

With 26

WiTH 26
is published by
BA (Hons) English
BA (Hons) Creative Writing
BA (Hons) English with Creative Writing
Falmouth University

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First published 2016
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Back cover art by Annie Johnson
WiTH logo by Joe Boswell

ISSN 2057-0449 (print)
ISSN 2057-0457 (online)

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CONTENTS

New Beginnings	5	Greg Fiddament
Glaucus Atlanticus	7	Benjamin G. Wilson
The Magician	9	Luka Watts
where you were burned...	11	Ophelia Ciocirlan
Shadows after a nuclear blast	13	Gareth Clarke
Humidity	15	Charlie Onions
A Self Portrait Painted Alone...	17	Gavin Hughes
Excellent example of a short essay	18	Mel Johnston
On Writing	21	Jodie R. Reed
Disconnected	24	Julia Byrne
Baby blues	25	Sophie McDaid
Boat	26	Mel Johnston
Forgotten Memory	27	Sophie Bowden
An essay on reading	29	Emma Jameson-Rickard
Sweet Dreams	32	Charlotte Rule
'I picked the first sweet-pea today'	33	Alice L. West
one one two three five	34	Anna Cathenka
Sarah, Sarah	35	Francesca Allen
Empty Bed	38	Lydia Hounat
01:15	39	Lydia Hounat
graphic	40	Christian Cardona
A Portrait of Pompeii	41	Georgia Matthews
Alive in the Evening	42	Alex Morgan
The Tropical House, Newquay Zoo	49	Sarah Cave
O, Bella Luna	51	Morwenna Barnes
Cross Your Legs	53	Lydia Hounat
Playground games for adults	55	Sophie McDaid
? Yes	58	Greg Fiddament
A Scrapbook Type of Diary...	59	John Bampini
What is Poetry?	66	Jamie Smith
A Glossary of Poetry	67	Jessica Hawes
The Parallel	70	Daniel Bateman
The Resistance	79	Anna Cathenka
Potato	87	Luka Watts
You Can't Ban the Columbine Kid	90	Gavin Hughes

New Beginnings

With each day dawning,
proof of where *not*
to begin again.

He tries everything so much it feels like he's missing out. So he stops. He wants to ask something, can't agree on the question, so starts with an answer and makes backward movements in all directions. Loci in an empty room waiting to be filled.

He makes the same journey again this time expecting different results. Einstein's definition of stupidity. He wouldn't agree with this statement, he knows himself *too* well.

He's defined in song lyrics. Good, bad and mediocre, *if* definable at all. His strings are static, rusty and broken, ringing across the cosmos, unsympathetically. The tune still beats at the kitchen door like malnutrition; awkward and weak.

He is faithless with words, trying desperately to point out their imperfections and failings. Ironic really. They point back *more* than equally, straight through him and out the other side. The water off a duck's back, not welcome here.

He fluctuates rapidly from multiverse to molecule, molecule to multiverse. Up and down the hourglass's thighbone. Nonrepeating.

He rejects the need to anchor, tying himself to the mast, every time it storms.

He comes powered by computer. Nationally adaptable. What leaks out through the fingertips is compensated for with excessive indulgence. Liquid and gas. Iron lungs of an astronaut. Not quite flying close enough to the sun, to melt the wax, but taking the plunge *any-old-how*.

Burning two candles at once. Each guttered with different inclinations. Meticulous attention to arbitrary detail. Deliberate rags. Squared up at the edges like a chalk outline. New murderer. Dead again with each interval.

...

Poised.

...

Expectant.

...

Born of some other world. An embryo of tomorrow in the ashes of cigarettes passed. Epsilon minus. There must have been some mistake. He's waiting for something to happen in the present; because it only ever seems to then.

Each petal falling,
marking the spot
where the present ends.

Glaucus Atlanticus

Language is leaking out of the sand
 sand, alien sand,
 that should be so far beneath
 as to be imaginary.

But sand is close now,
 and gravity is something I must reason with.
 "Sleep here. Be still here." it says.
 But the water is gone and
 I cannot sing back.

The sun, my lovely sun,
 who sings my frills into blueness
 "Heat. Life. Fire" she is singing,
 but the song of her is on me as the sand dries,
 and my music dries with it.

And then comes a shadow
 from an animal too vast
 in thought
 too vast
 in size.
 A thing like a whale that's lived through beaching.

(But now there comes a shadow vast and kind
 vast, vast in thought, too vast its size to stand.
 Dry thoughts like whales who sing on songless sand
 And lost on land do depthless, drying, die.)

And language is in its hands too, and
 it leaks onto me. Glaucus Atlanticus
 Blue Angel Blue Swallow Blue Dragon
 Yes blue, it says,
 with its hands that
 I cannot help but sting.

(Nomenclature falls from his fingers. Pure
 azure he calls me. Dragon. Angel. Blue.
 A nudibranch, bare hands, language imbues
 a second skin, the sky in miniature.)

Other things have come now,
 like the first, they leak
 opinions
 opinings
 through their glance
 "It looks unreal."
 "Is it dead?"

And then back to the wet
 which is silver beneath and blue above
 like I
 I
 I thrilling in the song of myself,
 the sun,
 my blueness my
 no
 name
 the
 blue

The Magician

She vanished out of thin air. Only he knew how that magic trick worked.

She had said no. He came out of the caravan, down to just his jeans. She was sat smoking in the pale dirt that surrounded the circle of caravans they called home. Most people would have brought a chair out with them.

“Good show tonight,” she mumbled as he ambled towards her. He held out his bottle of absinthe. “Haven’t you got a glass?” she said, not looking.

“Take it or leave it.” She grabbed the bottle, took a swig, wished she hadn’t, handed it back.

“So tell me all your amazing secrets. How did you cut that woman’s anus in half?”

“Mostly mirrors.”

“Oh.”

Lana Del Ray played from Dangerous Keith’s caravan, ‘West Coast.’ He needed to speak.

“I like this song.”

“I hate it.”

“Yeah. So do I.”

They stayed in silence.

After half an hour he pointed at his caravan.

“So do you wanna come back to mine and finish this bottle off?”

“No.”

Four weeks later she was on the missing persons list. They even gave her a name. The police came to speak to him, just as a precaution. Dangerous Keith told him to say she moved on. He didn’t want his funfair to lose its reputation. Too late for that.

He did another show. Only four people came. Two left after ten minutes. He went back to his caravan, found some more absinthe. He wanted to buy or maybe steal a vest. The body was buried in a pond. He'd found a bin bag. He was hungry now, he never had much to eat. There wasn't good pay in magic, plus he spent most of it on alcohol.

The police came back. Cordoned off half the park. Apparently someone stepped on a body in the mixed bathing pool. It can be a problem when you don't know an area well. They said the body must be gang-related, everything is round that way. The funfair wouldn't be of use to the enquiry.

Two more days until they moved on.

where you were burned,
about to burn or still on fire

the 13th of February '45

It is half 2 in the morning and the light outside is brighter than Otto's eyes. I dreamt that I was ill, puking blue flowers. A crow was pecking at my cheeks while a big paintbrush was painting the whole world in white. Mama was there and Karoline too. They were waving from on top of a mountain peak while the crow pecked, pecked, pecked. I tried to reach them, but my hand was a fox's paw and it was on fire. I like my dreams, usually, even when they are as sad as this one. Everything looks exactly like it should in dreams – diffused and pretty. Like poetry, like kissing. I –

later

I forget what I wanted to say. Outside, there is a furious dance taking place. I once read that a good dance is supposed to look like a fight, and a good fight like a dance. I haven't made up my mind which one is happening right now. I guess it doesn't matter. I was talking about poetry and kissing. Another thing that oftentimes looks like the other. I hold under my tongue that day in summer when Otto crushed me to him, all long limbs and freckles. Neither of us noticed when the rain started to pour down. Maybe if I close my eyes really tightly, I can go back to then.

afternoon

The quiet woke me up. It is ringing and it tastes like ash. If I were to look out the window...but I won't. At least for now. The dancers have taken a break. Maybe they are tired too. So much passion will eat you up from the inside. I know that to be true. I feel that I should go outside, but what would be the cost? My mind, my heart? No. I will find a way to stay busy.

late evening

*I've lived to bury my desires
and see my dreams corrode with
rust
now all that's left are fruitless
fires
that burn my empty heart to dust.*

Say what you will about the Russians, but they understand poetry. We are living in a topsy-turvy world where the day is grey and dark and the night is blinding. I just hope that at the end, our laughter will erode steel and our tears will be nowhere to be found.

the 14th of February '45

Look at it as if it's a song. As if an ivory-tongued mermaid is singing only to you and she loves you and it is not a death song whatever you may think. I tried going to sleep but it's suddenly so warm, I can feel my skin char just from touching the air.

We are an empty emergency room and the walls are peeling.

We are God's spit bucket and we are slowly, softly drowning.

Behind every boom-clap-shake there's only a little girl, skipping rope.

early in the morning

I have scraped my insides clean and all that is left is love. For unpaired socks, chocolate éclairs, the people above, the ones below and Otto, always.

Once upon a time, Dresden was burning and I was not afra –

Shadows after a nuclear blast

All technique. Look, he's crying. The Italian settled his differences.
The sea. Oh look at the sea. An electrical retailer slept on the
settee: the very old man's eyes flashed anger and loathing but the
boy sat alone, nervously obedient. Hexagonal. Sun-bleached. A
madwoman with an ironing board.

this is the beginning
this is the start
a gannet
and a flash from a lighthouse

Mid-western wheat. Paint. Wood. Nails. A stevedore's laughter.
Old Tom on a check-up. We made it together. Dancing in the
foyer. A cold spring morning and a tractor and trailer. The
President would like to meet you next time. Here today, gone
in an instant.

happiness floats
a windmill is turning
tomato
and cheese; a bottle of Guinness

White rabbit playlist. She forgot – you remember? A hat.
A telephone. A mantelpiece. Madness in the dead of night.
Madness in the morning. Fallen. At the stairs. Frozen. Food.
Loneliness. My best frying pan. A cascade of potatoes. Too deep
to pass.

don't know what the day is
don't know where he is
insurance: what he wanted
a policy uncomfortable

A white suit? A Honda 50. One gripped her head and made it bleed. Save a man at the window. Sums on a slate but it opened up beneath. The coldest winter. Economist turned tiler, rain dripped from his nose. Empty. The future's so dark, I'm gonna need a torch. He picked an anemone.

she gave her a painting
a chocolate digestive
there's trouble in waking
best stay where you stand

Humidity

Mother, your boy wants the oral Leonard got. He feels as though Chelsea's the place to advance in, your boy walks with a stride apparently, hopefully. Your boy mother is worried about his tooth, a hypocrite dentally your boy your boy. Munions' minions ought to be arriving now but they aren't mother, he wonders if you're alive mother, your boy his sheets need changing. He can't wait for the city times with you. The song about Nancy he just heard, see there he's still all about Leonard, your boy, your man, your olive-ish white young boy man.

He wants a sampler, he wants eye candy but knows he'd feign ignoring it if *it* were there. One day/right left right left jump up down the stairs going to ebay some Doom/then call will come and world will cave in melted unfair flake. He still wonders about your past, especially after that talk with Dad, he hopes your boy your boy. Did you marry a raver? He hopes.

He says your least favourite word an awful lot. He knows you know that and respects it double time, wants to retire with you and Dad to the West Coast, blunt and pass as unbeknownst swans into fat fucker suns. He wants sequences, Hollywood like that night with Boots, your boy your ex-baby.

He associates sunny days with Joni and Vaseline camera picnics; he has sex your boy, mother. He hopes you're past gremlins and witches; get this unclear delayed REVERB (huh huh huh) message. Hath he wandered into th' uncouth musings, m'lady? He doesn't mind Shakespeare now. He's kind of disgusting but his way is aimed for awareness, your boy he doesn't cry as much as he used to.

Again he's only bleeding, on Dad's side a hole's set to flump outward slapping all as thick rods of cancer. It's always mortality garlic powdered, weighed down with impressive tumours. Right now he realizes the room could be twirling up and over him he could get Alzheimer's, he asks friends always has to laugh first, then pale at the reality. Writing this has made him feel

obliged to ball into a coming of age tissue. He feels sorry for tissues. He's going to find this all very achey, entry level, he's a trooper of a cunt really, your boy your boy. He's predicted he'll die before you/left right down the shit pavement/local wait are you Manchester enough for that big coat/don't fit exact so no I guess. Getting his cred up for the finale mother, your boy.

He's working on it.

