

disemboweled, across the floor. Robert Llewelyn looks down towards his screen: 'In *De-Scribing The Savage*, Professor Larkin, one of America's finest critics, offers both a brilliant analysis of the colonial discourse on savagery and a major contribution to postcolonial theory. Concentrating on the textual representation of encounter Larkin unravels the...' He feels himself unraveling, as he has felt for years now, stretched and dislocated as though all the hyphens he has had to describe in these fucking blurbs has hyphenated him. Yes, I'm Ro-bert, very good to meet you. They always give him this stuff to do. Ato, who works in the same office, is half Nigerian but they think it might be too obvious if they handed it to him, stereotyping: give the black guy the colonial material, he's sure to be interested. They're still a bit guilty for it all, he sees - sorry about our empire fucking up your country, we feel terrible about it, we know better now. But as for a Llewelyn, well that happened seven hundred years ago, who even remembers, lots of time to get over it. Only a name, not even a skin, to remind them of ancient borders overthrown. To remind himself. They like it at dinner parties, it's a good conversation starter: 'Llewelyn, that's Welsh isn't it... You are... Where from... Can you pronounce that place with the really long name?' A hint of ethnicity, very fashionable in London now. Savage, from the French *soupage*, a dweller in woods and forests; wild, uncultivated. When he first arrived he didn't know how to use the underground or what wine to buy or where exactly Soho was. Everyone was surprised he wasn't even more of a hick. Barbarian, from the Greek *barbaros*, to babble, meaning those who do not speak Greek. 'Llanfair-pwll-gwyngych...' low murmurings of amusement ripple into the room as the impacted double *ls* and rasped *chs* dance through the air like performers in a circus.

There is a small memo pad in the corner of the room with one line scrawled upon it. Nobody is around, they have left him alone with this. He reads it slowly, trying to make it last:

A SORT OF HOMECOMING

Tristan Hughes

It flashes into view, hard and clear like waking, after the winding, cocooning green of the bends. The point is called Gallows. Masts are packed in the air over beached boats, a confusion of crosses, clicking, tinkling, whirring in the breeze; mad clockwork sounds that measure a chaos of time that runs not just forwards but backwards and sideways too. Crosswinds. Ropes hang everywhere, rocking like nooses. From the point (of no return, he can't go back now, can't run from this or here) the sea wall curves gently inwards while opposite, across the straits, the mountains bulge outwards into the horizon and are reflected down into the sea as though the whole scene is made out of mirrors. Seagulls swoop in distorted space towards the summits of the mountains in the sea. On the other side of the little bay the shore is a bright phalanx of colour where a Georgian terrace laps the water, painted pink and yellow and green; candy houses with marzipan walls and icing roofs, like those gaudy, confectionery cottages in fairy tale woods that lost and orphan children look hungrily towards.

'There's a message for you Robert, I think its kind of urgent.' His boss retreats instantly, the onerous task performed, meandering past computers and their cables that sprawl,

'Robert, can you phone home immediately – your father has passed away.' It is the full stop he notices most, thinking how he has never really felt a full stop before. They have helped him catch his breath but they have never taken his breath away. A life drifts around him in the room, his own, his fathers', pieced together with a less harsh punctuation, a dash here and there, the odd semicolon, a mix of exclamation and question marks; clauses that seem to run on forever and forever... And then this little dot stares up at him, prohibiting extension, whispering that syntax isn't going to help him here, that grammar is full of what is lost and irredeemable. It is a cruel sentence to be handed. It is.

Outside on the street the letters on the signs seem to have lost their coherence, their fixity, and returned to some primordial condition where they are just strange shapes stuck together. The alphabet has exploded and lies strewn in charred fragments all around. Everything is unraveling now and beneath it all is death. What did they expect? What did he expect?

Past the candy houses and around the corner and he has arrived. Castle Street is bustling beneath drooping banners that proclaim some town festival, looking exhausted with the burden of civic happiness they bear. A torn poster on the window of Edith's Newsagents announces that there will be a Lithuanian jazz quartet playing at the Bulkley Hotel on Thursday, followed by Misty Twilight, 'a world-renowned' four-piece Celtic rock band. Looking down the sidewalk Robert wonders if this might all be too much for the slow-bobbing blue rinses that hover everywhere on the verge of the road, perched, as if on the very edge of eternity, while they wait for the traffic to recede so they may cross over to the Castle bakery and buy 'authentic Welsh raisin bread'. They come all year, shipped along in gleaming metallic tubes – Fringe Express, World's End Motors, Dragon Coaches – sealed off from the attritional, scouring rains and winds that

arrive interminably from the Irish Sea; they have little left, more to preserve. Pensioners from everywhere, mostly women – the men die earlier – come to look at the castle as though it offered some vision of corresponding decay, of crumbling, rock-strewn endurance. He had grown up pushing impatiently between them and, returning, notices a faint aroma in the place that he has forgotten, an invisible patina that floats like scum upon the air, the scent of composty earth and slithery autumn leaves; a detritus of perished cells – the smell they have left over. Twilight: everywhere it is misting through their eyes, the light failing, falling, beneath it is... He is home.

Robert has not been back for years. Not since he began to feel his life spinning out of the orbit he had imagined it following, become sidetracked in an unmapped constellation that he knows now is failure, where the starlight shines at different angles as though viewed from some other hemisphere. This readjustment in space has made him shifty, furtive, a guilty interloper in the place where his dreams had formed. Coming back he feels a traitor, a betrayer of some earlier self that had formed out of this small island world a promise of undefinable vastness – of tundras, steppes, prairies – that would pulse and tremble behind the hedgerows and fields and houses and sky. That prior self and the quivering landscape that surrounds it will not leave him now, even in London, they are like an albatross hanging upon him, a hanging judge. What he has been and what he is are two places, two countries; borders that will not be broken. Outside Evans' Funeral Parlour he sees John and Bev Roberts and ducks away down Church Street to avoid meeting them. It's a reflex action, the traitor's instinct: avoid eye contact, speaking, explanation, they might see it in your eyes, hear it in your voice. He knew their daughter Tracy in school, they were friends, lovers too he remembers now. Why are they here? Her grandmother, he thinks, looking back a decade to a liver-coloured old woman who lurked in a house,

upstairs, an inconvenience to them both. He waits for them to walk past and prepares to see his father.

Mr Evans, tender of the town's dead, meets him at the front of the parlour. Inside it is slatey-cool, refrigerated by a cold stone through which the spring sun cannot obtrude. 'This must be a terrible time for you Robert, coming out of the blue like that. Nobody could have expected it.' Evans speaks with professional graveness, the voice gently assuaging an unspoken indictment: he died alone, he died without you here, why didn't you visit all these years? His father had nobody else, no other family in a family country. Robert's mother had died in childbirth and become an invisible woman who lived in the melancholy glinting of his father's eye. There were no aunts and uncles and cousins. They came from meager stock his people, barrens; producing even him had been too much, a fatal taxing of their paltry fertility. He thinks of this often during sex, imagines the deficient rush of his briny sperm as though it were some dead sea tributary trickling by in sterile, salty streams, not coming but departing. 'You must have made good time to get back so quickly,' says Evans, making small talk as they walk towards the room where the body is stored, the pronunciation careful, camouflaging the other language that lies behind it, the other accusations: why did you leave us, why did you forget what was yours? Evans knows that Robert has lost much of his father's first tongue. Does it matter now? he thinks. Surely the dead cannot speak any language. There can be no bilingualism to link those in the grave with the living. Alone with his father, in a cold room full of slightly chemical smells that remind him of dissecting frogs in school, Robert is shocked by the silence. In his memory there is noise everywhere: the crackling, spluttering sounds of fat boiling in his dad's chippy (what will he do with it now); the drunken, exaggerated loudness of the lads jostling around the counter on Saturdays; the gruff hwyyl of farmers come by

for a midweek treat of oozing, oily sglodions; the droning of an old radio set amongst plastic bottles of sauce and vinegar. His father is at the centre of all this noise, sharp-eyed and watchful, thick eyebrows arching over gleaming metallic edges that frame glass cases in which lie crusted slabs of fish, shriveled lengths of sausage, flaking pies. He is waiting in that noise, always waiting, for what Robert could never guess. Maybe for his wife to return, to materialise out of the frying, fat-sparkling air, her bones once more coated in a batter of pink, living flesh. Or maybe he had simply been waiting for the noise to stop. He had been a farmer's boy and never forgot the corner of land his father had sold to buy the shop, the quiet fields he had worked as a child with only the rushing wind around him. He had been most cheerful on those Saturday afternoons when the farmers came to sell him potatoes, arriving in rickety vans and unloading coarse, bulging brown bags that smelt of fresh earth, moist and fecund. They would stand together at the back door, speaking raucously in Welsh, elated by the small harvest that sat on the pavement. Afterwards his father would linger by the open sacks, inhaling the scent of clinging dirt like it was a perfumed emissary from paradise. They were his link with the patch of ground where he had been happiest, where his wife had not died, where his son would not leave.

