



the
RoomtoWrite
prize
anthology

2014

Room to Write

Prize Anthology

2014

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A JUDGE'S REFLECTIONS

Sharon Griffiths.

We were lucky this year to have a high standard of entries, many well-written competent stories. There are fashions in stories as in everything else – themes that emerge from current preoccupations. A few years ago I remember we had a spate of stories in which husbands left their wives for other men.

That excitement died down and this year we've had what I think of as the 3 As – Alzheimers, Abuse and Afghanistan. All fascinating issues that need exploring. But an issue doesn't make a story. You don't give a story gravitas just by writing about something serious. It takes a bit more than that. The other staple is middle aged disenchantment and wives murdering their husbands. Wish fulfilment doesn't make a story either.

People ask how you choose the winners. We don't. The winners choose themselves: as we're reading our way through all these competent and quite enjoyable stories, suddenly we read one that makes our hearts lift.

Every one of those on the shortlist had that effect. It made us stop and smile, treasure the words on the page and relish the thought behind them. Each one had a freshness and originality about it – either the theme, the plot, the different way of looking at things, all combined with good writing.

What's startling is how much the four judges agreed. We're an opinionated lot, never afraid to pitch into an argument, relish it, in fact. But all these shortlisted stories seemed to emerge from the heaps of paper as if by common consent. Even though we each value different things when reading, our selections coincided to a remarkable degree. They were all

clearly unequivocally special. The winners chose themselves. Nothing to argue about.

The only really tricky bit was the final placings, which got dangerously near to counting the angels on the head of a pin. *Diagonal Flight* had a fresh point of view - we were inside the head of that Chinese grandmother – but carried its theme all the way through without hammering at it. Delicately done. *KT Boundary* had a strong “voice” which couldn’t be ignored. *Ruby Fleet* took the now familiar story of the Magdalene laundries and gave it a mischievous twist. As did *Blood Pool* with the curse of sisterly rivalry.

Each of those stories took us somewhere else and gave us a new way of looking at the world. No mean achievement. What’s more, by the time we’d done the judging we’d each read each of the short listed stories at least four times, often more. And we were still finding new small delights in them - that really *is* the sign of a winner. S.G

DIAGONAL FLIGHT

Christine Powell

Win slides her arms into the red silk jacket, pulls on a pair of black twill trousers, eases her feet into her best brocade slippers. Today, she is Chan Jing Wei: Chinese grandmother.

There is a note from the daughter-in-law on the kitchen table, instructions to leave the charity bag by the front door when she goes out. Win makes tea in her special blue and white porcelain beaker, carefully replaces the lid and carries it into the front room.

This hour in the morning, when she has the house to herself, is her Tai Chi Chuan time. She stands a few steps back from the bay window, roots her weight over her feet, focuses on the roof of the house opposite, breathes down to the tan tien and adopts the first chi kung stance. Wuji. Before beginning the form she permits herself a sip of tea. Hei sai. Ward off. Roll back. A pair of jackdaws sidestep coquettishly across the slates. Diagonal flying. Each new year find a mate, build a nest, rear your young, teach them to fly.

She taught her son to fly; he headed west, found himself a post at a British university and a round-eyed English bride. When he insisted she should come to live with them in this damp, northern village, she could find no reason not to. So, for the last eighteen years she has been Nana Win, Mrs. Chan, John's widowed mother from Hong Kong; she has worn faded black sweatshirts and polyester jogging bottoms; she has been housekeeper and baby-sitter and she has attended English language classes, for the grandchildren. Now they, too, are learning to fly.

Thomas is training to be a Quantity Surveyor. Laura, Monkey child, restless and clever, 'designs things'. On a fleeting visit home last summer,

she said: 'I think I should learn Cantonese. You could teach me, Nana Win!' Win was gratified but non-committal.

White crane spreads wings. A small red-haired boy wearing old-fashioned spectacles with heavy black rims, an enormous rucksack on his back, races past the window. He has no bus to catch, the primary school is only a hundred yards away, but every morning he runs, arms pumping, up to the school gate. Kick with the right leg. The Methodist minister strides through the puddles with her labrador.

The family once had a dog, a Border Terrier cross called Bobo. Bobo used to sit at her feet, staring. 'I do not like dogs. You will not jump on to my knee,' she said, repeatedly, and the grandchildren wailed, repeatedly, 'Nana Win! You are soooo cruel to Bobo!' She did not connect with their response to the dog's death. She had never wept unreservedly in that way, not even when Déshi died, leaving her alone with their young son.

Perhaps she left Jiang Liu (as he then was) too much in the care of the crèches set up by her European employers in the big Central District hotels, but the pay allowed her to educate him well. He has always treated her well in return, although just now he is away, at a conference in London, and last night, New Year's Eve, neglected to call her. There is still a part of her that fears this departure from routine is an inauspicious omen.

Practice completed, she looks out the zodiac banners. The daughter-in-law gave up a lunch hour to find them in one of the Chinese supermarkets in Newcastle, so Win shouldn't be ungrateful, but they are mass-produced images on cheap material, not what she had hoped for. The banners go into a jute tote bag advertising YUE HWA CHINESE PRODUCTS. Her cousin, still cleaning the big houses in Pok Fu Lam, emails that the big store on Nathan Road is long gone. She drops the brocade slippers into the bag and puts on her wellingtons.

Mr. Craggs from next door is putting his charity bag out as she leaves. Mr. Craggs has milky grey-green eyes like the South China Sea. His wife is in hospital, his sack is full of clothes she will never wear again. Nor will she be home for his seventy-second birthday.

‘This is your year,’ says Win, ‘the year of the Horse!’

‘I look forward to galloping away into the sunset,’ he says. ‘Once I’ve had the knee operation. You look very smart this morning, Win.’

‘I’m going to the school, to talk about about Chinese New Year.’

There seem to be a great many children jammed into one classroom. Win smiles at the rows of upturned faces, like little pink peas on a shelf. ‘Kung hei Fat Choy! Happy new year! My Chinese name is Jing Wei. I was born a very long time ago, in 1940, so I am a Dragon. I think that you are all probably Pigs, Dogs or Rats!’

The children giggle, some rowdy boys on the back row start a snorting contest. The class teacher hands out calendars downloaded from the internet and a lively buzz fills the room as the children search for the animal of their birth year. A shriek of laughter erupts from the back row: ‘Look! Raymond’s a pig! Oink oink!’.

Everyone turns round; Win’s red-haired running boy bangs his fist on the desk top. ‘I’m not a pig! You’re pigs!’ The teacher hurries over, calms them all down.

‘Now, I want you all to listen very carefully to Mrs. Chan.’ A classroom assistant hangs the zodiac banners around the room; the smallest children in the front row fidget, waggle their feet, yawn, pull at their clothing, but most of the older ones pay attention as Win explains the animal symbols, taking particular care to stress the kindness and honesty of the Pig.

Then there is a special display. The year six pupils dance in procession around the school hall with a fantastical, green and gold papier-mâché

horse's head accompanied by their own composition on tin whistles, cymbals and drums. Win tells them she is very happy that they should honour her culture in this way.

As the hall empties, she feels an urgent tug at her left sleeve. It is Raymond.

'Miss, can I be a dragon? Like you?'

'The Pig is a good animal, Raymond.'

Raymond sighs heavily, she fears there may be tears. 'But I don't want to be a pig.'

'You have the heart of the Dragon, I can tell.'

'Miss, you know how you have a English name and a Chinese name?'

Win nods, solemnly. 'Can I have a Chinese name?'

'I think that is possible.' She nods again, 'how about Dewei?' It is the name she would have chosen for her grandson.

'Dewei! Does that mean dragon?'

'It does.' Win finds the dragon banner and presents it to him.

'Wow! Cool!' He throws it round his shoulders and rushes out to the playground.

