



SO:Write
Women Group
Anthology

2018



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Foreword

When So:Write Women began, in January 2017, the intention was to create a space where women felt safe to express themselves, to develop their voices and find empowerment in writing. We began in the early workshops by exploring why we *don't* write, and the same comments kept coming up: not being able to find the time, not feeling 'good enough', or experiencing guilt or even shame about writing.

Since then, over 40 women from Southampton and the surrounding area have attended the workshops and produced, among other work, the pieces that fill these pages. Some have been as a direct result of workshop prompts; others have come about indirectly, as a result of gradually finding the time, and the confidence, to write. A number of the women have taken their work into the public sphere, either by performing at spoken word and poetry events, or submitting to competitions, agents and publishers. I am immensely proud of all of them.

One of the unforeseen benefits of running the So:Write Women workshops has been the impact on my own writing. The energy generated in those rooms, at the Central Library and the Art House Café, has sparked work from me that otherwise would not have existed, and it is for this reason that I (reluctantly) include a couple of my own pieces in this collection.

In January 2017, my hope was to quell women writers' fears, and bring their voices into the light. I hope this anthology does that. Enjoy.

Joanna Barnard

May 2018

Fledgling

I want to write, I want to speak my mind, but I feel straitjacketed, curled in upon myself, protectively cradling my belly, my core, and I wonder why. I realise that despite my anger, my loss, my need to scream, my need to be me, I'm conditioned, constrained, by what is polite, what won't offend, by being good, by being nice. Still being the good girl I once was, at school, at home, at work, and still am if I'm honest, leads to insipidity. Writing that is the equivalent of afternoon tea, fine fragile bone china, English Breakfast tea, all whispers, all excuse me...could you pass me the...terribly sorry... little finger extended, lips pursed, no wrong words allowed past.

And then, and then...I go to an open mic night, a spoken word night, and I hear and see the freedom I seek. The women, especially, are visceral, naked, angry, emphatic. They are space-takers not place-markers. They are goddesses, they are warriors, they are lionesses, they roar. They are screams in the night, screams of no more!

Why do I feel this is something denied to me? Embarrassment perhaps, that terribly British: excuse me...oh, I shouldn't really...pardon me... I didn't mean to...But I am of stronger stock than that: my mother was a goddess I'll have you know, a phoenix no less. She remade herself in her own images, rising again and again from the ashes: of dreams, of marriages, of careers, of friendships, tearing spent bonds with her teeth, rising bloodied but triumphant, smoothing down her skirts, showing me again and again – though I did not see it then – this is how it is done, this is how you remake a woman!

Born of goddess stock, phoenix-like, I feel that creature stir within. It is tiny, all purple-green down, and flexing pin feathers reaching for the breeze. Yawning, slow-blinking green eyes at the light denied it for so long. I preen its downy feathers, it is almost time, it is almost time, my love. Together we will fledge into darkness, lighting it with a million supernovas, remade in our own image.

Claire Lewis





Dancing Words

A channel for self-expression
Called for, once, in oblivion
Inconvenient, oppressive, invasive
The providers of a place to breathe

Taking a shower, driving,
No sense of priority
Feeding the babe, cooking,
An idea for a new story

Loved by friends
Who don't see the pain
Every writing I read
Is so much better than my game

Peace has long gone
Holding the pen calls in joy
Every time I take to the paper
The relentless dancers of my mind

Claire Gaudry



Swing

Fear squeezes my heart. I squeeze my eyes. Maybe I can force the dream away this time? I try and match my whisper-breath to the rhythm of my sister's snores. I try to hide myself away in them, lie unnoticed in the dark.

I need to pee, but that means sailing on rug-boat across ocean-floor where sea monsters wait to catch my passing ankle. Floorboards creak, doors squeak, pipes knock. The whole house shouts, but it is loudest here. I listen to it. I feel something of its past. Its voice is what makes me scurry up the stairs at bedtime. Little long-haired mouse, nightie flying.

Sometimes during the day, I walk into a room and hear snatches of its story discussed by grownups. Sudden full-stops appear, loud to my tender ears. But the house wants to tell its own tale. It unburdens itself at night. I lie and listen to its thoughts reverberate around its head. My sister is already too old to listen.

Outside, the air is greasy with summer. In here, it feels like winter.

Soft moonlight climbs through the curtain. I watch it curl, wisp. It forms shape after shape. A face twisted by anger. Galloping horse with wild rider, billowing coat. Gravel sprays, pockmarks my mind's eye. Rider alights. Footsteps rush. I hear their crunch.

Fear opens the door and cowers behind candlelight.

A raised voice, incoherent with rage lifts a gun, shining silver like my breath.

The noise of death cracks again and again.

Screams rip the night.

Horse and rider flee.

The silver scene in front of me shifts.

People are gathered. Some bay from above like judgmental hounds. Sentence is passed, punctuated by burnished gavel and black cap.

Silver swirls part to show their final scene.

Ankles descend and swing.

Cate Holness



While looking forward to 2017's Riverfest, we took the opportunity as a group to do some writing exercises around place, in particular the watery kind. The following five pieces – *Tideline*, *The River*, *Mephisto Lake: Parsed*, *Incarnation*, and *Eerie Grave* – came about as a result of this workshop, and the latter two were performed at Riverfest.

Tideline

In the swallow time, we trawl our laces
through the silt-streams, catching wisps
of sea algae as we step and draw brown threads
across the tideline

climbing, we stoop into the flatiron mist
palms sea-clean, rinsed of the city
facing south to where the ocean opens

or where it would be if we walked and walked
until our faces lost their fog and our skin grew
scaled with salt marsh

once more burnt geese alight to skim the sift and sway
meniscoid, dark humps that move with the pulse
of the turbine thread and turn their necks
like tent pegs to the east

rising between dulled bottles, hardened caps
sown like farmer's seed in rows beside the aching surf
we take a narrow path of gravel beneath the sea wall
and curl into the baleenous yawn

the creaking iron, rotted into cavities
jaws flaked, into which our fingers clasp in rust
in seaweed slipknots and we hold
ourselves level with the land, the tide.

Yarrow Townsend





The River

Down to the River we ride. More in hope than expectation. It's been a lifetime since we were last here. We've been together, we've been apart, and now, fleetingly, we're together again. The three of us.

I take Mary's hand and lead her towards the riverbank. She's not as quick as she used to be. Neither am I, I suppose. I hold her close. I act like I care.

Mary looks at me. She acts like she don't remember.

If this doesn't bring anything back, nothing will. I long for the memories that once haunted me. My memories, both good and bad, are barely visible photographs reflected in the slowly trickling stream that bleeds below us. Mary's memories are long washed away, when the River had more strength: when we had more strength.

Mary looks at me and squeezes my hand. Her eyes are glassy like the water she watches. We aren't so different from those teenagers who wasted hours here.

It's been a winding, troubled journey. There were times when money, or lack of it, was all that consumed us. It was important then. It's not important now. I guess that's easy to say when there's nothing to plan for ahead of you.

The River, relentlessly murmuring round the rocks, pulls me to the present. I'm sure there was more water when we were younger. The reservoir used to be full. We used to swim. Mary used to swim. She doesn't now.

As if reading my thoughts, Mary steps forward. Staggering down the bank, her steps break the surface of the journeying water. Jealousy surges through me like the current. The River has the same pull over her as it did so long ago. Something I lost. Did I imagine it was ever there?

