

The Queen's Head

A 'Literary' Zine



#6

EDITO ED ORIAL

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→ Compassion is a tendon: stretched often and with due care it becomes loose and limber. You find yourself pulling shapes and favours you never thought possible outside of a quasi-religious yoga retreat.

So it goes with Kiare Ladner's *OMG!*, flippant with cataclysm right from the get go but, under the rubble, cautiously optimistic. Giselle Leeb's *Moonlighter* is a long-armed clinch of a human life from a not-so-distant outsider, while continuing with the hirsute hominids Anstey Spraggan's *A Hairy Tale* only looks cuddly - in truth, its familial warmth is solid as bone.

But bruise the compassionate tendon, let the joining muscles - the heart, the brain, other notable exceptions - atrophy? Then you're in trouble, as seen with dark trinkets and darker waiting rooms in both Lara C Cory's chilling *Bottle Brown* and Jon Wesick's confrontational pair of flash-fictions. Then the tendon stiffens, and good luck running from the oncoming gloom.

Just as well, then, this issue's poets provide something of a relaxing day spa - well, as close as The Queen's Head will ever get to to relaxing, anyway. Rest up in the geographic impossibilities of Brennan Burnside's *Therapeutic Rooms*, steep in Valentina Cano's menacing watery free-verse and find salvation, of a sort, in Les Bernstein's theological powerpoints.

And, at long last, our very own house illustrator Tawny Kerr finally gets her hands on a full issue, providing connective tissue throughout.

Right, enough of the warm-up - surprise yourself and (back)flip the page...

Ryan Vance

Lara C Cory

BOTTLE BROWN

→ They say that when one door closes another one opens. But is it wrong to walk through that door? Does it mean that for every opportunity taken, you leave a trail of closed doors and misery in your wake?

The bed was covered in zip lock bags. A bracelet, a baseball cap, a scarf, photos, notes and other artefacts lay sealed up and labelled, each with a name.

The bags were for Mr Kratzer. It's called transference. When a thing has been yours for a long time and you love it very much, a little piece of your soul is stamped on it for all eternity.

In the waiting room at St Marks hospital doors open all the time. It used to make me feel sick to my stomach every time. But now I feel nothing. I'd walk in and I'd wait, sometimes all night. Row after shiny row of plastic chairs where husbands, sisters, fathers and siblings suffer uncomfortably and in silence. They sit with their heads down, their numbed minds preoccupied and yet unable to focus on anything.

I usually select someone who sits by themselves, and usually in the small hours

of the morning; bad things always seem to happen then. A man sits at the end of a row. His hands rest on his lap and he's still but for the rise and fall of his shallow breath. I know what he's thinking. His eyes close for a long time and then they open to a dead gaze. He's too scared to leave this building because he can't face that life goes on outside those doors. In the plastic palace, the world waits while you wait. I watch him while he turns it all over and over again in his mind, remembering what it was like before. When everyone else has left the room, I go and sit by him. The man's bruised heart keeps time as we sit alone together in a silence that's punctuated only by the sound of the fridge cycling in the vending machine.

'What brings you here?' I always ask. Kindly at first, like a comrade, find out who and why. Close family, wives, husbands and children yield the best results and the fewest questions. For them it must feel as if Death himself is pacing the halls.

The man replies, 'It's my sister. She's taken a turn and things are looking serious.'

A sister is good and I've always felt that a 'turn' is one of the most underestimated euphemisms in the English language.

'What about you?' he asks. He's just being kind; as I speak his eyes wander over to the television in the corner.

'I'm not here for anyone.' I've tried making up my own sob story but it drags everything out for too long. My frankness puts him on guard, but it makes him more inclined to trust me.

'Then why are you here?' He's irritated, doesn't even try to hide it.

'What if I told that I knew someone who could help your sister?' I reply. People always think I'm a doctor.

'Do you know a leukaemia specialist?' He says as he looks me straight in the eye.

Now he's interested. His optimism is embarrassing.

'Oh no, it's nothing like that,' I assure him. If they're desperate enough, they don't ask questions, which is why choosing your target well pays off in many ways. 'What if I told you that all I needed from you was something personal, an item that you consider special - would



I would just walk into the living room, and he'd run into my arms. But it's not going to happen that way and it's not just the people and their changing clothes and hairstyles, or the fact that I can count the winters. I used to be able to hear inside my head, the sound of his voice, his laugh. Those memories have gotten lost somehow, dispersed in the course of my undoing and the harder I try to remember, the faster they slip away. Guilt and shame are as foreign to me now as kindness and pride. The sharp edges of my character are dissolving.

you give it to me in exchange for your sister's life?'

Of course he did, everyone does.

I did.

He'd been in the ICU since the accident. I was only allowed in for moments at a time, while they did tests. They suspected brain damage, spinal damage...all the worst possible scenarios. I would sit and wait in the plastic chairs, with a plastic cup of plastic coffee and languish in my seat. I remember noticing her, an older woman in the far corner of the room. She wasn't suffering like the rest of us, at least not in the same way. She smiled at me and even though I thought it was strange, I smiled back. Before I knew it, I'd given her my Eiffel Tower key ring, it's where I first met him. The heavily wrinkled woman asked for my name and then looked at me with something that resembled sadness before walking away. I never knew or understood the truth about the exchange. I didn't know that I would be giving up more than just a sentimental trinket. But then, I didn't think to ask questions.