As she walks home, she chides herself. Since when, Jing Wei, did you lie to children? The answer, of course, is, like all adults, she has always told small lies to children. To preserve happiness and harmony. As she replaces the silk jacket on its hanger, she notices a greasy stain on the sleeve, from Raymond's fingers.

She barely has time to make a cup of tea before her son arrives home. It is Friday afternoon, the conference finished early and he has a New Year gift for her, a turquoise scarf bought from a booth on King's Cross Station. 'We'll celebrate tonight,' he says, 'while Deborah is at choir practice.'

'Jiang Liu, I have not been a good grandmother.' She drapes the scarf over her arm, holds it up to the light. 'I did not try enough to teach Tommy and Laura about their Chinese heritage.'

He frowns, 'but they were born over here.'

On Monday morning, snow falls. Wet, soft flakes like small birds spiralling down to earth. Win breathes in, feels the chi sinking to the tan tien point and her joints open. Raymond is late. Perhaps he isn't going to school today. Perhaps his mother is keeping him at home because of the weather. Perhaps he is unwell. She begins to feel anxious.

But no, there he is, a small, dark figure charging through the blizzard. He has tied the dragon banner to his rucksack, it streams out behind him. As he draws level with her window, he leaps into the air one arm stretched out in front, the other behind making a diagonal line. It is a trick of the light and the snowfall but, just for an instant, he seems to be suspended there, like an arrow in flight or a superhero. He lands, waves, carries on running. Win removes the lid from her blue and white china beaker, sips her tea, watches the snow float slowly past the bay window.

***CHRIS POWELL** lives in County Durham. She used to teach Performing Arts, but now writing, archaeology, reading and swimming take up all of her time. Short fiction is her passion and her stories have been published in magazines and anthologies and broadcast on BBC Radio 4."*
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KT BOUNDARY

John Adams

Back then in the time of Pangaea, when the land was whole, those atoms, those molecules finally form to make a living cell. The Cambrian explosion. Boom! The genes that twist and turn in spirals of DNA that are the makings of me. Then the asteroid hits and the dinosaurs gone. Boom! Clear sailing from there. Years pass, millions of them - and those same particles now are surrounded by this body. The genetic fossils inside me.

The Mammy is out. I take the stool. Drag it over to the cupboard where the food is kept. Climb up, this stool feels dangerous and wobbly. Guilt already tightens the throat. Boom! It's there nestling in the tins for the taking. I cling to the shelf and stare for the longest time. As long as I dare - she'll be back soon perhaps. Then I decide. Grab the bag, carefully down off the shaky platform. Drag it back. No evidence.

Run upstairs, rip it open and stuff those miniature chocolate eggs down my gullet, mouth open like a cannibal bird chick. They taste different. Bad. No pleasure. No enjoyment, the shame soiling my taste buds but too late to go back. Finally they are all gone and I feel wracked with relief and nausea.

When the Mammy comes home she says, 'Are you OK?'

She says it looks like you've seen that ghost of the bogey man.

I keep the place neat. No one bothers me about that. No one bothers me. They are my friends. Like friends on Facebook. I know them. They're OK. These people like to tell their stories. Some are frightening. Some are funny. Some are so sad that to think about them in bed makes me weep in the night.

And they say that I must have a story to tell. I say that I have no story. I doubt they will be enthralled by tales of genetic drift and punctuated equilibrium. My life is so dull I say. Predictable. But today it is not. And of course, I do have a story to tell.

Two weeks after I ate those forbidden sweets we were at a family gathering. Me snuggled into the Mammy's arms, sliding into comfort sleep.

She said in my ear, 'Was it you that took those eggs girl? They were for your Gran, for the Easter time.'

'No Mammy, no!'

Off guard. She had me off guard. But I couldn't admit, even when the tears fell. The shame was too heavy. I had to deny.

She looked down at the condemned and said, 'Alright, be quiet now Kathleen.'

Pardoned. But it was too late. I'd gone bad.

Dad was a docker. A man's man. Huge fists to match the swagger. Laid off when the freight containers came in. The Mammy a hairdresser but with dad out of work she decided to open a discount store. Dad was kept busy again. The brains were hers.

And I'm growing up in this unit of Scouse Irish papists. Close-knit and tight as a fist but middle class now, Dad's graduated from pints of pale ale to G&T. Pints of Gordon's and tonic at the end of the day.

Yack, yack yack. Him and the Mammy, always talking while Gran goes up early on account of her years. Grainy Gran, five foot small with her folds of skin and Liver bird laugh. Pushing eighty but shoulder still to the family wheel. She brought me up, while they were building an empire of sorts. The Mammy driving it all, dad resenting forever that she would only wed him if Gran came along for the ride.

Me desperate to leave.

Finally I got away. Student me, naive and open to the arms of the Boy I fell in with the very first week. Boom. *Feel A Little Fresher Every Day* is what the T-shirts said. And that's what we did. Introduced to the family that tolerated this intruder who was not Irish nor Catholic or man's man. Dad remained sceptic, afraid for his daughter.

But we were bonded fast, dad could get no wedge in. Fated and sealed as those others faded away. Inseparable we were until the Mammy had enough of living. She checked into the Victoria Central with depression and a few days later, left by a second floor window.

Defenestration. What a word.

The cause of it all was an overactive thyroid, they said. Boom!

So I went back home to make peace in the war between Gran and dad. Him drinking, her mourning. Me missing the Boy. Gran became ill. Too ill to fight as I tended her wounds in that miserable house.

I was away for almost a year. Letters and phone calls the threads between me and the Boy. His visits becoming less frequent as our bond became weaker. Then Gran passed away, broken by grief at the loss of her daughter and the natural order gone wrong.

I returned to the Boy. We had planned a trip to Spain, a getaway break for some respite care. On the night of departure he told me about the affair that he'd had while I was wiping Gran's arse. Then he boarded the plane alone.

'Never trusted the fella,' said dad. A woman's man. Wanted to fit him up. Easily done he said, a few drugs planted and it's Catalan jail for the Boy. Just desserts. Just say the word. I couldn't let it happen though, some hope still alive.

Dad arrived with a drawing and a van for my stuff. On the artwork he pinned to the door, an outline of his knuckle duster and 'The End' scrawled under.

Drama king.

But I stayed and waited. For the Boy who returned three days late, strangely pale under his handsome tan. The Boy who thought with his prick. A kiss on the cheek. I said I don't like the smell of you any more. How could you do it? Who is she? And do you still love me?

The Boy looks at me. A bird flies in, crashing this party through the wide open window and shits over everything as he attempts capture. Three lost creatures flapping in desperation and panic.

I stare at the books which line this small room. My guardians give me all that I ask for. Those pages evolve me. I study like a monk academic, as I pick holes in the theories of Darwin.

Those rogue genes. That acid which tells us to make life more interesting. Who knows what they will dream up for us next.

Tears flowing in the madness. When the bird was liberated, I collapsed in a chair and he leaned over, looked down at me.

'Are you OK?'

I asked him again. 'Do you love me?'

'Yes. No. I can't love you any more.'

I kicked out hard and heard his rib crack. He stood up. Just stood there, arms wide inviting more. I got out of the chair and he leaned back against the shitty kitchen table. Everything shitty.

Head drops. 'She's pregnant.' he says.

I grab a knife, a steak knife maybe. Sharp anyway. Stab him in the neck. Red blood and shit. He looks up at me, a slight nod I think. Almost a smile. Love and remorse. No protest.

'Soul mate.' he said.

It took a long time it seemed. Both stood frozen. Then he collapsed to the floor.

I tried to save him with my snot and tears, crimson hands and the hot wetness. Wailing for the Boy, the Mammy and Gran. It's all over in this crazy kitchen, the moment of madness burned in me for life. Boom! The stolen eggs. Boom! The mutated gene.

Dad came when he could until his liver exploded. There was one other visitor. The Unknown Woman, who I thought might have come to spit in my face. But instead she was here to pass on two pieces of information:

1. The Boy had attempted suicide in Barcelona but was saved by the valiant staff of Hospital Del Mar.
2. She had miscarried the child.

