



The Queen's Head
#8

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EDITORIAL

There exists an optical illusion called the Fechner Colour Effect, discovered in the 1800s by a Mr Gustav Fechner, an early pioneer in experimental psychology and a founder of psychophysics. Just think, having that on your business card. Although technically the effect was first observed by Benedict Prévost, Monk. Fancy having that on your business card as well. Imagine if they were alternate sides of the same card. You'd be ever so impressive at networking events.

Anyhow, this effect is an illusion of colour, brought on by the rapid movement of black and white patterns. The colour isn't there, but you see it all the same. Different people see different colours. Apart from epileptics, who are advised to stay well away from anything called a Benham Top, and don't see anything. We've yet to figure out why, exactly, this effect occurs, and for that matter so have scientists, who are much more familiar with the effect than your editors, having dedicated their entire lives to the pursuit of knowledge. We like to wait for knowledge to come to us. There's such a thing as overkeen, you know.

Still, we like to think of this issue of The Queen's Head, our 8th, as a literary

incarnation of the Fechner. There are darkest darks, such as Sara Walters' Caged and James Hodgson's Exit Strategies, portraits of damaged minds spinning out of control, each by turns illusional and delusional. There are light-lights too, however: Camillus John's The Elastic Wedding Band is a comedic slice of fatalistic surrealism and industrial mishap, while Elaine Gallagher's queer romance A Life Examined finds renewed joy in lived experience. But then, not everything is as simple as a temporal modulation of local patterns. Between the black, between the white, you'll find the rest: Rachel Plummer's poems Midsection and Birdhouses which balance the visceral with grace and precision, Elliott Simpson's New Chair, a fabulist tale of Ottomannic metamorphosis, and Jenny Terpsichore Abele's encounter with the unverified, in Delia Bacon Does Not Exist. All three blend the truth with the unexplainable to disconcerting effect.

If, after exposure to all this strobing strangeness, you start seeing things that aren't there – colours, loved ones, the intentions of the multiverse laid bare like a Wikihow – well, you can't say we didn't warn you.

THE ELASTIC WEDDING BAND

by Camillus John

When you know at any minute you're going to smack yourself up against your wife at more than one hundred miles an hour, your life tends to lose a lot of its flavour. To say the least. And I did know that at any minute I was going to smack myself up against my wife at more than one hundred miles an hour, because it was all authenticated by scientists. Who could do nothing to save her. Or me, for that matter. They stated quite emphatically that it just wasn't scientifically possible to prevent me from killing her. Like, bloody hell, in the postmodern age of the bell-whistling internet, this was quite distressing.

That's why I offered her the kiss of death right there and then on a plate, instead of delaying the inevitable for a few weeks at most, I reckoned, eked out with endless squat-thrusts for strength (the basic up and down variety, because nothing more was possible in our elasticated position).

"Let's fling together, kiss and die gloriously, Honey. Come on. It's the most romantic thing we can ever possibly do. The repose of the happy. Abraham's bosom. And no one

could ever blame us. Our kiss of death will be guilt free. We'll go down in history. Look at our situation for God's sake. You won't last a month, and by then we'll just be fit to flop down listlessly without the wherewithal to as much as moisten our lips before the crash together comes, and our brains are dashed over the four living room walls."

"What do you mean next month, Chicken - me?"

"You're a woman. How could you physically last longer than me, a man? No matter how many squat-thrusts."

"You're a bastard, Chicken. A bastard. And I promise you now that I'll out-squat-thrust you any day of the week, onward to kingdom come."

"Well do that so, Honey."

"Don't worry, Chicken, I will."

And so it all began. She got Bookie, our nice landlord, to put up a net-curtain halfway across the room so she wouldn't have to look at my rubbery face ever again, and we squat-thrusted ourselves onwards for day after day after day, from opposite ends of the same room.

Because the basic up and down squat-thrust was the only sure-fire way we were going to survive, stuck as we were, permanently, into our stretched elastic band. Many top-notch scientists had said so. Top notch? Okay, I come at

you straight here, no pussy-footing. We could afford top-notch because both our parents are quite well off and they could supply us, Honey and I, with enough money for the rest of our lives, so we didn't have to worry about working for a living like everyone else. Which meant, after said scientists' chin-stroking advice, we had the means to survive in our stretched position until a solution could be developed for our problem in the laboratory, because no man or woman can stand in the gravel-crunching path of the march of technology without being pushed roughly aside.

The illustrious scientists employed by our parents were like professional boxing coaches pacing up to us between rounds, right in our faces, practically spitting. But only to motivate. So that we could maintain the tension. Our wealthy parents got them to the living room, in which we were permanently stuck, many times over with the power of the pound note. And each and every time it was the same. Keep up the squat-thrusts, guys, they said. And we'll develop a solution. Soon, we promise. Very soon indeed.

But how could I concentrate when I had to watch my eternal former lover through a net-curtain in the centre of a living room I could never leave? The

woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, and now had to spend the rest of my life with, in permanent tension no less, at the opposite end of stretched elastic. How, indeed?

Ever since that night of Strip Snap the scientists asked us, can you maintain the tension between you? Do you want to maintain the tension? Have you got the will-power to maintain the tension and live? Of course we do, we screamed. Of fucking course. We were fit people who ran laps in the Phoenix Park as part of our working week. Before. For fun. Before the elastic band. Nearly elite athletes at national level, both of us were, at school and beyond. Before the elastic band. Big and strong, and our parents were rich bastards. How could we fail to maintain the tension? How?

And Honey needed real life tension. That's how I interpreted the situation. My comments, I never apologised for. Not a syllable. She needed to kick against my prickist attitudes to keep her squat-thrusting onwards and upwards. The anger would maintain her focus, Grasshopper. I was a prickist. Go for it, Honey. Hate me and live forever. And vice-versa her.

Thus we watched and despised each other through net-curtains eating up our lives as best we could. Sleeping standing up in our elastic band. One

eye open. Squat-thrusting and having lovers in and out, over the years. Always maintaining the tension. Because we couldn't get any closer to each other. Which was our lives at opposite ends of the same room for thirty long years. Together. But apart. That's all I could see. Each lover she took giving my squats extra upward thrust. Renewable heartbreak. Thirty years' worth. And vice versa her. Probably. Since day one in Bookie's house where we painted a bedroom together. In the beginning.

Bookie let us rent a room in his house in Ballyfermot. We were a young couple married almost two months at that stage, saving for a deposit. Wink-wink to our rich-bastard parents. His house was a library and he was off out that evening to a book festival, while Honey and I painted our rented bedroom purple. It had to be purple. We celebrated when we had the job done with a card game called Strip Snap in the living room downstairs, seeing as though Bookie was gone and probably wouldn't be home until late late-late. A divil for the books.

We drank beer, smoked cigarettes and played Strip Snap until we were naked. Then we saw one of Bookie's industrial strength elastic bands, lying on the mantelpiece, in our drunken exuberance, yodelling out to us. When

you know you're in the presence of the person you'll spend the rest of your life with, the person you'll die beside, then there's only one course of action.

'Let's get inside that elastic band, Honey. It will bring us closer together.'

It was only, of course, meant to be a black joke and a laugh, but with beer, cigarettes and a strong connection, it became so compelling that we just couldn't not do it.

Bookie worked an elastic band factory for his daily bread and butter at the time. We should have paid him more rent, so he didn't have to work there. Asked our parents for the cash. Wise after the event every time. Because, he checked in to the elastic band factory to get a heads-up on the following day's production schedule before coming home to his house that evening – a crucial delay – after the book festival had closed up shop.

Thoroughly full of ourselves, we picked up the elastic band and stretched it so that we could get inside. Laughing all the way. Physically got inside. Standing up. At either end.

"You walk towards the kitchen wall, Honey, and I'll walk towards the opposite window."

It was only four steps or so in either direction but required a great deal of effort in our gregarious mood to really stretch that elastic. But we got there. We were young and drunk, is the whys

and the wherefores, and we desperately wanted to have sex afterwards. Honey touched Bookie's Guernica print on her wall. I touched his far window's cactus plant on mine, which looks out into the back garden. I stuck my head out. Then we turned to face each other.

"And now for sex!"

I began to step towards Honey's naked breasts when death licked my face and cupped my testicles.

"No, Honey! We can't."

"Chicken, I know. We're stuck.

Don't move. Bookie will be home soon. He'll get us out. He knows everything about elastic bands – and not just from books. From real elastic-band factory life."

If we stepped any closer towards each other the momentum in the elastic would be unstoppable. Both sides of the elastic band would flick together at such a speed that we'd smash each other's skulls apart when we met in the dead centre. Game over right there and then.

We'd worked it out, without scientists, on the spot. If only we were born a bit dumber. Or hadn't been educated to such a degree by our rich-bastard parents. Then maybe, just maybe, yes, a pipedream, I know, but maybe we wouldn't have realised anything of our own volition, and we'd have pursed our lips that effervescent

evening and skipped towards each other, joyfully looking forward to sex, and we'd have died beautifully. Instantly. Happily and romantically. Instead of what happened next.

And after thirty hard squat-thrusting years of refusal later, my mouth did something I couldn't control. For the very first time I cried out loud in my stand-up sleep:

"I love you, Honey."

