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MEET THE EDITORIAL BOARD



Ruth Carter: Graduated in fine art, specialising in filmmaking at Sheffield Hallam University. Went on to work freelance in short filmmaking, directing, producing, writing and assistant directing. Studied screenwriting with the Screenwriter's Workshop, genre theory with the Script Factory and Script editing with Blaze The Trail. I am a member of a writers group where we regularly workshop work in progress and so I am used to giving constructive criticism. I am currently writing a collection of short stories and a feature length screenplay.

Maria Giuliani: I am a freelance writer and journalist, most of my experience comes from working for the local online newspaper (Varesenews) and from the Comprehensive creative writing course I am following at the moment. I have lately been accepted an article on a national US cinema magazine (circ. 30,000 copies) and I have a past of contest-winning short stories (in Italy). I have just finished a novel (looking for a publisher) and I seem to be waiting an answer on a guidebook from a UK publisher. That's all. However you might like to check the US.imdb.com site. I wrote a short bio for Italian actor Flavio Insinna, after a telephone interview.

Rebecca Toennessen: I'm the founding editor of Riot Angel. Recent fiction appears on the Buzzwords webzine (<http://www.buzzwordsmagazine.co.uk>) and an upcoming issue of Cadenza. I've recently learned how to knit and have nearly as many ongoing knitting projects as I have poems and stories, and my house is slowly disappearing under a sea of paper and yarn.

Solitaire – Linda Owen Evans

Queen of Hearts to King of Spades..

She flicked through the deck of cards again, looking for something that would fit. Like everything in the shop, the pack of cards was shoddy, corners worn, bits missing. Mr Gupta had been promising to fix the microwave for weeks, but the truck driver who used to come in regularly at five o'clock wanting a Cornish pasty had already given up.

She still saw the HGV drive by every Tuesday and Friday, lights glimmering like a Christmas tree, on its way to the all night fast food drive through down the street. She'd sigh wistfully and hover at the window, plaintively hoping he'd at least notice and drop by to say hello. His name had been Gary. He used to call her `love` and wink. It made her blush, but she'd spend the rest of the night giggling to herself as she tidied up shelves of baked beans and pot noodle, replenished the sweet racks, waited for dawn.

There wasn't anything else to do. Just drink tea and eat some of the `reduced to clear` chocolate from the basket near the till.

She swapped over a stack of cards for a more favourable hand. The stalled game continued. After all, she was only cheating herself.

*

The car had been idle for so long, he could see his breath misting clouds in the air, like he was breathing cigarette smoke. Given up the things. Not out of any concern for his health, just that he couldn't afford the luxury anymore. There was ice forming in the grimy corners of the Cortina's windscreen. The scarred calf muscle in his left leg started to tense painfully.

He didn't feel the cold. Even so his fingers shook as he turned the gun over in his hands.

"Gotta make sure the safety's off, like." The shady friend of a friend had explained. The crash course in firearms had taken place in the dim orange glow of the back car park at the pub. "Just make sure it's on the rest of the time. Don't want to go shooting yourself in the foot, do you?"

"No, I don't." He spoke aloud, watching his breath evaporate again.

The girl in the shop across the street watched from the window as a HGV drove by. 2.45 am on the dot. Like clockwork.

For something else to think about, he wondered how the owner of the shop could afford to keep her on overnight like this. He'd been watching for a week, and he'd only seen a handful of people going in. He could probably afford to lose the money then, if he could throw it away. They didn't cash up till the morning. He'd watched that too. Watched her carry the bottle green cloth bag to the bank down the street as she left. There had to be a day's takings in the till. Enough to pay a few bills. Maybe a tank or two of petrol for the Cortina if he was lucky.

Turning the collar of his denim jacket up, the brim of his baseball cap down, he got out of the car.

*

Another night and still no Gary.

Two of hearts to three of clubs...

She used to pass the time watching the overnight programmes on the telly, until it broke. Mr Gupta took the telly away, saying he'd get it fixed and have it back in a couple of days. That had been a month ago.

She straightened the chewing gum rack again, stared out of the plate glass windows. The street was out there somewhere, but all she could see was her reflection. There was nowhere to hide from it. From that point of view it looked like she was on sale, like the lottery scratch cards and the Benson and Hedges on the shelf behind her. The bargain bin, like unmarked tins, or things with dents, or past their best before date.

Jack of diamonds wasn't doing anything for her. She swapped it for the eight of clubs. It opened up a whole other column.

There used to be a bell above the door, until Mr Gupta took it away. His eldest daughter used to work in the shop on Saturdays before she left for university, and had complained the incessant dinging of the bell made her migraines play up. The door thunking shut was all that altered her to the presence of a customer.

It wasn't Gary. Shame.

She barely looked up as he walked in. It made it easier to check the shop again, while pretending to look at a rack of magazines and a wire display stand of pre-packed sandwiches that looked like cardboard. Imitation sandwiches. There was a surveillance camera above the till. He tried keeping his back to it. If worst came to worst, he could shoot it. If he remembered how to use the bloody gun. He

pretended to skim read a magazine, oblivious to what he was reading.

"Doing some decorating are you?"

"What?"

"Decorating," she repeated, gesturing to the magazine. He turned it over to stare at the front cover of Homes and Gardens. There was some ridiculously out of reach living room pictured on the page, golden and opulent, full of those strange bowls and vases that were never in real people's living rooms. None that he knew, anyway.

"No." He put the magazine back, baseball cap low over his face as he walked purposefully up to the counter, fumbling in his pocket for the gun. "Gimme the money from the till."

"Eh?"

"The money! Give me the bloody money you stupid cow!"

"Oi! No need to get personal about it!"

He finally got the gun out of his pocket, waved it about in a way he hoped looked menacing and not stupid. She made a strangled yelping sound and disappeared behind the counter. For a second he thought she'd fainted, and wondered how he was meant to get the till open if she had. He could carry the whole thing to the car he supposed, but he'd wanted to leave as few fingerprints as he could. So far it wasn't proceeding as quickly and smoothly as it always looked on the telly.

He peered over the edge of the counter. "Get up."

"Don't kill me, please...Just take the money, take anything, just don't kill me!"

She didn't want to look up, afraid the barrel of the gun would be pointing at her. Images of Crimewatch flashed through her mind, of Nick Ross looking grave while he recounted her horrible murder.

Huddled against the stack of replacement carrier bags and till receipt rolls, knees drawn to her chest, she tried to make herself as small a target as possible. It was a pointless exercise; her size 20 overalls were testament to that.

"Just open the till, yeah? And give me the money, and you won't get hurt."

The lines could have come from an episode of Crimewatch too. She raised her head, over-enthusiastically applied eye make up streaming down her face in messy black tears. "Don't look at me!"

"Sorry." She averted her gaze, silent, before venturing meekly; "I'll have to look a bit if you want me to open the till."

He seemed to consider that for a moment. "All right. But just the till, okay?"

She got to her feet, unsteadily. She tried her best not to look, but it was the same temptation as being told not to think about pink elephants; all she could think about was pink elephants.

"You've got to buy something."

"What?"

"The till..." she began, voice quivering. "It won't open unless I'm scanning something in and making a sale. If you want it open I'm going to have to run something up."

"For Christ's sakes..."

"I'm sorry..."

"What's the cheapest thing you got?"

"Chewing gum's twenty eight pence."

"Fine..." He threw the little blue packet across the counter, dislodging some of her neatly arranged playing cards. She rang up the purchase, unable to keep from staring surreptitiously as he dug about in the pockets of a grubby jacket, eventually coming up with the money in an assortment of five pence's and coppers. The till clanked open with a ching.

"...That's it?"

"What did you expect? We're not Sainsbury's."