The skin on his father's face looks waxed and pallid as though covered by a layer of cold, congealed grease, and Robert half expects to catch the familiar aroma of stale chip fat drifting towards him. But there is nothing, there is not even the grief he felt welling within him when he first read the note. His father died then, this body is no confirmation, no accentuation of that moment; death cannot be extended, even by a body, its leftovers. The features are almost the same as when he left: the high cheekbones, the drooping nose, the little heart of a mouth. He has aged well. Only the slackness of the skin along the jaw and the extra layer of collapsed flesh beneath the chin acknowledge the intervening years, but

perhaps that is what happens to corpses. How should he know, this is the first he has seen. In the stone-chill of the room he feels the desire to hide slip away, his betrayal is safe with his father, entombed. The past is comfortable here, with the dead. Suddenly he is a boy again, wandering along the shore of the small bay, picking his way through twisted clumps of seaweed, looking out onto the winking scintillation of the straits and the mountains beyond which loom darkly and flare into green luminescence as the clouds scud over the sun, a panorama of swift shadow and light. The world is hovering, fluttering like a hummingbird's wing, its airy transparency irradiated by some great immanent space in which his heart expands until it is huge, until it could almost break. A promise, a secret, a revelation, given to him by this little postage stamp in the sea, that he carried with him always, that he went away that he might learn to translate it, to return it as a gift of thanks, but instead let wither and fade, finding in its vacated place an emptiness of unspeakable, mute vastness, a world in which he will always be lost. The cold eyelids of his father stare up at him. 'I'm sorry,' he whispers, tears wetting his lips, 'I am sorry fy nhad.'

Inside The George the afternoon has been hidden behind musky floral curtains. Jack Taci and Doreen are sitting in the corner beside an empty fireplace fringed by brass ornaments that look dull and pallid, yearning for the absent flames to light them. They look up and see Robert at the bar, sloshing a pint of Stella with hands that are trembling; it has been a difficult day and he cannot shed the coldness of Evans' parlour from his skin. 'Rob lad,' calls Jack, 'wot the folk are you doing back?' Rumbled at last Robert walks nervously over to join them, steeling himself to hide his failure once more. But after a few pints it has retreated, receded into some distant corner that is another country, far away from here. Jack and Doreen are reminiscing about Rob's old man and slowly, as

the appropriate, comforting earnestness with which death introduces itself begins to fade into familiarity, they begin to laugh together. Jack is telling a story about how he and Rob's father had collected a load of fish in his old van and stopped off at The Sailors Arms for a quick one, which became a quick eight or nine, after which they forgot about the van and staggered off leaving the fish to the mercy of the hottest August day anyone could remember. '...it was fokkin stinkin like a bastard when we went back, I'm tellin ya, you could smell it in fokkin Llanfairfechan...' Jack's face is alive with laughing, though the years of drinking have puckered it inwards, like the vortex of water that is sucked finally down the plughole. He had once skippered a charter fishing boat that trolled tourists out past Puffin Island and into the ocean. Robert remembers its name, *Starider*, and imagines Jack at its helm plunging through a sea of stars. They are in his beer now, percolating silver orbs floating in a golden milky way, stellar, a beautiful space where time is stilled and softened, it binds them here – him, Jack, Doreen – they are watching the stars from the same place. 'Did you hear about Tracy Roberts,' Doreen asks, taking silence as an answer, 'poor thing was killed in a car crash about three days ago.' The heavens are shifting again, nothing will stop them.

Outside he knows where he is going. Down the street and around past the castle walls that stand in crumbling watchfulness, looking out into the surrounding woods that have receded over the centuries into long fields dotted with vestigial oaks; this ancient anglo-island put up to keep its eye upon the unruly natives that lurked beyond its perimeters, behind the trees, babbling in an alien tongue. He walks up the sloping fields towards the undiminished clusters of forest that still remain, passing beneath the shadows of the single, lonely, leftover oaks. They had hidden in these little cocoons of green once, Tracy and him, finding refuge here from the liver-coloured presence of the grandmother. They had lain on the gentle, leafy grass, her black hair falling about above

his head, the slight chill of evening upon them, damp and dewy, and then the sudden hot wetness of her, almost stinging him, enclosing him in a moment of frantic, slippery warmth. Afterwards the slight sadness, the intimation of a small emptiness returning, the light fading under the cushioning branches. 'Did you come in me?' she had whispered here. 'Yes,' he had said, 'I came.' She has gone now. Somewhere, he thinks, her body lies crumpled and broken. Perhaps beside his father's. He digs his fingers into the earth, gathering it in his hand and pressing it into his face, tasting its fecund decay, smelling its bountiful rotting. Twilight is descending now, covering him, and below the town is dissolving in an evening mist; the castle walls, the dreaming, delicious houses, the tranced water, the still and silent masts, the mountains insubstantial as clouds, all are dispersing into a vapoury darkness, hanging on the borders of night.

BREAKDOWN

WHINBERRIES

Deborah Kay Davies

From where she stands, duster in hand in the twilight of the landing, Tamar's mother watches her daughter drooping around in the garden. It seems as if she's spent years of her life doing this. Spying, glancing, checking through nets and blinds and half-open doors. Trying to understand *something* she's actually reluctant to know about her daughter. Tamar is doing the sort of thing she always does when she's been sent out into the fresh air and she's bored – scuffing her sandals in the gravel, snapping little shoots off her mother's flowers. Just now she's sitting on a wooden bench intent on sucking her hand. She has cut the fold between her thumb and finger. Tamar's mother watched her running her hands through a clump of asparagus ferns. She watched as she'd held tight to the damp fronds for a moment. She's not surprised now that Tamar has this cut. She sees the wound streaked with green sap.

She turns away to flick her duster at spiders. Then she pauses again to peer through the nets. She automatically dusts the windowsill and sees Tamar grimace as she sucks her hand. She remembers the childhood taste of warm blood, cut through by bitter fern-juice. She knows the juice will make the insides of Tamar's mouth tighten; its sour taste will cause the blood to feel creamy on her tongue. Tamar still goes on sucking though; probably it's something to do. Her mother rearranges the drapes and moves away from the window.

As she sucks, Tamar looks up behind the house to the mountain. Although the mountain is near, she has never walked there. Today's gently rounded summit is the colour of her mother's bunches of dried sage. Every day she looks at the mountain and notes its changes. It sits above the house – both unreal and part of home. Up till now she has never thought of going there, but today, suddenly, she realises there is nothing to stop her. She could just go; walk and walk and eventually stand on the very top. The possibility flashes briefly, and then Tamar looks down and studies her hand. She thinks really it's too far.

Later that evening, her mother, dry-eyed, will remember seeing Tamar hunched up in the garden. She'll hold her daughter's summer cardigan tight against her body and tell her husband how Tamar looked out there, sucking. How every now and then she'd shake her hand and then put her thumb back in her mouth, how just once she looked up and gazed at the mountain. She'd looked as if she had never seen it before. The mother thinks if only she'd gone out into the garden then, taken a little strip of plaster, or called Tamar in to bathe her hand, perhaps given her some ice cream. She remembers how she'd paused to look through the bedroom and then the landing windows, and how irritated she'd felt to see Tamar so absorbed, messing about on her own in the garden, her socks loose around her bony ankles. Spoiling the flowers.

Tamar had known all along how her mother was watching from above. She'd shaken her hand as if the pain of the cut was unendurable because her mother watched her, but she wouldn't look at her. More than anything she wanted something to happen. Something exciting and different. She didn't even mind if it wasn't nice, just as long as it was something. Her mother always said little girls had no business wishing their lives away. Enough unpleasant things happened every day without wishing for more. She'd grow up soon enough and know these things for herself.

Tamar watched her mother as she pursed her lips and talked on and on. She listened to her mother but didn't believe a word she said, not for a moment. Even waiting in the garden it was possible something could happen. Knowing her mother watched through the window made things exciting. It was like being a closely-guarded prisoner, and mother was the warder. Tamar knew that really her mother would love for her to go out and play with the other children in the street; she was always arranging little visits with children she thought were her daughter's friends. She never gave up trying to make Tamar play with her older sister, even though she must have known it was a waste of time.

Tamar turned her back on the windows and walked toward the back gate, scuffing the stones, raising little puffs of dust. The gate was tall and locked, smelling darkly of fresh creosote. As Tamar walked nearer, the smell intensified. The gate would be tough to climb, impossible with Mother looking through the window.

Tamar's mother has made her another healthy lunch; a hard-boiled egg, some crackers, a stick of celery. She tells her if she eats her egg and celery she can have ice cream. She knows Tamar won't be able to. Her mother watches as Tamar cuts the celery into tiny crescents. Tamar hears the clink her mother's spoon makes in her ice cream bowl. She eats very daintily. Ice cream is all she is eating for lunch. It is variegated ice cream; tenderest pink, creamiest yellow. Tamar has eaten her egg and managed, though she was careful, to put some bits of eggshell into her mouth. They grate between her teeth. No matter how she tries, she cannot eat the wet celery moons. No ice cream for you then, says her mother, as she whisks off the table cloth.

Later, around about midnight, still holding the cardigan, Tamar's mother thinks about lunchtime. She could have offered her soft bread and butter and cheese. It would have been so simple to give Tamar that. Tamar would have loved to eat a bowl of raspberry ripple ice cream. She finds it hard

to think of how she ate hers slowly, exaggerating each movement of the spoon. Tamar had sat quietly without looking up. The silence in the kitchen was so complete she could hear the crunching of eggshells as her daughter chewed.

She's baffled now, unable to keep still, suffused with a wining, stark regret. Why hadn't she relented, pretended it was all a friendly game? She imagines herself back in the kitchen, but this time telling Tamar to shut her eyes tight while she places a bowl of pink and white ice cream before her. She could have sprinkled it with hundreds and thousands, poured a gleam of scarlet sauce liberally into the bowl. Instead, after listening to the crunching sounds Tamar made for so long, she'd said calmly and deliberately, go upstairs and clean your teeth. Don't stop till I call you.