She heard me and cried back:

"And I love you too, Chicken. But why the fuck didn't you say that thirty years ago?"

We no longer felt the need to maintain the tension. In the middle of the night, at last we were truly awake.

"But Honey – I only said that in my sleep. I was dreaming. You've just woken me up from a nightmare."

"You're joking, Chicken. Tell me you're joking?"

"Of course I'm joking, Honey. Of course. As I said earlier, I love you."

"In that case, Chicken, I want that kiss. After thirty years."

"Yes Honey. Yes. At long last."

So we pursed our lips and prepared to take our first steps towards each other in a very long time and to finally release all the tension.

"But first Chicken, let's have a minute's silence for our shared and unshared thirty-year past."

Thirty years of watching the love of your life living, loving and squat-

thrusting without you from across the room through a net-curtain from opposite ends of a stretched elastic band.

“It’s now or never. Kiss me to death, Chicken.”

We stepped forward with pursed lips and the elastic band did as was its wont. It came together at an enormous lick. Bookie, our nice landlord, filmed our final fling for Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. It’s what our fans wanted. So we gave it to them. We’d built up quite the romantic fan-base in the intervening years. We were actually in the top ten virtual Dublin tourist attractions for five of those years, although we did drop off the chart eventually. But after our death, who knows? Top three definitely.

In the end we tried our best to kiss, but it’s really difficult to direct yourself with any degree of accuracy when moving at such a speed. Bookie, however, proved it with slow motion afterwards, frame by frame. Corroborated by scientists. Our lips actually touched full-on for a fraction of a second, 0.245, i.e. a proper kiss, before our skulls collided, exploded, and blew our brains, skin, hair and bone out onto the walls of Bookie’s living room. You can still buy the print.

Bookie preserved it all pristinely. He never sold the house to our parents or

scraped us off the walls. He refrigerated the entire room so people can pay in and see us romantically mashed together. Still.

Nothing of us on the floor, ceiling or windows though, strangely enough. The scientists couldn’t explain that either. Just the two of us and the elastic band pebble-dashed over Bookie’s four walls in perpetuity. Not the way we wanted it, ideally, but the way it is.

*

Camillus John was bored and braised in Dublin. He has had fiction published previously in The Stinging Fly, RTÉ Ten and Headstuff.org. Recently he killed the Prime Minister of Ireland in fiction in the Welch literary magazine, The Lonely Crowd, with a piece entitled, The Assassination of Enda Kenny (After Hilary Mantel).

CAGED

by Sarah Walters

They arrived in news vans with satellites growing out of their roofs like angry, stiff erections. Julia was naked except for a thin white muscle tee that hung down to her knees, the material fluttering over her breasts with each warm push of the damp, Florida breeze through the yard. Her blonde hair, unwashed for days, fell around her face like a shredded veil. That was how I found her when I stumbled out of the house: wild. Eyes darting. Fingernails bit to the quick. All of her raw. All of her knotted and strung out.

"Julia." I said her name over and over. Over again. Over again. So many times it felt like a foreign language. Like I was saying it wrong.

"They're coming," she told me, after I had tried to place her nearly naked body into some kind of reason or logic or nonfictional space.

"Who's coming?"

"I called them."

"Called who?"

"They'll come. They'll see, then. How beautiful she is."

And then they came. First just one, and then three more all at once, with their satellites and their patent leather slingbacks and shoulder-padded blazers and hair that barely moved in

the wind. They unloaded onto the front lawn and Julia was grinning and naked and they swallowed her whole.

Julia met Louise in AA. Louise had veins made of whiskey and tar. Julia had vodka fire in her throat, ignited sometime in our sophomore year of high school.

"Not like there's anything to do in Lake Placid besides get blitzed," Julia would say from the passenger seat of my mother's Town n' Country, cheap plastic bottle of vodka between her thighs while she rolled a joint on a chemistry textbook.

We were 20 when her mother called me. Tearfully begged me to come to an intervention. To write a letter to Julia telling her how her addiction was negatively affecting my life. I was her best friend, after all—surgically attached since third grade, two heads full of blonde hair and crooked baby teeth.

I lied my way through it; Julia's addiction was the best thing about my life. Julia being a trainwreck was my point of comparison. I looked good in any light, standing next to her. Vomit in her hair outside a dive bar full of middle-aged dads willing to buy her drinks. Julia being completely fucked

made me the perfect, shining example of Has Her Shit Together.

I went to that first meeting with her. We hot boxed the car in the parking lot outside of the church. Shoved five bucks each in the cupholder on bets of how many Jesus Saved Me stories we would hear.

Louise was wearing a shiny gold bikini top under a gauzy black blouse, a microscopic pair of black shorts, and scuffed white Keds. She looked like a hooker who had mugged a fifth grader for her shoes. Julia was smitten.

“I’m Louise, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Louise.”

Her voice was thick and throaty, like it had drained through a cigarette filter. She had a beauty mark on her left cheekbone. Shiny, glossed lips. Nails painted Hellfire red.

Louise’s mother was dying of cancer. It was stage four and looking grim, so she figured she should “come to these meetings for that poor old bitch.”

Julia was practically masturbating beside me while Louise spoke. She sat on the edge of her tiny plastic chair. Gripped the sides with her bitten fingers. Pressed her thighs together like she had to pee. I worried she might start to drool. Or have an orgasm.

Julia was insatiable for disasters of all kinds. She read news stories about bombings and car accidents and

murder-suicides like gripping novels. She pinned them on her bedroom walls and swooned over them like they were photos of Hollywood heartthrobs. She only ever wanted to fall in love with people who were absolutely irreparable. Only wanted to unbutton her shirt for people who were terminal. Broken glass people. Backwashed-whiskey people. I should have imagined that AA would be like speed dating for her.

Outside after that first meeting, Louise was lighting a cigarette with a match. Julia glided across the parking lot and slithered up to Louise. I waited by my car and I watched them. Watched their lips move—Julia’s wound up in anxious grins and bottom-lip-bites, Louise’s twisted around her cigarette, leaving a red lipstick stain on the filter.

Back in my car on the way home, Julia held a matchbook in her palm like a precious jewel. Louise’s phone number was written on the inside. On the outside, the matchbook was an advertisement for The Blue Moon, a local strip club, a naked cartoon pin-up laid across the address.

If trainwrecks were works of art, Julia and Louise were a Van Gogh. A Da Vinci. A Degas. Flaming, burned landscapes that Monet must have

thrashed and bruised his way through before finally melting into lillies and still ponds.

They laid across the backseat while I drove most nights, their spindly limbs hanging from open car windows, cigarettes dangling from between their ringed fingers.

I drove because they couldn't. Because neither of them had a license because both of them kept getting pulled over after five and six cinnamon whiskeys. I drove because I always did, because before Louise, it had been me and Julia, two heads full of blonde hair and useless ambitions.

I drove because like any trainwreck, I couldn't look away. I drove so that I could watch them unfold around each other, draped over each other's laps in my backseat, rambling in slow, quiet soliloquies about the ways famous people have died, about strains of orchids that Julia failed at growing in her mother's living room windows, about Louise's ribs and how Julia thought they looked like a bird cage, how her heart must have been the bird.

"What does it sing?" Julia asked, head lazy in Louise's lap. I watched them through the rearview as the southbound lanes of Highway 27 slid past outside.

"It doesn't sing." Louise pulled hard on her cigarette, tapping ashes out the car window. "It doesn't sing."

*

Julia decided on a Tuesday that she had to kill Louise.

I was with her in her bedroom at her mother's house, her body all bones and sharp edges laid across the unmade bed, the mismatched sheets and blankets. Her naked breasts rose and fell with her breaths, her breathing almost a quiet lullaby she was singing while she spoke to me.

"Can you imagine it?" She asked, eyes fixed on the popcorn ceiling, fingers tracing shapes and letters on the bare expanse of her stomach. "Can you see it? Can you see her dead?" She closed her eyes, bottom lip between her teeth as if some kind of pleasure had just washed over her, her fingers ghosting the top of her pink cotton panties. "Wouldn't she be so beautiful?"

And we suffered through the rest of the endless summer afternoon, one that seemed to last for days, the ceiling fan blowing strands of blonde across our faces, Julia humming along with whatever scratchy melody dripped from the quiet radio speaker, and me thinking of Louise dead, of Julia wearing handcuffs like diamond bracelets, grinning at me.

*

We all visited Louise's dying mother the day before.

I drove. Louise sat up front. Julia laid across the backseat and propped her heels up on the open window. Crossed her thin ankles. Cat napped.

Louise's mother's nurse was the only one there. She sat beside the hospital bed reading a trash magazine. The bed looked out of place in the middle of the living room, all the other furniture shoved aside to make room for it, like her dying was a spectacle, something better to watch than the TV, which was turned and facing the wall.

All of the windows were closed. Florida's aching summer was pressing at their glass panes while the air conditioner hummed in time with the beeping of heart monitors.

We three stood like wilted orchids at the foot of the bed. Louise's mother was barely conscious, and she muttered and limply pointed at different things in the room. The nurse turned the pages of her magazine. Chewed gum with her mouth closed.