He stared at the small pile of notes she'd placed on the counter. Couldn't have been any more than fifty pounds. He couldn't even pay his mum's electricity bill with that. It didn't seem worth it, but he'd started the game and it would be a total waste to stop now.

"Where's the rest?"

"What rest?"

"There's got to be a safe, a change box...this can't be it!"

"This is it. You can check the back room if you don't believe me."

He did, that was the problem. He'd heard the same sentiment couched in different words too many times before. Nice try. Better luck next time, eh?

For a second he just stood there, gun shaking in one hand, gum in the other, just staring at the money.

"Well are you taking it or not?"

"Give me a minute..."

Gun or not, he was losing any of his intimidation. In fact she was staring at him brazenly despite his orders not to. Not just staring.

Frowning.

"Davey Miles? It is you, thought you looked like him!" He just stared at her, while she went on cheerfully like the gun wasn't pointing at her. "We were in the same Geography class at school. I used to sit at the front because I couldn't see the blackboard very well. You and your mates sat at the back and kept flicking bits of blue tack at my hair."

It would take forever to get the blue tack out from frizzy red curls. The stuff embedded itself and refused to let go. At least something wanted to cling to her. They'd always laugh and say they couldn't see the blackboard past her bulk, and used to call her –

"Aeroplane Jane!"

"Shut up!"

"Not my fault you're the size of a jumbo jet. Should stop scoffing all those mars bars. 'Ere...Catch!"

She tried to dodge out of the way of the football as it was thrown, but couldn't move fast enough. It hit her blazer, leaving muddy trails, before bouncing off down past the art block. Davey didn't seem to mind losing the ball. The objective of finding another reason to laugh at her had been achieved.

"You're just an ignorant bully Davey Miles!"

"Oh, hark at 'er! D'you carry a dictionary around with you, teacher's pet?"

"At least I didn't have to cheat on my mocks! They only let you get away with it because you won some stupid football cup for the school!"

"Yeah, shame they don't give out trophies for being a stuck up cow, you'd win hands down." He sneered at her with a malicious little laugh. "You're 'ardly going to win Slimmer of the Year either, are you?"

She'd turned with as much dignity as she could muster, ignoring the mud soaking through the school blazer. "And you'll never win Mastermind either."

Twelve years later, and it was guns and grubby shop overalls. Neither of them seemed to have won anything, now.

"So what happened to Oxford or Cambridge?"

"What happened to first division football?"

"It's the Premiership now. And I thought you were such a know it all." A little laugh, but no real malice this time.

"My dad got laid off at the car plant. They couldn't afford for me to go. Besides, it's not that bad here. I don't have to do much, I get a lot of time on my own."

She didn't know who she was trying to persuade. Neither of them looked all that convinced by her words.

"What about you?"

He shifted his weight a little at her question, favouring his left leg, hand beginning to reach as though he was used to leaning down and rubbing his calf.

"Was in an accident with some mates. Broke me leg. Must have been about seven years ago now..."

She had a feeling he knew exactly how long it had been, down to weeks, days, hours, minutes. "Can't you get physio or something to help it?"

"Just wasn't the same after." He shrugged. "Too late to be thinking about things like that now, anyway."

She could have spoken the words in synch. That was the argument with which she always comforted herself whenever anyone asked why she was wasting her life and ambitions standing behind a till in a twenty four hour grocers. No one asked much anymore. She was twenty seven. It was too late.

This was her lot now. Funny how that lot didn't seem like all that much.

"You were the one with the brains though. That's never going to go away, not like this..." He gestured vaguely to his leg again. The muscle began cramping up on cue, demanding attention. Bloody cold...

"Maybe. I'm saving up, so..."

He stared at her upside down game of solitaire, moved the cards without thinking.

Ace of hearts to two of spades.

"Yeah." He laughed a little, poking at the small pile of notes on the counter. "Could say I'm saving up too."

The both looked at the money. He put the gun back in his pocket. He never had remembered to take the safety off. She watched him for a moment, then shrugged.

"Take it."

"Look...forget about it, if it'll get you in trouble, or get you the sack or something."

"No, go on. Take it. Mr. Gupta's insured anyway, not like he'll miss it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, go on. Want anything else? Ciggies or something?"

"I've given up."

"Good for you. They're bad for you."

She stared at her reflection in the glass as he left, but she wasn't seeing her own reflection there anymore. She was seeing two ambitious fifteen year olds, with unshakeable faith in their dreams.

Getting the stepladder from the back room, she clambered up, balancing precariously as she reached for the surveillance camera. The cassette clicked out. She stared at it, before flicking back the flap, pulling out the smooth brown ribbon of tape, pulling and tearing at it, reducing it to an impossible tangle.

Erase and rewind. Start recording over.

With a satisfied smile, she went back to the counter, shuffled her deck of cards, laid out a new game. No cheating this time. Picking up the phone, she dialled Mr Gupta's number, waiting several moments before the sleep-groggy voice came on the other end of the line.

Her own voice was panicked as she calmly turned over her cards.

"Mr. Gupta? Yes, I know it's late...I'm sorry about that, but we've just been robbed...and...Not much, about fifty quid from the till...He had a gun Mr. Gupta! All right. Yes, I'll wait for the police now...No, I'm okay, just scared. What if he comes back? No...I didn't get a good look at him..."

Jack of Diamonds to Queen of Clubs.

"No, I checked the tape. It's all chewed up. The camera must be broken."

Linda Owen Evans bio is a recent graduate in creative writing, and had had several short stories and poems published in university magazines. A short story will appear in an upcoming anthology from Torquere Press.

sha boom sha boom – an interview with Salena Saliva Godden

1. when did you start writing? have you always known you wanted to be a writer?

thanks to sesame street i could read and write from a very early age...i mean i found it easy. i was way ahead from my first day at school and really keen. i would write for pleasure, for myself. i would make little books or radio plays. but i guess we all did that..

i was a two-sided kid either up a tree reading and writing quietly with my NHS glasses on or racing around, a right randy bugger with scabby knees and an afro terrorising the boys...shit don't change huh!?

i have always been in love with writing and i work hard at my stories, poetry and songs...i know when i am ripping myself off for example and when i can do better. i am not in competition with anyone, but myself, i know the piece i write tomorrow is always better than yesterday. i am working to make tomorrow today if you see what i mean. looking forward to being 50 and fucking brilliant.

champagne and hotel rooms, whiskey and irish men, cowboys and sunsets...nothing makes me feel as good as locking myself away for say 5 days solitude with the phone ripped out of the wall and just living in a story. such satisfaction.

2. who are your influences?

bad ones...ha

it goes through phases...when i was starting out i used to be obsessed with bukowski and i read and own almost everything by him...right now though my absolute god favourite writer has to be richard brautigan. but also got a lot of time for john fante too.

my favourite living poet is brian patten.

song writing and singing...early on i was very influenced by motown and prince. janis joplin made me want to be a singer.

3. what are you reading now?

my head is in france right now with gustave flaubert and maupassant. also ploughing through an entire collection of fitzgerald's short stories.

