spoke exactly
where it shouldn't be and us
so unsure of where we were.
Of course you refused
support and walked the city's length
to Minor Injuries, the wound stretching,
easing, stretching to the pattern
of your bends.

A needle sudden as impact—
the numbing spread of adrenaline then
fingers so buttery it was near nauseating,
scalpel slickening your flesh
as if a knee were water.

How I loved you then
faced with your turned-out
gristle; expanding horizons
of tissue and fat. There are the things
we suppose we can take
and the flashes that untie
us. Now when I try
to recall your pinks I see how you parted
yourself with ready hands
and how I turned
away from that glint
of bone, your femur like a fang bared
in a dog's strange mouth.

Milkweed (1995)

'I am not to be trusted around my old work for any length of time.'

Lee Krasner

Her fingers rip her
colour field, strike
old outpour
let disgust burst the trap—
canvas frays
new bristle-mark edges
her paint unhung, dripping
with fertile dismantle

The serrations rest
through frost and sweat

Unpin, re-pin
self into muse undone
From discard remake origin
where the glowing scraps of a monarch
may settle, for a moment
on shredded weed

Oliver Robertson

‘Oliver’s collection here displays humour, pathos and political fierceness with his vignettes of Glaswegian life. From the social activism of *M8* to the emotional urgency of *Christmas Post* he exhibits a stage poet’s bravura with a page poet’s intimacy, combining his talents to create works that are warm, impactful and vital.’

Michael Mullen

Oliver Robertson (he/him) is a poet and spoken word artist from Wellpark in Glasgow’s East End. Oliver was selected for the BBC Words First Scheme in 2020 and since then has taken his words to new audiences, performing at the Eden, Push the Boat Out and Hidden Door festivals. He has performed at many nights over the years as well as being a featured act at Loud Poets Greenock and Rock the Boat Out. Oliver was published by Speculative Books in *Retail Opportunity Zine* in 2022. His writing is centred around experiences of growing up in the East End of Glasgow.

Instagram: Oliverhrobertson

To see Oliver perform his spoken word poetry, please scan the QR code or visit scottishbooktrust.com/oliver-robertson



M8

A scar runs deep through mah city
Fae Ruchazie tae Toon Heed
it cut communities
in hawf
aww because some graph
promised tae slash commuting times
in two

The Monkland wis a playgroom
The murky wahters nae deterrent
away fae watchful eyes
weans balanced oan canal's edge
eftur playing kick the can
N sharing stories about the man
that went in
but never came oot

A scar runs deep through mah city
Fae Royston tae Anderston
It condemned the High Street tae eh waste bin
cause some city planner declared that car wis king
N the sick hing wis - They knew:
They knew it would sever the heart of the city
They knew it would destroy the fabric of the city
They knew it wid change eh city forever
N they knew we didny want it
But they did it anywiy

The granda ran through every narra street
that Toon Heed hid tae offer

He knew every neighbour, in every close
Shared sugar during the good times
and heat in the worst
But those streets are flattened, only phoaties ur left
But eh stories
They remain
But like everyhin - will eventually run ooty time

A scar runs deep through mah city
From Cowcaddens to the back middens of Laurieston
Separated Uncles fae Aunties
N pals who wur like yer cousin
N its legacy?
is ye needty cross criss cross'in bridges
on whit coulda been ah UNESCO heritage site
just to walk tae eh big fuckin Tesco

The jimmys ae Glesga
jumped eh tram tae their apprentice joab
at age fifteen
They looked oot
fae eh windae seat
N condensation surveyed
their only wiy tae make suhin oot ae this life:
A trade

A scar runs deep through mah city
Fae Sighthill tae Riddrie
despite protests and pleas
those planners hidden in chambers
segregated populations
withoot any hesitation
N wae that
Concrete change wis cemented

Mah Granda put ties doon in '63
wae wan mare mooth tae feed
Anderston wis eh place he resided
But two years later
back courts bonds wur bulldozed
neighbours fled the rubble
fae Canada tae Bargeddie
Some tae never cross paths again

A scar runs deep through mah city
It's called the M8
And my city still bleeds to this day

Christmas Post



The first red envelope of the season always came early
It fell through the door
awww aye
A surprise
I'll needy send wan back
Promptly followed
It flew through the air
arrived from a land down under
stamped from a place where no snowman
could stand
and utter the words of this tune
we all love to hate

He rolls fresh Blu Tack
picked from his address book
in his firm hands
a lifetime of toil
retirement could not erase
He pins the card
to the fireplace
It hangs solitary
like an early friend to show up at the boozier
waiting for the night to erupt

The weeks roll past and a lifetime of friends
clatter the letterbox
each enter with the same loving message:
'Merry Christmas and a happy new year!'
Before joining the others
hanging by the bar of the mantelpiece
I imagine them standing there
in a '70s pub
with their whiskys just how they like it
discussing impulsive bets
washing doon their wean's Scalextric set
Those days are long gone
but their friendship
still permeates
penetrating closed doors
and passing over national borders
A seasonal token
that their love really did mean something

He sets time aside
time that he claims is hard to find
Before Gary Lineker broadcasts to the dark solstice skies
In block capitals
he puts his bookie pen to work, sends his regards
with the same message he received
Like the winner signing autographs
after becoming sports personality of the year
Its playing in the background
while he flicks his pen
and tuts his tongue
An OBE for cricket?
Yer having me on

He is always last to post
hunting for his address book
under stacks of supermarket receipts
He tallies the post
and scores out the fallen
Just as well
as he had almost forgotten
his penny-pinching bemoaned him
not to waste a good stamp

The years go by and this process repeats
but the letterbox
claps less frequently
From a bus service that
used to deliver every ten minutes
has been cut
into a Sunday service
The decade absorbs the years
and he barely gets up
Sometimes asleep, sometimes not
I look towards the fireplace and I count on one hand the
friends that stand
who stick to a barely living ritual
I wonder if he will live long enough to receive no cards
I wake him
Hello I'm just having a wee doss
I can see that
I look down at him, marred with age
And say:
Merry Christmas Papa; here's a card

Which space is this?