A Self Portrait Painted Alone While Eating Stale Bread at Three in the Fucking Morning

He's a ham radio thrown into endless blue, picking up lost signals, a dying transistor scream that no one can hear. Echoes of the Big Bang colour and run, witness his eyes, his yellow teeth, the scabby outlines drawn in dry sand and the burnt-out bark of South Australian bloodwood trees. Termites run for the shadows. Figures of Dalí and Jodorowsky spasm behind sad eyelids, bloodshot, tearstruck, dirty clothes and dead eyes, can after can of melting spam, his choking tongue swallows the throatsores, his shaking hands and bitten cuticles, the toilet rolls and tramadol giving the reaper the wrong idea. He's gaunt, gaunt and snaking, like a mandolin over a Venice skyline that slowly sinks into stinking swamp. Lips like a breathalyser, motorik rhythms pounding on thin windows, he fills his shallow lungs and hacks up cherry blossom all over the new carpet.

Excellent example of a short essay by Mel Johnston

What role do gender and science play in *Bleak Horse and Middlemouth?*

This essay will explore how a very sad horse could possibly have become a doctor in the nineteenth century, when even human doctors were still struggling to gain respect and recognition for the newly emergent, enlightened medical profession.

Once it became a requirement to hold a qualification in order to practice medicine, the hoped for outcome was to eradicate the quacks from the system.¹ However, whilst the majority of ducky doctors were slowly paddling back to the Lake District, it went virtually unnoticed that certain dark horses were ostensibly galloping under the radar. Centuries of hanging out with the gentry meant secretly ambitious equines could use their status to curry-comb financial support and accompany their unsuspecting Hooray Henry pals to those seats of excellence in education – universities.

It must be noted that one reason doctors were not held in high regard was precisely due to the amount of horsing around they were known to engage in while professing to be serious students of science. Ironically, the dedicated horses were apt to succeed in their studies because they have digestive tracts which are more used to fermentation processes and could therefore hold their ale – a fact discovered through extensive undercover research by Professor B. Beauty of St Andrews University.² It also helped that they had four legs so rarely became completely legless.

Charting the history of the horse doctors reflects quite accurately the changes which were ahoof in society at large – a number of cheeky mares having the audacity to entertain the

¹ Little Grebe, *Muck, Ducks and Stethoscopes*, (London Zoo: Penguin, Wednesday) p. 456781.

² Prof. Barbara Beauty, 'Equine Alcoholism Unbridled', *Horsey Discoursey*, Vol 6 (1999.99), 222-221, (p. oh just look)

notion of training as doctors also. This was seen as an enormous threat to masculinity and after crisis talks it was decided that unless you had a very well-developed, muscular physique and ate a ton of oats a day, you could only be a nurse – from the latin ‘*norse*’ literally meaning horse-nurse.

The situation looked bleak for girlies – human and horsey – but one determined mare, known only as Lydia Gate, saw the dangling carrot of opportunity afforded by the EU – European Universities – where as long as her horse-blanket cover wasn’t blown and she remained outside a puff-pastry casing, her gender was not a problem, and she could study biology with the lads on a free rein.³

On Lydia Gate’s return to England, she tried hard to settle into medical practice in the Middlemouth community but found their stabling facilities next to useless. Despite Miss Dorothea going to the Wizard and suggesting a new stable block be built, where the most modern equipment and techniques could be used under Lydia’s management, unfortunately Lydia Gate had to leave Middlemouth before this could happen.⁴ A beautiful young woman had fallen in love with Lydia and was likely to destroy her reputation, in both the gendered and scientific sense, and a few other senses too.

In conclusion, it is unquestionably clear that gender and science played an incredibly big role in *Bleak Horse* and *Middlemouth*. Sadly it was the enormous taxation on sugar lumps rather than all the ridiculous paper qualifications the world had begun to rely so heavily upon, which finally put a stop to the almost runaway success of the horse doctors.⁵ The few now remaining in the UK are all too long in the tooth to practice and have quite literally been put out to pasture.

³ Gregory Eliot, *Middlemouth*, (Rural Hinterland: The In-Depth Character Analysis Press, 18whatever), p. near the beginning.

⁴ Eliot, p. nearer the end.

⁵ Gorge Flossbourne, ‘Ye Olde Budget for Poore People and Their Potentially Obeese Childerlings.’ BBC [online] available from www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics/budgetanalysis [accessed 16 March 18something-or-other – does anyone care – just more of the same – Hooray Henrys in charge blah blah blah]

Neigh-ver?

Yes, truly.

On Writing – When, Where and Why to

Look at your mother and then look in the mirror. Look for her dark brown in your pale grey-blue and give up again. Write about that.

Keep your mouth closed. Keep it sealed shut. Prove that you've learnt *that* lesson. Tell yourself that it's best when it's just you. That days when you don't speak a single word are the days where you think more and are therefore days that are best for your writing. Be an observer; an observer of everything and anyone. Listen close but don't meet their eyes. Take in those half-heard conversations and make the speakers into the people who scare you most and then write about them.

Write bad poetry. Write better poetry. Try writing poems that rhyme. Realise that you're shit at this and go back to writing disjointed, jumbled and clipped sentences. Pretend this is what they mean by 'edgy' and call this 'some of your best'.

Write letters, essays, short stories, not-so-short stories, reports, diary entries and letters of recommendation. Write beginnings and ends; write wedding vows and eulogies. Write rules. Write *the* rules. Write lists; shopping lists, to-do lists, Christmas card lists, 'done' lists and playlists for every occasion. Let yourself get hurt. Then do it again. And one more time for the people at the back? Great. Now write about that.

Write something you want to read. Write something that you would have loved to have read last year, 5 years ago, when you were in that bad place and when you were worlds away with those people that time.

Become fixated with something; a body part, brand or place. Write about fingers. Fingers and toes and nails and knuckles. Write about them as if they're more interesting than they really are while hoping no one reads it and thinks you have a fetish. Google 'weird fetishes'. Instantly regret this. Text your friends about Menophilia. Laugh, shake your head and then clear your browsing history. Write something to take your mind off the nastiness.

Write when you're angry. When someone has let you down and when you've let yourself down. Write when you don't feel like it. Write at 9 p.m., 3 a.m. and over your lunch break. Write when you're running late and write when you get there early and have time to kill. Write when you're supposed to be doing something else, unless you're a brain surgeon or my waiter. Talk to your friends and quote yourself. Tell no one.

Write about people who you love and people loved. Write about people you miss. Take a deep breath and write about people you don't. Write about people who hurt you and people you just can't forgive and people you can't look in the eye. Write about people who lived 100 years ago and write about people who are going to exist. Write people into reality. Write them into *your* reality. Write about someone else in your shoes. Write about someone else's shoes.

Find a photo of yourself when you didn't have all your adult teeth and then write a poem about childhood. Get caught up in the memories and write about your grandmother's cooking and about your 6th Christmas or birthday and about that lost toy. Call your family and ask how they are.

Write about something you wrote. Rewrite something you wrote. Write about writing itself and what it means to you. Do this again in a month. And again in another month. And again when you have writer's block. Compare, collate, repeat.

Oh, and read too. Read good stuff and great stuff. Read things your friends recommend. And then something your family, colleagues and internet recommends. Read something adventurous, something political and something historical. Listen to an audiobook. Read a children's book with bright pictures and animals. Read about the history of your town and read about someone's life. Read court documents, gossip magazines, leaflets, blogs, recipes, receipts, reviews and fanfiction. Read bad things. Like *real* bad literature. Like stuff that you can't believe got published. Hear yourself say 'I could've written something better than this...' Think about that as you fall asleep.

Write on the toilet, write in the bathroom and, if you're driving, pull over and then write. Write in bed and write on a sun bed and write about life on the seabed.

Read something you wrote aloud. Vow never to ever *ever* do that again. Ever.

Do it again.

Imagine you were born to different parents and write about that. Imagine you were born to a different species and write about that. Imagine you were born in a different town, country, continent, time, reality, and dimension and then write about that. Maybe draw your own illustrations.

Write something you can't show your mother. Write something about your mother. And your father. And your brother, sister, cousin, daughter, son, husband, wife, lover. Write about them even if they're not here. Or even if they never were.

Write on your laptop and in a notebook. Write on your phone and in the sand, in the mud, in your underwear and write with your Alphabetti Spaghetti.

Look through all you've written and find something you're proud of. Put it on the fridge.

Fail. Fail and feel bad about that. Fail and don't tell anyone. Fail and laugh it off. Fail and write about it. Miss a bus, burn your dinner, spill the milk and write about it. And don't stop. Don't ever stop.

Disconnected

Gracie Tonkins lived in a bubble
and knitted moonbeams into legends.
Synthetic wings enfolded and smothered
the insecurities that wound dark fingers into her nights
and syphoned the joy out of her blue cobweb veins.

A silver needle dripped poison
onto a prescription pad
and forever she lost her hold
on love and life and consequences.

Yet behind her eyelids, she still danced
arm in arm with Satan
who led her down long, green tunnels of emptiness
'til she slipped into
a clear, cool pool of suspended, extended
existence without past
or future.

Poor Gracie Tonkins, people wept
as they buttoned their coats and checked their phones.
She didn't get it, did she?

But alone in her castle of dreams and flowers,
Gracie knew they didn't matter.
She furnished her lovers with poems and gin
and ignored the world and its chatter.

Baby blues

I've never known the exact date my sister died.

I know it seems a strange thing not to know, but I just never have.

My sister's name was an obstacle to avoid, a conversation you never wanted to start at the dinner table in fear of silence for dessert.

I've never known the colour of her eyes. She could have been in the lucky two percent of green-eyed children, and the unlucky percent of babies that don't make it to their first birthday.

All I have always known is that in November there are flowers. All the colours of the rainbow and the letters in the alphabet, tied with a ribbon as precious as the baby girl's hair.

After Halloween was done and the sweets piled high on the table, flowers sit at the centre for my dead sister who never got to go trick or treating.

Every year, like clockwork. I've never known the exact time she died.

Each year blending into the next as children become adults then fly the nest leaving the bereaved parents to themselves once more. Wearing black and mourning the loss of their children, two to independence and one to death.

They have to live with their two out of three gamble my Dad puts on horses with names that remind him of us every Saturday.

I learnt at a young age that some months could be heavier than others. The weight of her death chained around November forever.

Boat

I decided to wear his oilskins
down to the shore
to take their mind off things
let them feel the sun
and a few drops of rain as it happened.
My plan didn't work
had the opposite effect
they just sat on the sand
stared out to sea
and cried.

Forgotten Memory

I fall between the buildings, the wind beneath my feet.
Flying over empty tracks as...

No, wait that's not right. Let me start over.

I fall between the buildings, the wind beneath my feet.
Flying over tracks as a tram inches its way beneath me across a
mystery bridge.

No, that's not right either. Let me start over.

I fall between the buildings, the wind beneath my feet.
Flying over tracks as a tram inches its way beneath me,
crawling away from Deansgate Station.
over to...

No, wait I forgot something.

I fall between the construction yards, the wind beneath my feet.
Flying over tracks as a tram inches its way beneath me,
Crawling away from Deansgate Station,
Flying over the huge domed building,

No, I've done it again.

I fall between the construction yards, the wind beneath my feet.
Flying over tracks as a tram inches its way beneath me,
crawling away from Deansgate Station,
flying over the city Convention Centre.
I turn and am going straight up the side of a skyscraper,
In an opening at the top stood a shadowy man,

...yet again, I forgot something

I fall between the construction yards, the wind beneath my feet,
flying over tracks as a tram inches its way beneath me,
crawling away from Deansgate Station,
flying over the city Convention Centre.
I turn and am going straight up the side of a skyscraper,
In an opening at the top stood a shadowy *child*.
I stop flying as I approach,
but I fall.

Wait, wait, that's not right

I fall between the construction yards, the wind beneath my feet.
flying over tracks as a tram inches its way beneath me,
crawling away from Deansgate Station,
Flying over the city Convention Centre.
I turn and am going straight up the side of a skyscraper,
In an opening at the top stood a shadowy child, a boy.
I stop flying as I approach,
but he pushes me.
Last I see is the child and his face as he smiles.

Last time! I won't get it wrong this time.

I fall between the construction yards, the wind beneath my feet.
Flying over tracks as a tram inches i's way beneath me,
crawling away from Deansgate Station,
flying over the city Convention Centre.
I turn and am going straight up the side of a skyscraper,
In an opening at the top stood a shadowy child, a boy.
I stop flying as I approach,
but he pushes me.
Last I see is the child and his face as he laughs,
watching me fall down the building,
a wide grin upon his face.

An Essay on Reading

People assume that just because I've not been outside of the UK that I've not gone travelling, that I've not seen things. They'd be right, in a way, but they're also wrong. So, so wrong.

You see, I've been to the edge of the world, and back again. I've seen the marshes and the mountains of Scotland and I've seen the past, present and future. I've witnessed the downfall of tyrannical leaders and the forming of friendships. And how have I done this?

I've read books, and a lot of them.