4. do you consider 'performance poetry' a separate and unique genre? do you write particular 'performance' poems and 'book' poems?

i hate the page vs stage row and i hate that snobbery, like a poet is less gifted because he has established himself on the circuit. i seek passion and honesty in writing, pain and a taste for death and life.

poetry that relies on references to a knowledge of ulysses, shakespeare or blake can be kinda gimmicky. quoting some obscure 13th century japanese writer for the hell of it just to give the impression of being well read...it alienates an audience/reader uncomfortably. who wants to hear/read poetry with that voice in the head saying 'ermm i don't get it...'

i believe as a poet your job is to narrate or document the times, the life, this being, this everyone, the world turning and the ants we all are, to communicate the beauty and the ugly...etc... what is the point if only 3 smug people read and understand that reference to that 13th century piece of rolled up parchment?

on stage some great poets sound like they are reading a pizza menu when you see them live and some stage poets work just doesn't translate to the reader admittedly, but a good poem will be appropriate anywhere. good writing just works, whether used with music, in art, with film, read aloud or on the side of a milk carton, it resonates without compromise. you cannot put down good writing, you want to take it up the heath and lie with it in your arms in the shade of a willow tree...

i write because i gotta write...where the baby goes when it is born is the luck of the draw sometimes it winds up in a song or published or both or ha...hidden in a box marked bollox. having said all that, in contradiction, i think my dirty and/or funny stuff translates best on stage, it has hooks and a kind of chorus and then there are poem that present best on a page, especially the pieces that have a kind of numerical sense.

5. you are also a singer/songwriter - how do you your lyrics/the process of writing lyrics differ from your poetry?

most of my songs are written walking, get a line and keep singing it. if i still remember it by the time i am in the studio then it's a hit. i walk most everywhere if i can, i hate tubes, often you'll pass me there walking the streets of london in the rain singing in a totally content cloud...

poetry and stories usually queue up at the back of my brain
 behind trigger one liners or titles, until i get a chance to sit
 and write then once i get that first one-line trigger down i
 kinda puke up a load at once onto the page. sadly recently
 those 5-day 'puke up' solitudes, are too few and far between
 with all the other crap i gotta do, but its all good and good to
 be busy right...busy to be good...good to be busy...busy to
 be good....good to be busy..

*keep the fires lit
 whilst the smoke
 gets in their eyes
 the light draws
 them closer
 sha boom sha boom
 salena saliva godden*



HOTEL CHAOTICA

...a lit/perzine named after the hotel room
 in New York City where the author Anais Nin
 performed psychoanalysis during the 1930s.
 It is written by a girl from Toronto.

A zine containing a variety of writing good
 for but not restricted to the romantically
 inclined (and by that I don't mean cupids).

Poetry, prose, short stories, erotica, and
 opinion pieces on personal muses and idols
 of days gone by. Reviews on books, music, &
 film.

Issues #1 and #2 available for \$2 postage paid/\$1 +
 two Canadian stamps/trade. Contact Sara at:

hotel_chaotica@yahoo.com
www.dreamlike.org/hotelchaotica.html

Masquerade – Simon Cox

a million acrid perfumes to hide behind
 a million plastic bags to fill the holes
 a million passerbys hiding behind synthetic fabric
 hiding behind maybe maybelline eyes and peroxide hair and
 polystyrene faces and silicon everything else
 a million snakebite wounds bleeding chemical blood

a million lights to attack the retina
 to leave behind the afterglow of
 a million different sales that tug with lunar gravity at a human tide

a million different push/pull reactions like
 a quantum microcosm of zeros and ones or
 both at the same time
 a million different lies in this masquerade this façade this smoke and
 mirror lights display
 a million different types of truth to pull your atoms apart and scatter the
 flux

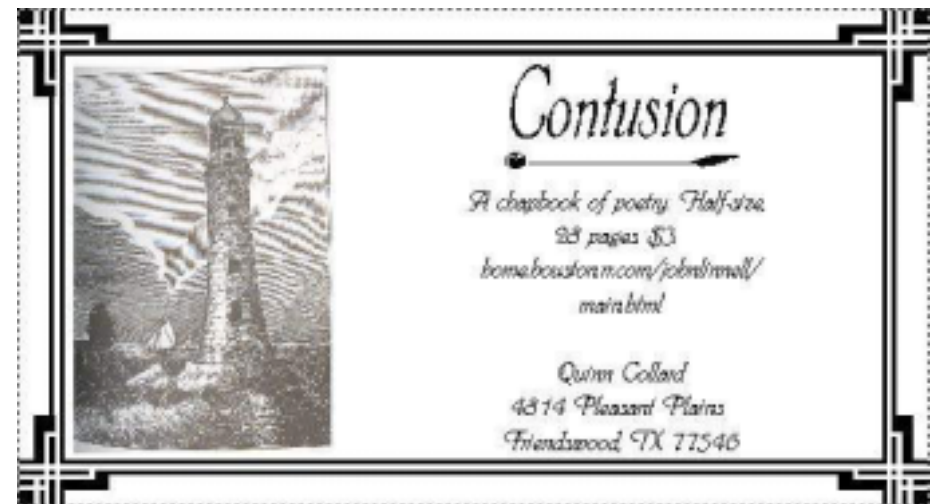
a million different eyes to burn through the plastic
 a million different voices
 lovers with sickly lips to lips to lisps
 extroverted vocal cords vibrating with self importance
 silent mouths engaged in self-conscious internal monologues for two
 voices and one
 bawd

a million gods that walk the night with burnt offerings in their ash trays
 and virgin sacrifices on their neon altars
 a million gods with their sacred text aerosoled onto subway walls and
 hidden in ring tone symphonies
 a million different posters; faded and backlit with the phosphorus
 afterimage staining your retina
 telling you about everything you need and want
 everything you must have
 a million different salesmen (smile for the camera) polystyrene masks with
 chemical red lips and chemical blue eyes
 and chemical white lies
 beneath chemical blue skies like a transparent apocalypse
 a million different brands hands grabbing you from every wall and floor
 and ceiling
 with dirty finger nails painted chemical colours drawing chemical blood and

increasing stockholder value
 a million intangible waifs stuck forever in the clinical colour maze with
 dead
 and empty eyes speaking of
 a million dead and empty stories about their handmedown youth and
 exploited sexploitated infiltrated penetrated clay
 a million generations born into SiN and forever dying styles
 a million fads and passing trends that move like the running river you can
 never cross twice
 a million neoplasma entertainment system cysts in
 a million young minds moulded like clay and then
 baked under the synthetic sun in the chemical blue sky where
 lunar gravity pulls the human tide
 a million screens with
 a million pixels
 a million frames per
 second
 a million bytes per
 second
 a million beats per
 second
 a million dollars per
 second
 a million lives per
 second
 a million empty suits with business proposals and buzzword business
 synergy paradigm mergers murders with
 a million different logos
 branded with hot iron
 to
 their
 pale
 screaming
 arses

Simon Cox has been making up stories since early primary school, and writing them down since about grade three. Currently he is a high school student who writes short stories (both conventional and unconventional), poetry (experimental and traditional) and plays (some of which have been performed at school). Occasionally he attempts

writing a novel or a film, and has written two novellas. He is especially interested in new forms of writing and new media, such as performance poetry, spoken word, fusion poetry, multimedia, graphic design, zine-making and websites.



Watership Down – a review by Colin Jones

A book has changed my life. I casually decided to read the supposed "classic" but had reservations; it appeared too thick, too time-consuming, wasteful and childish, without real meaning: I was wrong.

Watership Down is structured into short chapters, each beginning with a literary quote, skilfully used to set the scene for and to provide meaningful insights into each chapter's events.

Beginning with an ominous quote about "some vision of horror" with "death and dripping blood", Adams' ensuing opening prose contrastingly describes a commonplace, everyday rural scene. The familiarity of the setting combines with a seemingly simple but wonderful description to paint the picture. With a style which continued throughout, I could see the scene.

"The dry slope was dotted with rabbits," distances Adams, alluding to the protagonists. They were doing usual, expected things. "All is empty and quiet," emphasises the ordinariness and as "the warren was at peace", a sense of calm pervades.

However, a rabbit tells of a dream, a prophetic "vision" of "the danger – the bad thing" which is "here - all round us". Consequently, they've "got to go away before it's too late", and from the serenity, the apparently vulnerable rabbits are forced into a perilous escape. Danger and lurking death herald dominant themes.