She left without malice. I may have been forgiven. Years pass. Millions of them in this cell. Wheels grind slowly. Then parole was offered. I declined, so served the term. Remaining alone to study and learn. To discover the place where I came from. Where we all come from.

Three degrees on and now this doctor looks in the mirror to find that my red hair is grey, That gene receded, unlikely to be passed on. I have arrived at today. And tomorrow released. They will open up the cage and set this bird free again. Almost ready to explore the other side of the borderline. After all of the mess, all of that history. The meaning of death and the meaning of life.

And this is everything I have learned from it.

That eggs are not for the taking.

***JOHN ADAMS** - I used to be a video artist. Very exciting job - I got to travel and meet people. But I had to give it up because the pay was so bad. These days, I make commercial stuff instead. Sometimes it's not so interesting but the money is okay. And then I started writing - obviously, forgetting the lessons of that early career...?*

BLOOD POOL

Ruby Shifrin

If you walk the inland path that rises up to Blood Pool, past the asphodels and under the skylarks, and happen to pass someone and ask them why this small reeded pool is so called, they might say, well it's because of the colour of the soil hereabouts, and leave it at that.

Or they might, if feeling more expansive, tell you of the long hot summer when the crops failed and the drought was terrible hard on the people. Hard especially for those who lived up here on the mountain and had to carry all their own water, and hard on the farmers of course. And they might tell you how the cattle, left out on the mountain all day to seek out whatever threads of grass remained, were so thin their skin hung slack as a shirt on a hanger with the bones poking through, and how one time after a sudden thunderstorm which merely puddled the cracked bottom of the pool the cattle stampeded to drink. In the crush and crash that followed they gored each other until their blood, the little there was in each of them, trickled through the punctured fraying skins and filled the bottom of the pool, more than the brief thunderstorm had.

If the speaker takes a shine to you they might generously add that the cattle then drank each others blood and the grey dusty earth was stained red and the few surviving cows were likewise crusted with blood rust and how the metallic reasty taint carried on the drying wind across the valley for weeks until the rains finally came.

And that makes a fair tale. A believable tale when you see the harsh poverty of the land there. You can imagine the cows turning down the mountain track as the light fades, expecting the farmer to feed them. Just a

handful of cows left alive to hobble and lurch through the flies and stones, their backs grimed with bloodied dust, their coats matted and stiff, their hooves rusted red. The rooks arrived in a dark cloud of caws to feast, and to clean the bones of those who didn't stagger out from the pool.

So the name memorialises that difficult summer. What no one local tells, not to outsiders, nor scarcely even whispered to each other, is how my great grandmother and her sister lived on the hill farm nearest the pool, and how that hot scorch of a summer my great grandmother, Fi, with her copper curls turned fourteen. With the heat leeching the life from most everyone in those bare mountain parts she alone pulsed with life, her eyes all sheen and glitter. She walked and danced on the mountain all times of the day, barely tending her chores. In the hot airless nights bright with stars she danced unhindered. Enraptured, she skittered through dry pebbled stream beds and parched fields, pulling into the dance anyone she encountered along the way.

One of these was Joe. His family's farm was further down the valley. It was in better repair than the sister's farm, but with more siblings to divide it between in the future. He had it in mind that Caroline, Fi's older sister, was a grand lass, fair enough and steady, who would make a fine wife. The kid sister, so very much the child when he first started courting Caroline, was of no interest to him. But now, to see her wear a gauzy slip of a dress and dance about in the night's shadows roused him. He approached, just to watch. She held out her hand and they danced until inevitably they tumbled on the cracked and dusty ground.

That might have been the end of it had my great grandmother not fallen pregnant. No one asked her who the father was. The shame her sister Caroline felt was plain enough to see without rubbing in the salt of

questions. And who in this maddening heat wouldn't slake some thirst if they could, they reasoned with themselves.

Caroline knew though. How, she couldn't have told you herself but she knew. Form was maintained and she still walked out with Joe though she was remote and the promise of engagement withered. She could not afford to throw Fi out as some might. She needed help with the farm. And so they continued living alongside each other, with little said, and Fi still dancing whenever she could, until the rains finally came.

When the birth night arrived the next April, such a lush and bursting April, Caroline walked Fi to the poolside, to have water close by and reflected light from the moon she said. She boiled water over a fire and put a towel and bowls ready.

The baby, a girl, slipped out as quickly and easily into the cool mountain air as her mother had danced in the heat. She was just put to the breast when a wave of rage stormed through Caroline's blood, exploding her eardrums and she snatched up the knife, the sterilised knife that had been used to cut the birth cord, and slashed at her sister's throat. Fi saw the moonlit rictus on her sister's face and the flash of silver too late to move, but soon enough to breathe a curse, 'A red curse on you and any sisters in this line'. Caroline pushed the still bleeding woman into the pool, watched the water ribbon with red and took the baby home.

Nothing was said. Nothing happened. No neighbour spoke in protest. It was after all, a lonesome place and what, after all, could be done now, and as for bones that might be found there in the future, there's no telling how they got there. Someone met with misfortune, it happens. Besides Fi had enticed the man as good as promised to her sister. Now why would such a

one be missed, they asked themselves or sometimes one other in hushed voices. Besides baby Bridget needs someone to look after her.

Caroline never married but raised the child in frozen silence. In her turn, Fi's daughter Bridget heeded the curse and bore only a single girl child. Times changed fast, even in these stony parts and by the time she was pregnant my mother, glamoured by drilled wells, refrigerators and t.v. decided the curse was just superstitious nonsense and too long ago to worry about. I was her firstborn. Four years later my sister came along. It's then my mother grows nervous, fearful of the curse, sends me away to live with strangers, keeps my sister home with her. I've lived that curse. Twelve years I've been away from home, twelve years I've been ousted, but now, now I'm home, feet on the familiar rising path, with twelve years of wrongs to right, and a sister to visit.

***RUBY SHIFRIN** grew up on the outskirts of London. She planned to escape to the sea and be a poet but instead she worked as a pleasure boat cleaner, hairdresser's apprentice and an artist before recently turning her attention to writing.*

RUBY FLEET

Sarah Isaac

‘I want to keep a photographic record,’ Mrs Stephens says to the visitor, her hand with its soft fingers that have never done a day’s work tight on his arm, digging into the fine wool of his coat. It would be soft to the touch that coat, soft against my skin.

Her lips, wet and red, are reaching up to his ear, whispering. ‘I want to show how my girls progress.’

She breathes the words. Her eyelashes flutter. Charlotte, her daughter, does it too. It pleases only them and makes them look as if they are about to take a fit. I am not ‘her’ girl.

Mrs Stephens waves her free arm, the sleeve too tight around her flesh. She tells him what we do, how we work. She doesn’t talk about how the boiling water and the lye scalds our skin, how our fingers crack and weep, our backs ache. Her knuckles brush my shoulder as she walks past. She steers Walter Proctor past the coppers and the pails of water and the mangles.

‘Mrs Conti is an excellent photographer, and, being a woman, she doesn’t engender ... excitement,’ she says, looking under her eyelashes, a bead of spittle on her lip.

The first time Mrs Conti came she was with her husband, Jack. He has soft brown eyes, a rosebud mouth and a prick big enough to satisfy the oldest whore in Totterdown. We wore ourselves out talking and thinking about him. Mrs Conti’s come on her own since, pushing that barrow of hers across the city, too tight to pay a boy a penny, stronger than you’d think she’d be.

Walter Proctor nods at Mrs Stephens. He must know the patterns on every flagstone for he's not once looked away from the floor, not once looked at us.

The smell in the room, our sweat, the sour milk smell of the soap, still allows me a whiff of him. I can smell coffee, a wood fire doused by water and something sharp, lemons. There's a heat to him, underneath that buttoned vest and coat. His hands are restless. His neckerchief is so tight against his neck it must hurt. His fingers, long and pale have blunt edged that would press in were he to touch me.