There's a magical quality that all books have, and it's the ability to transport the reader to a place far beyond where they are, even if it's in the same town that they are in. They're full of new universes, new friends, new enemies.

Of course, not all books are well-written... I could name a few... but the ones that are, are the ones that leave an impression on you. The ones that make you feel happiness, and sadness, and fear that what the character is going through could or will happen to you. I've only cried once from a book, but I have felt an overwhelming fear that I would lose my husband, because of the way the author described how her character was feeling. I've actively laughed because of a joke, or yelled at a book when a character has died, and even had to get up and walk around my room. And because the experience has been so strong, I've thrown books across the room.

I've sat in rooms with a fire crackling as the light outside has failed and turned from blue to black with stars twinkling between the flurries of snow. I've spent nights talking with my friends as they made plans for the future and laughed and joked, but I've also been there for them as they cried over an argument they've had with their best friend. I've sat curled up on a chair as I've done my homework lazily, a cat winding his way around my legs. I've flown on a broomstick that I lost due to an accident. I've been warmed up by butterbeer and hot chocolate.

I've endured cold winds and empty hallways, the feeling of dread as my dreams turned into realities, as my friends turned against me, as I lost my friends for ever. I've walked through ice-cold rain as it drove into me, stinging hands and feet and a frozen face. But these experiences only made me stronger.

I've watched the winter turn to spring, turn to summer. I've sat by the lake watching people play in the shallows. I've seen the sunrises and the sunsets that marked happy days and sad days, and all the days in-between. I've counted the days, the hours, the minutes, until I could escape again to be where I wanted to be. I've travelled back in time. I've travelled forwards in time. I've stayed where I am. I've been privy to the secrets of noblemen and women who dance in their fine clothes and jewellery as they judged each other and tried to get married. I've watched the problems that can come from miscommunicating, for it all to be worked out in the end. I've sat by the bed of an ill sister and endured the torment of unhappy hosts. I've met Mr. Darcy and fallen in love with him and his house.

I've been the face of a revolution, my heart beating fast as I've fought for my life more than once. I've seen my friends tortured and killed, for them to put their own lives at risk for me to keep going. I've seen the damage a corrupt government can do, and I've vowed to never let it happen again. I've lost family to death and to sorrow and to hatred. I've cherished the items that they gave me, reminders that we had to fight through hard times to get to the good.

I've read books that I will never read again, but I've learned something from them. I've read books that I will never be able to read enough of. I've read books that have led me to discover a world that I had never thought possible.

I've seen how calling someone back from the dead can be a bad thing, especially if they have magic. It's funny how it seems to happen quite a lot. You'd think they'd learn the first time, but no. And so you sit there, fully immersed in the story, incapable of being able to do anything about it.

But do you know what the best bit is about all these stories, all these experiences? I can learn from them, and I can use them to help me create my own worlds. I can better describe the weather outside, or the way the sunlight falls and feels and smells. I can manipulate how the reader perceives a character, or a situation, or themselves. I can experience all the problems I want to by putting my own characters through them. I can make them steal the King's jewels for a woman he's never met, or have that same woman find out that she's to be sacrificed for no particular reason. I can let them suffer everything I never want to, or put them where I wish to be, make them better versions of myself.

Or I can write about what I want to be doing, how I feel how I wish things could be. In a way I already have.

The beauty of books is that they offer an escape, a way for the reader to become someone else, to go somewhere different. You can meet people and become friends with them. They become a part of you, the places become dear to you. You recognise yourself within them, and what you want to be, or what you don't want to be.

And as an avid reader, you learn quickly that there's not enough time to spend your life reading badly written books, or about things that don't interest you. You learn to stick with what you like and what you know, but sometimes, just sometimes, the best phrases and sentences are in the books you don't read normally. There's no harm in wanting to read romance novels if you usually read science-fiction, or reading hardboiled novels when you usually read fantasy. As long as you're reading something that makes you learn from it, that's all that matters.

Sweet dreams

Our toes touched
and I flinched under
the snowy blankets
whilst my head moulded
to your chest
like a home-made
jigsaw puzzle

the
comforting drums
made me sleepy

and before I went,
I *knew*.

'I picked the first sweet-pea today'
– Edna St. Vincent Millay

This is just a place for you to call home;
with a piece for you to chew on
and water for you to drink.
Blink twice
and blink again, then
turn around with floppy knees.

The place you'll get to next;
with two stones for you to sit on
and three miles for you to walk.
The graze will turn its back,
and the grass will sit still.
A place for you to call home?
A place to break your bones.

one one two three five

beginning with the palms of my hands she

and then
moving to the crook of my arm

it is intimate
a mountain under the sea
and makes my feet tingle

one summer I watched a hermit crab move house
inching its vulnerable flesh
into cold echoes of a new shell

in winter light faltered by three o' clock
sea spray rapped salt knuckles at our windows
peat smouldered and she

moving to nerves of my stomach she

in summer we stood naked under cut skies
and sang Cat Stevens into midnight storms
but when she finally

she pressed seeds fingertip deep into November soil

Sarah, Sarah

2:05 a.m.

She was hiding under the duvet, everything except her eyes. They look bloodshot, she must be petrified. As before Sarah looked as pale as a ghost, I wish her older brother would stop telling her these horror stories.

‘There’s someone under my bed, Daddy,’ Sarah said.

As all the nights previous to this I explained that there are no such things as ghosts, ghouls, demons or monsters. But she persisted that there was someone or something under the bed. I had no choice in the matter but to check. Again. Crouching down and lifting up the duvet that dangled from the edge, I looked from top to bottom. Left to right. There was nothing there.

‘See sweetie, there is nothing under your bed. You know what your brother is like, and I’ve told you not to listen to him. He tells you these stories to purposely scare you,’ I said to her.

‘Yes but Daddy, why does he keep telling them?’

‘Because sweetie, big brothers are mean, and I’ll be sure to tell him off when he gets home. I promise you, Sarah, there is no one under your bed,’ and with that, I left her room, leaving the night-light on, and returned to my own room.

I needed to have words with that son of mine first thing in the morning. This was the fifth time in one week that Sarah had been screaming in her bed, claiming there was someone underneath it. She is only six years old, she should not be exposed to those sorts of stories at her age. And to think Nathan is going to be nineteen next month, he needs to start growing up.

5:08 a.m.

I awoke to the sound of screaming. Despite Sarah’s night terrors happening every night so far this week, this was the first night where she had woken up screaming twice. Without any

hesitation I grabbed my night robe and went into Sarah's room.

'Sweetie, I thought we discussed this earlier, come on now, calm down,' I perched myself on the edge of her bed rubbing her hand to keep her calm. She was cradling herself; knees upright and her face buried in them. I couldn't hear her crying, so I just remained sitting where I was and kept holding her hand.

I had been just sitting with her for no more than two minutes when she began to shake.

'Sarah, Sarah?'

'It's under my bed, and it's going to kill me,' she replied, keeping her head placed on her knees.

Maybe she was trying to hide her tears. I moved myself closer to her and began rubbing her back to calm her down further.

'No one is trying to kill you honey. Not anyone. But I will kill your brother if he tells you another one of these stories,' I hoped that would make her laugh but it didn't. Nor did it stop her body from shaking.

'Sarah... Sarah? Please, there is nothing to be afraid of,' I got off the bed, 'look at me, please?'

She began to lift her head but slowly, her body still shaking. She lifted her head so all I could see were her eyes and they were even more bloodshot than before. It was clear that she hadn't slept a wink from when I last came in to see her.

'Now there's my girl, I can check under your bed again, but I'm not going to find anything, you know why?' I asked.

'Because it's going to kill you,' she replied.

'Sarah! That is quite enough, this is the last time I'm coming in here. Monsters do not exist. Neither do ghosts or demons or ghouls.'

I got on my knees again to check under the bed. Maybe she had a bad dream and got scared again? But that doesn't explain why her eyes are so bloodshot. My poor little girl. I can't believe how badly her brother had...

As I peered under the bed, I caught sight of a young girl with her back pressed as far against the wall as it could possibly be. She had Sarah's pink blanket wrapped around her. I didn't

know what else to do so I stretched my arm out and patted her arm gently, hoping I wouldn't startle her. That was when she pulled her head out of the blanket.

'Sarah?'

'Daddy, there's someone in my bed,' she replied.

Empty Bed

Between my legs
I have covered the space
And Dad had kitchen knives for fingers to protect it intact.

When I was broken in
My Dad said I was dirty and washed me like a dish
Only to be eaten off again

When I fell in love
My Dad said I was wasted and bought a new daughter
Only to be spent all over again

When I was stolen
My Dad said I was the thief and put me in chains
Only to be caged under his sweat and stubble

He coughs his money into my empty bed
Blank as a sheet
The cold coins bruise my gums as he presses them to my lips
for a kiss

Between my legs
I have covered the space
That he *owned like land*, he said.

01:15

he climbed into me
like i was a hole in his t-shirt
or something like that
he put himself inside me
i felt tighter than a pinhole
i hummed miss independent in my head
holding him tight to my carcass
he cut me like a grapefruit
my gums were sour
it felt like winter settled between my legs
it felt like snow glued to his very tips
i was a kind of failure
he said he'd smother me in his semen
the condom didn't pop
if it had it would've been better
something would be different
but he stalled the engine again
then broke himself
me, a great chew toy
being marred by his teeth
my flesh burned into the mattress
still wet he slipped himself out
my eyes rolled across the duvet
he said sorry again
then put another couple oceans between us.



A Portrait of Pompeii

Your words shake and rumble as they leave your mouth. Spewing dirt and smoke which causes my eyes to run, I forgot what water felt like. These temples don't belong to anyone anymore, they are the tourists' now and tourists are merely strangers. Lovers' bodies in broken beds too many to count, too many becoming skeletons in closets, covered in the ash that no one wants to brush off. To brush off means seeing the smoke which raised its God-like head over our city, protruded our walls with lava leaving us footless, without a leg to stand on. To remember would light a fire in our hearts, which would burn through the ribs of this city, only leaving us dwelling on the aftermath. How and why our world turned quiet.

Alive in the Evening

It happens at eight in the morning. The rocket shoots into the sky and the bang is heard in the distance. It's not the biggest explosion, any other day a firework at this time wouldn't garner much attention. This is not another day. Today, thousands fill the labyrinthine streets, like a flood they occupy every available space. The tightly packed houses grow hundreds of ears as heads can be seen protruding from every window. These streets live.

These streets, which just a second ago echoed with the sound of life, they are swiftly silenced by the second explosion.

This time everyone was watching; everyone followed this rocket upwards as it dragged the tension with it. It begins with a rumble. Whether this was an actual sound or something I had imagined I could not distinguish. Real or imaginary, it was growing; looking around, it was plain to see I was not the only one who heard it. People nervously craned their heads trying to look over the crowd, desperate for some hint of what was happening. I can feel the ground rumbling, or can I? It looks still. I reach down. It *is* still. This is something new, or rather very old.

They say animals sense danger and I'm beginning to understand. It is not through sight, or touch or sound but another, lost sense. Thousands of years of technological advancements have rendered it superfluous but here, in this ancient fortress, it is awoken. I can feel it. The crowd *feels* it. Danger. The rumble grows and shoves into the crowd. Something is coming.

It is perhaps this which sets us apart from animals, for although we share their sense to flee we are still curious. The people are leaving, but unlike the deer or gazelle who bolt at the hint of danger, *they* hesitate. They are curious, they want to see the danger they sense. Some of the crowd turn and walk slowly away, their necks at full stretch as they look back. A competition ensues among the remaining spectators; as the people flow away at an ever increasing pace there are those of us, much like the

rocks in the river, who stay planted. *Who can wait the longest?* A silly game, yet an irresistible one: humanity in a nutshell. I play, but the few who remain around me are seasoned pros. I must concede my inferiority, as must all eventually. I came here for danger, not injury, and now the rumble is a roar. As I turn something catches my eye, it's been difficult to see through the crowd, but now I glimpse a horn. Hell's gates have opened. The beasts are upon me.

Around this point I imagine you would like some context? It is July 14th, opening day of the running of the bulls. Although the event happens worldwide, I am at the heart: Pamplona. The City is famous for its tradition, whereupon half a dozen or so particularly angry hunks of sirloin are released upon a crowd who are chased down to the final stop: the bullring. Each of these bulls is then led to its paddock where that evening it will be fought and killed in front of a stadium of vying spectators, thus simultaneously completing that day's festivities and beginning the next.

Anyway, back to the run.