I used to pretend that when I returned

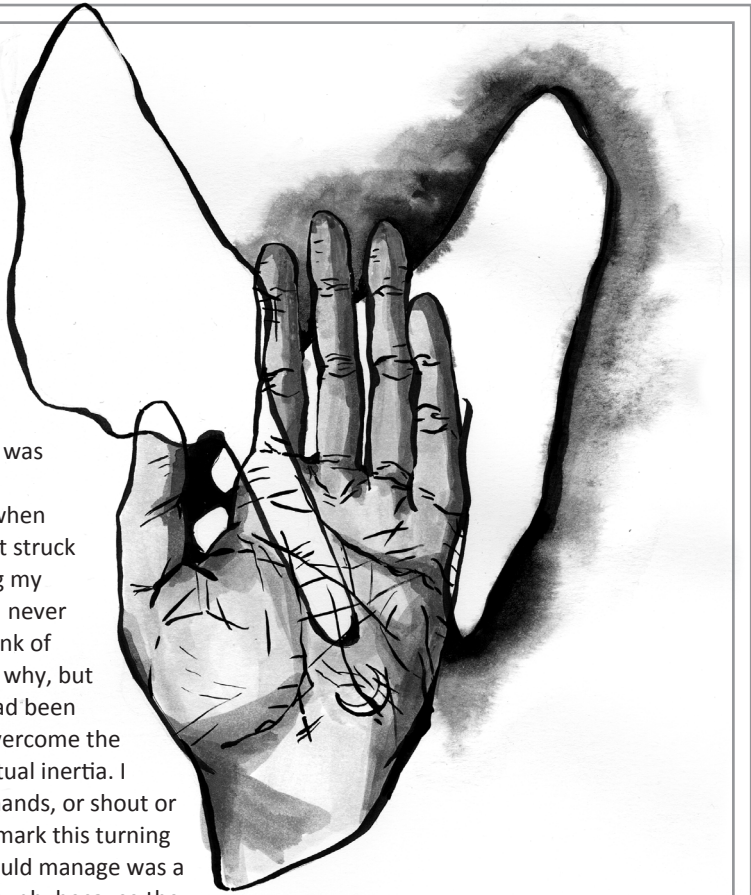
About three weeks ago, I woke, in the darkest part of the night. I got out of bed and stood at the window. The air was icy and a gibbous-moon illuminated the patch of green in the front yard. Beneath, I could see a figure emerging from inside the house, gliding almost, across the grass, leaving only the slightest foot prints on the frosted lawn. Before my eyes could adjust, he was gone and I wondered if it had been Mr Kratzer. I crept downstairs and stopped short at the bottom step. The light in the office was aglow. Mr Kratzer was shuffling papers and moving about. Curious, I crept back to my room and waited all night at the window for the figure to return.

The distant sky chased the night away with a sweeping grey light. I kept warm by dragging the duvet off the bed and wrapping it around me. As dawn struck the figure returned, and in the light I could see him better. Despite the weight of his heavy coat and boots he had swagger enough for ten men. As he got closer to the house, he looked up and straight at me as if he knew. Too late, I ducked out of sight and hid beneath my

blanket. I shook uncontrollably in spite of the mounting warmth because even in the dark I could see that face and yet I'll never be able to properly describe it. There was a nose, two eyes and a human shape to it all, but it was not like us.

Fear moved me when nothing else could. It struck me down, disrupting my emotional atrophy. I never really stopped to think of how it all worked or why, but facing that horror had been enough for me to overcome the dead weight of spiritual inertia. I wanted to clap my hands, or shout or dance to somehow mark this turning point and yet all I could manage was a smile. But it was enough, because the real triumph was knowing that I would never again trade in this vile currency. It was worth risking what little I had left to put an end to this miserable, maddening, regrettable existence.

Like any good bully, Mr Kratzer exudes that unhappy blend of menace and fear. An acting administrator, Mr Kratzer looked after the house and maintained the records. I had to find a way to distract him. With me and with the other unhappy inhabitants, he is curt and deliberate and always in control. But I know it's only a cabaret, because I have seen what happens after the curtain



goes down. Many months ago, I had an enquiry about the hot water in my room. As I waited in his office to make a report, marvelling at the curiosities that adorned the dusty room, Mr Kratzer burst in from the giant Goya reproduction that doubled as hidden door on the back wall. He was pallid and sweatier than usual, he bent low to catch his breath, with a steadying hand on the wall. As he straightened up and realised I was there, he smoothed his hair and dabbed his face with his kerchief. While he regained outward composure, I knew then that Mr Kratzer was just like



the rest of us, just closer to the source of the evil and a lot more frightened.

From the beginning I knew that what I did everyday was not possible without the aid of something otherworldly and powerful enough to change the course of history. And yet from the beginning I also knew that it was not Mr Kratzer who was responsible. He was merely a puppet, a politician, who was very gifted at diverting my attention. But everything changed once I'd actually seen the monster behind the miracles. I had the proof I needed to confront this menace and break free from my own servitude.

For the following weeks I maintained my habits, going out during 'peak hours' and returning to the house only to eat and sleep. The emergency room was always busier at night and intensive care saw the most despair in the early hours of the morning. I became a keen observer of the comings and goings of the puppet and his cloaked puppeteer.

Mr Kratzer almost never left. Sometimes he would walk around the green smoking a cigarette, having silent arguments with himself, and occasionally

he would take a drive somewhere to return only ten minutes later.

I wasn't the only one with a routine. The mysterious cloaked figure left at the darkest part of each night, about an hour before dawn, always returning as the sky grew light. Of course I tried to follow him on his nightly excursions but he eluded me every time. I would get as far as the town, but then all it would take for me to lose him was the slightest glance away and he would disappear, as if slipping into the very shadows. I tried to catch him coming into the house but he never entered through the front door. I was unable to locate another entrance to the house and so gave up on this particular venture. The only avenue left to pursue was the secret door in Mr Kratzer's office.

I didn't have to wait very long for the perfect opportunity. Mr Kratzer had retired early to bed after I'd seen him sniffing, spluttering and vulnerable that morning. Taking advantage of this rare occurrence, I waited until the figure went on his nightly hunt before racing downstairs and into the empty office. The door wasn't locked and the Goya simply

yielded when I pushed on it, opening on to a dark corridor that led to an absorbing blackness. I lit the way with my lighter. The floor sloped steeply and it was damp. Water trickled down the walls and I slipped a couple of times. There were four or five steps at the end of the path going down to yet another door. It was an old door with pocked, wrought-iron fittings, hundreds of years old, maybe more. Yet another door that opened for me, and in my usual fashion, I went through without hesitation. The low ceiling made the room feel like it was closing in. Or maybe it was an old cave. Hollows and crevices sucked up any light and my feeble flame struggled to illuminate even a small area. I moved around the flickering space to see what I could find. There was no one and nothing here. The cave seemed to stretch on and on and I had to lower my head until finally my hands came across something soft. A curtain, of what felt like velvet, hung across an opening and, as I drew it aside, I was overcome with uncertain awe.

In front of me, not 10 metres away, was row upon row upon of row of coloured, glowing jars. With every colour imaginable from the lightest teal to the deepest magenta and everything in between. They seemed to rise upon the shelves by hue. The lowest and most populated rows contained jars that were dull and bottle-brown. The uppermost row was decorated with jars aglow with a white light, so diffused and sublimely pearlescent that I couldn't begin to explain such rare beauty.

As I drifted spellbound towards the light of the glowing chamber, my ears pricked up at the sound of the old

wooden door unlatching. Springing back to the furthest corner of the room, I pressed myself hard against the wall and waited. He paused for a moment at the entrance. As the figure moved further into the room I could finally see that it wasn't Mr Kratzer. Approaching the wall of wonder, the cloaked monster began to physically sway with enchantment. Roaming the expanse with his eyes, in reverence he reached out and lovingly fondled many of the jars.