We've been sorting the laundry, hiding away the worst of it. It wouldn't do for Mr Proctor to see the way we stain our petticoats and our bed sheets or to smell the coppery scent of old blood. Mrs Stephens has filled the place with oil lamps. She's only just had the fires lit under the coppers. The steam from the tubs would make it impossible for Mrs Conti to take a photograph. It wouldn't do for Mr Proctor to sweat.

I could make him sweat.

She takes him around each corner of the room, all the time talking. I hear her say 'the discipline of labour assists their reform.' I'm not sure what it means, except it will be about us working, always working. I want to say 'our labour' fills her pockets, keeps her and her daughter in wine and cake.

I want him, Walter Proctor, to look at me. I want him to see me.

Anna Conti lifts the cloth attached to her camera while we stand as still as we can. There's so little of her she seems to disappear completely. The camera is almost the size of her but she carries it easily. She's clever, clever enough to be quiet about it. I could learn from her.

I am stood next to the maidenning tub. I have my plunger, ready to beat and bash the linen from the blind school across the road and the other place, the one Mrs Stephens never says the name of. It's for women, older

than us, harder to reform she says. Whores and dolly mops I say, just older and cheaper than me.

The laundry is in the basement, four floors of more rooms where we work, cutting and stitching, above it. The only light struggles through barred half-moon windows. Working down here is when the reformatory feels most like the prison it is. With the lamps and the fires beginning to warm the water and all of us pretending to work it is beginning to be as hot as hell itself. I can see damp patches spreading underneath Mrs Stephen's arms, stains on the silk we will have to remove. Mr Proctor though, there is not even one small bead of sweat upon his forehead.

We are wearing cotton blouses and thin aprons over our skirts. I wear nothing underneath on laundry days. I take my apron off to wipe my face.

I remember Walter Proctor from court, him the magistrate sending me here, never looking at me. The words, 'prostitution, vagrancy', looked like they were hurting him. He is stooping, hiding how tall he is. When Mrs Conti asks us to be ready he looks up. He looks at us as if we were animals in the zoological gardens. He looks at me and I smile. I can tell he knows what the smile means, what I am inviting him to do for there is now a faint flush of pink on his long neck. He lets out a small puff of breath and I can see the softness of his lips.

Mrs Conti, Anna, takes the lens cap off the huge box of a camera. She takes the plate cover out in one pull and starts counting, one, two, three, four.

I think of my sister, Mary, hiding the food I bring her from my father so she and my brother won't starve. They starve because I am here, not at home, because I cannot work. I think of the way Mr Proctor looks at me as if I were a report in a paper, a number in a book. I think about Mrs Stephens and her daughter and their lumpy horsehair furniture and

golden picture frames. It is supposed to be a privilege for us to clean them. I think about their larder full of cake, no need to keep it in a box to hide it from the rats, from a man who would sell his child for a drink.

I pour a ladle of cold water over me from the rinsing pail. Mrs Conti is still counting, nine, ten, and eleven. I am in front of everyone, facing Mr Proctor. Mrs Stephens stands at his side, looking at the girls behind me. Everyone is concentrating on standing still. Mrs Conti is looking straight at me. There is a small smile on her. The thin cotton clings to me.

Walter Proctor, his cheeks go red. He cannot look away. Mrs Conti counts, eighteen, nineteen, twenty. My nipples are stiff with cold, my blouse no more than a thin layer of tissue paper. My skirt clings to my thighs. I am as good as naked and blessedly cool. A smile is stretched tight across my face. Mr Proctor closes his eyes. Then he opens them again.

Mrs Conti stops counting. She takes the plate, leaves, goes to the room next door to do her magic, make us real.

I wanted him to see me, to remember me. I wanted the photograph to show me.

Matron has her fat arms out, to hide what? I'm only giving him for free what others pay for and I can't see where the shame is in that. She pulls me away and drags me to the door. I keep my gaze on him, taking it as a victory that he doesn't straight away look away. He will remember me now, me, Ruby Fleet.

SARAH ISAAC: *Born and educated in Wales, I now live in a remote Scottish glen. I've taught in schools, colleges and secure institutions. Ruby features in a novel I am writing. Short stories have been published in the 'Bristol Short Story Prize' anthology, the William Soutar Prize and 'DundeeWrites.' Two of these pieces include characters who work or live alongside Ruby.'*

NORTH CIRCULAR

Isabel Costello

It was unusually quiet the day they came. The road had been coned off, reduced to one crawling lane of eastbound traffic. I sensed the drivers' seething impatience and missed the thundering that had been the background to my life for nearly forty years: varying by the hour, easing almost to nothing around nine at night and returning at six in the morning like a tide.

The calm was broken by clanking. I peered through the net curtains which, like the windows, were never clean for more than one day. From a trailer, two men were unloading the metal shutters I recognised from my neighbours' houses, the people who'd done as they were told.

Pack up and get out of here.

One of the men stubbed out his cigarette on my windowsill.

'This should flush her out pretty quick.'

They each took one end of a heavy rusty panel pierced with holes and hoisted it into place at the window where I stood unseen.

Right in front of my face.

The room fell into darkness to the whirr of their screwdrivers. I was startled to hear the doorbell add its cheerful chime. Nobody came here any more.

It was a man in his thirties, about my son's age, with the same dark curls and brown eyes. He was wearing a suit and tie and a fluorescent safety vest. A smart silver car stood alongside the truck.

'Mrs Efthymiou? Giorgos Dimitriou from the council.'

I shook his hand without thinking because he spoke to me in Greek. He looked from me to the stack of unopened letters on the hall table. The

men were now covering the glass in the front door so I led him through to the small kitchen at the back of the house.

‘Do you think the old bat knows the place is going to be bulldozed?’ one of the workmen said.

‘You’d think she’d be dying to get out of a shithole like this,’ the other replied. ‘Who’d want to live on the fucking North Circular?’

Giorgos shot me a nervous glance.

‘They think I don’t speak English,’ I said, attempting a smile. I hadn’t said a word when they arrived.

He marched up to their unsuspecting backs.

‘Watch your mouth! This is someone’s home.’

I could hear he had learned both English and Greek as a child. Both his accent and his name told me his parents were Cypriot too.

‘So you *do* understand fully what is happening here?’ he asked. He knew I was not an idiot. I was not sick, demented or housebound, or at least not in the usual sense. I still went out to buy groceries. Once a week I took the bus to the cemetery where I did the best I could with a thin bunch of corner shop carnations. I only knew I’d been in the local paper because the shopkeeper tried to show me the piece.

The terraces further along had already been demolished and my little row of maybe twenty houses felt like an abandoned island.

The street behind had disappeared altogether.

It was me they were waiting for.

The men carried a ladder and more panels through to my tiny garden; one corner caught on the faded wallpaper, making a strip curl up like ribbon.

I had often wondered what it must be like inside the boarded-up houses.

And now I knew.

‘It’s not too late to move all your belongings out safely,’ Giorgos said. ‘We can do it this afternoon.’

‘I’ve lived in this house since 1974.’

‘Ah, 1974,’ he said. ‘So this isn’t the first time you’ve had to leave your home.’

And it wasn’t.

This house, despised by the thousands who used to creep past in traffic jams and would soon hurtle by on three lanes; this house with the swirly carpet that didn’t show the dirt; this house which rattled almost as if it wanted to dance was all I had left. I looked at the framed photos of me and Stelios on our wedding day outside the Greek church in Wood Green; of Alex as a baby, then a little boy, and finally a handsome young man like this Giorgos Dimitriou and I choked on my breath to think of a huge digger poking its cruel hand through the roof, smashing them to pieces, taking them.

‘Your old neighbours are concerned about you,’ said Giorgos. ‘They seem happy in the new flats in Enfield.’