An hour after lunch, Tamar's mother reminds her it's time to call on Tom. This is one of the arranged things her mother does. The afternoon is drifting slowly up and away in a dusty haze of hot tarmac and wilting roses when Tamar gets outside. Her mother had insisted she carry a cardigan. There seems to be no possibility of anything happening in amongst the small, red-brick houses of Tamar's neighbourhood. The hard surfaces make the air so hot and heavy it sings the insides of her lungs. The glaring warmth of everything makes Tamar think of leaves and water. She hopes Tom will want to go fishing.

Tamar's friend lives near the canal. Tom thinks fishing will be a good idea. He has a fishing net and says they should see if they can catch some sticklebacks. Tamar is to carry a jar for holding the fish. She waits on the porch as Tom gets ready. She can hear Tom's mother; she has some friends around. They're laughing; there is a smell of cigarette smoke. Tom's family has a television. Tamar can see the strange flashes and bars of light coming through the open door to the lounge. No one is watching, but the women in the kitchen are all humming along to a song a dancing man is singing on a show.

When he shouts '...What's new pussycat?' the women all sing along. 'Woh ooo, woh ooo woh ooo' they hoot. They are holding imaginary microphones, though Tamar doesn't know it. Then they stop and laugh at themselves.

Beyond the singing women the back door is open, and Tamar can see clearly through the house to the little children playing on the swing and slide in the garden. There is even a paddling pool. Tom's mother shouts up the stairs. She tells him to get a move on or his little friend'll start taking root. She's not angry at all. Such a slowcoach, she says, walking barefoot to the front door, smiling at Tamar. She rests against the door frame. 'D'you want an ice lolly, lovey,' she says in a cool, casual voice and ruffles the little girl's hair.

Tamar has to be very still. She wants to reach up and hold the hand down onto her head; it feels like an absent-minded blessing. Instead she says no thank you. She thinks about the silent kitchen and the eggshells. Her mother eating ice cream. The way things are. Tamar sits down on the porch tiles. The floor is a rich brown, smooth and chilly against her skin. The tiles don't shine like her mother's porch. She would like to live in this house. Tom has three brothers and a baby sister; his gran is always around, giving him sweets. They have a television that everyone can sing along to. She supposes this is what makes the house so different.

From where she is sitting on a stool in the kitchen, Tom's mother can see Tamar in the porch. The following week, when it's all over and she sees her friends again, she tries to tell them how she'd felt as she watched the little girl play with a cut on her hand. She'd looked so self-contained, so intent on what she was doing. Tom's mother tries to tell the listening women about Tamar crouched out there in the shadowy porch, how she seemed far too eager for a smile, like a little puppy. As she sits smoking, one leg crossed over the other, she can't put into words how she'd wanted to do something, make some gesture, somehow include Tamar. She sips her coffee and tells the other women how Tamar's never

included in anything much. They all sit drinking in the sunlight, and no one says a word.

On the canal bank it is cool. The nearly-still water smells of weeds. Tamar lies on the bank and dips her forehead in. The water is brown; she can't see the bottom. She imagines two thin, hairless, pale-green arms snaking their way up from the oozy mud. She thinks she would gladly hold on to them and fall in, her body hardly making a ripple on the surface, her bulky clothes slipping away as she slides down, down. Tom doesn't think this sounds nice. Think of all the dangerous stuff down there, he says; lots of rusty cans, and old prams. Big eels too. They decide to walk on and find some part of the canal where the water is clear. Tamar trails her cardigan in the dust. Tom walks on ahead; he's eager to catch something in his net. 'Come ON,' he says over his shoulder. I'm not hanging around for you. Tamar walks slowly. It's shivery but airless near the canal. The trees meet overhead. On the path in front of her she can see blobs of quivering sunlight. As she walks they surge up and over her, as if the sun is melting and dropping from the sky. The bank nearest the hedge is sprawling over the path, luxuriant with wild flowers. She stops to watch a huge black and amber butterfly open and close its wings as it rests on a drooping foxglove spear. It looks like a velvet brooch pinned there. No one seems to be awake for miles around.

Tamar walks on. She has no idea how long she has watched the butterfly. She doesn't care where Tom is. Each step has become a huge effort. She has a blister on her heel. As she walks she stoops occasionally to pick up a stone. She puts each one carefully into her shorts pocket. Soon her pockets bulge. She walks to the place where the canal slips under the earth for a stretch. Above there is a little rise and some open ground. The hedge is broken by a stile.

Tamar notices someone is resting against the stile. She walks towards the person and then stops, standing quite near. She wonders if she should say hello. The person resting

there is a man. He seems old. The sort of old man who would still wear a cap on a hot day, and a tweed jacket buttoned up. Tamar thinks it's funny how old people never seem to get hot. The man turns and smiles at Tamar, gesturing for her to come nearer. It's as if he's been waiting for Tamar to arrive.

Tamar thinks she recognises the old man; he seems so friendly. 'Do you know me?' she asks. The old man smiles again. Tamar climbs up and sits on the top plank of the stile. She can smell tobacco and mints from the old man's coat. It seems familiar. She and the old man just stand, looking up through the fields to the mountain. Tamar realises it's the same mountain that hides behind her house. From here it is easy to see how anyone could climb up from the fields. She can almost make out a narrow path. The man starts to talk to her about the mountain. He tells her there is an enormous lake up there, just over the other side. Hardly anyone knows about it. No one ever goes there nowadays. He tells Tamar that there are the most delicious fruits on the mountain, called whinberries. He says they are dark purple and holds out his thumb. They're as big as my thumbnail, he says. Tamar looks at the old man's nail. It seems huge, ridged and very tough. Tamar touches the man's nail and tries with her fingers to bend the nail over. I'm far too strong for you, says the man, and smiles.

Moving a little nearer he rests his arm on Tamar's bare leg. The tweedy jacket scratches her skin. The man's arm feels heavy, too heavy for Tamar to lift off. The man is gazing at the mountain. Would you like to climb the mountain and pick those berries? he asks, not turning to look at her. Tamar gazes hard at the mountain top. It looks like everything she's ever wished for. She imagines lying down among the short, springy bushes and tasting the berry juice. She pictures the smooth, deep lake, brimful of clouds, like a milky eye. She would like to paddle in it. The old man climbs slowly over the stile and stands in the field. Come on, he smiles, let's go now. He holds out his arms for Tamar to jump into. Tamar

leaves her cardigan on top of the stile and leaps down, sure that she'll be caught. She slips her hot hand into the old man's cold palm. Then they walk together up the narrow track toward the waiting mountain.

STONES

Grace slips out through the back door after the police call around. The sight of her mother is too much. She stays long enough to see the officer put Tamar's cardigan down on the table. She'd looked at the mound of soft yellow knitting from where she stood half hidden behind the lounge door. She tried to make sense of the cardigan. She tried to read the signs. She saw some sticky buds stuck to its waistband. She watched her mother's blue eyes slip down to rest on it. Everyone, the two policemen, her mother and father, were all motionless in the small kitchen. And on the table, near the sugar bowl, Tamar's cardigan, like a discarded skin.

Grace runs through the woods that rear up at the edge of the playing field. She runs along all its little dirt paths. She visits all the places she can think of. The beech canopy above her deepens to a secret green as the summer evening progresses. She runs through the pain of her stitch, through the undergrowth, welcoming its cuts and blows, until she falls down the steep side of a stream and comes back to herself in a luxuriant clump of dead-nettles. The palms of her hands sting; she has lacerated them on the drooping ferns that loll across her running paths. She sits in the silted margin of the stream and dabbles her raw hands in the water. Her gingham skirt sucks up mud. She thinks about her sister's cardigan and shakes her head like a pony troubled by flies.

Grace pushes open the front door. Her mother sits on the stairs covered in shadows. Her father is leaning against the

the sound of a step on her step, the rasp of the knocker, tentatively yet deliberately raised.

Who is it? she called, in her head perhaps, because it was evening now and the children who played outside in the street had gone in, and a certain thickening in the outline of things told you it would soon be dark.

Who is it?

Alessandro took his hands out of his pockets. The edge of his pockets rasped over his knuckles as he withdrew his hands. A cool current of air wound up the street towards him and threaded itself between his ankles and slid up over his shoulders and around his neck. He put his head on one side at an awkward angle and looked up past the dark shape of the hill rising away. The sky was a colour he had never seen before. It was the colour he thought it would be the first time he crossed the equator. A dark, indescribable colour. He settled his weight back on his heels. Something ticked inside him, like a metronome. The street, where it fell away quite steeply, was dull under the lack of stars. A light came on inside the house, and went out again. He felt the wind lodge in a series of cold little bars under his fingernails. The town was yellow now below him, and the hill black and solid-looking behind. He strained for a sound of something inside the house, but there was only the wind out there with him, and the curious half-darkness lapping the promontories of his hands.

TOO PERFECT

Jo Mazelis

The man and the woman were standing side by side at the marina, studying the new housing development on the other side of the water. He had been expressing surprise tinged with disgust at the sight of the red-brick buildings with their gabled windows and arches and as he put it 'postmodern gee-gaws'. While she, having no knowledge of what had stood there before and no great opinion on architecture, said nothing.

Then into the silence that hovered between them he suddenly offered 'Do you mind?' and before he had finished asking, took her hand in his. In reply she gave a squeeze of assent, noting as she did how large and warm and smooth his hand was.