This space
Is mine
This space
Is warm
This space
Is quiet
Away fae life's distractions
mah finger deliberately descends
14 times
onto crusty keys
and upticks 120 minutes
I have a mother to make proud
119
I huv tae get a real joab
118
I huv tae stop watchin daytime TV
117
That's why I'm here
116
Right cut the shit

This is their space
My periphery tracks
illuminated by fiery sunbeams

perched over the monitor
like a leopard focused on its prey
I see them in here a lot
in the mornings, before I arrive
staying after I leave
They look frustrated at times
with a sigh and a frown
Proscribed stress, much like mine
I hope their hair remains intact
unlike mine
and they get what they deserve

This is the maws' space
To get oot eh hoose
even if it's for a few hours
To watch their wean grow
and hear fae other motherly moans
but this is the weans' space too,
Bounce and Rhyme
Clap and Sing
in between songs
maws plan playdates
or dream about better days
I want to join in with the rhymes
but that's their space not mine

This is the widow's space
Where the free warmth
of grieving souls
is comforting
and chats about last waltzes
are listened tae
over tea and biscuits
partners remember

that the Foxes double cream
wis oor Johnny's favourite

This is the addict's space
Where peers support each other
through conversations
connections are made
and the violet rays
in the lavvy
keep the temptation at bay
While sponsors debate the game at the weekend
and where they would be
withoot each other

TAKE A GUESS: WHICH SPACE IS THIS?

This is a library!
the only space that unites oor community
and as soon as we depart
through those automatic doors
our paths
diverge
but we will meet again
thanks to the power of a plastic card

Robbie MacLeòid

‘Tha na dàin seo le Robbie MacLeòid aig an aon àm smaoineachail agus drùis-mhiannach, a’ rannsachadh aignidh a tha dà-chànanach agus dà-sheòrsach tro bhith ag ath-chruthachadh miotais agus smodal cultair pop. Dàin a th’ annta far a bheil ‘teanga marbh’ air a slugadh, air a sùigeadh agus air ath-bheòthachadh ann am beul bràmair; ’s e guth ùr gluasadach ann am bàrdachd Ghàidhlig a tha seo.’

‘Robbie’s poems are brooding and erotic, exploring a consciousness that is bilingual and bisexual through reworkings of mythology and smatterings of pop culture. They are poems in which a “dead tongue” is swallowed, sucked, revived in a lover’s mouth; his is an exciting new voice in Gaelic poetry.’
Peter Mackay

‘S e sgrìobhadair agus bàrd a th’ ann an Robbie MacLeòid, a bhios a’ cruthachadh anns a’ Ghàidhlig agus anns a’ Bheurla. An-dràsta, tha e ag obair air a’ chiad chruinneachadh bàrdachd aige. Bhuannaich an làmh-sgrìobhainn bàrdachd aige Làmh-sgrìobhainn as Fheàrr do dh’Inbhich aig Na Duaisean Litreachais ann an 2022. Bidh e bliadhna an Alba Nuadh a’ teagasg Gàidhlig. Tha dàimhean aige ri Eilean Bharraigh.

Robbie MacLeòid is a poet and writer, who creates in Scottish Gaelic and English. He is currently working on his first poetry pamphlet, the manuscript for which won Best Unpublished Manuscript at the Gaelic Literature Awards in 2022. You can find his work in *Gutter Magazine*, *404 Ink* and *STEALL*, among other places. Robbie is currently spending a year lecturing in Gaelic in Nova Scotia. Robbie has family connections to the Isle of Barra.

Faerytale

Meet me where the laws bend like backs,
so far, so far they almost break.
They can't take us in, our weight
too much to bear
on antiquated chains.
Meet me where 'I love you' and 'fuck me'
are equally locked away.

Meet me under bridges
like this is a fucking fairy tale.
I have riddles only your tongue can unlock.
Leave milk out for the good folk.
Don't look back when you're walking home.
If you hear a siren's song,
run, and lock the door
or... don't?
You can line the windows with your pillars of salt,
cross yourself as you bolt the lock or maybe
just
worship
me.

Meet me in otters' pockets,
or hung like horses,
ridden hard and put away
wet, in the bedroom,
bathroom, back alley, come
when the dry ice has dried up,
when you don't have to go home
but you can't stay here

and your ears are ringing
but oh, what a night. Come

take off that mask, lover,
or don it. I wait between lines,
and want between flickering
lights. Come away, oh,
come however
you are, whoever
you want to be

and meet me.

dà-sheòrsach

mo ghàidhlig orm
mar mo dhà-sheòrsachd;
do-fhaicsinneach.

thig a-nall, ma-thà,
a thàcharain. stob nam bheul
do theanga ‘marbh’.

Dà-sheòrsach

Literally ‘two-type’, Scottish Gaelic word for ‘bisexual’

I wear my Gaelic
like my queerness. You’d not
know it to look at me, so

come here to me.
Shove your dead tongue
in my mouth.

Cuimhneachan

Tha cuimhne agam
air a' Mhegadrive:

gràinneag ghorm an luaiths a' cruinneachadh
fhàinneachan den òr, le gliogadaich
a chuir gaoir tro Mam
is a chuireas fhathast,
dhan latha an-diugh;

an tuagh òr,
lem bhràithrean a' sgoltadh
ar nàimhdean
le ar gaisgich annasach
leis a' cheòl anabarrach math
ar leinn.

air neo

beagan nas aosda, nam shuidhe
nur seòmar aig ceann na staidhre
leam fhèin, is geama cho mòr romham
is gu feumte diosc airson a chluich—
gu feumte dioscan!
a' tighinn far an trèana
aig Miodgàrd, ceò
san adhair, claidheamh
rim dhruim, saoghal romham
ann an seòmar aig ceann na staidhre
air astar bhon tì is còmhradh ach fhathast
ann, leibh.

an-diugh, gheibh mi Sonic is Golden Axe
son sgillinnean air a fòn agam;
am bliadhna, thig ath-innse FF7 a-mach;
chan eil e cho comasach dhomh
sib' fhèin a thilleadh;

a-nist, dè th' agam dhibh?
£150 a fhuair mi de na bha air fhàgail
às dèidh cosgaisean cùraim a phàigheadh;
lèine-t a fhuair mi aon Nollaig,
air a bheil dearbhadh gun deach
a dhèanamh le luchd-obrach an aonadh;

agus cuimhne.
Tha cuimhne agam.

Memory Card

I mind the Megadrive:
wee blue rodent running
up rings with their drrring!
that drove Mam
up the wall, still do;

the axe of gold, with my brothers
splitting our enemies with
strange heroes and compelling
tunes,

or else

a little older, sitting
in your room up the stairs,
and before me, a story
so epic only discs - plural! -
could tell it. alighting
at Midgard, smoke
in the air, sword strapped
to my back, an entire world
in that room upstairs
a little ways from the tea
and conversation but still there,
with you.

nowadays, I can get Sonic and Golden Axe
for pennies on my phone; this year
yet another Final
Fantasy comes out,

and I return to Midgard
but returning to you
is not so easy.

what remains?

£150 - what I got of what was left
after the bills were paid. a t-shirt
I got from you one Christmas, proudly
proclaiming: Union Made.

and, too, memories.
I hold memories.

H4LL41G

[NA LOISG] air an fhia.

[CRUINNICH] na bùird agus na tairgnean.

[AITHNICH] na diofar chraobhan.

[LÌON] do phoca le ainmean-àite.