I should stop her; she could fall. But I don't. I watch her wade through the water. She's almost knee-deep and absorbed by the feel of the cold creeping through her shoes. The water in the River is the same but painfully altered. It's moved on. It's been here and it's been elsewhere. It has run to the sea and taken many different forms. But it has somehow returned to this point.

We have somehow returned to this point. At times, I thought we'd never make it. We were too young, too reckless and there were too many obstacles. But we made it. Like the rocks that hold Mary steady, we weathered the constant current of life. But we aren't the same. Nothing stays the same.

The sound of the River rages through my mind. My eyes reassure me the water is gentle, but in my ears, it sounds like the force of years of frustration roaring along the riverbed.

Mary looks at me. She looks at me with the same eyes as when we were much younger. And, for a heartbeat, Mary recognises me. I'm certain.

But then the recognition, unbearably, ebbs away again. Just like the River running from her feet.

Katie Isham





Mephisto Lake: Parsed

One of five linked lakes.
A compound noun; encircled
by coniferous exclamation marks.

A motorboat passes, trailing its wake like a run-on sentence...
Little speech marks slap the dock.
I curl like a comma in my sun lounger and watch
my possessive pronouns splash their dangling participles.

Damnait Monaghan

Incarnation

Are majestic rivers disappointed in their deltas?
Slackmouthed, open-yawning, they swallow the ocean,
Their gentle pools, lulling, lapping, shimmer in dappled afternoon-light.

While upstream they are magnificent, fierce flowing,
White water-falling into rainbows,
Roaring, trembling, tumbling, dancing, life-giving, breath-taking.

One day a heron, his prehistoric eye catches us from the shallows
For a moment we are in the Jurassic, the sick chill of a pterosaur overhead,
We are the shimmering, scurrying prey.

Do rivers dream of reincarnation?
Their offspring regenerated, softly fall in sunlight,
Echo their own rainbows, massive, transcendent.

Claire Lewis



Eerie Grave

Final check, all equipment on, my heart is pounding with anticipation. I am ready to explore a famously inaccessible site where World War II remains are exceptionally well preserved. As I progress slowly, it suddenly emerges from the murk like a giant ghost structure, hurt and ripped at its core. The sight sends shivers down my spine and makes my imagination run wild.

Settling my breath, I fondly remember listening to my grandmother's wartime stories. How she had to shelter in strangers' basements during blasts of air raid sirens while pregnant. How my grandfather eventually sent his family away to the country in the hope of keeping them safe. I remember a picture of my toddling mother wearing very worn homemade shoes because there were none to buy. It used to fascinate me even though I had no comprehension of the fear, anger and despair my grandparents must have experienced.

Today, it all sinks in. Entering the first hall, the piles of boxes of ammunition make me think of my great uncle Joseph who used to hide weapons for the resistance in his church. Until today his had just been another story I heard. The white markings on the crates eerily bring his courage to life in my heart. I can feel his unwavering dedication to his/our people's right to freedom.

I then spot the motorbikes, they are all stacked in rows of six or eight. Their frames have turned from their original army green paintwork into orangey-red rust. Every detail, from the coloured electric cables around the batteries to the tires, the saddles and the handlebars, are so intact that I can easily imagine their soldier riders speeding through country lanes aiming to transfer intelligence to the regiments on the front lines.

Yet these motorbikes were never used, as this cargo of army supplies never reached its destination. It was bombarded by German pilots only thirty miles from its journey's end.

It takes my mind, my spirit, my breath away to see these remains of history right in my face immersed in a sea of silence. Breathe, breathe, remember thirty metres under you cannot afford to hold your breath.

My eyes catch a carefree group of giant blue and yellow angelfish. As I float weightlessly, integrating the reality of war, they lift my heart. With some help from Mother Nature they have made this deathly shipwreck a magical space.

Claire Gaudry





Beauty and the Beast

It never occurred to me, not even once, that it would be the last time I would see her. Her contagious laughter, her adoring look and above all her being made of love, surrounded by love. She exhaled love. Not one mean word ever spoken. Not even when those about her were yelling at her. I failed to understand her composure at times like that. She remained calm. Took deep breaths and sat on her favourite rocking chair, rocking the yelling away. There was a faraway look on her angelic face which always mesmerised me. It was like she detached herself from all the yelling and admonishing and transported her mind to a peaceful place. When all the yelling had ended, she would adjust her intricately embroidered shawl, cough a little with her gaze returning to her angry, red-as-a-beetroot-faced husband. She would stop rocking the chair and gradually slide forwards to stand up and face him. Her slow rise from the chair always reminded me of a deer rising from the ashes, for how could anyone not see what the yelling had done to her? Her soul had escaped the scathing remarks and taunts only to return with more valour and resilience this time. Her face betrayed none of the anguish she suffered at these frequent episodes.

Agha jee, her husband, stormed out of the room after realising the futility of his recent outburst. He felt he was losing control. Why doesn't she react? How can she be so calm? I am sure she's pretending. No, she can't be pretending. Her face said it all. For a split second he felt ashamed of himself. How could this woman make him feel ashamed? She is a female. A female has no brain, his father's voice echoed. He shook his head to clear his mind. His conscience which had made him ashamed a minute ago disappeared into the thick fog of his ego, the ego which had been nurtured by a male chauvinistic father and an overbearing mother. Agha jee's story reminded me of a story in my English Literature class.

*In Greek mythology, Narcissus (/nɑːrˈsɪsəs/; Greek: Νάρκισσος, Nárkissos) was a hunter from Thespieae in Boeotia who was known for his beauty. He was the son of the river god Cephissus and nymph Liriope.[1] He was proud, in that he disdained those who loved him. Nemesis noticed this behavior and attracted Narcissus to a pool, where he saw his own reflection in the water and fell in love with it, not realizing it was merely an image. Unable to leave the beauty of his reflection, Narcissus lost his will to live. He stared at his reflection until he died. Narcissus is the origin of the term narcissism, a fixation with oneself and one's physical appearance or public perception.**

Except in this case, Agha jee was not at all handsome by the standards of Asian society. Bibi and he reminded me of Beauty and the beast, except the beast wasn't ready to transform into a placid and handsome young man! Upon exit from the room where he had been admonishing Bibi in his most thunderous and echoing voice he gathered his wits about him and left the house. I was surprised that Bibi hadn't died of a heart attack. I suffered palpitations most times during and after hearing his voice.

Bibi came out of the room, elegant as ever. Wearing her long white dress and shawl she was a vision of grace. Her head held proud and tall above a beautiful slender neck, she seemed determined not to let the goings on in the study affect the atmosphere in the house. She breathed a sigh of relief to see me and called me with her eyes to come forward. I saw a hundred stories in those eyes, which had become not just a mirror of her soul, but a well of untold sufferings, a mine of heartaches and unerupted volcanoes.

Reem Khan

*Citation: Wikipedia contributors. "Narcissus (mythology)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 30 May. 2018. Web. 6 Jun. 2018.



Beautiful

“I wish I was beautiful,” she pouted, twirling her Barbie doll in her hand. “Like you.”

When she woke up the next morning, there was no flab on her thighs. Long, long legs, feet arched. She dashed out of bed and braked in front of the mirror. Long golden hair dazzled her eyes. Her waist, thin and bendable like a reed. She froze, ecstatic at the change, and her smile stayed frozen.