To a passerby it would have looked like nothing out of the ordinary. He or she, on seeing this man and woman by the water's edge, would assume that this hand-holding was a commonplace event for them. But it wasn't. This was the first, the only time of any real physical contact between them.

Later, still awkwardly holding hands, each now afraid that letting go might signal some end to that which had not yet even begun, they made their way to the old Town Hall, once the home of commerce and council and now a centre for literature. This was the purpose of their trip, the reason why at seven that morning she had stood at the window of her

bedsit in Cambrian Street, Aberystwyth, waiting for the tin-soldier red of his Citroen to emerge around the corner.

Each had expressed an interest in visiting the Centre and had behaved as if they were the only two people in the world with such a desire. That was why, uncharacteristically, he hadn't suggested the trip to the other members of his tutorial group. It was also the reason why Claire had omitted to tell any of her friends, why she had agreed to wake Ginny that morning at ten o'clock, despite the fact that she and Dr Terrence Stevenson would probably be enjoying coffee and toast together in Swansea by then.

Terry, as he was known to colleagues and students alike, was a large man, over six feet, with large bones and large appetites, which now as he neared fifty expressed itself in his frame. He had once been lithe and muscular but his body had thickened with age. He blamed too many years at a desk, the expansion of his mind at the expense of an expanding behind. But he dressed well enough, choosing dark tailored jackets and corduroy or chino slacks, as well as the odd devilish tie, which was about as subversive as he got. In colder weather, as on this grey October day, he wore his favourite black Abercrombie overcoat of cashmere and wool mix. The coat hung well from the shoulders and had the effect of tapering his body, disguising its imperfections with a veneer of powerful authority and masculinity.

Claire thought he looked like one of the Kray twins in this coat of his, and to her that signalled a sort of dangerous sexuality. She could not help but imagine herself engulfed in that coat, held willing captive in its soft folds.

Next to him, she looked tiny, even less than her five feet and a half inch. Claire had very long hair, grown in excess to compensate perhaps for her lack of height. It hung down, straight and sleek to her bottom and a great deal of her time was taken up with this hair: washing, combing and plaiting it before she went to bed each night. Most of the time she wore it loose and her gestures, the movement of her head,

body and hands were all done in such a way as to accommodate her river of hair. When eating, for example, she would hold the fork in one hand while with the other she held her hair away from the plate. She was very proud of her hair and if asked which part of herself she liked the most, that would be what she would choose. Her last boyfriend, whom she had met at the Fresher's Dance at college and dated for almost three years, had loved her hair; had sometimes spread it over her naked body, Lady Godiva style when they made love; had once even made the pretence of tying himself to her by it.

Claire's body was like a boy's: flat-chested and slim-hipped. And today she was dressed like a boy too, with jeans and heavy black lace-up boots and a white shirt and a man's tweed jacket two sizes too big. Through both her right eyebrow and right nostril she wore tiny silver rings and her eyes and lips were exaggerated with make up in shades of reddish brown. She seldom smiled, but when she did her entire face was transformed into something not quite wholly beautiful, but something very like it.

They had trudged through an exhibition of artefacts relating to the town's one famous poet: the scribbled postcards, the crumpled snapshots, the yellowing newspaper clippings, all framed for posterity like the relics of some dead saint. Terry had begun by clucking and tutting yet more disapproval of the venture, disapproval he'd been nurturing and planning since he first heard of it, but with Claire by his side he found himself softening, growing acclimatised to her open-minded acceptance of all such endeavours.

They spoke in whispers, though the place was almost entirely deserted, this being after all a grey Tuesday in October, and around the back, beneath some engravings by Peter Blake they kissed their first kiss. It did not feel like the world's best kiss for either of them, but did well enough as an awkward, uncertain snatched preliminary to better things. Afterwards Claire had wanted to wipe her mouth with the

back of her hand, not from disgust but just because the kiss was a little wet. His mouth had swallowed hers, had not measured out the size of her lips yet.

After the kiss they each felt like a conspirator in some deadly plot; what they would create that day felt as if it might be as deadly as Guy Fawkes' gunpowder, as bloody as any revolution.

The second kiss came as they sat in a deserted bar of the Pump House. The barman, a student, they decided, was propped against the far end of the counter, his head bent over a book. They took turns to guess what the book might be. Terry said it was a handbook about computing, and she thought it was a script of something like *Reservoir Dogs*.

The clock above the bar, a faux-nautical affair, hung with nets and cork floats and plastic lobster and crab, read twelve-fifteen. They had the afternoon and the early evening to spend together. He was thinking about the Gower coast, a cliff walk, the lonely scream of wheeling gulls and the sea a grey squall bubbling under the wind. She was thinking about a hotel room, the luggage-less afternoon ascent in the lift to the en-suite room and the champagne, herself languishing on the sheets, feeling intolerably beautiful under his grateful gaze.

After that second kiss, which was prolonged, they wrenched themselves away and began to speak in a strange language of unfinished sentences and hesitant murmurings.

'Oh.'

'Gosh.'

'You know we...'

'I never...'

'Oh my...'

'We shouldn't...'

'I never thought...'

'Nor me...'

'I mean, I always thought that maybe...'

'Me too...'

Then they kissed again and the barman, who wasn't a student, raising his eyes briefly from his novel by Gorky, watched them with mild interest and thought they made an odd pair.

The odd pair finished their drinks: pints of real ale. She stubbed out her cigarette and they made their way towards the exit, his arm thrown protectively around her shoulders while his broad back wore her tiny arm, its fingers clutching the cloth, like a curious half-belt.

The sky looked by now greyer and darker than before. To the west a blue-black curtain advanced, promising heavy rain and a wind blew up from the east, sending her hair on a frantic aerial dance. They ran across the empty square as raindrops as big as shillings began marking the paving stones with dark circles.

Then she half stumbled and he caught her and in catching her, gathered her to him and they kissed a fourth time, this the best, with the rain splashing their heads and water pouring down their faces.

When they had done with this, this their unspoken moment of willingness and promise and wilfulness, their pact to indulge in what they knew was an unwise thing, he quickly kissed the tip of her nose and then hand in hand they began to run again.

Under the covered walkway, they slowed down and shaking off the worst of the rain from their hair and clothes, barely noticed a man standing close by. He was busy putting away a tripod and Terry muttered, 'Afternoon' and the man, grinning broadly replied, 'Thanks'.

Naturally neither of them made much of this, assuming it to be yet another curious aspect of Welshness. A further example of the strange smiling politeness, the thanking of bus drivers and so on, the chatting to strangers which each of them had at first perceived as alien, but now despite their breeding, accepted and in part adopted.

Later that afternoon, in his car near a field in the north of

Gower, with the day as dark as ever they almost made love. The next day, back in Aberystwyth, they did make love.

She had rung him from the payphone in the hall of her house when she was certain all the other students had gone out. His wife had answered the phone and she'd given her the prearranged message, which was that she'd 'found the journal with the Lawrence article he'd wanted.'

What happened that Wednesday was perhaps rather sad, though not necessarily inevitable. It became clear to both of them that what they sought was a fugitive moment; that there could be no more than this, the furtive opening of the front door, the climbing of the stairs, the single bed dishevelled and cramped under the sloping roof, his glances at his watch, her ears constantly straining for any sounds from down below. Both of them too tense for pleasure, but going through its rigours, him professionally, she dramatically.

Afterwards, when they had dressed again, they sat side by side on the bed like strangers in a doctor's waiting room, each thinking silently about how to end it, how to escape. She took his hand and held it on her lap, then began to speak.

'Your wife...'

'Catherine?'

'She sounded...'

'Yes.'

'She sounded...'

'Nice?'

'She is. I...'

'I don't...'

'I can't...'

'I think that...'

'Me too.'

He sighed. She understood his sigh to mean that he didn't want to leave and she sighed back at the thought that he might cancel his three o'clock lecture in order to stay. He had sighed because he was wondering how long he ought to stay

to make it seem at least remotely respectable. He rested his eyes on the small wooden bookcase next to her bed. She had all the required texts as well as a rather unhealthy number of books by and about the American poet Sylvia Plath. This made him sigh again. She was trying very hard to imagine him back in his study, with the coffee cups on the window ledge and the view of the National Library and the letter trays overflowing with student essays and she sighed again because now that she'd seen him in his underwear that ordinary idea seemed impossible.

He stood suddenly, ready to go, but somehow his watch had become entangled with her hair and she gave a yelp of pain as he unthinkingly yanked at it, ripping the hair from her head. They both looked aghast at the tangled clumps sprouting from the metal bracelet of his watch. He pulled at them but they cut into his fingers and stretched and curled and slipped and clung until finally they snapped, leaving short tufts poking out here and there.

Tears had come to her eyes with the sudden pain. He looked at her and seeing this, with ill-disguised irritation as much at himself as with her, said 'I'm sorry,' then bluntly, 'Why don't you get that cut?'

That would have been the end of the story, except that some moments, elusive as they may seem when lived, come back in other guises, unbidden. There was a photograph, unfortunately a very good photograph of a young girl on tiptoes, her long wet hair lifted wildly in the wind and a black-coated man bent over her, his hands delicately cupping her upturned face as their lips met. Rain glistened on their faces and shone in silvery puddles on the paving stones at their feet and behind them the sky was a black brooding mass of cloud.

It was a timeless image, a classic to be reproduced over and over, whose currency was love, truth and beauty. The people who bought the poster and the stationery range and the postcard assumed that it must have been posed, that it was really too perfect.

hear her talking in the tones of Grandma Crawford while her bright hair shone like a torch against the dark interior gave Vinny the instant blues.