"She looks like she's already dead," Louise said, her voice curious rather than sad. The room smelled of unwashed skin. I stared at the bag collecting urine hanging from the side of the bed.

"Do you think she's happy?" Julia asked. She sounded hopeful. She sounded enamored. She stared at Louise pleadingly. I wanted to pull her back. To shake her and make her stop.

Louise's shoulders lifted and fell. The thin straps of her tank top stretched over the deep valleys of her collarbones, taut on her shoulders. She wasn't wearing make-up. She looked pale and young and empty. She looked like a girl watching her mother die in front of her.

Outside on the porch as we were leaving, Julia told Louise she loved her for the first time. She wound Louise up in her arms and kissed her and held her face. Louise stood and let her.

When we were in high school, Julia fell in love with a boy named Luke. Luke was on the lacrosse team and had dirty blonde hair that fell into his eyes. He had a girlfriend named Natalie. He had no idea who Julia was, much less that she was in love with him, much less that it was the kind of love that consumed her, that swallowed her up and made her take sharp swigs from water bottles filled with vodka.

Julia wrote Luke a thousand letters. She kept them in a shoebox in her bedroom. Once, she showed them to me.

“See, I just. I can’t give them to him.” She tried to explain. She bit her cuticles. I looked at the papers. Instead of words, there were just scribbles. Abstract scratches of ink and pencil that formed no coherent thoughts or ideas.

Julia broke into Luke’s house one night while everyone was asleep. She stood over him while he slept. Sat on his bedroom floor listening to him breathe. She left the letters on his night table and a week later, when he hadn’t acknowledged her or the unidentifiable mess of scribbles she had professed to him on paper, she convinced herself his girlfriend Natalie was the reason.

After Julia attacked her in the school parking lot, Natalie had to get stitches across her cheek.

“She’s not pretty anymore,” Julia swore to me as I drove to the mandatory community service the judge sentenced her to.

I got the call the night after we visited Louise’s mother.

“I did it.” Julia’s voice was wild and breathy on the other end of the phone.

“Did what?” Sleep was still blanketed over me. I tried to shake it from my senses, half convinced I was still dreaming. I could almost see Julia

there in the room with me while she spoke through the receiver.

“She looks so beautiful. You have to come see.”

I drove to Louise’s place in a dreamy stupor, seeing things on my way—ghosts of dead presidents and mangled road kill peeling up from the asphalt.

Louise shared a shitty manufactured home with a girl she tended bar with. Their driveway, just a long stretch of dirt and grass, was empty when I pulled up. The clock on my dash wore a sickly green 3:04AM.

The front door was wide open. I found Julia inside in the kitchen. Her flimsy white sundress was caked in a thick layer of black-red. As I came inside, she wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of one hand, leaving a smudge of red behind.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, voice stuck in the sleep still heavy in my throat.

Julia just grinned. Tom Waits’ voice was crooning from the turntable in the living room—she thought she had the moon in her pocket...

My eyes, up until that moment, had refused to see it. The smears of red along the kitchen countertops. Dripped onto the floor.

Over the edge of the kitchen sink, the soft lines of a woman’s profile rose up like a landscape on a horizon line.

The round end of a nose. The two, careful hilltops of closed lips.

“She’s so beautiful,” Julia whispered, barely audible under the music. Under the thick, throaty voice lifting weightlessly from the turntable. Under the palpable darkness emanating from Julia’s every cell.

“Everyone should see how beautiful she is.” Julia sang out, a giggle punctuating her words.

The reporters emptied out onto Louise’s front lawn from inside their vans and trucks, satellites pulsing, high heels sinking into the damp morning grass.

“Julia,” I begged, but she just laughed and pulled madly at her hair—still stained red in spots from the night before, no matter how long I had spent trying to clean her up, how I had shoved her white sundress into the metal trash bin outside, tossed a match in after it.

“I called them,” she shrieked, eerily gleeful. “I called them and told them to come and see Louise. See how beautiful she is.”

I tried to think of when I’d lost track of her. How she had slipped out from under my watch and made the phone call. Had I fallen asleep, exhausted from hours of breathing in bleach, from scrubbing the kitchen with a sharp-

bristled brush while Julia stood at the sink, dragging her fingers through the thickened, dried blood in Louise’s hair?

A reporter in a pastel yellow pencil skirt and blouse stepped over an empty whiskey bottle on the lawn and approached Julia, cautious—a tiger handler stepping into the cage of a hungry cat.

“Did you call it in? Where are the police? This wasn’t on the scanner. Where did you find it?” She asked in quick succession, wary and impatient.

“She had a bird inside of her chest,” Julia answered, as if that was exactly what the reporter had asked of her. She nodded and went on. “She had a bird inside her and now, now she’s the bird.” She looked up to the too-bright morning sky, turning her face to the sun, Florida layering itself over her.

The reporter looked to me, and when my blank expression offered her nothing, she backed away, signaling to the men at her truck, back towards the sharp shove of satellites.

Julia collapsed into laughter. A laughter that was full and came from somewhere deeper than her lungs. It erupted from her in waves, tumbled from her grinning mouth and fell into the air around her so warmly that I could almost see it, glittering around her shoulders.

Inside the house, Louise had her eyes closed in the kitchen sink, while

the rest of her slept silently on the bedroom floor in a wide, beautiful circle of red—a halo of her pulse, quiet and still, as distant sirens swept onto the front lawn, taking step with the dancing light of Julia’s laughter.



Sara Walters is currently finishing an MFA at the University of South Florida, teaching creative writing, and drinking a lot of expensive coffee. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Bridge Eight, So to Speak, Barely South Review, Lunch Ticket, and Sugared Water, among others.

THE CHAIR

by Elliott Simpson

Oh God.

I am a chair.

Somehow I have turned into a chair.

I can't move. My legs, all four of them, feel like they've been encased in clay, and my arms are stuck out as if reaching for a hug. I can only look straight ahead, towards the door that leads from the kitchen to the hallway. My eyes – do chairs have eyes? – are just about able to skim over the gingham tablecloth laid out in front of me. I can feel the sunlight from the window warming my back, which means it's morning... and that I've been down here all night.

I can smell wine. Red? Red. That's what I was drinking last night, sat in here. Thinking about yesterday feels like picking up a half-read book after a week without contact. I was drinking alone in the kitchen, on my third glass of wine, maybe fourth. Alice... Alice had gone to bed early – yes. She said she was starting early the next day, and that I should still celebrate by myself: celebrate her saying, 'Yes, Jen, let's get married.'

Then this. Then I somehow turned into a chair.

'Alice. Alice. Alice?'

I try to call for her, but the words reverberate in my head. The clock informs me that it's eight o'clock, meaning that she should've been up half an hour ago. I hear stomping sounds from above me, and then footsteps descending down the stairs.

'Alice, please. It's Jen.'

I listen to the slap of her feet as she passes through the hallway and into the living room. She's saying something, chanting in a low hum, but I can't quite make it out. Still, I listen. Cushions fly off the sofa, only to be returned moments later. Drawers are opened, riffled through, and then slammed shut. I know what she's saying: 'Keys, keys, keys...'

Once the living room is dismantled and put back together, she comes into the kitchen. As I see her, a heat flickers inside of me. Alice stares at me for a few seconds, perhaps curious where the new chair came from. The moment quickly passes as she begins to search the kitchen. A few minutes later I hear a jangling sound and she rushes out of the room. The front door slams shut.

My phone is on the floor next to my feet. I must've dropped it sometime last night. It buzzes throughout the day,

sending unwanted vibrations up my legs. I say legs, but that isn't what they really are – legs let you walk, run, jump, kick... My body feels like one single unit: no limbs, just a large, intricately-shaped torso.

I can't read my phone's screen, but I already know what the messages say. It's Alice asking me if I can pick up some things on the way home. It's Mum wondering if I'm still okay for Sunday. It's James asking why I'm not at work today. It's Karen telling me that I better have a good excuse.

I have a good excuse.

As the front door opens, I call to Alice despite knowing how pointless it is. At first my efforts for attention are crude: I swear, I insult her, I say things that would make her disown me, just to get a reaction. Then I simply tell her that I love her. Nothing.

'Jen,' Alice says, 'did you pick up some milk?' After receiving no response, she comes into the kitchen to check for herself. 'For God's sake.' She pulls out her phone and calls someone; the vibrations in my legs tell me who. It doesn't take her long to discover my phone.

Alice spends most of the evening in the living room. She watches the awful,

gimmicky quiz shows that we usually sit through together. The kitchen door is left open, so I listen and play along. I imagine Alice shaking her head at my guesses and correcting me like she usually does. Right now I would give anything in the world for one of her head-shakes.

At half-past seven, she starts to cook dinner without me. We had planned to make a curry together, but she goes for oven chips and a chicken steak. She sits by me as she waits for her food to cook, playing with the ring on her finger.

We continue to sit together as she eats her beige dinner. In between chips and forkfuls of chicken, she makes phone calls: 'Hello, I was wondering if Jen was in today?' 'Have you heard from Jen at all?' 'Hi Shirley, I was just ringing to ask about Jennifer...' Her final call, to my mother, proves to be a mistake and it takes Alice a good ten minutes to calm her down. After slotting the last of her chips into her mouth, she disappears back into the living room. For the rest of the night I'm alone again.