[FAIC] na mairbh beò.

[BRÙTH] ‘X’ agus

[TILL]. [TILL]. [TILL].

H4LL41G

[DO NOT SHOOT] the deet.

[COLLECT] the boards and nails.

[RECOGNISE] the different trees.

[FILL] your bag with placenames.

[SEE] the dead alive.

[PRESS ‘X’] and

[RETURN]

[RETURN]

[RETURN].

Medha Singh

‘...the sequence is gorgeous, poignant, beautifully evocative and strange, masterfully subtle, yet poetically exhilarating.’

Alan Gillis

Medha is a poet, editor and translator based in Edinburgh. Her work has appeared in *The Robert Graves Review*, *3:AM*, *Hotel*, *Firmament* and *Interpret* among others. She is the author of *Ecdysis* (2017, Mumbai) and a work of translation from the French, *I Will Bring My Time: Love Letters* by S.H. Raza (Vadehra Art, 2020). Singh has completed a Masters degree in Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh. She was nominated for the TFA awards (India) in 2019 and 2020. She edits London-based literary journal *Berfrois*, and reads poetry for *Sepia Journal*.

Medha’s poems deal with grief, absence, love and loss, often engaging with the concrete and small as a funnel for the larger ideas that govern us. Her work relies on image and music more than movement and action, which is really a way of thinking of identity and place as rooted in one’s experience of language, the sounds in the voice of your mother, the words on pages of schoolbooks, all have a way of affecting the internal music of our everyday experience, it is the body’s secret laid bare.

After

I held you under open heat
by a river that warmed and curved
in the distance, it sloshed beneath trains
in that strange society. Our dawns tapered,
turning gelatinous within the deep grammar
of love. I peppered these quiet words for you, across
the marmalade dusk, and now you stand in a field within
my solitude. There is a God moving her dark hand in water over the straits
where whales go to calve. In shallows they find muster for the new babe.
The grass glitters, daisies quiver in their windy groove as you begin
to remember our time: I couldn't gather you up, knowing
your nose, your tongue might find another, snug
in the air coiling our concrete past, it now cracks
around the waists of women you think you
finally learnt to love. Think of me
as a hand in the pines, from a purer
time, as error and ghost still coring
your chest: stubborn,
unmoving.

Another Life

I'm writing love on a serviette
as mourners gather on a mound
for the disgraced dead, still
in grave-clothes underfoot—
suddenly, slow pianos sing
in air, the shifting earth
moving its cadavers to an ache
in the ocean. Here they are, the wretched
reborn as willows, contorted into pains
they don't recognise. Bad men become trees.
The earth forgives them, as do I. They begin
to give. The wicked also dream
of love. They know darkness overhead
means night before & night behind, yet drops
of light have shot through this earth's evening;
overhead, ginkoes have flared
against sun. Evening over tarmac, evening
beneath lorries, where dogs huddle
for warmth & for miles on end
the quiet noise of town & at the end
of the last mile, me, pouring this syrup
on a napkin. Things I can't say yet:
Oh, pianos. Oh, love. How we begin
to open, under black water.

The clouds now burn off

under white light, bracken and bramble
browning in white weather. Here in the meadows
is yet another creature, yes, odd like the women
appeasing volatile men and you see, she's foreign
too, trying to seem calm so she can justify
wearing her cotton dungarees in this joke
of a summer. Watch her try to contain fidget,
shiver and retort. Barbecue smoke rising
from grass, against skin, muscle, and a child
sleeps on his father's stomach who sleeps
inside the stomach of a hammock, lulled
by the warmth of body and day.

The Meadows

The slow tension of your step I know
so well, now this absence in air, where
your body moved next to mine. I drop
my eyes, they shine under sun. In the red
world behind closed lids, I fall inside
a river of lavender carrying on
into our days, as we lie in the meadows,
kissing. God's feints bruise the rising moon,
they come for me as you leave, my cheeks
saline now that it's clear the sun eats
only so much darkness, darkness sick
of itself, she, a mendicant for light - I alone
enter the black cave of your mouth, I alone
coddle its tongue with mine.

Rewilding

Ecstasy I was told is to lie outside oneself, the way we think of gardens being the only way the earth shakes awake from its taupe dream and enters world into verdure, or the way invisible things become apparent in visible things, the wind undulates in wheat, light flickers along stones under running water. Now, look at the life with bones and words, small but powerfully sad, with all its fine writing by the refined, consummate and dead. All I want in the anxiety and aimlessness of world and ecstasy is the courage of gardens that endure the quiver of time. The kind that could make me stand through the cremation of a child in snow, where there is none to attend but a blanket and me.

Lunch, Boat

The church on distant ground, its cross like a spinning top
& the kitchen at the restaurant ripe with hot butter sizzling
through fresh ramsons. A staghorn knife quartered the afternoon.
At the table on the prow, gleaming fish lay inside crushed ice—
such liquid music before the food's arrival, swish and slosh,
birthed in water. Such textures sitting in the narrowing light,
our chests taut with fear: political views, fissured and chivvied,
and don't speak of values, how they take time to marinate, cook.
What we mistook for love, really just refractions through feeling:
it was over then. Borrowed light mirrored in droplets at once
prism and sphere. In their sheen I saw reflections of lost friends,
the same lumens darting through us that once blighted Saturn,
its petroleum oceans & lay on the granular snouts of foals
tethered to a cart, in a sunlit field.

Touch

It's hard to turn back from what these hands have touched.
In one world, you'd want it to be silk, mead, ice sheets, dust—
I'd say yes to all but touch the black wind inside your ribcage
instead. It was then I knew a cold thing. We've gone on making
something of invisible sorrows in the night, as with elements:
what sits on a potting wheel but dance & congress of ocean limb,
orphaned earth, stray wind & trial, by fire. To build not break.
It's dark inside an earthen pot, so the water cools in summer heat.
I now know this bright chill – ingots of gold, driftwood in winter
& old rubber tyres in snow that burn the village dead. I have known
all one could touch: tribal song on another side of the forest,
I know by the way it held me first. I walked away, still
having had these hands on the newness of the strange—
cobblestones, different water, sorrel, this rain.

Look at the bronze bird between white birches—

moonwashed and soft, now the oak
above the rocks, and the woman sitting
inside the window with her Chartreuse.
Sometimes this makes up for what she, drunk
on an old pain, mistakes for the present.
The sounds of the day roll up like canvas
as points of starlight peek through
the grape-black sky. There emerges the voice
again, leaves whirling in idle wind, always
singing a tune she knows - how foolish
was Eve, never saw that Adam was
her father. Adam did not know how to touch
a woman. She thinks of herself
as a sad clown whose games are flashing
through the bare trees. She is inside the ocean,
wending her way through water. She is bone
-tired, kissed dry. She is alluvium and foam,
she's taking tonight's train, running away
from home. Falling asleep in a shivering seat,
she wakes to morning, baking her face
under Baltic sun. Senescent, how she floats
now, chewing on the ashes of God.