On that first morning, what hit me most was just how difficult it is to actually get on the course. The problem with this is that the party actually starts at 6 p.m. the day before and ends with the run in the morning. It's common to see hundreds of people sleeping in the streets during the night. The side-effect of this is that runners aren't in the best state when it comes to the actual event, and with the course already crowded, the Police stop many from running. On more than one occasion, I got onto the course only to be led back out. A frantic scramble followed as I, and others, searched the back streets until someone found another gap in the fence that was unguarded. Now, if you are set on taking part there are two things you should know, 1) There are very few rules, and 2) There are so many rules. I should clarify. Whilst you can go as wild as, and pretty much do what you like (within the law), that does not mean you should. I quickly learnt it was smarter to go unnoticed; anyone intoxicated was quickly manhandled out of the course. If this happens I suggest

compliance. I watched as officers grabbed hold of a young Englishman who, to be fair, didn't seem to be that inebriated and resisted their attempts to subdue him. This was a big mistake as, in an instant, he was on the ground feeling the swift sting of the batons. A pair of arms reached through the barrier, grabbed his legs, and pulled him out with such force that the fence which was in the way didn't seem to matter; he was literally dragged kicking and screaming into a group of officers who had appeared, and then he was gone. Later I discovered that British tourists can be a target. 'Can't handle their drink, and they're just not fond of the English,' an Aussie tour guide informed me. At this I could not help but feel the residual pride from my university drinking days swell up, before survival instincts swallowed it back down while I pondered whether they would care that I was Welsh.

The third firework signals the bulls entering the ring. A few seconds previously so had I. The entire run was a blur of excitement and panic, and I remember nothing of it now except for the entrance. This acts as a funnel and is ludicrously dangerous. On my second run I watched a man trip up there; by this point the river was a torrent and the man an unwilling boulder collecting everything that followed. There is no point in helping; the current is too strong and any attempts would simply add to the chaos. As you burst into the ring, the air smacks you hard. It is only upon leaving the crowd that you realise how suffocating it is. I bent over double as I tried to regain my breath as the heavy mix of oxygen, adrenaline, and last night's Sangria caused me to empty my stomach onto the floor; mercifully it was pretty much empty to begin with. Some advice to the reader: bring water.

The final firework means the doors have closed. I look at my watch and note how the hands have barely moved: minutes that have added years. I sit in the stands to recuperate, glad for the experience but also for its end. That's when I notice a large body of people in front of a gate. The bulls have been led away to their corrals and the arena floor is devoid of cattle. The people are on their knees, their heads to the ground as if in worship and then it

happens. The gates open and out leaps their God, another bull, much smaller than the others. These are the younger ones: one day they will run through the streets but for now they practise on the crowd. Their horns are corked and mercifully so it would appear as the young bull immediately charges into a spectator. Launching him into the air he crashes down hard and goes limp. The animal, naturally uncaring, continues to attack. A massive shout rings out across the stadium and I look to the police standing on the fringes, unmoving. That's when it clicks: the police have done their job. *Now* is what my second point noted, *now* is my first taste of the mob rule.

Several people rush forward, smacking the ground and edging closer to the bull. One gets close enough to slap its hind quarters. This has the desired effect and the bull turns his attention away from the unconscious man. Other spectators appear; they carry him still limp out to the medics. Over the next hour this gets repeated more often than is comfortable. The fates of these people are unknown, the nature of this tradition means many are injured, some are killed. It wasn't until the next day, when I rang home, that I was told a man had died on that first day. This is tourism at its darkest, so widely available, and so very risky.

Back in the arena all you can do is hope that each person carried off is okay. It isn't all serious, for instance when a man wrapped in a cape boldly strode out. Middle aged, balding and rather large, the crowd parted as clearly he wanted centre stage. He ripped off his cloak to reveal... nothing. The crowd cheered this act of indecency as he turned to bask in the glory. It was precisely at this moment when the bull, tired of waiting, decided to charge. I'm sure the reader can use their imagination as to where the horn went as the man was flung in the air! He was bruised but okay. I took great delight in how the police waited until after this to arrest him.

Next was my second taste of mob rule. The participants were getting braver. No longer content to dodge, there were those who would leap over the bulls as they charged, a highly

impressive feat that I wouldn't recommend attempting. Suddenly the watching crowd turned angry, boos filled the air and looking down I noticed someone had grabbed the bull's tail. Objects began raining on the man as the people on the arena floor moved as one. As a swarm they surrounded him, it was a flurry as he was beaten into submission before being dragged out; even the bull dared not interfere. Pulling the tail and grabbing the horns are considered acts of disrespect which is a big faux pas in this world of death and machismo. I must admit at first I found this concept hard to grasp - after all these bulls were lined up for slaughter. They were being baited, slapped and, to my eyes, made a mockery of. Yet despite this I was growing aware of a sense of respect. The only way of dealing with this I had was to think of them as modern day gladiators, slaves who are shown respect because they die for us. Their deaths are supposedly glorious and so they are effected small luxuries. Having always thought those games barbaric, I struggled with the morals behind why I was here.

Nevertheless, here I was, and having always been a firm believer that I shouldn't judge something new without first attempting it I entered the ring. Climbing over the stands I stood precariously at the edge, grasping on to the splintered wood as though it were my lifeline. I looked for the bull and spotted it. Except I didn't. At ground level it was surrounded by hundreds of people. Much like a black hole the only way to spot the bull was to see its effect on the surroundings. Its gravity drew in the crowd everywhere it went and so it was this I watched. Despite my vigilance, I was caught out by the speed of the beast; having looked down for a second, I suddenly found my space diminishing. People clambered up on to the shallow ledge and I looked across just in time to see it. Its right horn ground against the wood as it marked the circumference, taking out at least fifteen people by the legs. I tried to scramble back over, but the crowd was too thick. Realising my futility I changed tactic and watched the approaching terror. At the last second I pushed upwards and managed to lift my feet high enough for the

bull to charge on by. Taking my chance, I bolted from the wall: its promises of safety had been false. Nothing can describe the pool of nervous energy I had just plunged into. Excitement and terror poured from hundreds of people in what was the purest form of chaos. As I simultaneously dodged and approached the bull I began to understand why it was shown such respect. The feeling it provides is like nothing else. I even got to touch it, being careful to be respectful, and with my disposable camera snapped a photo as it charged. Centuries of civilisation have taught me that this is barbaric, yet it was euphoric. Respect is the best reward the people can give the bull for in turn it has struck a dormant instinct not needed in our lifetimes. It has made them, no *us*, feel awake.

There is no set time limit per bull, they simply charge until they stop. There was something sad to be had in the closing moments as each bull gives up and decides it wants no more. It stands there while hundreds of humans desperately try to bait it. They, no *we*, shout and stomp trying to squeeze every last drop of entertainment. Perhaps this is why the older ones are killed, a thrilling climax to avoid boredom becoming anger. Weeks later I look back on my photo. The grainy quality blurs the people into one big red and white mass, surrounding a bull that looks about half the size I remember. With hindsight it is easy to judge those who demanded more yet in the moment it was easy to be swept up in the excitement, to not want it to end. The beast is no longer so clear in my mind.

This is where I must admit a failing on my part as a writer, for though I claim to try things before I judge them, I did refuse to do one. In the afternoon, the bulls are put to their final test. Although unaware of it, their entire lives have led up to this point: the bullfights. The entire week I grappled with my conscience on whether to attend. Hemingway surely would have mocked my hesitation. My history with bull fighting was always chequered: as a young boy I had visited an arena on a trip to Spain. Due to my age, my knowledge of bull fighting had come solely from watching Bugs Bunny put on a funny hat and dodge various

animals. My pre-pubescent mind hadn't quite grasped that this could not be the entire process. I still remember walking into the inner sanctums of the arena, the stench of blood hitting my nostrils as I looked up to see dozens of heads mounted along the walls. Needless to say there was no question of fight then as I fled that stench of death. This memory was a big factor in my decision to avoid the fight. I wondered if this was hypocritical, as though avoiding the brutal finale showed a naivety regarding the festival I had participated in. The issue, much like the festival, is divisive. No doubt many of you will think I should have gone, while others will protest my ever going in the first place. But I did not come to pass judgement.

On my final evening I walked through the streets. The party was revving back up after the idleness of the mid-day slumber. Dangling from the local restaurants were various bits of the bulls that just hours before had been fighting the futile fight for their lives. The meat was already butchered and cooked so I bought some and sat down to eat, contemplating the last few days' events. It is true that parts of this tradition are horrific. It is also true that there is a lot to be admired about it. After much thinking I realised that neither mattered. I came for an experience, to try something unlike anything else and that's precisely what happened. It's as far removed from our world as is possible to get. We spend our days sat at desks and our evenings jogging on treadmills. We live in a world where we daze; our faces constantly illuminated by the dim glow of screens. This is not that world. Protests and pressures from animal rights groups and governments mean that soon it will be gone. Which side is right? I can't say. But I know that I sat there, a beer in one hand, and a piece of an animal that literally hours before had chased me down a street in the other, and for once, I felt truly alive.

The Tropical House, Newquay Zoo

Sound
is immediate
experienced
in present
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forward
best understood
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sound
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aviary
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hint/tint
of cage

the tongue
running
like water
over algae

am
phib
ian oxygenations
 exaggerations
of tropical
repetitions
guano
– giving
a distant
impression
of the imagined
Ga
la
pa
gos

O, Bella Luna

I am sitting in my circle, waiting. It took a lot of experimentation to get this circle to do what it is supposed to do – dangerous experimentation that I did not approve of – but in the end it worked out for the best. It's easier than the cage, the chains, the long walks through the night, the fear that *it* would break free. We have drawn the circle, as always, in the front room of the house and set the tiny fires all around it. My friends are locked out of this room now until morning.

I start to pace. Back and forth, back and forth, never a toe over the chalk line around me. The smell of the burning aconite is pricking at my nostrils, choking me, thickening the air so that I can barely breathe for its vicious sting. I want to throw up but my stomach is empty. I have not eaten all day. I try to stop my gut from heaving up acid but I can feel the burn in my throat. I try to think normally, to think good thoughts: tomorrow I shall...No, not tomorrow, when the cold hits and I shiver and my stomach tries endlessly to empty itself of nothing, and I'll be so weak, so hungry, so tired... No, let's rewind. I can hear them outside, safely beyond the door where they can't see me, waiting for this to be over. How they've accepted me, stayed with me, loved me for so long is impossible to understand. Remember the day we dressed up and went to London, drank cranberry juice, stayed up all night; the day we found a kitten, took her home, bathed her, then had to give her back; the day at that cafe, the free hot chocolate; the day that... the day we... there were so many days... why can't I think... the day... *that* day... no... that day... before I met them... the pain in my shoulder...

It's coming. Oh God, it's coming. It's coming and I already know it's going to be a long one.

Always the teeth, the teeth first, always the teeth. They have been twinging all day, the premonition of them beneath my gums, and now they start to force themselves out in front of my usual set, growing thicker and longer before my gums have

had time to loosen to fit them, stretching the flesh before my tiny human molars have had time to recede. My mouth is not big enough, I am gagging, I am suffocated by my own teeth. I am moaning, whimpering, cursing, shrieking, feeling every cell, every muscle, every bone of my body fighting against me. I am on the floor. My limbs are wrenched out of their sockets and I can feel them pulling, straining, trying to reconnect in ways that do not fit. My external body cannot keep up with the pace of change inside me. I am stuck in a limbo of agony, feeling like my bones will burst through my stretching flesh, like meat through the skin of an over-stuffed sausage, with a force that will slop my innards over the ground. The pain is so unbearable now that I want it to happen, want to explode into nothing but a pile of offal, just so this torture will stop.

But it doesn't. I have started to feel that hideous sensation creeping its way under my skin, the feeling like the wiry legs of a thousand spiders trying to scratch their way out of me. Each leg pierces me and is drawn out agonisingly slowly through a pore too tight for it, pulled towards the light of the moon that hides behind the curtains, every individual strand a unique pain, each one tugging a trickle of blood with it.

As the bones begin to tear through the tips of my toes, my brain goes into overload and I can no longer feel each separate sensation; I am adrift in a tumbling ocean of agony and I long to let go, to set my mind free, but as soon as I do that I will leave room for the beast to take control. I try to fight it, want to fight it, but I am so weak now, so tired, and as the cloud of darkness descends on my mind I feel a powerlessness so profound that I would weep if I still could.

I am not me.