I see little of Alice in the morning. She makes herself a bowl of cereal, but tips it into the bin after the first spoonful. I wish I could say something to her. I wish I could hold her.

*

'I need to call the police,' says Alice. 'I mean, it's been long enough, hasn't it? How long are you supposed to wait?'

'She's been gone for two days, hon. I can call them if you don't think you're up to it.' Julia is with Alice this afternoon – they went to school together. I was never very fond of her, and now no longer have the ability to walk out of the room when she enters. Alice sits down at the table while Julia fills the kettle.

'I can do it, I just... Should I consult with Jen's parents first? I mean, Jesus, she's just bloody gone.'

'There's never a right answer to this sort of situation,' says Julia. 'You've just got to trust your gut instinct, and do what you think is best. You've got to take control.' She sounds like she's recounting lines from some self-help article. That's all Julia is, a collage of opinions found in waiting-room magazines.

Alice winces as her friend places a mug of tea in front of her. 'No thanks. Just... There's a bottle of gin in the cupboard – that one over there, yes. Should be some tonic water as well.' A gin and tonic appears in front of her. 'Thank you, that's perfect.'

Julia takes her tea over to the table and sits down. I watch them chat as an

unwilling spectator, hoping that one of them will eventually call the police. Alice does. After having a few gin and tonics, Julia begins to stare at me, eyes hazy with alcohol. She asks Alice if she's always had five chairs. Alice sips her drink and glances at me.

'I don't bloody know.'

My mother is here this morning. Hello Mum. I thought she might sit on me out of some maternal instinct, but no, she stays standing. The meal we were supposed to have on Sunday has left a void in her schedule, so she's come over here. I think Dad is playing golf.

'You must have some idea where she is.'

'I really don't,' says Alice. 'I wish I did, but... I'm as distraught over this as you.'

She is. I heard her crying in the living room yesterday when the police came over. They came to collect some photos of me, as well as get a description of my character. Alice was mostly flattering.

'When did you last see her?' says Mum. 'The last moment? When?'

'I don't know, Shirley. I really don't.' Alice begins to cry, but my mother shows no sympathy. She just stands there and waits for her to stop, ready

to ask another question. I can only watch and listen.

Three weeks. The first few days were easy to keep track of, but now everything is beginning to mush together. My memories of the past week are just a collection of scenes: Alice's parents coming over to cook her dinner, the police searching through the house, the evening Alice spent working her way through several bottles of wine. Though I don't remember what order these things occurred in.

Alice is on the phone. 'Yes, yes, I'm fine, I just... Yeah, it was good. I've only been back for a couple of days, but I think the routine is good for me. Everyone at the office treated me like normal. I'm going out with the girls on Friday as well, after much persuading... Yeah, first time in a while. I don't think I could stand being stuck in here all day anymore, I'd just... God, I couldn't handle it. Claustrophobic. So how's Mum? ...Yeah, really? That's great. You'll have to tell me all about it on Saturday...'

Everything fades eventually. I can hardly remember what books I used to

read, what music I listened to, and what TV shows I watched. When Alice mentions names over the phone, I don't know who half of the people are anymore. I can't remember what colour our sofa is. I'm not sure what our garden looks like. I don't remember any of the in-jokes we had at work. It's been so long since I've seen anything beyond these four walls, anything beyond this kitchen. What lies in front of me is everything now.

And Alice. I also have Alice.

A new person. I hear her talking to Alice and Julia as the front door opens. Alice says her name: Sophie. Sophie, Sophie, Sophie... Julia calls her Soph instead, like she's trying to make it a thing. Sophie – I've heard Alice say that name on the phone before, and I've heard it thrown around this kitchen late at night while she and her friends empty a bottle of gin.

'Pretty nice place,' says Sophie.

'It's all right,' says Alice. 'Got all the essentials, I suppose. Living room, kitchen, bathroom, soundproof dungeon...'

'Funny.'

'It's also got a bedroom, hasn't it Alice?'

'Julia.'

'Oh, I'm just winding you up. It's only a joke.'

They stand in the hallway for a bit, chatting about odd things.

Julia clicks her tongue. 'Well, I suppose I better be getting on. Andrew said he was going to take me out somewhere fancy tonight. Alice, text later?'

'Sure.'

'And I guess I'll see you some other time, Soph.'

'Bye, Julia.'

The front door slams. After a few seconds, Alice says, 'I'm sorry about her. She's just a bit, well... She's always been like that.'

'It's fine, really. Don't worry about it.'

I wait patiently for the two of them to come into the kitchen, but they do not. Instead they go to our bedroom.

Alice and Sophie are sat in the kitchen with me, eating fish and chips. Sophie is here most days now. They talk about movies a lot, it seems to be a common interest. Alice says that her dad used to work as a projectionist, and that he was able to get her in to any film she wanted to see for free. She never told me that. I thought I knew her, but she never told me that.

Sophie has surprised Alice with a bottle of wine. She wasn't supposed to be coming over tonight, but now she

wants to take her out to dinner. For now they just sit at the table and drink.

'You know,' says Sophie, 'I've been looking at some houses recently. There are some really nice ones just outside of town that I think you'd like. This morning I was looking at this gorgeous place with an en suite bathroom, and the rent...'

'Sophie,' says Alice, 'are you asking me to move in with you?'

The question is answered with a blush. 'I think it's time, don't you? These past six months with you... I've loved every second of it. And if we're going to move in together, I want to do it right, you know? My place is too small – half of it is taken up by my bed – and yours, well...' She sips her drink. 'I just don't think it would be right for us to live here together.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know, your ex.'

'Jennifer.'

'Jennifer, sorry. I just think that you need to get away from this place, and all this stuff. Too much history. Alice, I love you, and I think if we live here we're just going to get caught under the shadow of what happened. And I don't want that, because I think we're pretty great together.'

Alice nods a couple of times, but says nothing. I half-expect her to play with the ring on her finger, but remember that it's not there anymore.

Instead, she stretches her hand across the table to Sophie, and they knit their fingers together. They smile at each other. I do not smile. I do not frown, or cry, or swear, or shout. All I do is watch-watch-watch and listen-listen-listen.

‘God, I didn’t realise you had so much stuff.’ Sophie leans on the table while she looks around the kitchen. Almost everything that isn’t food has been thrown away. The kettle is gone, the bread bin is gone, the gingham tablecloth is gone... My world has slowly been deconstructed into nothing.

‘It’s not that much,’ says Alice, coming into the room.

‘Darling, it is.’ She clicks her tongue and glances over the remaining items in the room. Her eyes stop on me. ‘What do you want to do with the chairs then?’

‘The chairs? I don’t know... To be honest, they are looking at bit old and worn out. Do you think a charity shop would take them?’

I’m surrounded by furniture: tables, sofas, bed-frames, desks, stools, cupboards, and even a few other chairs. I’m lucky that the man who owns this place chose to position me in

front of the window, allowing me to see out onto the street. Some people look at me.

I think about Alice sometimes, her and Sophie. I wonder what their house looks like, and whether they got an ensuite in the end. I wonder if they watch quiz shows together, and if they make up some of their dinners as they go along. I wonder if Alice ever thinks about me at all, and if she still has the ring I gave her...

But that’s only sometimes. Most of the time I just watch and listen.

*

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EXIT STRATEGIES

by James Hodgson

With amyl tucked under one nostril, a finger pinching the other, John takes a deep hit before he passes the bottle forward to the guy in front. The poppers are an activator. Already in his blood is about a quarter gram of PCP, or phencyclidine, which is a bitter white powder likewise administered via the nose. The combination of PCP and poppers will briefly permit John to fold space, to travel without moving: the amyl tunes out everything save a single object and the PCP is a powerful hallucinogen, and John is able to derive a sublime unparalleled sexual high from the alignment of these two things with a third thing, the aforementioned single object, that is here the male body's unglamorous exit. Gross, huh. The spice extends life. But so too does it expand consciousness, which for John means an unfolding of the universal human membrane – purple-red, pale-horse beige – twinned with the collapse of his mind towards it, a tin can that has crossed, deep in the ocean, from one threshold of pressure to another. Drugged thusly, John – no-longer-John, not-even-anything – journeys along corridors of mutable shape and fluorescent colour, travelling

far from earth, far across known space: travelling without moving.

Given the relativity of time it is impossible to say for how long he departs (those of us trapped unluckily on earth would suggest around ten minutes). His first thoughts post-amyl high are of his wife, Tanya. A vague headache. A finger of the nitrite's residual smell draws him on to others; the odour of cleaning products, gym mats, and bodily fluids lingering everywhere like background radiation. How Tanya would shriek. 'The germs, the germs...' she would say, white pack-ice knuckles topping fistfuls of blouse. John looks at the anus in front of him. How long is his companion going to be? Some people find it hard to come on PCP, particularly those on their first trip. He can empathize. But when John shared a line with this anonymous man, this man whose arse he's just, well, eaten, the guy said he'd screwed on it before. With large muscular buttocks pushed right up against his face he cannot guess whether he's even enjoying himself – in fact he just has to lie in the afterglow and wait. I wonder, thinks John, what he does for a living. The man is motionless. Eventually, John wriggles out from underneath. No response to this. It takes another minute, and the

arrival of a cold sweat, for him to understand the man is dead. Dead, somehow, possibly off the PCP, during the period of time in which John passed through the star-gate of his rectum, that is, the dead man's, to travel the universe. He presses a hand over his mouth, swears into it very quietly, and backs against the cubicle door. Someone tries to enter. He holds the door closed.