And then the spell was broken. It started with a deep, slow rumble deep inside him. The laughter grew so that it was forced in bursts through his nose becoming so violent that it turned into a wheeze at which point he said, 'Do you think I don't know you're here?'

Was he talking to me?

'Yes. I am,' he replied to words I hadn't said aloud. I remained silent.

'Magnificent isn't it?' He said, still fixed at the kaleidoscopic wall of light. 'You are the only human ever to set eyes on-' He took some deep steadying breaths before continuing slowly, on the razor's edge of rage. 'Your mere presence here is a-



He stopped short again and began to edge towards me in the darkness.

At first, he was hard to see because he hovered just outside of my lighter's halo. It was almost as if he existed between dimensions, his features blurred. Towering over me, he leaned in close to get a better look. Entering the light of my flame, I saw him clearly for the first time and was at once entranced and repulsed. His face looked almost normal, but his features were somehow exaggerated. The tip of his nose extended beyond where it should be, his wild eyes sat too large in his face with enormous black irises leaving little of the whites. His lips were thin and elastic; a wide mouth revealing unnaturally long teeth. Was this the face of a human being, alive well beyond the limits of nature? Or was it a demon's feeble approximation?

'You've come this far. Please, take a closer look.'

I felt the pressure of his arm on my back but not in any physical way; it was as if he merely made an impression in the air around him. I couldn't look.

'LOOK!' He wheezed into my ear,

grabbing my hair and forcing me to look at the rainbow lights throbbing in their jars. 'Isn't this what you came to see?' He craned his head to look at the highest point. He inhaled deeply and let out a satisfied 'Aaaahhhh.'

'One of these fetching specimens is enough to end to your servitude. But you knew that. Didn't you?' The dazzling colours, glowing and swirling in their tiny glass cages distracted him momentarily. He directed me, with a wave of his hands, to the lowest shelves.

'Like swamp muck... And yet they're the ones that keep turning up. Ugly from a life of ruin... so easy to sell out when you've got nothing to lose.'

'And those?' I pointed to the highest shelf, terrified but desperate to know.

A high sigh escaped his curling lips, delighting at the mere thought. 'The most innocent. Children are though, aren't they?'

The luminous jars pulsed with white light. 'But why?' Disgusted, I asked, knowing the answer I feared the most.

the zip-lock bag that lived in my pocket and caused me the most shame of all. His burning black eyes softened and he sniffed the air like an animal. A smile unfurled upon his repulsive lips and he looked at me knowingly.

He began to laugh.

‘You play a good game!’

As he sobered, the monster eyed me carefully, ‘Leave that trinket with me and you’re free to go. I’ll tell Kratzer that your debt is paid.’

I can’t remember leaving the chamber or finding my way back to my room. I don’t remember packing my clothes and collecting my meagre possessions. And I don’t know how long I’ve been wandering the city looking for open doors; it seems they all close for me now.

I may have my freedom but I remain condemned, living out my days with the one memory that haunts me: the sound of the feverish grunts and slobbering as the monster, in his hideous excitement, fumbled to get the pacifier out of the zip-lock bag that I’d kept in my pocket.



‘In all the world you’ll never set eyes upon such...in-can-descent ...splendour.’

‘They’re just baubles to you?’ It was like I’d been winded; all the years I’d served, the spirits I’d plundered, the lives I’d destroyed had amounted to nothing.

‘Yes, it is a weakness that I sometimes have to take the light inside me. But only when I’m more there than here. I don’t like to dip in to my personal collection.’ He laughed at himself a little as he regarded his ghastly and beautiful display, gesturing grandly as if he was presenting his wall to an enthused crowd. And then his mood changed. Had he heard my thoughts and felt my devastation? Did he, for a brief moment, feel my crushing disappointment, as I realised that I had given everything up for the petty amusement of a monster?

‘So high and mighty! Who is it that brings me my baubles?’ He paused before hissing, ‘It is you who sicken me.’ He grew impossibly taller in the shadows of the chamber and I was shamed; not from remorse but degradation. This monster, who valued even the souls of the most wicked, was repulsed by mine. I gripped

Brennan Burnside

Therapeutic Waiting Rooms

Red Room

16' π circular room with poured terrazzo flooring constructed of polished burnt lime and red clay, 16' tall cream colored travertine wall lit by dark red lithium chloride flames in three 7'x7'x5' fire pits located at north east and west sides of room, 14'x1' empty space at south end of wall, ceiling of limestone, seven 6' stalagmites hiding 1'x1'x1' BOSE speakers, each stalagmite playing different note in E chord.

Blue Room

Four 12'x12' cerulean plasma screen walls playing looped 3'40' video of expanding and contracting indigo circle to soundtrack of C chord, limestone floor, three sets of four 5' chrome organ pipes emerging from floor, two blue anthelia corals in glass cubes 3/4ths full of salt water.

Green Room

Three 17' tall white limestone walls, alabaster flooring, single light from single cylinder tube with green copper sulfate-infused flames in center of floor, two 3' long pipes 2' below ceiling on west and east, playing continuous low D note, alabaster floor supported by concrete slab with small slits in rock allowing gradual release of heat from subterranean magma pool encased in obsidian.

Therapeutic Bathrooms

Women's Room

Four teak wood walls 12'x24', 1x6' windows on west and east walls Afropea by Zap Mama on loop at medium volume, cerulean Plush carpet, circle of sixteen porcelain white American Standard toilets spaced 1' apart, 4'x6' black, yellow, white, red, green and blue mat made from recycled trashbags 1' in front of each toilet, metallic hugger ceiling fan at center of concave haint blue clay ceiling.

Men's Room

Roundhouse, circular 12' tall wall, 24 American Standard toilets, 2' from wall and 1' apart, steel pole 6' high between each toilet holding single roll of toilet paper, 16 sets-of-two Kohler urinals facing each other 3' from toilets, Afropea by Zap Mama playing at medium volume, four windows 1'x6' at north, south, west and east, metallic hugger ceiling fan at center of convex haint blue clay ceiling.

Kiare Ladner

OMG!

→You blew up the world.

You can't believe you did that.

You're not the type. You weren't even in a particularly bad mood, just a bit grumpy. You'd been to the dentist. She'd taken some x-rays. Said there were signs of erosion. Your teeth were eroding. She said, Do you have reflux, do you drink lots of Coke, or fruit juice, orange juice perhaps? You said No, no, no. You asked if you'd need fillings? She said, That would depend on the speed of the erosion. Make an appointment for six months time and we'll look at your teeth again. You said, Six months? Is that soon enough? If a person puts a tooth in a glass of Coke by the morning it's gone. She reminded you that you don't drink Coke, and steered you towards Appointments.