Cross Your Legs

In Tizi-Ouzou when I was 12
I stayed with my aunt and uncle in their country villa
This was before I had panic attacks or wore concealer

And told myself that the man walking behind me was some
threat in the shadows
I'd never survive in this world
Or be better for myself but for the sake of others

I digress
I stayed there one Spring
The garden tiles smacking your feet with their heat

I sat on a stool
Wooden
Blue long denim skirt

Floaty
Polo peach t-shirt
"Vous êtes une femme, maintenant"

In the distance wolves on the mountains
Bandits, terrorists cross-hatching their peaks
Meanwhile in the safety net of the town

There's a smell of rotisserie
Peppers blackening in the ovens
"Vous êtes une femme, maintenant"

Grandmother sleeping in another room
Yesterday morning she wanted me to marry my cousin
Today my aunt sits on the stool opposite me

“Vous êtes une femme, maintenant”

She shuffles over like another threatening shadow

And pulls my skirt under me because I am a woman now

Shoves the material between my legs

A makeshift nappy

Long enough to hide my ankles

For they were forbidden too

And the long skirt was still inappropriate

In a duet my father and his sister say “Vous êtes une femme
maintenant”

And they stuffed me into the box

Cross your legs

I'd try

I was another liability

I was clockwork to them

I ticked

And another suitor went by.

Playground games for adults

I was talking about the weather the other day,
how the sunshine had lifted my spirits
faster than any cheap mixer on student night.

But my fingers were itching trying to squeeze you,
slide you in across the sticky bar,
taking shots with strangers
seeking newfound friend silences
to mention your name.

I wanted to spew it out,
to thrust it around the room.
Your name, your name, your name.
I won't stop.
You aren't here to stop me.

I can shout, I can scream, I can whisper it,
but maybe today I will just spit it on the pavement,
rub it into the ground with the chalk
lines of the tic tac toes,
the yes and no's
we would play.

So I will keep making my deformed art,
my deluded picture of you,
until one day I stop finding my hands
trying to fit you into my life,
when you never wanted to stay.

Who ever does?
That fast food, fast lane, getaway.

Let me pack your things for you.
You didn't even stay the night.
You had a hotel room,
we could have talked till morning.

You didn't even stay the night.

You gave me a teaser, I chanted
More, more, more.
Then you stopped
so I chewed my hair to stop my hands
pulling it out.

You served me silence
and I ate it,
I crushed it,
I gnawed it,
I devoured it.
You gave me nothing to chew on
but my jaw still ached.

I stared at your face so long it started to change,
it merged into every passing stranger on busy streets
all the buskers started singing your song.
They all wanted to *dance with somebody*
they all wanted to *feel the heat with somebody*
somebody who loved them.

I started seeing you
here, there, everywhere.
I'm getting motion sick
someone stop this car I'm going to be explode.

You're sick of me.

You stopped talking so I didn't catch my breath,
I told them all,
I hate you
I hate you
I hate you.

You faded into background noise
as I held shells up to my ear
and listened to the sea side town
telling me you couldn't reach me here.

I talked about the weather today,
how the sky was my favourite kind of sunny day blue,
and I didn't even think, to mention you.

? Yes

? identity your taught you Were

? are they vague how matter no similarities find you Can

? others or/and oneself of deception successful the merely
intelligence Is

? quality from different value Is

? valuable you're think you Do

? rules the to attention any pay you Will

? way better a me show you Can

? existence of worthy you Are

? excess in pleasure find you Do

? sky the in holes there Are

? surveillance under really we Are

? ideas your me pass you Can

? why and how between difference there Is

? die to than live to better it Is

? statements than questions with more agree generally you Do

? enemy your with intimate been you Have

? people kill and hate to encouraged you Were

? unhappiness and anger feel you Did

? reality in coexist proof and truth Could

? outside go and page the off eyes your get you Will

? recipes own your up make you Can

A Scrapbook Type of Diary Dedicated to Small Plates

This is a selection from some of the entries in a scrapbook-style journal that I have created dedicated to my passion of eating what has become fashionably known as ‘small plates’. I would prefer to think of them as tapas. Tapas are essentially a way of eating that started in Andalusia in southern Spain. There is a legend that says that these small dishes often slices of cold meat or cheese were originally used to cover wine glasses. This was in a bid to keep the aroma in and the insect life out. The word *tapa* is said to have originally meant ‘cover’ in reference to this practice.

This way of eating is not unique to Spain. The Venetians eat small dishes known as Cicchetti. Much of the eastern Mediterranean eat small dishes that are referred to as ‘meze’ or ‘mezze’ and various other local spellings all essentially meaning the same thing. Tapas can be eaten as a snack alongside a drink in a bar or can be consumed in larger quantities. ‘Meze’ dishes are almost always served as appetisers before larger plates of food are eaten. The Italian Cicchetti are normally consumed as a snack in a bar setting. Cicchetti are less known than either tapas or ‘meze’ but are slowly becoming more familiar in the United Kingdom. Russell Norman opened a group of restaurants called Polpo. They’re described as *bácaro*, a Venetian word that is given to simple restaurants that serve humble food and good young wines.

SATURDAY 12TH JULY 2014

St Ives in Cornwall is famed for its beauty and world renowned on account of the town’s art scene. Painters are said to have been drawn here on account of its quality of light. The town is not especially well known for its tapas, but perhaps it could be? Those served at the Porthmeor Beach Cafe are some of the best I’ve ever had. When the sun shines this cafe really performs at its best. The decor is simple but effective, white walls and tables, toughened glass windshields with splashes of colour mostly

lime green and pink. Beach buckets like those used by children to make sandcastles are used as wine coolers. This enhances the beachside theme giving a sense of fun and reinforcing the casual ambience. The ambience might be casual but the food served here is taken very seriously. There are four of us present which means we can order and sample a varied selection of the tempting choices. The tapas style is applied to local produce combined with many ingredients sourced from further afield, producing tapas that are truly globally inspired. The chef here is Australian which offers some sort of explanation as to why tapas are produced in this style.

Mediterranean ingredients are certainly present, smoked almonds, olive oil, anchovies, parmesan, prosciutto, padrón peppers and chorizo make an appearance in various dishes. Pineapple, ginger, lemongrass, harissa, halloumi and pomegranate molasses show that this kitchen is globally inspired. The chefs are (certainly very) adept at fusing together flavours from all over the world. Unsurprisingly in this beachside location, fish is present in many of the tapas, grilled salmon, crispy fried monkfish, Newlyn crab and Cornish scallops all represented. Carnivores are offered Serrano ham, Moroccan meatballs, flash fried steak, smoked pork as well as the (previously mentioned) chorizo. For those avoiding flesh there are fresh and tasty offerings, such as grilled baby gem, garden radish, spring onion, pumpkins seeds and harissa. Alternatively there's asparagus, roasted fig, ruby chard, chickpeas, crispy puy lentils, mint and honey. Another great meat free option is the halloumi, crushed beetroot, orange dressing, mustard cress and cumin seeds. Just writing these words has me salivating. The sun-filled evening comes flooding back. We ate in the fresh sea air and consumed numerous bottles of Prosecco. We enjoyed the well-cooked monkfish with chilli caramel, pineapple shavings and Asian micro herbs. The pineapple cooled the chilli effectively whilst the herbs enhanced the freshness of the dish and the monkfish was not overwhelmed by these potentially over-powering flavours. The Moroccan meatballs are moist balls of lamb, served with bravas sauce, a slightly piquant

tomato based sauce that the Spanish traditionally combine with potatoes. The mint yoghurt is a pleasant and lighter alternative to mayonnaise that would normally accompany patatas bravas. This is a very successful variation on a well known theme. In Spain Serrano ham is normally served solo but here at Porthmeor it came with heritage tomatoes, feta, dried capers and a tapenade oil and it certainly didn't suffer as a result. The cafe at Porthmeor is somewhere I return to time and time again.

SATURDAY 10TH JANUARY 2015

I decide to introduce a bit of Spanish sunshine into my life one cold January Saturday by taking myself on a tapas tour of London. My Paddington hostel is in a Georgian townhouse. I was eager to check in and get out on the town. My intention was to eat my way through as many tapas as I could reasonably manage in an afternoon and evening. The frustrating communication issues between a Bulgarian guest and the Spanish receptionist thwarted my progress. However once my bags were plonked in the messy dorm I was soon on my way across London, headed for the Borough Market branch of Brindisa. This is their original location but now there are others (located around London.) Brindisi started out as wholesalers of imported Spanish ingredients in the late 1980s and didn't venture into the restaurant business until 2004. Regular customer and talented chef Mark Hix immediately saw the potential for the site at Borough to become a tapas bar. Borough Market is a fitting location as it has had a reputation as a 'foodie' destination for a long time. Whilst there are a lot more tourists present at Borough these days the food offered is still of a consistently high quality.

Brindisa was packed on the Saturday afternoon of my visit, I imagine this is always the case. There was no table available (initially) so I was shown to the bar. I enjoyed a Estrella Galicia beer whilst I waited. A space soon become available. I ordered a couple of dishes, chicken livers cooked with sherry with a caper and red onion salad and also Catalan Spinach with pine nuts and raisins. I decided to avoid things like potatoes and other

carbohydrate-based dishes. I wanted to try as many tapas venues as time and my stomach capacity would allow. The atmosphere was frenetic. Brindisa was filled with mostly thirty-something professionals and the bell demanding the waiter's attention rang with regularity every minute or so. My waiter was friendly enough and wearing an eye patch; whether this was a medical necessity or strange fashion statement was not apparent. The chicken livers were served on toasted rustic bread and cooked to perfection, pink-centred and moist. I was less enamoured with the spinach dish. Which was nothing to get (especially) excited about. However I ate it all, as I assumed it would be nutritionally sound. It was also really salty and the beer was a great aid to me finishing the dish. This dish could also have benefited from a better distribution of the raisins. Some sliced De Bellota Chorizo was ordered and it was creamier tasting than any chorizo I had previously eaten. Perhaps this is due to the diet of acorns that the pigs were fed on? In Spain there is an almond nougat product called Turrón traditionally eaten at Christmas time. When I saw a mousse made from this favourite sweet of mine I had to give it a try. It was great and the crunch from the almonds it contained was especially welcome. Brindisa's flagship branch had mostly served me well, bad pop music, salty spinach and cramped toilet facilities aside. Back on the street, London's tallest building The Shard towered above me. A taxi was swiftly hailed and I found myself heading for my next location. More tapas consumption was my objective.

Soon I was heading for Bermondsey with a guy that might well have been London's oldest cabbie. He had no sat-nav and didn't accept cards which meant a stop at an ATM. But what he lacked in technology he made up for with 'the knowledge'. My own knowledge was also revealed here as I was much closer to my next location than I'd realised and could easily have walked. I got to the street that I needed but got out too soon and found myself at Pizzaro. This is José Pizzaro's flagship restaurant rather than his more affordable tapas place simply named José further along the street. The kind staff soon had me on my way to José.

Things were much busier here, every bit as frenetic as Brindisa but with a more personal and homely feel to the place. Some dishes were ordered after chatting with a friendly Spanish couple. I'd revealed my plan of consuming as much tapas as possible at various locations in one day. They knew the place well and recommended what they considered to be the best dishes. I kept things simple and ordered padrón peppers and another dish of fried goat's cheese with honey. Both were deliciously simple, though again the peppers were a tad salty. Perhaps that's just how Spanish people like their food and once again the beer was a great companion. The Bermondsey of today is gentrified with the warehouses converted to accommodation. However their previous use and proximity to the Thames make it easy to visualise the area as a once thriving trading area connected to the activity of the river.

My next destination was Exmouth Market on the other side of the Thames. I chanced upon a bus that was going in the right direction and made the remainder of the journey by taxi. This was on account of both laziness and time restrictions. I wanted try at least a couple more tapas venues before the day was done. Upon arrival at Exmouth Market I decided to grab a coffee at Caravan. Caravan roast their own beans and brew a good cup of coffee. My severe caffeine habit needed a fix. I was soon chatting with the barista, who was originally from Adelaide. He revealed that he had recently returned from a surfing holiday in Perranporth in my home county of Cornwall. He was also knowledgeable about tapas and recommended Morito highly. This was my next intended destination and my reason for being at Exmouth Market in the first place.

It was a short walk along the street to Morito. A great seat at the bar was offered upon my arrival overlooking the chefs. What could be more honest than having your dinner prepared right under your nose? Sherry was my drink of choice here as they had a great selection and it worked well with my Spanish-themed day. I ordered two dishes: a middle-eastern inspired beetroot borani, which is like a humus made from beetroot, and

a spicy lamb dish. The beetroot dish was surprisingly imaginative and the crunch of the added walnuts and the flavour of the dill were dynamic. The lamb dish was less accomplished and somehow managed to be both greasy and dry at the same time. This was disappointing because the appearance of the dish was impressive. A generous amount of shredded meat perched on top of the roasted aubergine purée alongside pomegranate seeds and shredded mint. The disappointment from the lamb dish drew my attention to the chefs. I'm certainly not convinced that reheating cooked lamb on the plancha is the best idea. My waitress was super friendly and it was obvious as we chatted that she knew the London food scene very well. The Italian journalism student and food blogger sat next to me had similar qualities. One tends to start chatting to people more easily when dining solo. This is a necessity for a gregarious individual such as myself. I could quite easily have chatted to them for much longer but my schedule determined that I needed to get moving.