**Children's and young
adult fiction**

Sonali Misra

‘Sonali is one of the hardest-working writers I have ever met. Every piece of work she produces is infused with her passion and drive. She’s a bold thinker with hugely original and compelling ideas. Truly, Sonali is a writer to watch.’

Claire Askew

Sonali Misra is an Indian author of fiction and nonfiction. Her debut nonfiction book, *21 Fantastic Failures*, was published in 2020. Her short stories and personal essays have appeared in British, Canadian and Indian anthologies. As a winner of the National Library of Scotland’s Fresh Ink programme, her commissioned personal essay was added to the Library archives. It was also shortlisted for the Anne Brown Prize, delivered by Wigtown Book Festival and BBC Radio Scotland. Sonali began her YA fantasy novel *Aasra* while studying for her MSc in Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh and completed its first draft at a four-week UNESCO City of Literature writing residency at Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2022. She is the co-founder of The Selkie Publications CIC, which publishes minoritised voices, and is completing a PhD in Publishing Studies. Previously, she worked in editorial and product (sales) roles at Big-Five publishers in India.

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Extract from *Aasra*

Chapter Six *Kiara*

Sumeet and Kiara stare at the body that's fallen at their feet. It's Mita - the woman working in HR whose responses are two weeks delayed, minimum, and require more than a couple prods. She's also the one who informed Kiara that it was 'against company policy' to provide interns with a letter of recommendation, which her father told her she must collect before they forgot all about her. Her chances of getting that letter seem pretty slim now, since a knife's sticking out of Mita's chest.

A bubble of nervous laughter almost escapes Kiara's throat. Fuck, this isn't the time. Sumeet is the first to react and slams the door, grimacing at the thud it makes against Mita's head, but not before Kiara scans the scene unravelling before them. People - people she knows, has shared lunch with, gossiped with and gossiped about - running, tripping over corpses, screaming. Marching through them is a horde of grey-cloaked figures, the glint of steel in their hands veiled by a sheen of crimson. They turn towards the room occupied by the editorial team, just as the door obstructs them from view.

'What the hell is going on?' whisper-screams Sumeet.

'Is it a terrorist attack? I thought there'd be guns and not blades,' Kiara murmurs in a daze.

Sumeet shakes Kiara, forcing her out of the inertia that's grabbed hold of her. 'We have to get out of here, but how?'

There's an exit 20 metres to the left of the toilet, if only they were willing to risk it in the hall. The screams of the dying only underscore their hesitance. Instead they search their surroundings, and their eyes land on a vent high on the wall.

'We need to Bruce Willis our way out of that tiny thing?' Kiara exclaims, looking at Sumeet's huge breasts and thinking of her own big butt. They've often joked that if they combined their bodies, they'd either end up with a beanpole or a bulbous Coke bottle.

Sumeet grabs the dustbin, which she upturns and climbs. Peering inside the vent, she asks, 'Do we even know if this'll take us out of the building?'

That is a legitimate question. Knowing some of the infamous builders of Gurgaon, the vent could lead to a dead end. 'If it doesn't, we'll just have to hide and wait,' Kiara decides. While Sumeet tugs the grille, which obviously comes off much more easily than she'd anticipated - thank you, lazy corrupt builders - Kiara stares at the door for a few seconds before forcing herself to open it a crack. Are there more bodies strewn about than before? The terrorists are nowhere in sight, so she pulls it wider and bends low. Mita's eyes roll inwards above her agape mouth, probably stuck in a pathetic scream. She was terrible at her job, but she didn't deserve to die like this. No one does.

'Sorry,' Kiara whispers as she yanks out the knife, the motion of the blade grazing Mita's insides reminiscent of Kiara helping her mother trim excess fat off raw chicken.

We're all meat.

She shuts the door on Mita with another thud.

'Come on!'

Sumeet has scrambled up and gestures Kiara towards her. She takes one step, and the world breaks apart.

Terrorists use guns. And bombs.

That's the first coherent thought that crosses Kiara's mind as she comes to. Her ears hurt, as if they've been boxed, and a dullness settles over her like a fleece blanket, numbing all her senses except for the constant ringing that she hears. She's lying flat on her stomach as a weight holds her down. Something trickles down her face. Sweat or blood, she doesn't know. Medical dramas have taught her that she should test her toes and fingers to check if she's broken or paralysed anything. Thankfully, the digits wiggle in response. Coughing out the dryness coating her mouth, she opens her eyes in time to see, through cracked lenses, a cloud of dust accompanying the expelled air. She pushes backwards, but the door is stubbornly embracing her. She extends her hand from beneath the door, absently noting that her turquoise nail paint is now chipped, and feels a sudden clasp.

'Kiara, stay down!'

Ma?

This thought jerks her, and the renewed force helps her lift the wooden door far enough for her to crawl out. It thumps on the floor. She forces her eyes to focus. Rips in her jeans expose scrapes on her knees. Minutes - or hours? - before where she'd seen a clean face reflected in the toilet mirror, she now finds a grimy one with an ugly forehead bump. Her attention's pulled away to a familiar voice shouting obscenities as her fifty-two-year-old teddy bear of a mother unleashes an angry rain of bullets onto the cloaked man running towards them.

Her mother Radha turns those brown eyes - ones Kiara knows better than her own - to Kiara and runs

them over her body quickly before fixing them on her face. 'Go to the back exit. I'll cover you.'

'Ma - *what?* I'm not leaving you!'

She doesn't respond, instead aiming her gun at four more figures in grey. Kiara's eyes land on the one nearest them and the bright orange sun embroidered on his chest. She starts shaking at the sight of it. *I know it, I've seen it before - but where?*

Her usual protective instinct regarding her five-foot chubby gullible mother, who always has a bad joke to crack and extra food to fill guests with, flares up, but Kiara's rooted to the spot for the second time that day. She is unable to move in the direction of the exit or towards Radha to help her. But *how* would she help this Fury? A shadow enters Kiara's peripheral vision, and she's about to retreat further into the toilet when a hand grabs hers and it remembers the familiar touch of the callused palm.

Her father Rohit pulls her to him, she thinks for a split second, into a hug. But he moves away, and she's dragged like a ragdoll, her neck straining back to find Radha though failing in the confusion of the debris, the din and the dead. They slow down upon reaching the exit. His floppy salt-and-pepper hair is tousled, just like on lazy Sunday mornings when he cooks paranthas for the family in the classic dad attire of a white vest and shorts. His usually warm crinkled face is hidden beneath flecks of blood, dried and fresh. Is it his or someone else's? He shoots her a rueful smile. Before she can get more than a syllable out, Kiara's shoved outside by a force she didn't think her frail father capable of.