First come practical considerations. He checks the dead man's pulse, to be sure. Yes, dead. He scrapes up what he can find of his own semen, cooling, and wipes it on his towel. Alongside his poppers, he pinches the PCP beneath the towel the same way he imagines you'd hide a loaded gun, then re-enters the sauna's labyrinth.

Almost immediately after leaving the cubicle, a muscular twink cruises him. He does not take the proposition up. He walks into the dry-ice, hoping it will obscure his face, and at the end of the corridor turns left. Through the ears: faint house music. Through the nose: the fumes of lavender-scented cleaning products, liberally applied. There is but one way in to the sauna, and one way out—the locker room. Another man, this time thick-set, checks him out. Would he be tempted in any other situation? Jesus, John, he tells himself. A man is dead.

As he approaches the Exit (an oblong of golden-orange light) he hears a scream, sharp and effeminate, and likely therefor to be the muscle twink. Now John knows his timer has begun for real. He's certain the muscle twink saw him leave the cubicle containing the dead man, which, based on his experience with cruising, should mean he, the muscle twink, will absolutely recognise him, John, on sight and if not recognise his face then certainly his body-type, and his cock, too, and possibly recollect that he has a small tattoo of an animal paw on his pec which he sold to Tanya as symbolic of his inclinations toward naturalism (honey, I just love bears!) but in fact signals a taste for unsavoury things done to gentlemen covered in hair –

He walks towards the tangerine Exit, then stops. He must leave, now. He should leave, shouldn't he? He should open his locker and clothe himself and pick a breath-mint from the bowl and walk out into the evening light. So why does he waver, a corridor away from escape? In Frank Herbert's *Dune*, star-ship navigators are gifted with marvellous drug-enhanced cognitive abilities which they use to cross interstellar space (John's only seen the David Lynch film: after a charged evening watching Feyd Rautha's half-naked frame emerge

from the smoke on Geidi Prime he asked Tanya for her hand in marriage, moving neatly, even seamlessly, from one form of speculative escapism to another). Likewise, as John's preferred brand of cognitive enhancers dance down his neural pathways he thinks: if I am seen leaving now my face will be captured on the closed-circuit cameras immediately after the time of death which will be taken as a smoking gun. I should wait it out. Maybe even find someone to say, 'him? This John-fellow? Well, I was with him around the time you're talking about. We were engaged in private business.'

John pads away from the locker-room. A man, betowelled, slaps up the corridor ahead. It is the muscle-twink. He can hear him shout at reception. 'A body, a body!'

John takes a right and heads into the maze. Soon after, two attendants bolt past him, the second knocking into John without a word. The PCP skitters across the floor. Do either of them notice? No. John could leave it alone. But the finger-prints, he thinks, are surely an incriminating clue. He collects the drugs, holds them tight beneath his towel.

Some elements of the chemical persist in his psyche. For example, he reads into the faces of the men he passes both desire and judgement.

They can't know. How do they know? Impossible. He opens a cubicle. A bearish man is getting screwed by two men, one skinny, the other old. They take it in turns. John, feigning interest, listens to the corridor. Amidst the footfall of slow amorous travellers he can make out other sounds: harsh voices, shoes clunking up and down. Frantic movement. When the skinny man pulls away, cock shining like a bullet, he holds the bear's legs towards John. 'You want a go?' he says. John shakes his head. With eyes closed, the bear is oblivious or indifferent. Dead. Could be.

He sits within the darkness of a small porn-theatre, camouflage netting for a door, and tries to puzzle out the optimum way forward. "John," says a voice. "Is that you?"

It is a man from work. Alan Edgware, manager of Accounts Payable. His body (slouched pendulous flesh hanging from a slack frame) is what shocks Michael first. In the real world this man raises purchase orders. "John," says Alan, whispering. "It's me, Alan."

John keeps focussed on the screen. Alan holds up his ringless wedding finger. Brothers together: the secret sign.

"Does Sally know you're here?" says John. It's about the only thing he

can think to say that's not related to the office, but he regrets it immediately because Alan scowls. "Tanya thinks I'm working late," says John, by way of explanation.

Alan gets up and leaves. John, anxious for a moment about this, keen to apologise and return to the warm complicity between brothers, tries to follow him through the maze, but in vain: Alan has rushed off into the smoke.

John approaches the swimming pool. It is empty and still, the pool, but above the turquoise waters (actually in the place of a mermaid chandelier intended by the management as a touch of camp) floats a hallucinated Tanya.

'You said you'd take me on a long weekend, John,' she says. Is her head shaved, a la the Bene Gesserit sisterhood? He looks away. 'Tonight, John, I'm making Dim-Sum.'

That's right. Chinese night. Tanya makes very good Dim-Sum: pliable, feather-light dough packed with porkmeat, spiced, that spills immorally over each finger upon the bun's opening. Will he ever see Tanya again?

'Fear,' says the version crowning the pool, 'is the mind killer. You must not fear.'

He must not fear.

There is only one way out. John knows what he has to do: pass the

test of fear. He's waited long enough. If he leaves too late, Tanya will worry. He needs to make his exit. To return to Tanya. He must not fear. He will walk to his locker and clothe himself and pick a breath-mint from the bowl and stride out into the evening light; men will have come and gone and he will slip out like his peers and return to real life and enjoy Dim-Sum and take Tanya on a long weekend, perhaps –

He walks back to the Exit. Around it now he finds four men with torsos wrapped in towels standing alongside an attendant. The attendant is asking everyone to wait – there's been an accident. Up goes a groan. An ambulance is on its way. Although the attendant isn't certain he believes the police will need to take statements from witnesses. They ask the attendant questions, such as 'what happened?' and 'will you want our names?' John walks the other way, as fast as he can.

An alibi. That's the next best thing. Someone to say, 'him? This John-fellow? At that time, the time of the murder, we were engaged in private business.' A handsome Italian stares at him. Yes, he'll do. Just before he ducks into a cubical, two attendants approach. Actually, he realises, they are working their way down the corridor, knocking on every door. Asking questions. Inside, the Italian

starts to suck him off. Given John's proclivities this can only leave his dick looking like a sock caught in the rain. The Italian flicks his eyes up to him, puzzled, even pleading. John whispers in his ear. The Italian nods, gets on his knees and faces the door; John kneels behind him. 'What's that?' says the Italian. The packet of drugs has slipped from the towel once more. 'PCP', he replies. The Italian scoops out a bump. 'Any good?' He doesn't respond. It's too late to snatch the evidence back (although he is possessed by a brief fantasy in which he does just so, then one in which he reports to the police that it's not his PCP at all, oh no, actually the Italian supplied it—it's all his fault, you see, and not the other way around...). He reaches for his poppers.

A deep hit. Like acid, almost, along the innards of his nostril. He can likewise hear the Italian snort the powder. In the unguent darkness – the smells of which fold and unfold – John can see a tiny image of his wife. A final hallucination, activated by the poppers. Tanya is cooking dim-sum. She welcomes him home. He tells her about his day. She has had a good day. She has done many positive things in the world. They book flights for Cyprus. He lies her down on a beach, fetches her a magazine, and orders cocktails

from the bar. What a gentleman, she says. This is who I am, Tanya. She laughs at a crab doing something stupid. They drink piña coladas and laugh together at the stupid crab. This is who I am.

Of course it's just a trace-effect, the spice's pale echo magnified through the lens of the amyl like the last crumbs of gold brought to light by a panning dish. But what's funny is that for a moment (before the attendants knock on the door) he believes in the vision sincerely – as if it were real, as if it were something as innocent as a destiny, or a possible destiny.



James Hodgson has fiction published in The Cro Magnon, JJ Outré Reviem, Typehouse Literary Magazine, with Queen Mob's Teahouse and in Spoke, an anthology of New Queer Voices. He has poetry published in Kaffeeklatsch Magazine, NSW Magazine, Chelsea Station Press and the Between Anthology (CS Press, 2014). His website is hodgsonson.wordpress.com

birdhouses

by Rachel Plummer

Once our house was loud with birdwings. House
martin, coal tit. Feathers beating the close wooden walls.

Later our house was an abandoned nest box
incubating egg shells, dead leaves, three naked helpless
nuthatch chicks rooting for beech mast, maggots in the nest
bed. The birdhouse stank of wood rot and rotting
bird bones, sternum and scapula. We stripped them, starving
for the leather-scrapes of tendon that still clung in strings.

Empty. Stomachs clenched tight as fists. And we
were birds, air-light and perching, finally hollow
enough to dart from the door's black eye to the white eye
of the sun, blinding and new over the garden.

midsection

by Rachel Plummer

Belly wilted. Clitoris framed in folded
flesh like old linen that you've given up on
ironing, and all of that mossy, hanging
labial satin.

Moth bitten, one scar on her abdomen that
opens like a mouth, and another – there, it
bleeds silver capillaries upwards, outwards
over her pelvis.