Barbie girl tip-toed out of her bedroom, hungry from the smell of sausages and baked beans in her mother’s kitchen. But she stopped. She couldn’t eat that stuff. It wasn’t good for her. She sucked in her breath to make her waist tinier and tottered out of the house. She needed to buy the right clothes. Her joggers wouldn’t do anymore. Get smart. Look sexy before her friends discovered this dream girl. Her cheeks ached now from the constant smile, but she couldn’t take it off. Her feet hurt from being constantly on tip-toe, but she couldn’t flatten them. Shop, shop, shop. Oh all that pain was so worth it. Guys were giving her the look. Her arms were overflowing with shopping bags.

Her friends met her at the front of the mall. Their jaws dropped. They were happy for her, so she wanted to believe. They stopped for a frappuccino. She still had her frozen smile on. That gorgeous guy in the café asked for her number. She shook her golden mane and smiled her smile.

It was all very well, but she couldn’t speak. Damn, her back was breaking, arched the way it was. She just kept smiling. But she wanted to scream. So she played up a little. Could someone just give her feet a rub? Could they massage her back? They stared at her, incredulously. What seriously, woman? They laughed and then ignored her. They were going to a movie later. They didn’t ask her. When she followed them anyway, with her shopping bags and big blonde hair, they chucked her in the bin.

Hello, called a weary voice in the murky darkness. It’s nice to have company at last.



She looked around, amidst the candy wrappers and rotting banana peels. And there she was, wretched and broken. Her blue top in tatters, the red bow askew. Her yellow skirt stained.

What happened to you? She asked.

I cheated on seven boyfriends, she said. They threw me out. Be careful what you wish for.

Barbie girl sighed and fished out a dress from her shopping bag. You’ll need this for when the bin man comes, she said. Maybe he will rescue us from this shit.

Snow White sighed. Be careful what you wish for.

Susmita Bhattacharya

Lavender Farm

No lavender flowers yet, but the bees, busy, feast elsewhere
Puff ball globes, a sea of purple planets,
each its own small world, tended by a bee goddess
She hums, drinks deeply of the nectar of life
This one alium flower, to see it as the bee sees,
a thousand tiny goblets: nectar-drunk
she labours on,
woozily humming her drinking song

Swallows sweep, turn with a flick, falling
into the cornflower blue
they lift me in their wake, a clearer vision,
an unencumbered perspective
Now I can see the wood despite the trees,
I ride the thermals, dipping
low, skimming crystal lakes, spiralling
into the sun

Icarus got greedy, flew too high, but who wouldn't be
greedy, to drink deeply of this world, this early summer breeze,
which ruffles my hair, as it ruffles the feathers of this sparrow
Cockily attentive, rakish
in his bandit mask,
he struts ever closer to our bench, tilted head soliciting
our last crumbs as we solicit
the last morsels of this day

Claire Lewis

“Say it, no ideas but in things –
nothing but the blank faces of
the houses and cylindrical trees
bent, forked by preconception
and accident – split, furrowed,
creased, mottled, stained – secret
– into the body of the light!”

William Carlos Williams

In October 2017 I asked the
women writers to bring in
random objects from home,
and we used them as prompts.
They ranged from the everyday
– a whisk, a business card – to
the slightly macabre – a sheep's
skull. The following two pieces,
Betty and *Rose*, are among my
favourites from that workshop.



Betty

I always carry a whisk in my bag. You never know when you might need to add some air to a situation, some levity, some fluff. I've used it to whip the children into a frenzy. After all, everything is better with a bit of batter.

You never know when you might need to play an impromptu concert, to thwang and whack a few notes to some old harmony. Music can soothe the savage breast. Their slumber disrupted could well lead to incident. To a popping or bursting or the dreaded sag.

I forgot it once, just once. And do you know a whole group of school children nearly lost their lives in a sea of unwhipped cream? Where did my jokes get me then? Dripping wet with not a pudding in sight. We had to haul them out on strings of taffy that they ate as they climbed, and the bill from the nearby sweet shop was absolutely staggering. Not to mention the stomach aches, which can't properly be described save by the prodigious exits made. To say I learned my lesson, well I did.

So, I never leave home without it. My whisk, my wit, my way of keeping the bitter demons at bay. All with the use of a bit of butter and a strong wrist.

Clare Golding

Rose

“The bloody thing. It's not crowing, it's singing. Song of my failure, my shame, my...Oh come on! It's metal, blue, orange, diarrhea-yellow, it has no voice, no guts no...It is singing and that yellow silver blade sharp beak is pointed at me waiting to pierce...You're not listening, it has no guts and no feathers, it is not an actual bona fide chicken, you never feed it do you? Listen, that vibration, that's its song, my shame, my failure... Touch it and you'll see, it is only a metal chicken...No! That blue metal will freeze my fingers like Vladivostok ice...Go on, touch it...No! I must destroy it.”

No one knows her. The woman who lives in the house with the grubby nets, the metal chicken in the window. If you see her out she won't make eye contact with you. She keeps close to walls as she goes along, hand up to her mouth, biting already well bitten fingernails. She is never seen with anyone but she has company, oh yes, she has; the rational voice that keeps her more or less level, that she even listens to in quiet moments.

She does have one friend. Carol. But she feels that for Carol she has become a project - her I Must Help Rose project. The project is well meaning but misguided; none of the advice or suggestions stemming from it are anything like what Rose needs. Because Rose has her own plans for the future. Vague but definite. First though she must get rid of it.

It was the last thing she ever received from Aunt Vi - the inexcusable excuse for a mother after her, Rose's, own mother, disappeared with a brush salesman from Crewe, promising to come back for her baby. She never did. Aunt Vi took on the obligation - and never let Rose forget it. In the last years of her life there had been a series of odd gifts - apologies from or permanent reminders of put upon Aunt Vi - including the metal chicken.

If the chicken goes then a whole new life opens up. Rose knows this. Her companion - Rational Voice - thinks so too. No doubt Carol would take it away if she asked - finally a useful part of the project. But Rational Voice assures her that will not do. She, Rose, must get up the courage to touch it.

Rhiannon Hopkins



Lily – A Reflection

“I get so lonely – no one comes to see me any more,” Lily complains into the telephone. “I wish you lived nearer.” The elderly woman with the anxious, wavering voice that sounds like tears sits waiting each day for someone to call and, as our conversation begins, I feel the burden of her longing.

Not so many years ago, Lily was a joyful spirit, and a generous one, her door always open to the opportunity to chat, to lend a hand or to console. She was a friend to all, the neighbour on whom everyone relied. I turned to her in the confusion of adolescence, calling once a week from a telephone box in the village where I lived, to tell her of the battles being fought with my parents, and of my pain and anger. I knew she would listen without judging me, and when I talked to her I always felt safe. On long summer holidays, I would cycle the fifteen miles to the haven of Lily’s cottage and its beautiful garden, abundant on those warm days with brightly coloured delphiniums and hollyhocks, and smelling always, even as I recall it now from my memory, of sweet peas, roses and lavender. As soon as I clicked open the catch on the gate, I would feel that sense of calm.