Some of my friends would have continued to call if the phone lines hadn’t been ripped out. In the two months since they’d left, I’d seen no-one.

Giorgos took a deep breath, his yellow vest inflating.

‘Mrs Efthymiou, I’m sorry but you really can’t stay here any longer. The water and electricity are being cut off. It’s pointless even sealing the place, it’ll be gone within weeks.’

It wasn’t worth a squatter’s while.

‘We want to avoid the use of force,’ he continued, a desperate note in his voice. I often felt my black dress earned me respect I wouldn’t otherwise get. A far cry from the flowery sundress I’d worn in 1974; in Cyprus I’d been threatened with guns, not compassion.

‘I can drive you over to the flats now to have a look and I’ll hold onto the keys here until...we get things sorted out.’

We were standing in near darkness now. I led Giorgos out towards the road. The eastbound traffic had loosened and sped up. There were gaps. I considered dashing out, knowing I wouldn’t make it.

‘My son Alex was killed over there, and two other people in the other car,’ I said, pointing to the westbound carriageway. ‘Head on collision. There were cones sending traffic onto the wrong side because of roadworks. It was dark, pouring with rain. The drivers couldn’t see where they were going.’

He must have known this already, but watching Giorgos Dimitriou’s brown eyes fill up was just like seeing my Alex again. I’d always thought *If I could only see him one last time...*

Even as I explained why I couldn’t leave, I realised life goes on.

It can happen anywhere.

ISABEL COSTELLO lives in London. Her first novel is on submission to publishers and a second is in progress. Her short fiction has been published in *Rattle Tales and Stories for Homes* and shortlisted in competitions including the Asham Award. She is represented by the Rupert Heath Literary Agency.

THE DAY OUR JIMMY BECAME A MAN

Ruth Henderson

There is a time in my memory, a time when a man was born from the murky waters of the River Tyne. Our brother Jimmy, just left school with an apprenticeship at Swan Hunter's was still unproven, a boy, sent down to the Fish Quay Sands with Ted and Harry to build the ramparts; two arms of sand curving from the sea wall to keep the wind off our Mam and her friend Martha Skipsey. This was their place, where they'd dole out watery orange juice to us while keeping a flask of sweet black tea for themselves. With Mam firmly ensconced we'd tear off our clothes and scatter them to the four corners. She'd call us back.

'Hey! Wa' d' ye think this is? Roll ya clays t'gither. By God! If aa hev to speak to your Da about this there'll be some sore arses the neet.'

Da, according to our Mam, was a fierce man of swift retribution. 'Wor Jimmy!' She'd yell. 'Ya Da'll tek ees belt off.' Or it would be. 'Ya Da says, you go climbing in that Priory again you'll not sit doon for a week.'

Our father was, in fact, small in stature and quiet of spirit. He worked on the Fish Quay, filleting fish, leaving early to return about noon, his plaited straw bag heavy with the pick of the catch. We were sick of lobster, prawns and scallops. After tea he'd have a wash at the kitchen sink then take himself off for a couple of hours to his allotment. When he returned Mam would list our sins, telling him to sort the lads out. He'd run a gentle hand over a boy's shorn head, give a playful cuff to an exposed nape, or sling a bony arm about young shoulders and hug a precious son to his Woodbine clogged chest. However, according to our Mam his wrath was terrible to behold.

This particular day, we tidied our clothes and piled them beside her, then, jumping over sea-slimed rocks we pushed each other aside, standing on the slow coaches, any foul tolerated. The race is to be first in the river. Jimmy's in, arm over arm through the wash of a collier shedding its black dust as it steams for the open sea. Ted and Harry, commandeering a couple of empty fish boxes and some broken planks for paddles, race each other to the old lifeboat station. The makeshift craft are unwieldy and impossible to manoeuvre clear of our sand bombs. A direct hit and the boys give up being sailors in favour of an assault on the cliffs. First one to Collingwood's monument gets the only whole chocolate biscuit in the bag. Harry wins. We fire the big black cannons, boom, boom, we sink the enemy before launching ourselves back into the river, yodelling like Tarzan.

The river's choked with ships. Foy boats, with their lone oarsmen, dodge pilot cutters, police launches command order, fierce little tugs belch clouds of smoke as they guide giant freighters through the piers and two battleships sail up to the docks. We cheer, hip, hip, hurrah, but as the mighty ships expose their sterns we stare in dismay at the buckled rails and plates that seem made of silver paper tarnished and twisted in a fire. Men watch in silence while cranes dip in silent homage and stand ready to serve.

Smith Dock's buzzer shrieks twelve o'clock, but is no competition for our Mam. Waving a bare arm, that could fell an ox, she calls us to her. 'Come and get ya dinners.' She points up the bank to our Ted, newspaper bundles of chips clutched to his fair-isle pullover.

The sun beats fiercely down, but our North Sea is just a wave away from the Arctic Circle. Harry tightens his brass buckled army belt around baggy, khaki shorts. He's an avid fan of WWII and has never quite understood how it finished without him. My teeth chatter violently, my lips are blue and my fingers shrivelled, my knitted bather clings like wet sandpaper, but gaining the nest I snuggle up to our Mam and wait for her

to dole out the chips. Deftly she tears pages from an old Shields Weekly News and gives us a share, each according to our needs.

After we've eaten the lads take themselves off, but I'm training to be a woman and it's essential that I listen to the gossip. So, lying just within earshot of Mam and Martha, I play with the hard bladderwrack scattered on the sand.

Mam is a keen social observer.

'There's Kitty Turnbull's little lad.' She whispers to Martha as she holds out a doorstep of oven bottom stottie, spread with margarine and squashed around a few cold chips. 'Here son. Here's a bite for ye.'

Kenneth edges across and snatches the offering. 'Ta missus.'

'Where's ya Ma?' Mine enquires, innocent as a spelk in a plank.

'Had to go a message.' Kenneth scuttles away to sit alone.

Mam bends her head toward Martha. 'Poor little soul, left to God and good neighbours.'

Martha sniffs and adjusts her brassier strap. 'Aye and we all know what sort of messages Kitty gets in.'

'Aye, well, dragged up wasn't she. Hor mother was on the ...' Noticing that I've edged closer she stretches her neck to gaze at the horizon and speaking through motionless lips shushes Martha. 'Canny on, tha's holes in the wall.' But she's no need to warn away the secrets, our Harry's voice shatters the afternoon stillness.

'Ma, Ma wor Jimmy's gan i swim to Soo Shields.'

'Ees what!' She's on her feet. Her magnificent breasts forging a path between lesser mortals she ploughs down the sands, the momentum taking her into the river, right up to her suet pudding knees. 'Wor Jimmy! Get yorsel back here this minute!'

'Me and Bob James is hevin a race.'

'Ye'll droon ye stupid sods.'

‘We'll not man.’

‘Ye'll get run doon by a ship.’

‘It's low tide.’

‘I'll tell ya Da. Ee'll tek ees belt off t' ye.’ The two boys are well out of her reach, poised on the rotting spars of the old jetty. She turns to me. ‘Go and fetch ya Da.’

Harry counts them off. ‘Ready. Steady. Go!’

Jimmy and Bob James dive in. Arms flashing in the sunlight they strike out to swim the hazardous, filthy River Tyne at its deepest and widest stretch. Mam's still yelling at them to come back, but they can only hear the rush of water. We urge them on. From the top of the rocks I get a better view and can also see right along the Quay. Da and his work mates are watching from the roof of the filleting shed. With their long, white, rubber pinnies and Wellington boots encrusted in fish scales they shine like angels. The police launch, nosing out of the Gut, cuts across to escort the lads. This gives our Mam another reason to increase the volume.

‘Oh my God! Noo tha gaana ger-arrested. They'll be sent to the Training Ship!’