'That's right. Easter vac.'

He watched her take in his new goatee, well-worn boots and the camera slung about his neck. 'Lucky sod.'

'I know.'

'You photographing all them top models yet?'

'No. Not interested in fashion.'

'Oh I can see that... well just you let me know when you want me to pose Vinny... get my kit off, yes?'

'I will.'

'Yeah - you let me know when... and I won't be in.'

The little group made off at Gaynor's brisk pace with only the dog turning to look back at him. Regretful, it seemed.

Vinny had to knock at his own home because his key wouldn't fit the unfamiliar mahogany-panelled monstrosity.

'Hi, Mam. Bit of a change, huh?'

'I know. Kept it as a surprise - that's what your dad said to do. D'you like it?'

'No.'

'What d'you mean, no? Cost three thousand pound that did, what with security locks throughout and the bit of stained glass. Look at that!' Vinny's mam made the door pivot to catch the late-afternoon light. 'Look at that. Red tulips - see the red on the wall? Lovely they are. Your dad wanted roses - you know, for the Labour - but they didn't have none in stock.'

'It could've been worse, then.'

'Oh, so you've come back a Tory, this time?' His mam couldn't stop playing with the coloured refractions ... back and forth, back and forth as though she were being hypnotised by them - or trying to hypnotise her son. 'D'you fear that Col? Doesn't like the new door and he's pining for Benny Potts!'

Sir Benjamin Potts was the local Conservative, put in for

WASTE FLESH

Gee Williams

When Vinny came home and turned the corner into Melidan Street just for a second he saw it as a stranger might: two rows of identical dolls' houses psyching each other out over a strip of new tarmac. The council must've made it No Parking because there was a brace of acid-yellow lines now painted on top. Gary Bithel's old Norton 500 was breaking them up across from Vinny's mam and dad's.

The Crawfords', two doors down, had been pebble-dashed as a late riposte to the Flynns' stuck-on stone... while Mam and Dad... oh, shit! Mam and Dad had new white plastic windows with diamond-shaped leaded lights and the excess mortar still coating some of the old Ruabon bricks like badly applied coffee icing.

Once Vinny started thinking about the people who lived there the street clicked back into its old remembered form. He couldn't really see it anymore. Eighteen years opened up the buildings, spewing out their inhabitants, past and present, the Bithels, Vaughans, Crawfords, Lanes, Wynns, Flynns - and himself and parents at different ages... so that when Number Six really did open and Gaynor Flynn stepped in front of him with kids and a big mongrel dog on a chain and a black bin bag clutched in her bare, round arm he felt crowded.

'ello Vinny,' she said, 'not more bloody 'olidays, is it?'

Gaynor was only a year or so older than Vinny and to

years by the regiment of the retired living along the coast. The Bungalow Fascists, his dad called them. Vinny could glimpse his dad now at the far end of the house, eating at the kitchen table, framed by two doorways but offset to the left.

Radiance from an unseen source caught the pottery mug, the aluminium teapot, his big, pale hands. 'ello there,' he called to Vinny in that odd tone he'd always brought out for greeting his son. It was the tone people used when they met someone they didn't really know for the second time.

Vinny's dad was the handsomest man in North Wales - now that he'd travelled a bit, Vinny thought it might well be in the whole of Britain - this darkly dangerous James Dean with the brains not to kill himself before reaching forty-three. 'Looking good, Dad.'

His dad nodded. The perfect lines of his face held sepia shadows beneath brow and cheek-bones so that whatever he did, wherever he went, he always managed to look like a movie star playing the part of husband, father, miner, union activist... security guard.

'Catch you in a minute, Dad.'

Vinny vaulted up the stairs and bashed his way into his room using the bag. A new plastic window with stick-on leaded lights looked out over the strip of dandelions and lawn. 'Last Shift at Point of Ayr', a two-by-four blow-up, semi-matt finish, had fallen off the wall and lay rolled on the bed. Gently he unslung the old Canon Program and laid it on the quilt. In next door's garden Mrs Lane walked into shot shouting abuse at her hyperactive grandchild but no voice filtered through Vinny's double-glazed lens on the world.

Down in the kitchen while his mother washed lettuce and sliced cheese he said, 'I've got this project to do. Photo-journalism it's called. I thought I'd do this place. What d'you think?' He mimed the camera's focus and click, missing the familiar weight of the Canon against his breastbone.

'What? How we've done it up, you mean? Like in one of those magazines?'

'Na... not the house. The whole place.' Vinny turned away so as not to have to catch her disappointment. 'Thought I'd do a portrait of the... er community. You know, the end of the Flintshire coalfield... unemployment. Social problems... decay. Vandalism.'

'Oh well, if it's vandalism you want you better go to Rhyl. Wrecked the bus shelter, they 'ave... and paint - all up Undersea World! But I don't think you should be taking pictures of that. Just encourages them. Makes them think it's clever... and they're selling drugs in that little café me and your dad did our courting in. Smack... right opposite the Sun Centre.'

'It'll be a few spliffs, Mam, if you've seen them at it.'

'It's all drugs. You take their photos and these druggies think they're somebody.'

'Mam if I started taking smackheads' pictures I'd end up in the Marine Lake.'

'That's what I said,' said his mam.

'No,' said Vinny, 'it's not about deciding to make some things look important - that's not why ... I just want to show what's here... there's the mine - or there was - which was work and the seaside which was... well holidays, the opposite... and this village, with no real reason to exist anymore.'

'Oh, thanks very much.'

'I didn't mean it like that.'

He tried to make eye contact with his Dad wanting to share some feeling about his mam that he had no word for.

'We have this tutor - he did a whole book on the Shotton Steel works when that went. Black and white - thirty-eight full-page bleeds using only natural light.' His mam stared uncomprehendingly.

'Sounds like it's all been done, then,' his dad said. 'Been done to death, that sort of stuff... down South. Big thing,

mining and steel was to them. They'd got nothing else at the time.' Vinny tried not to smile: down South meant London to him. 'Still haven't. Anyway, nice to see you back... I'm off up the road for a couple of hours - committee meeting... keep an eye out for some social problems for you, shall I?' He was looking sharp - well defined - in black denims and a blue shirt, which somehow made it sound even more ridiculous.

Vinny waited until the door slammed and sprinted upstairs. He was back out in the street in time to freeze his dad against a bright grey sky. Gary had sportingly moved his wreck of a Norton and the bare terraces held the retreating figure - wide shoulders, straight back - as it sliced the horizon.

'You know,' he said to his mam who was still muttering on about how he mustn't mind his dad as though if both parents got into a who-could-get-furthest-up-your-nose competition, she wouldn't always be an outright winner.

'You know, it's really weird - eighteen years underground and Dad never got a stoop.'

'Your grandad had a stoop,' his mam offered, 'and tiny he was - only my height... like a garden gnome, Colin used to say. I think he'd had rickets when he was a boy.'

'But he's dead... and he was on the railway. He's no use. I can't photograph him.'

He mulled it over while he cruised with the Canon, trying to work out what it was his Dad's silhouette brought to mind... up Melidan and into Ash Grove catching an old woman in fluffy white slippers walking a Westie, wearing its relatives for the camera. Two boys sprawled across the bonnet of a parked car, the smaller shouting, 'It's me brovers' an' 'e don't mind so piss off!' as Vinny snapped them.

He finished the film in the street: one of the Crawford girls rehousing her grandmother's net curtains, tomcats fighting on the footpath behind the scruffy strips of garden and a portrait of Les Lewis in his aviary with budgies fluttering about his head. Les had to clap to get them airborne and

Vinny was allowed just one shot. 'Doin' it more than once,' said Les, 'I'll leave the poor little buggers without a feather to their names.'

Les' prize bird was called Tony after Tony Blair.

'Nice looker,' Vinny ragged him, 'but can he perform?'

Les was the Labour Party agent. He didn't rise. 'You on the roll at y'mam an' dad's?'

'Yeah, I guess... on the roll but not on a roll.'

Les wasn't interested in Vinny's problems. 'Proxy vote is what you want then, for the local elections. Those Liberal Democrats always sniffin' round, you know.' He favoured a bright yellow bird with a vicious look. 'Even that Plaid! And then there's this Assembly. Mind you, I reckon old Benny Potts won't live to run. Pickled.'

Vinny grinned. Whatever his mam said, booze remained the drug of choice round here.

'It's true! He could go at any time. Mervyn Price says he fears for the safety of the Crematorium if they get the job. "Abide With Me" - and then one hell of a big bang! Anyhow we don't want to get caught short and you off at that college. What you doin' there?'

'Photography ... with journalism. It's a sort of combined--'

'George Orwell,' said Les, 'he's the boy. Greatest journalist that ever lived. Got all his books upstairs ... if you want a lend.'

'Thanks. Got most of them for A-level. *Inside the Whale*, *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-four*...' Vinny popped the lens-cap on: the only coda in his waking life. 'I'll get these developed tonight. Bring you a copy of you and the birds, eh? I'm gonna put captions on them all or a slice of text - "Socialist attacked by true-blue budgies!" ... "Hitchcock comes to the arse-end of Flint!"'

Les turned away, his mind on millet. 'Remind your dad there's a committee meeting tomorrow. He's missed the last two.'

He could've corrected Les but didn't. With people Les' age

you could lose good time out of your allocation putting them right.

'You just keep watching the birdies,' he said.