These days I call Lily from my home three hundred miles away. As I reach my own middle years, I am aware of her growing isolation, and I realise that it is my turn to do the listening. Occasionally as we talk, I’ll catch a glimpse of her energy and lively wit, once so vivid and yet fading now like the colours in an old photograph. “I can’t bear being heaved onto that minibus with all the other old dears,” she confides one day, “left in some grim café to talk about nothing all morning when there’s so much else I could be doing.” And I imagine them, these women and men, seated passively around formica tables in unsympathetic towns up and down the country, sipping in sorrowful unison as they search for the words that will recapture their rich life histories and enable them to share some conversation more fulfilling than the worn-out lament of weariness and frailty. How cruel and disrespectful old age can be.

Two summers ago, I made the long journey back to the home of my childhood. I wanted to see Lily, and I asked my brother if he would visit her with me. “I’m not sure,” he hesitated initially, fearful of a forgetfulness he had noticed, but he came in the end, bringing with him his six-year-old son, who embraced Lily with his smiles and reawakened her sense of fun, along with the songs and colourful stories of her childhood. He was neither fazed by her lapses in memory nor tied by rehearsed

conversational conventions. “What’s it like to be ninety?” he asked. With a wink, she turned his question upside down: “What’s it like to be six?” They both laughed and, smiling, he took her hand in his.

Increasingly now, though, there are days when Lily finds it hard to follow a conversation. She always remembers that I live a long way away, but often the name of the town will elude her. Nor can she always recall, I realise, the names of my children. Usually we can fill in the gaps together, and the chat will begin to flow again. On the days when remembering is particularly difficult for her, I try to concentrate on smaller things, one at a time. “Have you been outside today, Auntie?” I will ask her, or “Is the sun shining down there?” Such easy questions for me to pose, and yet each reply requires new effort on her part. Still, though I miss the days when the words used to come so easily to us, I am grateful for each conversation we share.

Today is one of the more difficult days, and the uncharacteristic sadness in Lily’s voice catches me by surprise. I have been looking out of the window as we talk, and my garden supplies a welcome distraction. I tell her about our family of hedgehogs, and the bold cat I saw recently chasing a fox across the lawn. She laughs, and I venture, “Auntie, do you remember those summers when I used to cycle over and visit you?” The smile is still there in her voice as she recalls the long-ago memory and replies, “I always used to wonder how you managed to cycle so far in one day!” Heartened, I suggest, “Perhaps you could sit in your garden for a while this afternoon. You’ve always loved it so much.” But then I sense the distress in her voice as she asks me once again where I am living, and the reality of her deepening confusion, and a future that we both fear breaks abruptly into the safety of our precious, shared past. I am holding back tears as she utters a resigned, “There’s nothing really to live for any more.”

I feel inadequate and clumsy as I draw in my breath and try to steer Lily away from this thought, too sad for me to bear. In a light-hearted tone, that we both know fails to ring true, I say, “We were talking about the garden, Auntie. Do you think you will grow your sweet peas this year?” She in turn answers me cheerfully enough, but I sense that a new reality, and one that I do not want to acknowledge, has insinuated itself into our conversation and our consciousness. Her wonderful zest for life is leaving her, along with many of the friends and neighbours with whom she has shared that life for all these years. Lily, who always gave her time and company so





freely, has realised that, as her mind and memory fail her, loneliness and anxiety threaten to become her only regular companions. Her ability to keep on going in her always-cheerful way is beginning to concede to the physical inertia inflicted on her by old age, and in her voice, where before there was always good-humoured determination, I now hear uncertainty, frustration and, occasionally, despair.

The elderly woman with the silver-blue eyes and paper-thin skin sits waiting each day for someone to call and, as our conversation ends, I feel the burden of her sorrow. "I'll call you again next week, Auntie," I say. "And I will come and see you soon, I promise." Then I add, "I love you, Lily," in the hope that these words at least will stay and keep her company.

Madeleine O'Beirne

Lloyd

L is for Lloyd
L is for laughter
O is for outstanding
Y is for young
D is for a dear friend

G is for great person
R is for rare
E is for entertaining
E is for everlasting memory
N is for never giving up.

This poem is about everything that Lloyd Green was.
He was a friend of mine who died.
I miss him but he is in my heart for ever.
In loving memory of Lloyd Green.

Heidi Jones

Purity

Looking back to yesteryears,
I feel my heart's aching spears.
When life was simple and easy,
no need for cunning and sleazy.
How intention was pure and white,
not tainted by bile and spite.
How humans weaved bonds with love,
irrespective of which clan or cove.
Neighbours spoke the language of humanity,
and didn't sneer at each other behind vanity.
Life for children was outside play,
not sat indoors with a robotic display.
Everybody shared the pain and sorrow,
selfishness and vice hadn't blinded the morrow.

The skies were clear blue and the sun shone,
children played on the sandy beaches alone.
My wish for the years to come
is to see the safety and harmony return,
where life means living every moment,
breathing the air so pure and potent.

Reem Khan

For our workshop on Secrets and Lies, I cribbed an old icebreaker from my former life in the corporate world. Each person offers 3 'facts' about themselves, one of which should be a lie. The game is that the others have to guess which.

In our version, the women each pooled their 'facts' into the centre and chose somebody else's statement at random to use as the opening line to a piece of writing. Some proved to be poignant, as in *Absence*, some wild and engaging (*I Used To Be*), and others used a seemingly banal statement ("I hate celery") as the jumping off point to a fuller story.



Absence

My father left when I was two. Mum says I can't possibly remember it, but I do. Well, not exactly. I mean, I don't remember what happened, of course, more the lack of him.

The empty chair. His chair. His slowly dissolving impression in its cushion. The extra space in the shoe cupboard. The absence of aftershave and cigarette smoke in the smell of home.

I remember the shift in the air. It became somehow thinner and lighter, easier to breathe in. Or at least during the day it did, anyway.

And I never needed to wonder who was stumbling to me through the dark when I woke at night and lay there, choking on fear that was thick as dust.

Cate Holness

I Used to Be

-1-

I used to be a singer in a band. I thought I was Debbie Harry. Please don't tell anyone – if you do I'll have to kill you – but I even tried the bin bag look once. I will be honest. I didn't rock it. And it fell apart after ten minutes anyway. I think Debbie must have used heavy duty bin bags, not Tesco's value range.

I gave up singing with the advent of Facebook and smartphones. I found that once anyone could easily create and upload a video clip of me, which my friends gleefully did with horrible regularity, I could no longer maintain my fiction that Debbie and I were separated at birth.

I don't miss it though. I am an optimist so I took the chance to retrain, and now I am a drummer. Remember Stewart Copeland? The Police? Well, think of him a bit shorter, longer hair, boobies, banging the drums with gusto. That's me, that is. I used to be a singer in a band, but now I'm a drummer. And I rock it!

-2-

I used to be a Bulgarian dancer. I know I said last time that I used to be a singer in a band, but that wasn't true. I made it up. I made up the bit about being a drummer too. Does that surprise you? But I did used to be a Bulgarian dancer.

Oh heck, I was good at it. It involved plenty of belly wiggling and pretending to be in a trance and making shapes with my hands. I was the lead dancer because of my peculiar talent of being able to rock my head from side to side whilst keeping my chin parallel to the floor. Not everyone can do that you know. Sometimes I'd flare my nostrils too, but I don't suppose the audience really noticed - I've only got a little nose.