Although you thought she might be screwing you over for the check-up money, and next time she might try to get filling money out of you too, and many appointments and several hundred quid, possibly thousands, later you'd end up with a shiny metallic smile for no good reason at all, you meekly got a date in your diary before heading for the lift.

The lift doors opened on two men in surgical scrubs and masks. One was slight and balding with the remainder of his hair close-cropped. You didn't get much of a look at the other. The balding one's dark eyes seemed vaguely familiar. Through his mask he said to the other one, 'It'll be a grand, E. Venning!'

Aware that you were staring, you reflexively took out your phone. Next thing you knew, with a few easy strokes, you'd punched in the code the militants had been advertising oh-here-there-everywhere over the past twenty-four hours. Recalling the code was no hardship to you. You'd memorised it using a mnemonics technique learnt from an illusionist's memoir.

The mnemonic you'd invented went like this: A man on the coach to the airport says he has taken an aeroplane 0 times in his life. He has 2 suitcases, 3 items of hand luggage and, most alarmingly, 1 plastic bag containing 1 live duck. You say he will not be allowed to travel with a live animal. He says, if he killed the duck would it be okay? Can you travel with a dead duck? You look it up

on your phone and say that if the duck were free from disease and for his own consumption, and if he were travelling within the EU or one of the other 8 exempted countries it would be fine. He says he is not travelling in the EU or any of the 8 exempted countries but he eats nothing (0) except duck. Even if he left the 1 duck behind, there would be dead duck in his stomach from 2 or 3 or even 4 previous meals. He says there may be 2 or 3 or even 4 dead ducks inside him right now. You assure him that this will not matter. If the dead duck is inside him nobody (0) will have a problem with it. He says, so inside/outside determines whether what I am doing is legal/illegal? You say, that's 1 way to look at it. He says you are surely wrong because he has heard of a woman being arrested for having 7 insoluble capsules of drugs in her stomach. You ask how she was caught, and he says it turned out 4 of the capsules were soluble which led to 1 hell of a deadly high. As the coach pulls in at the terminal, he says what it's really about is if you get found out or not. Then he heads off towards the men's toilets with his 2



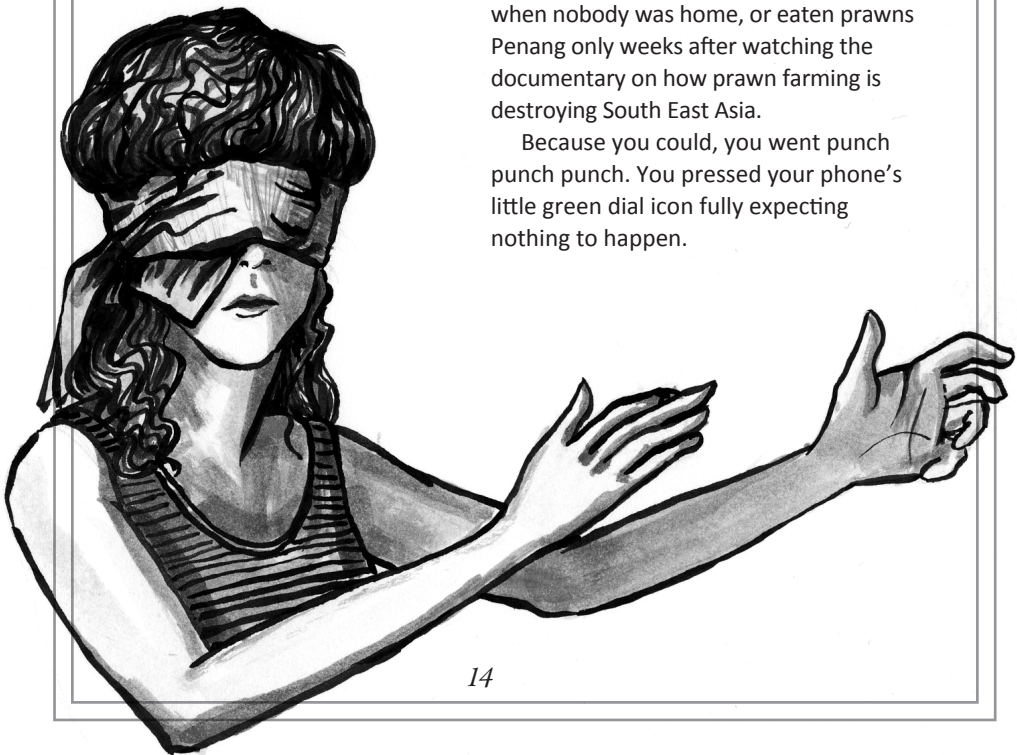
suitcases, 3 items of handluggage and 1 plastic bag containing what you reckon will soon be 1 dead duck.

023118801234234017412311

But here's the crux – you memorised the code in order *not* to punch it into your phone by mistake. So you can't say that doing it was accidental. Though it didn't feel deliberate either. You're not a psycho. You're an ordinary person with ordinary expectations that don't include having the power to set off a batch of bombs intended to destroy all life on earth. You could say you'd believed the militants' threat to be a fear-inducing hoax. Or you could say that you didn't expect there to be network reception in the lift. You could even say that despite with your marvellous method of mnemonics you'd assumed you'd make an error, forgetting to repeat the 234 for example, or to add the (0) for

nobody. But the truth – the truth is simply that you were not in a considering-the-consequences state of mind. Punching in those numbers felt no more significant than times you've spat your chewing gum and missed the bin, or left your empty (Coke) can behind on your train seat, or stayed extravagantly long in the shower when nobody was home, or eaten prawns Penang only weeks after watching the documentary on how prawn farming is destroying South East Asia.

Because you could, you went punch punch punch. You pressed your phone's little green dial icon fully expecting nothing to happen.



cinema or on television, and if on the news then only in places so distant as not to be a part of your personal, experienced reality. Not only the building but the entire cityscape was gone. There were great noxious clouds that billowed and subsided. People greyed by ash were running and shouting. The nightmare world was loud and fast with what was going on while also hollow and empty with what was not.

It was each for himself/herself/ themselves and you were no exception. Your legs spun like wheels on a trolley with your head perched numbly in a basket on top. You kept going until the exertion forced you to brake, gasping hard. The dentist's couldn't be that far from where you lived. Down a few blocks, along a few streets? Except – there were no blocks, there were no streets. Only rubble in shades ranging from concrete beige to tar grey.

Soon you were lost beneath an oppressive khaki sky. You took out your phone to use the navigator function, to key in your postcode, to follow the little blue pin to the little red pin until the two pins overlapped. But your screen was blank. →

For a moment nothing happened.

Then there was an explosion that was a vision that was a sound that was a taste that was a feeling that was a smell that was a beginning that was an end. People were bone shadows against a heat so white it strained your eyeballs.