Here. Her vulva, vulnerable underside; its

soft topography on your fingertips like
 nothing ever sculpted or set in marble,
 wrinkled and golden.

Ebb. And ebb. See how she is curved underneath,
 moon-round, marred. You're cored like an apple, hollow,
 flowing out and in on the tides of her skin. She
 bares you like teeth.

Plush as fruit exposed to the wasps and rotten
 at its centre, she lets the edges give and
 sag and swell beneath all that lush and hairy
 flinching, sleeping

skin. So pale, and normally unexposed; her
 damaged stomach, ribs, and the softness below them
 smudged as if by fingers. Not flower-like, not
 bud and not petal,

even when she spreads out the limp majora.
 See, they sigh like something unused to being
 seen. Steady. She's shy as a green cocoon too
 soon picked apart. She

wears herself like another woman's dress. Who
 is the girl so lost at the edges? You can
 see her small, dull eyes in the mirror, watching.
 No recognition.

*

Rachel Plummer was born in London but has spent most of her adult life in Edinburgh, where she lives with her husband and two young children. She has had poems published in magazines including Mslexia and Agenda, is a Troubadour prizewinner and a recipient of the Scottish Book Trust's New Writers Award.

A LIFE *EXAMINED*

by Elaine Gallagher

The singer has launched herself into the crowd, trusting the raised hands to support her and pass her along, directing herself by leaning in one direction or the other as she trails a forty-foot train behind her. She comes straight for Sara, grinning wickedly, waves as she passes and travels on. Behind her on the stage the band keep up the song's chorus, improvising riffs around the melody and keeping the atmosphere high as the crowd cheers her on.

'Isn't that amazing? Look at it again!' Sara thumbs her phone to rewind the video and the singer approaches the screen again, grinning again as she crowdsurfs past, the music tinny through the speakers, sounding flat against the background music of the cafe.

'Marvellous. Did you actually watch the gig?' Rafe looks curiously at the phone and then at Sara.

'Of course I did. I was there, wasn't I?'

'Filming it.'

'Well, yes, how else am I going to remember something like that, look!'

Sara rewinds and plays the film yet again.

'You could, you know, remember it. In your brain?' Rafe taps Sara on the temple and she pouts. Gorgeous, tall, with fair curly hair, greatcoat and suit hiding a slim figure, Rafe insists on being referred to as neuter: they, them. Sara can never tell whether they are male or female, both or neither and doesn't care. She can't draw her eyes away from their beautiful cheekbones and wide dark eyes. She desperately wants to impress them.

Rafe smiles their amazing smile and Sara forgets her pique. They know the effect they have on her, but for some reason they have held back, seeming content to stay just friends. Sara sighs and smiles back. They sit for a moment, saying nothing but nodding to the server as she brings their coffee. The shoppers pass by outside the window, busy in their own worlds.

'Did you enjoy the gig?'

'Yes! it was brilliant ...' Sara starts thumbing through icons to play other clips but Rafe puts their hand over hers to stop her.

'Describe it to me. Make me be there.'

Sara opens her mouth, pauses, closes it. She glares at Rafe, 'That's why I took the videos, to show you. To keep and to see it again whenever I like.'

'But I'm not there, all I see is a little picture. Can't you make me feel as if I were there?'

'How can I do that?'

'If you were really, truly there, watching, feeling, listening, part of the crowd rather than a bystander recording it, you would be able to make me feel it too. I'd hear it in the thrill of your voice as you tell me how it was and what you saw. What you felt.'

'But I was there! Now you're taking the piss.' Sara feels as if she's about to cry, disappointment welling up in her throat, behind her eyes.

Rafe holds up a hand to her face, tilting their head and smiling a wordless request for permission before they gently stroke her cheek and wipe away a beginning tear.

'Can I make a bet with you? How about you put that thing away for a couple of months and actually look at the world? Then I'll ask you again and we'll see how you do.'

'What do I win?'

'I think you'll find that you win a wealth of experience, but you want something more?'

'I'll feel like I've been hobbled, I think I deserve something more.'

'All right then,' Rafe smiles a promise that makes Sara's breath catch in her chest. 'A kiss.'

'Done!'

Sara is walking through Kelvingrove park, on her way from her flat in the West End to the city centre. It is a walk that she loves in any season; right now the early November drifts of leaves are golden at the sides of the path and the air is crisp without being biting cold. As she walks she drinks in the colours; greens pale to conifer dark, muted by the overcast, the lighter trees showing patches of rust as their leaves turn to fall and join the drifts on the path.

Beside the duck pond there is a tree, a flowering cherry that she has photographed many times in its seasons, still keeping its leaves but now gorgeous in many shades of red and orange. She stops, enchanted, and reaches for her phone to take a picture.

Her phone is up at her face and she is setting up the shot when she remembers her deal with Rafe. She grimaces, thinks about taking the picture anyway. Who would know? It's not as if she shows them every picture that she takes. Just the really good ones. And this would be a really good one; the colours of the tree are beautiful, a flame in the dourness of the Scottish autumn. She puts her phone away; maybe she'll learn to paint.

Further along the path there is a group of childminders with half a

dozen toddlers, the children free of their prams to run on the grass. A couple are running round a tree. Another joins them, chortling, then another and soon all the children are circling the tree, no purpose or game but laughter and running. Sara smiles at the scene and walks on.

Sara catches up with Cathy at the bookshop on Argyll Street and soon they are negotiating the Saturday afternoon bustle on their way to Mono for lunch and an afternoon's gossip. Friends since they met in a first-year History tutorial, they have shared books and bands and advice on boyfriends or girlfriends.

'What, not at all?' Cathy asks.

'I can use it as a phone of course, but I'm meant to pay attention and remember things. It's murder.'

'That's a bit extreme.'

'I know! They keep doing this Jedi Master shit, I don't know why.'

'Why do you let them away with it?'

'Well, there's a kiss in it for me...'

Sara falters, suddenly uncomfortable; something feels off. She shakes her head and turns back to Cathy, whose attention is distracted by a woman trying to push a buggy at the same time as she is keeping a fractious four-year-old from running away.

'Each to their own, I suppose...'

Hey!

A boy in a track suit and hoodie has his hand wrapped in the strap of Cathy's bag and is dragging it away. Cathy has the bag in both hands and is struggling to keep hold of it, her efforts pulling him around to face them. Suddenly the buckle snaps and the strap gives way. The bag's contents go flying, and the boy lets go the strap and runs for it. He is around a corner before Cathy or Sara can get a phone out and take a snap.

'Bastard!' Cathy hasn't had time to be shocked but tears are starting as she puts together the wreckage of her bag. Sara puts her arm around Cathy's shoulder and waves for the attention of a nearby police officer, who has just noticed the fuss and is running towards them.

Sara looks at the corner where the boy has disappeared, picturing the pinched face that had been beneath the hoodie, and vows to herself, Phone or not, I'll remember you.

Sara weaves through the gig crowd at the Academy, spilling slightly the drinks in her hand, shouting 'excuse me' in the ears of guys standing in her way so that she can be heard over the chatter of the crowd. Eventually she makes her way to where Cathy is standing, holding down places near the

centre front of the venue, perfect place to see the stage.

She hands Cathy her drink and turns to see what is happening. They had made their way to the spot while the support act were on and the crowd had been thin knots of people standing, drinking, chatting, completely ignoring the singer and guitarist on the stage. Cathy had wanted to do the same, but Sara had found herself caught up in the voice of the girl singing, and while she hadn't shushed her, had not paid attention and Cathy had got the message.

To cheers and shouts, the PA announces the main act and they come bouncing on stage; a singer/pianist, guitarist and drummer who are on their reunion tour after about fifteen years. The gig starts, the lead launching straight into a high-energy rock number and Sara and Cathy are dancing and cheering with the rest of the audience.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sara sees Cathy lifting her arms up, trying to get a snapshot of the band, or at least the singer, since she is probably too close to get the whole band into the shot. She is standing still, jostled by the bouncing crowd and looking up at her phone to try to see the screen. Sara grimaces, thinking of the gigs she had been to in the last couple of months,

the photo opportunities she had missed, the tweets that she hadn't been able to make, squeeing about songs as they were being played so that everyone would know what a good time she was having. She puts her hand in her pocket, closes it around her phone, thinks of her deal with Rafe and pushes the phone back down safely.

The band slows down slightly, playing a number from the new album, then another one that is complicated and baroque with varying dynamics and difficult lyrics. Sara is fascinated, marvelling at the tightness of the players as they hand melody from one to the other and play spectacular solos.

Cathy nudges Sara; 'What's this one? I don't know it,' she shouts.

'I don't know it either, must be new,' Sara shouts back.

'It's a bit weird!'

'I'm liking it!'

Cathy makes as if she's going to shout something else but Sara misses it as she turns back to face the stage.

Song follows song, numbers from the new album and familiar ones from the band's previous life and from the singer's solo career. One, he introduces as being about a tragic period from his youth. The song is haunting, with a melancholy piano accompaniment and very light backing from the rest of the band. Sara had never known the story

of the song and she finds tears starting as it pours out a tale of grief and heartbreak.