Vinny had to share his dark room with the Hoover, the ironing board and linen basket, a pile of old suitcases and a half-dismembered shopper-bike. His spine ached. His elbows needed to be pinned close to his sides to prevent damage. If he straightened up one of the stairs grazed the crown of his head.

Even before the print was out of the fixing bath Vinny's brain closed on what it had been ferreting around for: those two lines of black italics that he could thread across the page.

George Orwell.

It was as if the long-dead writer had lain in his grave just waiting for Vinny Morris to capture the image of his words. 'Noble bodies' Orwell had said, 'wide shoulders tapering to slender supple waists' and 'not an ounce of waste flesh anywhere.' This was Orwell's picture of miners: confident, athletic beings, physiques made beautiful in the performance of masculine function.

Not an ounce of waste flesh.

In Vinny's picture Karen or Carly or Ceri Crawford - whatever her name was - fought with the veil of nylon lace on her grandmother's glass... but next door the bedroom was uncurtained and Gaynor Flynn's plump arms wrapped the hard muscles of his dad's torso and Gaynor Flynn's face hid itself in the hollow of his dad's neck.

"Looking good, Dad," Vinny said.

DALTON'S BOX

Des Barry

'You remember Mick Dalton, don't you?' my brother said. 'Tall feller with spiky black hair. Always fancied himself as a bit of a Godfather type, right?'

'Aye,' I said. 'Great bloke. Played cricket with you, didn't he? For Glyn Taf Engineering?'

'Aye, before he went in jail the last time.'

My brother took a big swallow of his Brains SA and then set the pint down on the table in front of him.

'Anyway,' my brother said. 'Four months ago, he wins three thousand quid on the National Lottery.'

'Never.'

'Aye. So I says to him, right, "What you gonna do with the winnings then, Mick?"'

"Invest it," he says.'

'Oh, fuck,' I said. 'What was it this time?'

'Import-export,' my brother said.

'Not again,' I said.

'He's got a better plan now. He says, "I'll pay off the debts, about five hundred quid, then I got just the scheme for a three-hundred-per-cent return on the initial outlay, like. But nothing too heavy. Nothing the dogs can sniff out, like. So it's fags."

'Fags?' I said.

'Aye. Fags. Contraband Marlboro cigarettes. Two thousand five hundred quid's worth. So Mick gets on the

him, I suppose. Yes, of course. The boy had stolen something – and it did look like a *really* good leather bag. Might have been one of ours.’

Jesus Hol, you're meant to be just five years ahead of me, not twenty-five!

Or was she joking? He had no idea. Heart hammering! Suddenly and when he'd asked it for no effort – was it expecting to have to fuel a fight? An escape from something that he didn't know was close? And here was Holly hanging about him, impeding his movements... it was all he could do not to pull her off, push her away. 'I was standing here and I just realised. How I was on the side of the bloke then – but now I wish the kid had made it – got away with it, you know?' 'What on earth are you on about?' She let her arms drop and stepped back.

'I don't know. But... something's got to change, Hol.'

'I can see that.'

'Really change.'

'Yes. I think you're right. I can really see it. Can we go to bed, though? I'm dead on my feet. We've got the weekend ahead of us. And nothing's happened – what I mean is, we haven't done anything we can't go back on. We're lucky. There's nothing we can't fix.'

He peeled off his clothes, left them where they fell and got into bed. Later he felt her slip in beside him in the dark and her hand on his shoulder. Later still, her regular breathing. Sleep wouldn't come; instead the scene played out again, this time with Holly not answering his question (or not answering quickly enough) and his turning and shaking her by the shoulders till she cried in pain, till she pleaded, 'I don't know Alun! Whose side do you want me to be on? The kid running away or the bloke after him? Which one?' Her fear of him was new and thrilling. It kept his fingers digging into her thin shoulders. It made him want to keep shaking her as long as it lasted.

It could have so easily gone that way.

FRESH APPLES

Rachel Trezise

When you get oil from a locomotive engine all over the arse of your best blue jeans, it looks like shit, black and sticky. I can see it's black, even in the dark. I stand on the sty and try to brush it away with the back of my hand, bent awkward over the fence, but it sticks to my skin, and then there's nowhere to wipe my hands. Laugh, they would, Rhys Davies and Kristian if they could see me now. Don't know why I wore my best stuff. 'Wear clean knickers,' my mother'd say, 'in case you have an accident.' She'd say *knickers* even when she meant pants. She's a feminist, see. But it's not like anyone would notice if I was wearing pants or not. Johnny Mental from up the street, he said when he was at school the police would pay him at the end of the day to look for bits of fingers and bits of intestines here, before he went home for tea. If it can do that, if it can slice your tubes like green beans, who's going to notice if you had skid marks in your kecks? I can still hear the train chugging away, or perhaps it's my imagination. Over in the town I can hear drunk people singing but closer, I can hear cicadas – that noise you think only exists in American films to show you that something horrific is about to happen – it's real. It's hot too. Even in the night it's still hot and I'm panting like a dog. I'm sure it's this weather that's making me fucking crazy. I'm alive anyway; I can feel my blood pumping so it's all been a waste of time. Forget it now, that's the thing to do. Oh, you

want to know about it, of course you do. Nosy bastard you are. Well I'll tell you and then I'll forget it, and you can forget it too. And just remember this: I'm not proud of it. Let's get that straight from the outset. The whole thing is a bloody encumbrance. (New word that, encumbrance. I found it in my father's things this morning.)

Thursday night it started, but the summer has been going on forever, for years it seems like, the sun visors down on the cafés and fruiterer's in town, the smell of barbecued food wafting on the air, and never going away. And the smell of mountain fires, of timber crumbling and being swallowed by a rolling wave of orange flame. On the Bwlch we were, at the entrance of the forestry. There used to be a climbing frame and a set of swings made from the logs from the trees. It's gone now but we still go there, us and the car and van shaggers. Sitting on a picnic table with my legs hanging over the edge so I could see down Holly's top when she leaned forward on the bench, her coffee-colour skin going into two perfect, hard spheres, like snooker balls, or drawer knobs, poking the cartoon on her T-shirt out at either side. She was drinking blackcurrant, the plastic bottle to her mouth, the purple liquid inside it swishing back and fore. I asked her for some. I wouldn't normally – I'm shy, I'd lose my tongue, but my mouth was dry and scratchy from the sun. Yes, she said, but when I gave the bottle back she wiped the rim on the hem of her skirt like I had AIDS. Kristian and Rhys Davies John Davies, they had handfuls of stone chippings, throwing them at Escorts when they went past, their techno music jumping. Jealous they are, of the cars and the stereos but fuck that dance music, it's Metallica for me. (Don't tell them that.) It's his real name by the way, Rhys Davies John Davies, the first part after some gay Welsh poet, the second after his armed-robber father, shackled up in Swansea prison.

Every time something passed us, a lorry or a motorbike, it grated on the cattle grid in the road. That's how Kristian came up with the cow tipping idea. Only we couldn't go cow

tipping because you can only tip cows when they're sleeping, in the middle of the night and it'd take ten of us to move one, so Holly had to go one better.

'Let's go and start a fire!' she said.

'Don't be stupid,' I said. 'We should be proud of this mountain, Hol. They haven't got mountains like this in England. And you'll kill all the nature.'

'Nature!?' she said. She rolled her eyes at Jaime and Angharad. 'It's not the fuckin' Amazonian rain forest, Matt,' she said. She can be a cow when she wants, see. 'C'mon girls,' she said and she flicked her curly hair out of her face. 'When there's a fire, what else is there?'

'A fire engine?' Jaime said.

'Exactly. Firemen. Proper men!' And she started up off into the trees, shaking her tiny denim arse at us. The girls followed her and then the boys followed the girls. So that just left me. And Sarah.

Sarah, Jaime's cerebral palsy kid sister. She's not abnormal or ugly, just a little bit fat, and she rocks back and fore slightly, and she has a spasm in her hand that makes her look like she's doing something sexual to herself all the time. But she's brighter than Jaime gives her credit for, even when she's got that big, green chewing gum bubble coming out of her mouth and hiding her whole face. I just never knew what to say to her – how to start a conversation. I smiled at her clumsily and tried to giggle at the silence. We stayed like that, her sitting on her hands, chewing her gum loudly so I could hear her saliva swish around in her mouth, until a fireman came with thick, black stubble over his face, fanning the burning ferns out with a giant fly squat because he couldn't get his engine up onto the mountain.

'Come and get me you sexy fucker,' Holly was shouting at him, hiding her face behind a tree. That's when I went home.

On Friday morning, on the portable TV in the kitchen there was an appeal from Rhymney Valley Fire Service for kids to stop setting fire to the mountains.

'Nine times out of ten it's arson,' the man's voice boomed. 'It's children with matches.' The volume's broke, see, either it has to be on full, or it has to be on mute.

'That's kids, is it?' my mother said, hanging over the draining board, a red gingham cloth stuffed into a tall, transparent cylinder. 'I always thought it was bits of glass left in the ground starting it. It can happen like that when it's hot can't it?' My father ignored her, standing at arm's length from the frying pan, turning sausages over with his chef's tongs. She gave up pushing the cloth down into the glass and washed the bubbles out under the cold tap. I watched the rest of the announcement, spooning Coco Pops into my mouth, the milk around them yellowy and sweet.