Jimmy is far away. An empty path across the river turns into a blue fantasy, the surface hovering in humid stillness and shielding our eyes we watch breathlessly. Finally the swimmers crawl up the opposite sands. South Shields is a far away land and Jimmy is now among strangers. Mam's big, soft face crumples and tears flow into her three chins as she sags to her knees. Awkwardly Martha pats her bowed head.

Finally the crowd on the opposite bank parts and there they are, Jimmy and Bob James waving to us.

Instantly my mother recovers. ‘Oh yaa not deed! Well ye bloody well will be when ye get back here. Get yorsel's ower.’ She urges them back into the now turbulent water, but the police order them into the

launch. Incensed at being thwarted our Mam keeps yelling. 'Wait till your Da gets a-howld-i-ye. You won't sit down for a week! You'll wish you *were* on the bloody Training Ship!'

I look up the Quay. Da is the centre of attention, being patted on the back and lead into the Dophin pub.

The launch lets the two heroes off at the jetty and we run to meet them. Our Jimmy swaggers along the polluted beach, then, he dries himself with Mam's towel, in Mam's spot by the sea wall.

With a face like concrete she's heaving herself up the sand, pounding it to dust beneath her. We wait in dread. The scope of punishment available for this offence is unimaginable. For an age she looks down at his skinny shivering body and his gleaming smile, then, staring down the other matrons she shakes sand from her towel, lies it carefully inside the sheltered banquette and picking up her silver flask of hot, sweet, black tea, she says ... 'Sit yasel' doon son. I'll pore ye a cup.

RUTH HENDERSON won 'The Biscuit' short story competition in 2001. Three novels followed and more awards for her short stories, published in magazines and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. She also writes poetry and plays which are still being performed. 'Writing is like reading the best book in the world.'

CLIMBING

Jason Jackson

The man had been sitting in the chair since before dawn. The window looked out over the park, and he watched as the sun came up and the sky turned from black to purple to pink to blue. The clouds were not heavy. There was no breeze. The man watched as an aeroplane left a white trail against the sky. Caught between two of the thicker branches of the tree, the doll was still there. Its colours had faded with the rain and the winter sun. No one had come to climb the tree. No one had come to take the doll. It had been over three weeks now.

The man shifted in the chair. There was still his mug of coffee, but it was cold now. He took a sip anyway, grimaced, and spat it back.

He said, "Right, then," and he got out of the chair. Within five minutes he was outside, in the park.

He didn't know what kind of tree it was. He knew nothing about trees. It was tall, and the bark was a strange kind of silver-grey underneath the green fungus which grew on much of the trunk and the lower branches. The man could remember climbing trees in his grandmother's garden, and on holiday at the farm with his brother when they were younger. Forty years ago, now. More. The man reached out a hand, patted the solid wood, then he put his cheek against the bark. He closed his eyes. He stayed there for a long time, resting against the tree, until he said, again, "Right," and he looked up.

The doll was a long way above him. He looked around for stones. Perhaps he could throw something. But there was nothing, or at least

nothing that looked as if it might be the answer. The man looked up again. He kept his eyes focused on the doll. It looked small. It seemed almost part of the tree. He began to stretch his arms above his head. Then he bent at the waist in a motion which, perhaps twenty years ago, would have allowed him to touch his toes. He put his hands on his hips, and then he bent sideways at the waist, this way, that way. He did this ten times on each side before stopping, standing straight, and saying, quietly, "Ridiculous."

It was difficult to begin. There were no branches within reach and he could not get a foothold. After a short time, he walked over to the houses across the street from the entrance to the park and he took one of the black wheelie bins. He pulled it back through the gates, and he dragged it over the grass until it was underneath the tree. He managed to stand on top of the bin, and when he reached up he found that he could pull himself up. He climbed into the lower branches, then up three or four more, and finally he sat down on a thick branch twenty feet or so above the grass.

He did not look up at the doll. Instead, he looked over to the window of his flat. The curtains were open, but it was brighter outside in the park than it was inside the flat, and he could see very little. Somehow, the distance seemed less from inside the flat than here in the tree. The window through which he had watched the dawn was a small, dark, blank rectangle. Most of the other windows had their curtains closed. It was early. Sunday.

There was no one around.

The man said, "Okay, okay," and he looked up towards the doll.

He would be able to do it. The doll was not too far away. He could not reach it from where he was, but it would take only a little more effort to climb the two or three branches needed. The man imagined holding the doll in his hands. He imagined looking into its plastic eyes. Its hair would be in poor condition, its clothes too. From his window he had been able to

see that it had, for whatever reason, begun to turn black. It was small. It would fit easily in his pocket.

The man could not remember the dolls his daughter had played with in any detail. She'd had a house, a huge thing which took up half of her bedroom in the old place, and she'd spent hours up there. He could remember standing outside of her room, listening to her act out conversations between the dolls. The dolls seemed to all live together in the house, with shifting roles, arguments, complete lives, and these domestic scenes could go on for hours.

His wife had laughed at him. "Why don't you go in a play with her?" she'd said. But that hadn't been it at all. He hadn't wanted to disturb her, this little girl and her private world. He hadn't wanted to intrude. It had been enough to listen at the door. Or at least that was how it had felt at the time.

Sitting in the tree, he thought about his daughter's dolls. He thought about the woman who no longer felt like his daughter. And he thought, briefly, about the woman who was no longer his wife. And then he looked up again and said in a whisper, "Right. Right, now."

In a minute or so, he was sure, he would have the doll, and then he would be able to climb down again. He would take the doll home, clean it up. There were some charity shops on the high street. He knew that later he would be able to make himself a coffee, sit in the chair, and look out at the park, at the tree. He would be able to watch the whitening blue of the Sunday sky.

So in the bright, winter morning, the man again began to climb.

***JASON JACKSON** writes short fiction and poetry. His work has appeared both online and in print, as well as being performed around the world. Jason is a member of Bootcamp Keegan, and online writing cooperative, and he keeps an occasional blog at <http://www.tryingtofindthewords.blogspot.co.uk/>*

THE DERBY WINNER

Simon Van der Velde

Football's changed. The racists have pretty much gone, and even the sexists have been reduced to a few spiteful old men. But there's one prejudice I cannot shake. Maybe I should be old enough to let it go, maybe we all should. But maybe I don't want to. Because even if the penny-pinching billionaire sells all our best players, if we lose every game for the rest of the season, we've got to beat the Mackems.

I'm in the bar, and we're one-nil up with twenty minutes to play. But we're clinging on. If the back four drop any deeper they'll be playing in the Gallowgate. The timer clicks round to 72 minutes. It's torture. A good drink spoiled. I'm only on the Coke but there's no holding on any longer.

The toilets are empty, or seems like it. I'm zipping up when I see that 'wash your hands' sign over the boarded up window. That's not what I'm looking at.

There's this kid hunched up under the sink, rocking back and forward, with his head down and his arms crossed tight against his chest. There's no blood on him or anything, but he's tiny, maybe five-years old.

Christ. I look around for help, but the cubicle doors are open. There's no one here.

'You alright, son?'

The rocking stops.

'Where's your mam?'

His head lifts. He looks at me with the light reflecting in his wide blue eyes, and his lips shut tight.

That's when this shout goes up from the bar. Not a roar, just scattered, angry voices through the silence. Something's happened. Maybe a sending off. Please, let it be that.

It isn't.

I practically pull the door off its hinges in time to see a load of Mackems jumping around the corner flag. I stare dully at the replay and stomp towards the bar.

I'm three steps in when I swear at the big screen and turn back.

The kid's standing up, with one hand on the sink.

'Haway, son. You want some juice?'

He still doesn't answer, but the tightness has gone from his mouth and he follows me into the bar.

I get a real pint and an orange juice, and look down at the kid. Two dimples, like little chisel marks cut into his cheeks.

'Alright, you scrawny get.' I tell him. The chisel marks dig deeper. 'Two packets of cheese 'n' onion,' I say to the barman, and then I get back over to the lads.