A shoulder jostles her and Sara is pulled from her reverie as a boy pushes past her with drinks. He passes them to his friends just in front of her and they laugh and talk through the crescendo and the ending of the song, completely ignoring the fact that there are people around them trying to pay attention to the music.

The show picks up pace with a crowd favourite, in which the audience is divided into halves and given tunes to sing, as if they were trumpet and sax sections. Sara is caught up in the enthusiasm, chanting her part with Cathy and everyone else around her. She is part of the show, the pleasure of the audience, the joy of the players and the song, uplifted by it; for a brief moment she feels as if she is every person there, musicians and audience alike.

The show ends, the crowd cheering for several encores, and Sara is transported through it, one with the revellers until she and Cathy are jostling for the exit.

'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine, wasn't that amazing?'

'It was fantastic! Look at this,' Cathy pulls out her phone to page through the pictures that she had taken and

starts to post them onto her social networks.

Sara grins and walks on, still glowing with the happiness of the crowd.

It is a spring Saturday and Sara is walking through Glasgow Green on the way to the People's Palace. The day is warm and bright, April sunshine glowing in the new buds of the trees. She stops as she reaches the riverside edge of the park to lean against the railing and watch the sparkle of light on the ripples raised by the breeze.

A cormorant is perched on a pile in the river, wings spread to dry in the breeze. Sara stands watching it for a few minutes.

A couple walk past her. 'Look at that, what's it doing?' the woman says.

'Their feathers get waterlogged when they dive.'

'Oh. Wait a minute.' The woman pulls her phone out of her bag and takes a picture.

Sara looks at the cormorant. The cormorant looks back. They both shrug, and the bird dives off the pile, leaving a circular wave that is quickly wiped away on the rippling river surface.

Sara turns away and walks on, unsettled. Did that bird really shrug at me?

As she walks through the park, the breeze moves the tree branches and the sun through the translucent leaves shines dapples on the grass that dance like laughter. Sara sees a tree that looks distinctly amused, and wonders if she is losing her wits.

The People's Palace is a museum, with a large arboretum built to the side, the Winter Gardens, filled with tropical plants. Sara comes here a few times a year, fascinated by the lives of the Glasgow citizens that are preserved in the displays. As she passes through the entrance hall, she hears echoes, her footsteps coming back to her as murmurs of voices and a hectoring speaker. She looks around but there is nobody in sight and the voices fade. She remembers that the palace was originally intended to be a lecture hall and meeting place for the people of Glasgow, and shrugs at her overactive imagination.

She goes up to her favourite display, the reconstruction of a tenement flat from the time before electric lights and the modern kitchen appliances that she takes for granted. There is the cast-iron range, the cooking and heating of the flat, and she sees the family settled round it, Paw and Maw and children like a scene from The Broons comic strip. No. She doesn't; the museum display is as it

always has been, the range surrounded by the household implements, the flatiron and the skillets and the pictures of the sink and the wringer that would have done for the household's washing, and the Liz Lochhead poem framed beside it.

More voices distract Sara as she wanders round the displays; images of people, snatches of conversation. Bright chatter and shrieks of laughter of women washing their sheets in the steamie, the public baths and washhouse; jazz and rock and roll played in the Barrowlands ballroom. She has been to the Barrowlands, but it's a gig venue now, not a dance-hall. The overlay of emotion is like nothing she has ever felt, the connection she feels with the lives of the people that are depicted.

Down the stairs, out past the cafe area and along the arboretum path to the shelter of the trees. The warmth and humidity enfold her and the murmur of the trees and plants, some as old as the Winter Gardens themselves, are calming. The old banana tree is friendly and comforting to sit under and Sara gradually relaxes until the clamour of her feelings subsides. She pats its trunk, nods thanks, and stands.

It's Friday night and Sara and Cathy are at the Pig and Butterfly to hear their friends' bands. The crowd is friendly and the first band have a good sound for the venue; quirky and fun, mixing klezmer and rock in danceable tunes. Sara sips her drink and listens to the music while Cathy chats distantly to some guy who seems intent on separating them, smiling politely while keeping her body language neutral.

Sara looks over at the guy. She purses her lips. He has a look that she really doesn't like, quite apart from the fact that he's being incredibly rude to her and taking up her friend's attention. It reminds her of something. That bag snatcher. It's not the same person, but Sara remembers the feeling. She nudges Cathy, who looks round.

Sara tilts her head in the direction of the band and Cathy nods. She turns to the guy, says, 'Excuse me,' and the two of them start filtering their way through the bar, past the leather armchairs and tables, to the stage. They dance together to the rest of the band's set, and hang around to chat while they break down their kit and make way for the next band.

There is a scuffle near the door; Sara can see the bouncer heaving a man out in an armlock, recognises the

creep that had been chatting up Cathy. She doesn't point him out to her.

They have a good spot near the stage when the band takes their positions and starts to play. The lead singer is theatrical, with a curled moustache and bowler hat, cerulean trousers and red and white spats. Sara grins just to see him, and laughs as he gesticulates and dances among the crowd, climbing on tables and getting the audience to sing along with the refrain.

Sara is focused on the music and the performance, when from behind her, a voice says, 'Hello.' She starts, and feels stupid for it as she relaxes and grins at Rafe, who grins back. She feels her heart leap, because the smile has the same promise in it that she saw months ago in the cafe. They beckon her, and she follows them to the edge of the crowd.

'Are you having a good time?'

'It's great, yes. Paul really knows how to work a crowd, look at him.'

'What about your friend?'

Sara looks over at Cathy, who has settled in with a knot of their friends and a couple of the players from the previous band. She remembers the creep and looks around, but she can't see any sign of trouble, and relaxes.

'She's fine, we're both good. How about you?'

'Not bad at all. I'll be moving on soon, though.'

'Where to?'

Rafe just smiles and turns to watch the band, who have launched into a spiky, dissonant number which the lead singer is performing with a hand-puppet of a skull, which he makes to sing along with him. Sara stands close to them, as close as she thinks she can get away with. Any other time that she has tried this, Rafe has gracefully stepped away a little, but this time they look round at her and smile gently, not moving away. Emboldened, Sara takes their arm.

The band goes into a cabaret number that has a lively beat and people around the stage start dancing. Rafe takes Sara's hand and says, 'Will you dance with me?'

'Yes!'

Rafe swings Sara around, leading her in jive steps; she has no idea what she's doing, but their lead is firm and gentle and she finds herself spinning and swaying to the music along with them. As the song ends, Rafe gathers her closer in a circle of their arms. Sara smells a spicy scent, cinnamon perhaps, and feels warmed, as if she's surrounded by a golden glow.

'You've been learning to pay attention to the world, haven't you? Look around.'

Sara reluctantly looks away from them and around at the people in the bar. Many of them seem the same as ever; her friends chatting and nodding their heads to the music, the other people in the crowd the same kind of well-off twenties and thirties-somethings she'd see on a Friday evening in the Pig and Butterfly. She starts to notice feelings associated with the people she is watching; loneliness in this woman; simmering violence from that boy that makes her recoil, reminded of the creep from earlier; genial anarchy radiating from the singer on the stage.

Another person seems doubled, as if an unfocused image were superimposed over them; regrets, a life not lived. As in the museum, images begin to overwhelm Sara; emotions, pictures, histories. She trembles and looks around wildly. Rafe holds her close and pats her back.

'Don't be afraid, you're just seeing what's always there, if you begin to look.'

Sara pulls away slightly and sees that the glow she had imagined still surrounds them. In fact, it surrounds Rafe and she is bathed in it and warmed by it.

'Always keep looking,' they tell her.

They take her arms and move her away as the aura opens around her and draws back around their shoulders. It

spreads the length of the bar, covering and enfolding the Friday revellers.

Raphael draws Sara closer again; leans in to kiss her lips. She slides her arms around their shoulders and they hold her for a timeless, euphoric moment. The moment fades and leaves Sara standing alone in the crowd, smiling blissfully, a tear running down her cheek.

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DELIA SMITH
DOES NOT EXIST

by Jenny Terpsichore Abeles

She as much as admitted this to me.

She wasn't sure if she was Delia Bacon, or had been, or had nothing to do with Delia Bacon, but it appeared that she found herself more or less anchored to the brown sandstone cross that bore Delia Bacon's name in the Grove Cemetery. The dead have a fondness for stone, as do the living, and the reasons for this may become apparent someday. When Delia Bacon appeared, I had been sitting in a somber cross-legged position for over three hours, until my bum had gotten damp from some deeper layer of the earth and my legs and hips had gone numb, and when I noticed her, she looked like an antiqued photo that someone was holding ten feet underwater in a wind-bristled lake. Or maybe in the sea, while the waves are slapping. I think she was wearing a bonnet—not a hat, but a bonnet, the big, face-framing, old-fashioned thing. And I think her hair was dark and coiled beneath her bonnet, and under her chin, I think, was a silky, white bow. Her hands were folded in her lap. Her

dress drifted away at the edges, fraying into the green and stone cemetery landscape. I recognized her immediately, and informed her, "You are Delia Bacon!" And she responded as clear as day, or at least as clear as a misty, rainy, poor-visibility kind of day, not the romantic kind, but the cold and clammy kind that you'd prefer to view with an involuntary shiver from inside your house:

"Delia Bacon does not exist."