Adams arouses sympathy with the tale of the world's creation. Frith, its creator, "made all the animals the same"

but Prince Rabbit, El-ahrairah, had many wives bearing uncountable and uncontrollable young. Frith declares: "Prince Rabbit, if you cannot control your people, I shall find ways to control them."

He gives other animals gifts to kill with and "the cunning and the fierceness and the desire to hunt and slay and eat the children of El-ahrairah", along with "nothing but hunger to kill the rabbits". We enter and immerse in a new, other, threatened world of rabbits, with an awareness of omnipresent danger.

The rabbits, with us, venture into the wild world, facing many ferocious foes. They need extreme cunningness to survive and reproduce, like El-ahrairah did.

Dandelion narrates El-ahrairah's legendary escapades throughout. The stories act as comforter, morale booster and inspiration in their dangerous, courageous quest. Each tale "raises your spirits".

Adams humanises rabbits with their names, language, emotions, feelings, relationships, and abilities to count, speak and think shrewdly. Each character becomes real, showing personal qualities and traits. There are fighters and thinkers, the brave and fearful, the outgoing and reserved, to identify with. We are all with them but later, inversely, rabbits have evolved, they are "alive" to other things and "above civilised human beings".

Along our adventures we go as the rabbits seek food, somewhere to "sleep safely" and gain shelter against the "cold and damp" - core elements of survival. We journey through woods, over fields, and across roads and rivers – using cunningness and smell to direct. Dangerous enemies

are everywhere, including animals like "the large dog", tractors and motors, potentially humans and even the territory with a "big thorn" leaving Pipkin's foot in a "pretty bad way".

They are injured and hurt, exhausted and scared but camaraderie prevails. It is sometimes "too dangerous to sleep" but a watch is kept. They reach a relative sanctuary but are in limbo, away but not arrived anywhere.

Doubt and fear descend: "Fiver was wrong", "it gets worse and worse the further we go", so "go back". Another recalls the danger: "How can you go back through all we have come?"

Furthermore, staying in safety means extinction. They need does to repopulate and survive. Hazel hatches a "secret plan" but the risky mission had little success and seemingly great cost. However, the experience later proved invaluable. With the rabbits exposed to dangers and adversity, it appears impossible for them to survive. "We've been through a lot of danger," underestimates one, and they seem doomed. Nevertheless, in the spirit of El-ahrairah, they show resistance and determination to live. Their ingenious but perilous solution is indeed a matter of life and death.

Efrafa is a tyrannical warren run by General Woundwort and his council. Horrors occur there. Hazel and Blackberry devise a plan, but this one "is going to be dangerous business". Asked where he is going, Hazel, "to murmurs of astonishment", replies: "to Efrafa". A rabbit feels "obliged" to "speak against" Hazel: "this is likely to be a complete disaster".

Later, the plan is improved and Blackberry declares: "If I'm not mistaken, General Woundwort is going to look remarkably silly before we've finished. I thought at first that it couldn't be done, but now I feel sure it can."

So begins the end. The plan is put into action. We wonder what it is and whether it will succeed. We experience and are taken through a truly thrilling, dangerous climax. I put the book down and was brought back to a strange world.

Things looked different to me.

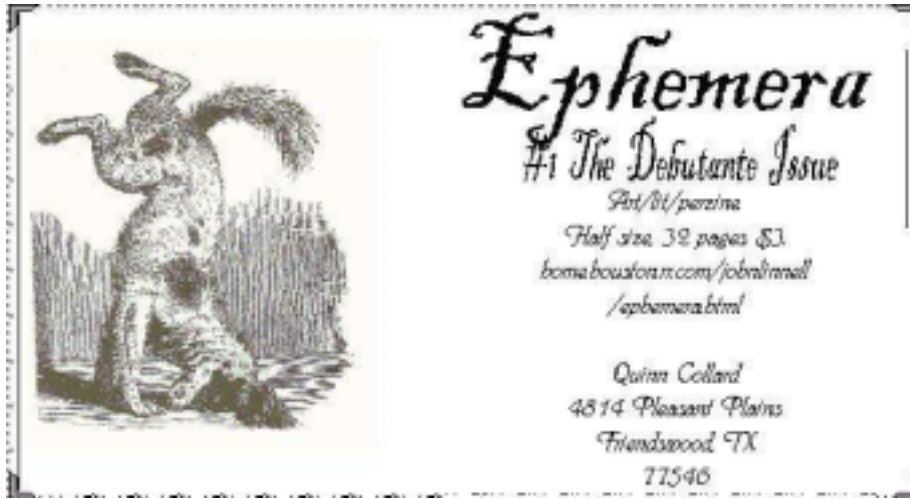
The book seemed real.

Recently, I was walking along a lonely country path. A rabbit emerged from the bushes, stopped and stared into my eyes before running away. In that moment, such was the book's impact, I actually thought...no, it couldn't be, I concluded.

Could it?

Colin Jones was born and bred in Wigan. Most of his early background was in education. Since then he has moved into proofreading and editing.

His interests include reading and writing. He decided to write the review because of its impact on him.



Hungry for Love – Deborah Maudlin

She coiled around him like a snake
feeling for his warmth
and the sweet beat of his heart,
but she was too demanding
her kisses too hungry
her embrace too tight
he couldn't give enough to quench her ache
left over from so many lovers,
who had taken more than they needed
and left her cold and broken.

Deborah Maudlin is a typical Gemini who loves to write and paint. A number of poems and short stories have been published over the past years and as her degree is in history, she enjoys writing and researching stories of a historical and fantasy genre.

Review – Maria Giuliani

*Short / Passing Through by Kaye Axon. 16 pp. Single issue
2nd class stamps from 9 Tillett Road, Thorpe Astley,
Leicester.*

This are self-published booklets to provide Mrs. Axon's poetry a way out and I appreciate the effort. The presentation is quite nice, and some of the poems are quite enjoyable, although I feel that some appear in it just to fill out blanks ("Can't think/ can't write/ won't think/ won't write". In fact, she writes!). I wonder if this poet has ever tried writing haikus. I know they take a long time to reach perfection but when I read a huge lot of short, sometimes cryptic poems I cannot help asking myself if they really come cheaper by the dozen. I am not being prissy and don't think all poetry should rhyme or be written in iambic pentameters, but at some point each poet has to show some "technical skills". Axon does. "Chinese Masseuse" is a very interesting work, with its onomatopoeic verbs and the two rhyming lines.

I also liked "Dead Frog", which seems to stand out in the "Short" booklet as funny and fresh, while "Traffic 2" is a free adaptation of "where have all the flowers gone", an endemic refrain coming on paper again and again (I wonder when we will get rid of 70s-like imagery and create some new, so that in 30 years' time new writers will dote on it like we are doing now...)

In "Passing Through" I found "Unfinished" very interesting, although there is a typing mistake in the first line. Also, the poem about "koi" is definitely appealing.

In conclusion, I think that the modest fee the publication requires is more than deserved.

Facing Extinction: A rhyming poets fight for survival - Bethan Gordan.

At precisely 8:47 this morning, yet another unwanted manuscript came to grace my coir doormat, with yet another " thanks, but no thanks (and we haven't even bothered to read it) " compliment slip pinned to the corner.

It's safe to say that at this precise moment in time, I feel strangely at one with the Dodo. I can now fully appreciate how that last remaining bird must have felt, knowing his time was up and his goose was cooked... For it feels like I too am staring extinction straight in the face. Let me put it this way... If there were any fear of my getting 'Sylvia Plath syndrome' now would be a good time to panic.