We got in early to get the seats, but Lee never turned up, sign of the times, so there's a spare stool. I pick the kid up and put him on it. The lads give me a 'what the hell' look. I shrug, and they turn their faces back to the screen.

I watch our centre-half belt the ball into row Z, and I wonder, what the hell am I doing? And I can't help thinking of my own little boy, getting bigger, over in Los Angeles with his new, rich Dad. The L.A. Galaxy, he supports now.

'But it's alright,' he told me on our Saturday morning Skype, 'I still like soccer.'

I take a mouthful of beer, like that's going to help, and feel the skin prickle along my arm. There's this lass sitting over by the wall, watching me. I sneak a glance. She's not a beauty, but she's not bad. A blond pony-tail, and a hint of something just a little bit sad around her eyes.

Don't kid yourself mate. There's more chance of us winning the cup.

Sunderland get another corner. We're hanging on for a draw, but I know, from that ache in the pit of my stomach, and from all the decades of this. We're not going to make it.

And what the hell am I going to do with this kid?

It's almost a relief to have something else to worry about.

'What's your name, son?'

The kid doesn't answer, just stuffs the crisps in and stares at the screen.

I shrug. There's only five minutes to go, and maybe, just maybe, we can hang on.

Someone goes down injured.

'Get up,' the kid says, daft little bugger.

'Stay down,' I shout, and I feel those eyes on me again, that lass across the bar. She looks away, but doesn't that only prove she was looking?

Something weird must be going on, because Newcastle put half a dozen passes together. Our striker's through on the edge of the box. His foot goes back. I'm half-way out of my seat when this defender comes piling in.

'You dirty...'

'Tackle.'

I look to see who said it, but I already know.

'You're a Mackem?'

The kid looks at me over the top of his juice and gives me this lopsided grin.

I shake my head. 'It was a bloody foul.'

'Nah,' the kid says, and of course, the ref. doesn't give it.

We're pressing on, putting some passes together. The board goes up for two minutes injury time. Typical, that we only start playing now. But I can't stop the hope rising up through my chest.

Do I never bloody learn?

Every player is in their half. We're knocking it around, getting nowhere fast, and the clock's ticking. That's why we get edgy. Give it away.

Their full-back belts it over the top.

'Yesss,' the kid says, but it's a ragged, anywhere ball, halfway to the clouds.

'That's it. Times up,' I tell him, but the words catch in my throat.

Our centre-half can play, but he's thirty-three. Their striker's nineteen. He gets a step ahead. Our keeper charges out, and they all come together on the edge of the box.

The ball drops out of the sky.

'Keeper's ball.' Got to be. His gloved hands come up.

'Catch it, man, catch it.'

He doesn't catch it.

This ginger head pops up between his hands, and sends the ball looping into the air.

All three of them land in a heap.

I look to the ref but his hands are down by his sides.

The ball bounces on the penalty spot.

'Yesss.' Orange juice spills across the table.

'No.' I jump back, too late to stop the sticky wetness from soaking through my jeans.

The ball bounces again, and dribbles about six inches over the line.

The kid's going mental. He's up off his stool, shouting his head off with crisps and juice all over the floor.

I don't look at him, but I can feel the rest of the bar staring daggers at the pair of us.

'Sit down, man,' I hiss, but he just stands there with his fists in the air.

There isn't even time to kick-off again before the ref. blows for full-time.

'We're away to the town,' the lads tell me, and the bar empties out in about ten seething, angry seconds.

I'd go too, just to get away, but I know I'm going to feel sick for the rest of the night, and no amount of beer's going to change that, and anyway, I've got this kid to sort out.

I don't even know what makes me look, but that lass is still there. She gives me a little nod, and this edgy, tight-lipped smile. I smile back, and like magic, the world changes. All that bitterness washes away.

I think of my empty flat, and the way her hair falls across her shoulders. I should go over, say something, but the fear's still aching in my stomach, left over from the bloody football, and anyway, what am I supposed to do with this kid?

Leave him, this little voice whispers in my head. He's not your problem.

I look at him, legs crossed, feet swinging nowhere near the floor.

Three years on my own, and a few seedy one night stands to show for it. This is different. I can feel it. And how many chances are there going to be?

The lass stands up. Her shirt falls loose over her jeans.

My heart thumps in my chest.

Her eyes lock onto mine.

I blink, and swear, and turn away.

'Where'd you live, son?'

'Kingston Street,' he tells me, dabbing the last crumbs off the silver paper. 'In Roker.'

'Roker?' Jesus Christ.

'Alright. Aye, I'll drop you home. You're mam'll be frantic.'

‘It’s okay,’ he says, and gives me another grin. ‘She’s just there.’

The lass is standing above us with the sun in the window behind her, so I can see the shape of her through that red and white shirt.

‘Thanks for looking after Jimmy,’ she says. He gets a bit upset when their losing,’ and she must see the penny drop, because they both give me that same silly grin.

‘He’s coming back to ours,’ Jimmy says, and we laugh together at the daft things that kids say, except this time I don’t look away.

***SIMON VEN DER VELDE** recently won the Wasafiri International Prize for his short story, *The Bearer*, while his second novel, *The Benjamin Exhibition*, was short-listed for the Harry Bowling Prize, 2012. Simon’s third novel, *Coira’s Wall*, a love story set against the backdrop of the building of Hadrian’s Wall, is nearing completion.*

RESTORATION

Sally Wylden

My aunt Laura is an upholsterer. Over the last forty-six years, she has rescued one hundred and twenty nine chairs, not counting two still in her garage. As others might battle for safer roads or healthier eating, Laura has been a life long campaigner to save our best crafts. The discovery of a Hollywood vintage slung over a fence and left to rot had brought tears to her eyes. To chuck out a pretty chair was a clear sign of moral degeneration.

Laura rang last Tuesday afternoon. Come and see her latest. Where had she found it? A tip? Bonfire? Auction room? Junk shop? On-line? No, no, no and no. The guessing game was all part of the great rescue story. Found in a lorry car park (what Laura was doing in a lorry park was a question she didn't care to answer). Apparently, a driver had kept the chair in his cab. On days when his route took him to this car park, he'd bring out the chair; sit for an hour or so in the sun and read his newspaper with a mug of tea in hand. A year past November, the chair was found in the long grass on the north west side of the park, orphaned by circumstances unknown; its owner not seen from that day to now. Rain soaked, resisting the sun's brittle effect on its joints; obviously waiting for the moment when Laura would scoop it up as a mother hen might gather a stray chick, lay it in the back of her hatchback and drive away. It stood on her living room carpet. If you overlooked the weather bleached frame and ignored the torn upholstery where unspeakably filthy cotton kapok poked through; if you

didn't care that one leg was split and hanging loose, then some might call it a beauty. Laura ran an index finger over the furl of the fleur-de-lys carved on the apex of its charming spoon back. She insisted I felt the grain of the walnut that had been coaxed and bent to the will of a craftsman more than a hundred and fifty years ago.

'It's yours,' Laura said. Gulp. I didn't possess the hoarding gene of my aunt and I couldn't think of anywhere in my one bed-roomed flat to put it. The worst thing you can do in Laura's book is to pour a bucket of cold water over her latest project. Immediately, she'd shut down the conversation, look at her watch, suddenly remember an appointment and show you the door. Therefore, I enthused.

'Wait till I do it up for you,' she said. 'Then you'll wonder why you dithered.'

Laura decided fabric of woodland colours would be a perfect match with the walnut frame. She went to a huge cardboard box and pulled out a length of velour with smudgy patterns of earth red, moss greens, honey and rich brown, so soft you wanted to bury your face in it. She spread a paper out, upturned the chair, took out a pair of pliers and started to pull out the tacks on the bottom of the seat. I watched as layers of hessian, horsehair, cotton flock, calico were removed right down to the crossover webbing. Her strong, calloused hands were capable of stripping the layers from a chair in seventeen minutes flat. The last tack yanked out, she put the chair on the table and walked round it as if getting to know it properly for the first time. Elegant, spare, fine tapering legs, her look confirmed that the chair had 'plenty of shout'. It stood there as if it took pleasure in its freedom; feeling the sun through the open window play over the planed surfaces; feeling the warmth of the rays coaxing its stiff frame into life,

catching a gulp of air in the scoop of its hooped back. If that chair could walk off the table, I swear it would.