Still, I am going to call her Delia Bacon.

Usually the dead don't bother to get your attention.

I can imagine them comfortably laid out in their best clothes many feet below the earth, perhaps gaseously flitting around their bones and whatever flesh hangs about, and in any case, content to remain beneath our notice, less distracting, even, than a bad smell. They are simply there, invisibly enjoying what amounts to a lovely garden with trees and monuments and sweet little walkways, with nothing on their minds as much as eternity, undisturbed even by the wildlife that burrows in the several feet below the garden that we—the living—don't see. People don't like to think about that. The worms. The dirt that will eventually fill in the spaces in their

skulls where once eyes and the medulla oblongata, etc. were. Dirt that crushes bones, eventually. Dirt that we co-mingle with, become no different from, our solids and gases mixing with its solids and gases in an extremely long-term, inescapably intimate affair. A tongue of dirt in your ear, or in the cranial hole where your ear used to be. The skull is full of such apertures, as is the skeleton. The body, before dying, is perforated, as well, but the skeleton is different. It is itself a hole, dug deeper than a grave, that a life has climbed out of and then fallen back into. Ashes to ashes—true enough for some. For others, dirt. It's the sort of becoming that's extremely undramatic from topside. Topside, it's all quite peaceful as far as the dead are concerned. Which is why I was, after three and half hours, surprised, after all, to see Delia Bacon appear, hugging close to her crucifix in a hobbled sort of way. I had gone there to speak with her, but hadn't really expected to.

Her voice was whispery, as you'd imagine a dead person's voice to be. Who knows where she was finding the air to push her voice into the sunlight. "...my foot!" It sounded as though it were coming from deep within a cave at the bottom of a valley on the other side of dense forest at the end of an interstate highway. It sounded as

though it were coming from a cemetery across the sea, perhaps in England. It sounded as though it were coming from the sky, or under the earth, or both together. "...my foot!" I couldn't hear her very well. I have never heard the dead speak; when I've seen them, they have always kept their lips disapprovingly pursed, as though I had offended them with my living presence, my blood, my beating heart. I can still my heart to almost nothing, the patter of a mouse foot, the sound of moonlight dropping on frost, but they can hear it anyway, and I can see how annoyed they are by it. "...my foot!"

I listened harder, testing my living ear against death's silent vacuum, and then I got it. "The Bard of Avon, my foot!"

Delia Bacon is not impressed by uneducated people from the country.

William Shakespeare, who she calls a "fourth-rate player" (even though the King was sufficiently taken by Shakespeare's company to give it his royal name), was an Elizabethan-style hayseed. And he never went to university, it is true. One might doubt that a country-boy with no proper education could have written thirty-some-odd of the most beautiful and delightful and disturbing plays anyone

has ever seen. Delia Bacon penned a 658-page book about it. Delia Bacon had been born in a small Ohio town, and never attended college.

“Hush!” she whisper-hisses at me. “Delia Bacon does not exist!”

For some, it’s fine dining.

For others, baseball or spy novels or simply their work. It takes nobody long to realize that all the hours and days of a life must be filled with something. I tried sewing for a time. I liked the feeling of cloth between my fingers, cloth in long swathes that could be formed into anything. I took my Uncle Danny and Aunt Esther’s old, orange drapes and made a toga out of them. The toga is not considered to be a very au currant fashion, but it is comfortable, and on someone as tall as myself, quite elegant. On the streets of my smallish New England city, heads turned with well-oiled alacrity at my passing, but when I caught a glimpse of myself in a bakery shop window, my oranginess pleasingly framed by pink-frosted cupcakes, I felt suddenly unanchored, as though I were a ship that had sailed out beyond the edge of the world, back when the world had an edge, and could never find my way home again. I hurried home and removed all the old family photos from their frames. I replaced them with the

snips and pieces of orange cloth left over, and hung these on the walls of every room in my house. These are the flames, the lighthouse eye that will always guide me back to my port, for no matter how far I ramble, I would like to return home again eventually. My ghost knows that, the little ghost in my womb, waiting to be born when I die.

I do still sew sometimes, but I discovered a hobby I prefer. Some people call it “paranormal investigation,” but that suggests a lot of technical gadgetry that I have no interest in storing in my closets. I have my senses, more so than some. That’s all a good ghost-hunter needs. Some like to stake out haunted houses or hotels, but you shouldn’t do that. It’s an awful invasion of privacy. Cemeteries look like gardens to us, but to ghosts, they’re cities, public spaces. Necropolis, it used to be called. City of the dead. They’re very public places. Boneyard, God’s acre, barrows—we’ve had to put them somewhere, haven’t we? I find “resting place” to be a nice name, and they can be very restful, indeed. Until you actually see a ghost, that is, which can be distressing, it turns out. The dead are not good conversationalists. Look at poor Delia Bacon! She didn’t even know if she existed.

I wanted to meet Honoré de Balzac very, very badly.

I went to the Peré Lachaise Cemetery, bought a map for some-odds, and walked round and round. It was a lovely day. My shoes were uncomfortable. I got lost. I saw Oscar Wilde's grave, covered in lipstick. I saw Frederic Chopin's grave, and Sarah Bernhard's, and Jim Morrison's. I saw Abelard and Heloise's grave, a bit gaudy, I thought, built by a romantic countess for two epistle-wrapped but rotten corpses. I had come there to see Balzac, and finally, a bit tear-stained, I did find his grave hidden amongst abundantly blooming hyacinth. Someone had left a bottle of Côte du Rhône there, and someone else had left a fifty-franc note pinned down by a rock. I pocketed the note and smashed the neck off the bottle of wine, drinking carefully from the jagged edge. Wine makes my skin feel fuzzy, but not my head. I talked to Balzac for quite a long time, but he had nothing more to say to me. Everything he was ever going to say had been said. The thought made me sad. I didn't glimpse his jowls shaking in the shadows; he did not glare at me from under messy hair.

I thought about the careful pages he had written about his world, a world that was gone now, and

wondered if even that was enough, what he had done with his time. I was reluctant to turn out the gate into the streets of the city of Paris, worried that the whole city would seem now like something different, a place from the past where the living should not be, a place from the future that I haunted unwittingly. Lingered, that is when I saw him, the ghost, standing by a water fountain. He seemed to be trying to get my attention with all the discretion of one long dead. His costume was eccentric and his moustache long. His lips were clenched shut, a dark line sewn across his blanched face, but his eyes held whole dictionaries, encyclopedias, books of hours—all the hours that had passed between him and his flesh. It was getting late, dark dusk, and although I didn't mind standing there with an old ghost—one has nothing if not time, after all!—I could see that the gatekeeper wanted to shut in, and so I left, without ever knowing the name of him to whom I whispered Fare-thee-well.

Delia Bacon was the only one who ever spoke to me.

Even if it was only to tell me that Delia Bacon did not exist. Maybe she'll tell me something different if she ever follows the inviting orange torch I lit in

my soon-to-be haunted house. Maybe then we can speak as equals, she and I. It seems as though everyone I've ever met, no matter how young or ignorant or uninformed or hare-brained, seems to know that butterflies live only for one day, one day! How much crueler, then, to stamp its life out, driving by, perhaps, not realizing that something delicate and lovely has left its vital fluids on your headlight. Every hour must count for a pale green moth as years of our lives count for us. In an hour, like a butterfly, I could fall in love, dream oceans of bliss, get my heart broken, and die. In a minute, I could get a Ph.D.

If Delia Bacon does not exist, then neither do I. We are, both of us, orphan theories launched from the minds of geniuses who neglected to give us shoes sturdy enough to stand in muddy streets. She shimmers for a moment in a sunbeam, but is it really a sunbeam? It might be a sign of blindness sneaking over my aging eye. And when she really disappears, I think that it is possible she was never here at all, not her ghost, not herself, with her bonnet and her own penchant for sitting on gravestones on sunny days. We have heard that the light from certain distant stars only reaches us decades after the stars themselves have died. Observed of all observers.

Imagine—gasping at the radiance of dead stars!, but maybe whomever gazes at our light also sees only a brilliant afterthought, a fairy flame that marks the way for other wanderers of unknown wild wastes. Following each other's errant light, we foray much further into the fens than we know we should. Maybe just when we've given up hope of ever being found, a woman in a humble home will invite us in and give us a drink made with warm milk, mint, and drugs, and when we will lay our heads on her hard pillow, we will dream yet another sleep, full of unlikely stories, that it will be nigh impossible to rouse from.

Have you ever filled your pockets with stones?

People do this at the beach, often, because the stones are worn so smooth by who-knows-how-many centuries of lolling around in salt water. The white stone that has found its way into the shorts pocket of a young woman wanting to remember this walk along the beach with her lover until her dying day was once a mountain, probably, and will one day be a grain of sand. And the woman? What was she when the mountain still stood? And what will she be when her keepsake is slowly shattered by the unstoppable, the passing of time? A fish. An ash. A

ghost. A musical note. A lilac bush, every small flower in each nodding bunch crying out, "Look at me! No, look at me!" After everything, we are only blanks that can be filled in with anything. Nobody has ever said that about a stone. Nobody has ever called a stone a phony. Nobody has ever claimed that stones do not exist. Unlike Delia Bacon.

*

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