'The mountains are tinder-dry,' the man said, 'so please don't go near them with matches. While we're attending to an arson attack there could be a serious house fire in the town.' I remembered the look of helplessness on the fireman's face while he sweated over the ferns, Holly asking him to fuck her. He knew that as soon as he'd gone we'd start it again so he'd have to come back, sweating again. I opened one of the blue cover English exercise books my father was marking at the kitchen table before he got up to cook breakfast, and I read some kid's modern version of *Hamlet*. Crap it was, but I found two new words, *psychodrama* and *necromancy*.

Later, at Rhys Davies' house, his mother was still cleaning spew off plastic beer-garden tables, and his father was still in jail, so Kristian and Rhys, they were drinking a box of cheap red wine.

'Matt,' Kristian said, dropping the PlayStation pad on the carpet. 'Holly got her tits out last night.'

'No she fuckin' didn't,' I said.

'She fuckin' did and you missed it,' he said.

'No she didn't,' Rhys said.

They offered me the wine but I didn't want it. I went to the kitchen and scoured it for Mrs Davies' chocolate. She

had a shitload hidden from Rhys' sister in Mr Davies' old lunch box, under the basket-weave cutlery tray.

'I wouldn't poke 'er anyway,' Kristian was saying when I went back. 'She's a snobby bitch. She's the only form five girl I haven't poked and I don't want to poke 'er. She's frigid, inshee?'

I didn't know what frigid meant but I made a note in my head to find out and another one to remember to poke some girl before people started to think I was gay.

'Imagine all the new girls when we start tech!' Kristian said. 'We were starting tech in a month. Kristian wanted to be a plumber. His father told him, with some prison guard standing nearby, that he'd always have money if he was a plumber. Strange, because Mr Davies was a plumber but he tried to rob an all-night garage with a stick in a black bag. Kristian and me, we were doing a bricklaying NVQ because the careers teacher said it was a good course.'

'The girls from the church school'll be starting the same time and none of them 'ave got pinhole pussies,' Kristian said. 'Johnny Mental told me, they're all slags.'

I was leaning out of the window watching the elderly woman next door feeding lettuce to her tortoise. It was still really hot but she was wearing a cream-colour Aran cardigan. I was wondering if there was a job somewhere which involved collecting words to put into a dictionary or something, or a course which taught you to play drums like Tommy Lee so I could throw sticks into the air after a roll and catch them in my teeth because I didn't find bricks and girls with big fannies that exciting. I unwrapped the chocolate but it had already melted.

That night we were on the mountain again, standing on the roof of the old brick caretaker's hut, looking down into town at the small groups of women walking like matchstick people pubs in their sunburn, their too-tight trousers and gold strap sandals, the men in blue jeans and ironed shirts. Holly, Angharad and Jaime, they came up via the new road

because they had Holly's collie dog on a lead. There's a farm across the road, see, with a sheepdog in the field, a white one with black patches around its eyes like a canine panda. It barks at the sight of another dog and keeps barking until the farmer comes over and tells us to fuck off before he shoots us. He thinks anyone under the age of eighteen is committing some heinous crime just by breathing. So we missed looking down into Holly's cheesecloth blouse as she passed underneath us. Sarah was five minutes behind them, wobbling over the banking, her thick white shins shining, her short yellow hair bouncing on her fat, pink head. There was some kind of in joke going on with Kristian and Rhys and Angharad and Holly and Jaime. They all seemed to be winking at one another, or talking to one another but with no words coming out of their mouths. I thought I caught Kristian doing a wanker signal behind my back but I passed it off as a hallucination, with the sun being so fucking hot. Then the dog began to cough.

'Holly, there's something wrong with your dog,' I said.

'I think it's dying.'

'Take her to the dam,' Holly said, because she thinks I'm some kind of PA, put on the planet to look after her. I took the dog to the dam, watched it lap up the slimy water and when I came back everyone had gone. You get used to that when you're a teacher's son, your friends disappearing to smoke fags or sniff glue and aerosol canisters without you.

It had been an hour before I thought of something to say to Sarah and even then I didn't say anything. She blew a great big bubble; I saw it growing from the corner of my eye where I was sitting next to her on the grass. I put my finger straight up to her face and burst it. For a second everything smelt like fresh apples. That's what made me want to kiss her. I just pinned her to the ground and kissed her, my eyes wide open, her tiny blue eyes smiling up at me. Inside her mouth the chewing gum tasted more like cider. I found her tits under a thick vest but there was no shape to them. Her whole chest

was like an old continental quilt, all soft and lumpy under its duvet cover. I kept on kissing her, my front teeth bashing against hers. She didn't flex a muscle, just lay there looking amused by me. When I had her bush in my hand, her pubes rough and scratchy, that's when I noticed the dog looking at me funny, its brown eyes staring down its long snout. I tidied Sarah's clothes up the best I could and ran away sniffing my fingers and I thought that was the end of it.

On Saturday morning – the next day – Kristian, Rhys Davies and me, we were sitting on the pavement in the street flipping two and five pence coins. It's the main thoroughfare, see, for the town. When it's sunny we just sit there watching women going shopping in cotton dresses, pushing prams with big, bald babies inside. Our street was built during the coal boom, my father said, a terrace with a row of small houses for the miners and their families on our side, and a row of bigger ones with front gardens opposite for the mine managers and supervisors. Johnny Mental was sitting on his porch wearing sunglasses, drinking lager, his teeth orange and wonky. Someone was painting their front door a few yards away, with a portable radio playing soul music, Diana Ross or some shit. A big burgundy Vauxhall Cavalier came around the corner, real slow like an old man on a hill, until it stopped next to us and I saw Jaime in the back looking worried, her eyes tiny and sinking back into her head. Her father got out, a tall broad man who looked like Tom Baker in *Doctor Who*, and he picked Kristian up by the collar of his best Kangol T-shirt because that's who he was closest to.

'You raped my daughter, you little prick,' he said. My stomach did a somersault inside me and got all twisted up. I looked at Jaime through the smoked glass of the car but she had the back of her head to me, looking at Johnny Mental. He'd stood up and was watching us; the lager can tilted in mid air towards his chin. Jaime's father punched Kristian in the midriff, cleverly so that none of us could see it, but we all knew it. 'Look at you – you dirty fuckin' paedophile,' he

said to Rhys Davies and he spat on the pavement next to his feet. 'Won't be long until you're eating breakfast with your father, will it?' he said, but he didn't touch him. He picked me up by my ears, *by my ears*. My heart stopped beating then and my blood drained away. I don't know where it went but I felt it go. 'Was it you?' he said, and he knocked the back of my head against the brick wall of the house. 'Did you rape my daughter, you sick little cunt?' I could feel myself disappearing in his grasp when I heard Jaime shouting, 'C'mon. C'mon Dad, get in the car.' I heard the door slam behind him but it didn't sound anything like relief.

'You've gone all fuckin' white,' Rhys said, looking down at me when the burgundy car had been out of the street for a good two minutes.

'So have you,' I said, even though I couldn't see him properly. All I could really see was the bright yellow light of the sun but I imagined Johnny Mental smirking at me from across the road. I was thinking that if a stick in a bag was actually armed robbery then just having a cock could make a kiss and a crap fumble into a rape. I tried to look as confused as Kristian and Rhys were, as we all looked at each other, pale-skinned and speechless, and I tried to drift back to myself.

I never really got there. My parents went to the town hall that night to watch a play about an old writer dying of the consumption. I went walking. I walked through the comprehensive school, even though I thought I'd done that for the last time after my exams three months ago. I didn't have the energy to lift my feet but at the same time they seemed to lift all by themselves. Over the running track I kept thinking about Sarah. I tried not to. I tried to think about words but the only ones which came were the ones that came out of Tom Baker's mouth with a spray of bitter saliva: *sick* and *paedophile* and *rape*. And underneath them I could see Sarah on the grass, smiling at me, her skirt hitched up her fat legs. There was no way it was rape or even molestation,

she was fucking smiling at me, and she's fourteen, not a child. I'm not a paedophile. Jaime's sixteen and she's sucked the whole village's dick – that's what I told myself. But the longer I looked at the picture the more her smile turned into a frown, like looking at the Mona Lisa too long, and she was starting to shake, her arms flailing on the ends of her wrists. Then I was here, on the railway track, lying down, the rails cutting into my hamstrings and the small of my back. I wasn't sure if I wanted to die. No, I didn't want to die. Not forever anyway, only until it was over, until it was all forgotten. I remembered Geography classes in school, where the teacher would talk about physics instead because he was a physics teacher really and we'd get bored and stare down here to the track and talk about how many people had died here. Kristian said there was a woman who tied herself in a black bag and rolled onto the track so that when the train came she wouldn't be able to get up and run. I didn't need to do that. I stayed perfectly still. Didn't even slap the gnats biting my face. When the train came, the clacketyclack rhythm it made froze me to the spot. I just closed my eyes. When I opened them again the train had gone, gone right past me on the opposite track and splashed my legs with black oil. I don't know now if I'm brave or just stupid. It isn't easy to be sixteen, see, and it isn't that easy to die.

'Crickhowell House.'

The man spoke with an accent that Naz found difficult.

'Sorry, say again.'

'The Assembly building.'

'Ah, no problem. The bay, yes.'

The man just nodded and turned to face away from the mirror.

Naz concentrated on the traffic ahead as he pulled wide into Cathedral Road. The cars were lined tight, nudging each other out of the city for the weekend. This was a city that dozed through the evenings, only coming awake for a brief few hours between eleven and three, alcohol lowering its inhibitions. It pulled tight to itself during the day. The churches still blistered the city, still calling to it through empty pews. There wasn't enough here yet to break with its past.