'Go. Don't call us. We'll find you.'

'Papa, *please!*' she screams as he slams the heavy door in her face and jams the handle using the butt of his big gun.

Kiara stands there, looking at his retreating figure through the small viewing pane of the door, and only then remembers Sumeet. Fuck! She hits the door with her right hand and screams in pain – there are splinters in her fist – but he’s lost in the smoke.

What the hell is going on? She. . . she doesn’t know what to do. How does she help them, any of them? How does she do anything?

She shuts her eyes and tries to orientate herself. Sumeet, she can focus on Sumeet right now. Kiara runs towards what hopefully is the external wall of the women’s bathroom. She spots a vent, jumps on the spot and shouts her friend’s name. No response. She screams again, hoping she won’t attract any other attention – she doesn’t know how many terrorists are in the building or if they’re outside too. She should’ve counted them. She should’ve done so much more.

Reaching into her pockets for her phone, she finally notices the blood-ridden knife in her left hand. She held on to it even through the explosion. With the right, she dials Sumeet, who answers on the second ring and cries out Kiara’s name.

‘Sumeet! I think I’m outside the vent. Bang on it.’

Kiara’s heart lurches at the sound. ‘I need you to kick it down. I’m here,’ she says.

‘This one is nailed shut from the outside, you have to open it!’

Kiara staves off waves of helplessness and panic that threaten to wash over her and stares at the knife. Could it act as a makeshift screwdriver?

‘I’m trying something. Wait.’

She whips around, in search of something to stand upon, in time to see an arm reaching for her. Without the thought formulating in her head, she slices the forearm.

‘Keep the dagger down,’ roars a broad-shouldered man, whose head is eclipsing the sun at his back.

Kiara tightens her grip on the weapon. He sighs and whispers something. She waits for his next move, but he relaxes his stance, which makes her even tenser. Suddenly the dagger is flicked from her grasp – one second it’s there and the next it’s airborne. No, not airborne. Someone is holding it, but how’d they get behind her, between her back and the wall? She flips around, conscious of being surrounded, focusing on a way out of this new mess.

‘We’re here to help you. The Sharmas called us,’ says the girl on Kiara’s left as she wipes the dagger on her sleeve and tucks it into her belt.

‘Why would my parents call you? They’re trying to save me from the likes of you,’ Kiara spits back, all her repressed anger and fear spewing finally like venom.

The man directs his next question to his companion, ‘How long is this going to take?’ but the girl shushes him.

‘I’m standing right here, Baldy,’ Kiara interjects and his bushy eyebrows shoot up, ‘and it’s going to take as long as your explanation will.’

Whatever he’s about to say is forgotten as a banging comes from the direction of the vent. Both step in front of Kiara with their fists at the ready, but she shoves past them and glares them down.

‘My friend’s stuck in there. If you’re really here to help me, get her out.’

They exchange a look, no words. The man walks to the wall. His bulk casts an even wider shadow on the peeling paint as he hauls the girl on top of his shoulders in one fluid move, reminding Kiara of the acrobats at the travelling circus last year. The girl pulls out a dagger

of her own, a symbol etched on its glossy handle. A red gem above the symbol catches the light and sparkles. She undoes the screws of the grille with a few deft movements and extracts it. This, she throws on the lawn, then peers inside with a reassuring smile. Kiara shouts, 'It's safe! They'll help you down', with more optimism than she feels.

Once Sumeet's down, the two friends exchange a quick hug. Kiara grabs Sumeet's hand tightly and looks at the strangers again. She's never seen such a pair of physical contrasts before, outside the caricature figures of Laurel and Hardy on TV or Motu Patlu in Rohit's old comics. Kiara's an average height at five-foot-five, but she towers over the girl - or the woman? She could easily pass for a school-going teenager, except for her eyes. Those eyes cannot belong to a child. Her jet-black hair is tied in a practical plait reaching her waist, its oiled shine complementing the sheen of her dark skin. Lithe limbs hanging with a carefree grace don't suit her torn dusty clothes or the reddened tails of her knotted shirt. She looks winded, her breathing low and hard. The man's build, in opposition, threatens to envelop you, making him seem much taller than he is. He has to be a good decade older than his partner. His wide shoulders hang loose beneath his unreadable face, bar the expression of seeming bored.

He clears his throat. 'We've proven we're not the bad guys by getting your friend—'

'Or you've just got yourself another hostage,' Kiara breaks in and Sumeet releases a yelp.

He exhales and turns to the girl. 'Can we knock them out already?'

'What?!' Kiara sputters as she and Sumeet retreat. The girl brings a hand out of her trouser pocket, blowing a

shimmery powder at them. Kiara coughs and notices how heavy her tongue is - was it always this wide? Her eyelids are being pulled down like evening shop shutters. For the second time within an hour, she finds temporary respite in unconsciousness.

Chapter Seven

Kiara

A shadowy figure. . . a woman. . . crouches in a dark corner as another leans against a brick wall. They don't speak a word, their eyes focused on nothing in particular. Footsteps echo behind me, along with the turning of a key. Somebody laughs, a deep throaty laugh - and I realise it booms from my chest. The man strides towards me. He'll crash into me, I can't retreat - but no. Metal bars separate us. He grabs hold of them, his knuckles whitening with pressure, and leans in. Papa's face scrunches into a growl and spits at mine.

Kiara feels a wetness. Rico's climbed into her bed again and is licking her. Blindly, she reaches for his furry body so she can *lovingly* shove him off, but something's odd. Did Papa trim his coat? He's never made it this short. She opens her eyes to find a pink tongue give her a good lick-over before she pushes its head away. Amber eyes stare at her down a long brown snout.

This isn't Rico.

Kiara startles, scaring off the dog as she bangs her head against something hard. Just the headboard. Wait, whose fucking bed is this? She groans. Her head hurts, and the room seems fogged up. Or is her vision just cloudy? Among her muddled thoughts, images appear of rom-com films in which the heroine's partied too hard and is innocently laid to bed by the hero, her

soulmate. She doesn't remember going out drinking, but even if she did, she'd probably end up being raped and murdered and not put to bed with her clothes intact.

Flashes of the day race into her head. The blast. Ma shooting people down. Papa pushing her out of the office. The strangers and their even stranger sleeping powder.

Oh.

Sumeet?!