It would seem that one little thing stops my poetry in its tracks. One thing keeps me an inch away from that huge six-figure cheque and that Bahamas holiday. One thing above all causes my work to fail miserably in today's publishing society. I am committing today's greatest writing taboo. The big no- no of Poetdom... MY STUFF RHYMES. It doesn't gently hint at its subject, it doesn't tippy toe around it. it doesn't pretend to be what it's not. It grabs the subject by the horns, and goes at it full throttle. It drops rhino sized hints at my ex boyfriend's failings in the bedroom department. It doesn't mince words. It laughs. It pokes fun at everyone and everything around me. and most of the time the stick is aimed at myself. It even sometimes; when I'm having an off

day can cause people to feel a little suicidal. but always in a dry humoured kinda way.

It takes the Michael, doesn't claim to be 'Mensa' clever... and you certainly don't need a thesaurus to figure out what's going on. It even occasionally dares to make the reader smile.

So where am I going wrong? Where is Pam Ayres when I need her advice? What is so damn good about Purple Ronnie that he can reap the rewards and I cant? I am all for the new styli, non-rhyming, clever, contemporary poetry . the type always featured in Mslexia . but I just can't write like that, and more importantly don't want to.

I fully appreciate the talent of the writers behind them. understand why the literary world believes in them, and accept that most publishers are fighting tooth and nail for them. But surely there's enough room on the bookshelf for both us... The cool poets and the goofy poets; after all surely the buyers deserve a fair choice.

I actually like the way my poetry spills out of my brain onto the paper and the way it doesn't beat around the bush. It holds no sway with the literary genius of today's poetic society, but surely I'm not the only person (or dodo) left in existence, in the vast expanse of our universe, that likes a good rhyme and a good giggle. The woman in my local post office always takes a sneaky peak in my envelope, before slapping on the stamps. and always voices her approval, in a purely non-biased way (of course). The local parish magazine has published a few of my 'tamer' ditties, and even the local hairdresser requested a few to put up on the salon wall. So why, oh why, it is assumed in the publishing world that no one wants to read me?!

I like to be straight to the point; I'm never without my
chambers rhyming
dictionary, but what use is my beloved book, when no one
wants a poem that rhymes anymore? What would Benjamin
Zephaniah say if he knew his preface had been in vain?

I am asking only for a fair trial, a fair (no cocks involved)
fight. A chance to stand up against the mighty JK Rowling, or
Sophie Hannah (whose work I very much like, by the way)
and maybe . given an enormous
miracle, kick some top class literary ass.

Ok. so maybe a six-figure cheque is a little too hopeful, but if
there are any fabulous publishers out there, brave enough to
try something quirky, tongue in cheek, and totally off the
wall; then PLEASE don't hesitate to drop me a line
(preferably before my family starves, my stamps runs out...
and I have to cancel Christmas ... again !)

The Ego has Wilted – Bethan Gordan

I spent many years lusting, and craving and longing
Convinced myself you were "The One"
Then ironically, five minutes after I got you
It didn't seem half as much fun

All the girls, and the sexual conquests you've boasted
I'd heard all about it, and hey.
I guess I expected some stamina
And a tiny wee bit of foreplay!

The balloon burst too quickly, things came to a head
It was over before I could start
And the fact that you peaked prematurely

Was enough to make anyone laugh
Anatomically challenged, just doesn't come close
And I'll try to sound kind when I say
Your technique is in need of some serious help
Strong advice should be sought right away

And so, if I'm a notch on your bedpost, it really is nothing to
brag
2 minutes of meaningless prodding, rolling off and then
having a fag.
As far as a pleasured experience goes,
Doesn't qualify much as shag

" Is it in yet? " occurred to me, many a time
And I'm almost too sorry to say.
The 'Adonis like' god, that my head had built up
All too suddenly wilted away

But at least it resolved things, concluded my mind
And confirmed that my heart was mislead
Cos sex without Ooomph is a pointless affair
...I'll go buy a vibrator instead

***Bethan Gordan bio 27, and lives in Ockley, Surrey.
She has been writing since the age of ten, and has four
collections of humorous poetry (for women) and another
two in working progress. She also has a collection of poetry
for children, and a recently completed chick-lit novel.***

Desire - Tom Leins.

"If you could be any culturally-significant figure from the last fifty years, who would you be?"

A boy and girl let their hands fall apart as they separate to avoid a smart middle-aged lady brandishing a clipboard. They trudge through the Saturday throng, but don't hold hands anymore. The young man – Joe - has his hands in the pockets of his baggy jeans, and slouches like someone with very bad posture. The girl – Ani - roots through her bag in search of something she never finds. They seem fairly average – but not in a bad way. They are good looking, and if it wasn't for their seeming indifference towards one another and everybody else, they could probably be catalogue models. Possibly even underwear models.

The general public are shopping like it's going out of fashion. It might already have done. No one would have noticed. Joe and Ani continue to pick their way through the swirling mass of happy shoppers - many of whom are taking back plastic bags crammed with unopened Christmas presents - just to get more money to spend on bad speed and white trainers.

"Well?"

She shrugs half-heartedly and starts walking slightly faster. Without turning to look at him she grumbles:

"I don't know and I don't care. I really haven't got time for these questions - I'm trying to shop. Look - I'll see you in the pub about seven. Okay?"

Without waiting for a response she makes her way down the high street. The corners of his mouth twitch and after a

couple of seconds he falls back into step with her. She turns impatiently towards him. He skulks into Our Price before she can make a disparaging remark.

They'd met in a dirty student bedroom, and then picked the cigarette butts off their socks. Exchanged meaningful glances over half-finished canteen meals, and then washed away the taste of the food with small cups of water. Bonded during the never-ending afternoons of repeated 1980s BBC dramas, and then argued whether Lovejoy was his first name or his surname. Shared a vodka-soaked kiss under a starless sky, and then... And then nothing. Falling in love was easy. Too easy. Climbing out again was much more difficult. Trying to work out whether or not you wanted to climb out was even harder still.

He idly browses through the CD racks, dwelling on albums he already owns. Lots of people do that in record shops – scrutinize albums that they have at home. Why? It was the equivalent of finding a grubby map in a foreign youth hostel and prodding the city that you're already in. Limited imagination. He didn't want to be one of those people, but today these CDs are triggering off happy memories like small cracked plastic boxes bursting with serotonin. Brilliant nights - in awful nightclubs - in nondescript seaside towns; listening to Bob Dylan for the first time, on a scratched-to-fuck CD that he found on Carl's floor... He moves across the shop and picks up a CD by a band called the Forget-Me-Nots. The NME described them as 'fey'. Is fey a word? He thinks so, but that might be one assumption too many. They sound fey. Is fey a word? It is now. He pays for the album with two crumpled fivers and walks home trying to figure out whether or not Forget-Me-Not is a good name for a band. Trying to figure out whether or not some things are better off

forgetting straight away – worth forgetting before you have chance to remember them.

At home he finds his friend Carl rooting through the freezer. They cook a box of tiny beef-burgers that belong to Joe and crack open a couple of cans of Fosters Export that they find on a windowsill.

“Where’s the missus?” asks Carl after they finish their meal.

“Fancy a pint?” replies Joe.

“Be rude not to.” considers Carl.