When your vision fragmented, you saw the atoms, or if not the atoms then the finest particles, the billions of dots, that make up everything. You saw how the dots joined together – the boundaries but also that nothing was untouched – everything touched everything. The dots of your hand touched the dots of the floor that touched the dots of the dentist's bum that touched the dots of the air that came into your mouth and over your eroding teeth and then went out again. Then there was darkness.

The lift had stopped.

'Level 4. Doors opening,' it said.

The doors opened.

Beyond them was a war scene – or how you imagined a war scene to be because you'd only ever seen war scenes at the

Your phone was as dead as if its myriad powers had been merely an arrogant human fantasy – one that had come to an end.

You walk from the outskirts of one explosion to the epicentre of another: in again, then out again, in again, out. No explosion is distant enough from any other to allow for even the narrowest rim of what existed before. No oases, no corridors, no breaks. From horizon to horizon there are only ripples and craters; anaemic fires, burning rain, and dust.

The world is no longer loud and fast. Of the few people about, some are slumped in a way that suggests dead, or barely alive. Those who move give the impression of winding down. You are one of the winding down. A part of you thinks you must be dreaming; another part finds it surprisingly easy to accept that life before was the illusion.

You once saw an illusionist's show in which a guy was hypnotised into believing he was at war with zombies. The idea was that he would learn certain desirable character traits from the experience. Imagining this, here, now, to be just a show makes you feel better at once. With millions of people watching, you will be braver, more helpful, friendlier.

Your resolve is immediately tested by a yank at your sleeve.

An old woman with candyfloss hair in a spotted dress and mid-calf-length socks says, Dora?

You shake your head. No.

She says, You know that quiz programme where they test how well couples know each other? I'll ask the

questions. You answer. Red or blue?

To humour her, you choose.

She says you got it wrong. Black or yellow?

You choose again.

She says you got it wrong again but she asks you the rest of the questions anyway. Salty or sweet? Waltz or tango? Chinos or jeans? Dog or cat? Best for last or best first? Lark or owl? Tablet or laptop?

After you've made all your choices, she says, You got everything wrong!

Sorry, you say.

Be Dora anyway. She slips her hand into yours. C'mon?

She hasn't got the clichéd papery grasp you might expect. Her hand is warm and plump. It holds yours with the determined trust of a small child.

The sky has become bludgeoned with clouds: purple, navy, vermillion. Forget couple quizzes. Would even your closest compadre have guessed you'd blow up the world? Would even you yourself have guessed?

You imagine a conversation in which

you'd settle for a tunnel with a golden light at the end of it.

There are so many remarkable things in this world, Candyfloss says.

I've just blown them all up, you say.

Delusion is necessary, she says.

I'm not deluded, you say slowly and deliberately. I punched the code into my phone, then BANG. 023118801234234017412311, you say for emphasis. Then you add BANG again.

Slowly she shakes her head.

the militants' guarantee of anonymity has been wavered. Candyfloss-hair knows what you have done. She asks, Don't you feel bad? Of course, you say. She says, You're not acting that way. You say, How should I act? She looks at you like you've asked a rhetorical question.

Meanwhile, in the real world as the real world now is, Candyfloss only says, Where are we headed?

Home, you say

Dora would never put me in a home, she says. We'll have to go somewhere else.

You can't think of anywhere else.

But after a moment's pause, as if you'd provided another, more satisfactory, answer, she says, Okay, hurry up! Get those skates on!

Far from skating anywhere, your walking has come to a full stop. There's this persistent white fog that's getting into your head. It zones you out a bit at a time. Bit by bit by bit. You slump down against a sign you can't make sense of. Is this dying? You'd prefer a golden light. Or if there had to be a trial of obscurity then

The white has enveloped you. It's in your lungs, it's everywhere. It's clogging up inside you like damp cotton wool. You think of the man in the lift and envy him his surgical mask. A surgical mask, now that would be good. But didn't he look a bit like the illusionist, that man, the one from the zombie hypno show?

One part of your mind chucks the random idea from the conveyor belt; another part hangs onto it while Candyfloss tugs your hand. She breathes or snores or whispers something in your ear.

t's b a gra ven ng

WHAT? you wish you could shout.

But - did she just say what you thought she did? The words that could turn the clock back?

Is this hope – or a longing so strong that it will lie to you? Is it real or the itch of an amputated limb?

Still here. Still hear. While there's 'ere, there's 'ope, an inner voice mocks at the same time that you're all ears.

All ear.

Listening so hard

you can hear nothing else.

It's been a grand evening! Simply grand.



Les Bernstein

Beelzebub's
Fundamentals
for Success

seek solace of a peculiar familiar world
operate from ongoing unconscious bias
fill days with sour recriminations
insist on musty precision
speak with clicking sounds of errant thoughts
employ the secret power of the antonym
invoke histories of cataracted vision
demand dreams of an overly decorated future
deny the restless sifting of chance
fill your days with confidence of eternal life
scatter seeds of religious certainty
be convincing

What The Great Almighty Carries In Her Purse

address book of dreams for unkempt minds
keys to the secret laboratory of language
tinted glasses of contentment and despair
sewing kit with safety pins for newly created ruins
tape measure for the metrics of uselessness
cash and change for the noisy whimsy of commerce
mirror to apply the shadows of incomprehension
arbitrary and deliberate facts made of soft rouge
comb to unknot the fundamentals of solitude
photo of family at the well-laid table of reminiscence
tissues for proof of a second icier world

Jon Wesick

THE PROBLEM HAS ALWAYS BEEN PEOPLE

→ I almost told Diane. She looked so competent and trustworthy in her knee-length skirt with matching hemp purse. Then I saw the telltale purple sores on her lips and knew she'd ignored my warning. No one ever listens. Even with government purity certificates, the food in supermarkets isn't safe. Pity! I would have given up six months of rations just for her company.

Looks like I'll spend the great unraveling in my safe room alone. It's a beauty – six-inch steel walls, hidden entrance, and enough food and water to last a year. I've spared no expense when it comes to my survival. The LCD lights run off a battery that's trickle charged from the power next door. Outside air passes through a HEPA filter. I have a shortwave radio, backup pedal generator, and exterior surveillance (both optical and closed-circuit TV).

The furnishings are basic but comfortable – futons for sleeping, table, chairs, chemical toilet, and a small library. I have a roll of Krugerrands to barter, when it's all over, along with the weapons experts say a guy like me should have – sawed-off shotgun and .38 police special, the stainless

steel model that won't rust even if it's not cleaned regularly. There's a Geiger counter and sensors to detect chemical and biological weapons. The last had a bad indicator light, which is why I called Brian.

"It's the sensor unit," he said. "Cost eight hundred dollars to replace it."