Kiara jolts forward and regrets it immediately. Ironically, she does feel like she's had a tequila shot too many. She's about to grab her throbbing head when she notices her bandaged right hand. The Jaipuri quilt reveals that she's still got her filthy clothes on. She slides her feet into her sneakers and stands on wobbly knees. Collecting her glasses from the bedside table, she scans her surroundings, trying to ignore the cracks in the lenses. The tiny room only contains a small window beside the air-conditioner, and the curtain parts to reveal kohl blackness. The night sky doesn't contain any visible stars, but she wasn't expecting any so soon after the Diwali celebrations and the high pollution levels. Papa's right, she really needs to find a way out of this city that's slowly abetting her allergies in killing her. She winces at the memory of his face. Her knees buckle, but the bed supports her fall.

A trembling hand wipes off the sweat that's appeared on her forehead. Her fingers brush against the bump and she gasps in pain. This hitch in her breath leads to rapid intakes, until she's forgotten how she ever breathed. Her chest hurts - like palms held by criss-crossed fingers are pressing, pushing, boring in - and her body shakes in pain and its anticipation. She squeezes her eyes shut, and the tears crouching there flow down her cheeks.

Kiara was hoping for a comforting blankness, but the memories of the day play on the screen of her eyelids. Radha shielding Kiara and walking straight into possible death. Rohit, bruised and bloodied, his desperate eyes roving over her face as if seeing it for the last time.

She knows what she saw today, but she doesn't understand any of it, and the harder she tries to make sense of things, the more ridiculous each explanation becomes.

What exactly happened? Who were those terrorists and why'd they attack a stupid publishing house? They edit grammar books for kids, for crying out loud. There's nothing nefarious going on. And where did Radha, a housewife, and Kiara's retired accountant of a father learn combat or even get the guns? But, most importantly - a thought that makes Kiara press her nails into her palm until she pierces it bloody again - *how* could she have left them behind? She's known for years that she's a coward, but she should've at least reacted differently when it came to her own parents. Parents who may have just sacrificed their lives to save a pathetic gutless shit like her. Each new wave of bewildered fear washes over her until she seems to be gasping for air, her limbs chilling into inaction.

A whimper beside her is followed by the wetness of the dog's nose against her forearm. It roots Kiara to the present. She wipes her face with her uninjured hand. Taking a deep breath, she counts to ten and exhales - a technique her mother taught her to manage her panic attacks. Kiara locks these thoughts, which she knows will mince her into sand if she dwells upon them any longer, away in a chest. She forces herself to stand back up. The two kidnappers brought her somewhere. She must find a way out - but not without Sumeet.

Maybe they've put her in another room, just so they have something to hold over Kiara? This again ties up with everything that's mindfucking her. Who are these people and how do they know her parents? She would have to be pretty dense to ignore that there's a part of her parents' lives she's clueless about, and those two strangers seemingly fit into that space. What else have Ma and Papa not told her?

The dog tilts its head at Kiara from the bed as she engages in this inner monologue. She absent-mindedly pats it while sorting her thoughts to focus on the tasks at hand:

Get Sumeet.

Get out.

And find her parents.

Summary of *Aasra*

Aasra (Hindi for ‘shelter’) is the first in a YA fantasy trilogy set in contemporary India. It reimagines India’s history as being moulded by the hidden neoliberal League and traditionalist Samaj. The story is told by three characters, Kiara, Vik and Ahaana. Kiara, 18, is embroiled in a centuries-old war when the Samaj’s soldiers attack her place of internship. She escapes, only to learn that her life has been a lie. Her country’s fate is controlled by secret forces; her parents, former League warriors, adopted her on its Council’s orders; and she can blur the gap between dreams and reality. Now, Kiara must lead the League, as she tries to rescue her parents and master her powers. She’s whisked to *Aasra*, the League’s headquarters in the Himalayas, by the other protagonists: prematurely retired warrior Vik, 21, who’s plagued by the violence in his childhood and the League; and driven tactician Ahaana, 18, the first of her social class on the League’s Council.

Through a fun fast-paced story commenting on growing global conservatism and the inability of neoliberalism to counter it, Sonali will introduce Indian genre writing to an international readership, especially fans of Leigh Bardugo’s *Six of Crows* and Tomi Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone*.

Henry Coles

'I love Henry's writing. He blends magical and scientific concepts in ways that seem absolutely real - full of clever codes and clues, but also vivid characters and settings. Everything he does feels new. I'm delighted whenever I read something of his, then jealous that I didn't think of it myself.'

Alastair Chisholm

Originally from a small village in Yorkshire, Henry now lives in Edinburgh with his partner, children and modest collection of cats. After studying chemistry and materials engineering, he became a software engineer and an accidental expert in obscure software-testing techniques.

Henry started writing Middle Grade fiction in 2016. His first completed book, *The Cipher Engines*, was shortlisted for the Times Chicken House IET 150 Award and Well's Book for Children competitions. His second, *The Traitor's Moon*, was longlisted for the Bath and WriteMentor Children's Novel Awards.

Extract from *The Traitor's Moon*

1. The Loophole

Haskell's father was in the Receiving Room, talking about him with a man who should not have been there.

The Receiving Room was gold. Fine art and ancient tapestries. A loud declaration of wealth to intimidate a visitor, or make them feel at home. For a man like the one Haskell had seen welcomed in – low and insignificant, dressed in dusty travelling clothes – there was the back entrance and the servants' floor.

Haskell paced the carpet outside, imagining how the discussion could concern him. Why had he been summoned?

Long-dead ancestors glared down from flaking portraits. Not Haskell's ancestors. Not Smythes. The largest, brightest and newest of the pictures were of his own father and grandfather, but the rest belonged to someone else. A procession of dead strangers that culminated in the down-on-his-luck duke who had sold them to Haskell's father, along with the house and grounds.

The door opened and Valence, Haskell's second-eldest brother, peered out, dressed in his captain's uniform.

'You can come in now,' he said.

Haskell stepped through the doorway. The visitor was gone, spirited away through a side entrance.

Haskell's father was sitting in the Grand Chair, a construction of wood and gilt he had brought back from India on one of their ships. A throne in all but name, from which he liked to greet his visitors. He ignored

Haskell, busy with a document. Mr Slinger, the head of the family's lawyers, was sitting to his left. He nodded to Haskell and smiled.

Valence perched himself on the edge of a high side table. Haskell's eldest brother, Jarle, emerged from the shadows at the back of the room and stood to his father's right. He regarded Haskell with a frown.

Everybody waited.

Haskell's father turned a page, then glanced up at Haskell.

'Tell me,' he said. 'What happened to the *Dart* last year?'

Not long ago, such an unexpected question might have thrown Haskell into confusion and stuttering, but for the past six months his latest tutor had thrown questions at him in English, Latin and Greek, striking with a cane if he showed any sign of hesitation.

'Nothing, sir. She arrived safely into Bristol.'

'And what price did we get for her cargo?'

'I don't remember, sir.'

'It was poor. Lord Cantwell's *Albion* sailed the same route. She departed later, but arrived days ahead of the *Dart* and sold her cargo at twice the price. How did she beat the *Dart* to the prize?'