‘Come back in a fortnight and I’ll have it ready for you.’

How could I argue with such generosity?

A fortnight later, the chair was ready to collect. Was I free at the weekend? I could stay for lunch too.

Laura led me through the kitchen out to the garden beyond. On the lawn, the chair looked much smaller than I remembered and almost vulnerable. I looked, marvelled, and gave her a big hug of gratitude before we went back into the house to enjoy a chilled glass of Muscadet.

Now the chair is in my hall. Majestic. I wanted to show it off. So I asked a few friends round for a meal and the chair was brought into the living room. Danielle, bold as ever, dropped herself onto the seat, smiled and said ‘I’m the first.’

At eleven o’clock people started to drift off and Danielle got up to leave. ‘Tell your aunt we all loved it.’

She lowered her voice. ‘One little problem though, the front corner, something was sticking into me. Feel it? There! Yes there!’

Astonishing. Can’t be true. Laura’s work was flawless.

‘Maybe I’m imagining it.’ Danielle said.

Daily routine dulls your sensory awareness and I forgot about the chair as I brushed past it each evening without a glance.

I’m not the best sleeper and I often come down for a glass of water. That’s when the chair caught my attention, lit by the bright new moon as I came downstairs. I stopped. What...? What was that? A knotty twig was

growing through the ripped material over the right front leg, curving round the frame, its tapering ends entwining themselves over the velour seat. Spongy moss covered the entire front leg. Not sinister. Amazingly beautiful. I went over to the chair and dug a nail into the finely branched twigs, and scraped back the delicate bark. Moisture lay just underneath. It was alive.

Laura was due back from Devon in a few days and I couldn't wait to tell her about my discovery. Are you sure? She asked, 'inexplicable. Quite inexplicable. Bring it round. I must see it. Do wrap it carefully. Don't damage it.'

By the time we found a date, a week had gone by and I could see how eager Laura was to undo the wrappings.

'Careful, careful,' Laura unwound the layers of dustsheets. Her hands flew up to her mouth when she saw the chair.

'Exactly,' I said.

The chair had advanced in its transformation. The knotty twig had developed into a thick bough that now formed the arm of the chair. The finer twigs had spread from the seat and were finding a hold up the front and wrapping themselves round the back of the chair. The moss had grown along the front frame and down the next leg.

Laura spent the next half hour examining the changes, paying close attention to the areas of wood where the live tree was emerging from the old polished walnut.

'Don't you see?' Laura whispered, 'It must have taken all its strength to get this far. It needs help. We must do something.'

What can you do for a chair that wants to be a tree?

But Laura understood. She asked me to wrap it up again and load it into the car. Then we drove about fifteen miles and swung into the lorry park where she had first found it. We followed the marked route then bumped our way over an unmade track to the dappled shade on the other side. No one paid any attention. Laura chose the spot; I opened the car boot and lifted the chair onto a patch of soft, damp earth. Laura positioned the chair, heeling the mossy legs into four small hollows. She twisted the legs back and forth until they settled a couple of inches into the earth. We got back into the car and drove off without saying a word.

That was over four years ago.

Laura phoned me one weekend and asked if I wanted to come with her to a Bygones sale. 'By the way, a bit of a detour, if you don't mind'.

After driving fifteen miles we turned into the same lorry car park and drove across as before. A driver was doing last minute checks on his load. He asked if he could help. We tried to explain about leaving a chair there. We sounded crazy. He said he'd left a battered old one a few years ago, pointing to the place where we had positioned our chair. Got nicked, he laughed, climbed into his cab and drove off.

In the same spot, a light wind was ruffling the leaves of a healthy, walnut sapling.

SALLY WYLDEN'S *radio play, The Wall, was a prize winner in a BBC East/Eastern Arts competition and she was awarded a Film Council script development grant for her feature film script, Someone Awake Somewhere. She is now looking forward to writing more short stories.*

INDIVIDUAL COMMENTARY BY JUDGES

DIAGONAL FLIGHT - Christine Powell – This a highly visual piece of writing, beginning and ending as it does with strong images of Win and later on in story, the snow. Diagonal Flight has perfect pitch and flow - nothing jars, nothing disappoints. We were impressed by the original viewpoint and fine writing in this beautifully crafted story. It focuses on the particular and at the same time reveals universal truths applicable to us all. This great character study is a slice of life that tells a strong story - especially how it is to be a woman from Hong Kong living in a 'damp northern village in South Durham.' As well as this, it tells some fundamental truths about what it is to be a grandmother. The movement and energy bedded in the prose makes it stand out among the entries - the tai Chi, the boy running, the jackdaws sidestepping, the Methodist minister striding come to mind. A great story.

KT BOUNDARY - John Adams — This is an explosive story told with huge energy and beautifully written – much of this energy comes from the way John uses language - in particular the short, even one-word sentences and the potent use of dialogue. So that as a reader what we hear is a strong and unique writer's voice, drawing us in. KT Boundary intrigues us from the start. Is very brave in its scope – a whole life is told here within 1,500 words and ultimately it surprises us - as good short stories often do.

BLOOD POOL - Ruby Shifrin— In this story Ruby explores how the pool became so named. In doing so she transports us into the realm of myth and fairy tale. Beautifully told: the language is lyrical and poetic and often surprising. A highly visual, sensual story full of powerful imagery and

redolent with place. And from the beginning, underneath the wildness and beauty of this place there is an underlying sense of darkness and foreboding

NORTH CIRCULAR - Isabel Costello,

Marooned on a demolished estate, a Greek Cypriot woman about to be physically ejected is visited by a Greek Cypriot social worker. Great sense of place here with a woman in a house in an island of traffic. Told in the first person the style here is punchy and staccato, wasting no words yet implying depth of experience. This well written, well located, well-structured story focuses on the personal but underneath this lie crucial issues of living in modern urban Britain..

THE DAY OUR JIMMY BECAME A MAN - Ruth Henderson -

A very powerful piece of writing which, in using heroic language, has the epic flavour of the old sagas. It has the sense of lives powerfully lived. The characters – particularly the mother and father - are strongly drawn. The use of the (easily understood) Tyneside vernacular enhances the sense of family identity, giving the story the flavour of myth. This writer's skill lifted this story out of nostalgia into a universally recognisable truth

CLIMBING - Jason Jackson

This cleverly structured short story, told in the close third person voice, tells of an old man who climbs a tree to recover a lost and neglected doll. The spare prose here is full of unspoken feeling. This makes us empathise with this old man. As the tension in the prose drives us forward we learn fragments of his back story.. We sense his loneliness and isolation and his anonymity played out against the well-drawn park landscape; we come to know his determination, feel his satisfaction when he achieves his aim in reaching the doll. The nature of the day dawning brings the story to a neat close

THE DERBY WINNER - **Simon Van der Velde** (congratulations on winning the Wasafiri prize) - Here is a story about a man in a bar watching a football match that grabs you from the word go. And of course is about much more than football - underlying all the bravado of the bar and the match is a poignancy and a certain sadness. A powerful first person voice, a story whose great tension is created by the dialogue as the match unfolds and the mystery of the young boy.

RESTORATION **Sally Wylden:** (Suffolk) ‘What can you do for a chair that wants to be a tree?’ This story grew on us like the tree on the chair. It is intriguing and highly original and a great example of the power of the object in storytelling, the object in this case being an abandoned chair in a lorry park. The story hints at underlying truths about the world of the object -the inanimate and the natural world, - the animate world and the place in which they meet. As such it touches on universal: this is a story of transformation and, as the title suggests, of restoration.