I had to give it up because of the trauma it caused me when my skirt caught fire. Whoosh, it went up like... well, like a chiffon skirt on fire. It wasn't my fault. The waiter normally blew the candles out before the finale, but this time he'd left one burning and my skirt caught it as I spun across the table top. It could have happened to anyone, so I didn't blame him. His boyfriend had just dumped him quite publicly, in the middle of John Lewis of all places, so his mind wasn't on the job.



I can't hear Bulgarian music now without feeling the flames on my legs and the lumps of ice from the water jug smacking into them like glass. And the worst thing of all was that I'd got a bit behind with my washing and had my Bridget Jones knickers on and everyone, yes everyone, saw them. So that is why I say that I used to be a Bulgarian dancer. It isn't something I do anymore. I don't dance on table tops now either. At least, not without checking that the candles are blown out first.

-3-

I used to be a victim. I know I said I used to be a singer in a band, and a drummer, and a Bulgarian dancer. I made it up. Does that surprise you? But I did used to be a victim.

I didn't do it deliberately. I was brought up to be polite and pleasant. That's what I do. I became a victim by accident. And I wore bin bags, banged drums, and flared my nostrils whilst dancing, so they say (and as my nostrils are very small and won't show up on the video clips even if I did flare them, who is to say what is true and what is false). But I'm not a victim anymore, and that's the truth.

Once I stopped being a victim I became a survivor. It's a bit like being a Bulgarian dancer, you've never heard of it before and you don't know how it works but somehow you find yourself being it. It's a bit of a ball-ache being a survivor, so after a while you want to go on to something new. And if you've already been a singer, a drummer, and a Bulgarian dancer, what next?

Well. My friend Sue tells me that survivors are thrivers. And I've tried everything else, so what the hell, it can't be worse than your skirt catching fire and showing off your Bridget Jones knickers, can it?

Sarah E Helliwell

Celery

I hate celery. I'm annoyed about hating it, since I generally pride myself on being an unfussy eater. But really, what's the point of it? It's like corrugated cardboard. It looks as though it should taste of nothing, but in reality it's revolting, and the worst thing is that its appearance does nothing to warn you of this. It's the disguise I resent the most. At least porridge, the only other thing I won't eat, *looks* like something you don't want to put in your mouth.

It was the third date. Everyone knows the third date is The One, the pivotal moment. We agreed I would go to his flat and he would cook, and we both pretended I would get a taxi home (my toothbrush and spare pants were, of course, stashed in my bag). The smells from the kitchen were divine. Onions, garlic and white wine. He was cooking risotto, and as I watched him stirring in the butter and cheese at the final stages, generous, indulgent handfuls of parmesan, I thought, *I like this guy*.

He lit candles. We sat down and tucked in. I smiled at him as I brought the fork to my mouth.

And that's when I saw it.

You can't pick celery out of risotto.

I've trained myself to eat olives, and raisins. But I won't do that for celery. Celery doesn't deserve my time and effort.

I ate the risotto, I felt it was only polite. But there was no fourth date.

Joanna Barnard



Ankles

The day cousin Liz told me I had fat ankles I started hating myself. I was ten and she was fifteen. And she had kissed every boy on her street.

There she was, balancing perfectly in her stilettos, her honey tanned legs glowing in the soft evening light. She shimmered, all gold and white and pink while I took in her loveliness. My eyes swept from the swell of her bosom to the curve of her hips, down the length of her legs, stopping to look at the beauty of those perfect ankles.

Her words buzzed around me like wasps, stinging me with their cruelty. Always the subject of ridicule: the shape of my body, the heaviness of my walk. I watched her giggle with the others, the bunch of flowers that she clutched in her slender hands. Her knuckles white and strained. But I smiled. It was okay. It really was. She didn't matter anymore.

The music began and my father linked his arm through mine. We walked slowly, passing friends and family, who looked at us through teary eyes and smiled. I felt her presence behind me, following me. This was my moment. The girl who always fell behind. The butt of all jokes. But today, I was the one walking down the aisle, while cousin Liz hung behind, perfect in her perfectness. Only a twitch of envy marring that perfect face.

Susmita Bhattacharya



That Woman (And So Much More)

I'm not that woman anymore,
that crumpled heap on Man A's floor,
whose flowers and leaves and very roots
he trampled with those walking boots.
I'm not that woman anymore,
who stood so firmly at the door,
and unspun all of Man B's lies
which tumbled from his lips and eyes.
I'm not that woman anymore,
who walked so sadly on the shore,
trying to make some sense of life,
why would a man so treat his wife?
I'm not that woman, not at all,
just see me standing oh so tall,
and listen to the song I sing,
of life and love and wing-walking!
I'm not that woman anymore,
not at their door, nor on their floor,
I'm nowhere where they know to go,
I'm home safe now, it's time to grow.
I'm not that woman anymore.
I'm so much more, yes so much more.

Sarah E Helliwell



When we spent a workshop looking at character, back in early 2017, one of the things we explored was how characters can say one thing and mean another, and how we represent this in dialogue. We discussed the spaces in between what's being said; and I set the groups the challenge of writing a piece that was entirely dialogue, with the following brief: there are two characters. One of them is trying to tell the other something important, and the other is doing something else (but you can't describe directly what they are doing). Dialogue only, remember. We had fun with this and the following two pieces, *Cross Purposes* and *Teaching Lies*, came from this exercise.

Cross Purposes

The clock announces midday with a soft click as the hands move into alignment at the turn of the hour. But no one takes any notice.

'I saw Henry down the pub last night.'

'Mmmm? These potatoes are no good, half of 'em are green. I'm not buying any more from that shop.'

'Henry, I saw him last night and we had — quite a talk. He was in town on Friday evening, been to a meeting of one of them committees he's on.'

'Henry and committees, bit like fish and chips, innit? Maybe they like 'em green.'

'What?'

'The Asians who run the mini mart, maybe they eat green spuds. Maybe Asians like 'em that way, that's why they sell them. I shan't be buying any more I can tell you that.'

'Are you listening to me?'

'Of course I am. Henry was down the pub last night banging on about one of his committees. What's it for this time?'

'No, you're missing the point', he said.

'Oooh, do you remember when he tried to get that neighbourhood watch scheme started? Bustling about with his little clipboard like he was so important.'

'He had something important to say about *Friday evening* and it was bummer all to do with a committee.'

'Yeah, it's all committee this committee that with him. I'm surprised you didn't nod off. Now, broccoli or carrots? There's some green beans in the freezer if you'd rather.'

'Whatever you like, I ain't that hungry.'

'Don't get shirty with me! What's up with you?'

'Henry.'



‘What about him? Will you get to the bloody point?’

‘Henry was in town...’

‘Never mind. I need to get the chicken in the oven. Tell me later.’

‘...Friday night when you said you were having a girls’ night in with Stella because her old man’s working away again. Henry was in town on his way home from his meeting and he saw you — and who you were with.’

‘Ah.’

The clock finally gets its voice heard as it ticks into a sudden silence.

Rhiannon Hopkins

Teaching Lies

Where’s your homework?

Forgot it.

I’m sorry?

I forgot it. Miss.

Where is it then?

Um, it’s at home. I left it there. I forgot it. At home.

At home. So you did the homework then?

Yeah. Of course.

Both sheets?

Yeah, both sheets. I left it in my room. They’re like on my desk. I did them last night. Swear down.

No need to swear thank you. Fine. You need to bring it to me tomorrow.