My next venue was going to be Barrafinna in Soho. Once again I find myself hurtling speeding through the streets of London in a black cab. I'd initially intended to travel by bus but met a couple of guys called Billy. They really were both called Billy apparently. Despite being a tad drunk they seemed reasonable so we decided to share a black cab. I reached the Adelaide Street branch, (the original is on Frith Street). London tapas bars really are stupidly busy it would seem. The décor here was noticeably different to the other places I'd eaten at that day, more modern with immaculate white walls and gleaming stainless steel. The chefs on display here were in stark contrast to those at Morito, more communicative, frequently smiling but taking their work seriously. This was evident when the food arrived. Unfortunately my prolonged stint of eating had taken its toll and it was no longer a pleasurable pursuit. I ordered Pan con Tomate, which is simply tomato on toast on account of having eaten it many times in Spain. It's always great there because the climate produces fantastic tomatoes ripened by the sun. The dish arrived and looked great, vibrant red coloured tomato on toasted rustic

bread. However, the taste just did not have the depth of flavour that I was expecting. The last time I could clearly remember eating Pan con Tomate it had been mid-summer; I had been sat under an olive tree in Valencia seeking refuge from the hot sun. The other dishes I ordered were very well put together. Tempura monkfish tail with mango dressing was ordered next. Monkfish is one of my favourite species of fish and this did not disappoint. The batter was thin and crisp, the fish cooked perfectly. The flesh remained succulent and the mango dressing was full of flavour but did not over power the relatively delicate fish. The other dish I tried here was a scotch egg where the traditional layer of sausage meat that sits between the egg and the breadcrumbs had been replaced with a sweet potato purée. This worked really well and was as good as any scotch egg I could ever remember eating. It's worth mentioning that Barrafin in Frith Street in Soho has been awarded with a Michelin star. This does not happen often for tapas restaurants. Having eaten at the Adelaide Street branch I am less surprised by this. The food was really well cooked and inventive. Once again I get talking to fellow diners who were both enthusiastic about food and dining, but I was getting to the point where food was the last thing I wanted to talk about. My tapas -eating marathon had got me to a stage where my tastebuds were jaded, and I felt bloated. The walk to Charring Cross tube station was a struggle despite being a short distance. The train journey back to my Paddington hostel couldn't end quickly enough. I needed to relax in a bid to aid some serious digestion. The reality upon arrival was that it was unbearably hot and it became one of the most uncomfortable nights I can remember. I kept recalling wildlife documentaries, the ones where a snake eats something huge like a buffalo, the huge lump still visible as it works its way along the body and the snake just has to stay put for a while and not move. Whilst I could not see any visible signs due to my day of gluttony, I too struggled to move and was unable to get comfortable. This is an experiment that I'm in no hurry to repeat despite having eaten some wonderful food.

What is Poetry?

It's not

poetry is a word or two
erupting into meaning

is it?

poetry is characters of nothing
and everything at once

is it?

poetry is grammar set out
formally subjective

is it?

poetry can be identifiable
through splendid definitions golden

can it?

poetry can be spitting ambition
letters breathing anxious desire

can it?

poetry can be flat
lending early torturous pain

can it?

poetry gracefully dances wonders, subject
for mountains under oceans forming truths
politically, grieving peace through sadness rising
among all, elephants white deviously challenge half-
-arsed shits, small feeling unseen yet largely evident
in smells of eyes, structurally igniting mild oddities,

is it?

end comes for blushed cheeks pretty thoughts floating gone.

experiments

all know poetry, me (not) included.

A Glossary of Poetry

A Snippet

THE BLANK VERSE

Within blank verse resides a common feat
 we speak the rhythm in our day to day
 an unstressed beat precedes an emphasis
 to formulate an iambic display.

And there you'll see the sin I have just cast
 as rhyme is not permitted in this form;
 the greats of Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats
 they show their true commitment to the class.

A play by Shakespeare will revel in blank
 as do the works of Henry Howard, Earl –
 a monologue best suits this style of verse
 if wish you to escape the rhyming

hex.

THE BLAZON

Your French heraldic beauty blinds mine eyes
 so I'll emblazon you in metaphor
 I'll mark the limbs of you I most adore
 for physique is thine honour and my prize.

I'll start atop your figure with desire
 then move my adulation to your feet
 and with Renaissance ardour you shall meet
 as your design's sweet kindling to my fire.

THE ELEGY

O' long has passed the day you were last writ
 with sorry sorrow, satire or wit.

O' gone's your Grecian lament for the lost
 and numb's the mourning meter with past frost.

Yet still we lift a dram in Donne's salute
 as poesy's a voice to those now mute;
 in *swift* heroic couplets I appraise
 the quilléd honour lived throughout your days.

At last we find, in meditation, peace
 and so the sombre keening soon may cease,
 as solace in the final couplet's found
 and Elegy, you slumber in the ground.

THE FREE VERSE

liberate.
 Don't repeat the beat
 split the prose
 the French century
 'spaced' box broken pen mosaic
 Ginsberg the grey
 make like Whitman with the ink
 vers libre
 am I consistent enough?
 Thank you,
 No.

THE ENGLISH SONNET

The English sonnet's fourteen little lines
 do grip the iambic of five-toed feet,
 with formulaic meter and hard rhyme
 the triplet quatrains pound a rigid beat.
 Elizabethan penmen practiced praise
 while Shakespeare's sequence bled with sable blood;
 enigma of Dark Lady's label raised
 a river sweeping seekers through black flood.
 In camp of four, three arguments are set
 and oft' of love or lovers, they comprise;

a plea for unrequited anguish met
 and Surrey's courtly capers claim their prize.
 But couplet calls the poet to conclude,
 and offer solace to the lover's feud.

THE ITALIAN SONNET

Again, alike the English, lines fourteen
 but from the pen of Petrarch I prevail,
 and see no triplet quatrains I entail
 instead one octave and a sestet gleam.
 From sweet 'sonetto' little poem beams,
 the pride of da Lentini's work avails;
 a continental verse of mighty hail
 whom Wyatt writ and raised in England green.
 And on line nine the Volta enters in
 – a turn or twist or spin of silken skirts –
 to aid the anguish in the octave eight.
 Mine sestet is salvation for past sin
 or resolution right of wrong reverts,
 in ending, I resign myself to fate.

THE SPENSERIAN STANZA

A verse contrived within a Tudor mind
 by Spencer for his Faerie Queene to speak,
 of simply nine, no more, no fewer, lines
 its fixed nature flourishes technique.
 A long-since perished ambiance antique,
 in French Ballade i's ancient roots are laid
 its branches bow'd with Chaucer's ripe-writ sweets;
 a sonnet – such pastoral escapade
 whom after all its fame, did nought but away fade.

The Parallel

I'm not crazy, but I see things. I know I'm not crazy, because other people see them too. Take this morning. I went to unlock my car, and stared in amazement as the keys slowly melted in my hand. The metal bubbled and slid through my fingers, like mercury, and collected in a small pool at my feet. Incredulous, I pulled at the door of my car, which was locked. I'm not crazy. I know I'm not crazy because there was a man walking past at the time, and he saw it too.

'Hey!' I called out. The man stopped and turned towards me. I held up my hand, which was covered in a viscous grey liquid that used to be my keys.

'Did you see that?'

The man tutted and shook his head. 'Yeah, bad luck,' He said.

See?

He waved goodbye and walked off. I stared after him, thinking I was the object of some practical joke. I tried the door again, which was still locked. I tried it again. Locked. I lost my rag and yanked at the handle, which, with a roaring metallic screeching sound, came clean off in my hand. I stared at the handle, then at the grey puddle on the floor.

'Bugger.'

I rooted around my pockets for some change, wiped my hand on my overcoat, and set off toward the bus stop.

I managed to get a seat on a narrow, red plastic bench while I waited for the bus. The stop smelled of piss. I was crammed in between an elderly woman, who looked deaf and stared at me, and a teenager of about fourteen. The kid kept staring at me. I raised my eyebrows, and the kid pointed at the smeared, grey stain on my coat.

'What's that?' he said.

I looked away and muttered my answer.

'My car keys.'

The kid whistled and shook his head.

‘Damn, what happened to your car?’

Either this kid had been following me, or was incredibly gullible. I turned my back on him and tried to kill the conversation.

‘Nothing. The car’s fine.’

He didn’t get the hint.

‘Man, that sucks. Look at my iPod.’

He pulled out his iPod from his pocket and held it in my face. He had a corner pinched between his index finger and his thumb, and the rest of it was drooping towards the ground, like it had half-melted. The kid, looking pretty smug, then balanced it on his finger. The iPod bent around it and formed an upside down U, the top and bottom nearly touching.

‘It’s like jelly. Still works though.’

I leapt out of my seat, grabbed him by the collar and was about to demand an explanation when the bus arrived. The old woman held out her hand and the driver slammed on the brakes, but the bus, a double decker, didn’t stop. The wheels screeched and locked and the bus, as if on ice, skidded out of control. It careened into the back of the car in front and flipped twice, lengthways, before crushing three other vehicles with a terrible crunching noise, like thunder smashing glass. The wreckage, a mangled heap of metal on the pavement, began emitting thick, black plumes of smoke. Passengers emerged from the remains. Miraculously uninjured, they rolled their eyes at each other and dispersed, like ants crawling away from a fire. The driver stood atop the wreckage with a hand on his hip, speaking into a phone, looking miffed.

The woman at the bus stop shot me a look of frustration. She threw her hands up in the air, and with a righteous cry – ‘gah!’ – grabbed her stick and hobbled off. I stared after her. My hands slowly loosened and I felt the kid wriggle away, but barely noticed. The crash held my whole attention. I watched the people milling about, throwing their hands around, looking pissed. I felt a tickling sensation on my chin, then a sharp

poke on my cheek. The kid was scowling at me. I closed my mouth and wiped the dribble away on my sleeve. 'Weirdo', the kid mumbled, then jumped onto the road where the bus had skidded, and shot away on his front like a penguin.

But I'm not crazy.

Why is it, that when you go to see a GP, they're always running late? A great big clock on the wall, ticking, very slowly, told me she was fifteen minutes behind. This annoyed me, as I was there on time. Wasting my time. My watch told me that she was seventeen minutes behind. This also annoyed me. How was I meant to know the time if the clocks can't agree on it? The clunky ticking of the big clock filled the room, and the thin, tinny ticking of my watch filled my ear. They had different ideas on when to tick, which annoyed me, because how was I supposed to know when the second happens? *Clunk, tick tick, thunk, tick clunk tick, tick, thunk tick tick, clunk, tick tick.* The receptionist stared at me. She slowly ate a banana and looked me dead in the eye, a phone at her ear. A baby in a pram was scowling at me, a tiny podgy finger pointing straight at my face; and a model on a stack of antiseptic magazines glared at me, daring me to whisk some eggs. A chav stared right at me and coughed and coughed. *Clunk, tick tick cough, tick cough cough cough cough THUNK.* I fiddled with the edge of my jumper and a thin strand of cotton came away. I tried to snap it off but I pulled and more came away, and I pulled and it kept coming and coming and my jumper came away, and it unravelled and the thread kept coming and my jumper fell off and turned into a heap of thread on the floor. *Cough cough THUNK.*

'Franz K?'

A lady, about thirty, was smiling at me. I raised my hand. I patted my chest. My jumper was still there.

'If you'd like to follow me?' She turned round and began walking back the way she came. I rose to follow her. 'Don't forget your drink!' Blank, I gazed around and spotted a cardboard cup of tea on a stack of magazines. I followed the lady and we ended up in her office.

‘Take a seat. What can I do for you?’

She was staring at me with that concern-for-strangers face that doctors have. I sat down in the chair and leaned in.

‘It’s nothing... I’ve been seeing things,’ I whispered.

‘Oh?’ The doctor raised her eyebrows and began typing on her computer. ‘What kind of things?’

She frowned but I wasn’t looking at her face. Her hair. It floated around her head, eerie, like she had been suddenly submerged in water. Her chair slowly rose off the ground and, gripping the sides, she began to move in lazy somersaults towards the ceiling. Incredulous, I jumped up and went for the door, but my feet found only air as I too rose off the ground. All the objects in the room followed suit. The plastic bed in the corner bounced around, as if dangled from a hook, the computer and the keyboard parted ways. Red, blue and green pens scattered and hung in the air like baubles on a Christmas tree. The doctor tutted and rolled her eyes.

‘I’m so sorry about this,’ she said. ‘All our physics have been on the blink since we switched to BT.’

She eyed the tea, which had freed itself of the cup, and was floating around the room in a great big, brown globule. ‘Would you like a straw?’