Haskell swallowed. His father never asked impossible questions like this. How was he supposed to answer?

'Perhaps the *Albion's* captain is especially—'

'The captain of the *Albion* is an inbred idiot,' his father snapped. 'The *Dart* was crewed by our best. What about the *Doddington* the year before?'

'The *Doddington* was wrecked off Bird Island, sir.'

'She was. Wrecked in calm waters. Lord Cantwell's *Antelope* came into the Lyver Pool carrying sugar and tobacco two weeks later, and made a handsome profit.'

Why do you think Lord Cantwell has such luck while our own runs poor?’

Another impossible question.

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘Because it is not luck. Which brings us to the order of business. It is time we talked about your future, Haskell.’

‘I don’t understand. What does my future have to do with the *Doddington* and the *Dart*?’

His father rose from his chair and poured himself a drink, waving away the servant who rushed to help.

‘You are fourteen now, Haskell.’

‘Twelve, sir.’

‘What?’

‘I am twelve, sir.’

Haskell’s father held him with a glare. For a moment Haskell thought he had triggered one of his father’s rages, but the dark look passed.

‘Twelve then. It is time to think about what you will do for the family. You must have a purpose. You cannot continue to play with your books and ride on the work of others.’

Haskell pressed his teeth together firmly to ensure he would not speak.

‘Have you thought about how you might become useful?’

Haskell hesitated, unsure if he was really meant to answer. ‘I thought perhaps I could captain a ship, like Valence.’

Valence and his father exchanged a glance, and Jarle laughed.

‘We have spoken about this before,’ his father said. ‘You do not have the qualities of a seaman, let alone a ship’s captain.’

‘Or I—’

‘And you are quite unsuited to a position at the helm of the business, like Jarle. These things are out of the question and will not be discussed further.’

Haskell pressed his teeth together again, harder this time.

‘Your tutors say you have shown an aptitude for numbers. We had thought you could help with the accounts—’

Haskell shuddered. This had also been discussed before, and he had endured dull afternoons while the books and accounting were explained to him.

‘—but another possibility has arisen.’

Haskell recognised the set of his father’s face. Whatever this was, it was not a possibility. A new certainty was about to enter his life.

‘Cantwell does not have better luck than us. The game is rigged in his favour, and that of the other titled families.’

This was a favourite topic of his father’s, and Haskell knew his lines.

‘A title gives the right to birth debts,’ he recited, ‘and indentured labour is all but free.’

‘Quite right, son’ - his father nodded approvingly - ‘but free labour is not the only way in which those with titles are kept ahead of us. With a title also comes the right to consult a wizard.’

Haskell shifted uneasily. Wizards were seldom spoken of. There was something unsavoury about them. Something that made them dangerous to discuss.

His father nodded to Mr Slinger, who cleared his throat with a dry, rasping sound.

‘A man can gain great advantage by commissioning an act of magic,’ he said. ‘But there are restrictions. There is a large - and detailed - body of law. They might ask for a fair wind to be put in a ship’s sails, as Cantwell

did for the *Albion*, but may not sink a rival's vessel. The *Doddington* was a crime—'

'But we cannot prove it.' His father's lips twisted into a snarl. 'So I have decided that we shall beat Cantwell at his own game.'

'But how?' Haskell asked.

'There is a loophole,' Mr Slinger said, his face lighting with satisfaction. 'If a wizard were to perform an act of magic without money changing hands, it would be within the letter of the law. Cantwell might challenge it, but the Supreme Court has become bold of late. It decided against the king himself last year. I am confident it would find in our favour.'

Haskell's father finished his drink and held out the glass for a servant to take.

'You have been a disappointment to me, Haskell, but now is your chance to prove your value. I have agreed a price for your apprenticeship.'

'Apprenticeship? I don't understand.'

Haskell's father placed a hand on each of Haskell's shoulders and smiled at him for the first time.

'You are to be apprenticed to a wizard,' he said.

2. The Traitor

Water flowed out of the millrace, fast and angry, foaming against the paddles as it turned the wheel.

Agatha spat and threw another stone, the ghosts of her missing fingers complaining as her hand whipped through the air. The stone fell short, disappearing into the spray.

'You, girl, don't you have work to do?'

The shouting man was Joseph Hawtin. He knew Agatha's name well enough, and had no business calling her 'girl'.

She was about to yell as much back, but saw the man standing behind him: the bookkeeper. He wouldn't know Agatha from any other child in the village, but he'd find her name in his book soon enough, if someone were to shout it out in front of him.

She said a silent thank you to Joseph for the warning, slipped from her seat on the wall, and quickly made herself be elsewhere.

There was work she should be doing. Right now, as far as his Lordship was concerned, she should be combing wool. It was a family tragedy that Agatha had been sent to the combing shed, which paid half as much as the mill, but she liked it there. The mill had been deafening, full of choking dust and danger. The combing shed was quiet and calm, and the overseer liked to 'steal a little back from his Lordship' when he was confident no one would get caught, or in a dark enough mood not to care. Today he'd let it be known he might not notice if she went missing for the afternoon. Normally that would be unthinkable, but it was the Traitor's Fayre tomorrow, and rules were starting to relax.

The carnival folk had arrived already. Tomorrow there would be plenty to see: acrobats and jugglers, traders' stalls and games of chance. The Recruiting Sergeant had arrived early too, and was now marching a squad of soldiers back and forth across the village green, medals jangling. Agatha's brothers had strict instructions to go nowhere near him.

His Lordship's men had erected a tent at the edge of the green. Tomorrow Agatha would have to visit it. Everyone in the village would. The bookkeeper would be waiting inside. He'd read out what you had owed at the start of the year, what you had paid, and what your debt to his Lordship now was. Sometimes the number went down.

Sometimes it went up. If it went up, you could argue, but for that you'd spend a night in the cells, and that would have a charge. You'd see it listed in the book next year, along with interest and other fees that the bookkeeper would perhaps explain. Or perhaps would not.

It was best to stay quiet and make your mark on the line the man pointed to and hope not to see him again for another year. Life could be hard if you got on the wrong side of the bookkeeper.

#

Agatha perched on the wall by the village green and watched as the innkeeper, Mr Swales, dragged the Traitor from the cart he'd arrived on.

Last year the Traitor had been dressed in normal work clothes, but with a dead cockerel held to his shoulder with wire. Agatha's mother had explained that the cockerel was the symbol of the enemy France, so the Traitor must be a French agent.

This year, he was dressed in a bright red tunic and ruffled shirt. The clothes looked quite fine at first glance, but up close, the material was rough and poorly stitched. As always, a traitor's half-moon was sewn to his front. There was a note pinned to his back. Mr Swales pulled it off and read it aloud.