First thing. Understand?

Ok Miss. I will. Promise.

So. If you’ve done it, you can answer me this: what’s a simile?

A simile?

Yes, a simile.

A simile’s a thing innit. A descriptive thing. You know.

Ah yes. Can you give me an example?

Like the ones on the sheet? Ah, Miss. I know them. Miss, did you see I used them in my test?

Your test?

That one we done last week. I used some then. That was good wasn’t it?

Um, I think so. What I remember. I’ve marked a lot.

Miss, do you think I’ll get a pass?

A pass?

Yeah in the test?

Ah a pass.

Yeah, do you reckon I’ve like passed?

I can’t give you the results yet.

But you have marked it Miss?

Yes of course. They’re on my desk. In the office.

Well, what did I get?

I can’t tell you that. You’ll have to wait to get your result with everyone else.

But do you think I did well?

Do you think you did well?



Well, it was hard but I wrote loads. A whole page. My hand well ached. I reckon that's good.
Very good.
So do you think I did good enough to pass?
Well we'll have to wait and see won't we? Quick now. No more questions.
You better get the bus.
Yep. I'm going. Can I get my test tomorrow Miss?
Off you go I said! And don't forget your homework.

Katie Isham

When we considered place and setting for the second time as a group, we took a slightly different approach, and focused on physical features of town and country, from tombstones to mountains. We then paired them with random verbs and emotions. Some enchanting pieces resulted from this, including, featured here, *The Waving Clocktower* and *The Relief of the Cenotaph*.



The Waving Clock Tower

The waving clock tower is comical and Disneyesque, its bright face grinning mischievously while its hands, white-gloved and unerringly cheerful, wave to passing shoppers. Children look up, their glowing faces filled with excitement at this unexpected pantomime. Some plant their feet firmly on the ground and resist parental efforts to draw them away to drearier pursuits.

I wonder what the waving clock tower does when the square has shaken off the chattering crowds and the city is silent. Do its hands drop heavily, on reluctant arms, to its sides? Perhaps it feels foolish standing there, still illuminated as though beneath a spotlight, awkwardly waiting for the next day's audience and worrying whether it will put on as good a show for them.

But I believe there are some for whom the clock tower performs a night-time role. I think I can see them waiting, in whispering anticipation, for the moment when its hands will stop waving and it will instead reach down to embrace them as they cling, lonely and shivering, to its solid base. It offers them unquestioning protection, and in the darkest hours it stands tall and resolute, perforating the threatening skies with its resounding chime.

When the dawn breaks it will announce to its charges, in gentler tones, that it is time for them to move on. They will rise obediently, tacitly acknowledging their gratitude for the shelter it has provided. They know that, as the city wakes, the waving clock tower must resume its daily routine, and it in turn appreciates their reluctance, like that of the children, to leave.

Madeleine O'Beirne

The Relief of the Cenotaph

She rises early, as she does on this day every year; she wants extra time for her 'daily ablutions', to borrow her husband's phrase. He learned it in the army and she likes to use it in his honour.

After a solitary breakfast (strong tea, an egg and brown toast scraped with butter), she chooses her outfit with care. The blouse is freshly ironed. She forgoes her worn trousers and steps carefully into a black skirt. Her gnarled fingers falter on the zip, but she perseveres. Keep calm and carry on, she remembers.

At the mirror in the narrow hall she steadies her trembling hand and paints on a smile with poppy red lipstick. She reaches up the sleeve of her best coat for a tissue and dabs at the spot where her hand slipped.

The street is quiet as she begins a slow shuffle up the hill. None of her neighbours are out in the bitter cold on this Sunday morning in November. She is the last of the old guard; it's all young people now. They never knew George. It wouldn't surprise her if they didn't know about the war either.

She reaches the crest of the hill and the cenotaph comes into view. George's name is engraved on the front, third from the top. She traces the letters with her gloved hand. Here George is remembered. Here he still exists. Here, and in her heart.

Damhnait Monaghan



1916

In a furnace, far from home, I lost a man I'd never known
knocked out of time, light snuffed, his widow alone,
kids in tow, shoes scuffed, spit and polish, aching hearts,
need a father, she a man. How far have we come since time marched
backwards, frozen in the veins, one hundred years,
and yet, she persevered, stiff upper lip, no tears.

Well what else did you do - workhouse or remarry.
Grief, untold, all comes out in the wash, a burden to carry
out to the line and hoist it high, gleaming white ghosts
of pants, and vests, nothing wasted, nothing lost.
His good trousers, wearing the boy, one day he'll wear them,
for now, he is her doomed youth, her anthem.

Claire Lewis

The Boneless Ones

The message reads: *Beware the Boneless Ones. They are coming.* The ink is faded to the colour of old blood. The shaky handwriting is hurried, the luxuriously thick paper yellowed, the edges torn. I had found it in my uncle's study, forbidden to children. Dust borrowed from his hundreds of books sparkled and clouded the air.

The Boneless Ones.

That's it. Nothing else.

The Boneless Ones.

The sound of footsteps on floorboards outside the study has me scurrying to the door. I can't be discovered here. Not ever, but especially not today. I wait, fingers outstretched to the doorknob. Dust that tastes of words hitchhikes my breath and tickles my throat. I bury my face in my arm to stifle my cough. The footsteps slow outside the door. I stretch my ears, hand over my mouth, fingers pressing into my cheek. Fear, as hard and bright as nails, scrapes my scalp and scores my conscience: *this would never have happened if you had just done as they said, but you thought you knew better.*

Go into his study and bring back a book. That was the dare and that was all I had intended to do. With my face screwed down into a tight smile, I had excused myself from among the black forest of legs and relatives' arms that reached out to me like an enchanted wood, stark against the golden sunlight from the French doors. On stealthy feet, watched by my cousin and older brother, I had climbed up the carpeted stairs, past the study door, to stare out of the window at the end. A sombre wall of chatter from downstairs pressed against my ears. I had knelt on the cushioned window seat and let my eyes play their game of focussing first on the naked trees beyond, then on the breath-laced window. Trees. Window. Trees. Window. Trees. My attention had been caught by my least favourite tree. Scarred and blackened by lightening, it was half dead, but grimly carried on existing. The few living branches that remained were deformed, twisted, grasping. I had never liked that tree ever since the night of that storm when, disorientated, I had clambered out of bed to find my mother for a hug, but instead had found myself staring at this tree's arms, black against the lightning-torn sky.



The sound of sliding gravel under the wheels of another car arriving for the wake had brought my attention back to my task. I glanced at the reflection of the landing behind me. It was empty, so I took my chance and crept to the study. The door had shut behind me with a soft click and the smell of stale words greeted me.

I had hovered with my back to the door, waiting for the butterflies in my tummy to slow down. Why do they call them butterflies when it feels more like the slither of snake against snake? When I was sure that no-one knew where I was, I tiptoed to the shelves. They ranged from floor to cobwebbed ceiling. *Bring back a book*, but which should I choose? My fingers reached out of their own accord and stroked a red leather spine, traced the embossed lettering. Not that one; too big. I remember deciding it had to be one I could hide under my top. I scanned the shelves for something small and light, but there wasn't much that I was tall enough to get to. *Runt*. That was what my brother called me. The smallest and weakest of the family pack.