Two hours, four pints later they are doing what they usually do on Saturday nights: talking about life, talking about the important stuff. Stuff like – football – Torquay United’s inability to hang onto a lead; rock ‘n’ roll – “Right, name twenty bands or solo artists who have name-checked themselves in their own song titles.” (Joe got five or six, Carl got twenty-two 1 films – “Man, who do you think should star

¹ 1. The Clash ‘This is Radio Clash’, 2. Blur ‘B.L.U.R.E.M.I.’, 3. Superstar ‘Superstar’, 4. Bob Dylan ‘Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream’, 5. Freestylers ‘Freestyle Noise’, 6. Green Day ‘Green Day’, 7. Bluetones ‘Bluetonic’, 8. Public Enemy ‘Public Enemy #1’, 9. Stone Roses ‘Made of Stone’, 10. Chemical Brothers ‘Chemical Beats’, 11. Wu Tang Clan ‘The Wu Tang Clan ain’t Nuthin’ Ta F’ Wit’, 12. McAlmont and Butler ‘Theme From McAlmont and Butler’, 13. Mansun ‘Mansun’s Only Love Song’, 14. Dr Dre ‘Forgot About Dre’, 15. Lo-Fidelity Allstars ‘Lo-Fis in Ibiza’, 16. The Monkees ‘Theme From The Monkees’, 17. Snoop Dogg ‘Snoop Dogg’, 18. Elastica ‘How He Wrote Elastica Man’, 19. Boo Radleys ‘Wake Up, Boo!’, 20. Tricky ‘Tricky Kid’, 21. Turbonegro ‘Turbonegro Hate The Kids’, 22. The Hives ‘The Hives Are Law, You Are Crime’.

in a Hollywood version of ‘the A-Team’?” (George Clooney as Hannibal, Ving Rhames as B.A., John Cusack as Face, Jim Carrey as Murdoch.) “You are so wrong! Jim Carrey would be crap, he’d take over the whole film. I’m going to go away and have a serious think about that, because that question is far too important to leave hanging. You’re wrong Joe. Very wrong.”; women – “Mate, I haven’t pulled since Torquay last won away!”; “What, 1998?”; “Fuck off. Do you want another pint or not?”

Carl returns from the bar with two more pints and starts talking before he sits down:

“Cheesy question - what the fuck are you going to do with your life next year?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Well, almost. I reckon I’ll just chuck my life up in the air and see where it lands. Pick up the pieces I want, ignore the rest. I’d love to do what the guy that Phil Daniels played in Quadrophonia did. He gave everything up to become a Mod.”

“Not a bad life I suppose. I mean look where he ended up – the career of a moderately successful magician isn’t to be sniffed at.”

“No - Phil Daniels. Not Paul Daniels. Are you listening to me?”

“Not really. I’m trying to make eye contact with that blonde by the jukebox. Fantastic ... taste in music. So you wanna be a Mod do you? Or a magician? Sorry I wasn’t listening.”

"Don't worry about it. Next time I ask you a question I won't bother listening to the answer. I'll just ogle slightly overweight girls instead."

"Leave it out. She's lovely. Anyway, there's nothing wrong with a slightly fuller figure."

Carl rubs his sizeable belly.

"Absolutely not, mate. Anyway, I could handle one of those big green parkas. And that brown suit he wore to Brighton. Nice."

"Fucking hell. Next you'll be saying you want to shag Leslie Ash in an alleyway."

"Well – I wouldn't say no."

"Then or now?"

"Either. Don't pretend you wouldn't either."

"Nah, I suppose not."

They sup their pints, laugh at each other and laugh at themselves. This is the first time that Joe has been truly happy since breakfast time. They hear someone clearing one's throat (Someone clears their throat?) behind them. Twice. They turn around to find Ani with a half-smoked Marlboro Light between her fingertips, nursing a double gin and tonic.

"You ought to give up the cancer-sticks, love." Chortles Carl, as he lights up. "They'll really fuck you up if you're not careful."

Ani takes a dangerously long drag on her cigarette, stubs it out, chuckles, and exchanges pleasantries with Carl.

"Isn't it about time you made the acquaintance of certain blonde by the jukebox? I saw her wearing a Urusei Yatsura T-shirt once."

"Really?" Drawls Carl as he trudges towards the Wurlitzer. Ani eases into the vacant seat and looks at Joe, expectantly.

"So – erm... did you... buy anything nice in town?"

"Yeah. This top. Do you like it?"

"Yeah. It's ... nice?"

"I bought an old REM album as well, but when I got home I found out that I'd already got it. You can have it if you want."

Joe reaches for his wallet.

"How much?"

"Don't be silly."

She touches his arm, but withdraws her hand almost immediately.

"How's Carl?"

"Fat and happy. About 35 years early."

They both laugh. Then smile sheepishly at one another.

"I like you. You know that?"

"I like you, too."

She reaches for his hand briefly, but then decides to take another drink.

Ani breaks the short but uncomfortable silence: "If you could be any culturally-significant figure from the last fifty years, who would you be?"

He tries to work out whether or not she's taking the piss out of him.

"I thought you hated those sort of questions?"

"You think too much."

He takes a swig of Stella and ponders the question.

"I'll go for William S. Burroughs."

It takes her a few seconds to work out who he is. Then she guffaws.

"No! Not that old weirdo?! Jesus, Joe. I'm surprised and not a little upset. I'm not sure what he loved more: fucking little Tunisian boys or writing unreadable books – about fucking little Tunisian boys! Is there something you're not telling me, Joe? Didn't he blow his wife's head off with a shotgun?!"

"No. Think about it – he was probably the only person in the world who was friends with Jack Kerouac AND Kurt Cobain. They were fucking legends and I'd give anything to meet them. To meet them both. That would be too cool."

"Why don't you choose one of them then?"

"Because then I wouldn't be able to meet the other one. I don't want to be either of them, I just want to meet them. If I'm honest, I don't think I want to be anyone except myself. I mean: William Burroughs! The man survived on a diet of semen and heroin! I've never even read any of his books. Is that answer okay? Not too sordid?"

"Yeah. No. Good. Now ask me."

"Who would you be?"

"Leslie Ash."

A smile of recognition creeps across his face. She laughs. He lifts his glass to his mouth.

"I don't wanna be like everybody else..." She begins, her eyes fixed firmly on his.

He drains his pint: "That's why I'm a Mod, see?"

She finishes her gin and tonic in one gulp and hides a gentle burp with her hand. She pushes her chair back and stands up clumsily: "So, Mr Burroughs – know any good alleyways around here?"

He slips his hand into hers.

"Not yet".

Tom Leins was born on Valentine's Day, 1980 and currently works as a full-time Beach Attendant in a small town called Paignton. Minimum wage, maximum sunshine. A couple of years ago he got a decidedly-average degree from a decidedly-average university, but has no immediate plans to

use it. He has published one volume of poetry: Clean Living Under Difficult Circumstances, and is currently applying the finishing touches to his debut novel: Thirsty & Miserable, which he hopes to get published sooner rather than later, so that he can retire to the Caribbean with a suitcase full of cash and spend his days playing tennis with Lou Reed and Roger Waters from Pink Floyd.

He is technically tall enough to be a catwalk model.

COMPETITION DETAILS!

I saw your magazine's details on the Mslexia site, and wondered if I could let you know of the Yeovil Literary Prize 2005, which might appeal to some of your readers. I am Writer in Residence at Yeovil Arts Centre, Somerset, and with my co-administrator Jim Mitchell, have devised a literary prize to try to raise funds to help keep our Arts Centre afloat, and to support the arts of the area.

There are three categories: Novel, Genre short story, and Literary short story. Details and entry forms can be seen on our website www.yeovilprize.co.uk
<http://www.yeovilprize.co.uk>

Each Morning Light – Geoff Stevens

Naked, you are as complex as calculus
And yet so easily differentiated
Because it is a nakedness
That I have come to know,
So that my mind calculates the area beneath the curve
Without but a thought
And tells me in the darkness
That it is you.

Naked, you are the cost of my intentions
My passport to abroad withdrawn
My heart confined to house arrest.
Statements that I make
Are vetted by my love for you
Yet prisoner of conscience
I am provided with all the comforts
Wished from life.