She kicked off the ceiling, like a swimmer off the edge of a pool, and landed on the carpet, where she gripped her desk. She opened a draw and a variety of office supplies poured out, paper clips, pencils, a stapler. They were followed by a number of plastic bendy straws. She caught one and flicked it at me. She watched with the face as I rose like a balloon, bounced slightly against the ceiling, and finally came to rest in a corner above the door.

‘You just, er, hang in there while I ring Sharon.’

She took aim, and then kicked off the desk in the direction of the phone. She caught it as she flew past and hit the opposite wall with a slight ‘oof’, then dialled a number.

‘Hi Sharon? I’m having problems with the gravity in my office.’

I heard a thin, tinny reply come out of the receiver.

'Looks like the whole building's gone, Jess. I'm ringing them now.'

'Ok, thanks Sharon.'

She put the receiver down, but kept hold of the phone. She lay flat against the wall; her arms and legs spread out like a starfish, and looked up at me. My neck was bent against the ceiling; my limbs twisted around me, the walls in the way.

'Now,' she said, 'What kind of things have you been seeing?'

Her voice was distant. I was watching a pen spin around on the spot, in mid air.

'...Keys melted.'

'Wow,' she replied, 'that must be annoying. Anything else?'

It was doing pen somersaults, slowing down.

'...Bus crash.'

'Ah.' The doctor nodded to herself, seeming to understand.

'Yes, I saw that on the news this morning. The road lost its friction, apparently.'

She was talking on the phone again, but I didn't care. I put the straw in my mouth and half-heartedly wafted the tea towards me, but it had separated into three globes, which were orbiting my head. I felt an uncomfortable wetness as one floated straight into my ear. I tilted my head and began hitting the other ear with my palm. Tiny bubbles of tea emerged in a stream and floated towards the carpet, and I watched forlornly as they drifted away, lost forever.

'And that's what happened?'

Yes.

The man waves his fingers in my face.

'Do you know how you got here?'

No.

'A policeman brought you here. Do you remember him?'

I don't know any policemen.

'Ok Franz. You wait here and I'll be right back.'

P.C. Perry tutted and rolled his eyes as he walked into the doctor's surgery. There was a strange movement in his gut, and he felt faintly queasy as he rose off his feet and hovered in mid – air. He made a swipe for his cap as it came free from his head, but barely brushed it with the tips of his fingers before it floated out of his reach.

'For God's sake,' he muttered.

'Hello there!'

In the middle of the room, there were rows of chairs bolted to the floor. People were holding on to them, some sitting normally, reading magazines, others, like the woman who had spoken, had not quite grasped the logistics involved to do so. She was gripping the bottom of one such chair, hanging upside down with her feet pointed at the ceiling, her hair waving around like branches in the breeze.

'Do you have an appointment?' she said.

'I got a call from... ' He consulted his notebook, 'Dr Blake? Is she here?'

The receptionist span round and pointed at a door leading further into the building.

'Number three through there,' she said.

'Cheers,' he replied.

Perry reached down and took off his shoe, then threw it back the way he had come. He drifted towards a wall and grabbed a radiator to stay in place. With his free hand he took a fire extinguisher out of its bracket, then let go and floated back into free space.

'All clear,' he said. The patients pushed themselves towards the ceiling and the walls, creating a clear path to the door. Perry straddled the extinguisher, then let fly a great cloud of white smoke and shot backwards across the room. He hit the door and flew straight through, before slamming into the wall behind it. He made his way down the corridor the same way, letting off short bursts, bouncing off the walls.

The door to number three was open. He floated inside and found the doctor spread-eagled across a wall.

'Dr Blake?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Thanks for coming.'

'That's alright.' He looked around the room. 'Where is he, then?'

The doctor pointed towards the corner above him. He looked up and saw, in the space between the door and the ceiling, a very pale man in his mid-twenties. Every now and again he bounced off the ceiling, spinning around slightly each time. He mostly stared blankly, but as Perry approached, he turned his wide eyes upon him, and began mouthing words, but didn't make a sound.

'Poor bugger,' Perry said.

'Yeah, the crossing messes them up a bit.'

Perry gently took hold of the man's wrist, and pulled him down from the ceiling.

'Come on buddy, hold on.'

Perry parked him on the edge of the extinguisher, and reached around for the nozzle. They were almost out the door when he turned around and spoke to the doctor.

'Sorry, what's his name again?'

'Franz K.'

'Ok, cheers.'

They glided back through the hall and emerged into the waiting room. As they were about halfway to the exit, the gravity kicked in again, and people, computers, books, prams, magazines and all the other floating detritus dropped to the floor with a thunderous crash. Perry got up and observed the mess around him.

'B.T...' he muttered.

He grabbed Franz, reclaimed his cap and shoe, and left the surgery.

'Do you remember now?'

There's a chair, and a table, and a big electric light that hums and crackles. There's a giant beetle scuttling along the walls and the ceiling.

'Ok. I'm going to ask you a few more questions, Franz.'

Ok.

‘What is your address?’

I dress in shirts, and trousers, and shoes.

‘Where do you live?’

In a house. No, a flat.

‘Ok. Can you tell me what this is, Franz?’

He holds up a blob of colour. It’s flat. Black and white patches merge into one another. They munch on some grass.

A cow.

‘Very good. And this?’

He holds up another flat picture. It curdles and droops in his hand. He starts sinking into the ground. Beads of moisture trickle down the walls and they wobble like jelly, and the table legs buckle and the top slides off and I’m not crazy and my feet start sinking, like I’m in quicksand, and the roof hangs down in the middle and I’m up to my waist, and the man’s face disappears and his hand claws at the wall which comes away in great big chunks like Play-Doh and I’m swimming through the floor and the walls and the light and the walls and the table and the chairs merge together in a great big pool of gloop and someone grabs me and pulls me out and I’m not crazy.

‘I’M NOT CRAZY!’

The doorway drips down and through a small gap that’s left, I see the room collapse in on itself and its happening and the man is dead and I’m not crazy.

‘You’re not crazy, Franz.’

P.C. Perry held Franz in his arms, and watched helplessly as the building melted around them. The exits were already collapsed, and they were slowly sinking into the floor.

‘You’re not from here. It’s different where you’re from.’

I look up at him and he looks down. They both held on to each other, knowing that we didn’t have much time left.

‘Physics doesn’t work here.’

‘What? How...’

‘Oh...’ Franz waved their hand in a dismissive kind of way. ‘Some guy broke it. We hire it from power companies. BT is

a bit shit. You must've slipped in through a wormhole from a parallel universe or something. I don't know.'

And Perry closed my eye as we held into each other and they sank

down,

down,

down,

down, up a bit

then and a bit sideways

and flattened out into Franz's car keys, which woke up and wondered what the hell had happened.

The Resistance

Clare woke to the smashing of the kitchen window. She had once seen a hare sit rigid and wide-eyed while the rhythmic thumping of its startled heart shook its body, then it had unfolded and sprinted into the woods. Clare moved silently to the cold edge of the bed, slid her legs out from under the covers and sat up. She hesitated. *Gérard is at war.* She stood and moved quietly to the door, its brass handle cold under her damp palm. *Gérard is at war.*

In the kitchen just the grey glow of a man's clothes and the shine of his gun. He whispered, Claire jumped. He searched for the French word. *Oh*, he said, *oh, oh*. He tipped his hand towards his mouth. Clare nodded. *Eau*. She took a step into the kitchen. The gun straightened. *L'eau*, she replied, pointing to the dresser. He lowered the gun and she moved to fetch a glass. As she bent down to the lowest cupboard of the dresser where the glasses were kept, *Oh!* She heard the man fall behind her. She turned and stared: a giant in her kitchen. The Germans would find him. She took the glass from the dresser and filled it then knelt beside the man, tipping the water into his mouth, it trickled over his beard as his head fell back onto the stone floor. She lifted it, propped it under her legs, her fingers greasing with his matted, curly hair. The head weighed heavy in her lap.

Sam woke in a bed. He fought to remember what had happened, raised his head from the pillow and looked about the room. A woman sat staring at him from a chair in the corner. He froze. He saw the gun he had stolen from the guard room resting in her lap. Her blonde hair haloed in the white light of the morning. German? French? She spoke. French. It was full of disdain. *Pardon*, he whispered, *pardon*. For the briefest moment, her grey eyes softened. *What's going on here?* He tried to remember what had happened after he had broken into the house. Why was he in bed and alive? Perhaps he wasn't, perhaps this was

afterwards. Perhaps the girl in the corner was... *Mary, is that you?* She listened to him. *Mary, what's going on here?* Sam sat up to get a better look at her. She stood up, moved towards the bed and pressed his shoulders back into the softness of the warm pillow.

He was one of Gérard's rams: Roman nose, broad shoulders, youth. Twenty-three, twenty-four? And dirty: black fingernails, brown skin, his beard unkempt and straggly, hair matted. He smelled of earth and sweat and a little like the fields after rain. When he woke she saw that his eyes were blue, bright bright blue, and scared. He sat up, mumbled incoherently in his English. Then he started crying. She got up, laid the gun in the chair, and went to him.

The woman sat next to him on the bed, smiled kindly. *Shh*, she placed her small hand gently over his, he softened his grip on the edge of the blanket. When Sam next woke the woman had brought him stew. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten. He mopped up the juices with sweet, warm bread. Afterwards Sam watched the tops of trees outside the window bending under the wind. When he next woke it was dark and a Spring storm shook the little house. The woman stood by the window, watching the lightning.

By morning the storm had passed. Sam lay in bed, listening to a high, lonely bird song. *Where's the woman?* The glass of water by his bed had not been filled. He waited at least an hour. There was no sound downstairs. She had gone. *She will come back with the Germans.* Sam sat up, moved to the edge of the bed. His head spun. *Clothes, warm clothes, food.* He swung his legs from the bed and stood up, steadied himself with his hand to the wall and went to the chest of drawers that stood in the corner of the room. He found men's clothes and changed into as many layers as he could reasonably wear. Downstairs he took a cloth and filled it with bread, cheese and apples, tied it in a knot and left the house, his heart pounding like a caught hare. Immediately, he collided with the woman. He grabbed her shoulders, shook

her, *where are they? When are they coming? Did you tell them? Where are they?* She looked afraid, said something fast in French. *Germans?* He hissed, *Allemand? Allemand?* She shook her head, *non non non.*

Clare caught the Englishman before he fell, then knelt to the ground under his weight. He was wearing Gérard's clothes. He shook. Clare let him hold her while she sat rigid. The man moved first, once he had calmed, he lifted his face from her neck and righted the contents of her spilled basket, then helped her up. He placed his knot of supplies on top of hers and they went inside.

They ate breakfast in silence, then Claire heated water and placed a tin bath in front of the fire. She washed the man's hair first. Then ran the soaped cloth over his dirty skin, he flinched. His body was scratched and bruised, *pardon*, she said. His blue eyes flashed at her, his chest rising, droplets of water on his long eyelashes. Gérard's razor rasped over the Englishman's yellow cheeks. A small nick dropped blood into the dirty bathwater. After she had finished, she gave him a towel to rub off the soap. He had a strong jaw, and a wide mouth. Without his beard a smile changed his face like a lamp changed a darkened room. His bare chest leant into her shoulder as she supported him up the stairs and back into bed.

Sam awoke to the sound of voices downstairs. A woman – *the* woman – and a man? A German? He couldn't tell, the man spoke French. Did it sound like a German speaking French? Maybe. He lay still and naked under the bedclothes. Should he escape? Would the woman tell them he was there? Would she cover for him? He thought now that she would.

Clare made coffee for the German soldier, he indicated to the sheet that covered the kitchen window. *We were concerned after a neighbour alerted us that your window is broken.* He smiled. She knew the Germans liked her because she looked like one of

them. *It was the storm*, she explained, *a branch came through the window*. She placed the coffee on the table and sat next to him, tried to seem warm and relaxed. The German sipped his coffee too slowly. He asked her about her husband, tried to flirt with her, to find out if she was sleeping around. They all did that, the Germans, flirted with the French wives. But he was shy, this German, and awkward. He asked her if she had seen anyone suspicious. *No, why do you ask? None of us are against the Germans here, we all believe in the Nationalist cause*. The German choked on his coffee in his haste to reassure her. *No, no, we know this to be true. But we all must exercise the caution. There is a man on the loose, an Englishman*, Clare's heart jumped, *who has escaped from a camp. He is very dangerous and we are concerned about you*. He looked into her eyes *I myself am concerned*. Clare tried to smile sweetly and cast her eyes down, in virginal innocence. *You are alone out here, and it is very far from others, we worry you shall not be able to protect yourself if the Englishman should come*. Clare sipped her coffee. What to say? *I am flattered that you should care for me, but I know you Germans will catch the soldier. I have faith in you. I must stay here, because it's my husband's farm and I must keep it for him. He fights bravely in the militia and I must be brave too*. The German smiled. As he was finishing his coffee, Clare noticed Gérard's razor sitting on the damp hand-towel by the sink. The sink was by the back door and as he made to leave the German hesitated. The hare's heart shook her frozen body. The German turned, he looked thoughtful. *If you see anything you will let us know?* His eyes on hers. She tried to smile, *of course*.