What had I done next? I remember thinking that I should check Uncle's desk, that perhaps there was a smallish book there that I could take. The desk was bigger than my bed. Heavy and dark, it scowled at me, dared me to approach. I accepted its challenge, imagining that I was an explorer, a pirate, a highwayman. Someone braver than me, stronger than me. I remember touching the desk, caressing its top.

My hand shook with excitement and fear as I opened the top drawer. It dragged on its runners and whimpered like an abandoned cub. It was empty except for a book. Black and leather-bound, its pages had gold edges and smelt of years and damp. I don't remember what happened next. One moment, my fingers were trying to pick up the book, graze its face, and the next, I had my back against the wall with panic heaving my breath. The snakes were back, writhing in my tummy, fangs out, spitting taunts at my rattling heart. Dust, or something darker, burned the back of my throat and my hand was crushing yellowed paper with torn edges.

Now, I wait at the door handle, ear pressed against wood. I wait until the snakes have calmed and then turn the handle, pull the door and tumble out onto the landing, with my shaking hands hugged in to my chest. The door swings shut behind me, the click of its latch a smug reminder that I have done wrong.

My ragged memory of the last minutes clutches at my conscience. I glance back at the window. My least favourite tree beckons through the gloom of dusk. I frown. How long was I in there for? My feet tread a sullen path to the stairs while I try to work out what it is that has changed. At first I think the silence is because someone is giving a eulogy. Eulogy. I remember that word from the order of service. I let it roll over my tongue and wonder again that its roundness sounds more like something related to sheep instead of a lament for the dead. I taste its sound again and again and gradually it changes on my tongue. Eulogy. You-ology. The study of you. You-logy. Logic. The reason of you. No. That's not what is happening here. The house is too quiet. There is no hint of words or movement. No roomful of people waits for me downstairs.

My fingers clutch the message so hard I can almost feel its words become part of me and claw their way to the front of my brain to squat like toads. *Beware the Boneless Ones. They are coming.* Toads croak and snakes writhe and coil as I make my way softly downstairs. Fear sizzles on my skin and pulls every hair to attention. My breath becomes as ragged as my memory as I reach the door to the wake. It is ajar. I try to believe that I will find a collective joke of hushed, hiding relatives on the other side. It is a ridiculous idea and the toads block its path, croaking their message. *Beware the Boneless Ones.*

I slide through the doorway. The room is empty. The hungry fire has hushed to embers. Half-full plates litter the tables and the floor. Shadows lengthen and fret at the edges of the glow from the fire and table lamps. A waft of air moves the curtain in a fluttering call and I am suddenly eager for the outside air. My unsteady legs take me to the doors. A sparseness of crows feeds on the lawn. No, not sparseness. What was that word my uncle told me? The word for a group of crows? Murder. A murder of crows. They are appropriately dressed for today. Their black feathers absorb the light from the setting sun. They are what my grandmother would call insolent. I watch as they pull worm after worm with their arrogant beaks. The closest one stares at me like an equal. It stalks towards me and I back away. Away from the crow. Away from the house. The crow pauses then stalks again. I turn and try not to run. I am an explorer, a pirate, a highwayman. They do not run in fear. They are brave. I am brave. The crow gives a loud caw of triumph and I remember that I am just a runt.



Then, the tears come, flavoured with fear and anger, spiced with guilt.
They blind me and my legs carry me on until a tree trunk with a smooth,
scorched scar confronts me. I gulp the night air and force myself to look
up at my least favourite tree. I have never been this close to it before.
From the house, it glowers, its roots claw the ground and repel me. Here, it
welcomes me like an aged cousin. I find myself burying my face in its scar
and throwing my arms around its trunk. I feel it pull me in, comforting
me, absorbing me.

A crow pecks at tattered yellow paper nestled among roots.

Beware the Boneless Ones. We are here.

Cate Holness

Fitting

Look at them! They're a smug fit aren't they, nice round pegs in a nice
round life,
snug in their belonging, Mr Average and his wife

I had that once or twice, you know, or thought I did, a veneer, if you like
Of small connections, easy laughs, of matching wavelengths, matching
views
Of loud triumphant – Yes me toos! – but underneath the artifice
What is real? What persists?

Life changes, twists and morphs itself, to tortured vistas, savage streets
And so I find myself, outside – I'm looking, always looking in
A stranger in a hostile town... my money is no good here now,
my dialect it marks me out,
I feel their eyes, their hollow grins

Their customs and their words confuse me, their tightly drawn flock
curtains bruise me
invisible, my breath betrays me – it steams the windows of their lives
I want to write, I want to scream – I once was you
I once had dreams, but my words contrive
to melt away, discarded sighs
they pool, congealed

Claire Lewis





We may not always like to admit it, but a lot of writing is theft (well, borrowing). One day we used song lyrics as prompts, titles or first lines, to jump off from into stories that in many cases bore no relation to the original work, just as in the following piece, which takes its title from a line from a Manic Street Preachers song.

What Price Now For A Shallow Piece Of Dignity?

He looked like a film star, and it was absolutely love at first sight when she saw him waiting outside the cinema. Even now, all these years later, he was still the best-looking man she knew. He liked things to be clean and orderly and he took care of himself – there was no doubt about that. Each night he ran a bath and filled it to the brim with scalding hot water scented with Radox. After steaming and luxuriating in its warm indulgence, he would shout down the stairs for her to come up to use the now tepid water. There was to be no waste in this house. The treat of having indoor hot water was still a novelty, but two baths meant double payment. She'd rather share and keep the cost down; she was the one who paid the bills. So, every night, she let him go first, with his excessive use of Hollywood style bubble bath foam. She had the leftover, lukewarm, flat, grey water, with his scum floating on top and around the edges of the tub. She didn't take long to wash – a quick scrub before cleaning the bath. He didn't like to be kept waiting for his tea.

Mary Frisby

Frayed Ties Still Bind

The Child:

Sits in the marble palace of Constanza the Magnificent constructed from hay bales, griffins guarding the door.

The Mother:

Remembers London and the life before this village where she will always be an incomer. The voices tell her: “you made a mistake marrying a man who works the land, who loves the land.” “Sod off, I’m happy,” she tells them, but her words lack conviction.

And the day melds into evening.

In the kitchen the child sits at the old card table that does service for a kitchen table. Her crayons and colouring book are spread across the red chenille cloth. The mother is making pastry on the pull-down flap of the red and white cabinet, using an empty milk bottle for a rolling pin, which she prefers to the wooden pin that sits in a drawer unused. When the child holds up the finished picture for approval, she gives a brief answer and an instruction to clear the table because dinner won’t be long. This girl child frightens her. She is a dreamer, curious, a seeker with a thirst for knowledge. She would run into the world eager to explore because she does not know how unsafe the world is for a woman. She must be protected. She must be taught to be careful, keep her knees together, her eyes down and leave all her questions unspoken. That is the only safe way for a woman to be.

The child has embarked on the Hispaniola with Squire Trelawny, Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver. The mother turns down the gas under a pan of cabbage, looking into that corner of her mind where even her husband has never been. The place the voices originate from. A dark place full of shadows that defy interpretation. She is afraid that one day she will live there.

The child turns a page, does not look up. The mother takes plates from the cabinet, cutlery from a drawer; afraid of her daughter and afraid for her daughter. She must be protected, above all, from her own mother who will contaminate this precious, beloved daughter if she allows her to come too close.