'Lord who withholds taxes from the king—' he drew in breath, making a whistling sound '—his Lordship won't like that one bit. Still, better get him stored. You're in for a warm evening, my friend.'

He addressed this last part to the Traitor, who did not reply as he was made of straw.

He'd been constructed and clothed in a town ten miles away. Tomorrow they'd hoist him on a pole and parade

him round the village. As dark drew in, they'd set him alight on the pile of wood they'd heaped on the village green in preparation.

The village's own Traitor had been tied to the top of it for the past week, but had been cut down that morning and sent by cart further down the valley. Most years they dressed him according to his Lordship's favourite theme of 'Idle Worker', but this year he was a 'Traitorous Judge'. Mr Swales said the suggestion had arrived in a letter with the royal seal.

'Going to be a tight year,' Mr Swales announced. 'His Lordship will be squeezing us a little harder if the king is squeezing him. You might as well get the word about since you've got nothing better to do, Agatha Pighills.'

He turned to face her as he said her name, and Agatha started guiltily.

'I'm on an errand.'

'I'm sure you are. You'd be a damned fool to be gawping there in plain sight if you wasn't.' He lowered his voice. 'And while you're about it, you can warn folk about *him*.'

He nodded towards a one-horse cart stopped outside the inn. It stood out from the brightly coloured trailers of the Fayre folk by being drab and uninteresting. The owner, tending to a horse tethered on the grass, was easy to match to it, dressed in a worn travelling cloak over a woollen jacket and breeches.

'Says he's recruiting wizards,' Mr Swales said.

'Wizards? I've never heard of anyone recruiting wizards.'

'Me neither. Told him he's wasting his time looking for anything here but sheep and fleas, and he says to me "sheep, fleas and children". I'd be steering clear of him if I were you.'

There were other people not at work. They exchanged guilty glances with Agatha or carefully avoided noticing her at all. Everyone had the good sense to keep their heads down and not draw attention.

Almost everyone.

Sam Feather was sitting at the edge of the common, already drunk. The sensible thing would be to leave him be, but Agatha had the kindness granted her by Joseph Hawtin to pass on.

‘Mr Feather, sir? Time to be moving on, the bookkeeper is about.’

‘Elizabeth?’ He looked up at her, confused.

‘No, it’s me, Agatha.’

‘Agatha?’ He spoke with the slow, distant confusion of someone who was not going to get up and out of sight any time soon. ‘Have you seen my Elizabeth?’

Elizabeth was his daughter. Six months ago, her dress had caught in a spinning frame. The men who carried her body away said there wasn’t a bone that wasn’t broken. Agatha’s ghost fingers ached at the thought of it.

Sam Feather was too big to move alone, but the bookkeeper could come at any moment.

‘I saw Elizabeth earlier,’ Agatha said. ‘She was heading back to your house.’

He looked at her sharply. Not angry, but more confused than before, aware something was not right.

‘Here, take my hand. I’ll walk you there.’ She held her hand out, and Sam Feather looked at it dumbly. ‘Come on, you don’t want to miss her. She’ll be gone if we dawdle.’

He hauled himself up, then shook her hand away and started unsteadily up the steep path towards his house.

It was likely that he would stop for a rest, and just as likely that he would not get up again. She could follow to see him safe, but if he didn't have the sense to stay hidden, perhaps he deserved what came to him?

'You, girl, what are you doing here?'

The voice froze her. She used to make fun of it, but only when its owner was well out of earshot.

'Turn around so I can see you.'

Agatha turned, head downcast to avoid the bookkeeper's eye.

'Where should you be?'

The bookkeeper's voice was flat and grey. Not like his clothes. He dressed in bright colours, as if he were some rich merchant or minor lord. His face was all red cheeks, teeth and broken veins.

'Well, girl? I asked you a question. What's your name?'

She hesitated, then hid her mangled hand in the folds of her shawl.

'Elizabeth, sir.'

It was dangerous to lie, but getting caught shirking was not just a problem for her. The overseer would catch trouble too.

'Elizabeth what?'

'Feather.'

'And where should you be?'

'The mill, sir, but I was sent on an errand.'

'Is that so?' He looked unconvinced. 'And what is this errand?'

'I'm to take a message to his Lordship. A frame broke a wheel.'

The lie was ridiculous, but she was too panicked to do better. The bookkeeper made a show of finding it amusing, with a laugh that didn't reach his eyes.

'Wasn't it you I saw sitting idle by the mill race earlier?'

‘No, sir.’

He reached out and lifted her chin, gripping it tight between his thumb and the knuckle of his forefinger.

‘Yes, it was you sure enough, sat bold as brass throwing stones at the wheel. So, if I am to believe your story, you were sent to speak to his Lordship himself about some trivial problem, but instead choose to sit and daydream. Is that right, Elizabeth Feather?’

He said the name slowly and clearly. A threat of sorts. He had not let go of her chin and turned her head now, left and right.

‘How old are you?’

Agatha was thirteen, her parents thought.

‘Fourteen, sir.’

‘Do your family know you are not at work? Are they shirkers too?’

He’d got a good look at her face. He would probably forget it in a week or so, but she didn’t have a week. Tomorrow she’d have to go to his tent and stand right in front of him as he looked her name up in his book.

‘No, sir. They work hard.’

He let go of her chin and straightened her coat and dress.

‘Lazy, insolent and careless of your appearance. You’re all the same, the whole worthless lot of you.’

She should never have turned around. She should have run the moment she heard his voice.

‘You at least won’t get away with it. The mill’s too good for you. We’ll find you something more fitting. Something harder. The rest of your family too.’

He grabbed her arm and pulled, jerking her against him.

‘Please, sir. I’m sorry. I’ll go back to the mill. I don’t want to—’

‘The likes of you don’t get to have choices.’

She bit his hand then, hard, until she tasted salt and metal. Finally, she ran.

Summary of *The Traitor's Moon*

When thirteen-year-old mill worker Agatha is apprenticed to the wizard Titus, she imagines a chance to pay off her birth debt and escape from poverty. Privileged Haskell hopes only to please his domineering father, who wants magic for his business empire. But Titus and his filthy ruined castle are not what either of them expect. Agatha is treated as an unpaid servant, and Haskell's magic lessons are a sham. They hate each other on sight.

Everything changes when the king's sorcerer, Septimus, visits the castle. He is looking for something secret and valuable and will stop at nothing to find it. The seemingly weak and fearful Titus defeats him with wild magic beyond anything the children could imagine. Now Haskell and Agatha must work together to uncover Titus's secrets before Septimus returns. When he does, he'll bring the king's army, and the children will face the full might and fury of the Crown. . .

Set in an alternate early industrial Britain, *The Traitor's Moon* is a Middle Grade magical adventure that explores themes of social justice while gently stretching the laws of thermodynamics.

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