Naz had lived in Manchester. It was a real city, full of people, full of the swirl of imagination. There were secret places in that city. Even for him, there were places to drink, to meet women. It was OK to pay for it then. He was a single man. There were necessities he couldn't ignore. He could remember his male friends on the streets at home, holding hands. Frustration dripping between them and not a woman in sight. Death and marriage had saved him from that.

His father had always expected him to give in and come home. The old man was still expecting his son's defeat when he cut into his leg with a cleaver. An accident but still death. Naz had looked for the memory, searched through its corners, even though it couldn't be his. The street thick with the smell of meat. The gutters running with rats and the crows ready to pick scraps from the bones. The panic for a taxi. The blood pouring from the severed artery as his father had seen it pour from so many dying animals, knowing he was dying. Naz had escaped that. His father had died in a taxi on the way to hospital.

The youngest son, he was allowed a chance, a chance to

THE FARE

Lewis Davies

Naz had been waiting. The clock clicked forward, timing the day, his fare. Rain traced lines between the droplets on the windscreen, tugging each one down. The wipers swept forward, then back. He checked his watch; the fare was for four-thirty. He wanted to finish by six. He was hungry. He hadn't eaten for nine hours. He didn't like getting up before it was light to eat. It didn't suit him. The days were longer with no food.

He hoped the boy would eat tonight. It had been nine days now. He could see the heat inside his son as it rose to his skin in sweat. But his eyes were still quiet, looking beyond them to somewhere else. The hospital was clean, white and efficient, and it frightened him. The single room surrounded them, hushed.

He needed to finish. Time to eat. Time to visit.

He turned the engine on. A light in the hallway of the house caught him before he could drive the car away. Then the door opened and a man ran from the doorway down the path to the waiting cab.

A rush of cold air filled the car as the man clambered into the back seat. He was out of breath, his coat ruffled up. Naz watched the man as he tried to settle himself and his briefcase into the seat. The man took off his glasses to wipe the steam and rain from the lenses. He peered into the front, up at the mirror, his eyes squinting with the effort.

become himself. His brothers had paid for a marriage then. Sure he wasn't coming back. Insuring against him coming back. A proper respectable girl. A good name. Her family lived in Cardiff. They were cousins of a cousin. He would have to move from Manchester. Too many memories, connections for a man about to marry. It was another city, a smaller city.

There were fewer cars going back into the city. It was a straight run, Cathedral Road, Riverside, Grangetown, Butetown, Docks. He could see the faces and houses change colour as he followed the river to the sea.

The man in the back shuffled the papers in his briefcase. He caught Naz looking at him in the mirror and smiled unsurely back.

'I'm late.'

Naz smiled. 'Can't go any faster. The traffic.'

'No, don't suppose you can.' He looked forlorn.

'Important meeting?'

The man looked as if he didn't quite understand the question.

'At the Assembly?' prompted Naz.

'No, not really. A commission.'

'You're an important man?'

The man straightened himself in the back seat. He looked to see if Naz was mocking him. It was a straight question.

'Er, no, I don't suppose I am.'

'What's the rush then?'

The man looked away. He watched the river rush below him and the space where there had once been factories now filled with cleared land. A sign marked the opportunity: 'Open to offers!'

The radio crackled through. Naz picked it up. A voice told him he had another call at the university. He could go home then. Narine would be waiting for him. She had been at the

hospital for days. They allowed her to sleep there at first. Waiting. But she couldn't sleep and she just spent the nights staring out across the lights that marked the limits of the city. Naz liked the view from the ward. It was the only thing he liked about the hospital. At nights he could see the towns on the far side of the estuary and imagine what it would be like living there. Anywhere but here, now, while his dreams struggled through in the bed beneath him. It was a strange country, this. A country trying to find its way. There was nothing he could see that wasn't just smaller than Manchester.

He had taken Narine, the boy and the baby out to the coast last summer. The little boy had played in the waves as if they were something new and unique, especially provided for him. Narine had prepared dahl and chappattis which they ate on a rug placed over the sand. He could feel the stares; unease or novelty, he couldn't be sure. He tried to ignore them. The beach was packed with children, kites, dogs, sandcastles, the debris of a day out. Naz had been filled with the wealth of summer, the God-willing luck that had provided him with a wife and child. Narine couldn't swim, but she went into the water in her suit. The boy had played with the ball, and the waves had played with him. It had been a good day. He would be a father again in the spring, but that was a long way back through the winter now.

The traffic lights held him on the corner of Bute and James Street. An ambulance streaked past. Blue lights flooding the cab. The man in the back leaned over to get a better look at the road.

'I didn't think it was going to be like this?'

Naz looked up at the mirror to see the man's face. Lines of stress seemed to have cut into him.

'It's the time of night.'

'No, not the traffic. The city, this country. I don't understand it.'

The lights allowed the car to move forward. Naz checked his watch.

'What time is your meeting?'

'It doesn't matter.'

The man seemed to collapse back into himself.

'It is your country?'

'Yes, but I can't escape from it.' The man struggled in his pockets for money.

The edifice of the Assembly building rose out of the rain. It was spotlighted but seemed unsure of itself on the stage in this new half-country.

Naz pulled the car into a lay-by opposite the building. Four pounds forty was displayed on the clock. The man handed him a five pound note. Naz knew he would require change.

'Can I have a receipt, please?'

Naz scribbled the amount on the back of a card. His writing had never been as good as his speech, but he was OK on the numbers. The man pocketed his change and the receipt. He got out of the cab and shut the door. Naz pulled the car back onto the road and headed into town.

He didn't like calls at the university. They were usually students. There were too many students in the city. The city swelled with them every October, gorging itself on their easy money. But by December he was tired of their jokes, their endless enthusiasm and the way they threw up in his car. Today was the last day of term. He kept up with these events. He used them to mark his time in the city. Six years now. Six years with a new wife and now two children. The first one was a boy, that was good. The next a girl. That was good also but maybe more expensive. Still he loved girls and the way she opened her eyes to him. He would earn enough money. He would be successful in this city. His father-in-law had offered to lend him some money to start a business. It was good to be in business. In business for yourself. He knew

about the cars. There would be younger men keen to work longer hours as the city expanded. He wouldn't be a younger man much longer. Then he would need to make a business.

The car pushed itself along the flyover that cut back into the centre of the city. The road rose steeply, soaring above the railway line and the units that lined its route out to the east. From the top the city was all briefly visible before the road crashed into the walls of the prison and the horizon reduced itself to streets again. The traffic slowed him again at the law courts. He wasn't sure if the fare would still be waiting at the university. People called through then forgot about it.

The students reminded him. There had been a ripple of meningitis cases last winter. He had seen their faces in *The Echo*. Bright, young, hopeful, dead. It took them so quickly. A few days of coughs and headaches and then a sharp coma. There had been a man working in a restaurant he had heard about, a Hindu. He was working on Monday night, in hospital by Tuesday. He had only lasted two days. There was a picture of him behind the counter in the restaurant. A big smiling man. The boy was a fighter. A strong boy. He could feel the determination in his arms as he clambered around his shoulders, mouthing words in two languages. It had been too many days, the dark days of winter in the city. He called back into the radio. He was signing off for the night. There was a brief complaint from the operator on the far side of the call. Then he put the handset down.

A month ago he had followed the cars to the cemetery. They had been given a plot out in Ely, a few miles to the west of the city. The graves were new. They had been cut deeply into the soft Welsh loam. Each new mound, a life ending out here, many miles from the start in a dusty village on the Indus plain, or the crumbling walls of Lahore or Karachi. The cities themselves had changed their names, as if able to disown their children. They couldn't return to a place that no longer

existed. They had cut themselves off and would now be the first to die in this new place where it rained through the long winters. He had thought of their hopes. Many of the graves carried pictures of them as young men. Faded, overexposed pictures of dark men in poor new suits, eager for a go at the world. Most had thought they would go back.

They had listened solemnly in the mosque off Crwys Road. The walls dripped with the sounds of his childhood and the cool mornings in Peshawar before the sun got too high. The time to work. His father had been keen on education, avoided politics. The future was commerce.

The new mosque had been a factory, making clothes. They bought it with donations and optimism. He never attended much himself. The community was growing. He could buy Halal meat now and vegetables he hadn't seen since he left Manchester. His wife bought clothes from people who could speak Urdu.

The meat was good but to be avoided in memory of his father. But it was there, fresh and available. They had some strength now, numbers, a community. The boy would be starting school in a year. He would learn English properly then.

There were casualties. His closest friend ran a chip shop in Llanrumney and was living with a woman called Ruth. He had given up the cars. He was too old for the abuse and the girls who wouldn't pay you and the men who simply walked away. He would trust in Allah, he had claimed, and now he was sending money to a woman he had married and living with one he hadn't. But Naz couldn't leave the faith. It was part of him. The inscription above the door convinced him. Allah is good. Allah is great. And indeed he had been. But now, with his son at the hospital, he wasn't so sure. The little boy had committed no sin, but then he remembered his own nights on the riverside in Manchester.

He drove the car along Richmond Road, across the junction. The lights favouring his flight. He pulled up at number forty-

seven Mackintosh Place. The lights were on in the front room. He could feel the tension in his fingers as he cut the engine and opened the car door. The door to his house was ajar; he could smell the good smells of cooking food through him. He found Narine in the kitchen. She was sitting at the table slumped over, her head resting. He touched her hair. She stood up and folded into him. He knew his daughter was being cared for; he knew the boy had gone.