Rhiannon Hopkins

How do we approach writing about the body? What inspiration can be found not only in outward appearances but in the organs and internal systems that keep us ticking over? When we considered all things bodily, each woman was given a random body part (on a piece of paper!) – an ear, a liver, a lung – and asked to write about it, in as original a way as possible.

It can be difficult not to fall into sentimental cliché, with sparkling eyes and beating hearts in particular, but I loved Madeleine’s *The Life of the Heart*, the first draft of which moved many of us in the workshop to tears.



The Life Of The Heart

As January welcomes in the new year and a new growing season, I am looking out of the kitchen window and thinking about digging over my garden. The soil is looking better than it did when I first moved here. It's what the old fellows on the allotments back in Yorkshire would have called "in good heart". That's an interesting expression, and one that I have been pondering for a few moments now. The heart is as vital to the earth as it is to our own lives as we exist upon it, and as I stand here I remember that complications in the workings of the heart have touched my life significantly on two occasions. I am reminded also that the love contained within the heart helped me to know what to do on the occasion when it most mattered.

ONE

When I was five my sister, who was a year older than me, needed to go into hospital so that, my parents told me, the doctors could have a look at her heart. There was, they said, a hole in it, and advances in medicine meant that they would be able to examine it and, if necessary, repair it by surgery.

"What does a hole in the heart really mean?" quizzed my five-year-old brain. "It's not the same as a broken heart, is it?" I understood that my sister's heart had to work twice as hard as mine to pump the blood and the oxygen round her body, and that this, my father explained to me, was why she couldn't run around like I could when we played together – and why her face and hands seemed to me to be tinged with blue.

The night before my sister went into hospital, I watched as her little bag was packed. "Don't forget, you'll need your teddy!" I reminded her. I hugged her as she took it from me, smiled and added it to the book she had ready for my father to read to her when the operation was over.

Living with my sister, in those earliest years of my life, taught me much about the life of the heart, and about its figurative association with loving. I knew (and I like to think I told her this) that I loved her more than anything in the world, that I hoped we would always be together and that I would miss her with all my heart while she was away.

The day of the operation passed slowly. At the house of a kind neighbour I waited and waited but, even when my parents came home from the hospital the following morning, my sister did not come with them. She

would never come home. "I was reading to her," my father said calmly, holding back his tears so that I would be able to hear the most important words, "and she died peacefully in my arms. The doctor did everything he could." As I sobbed, he explained, "We had to try it, because it would have made all the difference to her life, and perhaps one day in the future they'll be able to carry out these operations as a matter of routine."

That day, 9th March 1967, my own heart ached in a way that I could never have imagined possible, and it was a date that filled me with dread every year. I only experienced pain such as that again when my father died, nearly twenty years later, his heart and body broken.

My memories of my sister, and the few years we had together, faded over time. I only had a couple of photos to help me remember her, but when my daughter was born, twenty-five years later, I could see my sister clearly in her face. My daughter's birth filled my heart with a joy I had never experienced before. It reminded me also that it was possible to feel absolute, unconditional love.

On the afternoon after my daughter was born, I suddenly realised that she had been still for a few moments. Then I caught sight of a blue tinge in her face. Instinct, and some deep-down memory, made me grab her from the cot and yell in panic for the nurse. She had stopped breathing, only momentarily, but she spent the rest of that week in intensive care, learning to breathe unaided and undergoing a series of tests. In time it was concluded that all was well, and she is here, twenty-five years later, beautiful, strong and full of life.

TWO

When I was fifty-five my partner, who is a year younger than me, needed to go into hospital so that, he told me, the doctors could have a look at his heart. He had been experiencing curious pains, and advances in medicine meant that they would be able to examine it and, if necessary, repair it by surgery.

"What does angina really mean?" mused my fifty-five-year-old brain. "Can it be fixed?" My partner and I talked about what was happening with his





heart, and he explained to me that, “as a worst-case scenario”, they might need to operate to restore an efficient flow of blood and oxygen around his body. This explained to me why he couldn’t always keep up with me when we walked together, and why he sometimes experienced that pain.

The night before my partner went into hospital, I helped him as he packed his overnight bag. “Don’t forget, you’ll need a warm pair of socks!” I reminded him. I hugged him as he took them from me, smiled and added them to the book he had ready to read when the operation was over. Something cold and unexpectedly familiar passed through my own heart at that moment.

The day of the operation passed slowly. Hour after hour my anxiety rose, and those long-lost and deeply hidden memories flooded my body relentlessly. Then, late in the afternoon, I received a brief text message. “Two stents inserted. Ready to come home.” A kind neighbour drove me to the hospital, and there my partner greeted me happily, holding his book in his hand, marked at the page he had been reading. “The doctor says he’s given me another twenty years of life!” he beamed. As the nurse explained the procedure to me, the room began to spin. I tried to control my breathing while I watched her mouth say the most important words, and then I heard her add, “Nothing to worry about, love. We carry out these operations every day – they’re all routine now.”

That day, 24th February 2017, my own heart ached and leapt with relief at the same time. And then, as my partner and I travelled home together, I understood that the old scars which I had borne for almost my whole life had been permitted a vital opportunity to heal, and I was filled with a new sense of gratitude.

A movement in the garden awakens me from my reverie. A robin is darting in and out of the branches of the laurel, and something in its movement beckons me outside. There is a chill in the air, but as I bend down to brush my fingers through the fragrant leaves of the rosemary bush, I notice that the little snowdrops are already pushing bravely through the soil. New life is beginning in the earth, and I suddenly find myself looking forward to March, when the daffodils, ever reliable, will open to greet the spring.

Madeleine O’Beirne



When we did a workshop on haikus, it really sorted the poets from the prose writers, but we all got a chance to be a little bit of both. We each started with a haiku, used it to inspire a piece of short prose, then distilled it back down to a brand new 3-line haiku.

It was from this exercise that *A Brief History of Us* emerged (it also happened to be the week that Professor Stephen Hawking died).



A Brief History of Us

When he was asked what existed before the big bang, Stephen Hawking explained that as space and time are curved, somewhat like the earth, you might just as well go to the South Pole and look for a point further south. At the end of the earth, there is no more south. South is meaningless there. In the same way, it is meaningless to ask what was there before time began.

Some of us struggle to wrap our heads around this just as we can't conceive of a world without us in it. Before you existed, you simply were not.

My son asks me was he always in my tummy. I start to say no, then hesitate, and tell him yes, in a way, you were. I was born with my thousands of eggs and one of them, one day, would become you. (It will be a much later conversation when he asks 'How?' and 'What did Daddy have to do with it?')

The answer pleases him – you were always in me – and it pleases me, too. I imagine my ovaries crammed with constellations from which magic would one day explode, in the shape of a boy with worlds in his eyes and so many questions on his tongue.

I also read somewhere recently that when you have a baby, part of their DNA stays in you.

So in a way, I tell my son, you were always in me, and you always will be. Before your time began, and after mine ends, when I will send our sparks into the sky.

Joanna Barnard

Convergence

Today generations converge,
across near twenty years she is with us.
Her flamboyance, her artistry and strength
Flow in our veins, if we do not see it.

Of and despite our genes we stretch,
grow, always towards that sun yet away,
invisible bonds a cat's cradle
of quick, hot impulses tempered by time.

Claire Lewis





Mayflower
Theatre



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