Sam heard the kitchen door close. The man had left. There was silence and then footsteps as the woman came upstairs. She came into the bedroom carrying a glass of water, her face had drained white. He took the water from her and placed it on the bedside table. The woman sat down on the bed. He wanted to comfort her, to thank her for not giving him away. *Thank you*, he said, but she didn't understand him, *Everything's going to be OK*, but it was as if she hadn't heard him. Cautiously, Sam placed his arm

around her shoulders. She sat still, looked to her knees and stood up, said something in French and left the room.

An hour or so later the woman came back with some fresh bread and butter, she gave it to him then left the room to fill his water glass. *Tomorrow I will leave*, he resolved. When the woman came back she began to talk to him in earnest about something. *Yes, yes*, he assured her, *tomorrow I will leave. Tomorrow? Is that OK? I don't have the strength today.* The woman fell quiet, looked at him thoughtfully then moved to the door, propped it open and went out then, pointing to a trap door in the roof at the top of the stairs, said *Allemande* and he understood. He smiled. She smiled back.

In the evening they ate stew and drank fierce red wine at the kitchen table with one candle burning and the fire red and hot. After the meal they sat in silence, the white logs crumbling in the grate. *Do you have a pack of cards?* Sam asked. He remembered how the French officers liked to play cards with him in the evenings at the POW camp. He mimed shuffling and dealing. Her face brightened: she did.

One minute she'd been laughing at his attempt to balance cards, the next her face had dropped. Sam mimed sleep, his hands folded in prayer on his cheek and his eyes closed. She turned her grey eyes on him. Christ. He hoped to God she didn't think he was propositioning her. He stood up and made for the door, tried to look jolly and unassuming. He left the room without her and went to bed.

Several minutes later the woman came into the bedroom after a quiet knock at the door. She placed a glass of water by his bedside then moved to the chair in the corner where she placed a cushion behind her head and a blanket over herself. A wave of guilt came over him. He sprung out of bed, it seemed to startle her. *This is no good, is it?* He joked, he gestured for her to take the bed. She didn't understand, she looked at him with wide eyes. *Oh Christ, you do think I'm propositioning you. I'm not, I'm being a complete gentleman, look*, he gently took her arm and coaxed her

out of the chair then pointed to the bed, *you sleep there and look, I'll sleep here*. Sam sat down in the chair. The woman laughed and looked at him kindly. *Arrêt!* she said and, taking the blanket from his chair, she divided up the bed clothes so that the bed was split in half, with one blanket on one side and another on the other. Then she got into bed and gestured for him to take the other side. He smiled. He understood, climbed under the empty blanket and turned away from her. *Good night* he said. There was silence, then she whispered her reply: *bonne nuit*. Sam lay looking at the window. Clouds raced over a full moon. He could hear her gentle breathing beside him. Just feel, ever so slightly, a soft warmth reflected onto his back from her small body.

Clare lay unmoving, too aware of the young man that lay behind her. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but the memory of his eyes was like sunshine on her face. He moved, just an inch, but it felt like an earthquake in the bed next to her. His foot brushed against her leg. She moved it as quietly and quickly as she could away from him and lay still again. There was a mountain in her bed. The pillow smelled of him. *Gérard is... Gérard is...* she remembered perfectly the weight of the Englishman's bare chest on her shoulder and it stayed with her, that memory, as she fell asleep.

She dreamt of blue skies and awoke with her head on his chest, his arm cupped around her back, her hand resting on his shoulder. She could hear his heart beating. Was he asleep? She lay still as ice, hardly dared to breath. There was a knock at the door.

Sam jumped out of the bed. The Germans had come. He grabbed the stolen gun and looked at the woman. She moved silently to the top of the stairs, taking his hand in hers, and took the gun from him, nudged it up into the trapdoor, pushing it open, then gave him back the gun and formed a platform with linked hands. He stepped into it, lifted himself into the roof and slid the trapdoor shut.

The knock came again. Shaking, Clare made her way downstairs. The German who had come yesterday stood in the rain. *All night I have worried for your safety*, he began. *You look scared, my love*. He seemed drunk, though it was early in the morning. *I thought you were the Englishman*, she replied. *It is raining, can I come in?* There was no excuse, she stood back and let him into the house. *Would you like coffee?* She asked. The German didn't reply. There was a look in his eyes, *I have thought of you all night, my love*. Clare didn't know what to say. She turned to make coffee and he moved towards her, sped across the kitchen and grabbed her by the arm. His breath was hot on her face. *Are you lying to me? Is he here?* She hesitated, his grip tightened. *No, of course, I'm not lying to you. There's no Englishman*. The German's strike was hard and fast. *I'm sorry, my love. I do not like to be lied to. Prove to me that you are not lying*. Clare looked into his small eyes then turned towards the stairs, she would show him.

He followed her into the bedroom, looked under the bed, in the cupboard. He was frantic. Clare was cold in her thin nightdress. Once satisfied he looked to her, then sat down on her bed. He whispered *Forgive me, my love. The war weighs heavy on me*. She tried to smile. *That's OK, I understand. Why don't you come downstairs and have some coffee?* The German looked at her. His breath was heavy and loud through his wide nostrils, his chest heaved. He stood up, the speed of it made Clare jump. The German grabbed her and forced her to the bed before she had time to struggle. He held her with one hand and placed the other over her mouth. He was strong. He pressed down onto her, slid his chin into the crook of her neck and spoke into her ear. *Don't worry, your husband will never know*, he released his hand from her mouth tentatively. When he saw that she wouldn't scream, he kissed her hard on the mouth and, with his free hand, unbuckled his belt. He raised his face away from her, then slid her nightdress over her hips. The German's face exploded in a shower of red. He slumped forward onto her body, the pistol on his hip hard against her arm. Clare writhed her way out from under him.

As the woman pushed the German's body off her Sam dropped his gun and went to her. He caught her in his arms and she fell into him. He knelt under the weight of her body. She shook. He looked over at the German sprawled ungainly on the floor in his red puddle then turned back to her, she raised her face and looked into his eyes. The bastard's blood was splattered over her soft, pink cheeks. Sam licked his thumb and made to wipe it off. *What do we do now?* He asked. She looked over at the German, said something in French. *What? I don't understand?* He absentmindedly made to wipe the blood from her cheeks again, tucked her dishevelled hair behind her ear. She looked back at him, her eyes hard. Sam's fingers were still placed in her hair, gently touching her just behind her ear. Their breathing was shallow, and rapid. He flattened his hand, pressed it over her ear and across her cheek and held it there. *Sam*, he smiled.

Clare returned the smile and whispered *Clare*, raised the German's gun to Sam's temple and pulled the trigger.

Potato

“Does my Right Honourable Friend agree if 16- and 17-year-olds are given the vote it increases the likelihood they will be regarded and treated as adults, therefore increasing the likelihood of them becoming victims of sexual exploitation?”

“No.”

“Hmm. Well if you say so.”

I stood in Parliament’s viewing gallery thinking about this strange statement from Conservative MP David Nuttall. As I did this my boyfriend Jack looked at me and asked; “as a sixteen year old d’you think voting in the EU referendum’ll mark you out as a target for all the paedos?”

“Not particularly.”

“Nah, me neither. It’s almost as if there’s another reason he don’t want us to vote, something he ain’t so happy to say in public. Know what I mean?” He winks at me.

“Oh.”

“Although he did vote against gay marriage and the equal pay transparency bill. And he supports the death penalty and conscription so maybe he’s just some lunatic with a fucked up childhood, the sort who’d adopt a potato and call it Potato...”

“Jack can we go?”

“Why?”

“Well this isn’t as much fun for me...”

“Aw come on Patrick—”

“Plus our dinner, we have to be on time babe.”

“It’s McDonalds. We don’t have a reservation.”

“It’s a very long bus journey back to your flat.”

“Which is why your mum said I could stay at yours”

“But...”

“Patrick, please mate. How many kids from a council estate in Coulsdon get to see Parliament? I wanna appreciate this.”

I left him to his fun and went looking for a toilet. He makes every argument about class. Typical communist. I should have known better when he said we were having a romantic day out

in London. At least it was an improvement on our first date; a debate on the spread of radical Islam. Or the rally against austerity where I got chased by a police horse. I say yes to everything he suggests because knowing Jack wants to spend time with me feels so good I don't give much thought to what I've signed up for. You would do the same if you knew him. I smile to myself then realise I am completely lost. It turns out Parliament is a big building. I can hear a conversation from behind a door and am about to ask for help when I recognise a voice; David Nuttall.

"Isn't that enough for today?"

"No!" Replied a woman with a voice I had heard nothing like before, the sound of death, anger and hate. "I wonder what stupid shit I can make you say next. Maybe international aid should be replaced by a hippo that was trained to shout 'LEARN YOUR PLACE' in a thick Israeli accent. Or rape being illegal on private property is political correctness gone mad. Or people in wheelchairs didn't accept our lord Jesus Christ in a past life—"

"—Why are you doing this?"

"Don't interrupt me. Because I can and I enjoy watching you squirm. Your secret would end your career far sooner than the fallout from this little game."

"Would it?"

"Of course. I work for The Sun, I know these things. People forget about casual racism or supporting the death penalty but if they knew an elected MP adopted a potato and called it Potato, then claimed two grand in expenses for its clothes that would be the end of you."

"Please don't make me say those things anymore."

"So if you want your career to last, you'd better keep saying everything I tell you to, or I might find a very interesting front-page article."

"Please..."

If I was as into politics as Jack I would have listened for longer. But if you want the truth I don't think anything will change with people like David Nuttall and that woman from

The Sun in charge, so what's the point caring? Of course Jack disagrees, he showed me this speech he wrote for a trade union do about how progressive change only happens when people mobilise to stand up for the oppressed after the first time I went down on him. I suppose opposites attract. I head back into the viewing gallery.

“Hey Patrick, wanna get outta here?”

“No, no it's fine, if you want to stay—”

“I prefer it on the frontline, these are a bit of a joke. David Nuttall just spoke about the ‘so-called Holocaust.’”

“Oh dear.”

“So. McDonalds?”

“Ah go on.” And we left.

You Can't Ban the Columbine Kid

'First of all let me say, God bless the people of Iowa. Without y'all, I would not be standing here.'

Come on, Ted, enough of the chitchat. Exercise your right to bear arms, already. Let's go Aurora Theater on these fuckers!

Not now, Kiddo. 'Indeed, tonight has been a victory for the grassroots, and for conservative America.'

Blah blah fucking blah. You ain't getting cold feet, are you?

'But we cannot become complacent. In my judgment, we are facing what I consider to be the epic battle of our generation, quite literally the battle over whether we remain a Christian nation. Religious liberty is a cornerstone of our society, but in Obama's America ordinary people who disagree with marriage equality are persecuted every day for their beliefs.'

If you can shoot a deer, you can shoot a queer, eh Ted?

'And it see —'

Teddy? Don't you go pretending you can't hear me.

'Ahem, excuse me. And it seems that our president thinks it appropriate to play God, when he takes from the unborn that precious gift of life.'

Good thinking, Ted. Wait till after she shits the little tyke out. Then we actually get to see the life leave its eyes.

'Let it —'

I'll bring the popcorn.

'Let it go on record that I do not believe a man is fit to stand in the oval office unless he begins each day on his knees.'

Mmm, President Lewinsky, I like the sound of that.

Please, Kiddo, this isn't the time. 'I believe that the President of the United States must abide by the same laws as the people, and that he must stand first and foremost for liberty and the constitution.'

Oh Teddy, I love it when you talk patriotic to me.

'America is in a time of crisis, but in Iowa here today I have been inspired. I have been inspired by the faith and resolve y'all've shown. There is still hope.'

Go on, Teddy! Use that second amendment and send 'em to God! They're begging ya!

'...And I would be honored if y'all continued to place that hope in me. Goodnight and God bless.'

Wait, what? What the fuck, Ted? That wasn't the plan!

I – I can't...

There's a couple o' dead wetbacks out in Presidio County that say different. Remember them, Ted?

That was you, Kidd –

hat was US, Teddy! US!

'Look, I'm just not wearing my argument boots right now, Kiddo.'

Argument boots, Ted? ARGUMENT boots? Fuck your argument boots! Get on your jackboots, Teddy boy! Tonight, the Columbine Kid makes his comeback!

'Kiddo? Who's Kiddo? Senator Cruz, were you talking to me? Senator Cruz? Senator? Oh my God, senator! Please... Put down the gun... Senator, I have a wife and k –'