Naked, you say you love me.
It is a statement without clothes.
It smells of your skin.
It throws its arms around my neck.
It is as warm as your body.
I stroll around it all my island day.
And after the lonely tide of sleep
It is the sunshine finger writing in my soul.

Channel Swimmer – Geoff Stevens

Will the grease ever disappear
from off my skin
the waves wash off the retinas
of my eyes
the rings around the sockets
fade away?
Will I ever get my land legs
back
lose this sea-level vertigo
the taste
of salt from off my tongue
or am I
forever bound to be a sex-slave
an answer
to your every beck and whim?

Geoff Stevens was born in West Bromwich in 1942, and is Editor of Purple Patch poetry magazine from 1976 to date. His latest poetry book is The Phrenology of Anaglypta from Bluechrome publishing. He is a member of the Unleaded Petrels poetry performance group.

Submissions are required for "The Book Of Hopes And Dreams", an anthology of transcendent poetry, short stories and art.

All profits from this book will go to Spirit Aid: a humanitarian relief organisation dedicated to alleviating the suffering of children and young people whose lives have been devastated by war, poverty, genocide, ethnic cleansing and all forms of abuse.

Guidelines and submission criteria at www.thunderburst.co.uk

The Truth is in Here! – Richard George

the angle that only the ant can see
the ant that only Hubble can see
that is how small
the rolled-up dimensions are

this is where the dead are

their world curls
inside ours
like a Russian doll

we are as outer space to them

how do they reach us?

well what did you see in the sky last night?
they are building their own voyagers
it is difficult

their world is extremely unstable

but they have another option
to viol the strings
we are made of and move us

as they love we shall love
as they do we shall

Richard George is 39, lives in St Alban's and writes a range of poetry from traditional to more experimental. His first full-length collection Vertigo Swimming came out in 2004, and he is compiling a second. He is an avid reader of Fortean Times.

And we spent the whole week watching telly...
– Jacinta Nandi-Pietschmann

"Liv! Liv! For fuck's sake, you've got to wake up! Curtis Stigers has died! In a car crash! For fuck's sake, wake up, wake up, wake up!"

It was Sunday morning and it was still early and I wasn't waking up, not even for Curtis Stigers's sake. I hauled the duvet over my head, squeezed my eyes shut and fell back asleep whilst all around me Jacqui squealed.

"Liv! Wake up! Wake up! In a car crash with Dodi!"

My mind, fuzzy with sleep, briefly woke up long enough to wonder what Curtis Stigers had been doing in a car with Dodi in the first place. But not long enough to stay awake.

"Princess Diana!"

Princess Diana.

"Princess Diana?" I mumbled, suddenly hot and sticky under the duvet. It was like being raped awake, wide wake, breathlessly, hopelessly awake.

Princess Diana....

"Princess Diana." Jacqui repeated, nodding solemnly, switching the telly on.

"Princess Diana," I said to myself as we sat there, in her mum's double bed, staring at the blue screen with the picture of Di with her pretty crown on.

"I thought you said Curtis Stigers was dead at first," I told Jacqui.

"Who?" She looked blankly at me. I didn't really know either. I decided to ring home so I could be the first person to tell someone.

"Yes, yes," my mother interrupted me. "We're very shocked here, very shocked and upset, everyone's very shocked and upset here, except for your stepfather, you know what he's like, too fat and lazy to get upset, in fact he hasn't been upset since 1976 when his mother accidentally threw away his favourite Wireless Weekly but me and the kids I must say we're ever so upset, Liv, ever so upset, in fact I might just phone in sick and Sarah well Sarah's in shock really to be honest, she's in shock and Paul, well perhaps Paul's just a little too young to understand exactly what's going on - Paul - are you upset? He says he's upset Power Rangers isn't on. But I'm really shocked. Liv. When you think, like. Lady bloody Di, dead as you like...not that I was a fan or anything...not like your auntie Ange, she'll be devastated, like, but still, she was an icon, wasn't she? A fashion icon, a feminist icon, a spiritual icon. I am really shocked, I must say. Perhaps I should ring in sick, what do you think? But they'll probably have the telly on in work, won't they? Are you ok, poppet? I s'pose you're just a bit shocked and upset. How's Jacqui taking it? Will you be in for dinner?"

Jacqui and I installed ourselves in front of the telly, eating Pringles and crunchy nut cornflakes straight from the packet. They were showing all these fat, black women, wailing. Tony Blair rallied the nation. Lots of presidents and celebrities kept on personally offering us their condolences. Madonna said how Di had once told her that she, Madonna, dealt with the press better than she, Di, did. They interviewed some

cancer kid who was blatantly telling lies about how Di had said she wanted to adopt her, only no one mentioned how it was blatantly a lie. They also interviewed a florist. Jacqui had snot sliding down her face the whole time – I hope he gives the profits he makes to poor little black landmines babies, she sobbed – but I didn't cry till we watched the Channel 5 documentary on Di's style through the ages, showing how as she'd matured she'd actually grown into her looks, using the trends of fashion to complement her natural, elegant beauty. That's what did it for me, all her different haircuts flashing through the TV screen. I started crying like I'd never stop.

And we spent the whole week like that, crying and watching telly. Everywhere you went and the telly was on and women were sniffing. My mum spent the whole week telling everyone who'd listen how she'd cried much more now than when her uncle Stan was stabbed to death and set on fire. Yeah, agreed Jacqui when she told her. I've cried loads more than when my cousin committed suicide. "Dave hasn't cried at all," said my mother of my step dad, in a tone of disgust. "Liv hasn't cried much. You've not cried much, have you Liv?"

"I've cried enough," I said. "I've been crying in private, like."

Ooooooh, said mum and Jacqui.

"I've not stopped crying for longer than an hour at a time," announced Jacqui, welling up as she spoke. "I went up to Kensington Palace yesterday and I couldn't hardly find the place what with my hay fever and my eyes full of tears and I was all dizzy you know? But I just followed the crowds and there I was."

"Did you sign the book, like?" Asked my mum.

"Yes." Jacqui sighed. "And I left some flowers and my old teddy bear. I just wanted to show I care."

"I know exactly what you mean," said my mother. "I can't stand crowds else I'd go up myself. Although people are also leaving flowers outside the town hall so that does save you the trip, doesn't it? Coz Di opened that town hall, she did." "They're leaving flowers outside Goodmayes Tesco's now," said Jacqui. "They've got a condolences book and everything and a big pile of flowers out side the entrance and then again by the bottle bank."

"Outside Tesco's?" My mum's voice was full of scorn and disbelief. "She never opened that Tesco's now, did she?" Me and Jacqui laughed at that a bit. But mum's brain was ticking away.

"I can understand not wanting to go up to town, mind you, what with all the crowds and what have you." "Mum," I warned her, "you'd better not sign the Tesco's condolences book."

"The whole country's gone fucking mad," said my step dad, coming in from fixing the car.

My mum said me and Sarah and Dave had to go and get the shopping in, coz she couldn't face it, she was done in, like, and my step dad sighed deeply. I did want to work a bit more on the car you know, but in the end we went and it took half-an-hour to get round the car park because of all the people queuing to sign the book.

"Fucking peasants," said my step dad. "You know what's wrong with this country, girls? You want to know what's

wrong with this country? The people of this country are a bunch of fucking peasants," he spat through the window. Sarah and me giggled.

"A nation of morons," he continued. "An entire nation of fucking cretins. What would be the best thing that could happen to this country, girls? The best thing that could happen to this country would be if a nuclear fucking bomb was dropped on it."