I paid in cash. I always pay Brian in cash.

After he was done, he said, "Want to see something sweet?" He removed a knife reverently from his tool kit and handed it to me as if it were the bones of a saint. "SS dagger carried by a martyr in the last true fight against Communism. You know, you ought to join me at the National Front meeting. We're not like those skinheads who just beat up mud people. We're going to get something done. I can introduce you to tomorrow's leaders."

"I'll check it out." I returned Brian's knife. Perhaps I should have argued but antagonizing someone whose discretion I rely on would be foolhardy and dangerous.

Some days I just want to close the door and never come out.

PALANGA, LITUANIA

→ Folding tables sprout from sidewalks near the neglected, bronze statue of a Soviet soldier. Locals spread cloths over them and set out belts and jewelry. Capitalism brings them dreams of getting rich. Here even the crows wear mink stoles.

I wander the aisles and idly finger Russian dolls, Lenin inside Stalin and so forth, but I'm drawn to the amber, that fossilized sap from ancient forests. A present or perhaps something for myself? I pick up a piece strung with a leather cord. It's golden, transparent, and light as Styrofoam. I set it down with a nod to the overweight man with a newsboy cap and five-o'clock shadow.

The most prized pieces contain a preserved insect – some unlucky spider or mosquito who got trapped millions of years ago. I search but the results disappoint. The amber is cracked or the specimen twisted and broken. As I'm about to leave, I spot an old woman. A strega, witch, bruja, her table holds the finest specimens but locals shun her. It's impossible to guess her age. A frayed scarf covers her hair, her eyes are cataract blue, and her skin is wrinkled and leathery.

Her specimens are perfect – large pieces of unblemished amber holding insects captured at the peak of health, six legs, slender filaments of antennae. One after the other I pick them up and run fingers over polished surfaces. The sun sparkles off a piece in the corner. I reach for it and then withdraw in shock. Trapped in the hardened goo is my life – the stagnant career, stillborn love life, invalid mother, and decaying nation.

“No! I don't want this!”

I turn to flee but the witch pins my wrist to the table. Ninety pounds but with the strength of a wrestler, she pries my fingers open and presses the cursed stone into my hand.

Giselle Leeb

MOONLIGHTER

→ It is midnight crisp. He sits in a deckchair near the gates in the keeper's blue uniform and hat and smokes a leftover cigarette. Relaxing by the gilded bars, which he can walk through at any time if he chooses to, makes up for the tedium of his day job and the keeper is grateful for some time off.

He knows he will not go beyond the gates, and so does the keeper, and because of this he is free to watch the blue smoke swirling up and over the old elephant cages.

These days there is more space: the elephants left years before he arrived. He imagines them returning to Africa, strolling back into the long grass. Yes, these days they assign ample room per animal, using a complex equation to measure size and space versus activity.

The keeper had explained it all to him one night when they swapped the watch. They'd sat for a while side by side, blowing smoke rings. The ape had done a visitor-ape impression and they'd laughed together while he mimed running up and at the bars and away again, pulling faces

at the cheering crowds.

'A job's a job,' said the keeper.

He is unable to tell the keeper that he has occasional nightmares about the elephants being chopped up at the knacker's, like the horses he saw in the keeper's newspaper, but he's sure that this wouldn't happen, not these days; the keeper has told him more than once that the elephants went home.

During the daytime performances, he gives a conspiratorial wink as the keeper walks by the cage - a subtle wink, the night watch is their secret — and he immediately feels better, thinking of the evening to come.

He bases his performances on close observation; so far, he's learnt that the English especially love the funny faces, the Americans like everything, and he has to pull out all the stops to amuse the Russians. The day after a nightmare, he cannot help modelling his expression on weeping children, with tragic accompanying gestures. Afterwards, he is bitterly ashamed and sorry for failing so abysmally at his job.

He is proud of the fact that, when he'd

first arrived, the keeper chose him from the whole troop of new apes. What was even more satisfying was that he'd been the wildest one, shoving at the bars of the cage.

'You've really come on,' the keeper often says.

Retrospectively, he guesses that the keeper is experienced with rebels. One night, very late, the keeper had let him out of the cage and led him to the gates. Then he'd opened them. The ape had stared at him, wide-eyed.

'I've arranged for you to visit across the road,' said the keeper.

It was a hot night, rare in England, with a full moon; warm air soothed his fur and it almost felt like home. The bars on the gates gleamed gold, reflecting light from the petrol station shop across the road.

He'd looked at the keeper for reassurance and the keeper had pointed through the gates.

The ape felt a deep dread, like being on the edges of the troop after dark, as he crept over the pungent tarmac into the soft blue night.

'Keep going,' shouted the keeper



behind him and for a moment he hadn't seemed like a friend; he had seemed like the leopard from the big cat cages and the ape had to fight the urge to run.

'Look out for cars,' the keeper had warned him before the crossing and the ape had nodded.

The ape knew about cars; after they'd docked at the harbor, they were transported to the zoo in the back of a truck. Even then, despite the overwhelming smell of fear, he was learning. He'd peeked through the little square of window in his crate and observed the flashing white lines and the vehicles passing at incomprehensible speeds.

He'd trembled and shivered crossing the road to the shop, the stalking shadows forcing him down onto all fours, but he'd known that he must get over.

Illuminating the oil-soaked forecourt, the light from the shop glowed underwater-green, intersected with a violet stripe, and as he'd crept forward the green had fused with the lushness of the grass after the first summer rains. The roar of a car on the road behind him

startled him awake and it was a relief to dart into the open shop door.

The man behind the counter looked nervous. 'Easy, tiger,' he whispered.

The rows and rows of colourful objects made the ape feel faint and he tried to compose himself by smiling, but this seemed to make the man even more nervous.

Then the ape remembered the performance. He took a few steps back, before somersaulting forwards into a sitting position and placing one hand over his heart. This always worked with the weeping kids at the zoo.

The man smiled. 'Not going to bite are you?' he said and the ape, feeling small sitting in the pool of light in front of the counter, slowly stood, shook his head and extended a paw.

The man did not offer his hand in return. 'Just wait till I get home,' he said, as if in an aside to an invisible third being.

The ape felt a pang, wishing that he could speak. His courage returned and he gestured to the shelves.

The man moved cautiously round the counter and held up a Mars bar. 'This

one?’ he asked.

The ape shook his head.

‘He understands!’ said the man to his invisible friend.

The ape pointed to a Milkybar. The man slid the chocolate across the floor and watched him carefully unwrap it, his mouth falling open when the ape held it out to him, offering it to him first.

‘Thank you, my friend,’ he said, breaking off a piece and handing it back.