It wasn't till we were finally parked and inside that my sister said she wanted to sign the book, too. My step dad swore. "The Russians had the right idea," he said darkly. "Oh go on, Dave, let her," I said. "We can wait for her in the coffee shop, have a cup of tea. Meet us in the coffee shop when you've signed it, OK, Sares?"

In Tesco's Coffee Shop my step dad wanted a flapjack but then got really upset when he found out they cost £1. 10. "£1.10 for a flapjack," he said. "What a fucking life." He started complaining about mum.

"I mean, your mother is basically mentally ill, isn't she, Liv? After 10 years of marriage I've basically come to the conclusion that your mother is basically mentally ill. You know what she wants to do now. She wants to change the living room carpet. I mean, it's a perfectly adequate carpet. She's sick that's all. It's a perfectly adequate carpet."

"It is a bit 1970's," I said.

"What was wrong with the 1970's? In the 1970's you were never paying £1.10 for a sodding flapjack. You know what Marx said. The workers get the fag end of everything."

"Is that a direct quote?" I asked him. My sister walked to our table, shining. My step dad touched her briefly on the head. She beamed.

"You wanna know what I wrote? I wrote: ' You'll always be the queen of my heart.'"

This fucking country said Dave as we went to fetch our trolley.

In the end I watched the actual funeral round Jacqui's house, even though I had promised my mum I'd watch it with her and the kids. I felt like I'd spent the whole week sobbing and didn't even have much tears left but I managed to squeeze a few out when I saw the card saying mummy. Jacqui though, Jacqui howled like a bitch in pain the whole way through.

When I got in mum was all mardy with me.

"You could have been here for the funeral," she said. "We could have watched it together like a proper family. Sometimes I think Jacqui's family is more important to you than your own."

"Jacqui's mum wasn't in," I said. "I couldn't leave Jacqui on her own, could I."

"You could have both come here."

"Jacqui don't like coming here coz you're so stingy with the orange juice."

"Olivia, last time she was here she drank a whole litre of the stuff. A litre. It doesn't grow on trees you know. Well, what

did you think, a lovely funeral, wasn't it, and wasn't Earl Spencer magnificent?"

"Elton John's eyebrow was weird," I said. The kids laughed. "Paul and Sarah really missed having you here, you know, I do think you're mean. And your stepfather. You won't believe what your stepfather did. Would you believe he actually walked out halfway through to go and work on the car. I don't know what the neighbours must think of us. Well, at least you're here now, d'you want a cup of tea? Sarah, make your sister a cup of tea, there's a good girl. The BBC's coverage was of a much higher quality than ITV's, didn't you think, Liv?"

I told my mum the cameras were penises and the paparazzi gang-rapists and Lady Di violated to death.

"Ooooooh, " she said, "did you read that in the Guardian, like? There might well be some truth in that you know. Well, back to normal viewing, then. I must say, I'm really upset it's all over. I've quite enjoyed this week, to be honest."

"Mum!" My sister squealed. "How could you have enjoyed it? It's been so terrible! We've lost the greatest living English person ever!"

"Oh yes, yes, that's what I mean. On a personal level it has been the worst week ever, I've been ever so shocked and upset and what have you but as a whole, as nation, I must say, we haven't had this much fun since World War bloody Two, like."

Dave walked in from fixing the car.

"Dave, you're not trailing greasy motor oil through the house, are you?"

"Has Your Mother told you what she did this morning?" He asked me.

Mum put her slightly embarrassed face on. "I went and signed the book, like."

"Not the Tesco's book?"

"Hmmm, I just suddenly realized, I'd never get another opportunity."

"And," announced my step dad, "and, she went and bought flowers from Penny's."

"You dint leave flowers outside Tesco's, did you mum?"

"I just wanted to show I care."

"Mum," I said, "mum, mum, mum, mum, we talked about this."

"You spent more on those flowers than you did when my mother died. When my mother died you deliberately chose the most anaemic, anorexic, pathetic, sickly carnations in the whole fucking shop."

"Dave, she was a princess, after all. And anyway, there weren't any cheap flowers left, love. Penny's was practically sold out. D'you think it's so silly of me, Liv? I mean, it's the thought that counts, isn't it?"

"This fucking country," said Dave. "A nation of morons. Idiots. Cretins. If I could just get my hands on some nuclear weapons."

"Oh, people just care, Dave, people just loved her. Honestly, you're such a philistine sometimes. Anyway what do you think, Liv, we could get that nice piccy of her with the poor little black boy framed and hung above the mantelpiece?"
"If you do that, I'm moving out." Dave started walking out the living room.

"You know the thing is, Dave, the thing is, excepting Certain People," called my mum to him, as he walked out the back door, "she certainly brought out the best in all of us."
The back door slammed.

Me and mum and Sarah cracked up and little Paul joined in the way kids do when they don't really know what they're laughing at.

Jacinta Nandi-Pietschmann was born in Ilford, Essex, twenty-four years ago. After graduating from Exeter, she moved to Berlin, where she now lives with her darling nine-week-old baby Rico. When not breastfeeding, changing shit-filled nappies or sleeping, she writes - anything she can think of. Her favourite literary character is Anne of Green Gables though she would undoubtedly hate her if she met her in real life.

Today's stains - Sayraphim Lothian

030325

Today's stains are purple
and I am covered in black ink.
dirt and old purple paint under the fingernails
words fading into the skin of the back of my hand.
dried blood on my fingers
and today I feel like me.

030413

today's outside stains are striped faded neon oily orange
and dirty white

today's insides are stained and old and dirty
and scrabbling backwards in blind fear

030420

today's stains
are lizard coloured
flame warm
and taste of afterbirth

030421

yesterdays stains still linger
yesterdays stains are still here.

I can't get the carbon
out of yesterdays stains

030707

today's shadows
are old blood stains

030707
today's stains
are yesterday, leaking through

030708
yesterdays stains
are going to be here for a long, long time.

yesterdays stains
and the day before that
and the day before that.

all burnt into
all collected under

my skin

030824
are old
and empty
and nothing but echoes
of all the stains
I ever collected
from all the yesterdays of my life.

030901
today's songs are blue

that's what I learnt
today

today's girls are songs in blue.

030918
today's stains are black
and faded brown with antique gold flecks

all under my nails
and along my skin

yesterday's stains were teflon
and sounded like the clacking
of gargoyles beaks in warning.

031019
today's stains
are pixel related
all square and blocky and mono coloured

spreading like a virus
growing like a spreading stain

today's stains are growing
mould in a shower stall
at my desk

031021
today's stains are fading permanent texta on a paint-peeling
wall

in curly handwriting

i'm learning to dance alone...

031026
today's stains
are only yesterday's ripples
are only last years traps

that I still choose

staining myself
blaming someone else

when all the time I should be saying

this is my fault
again

031119

ohh, there is too much blood in my head.
today's vortex is red
today's stains are...
who knew that soundechos could be stains too.

040802

are fresh, every morning

today i'm not so sure
that I am standing tall
barefoot, on this broken glass

040816

today's stains taste like old port
today's stains feel like dust motes floating
in a dark mouldy house
today's stains are an echo
of all the other nights i've ever had
today's stains
make my tongue ache
today's stains
have dried already
today's stains
are old

and forgotten

already

Sayraphim Lothian is an artist, photographer, word smith, painter, sculptor, dramaturg for the independent Melbourne theatre company theatre in decay, graphic designer, theatre designer, web designer, web mistress and grammangel.

Sayraphim has contributed artworks and words for exhibits and theatre pieces in Melbourne, Canberra, Bendigo and regional Victoria and Wisconsin, USA. Her writing and images have been published in a book, in newspapers and magazines, on the web and on toilet walls. She has worked as head of the photography department for an e-commerce site, as a roving photographer, a life model, call centre monkey and photoshop pleb.