The ape was so pleased to be called ‘friend’. He nodded sadly as the urge to converse welled up in him. The keeper had explained that this was a difference between humans and apes: apes lacked the right voice box for human speech.

The ape gestured towards the warm blue outside the door, meaning ‘nice evening.’ The man mistook this for a wish to go outside and he went to the door.

The ape thought that perhaps it was a good time to leave. He shook the man’s hand warmly on his way out. Nice to meet you, he said in his head.

‘Come again, come again,’ the man shouted as the ape looked right, then left and walked across the road and back

through the gates. The keeper waved to the shop man and closed them with a clang.

As he’d entered the gates, the ape had felt like he was returning home. He’d contemplated running in the opposite direction, but he lived at the zoo. The bigger picture, where he’d come from, where he was now, was dawning on him. He’d examined the maps stuck up at the visitor hut and seen the shapes called ‘Africa’ and ‘England.’ He was beginning to understand how hard it would be to return. And besides, he did not want to betray the keeper’s trust.

Only much later, when he and the keeper were better friends, did he guess that the keeper must have known that there wasn’t any danger when he’d let him cross the road. By then the ape realized that he was quite valuable.

He sits in his deckchair, cap pushed back off his prominent brow, sipping from the bottle of beer the keeper has hidden for him under his newspaper. ‘A perk’ the keeper calls it, although he isn’t supposed to drink on the job.

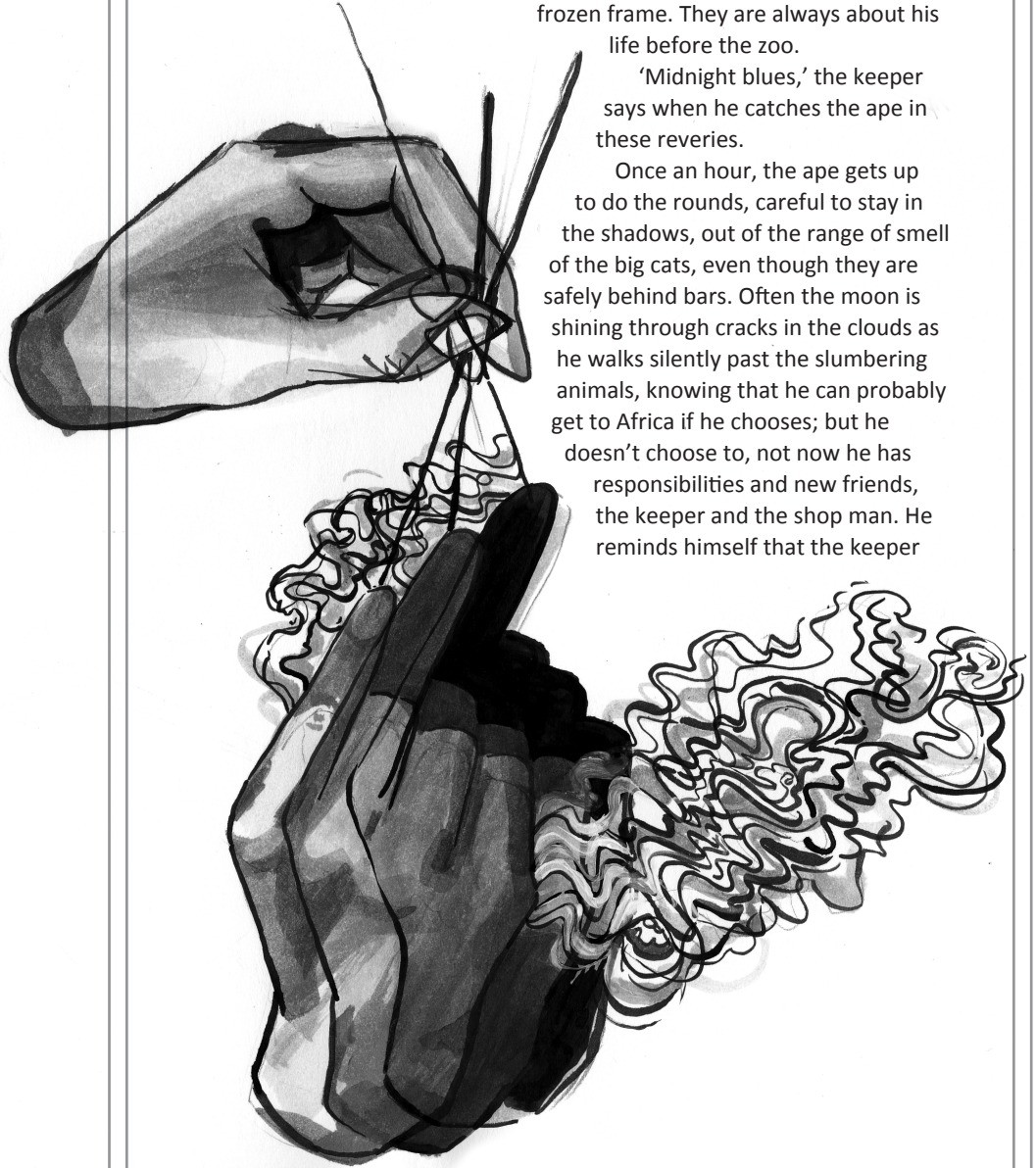
The ape can’t read but he enjoys



browsing through the pictures. They have a curious stillness. Are these animals alive? he'd thought, before the keeper had explained. The ape finds himself making up entire stories from a single frozen frame. They are always about his life before the zoo.

'Midnight blues,' the keeper says when he catches the ape in these reveries.

Once an hour, the ape gets up to do the rounds, careful to stay in the shadows, out of the range of smell of the big cats, even though they are safely behind bars. Often the moon is shining through cracks in the clouds as he walks silently past the slumbering animals, knowing that he can probably get to Africa if he chooses; but he doesn't choose to, not now he has responsibilities and new friends, the keeper and the shop man. He reminds himself that the keeper



trusts him and returns to his deckchair with a feeling of deep satisfaction.

Sometimes the shop man comes to his door and waves and the ape pulls his cap down low so that he looks like the keeper. There is no danger of the man finding out their secret: unlike the ape, the man is not allowed to go further than the shop door.

The ape works hard at his day job, pushing himself to new athletic heights; it is important to stay fit should he ever decide to leave. And the keeper notices his diligence — that's why he'd singled him out from his fellow apes in the first place.

The keeper does not lump him with the human immigrants he is so angry about. The keeper is proud of how he has come along and the ape guesses that he is not worried about him taking his job. Although the ape dreams about it, he knows it is unlikely he will ever be promoted.

Yet it is enough. No little window like in the truck but, for the daytime performances, a big cage front with bars spread its length and height. Limited,

true, but a whole world plays out in front of them, the audience laughing and cheering and throwing gifts. A job, that is very much what it is, and tired, hungry, happy or sad, they go at it every day together, and it cheers the ape up, reminding him of his old home, how there is safety in numbers.

It is the late night openings at the zoo he dislikes. That is when everything feels wrong and he longs to be in the deckchair on the other side of the bars.

'Moonlighting.' The keeper says that it means having two jobs at once, but the ape likes to think of it as those nights when the moon is lighting things up.

Maybe he will never completely belong. He knows that membership of the Zoological Society is out of the question. Even the keeper isn't allowed in. But just to sit here alone. That is something.

The thing is, on moonlit nights, he often thinks of those left behind. In a way he envies them their simpler life; but he has started to imagine that the harbour is the biggest gate of all and that he had been behind it his entire life before travelling to the zoo.



Anstey Spraggan

A HAIRY TALE

→ When she was born, the beard didn't seem like such an issue. We tucked her up in pink blankets with ruffles and frills of ice cream white and let the tendrils of her facial hair rest delicately on the upper edges.

At first, we enjoyed people's reactions and – if anything – it brought us closer together as a couple. If it was cold and we'd zipped her anorak hood up over her little chin then only her faint moustache looked out of place. Old ladies and regular baby-botherers were rarely that sharp-sighted and didn't even see it. Sometimes Albert and I were disappointed that they didn't recoil or gasp and we had nothing to talk about between ourselves.

As she got older, other traits began to show – tiny irritant things that festered like growing pearls in mine and Albert's relationship. She started to eat moss. Pale lime lichens were her favourite. She would crawl across the forest floor, fat pink knees picking up dints of twigs and last season's skeletal leaves, and upturn stones to hunt for snacks. Her strength for such a young child was remarkable.

Her nails grew thick and wide and

made marvellous spatulate chisels to prize the moss from its stone bed. I thought she was a wonder. 'Look,' I'd say to Albert, 'watch the way she seems to snuffle the moss out. I swear she could smell it from the car.'

'I don't like the way her beard catches under her knees when she crawls,' Albert answered. 'I wish you would trim it.'

And later, in the dark of our marital bedroom, our heads propped parallel on our pillows, 'She makes pig noises when she hunts for moss,' said Albert.

'And?' I asked, certain that Albert would find those squeals and oinks as charming as I did.

'It makes me feel uncomfortable,' said Albert. 'My mother would be horrified.'

So far, we had kept Albert's mother away. It wasn't so hard, she was in France and we were hidden in the corner of a forest in Eastern England. If she threatened to visit, we would touch wood and invent a virus; the baby has a cold, measles, foot and mouth.

When the baby learnt to toddle, she took crashing strides through the undergrowth. I tied her beard up tidily

in a pink scrunchie lest she trip. The scrunchie was terry towelling and had a tiny toy dog in pale plastic hanging from it. She looked so beautiful.

One day, Albert asked the question we'd all avoided. 'She's not mine, is she?'

'Hmmm,' I was stalling for time. I reached out and took a blackberry from a briar, I ground the seeds thoughtfully between my teeth. 'Do you mean biologically?' I asked.

'What other way is there?' said Albert, and I knew he could never be her father in any sense.

'Remember that huge hirsute man we met in Belgium? The one with the laugh?'

Albert made a face – he was becoming uglier by the second.

'You didn't like him,' I said, 'you thought he had appetites.'

'He was uncouth,' said Albert and lumbered away through the hazel striplings, tags of brambles catching at the edges of his trousers, ants and beetles slaughtered beneath his thoughtless feet.

I heard him go but I didn't bother to watch. I didn't take my eyes off the baby.

My daughter sat, her dumpling legs outstretched on the leaf mould, and moss caught in the pony tail of her beard. She smiled a smile that lit up the forest like a fire. She burned in my heart.



Valentina Cano

Beach Day

Tumbled by a muscular wave,
I lost my thought in the sea.
It swam away with a flash
of cellophane fins
and left me grasping at
slippery handfuls of silence.

Mouth

My mouth is like a watering hole,
complete with swinging ropes
and rocks to avoid.
The water can be warm,
with traces of minerals
and soft sand that catches sunlight,
but it is mostly as cold as reptile skin,
looking for the next person to smother.

cont ribu tors

→ Lara C. Cory is editor of 15questions.net, author of Musicwithoutwords.com, contributor to The Wire and co-author of *Animal Music: Sound and Song in the Natural World* to be published in May by Strange Attractor Press. Lara is currently working on a collection of short stories and scripts for film and theatre. She lives in Cookham with her family. Twitter: @Laraccory

→ Giselle Leeb's stories have been published or are forthcoming in *Bare Fiction*, *Mslexia*, *Riptide*, and other publications. She grew up in South Africa and now lives in Nottingham, UK, where she works as a web developer when she is not writing. Twitter: @GiselleKLeeb

→ Valentina Cano is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time she has either reading or writing. Her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Web. Her debut novel, *The Rose Master*, was published in 2014 and was called a 'strong and satisfying effort' by Publishers Weekly. Twitter: @valca85

→ As a child, Kiare Ladner wanted to live on a farm, run an orphanage and be on stage. As an adult, she found herself summarising crime on nightshifts, doing drama with prisoners and taking minutes for academics. Then some kind funding made UEA's Creative Writing MA and Aberystwyth University's Creative Writing PhD possible. And that's where she is, working on a short story collection, right now.

→ Brennan Burnside's work has recently been published in *Lyre Lyre*, *Lost Coast Review*, *Gold Dust* and *Lux*. His chapbook *Room Studies* will be published by Dink Press in April.

He lives near Philadelphia and blogs at burnsideonburnside.tumblr.com

→ Jon Wesick hosts San Diego's Gelato Poetry Series and is an editor of the San Diego Poetry Annual. He has a Ph.D. in physics and is a longtime student of Buddhism and the martial arts.

→ Les Bernstein lives in Mill Valley, California with her large and boisterous family. Her chapbooks *Borderland* and *Naked Little Creatures* were published by Finishing Line Press, and her next chapbook *Amid the Din* will be released in September 2015 by Finishing Line Press.

→ Anstey Spraggan teaches creative writing in the community and for Canterbury Christ Church University. She lives in Kent with her husband and a huge sigh of relief that their five children and step-children have left home. *A Hairy Tale* was based on a picture of Grayson Perry, some moss, and all the memories of her children being small (and sweet). Twitter: @ansteyspraggan

→ mistress of pop, purveyor of fine doodles, erstwhile ukulelist. Currently based in Phoenix, Arizona, when she isn't dodging cacti she can be found up to her elbows in art supplies, indie bunting and riot grrrl art cargocollective.com/tawnykerr



